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# The Long Wait: August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*

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**Sandra G. Shannon**

From a prison cell in Birmingham, Alabama, in April 1963, Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote,

For years now I have heard the word "Wait!" It rings in the ear of every Negro with a piercing familiarity. This "wait" has almost always meant "never." It has been a tranquilizing thalidomide, relieving the emotional stress for a moment, only to give birth to an ill-formed infant of frustration. (83)

Although King's thoughts were a direct response to an annoying letter he had received from white clergymen some four months earlier, his words also very adequately describe the universal and timeless psychology of oppression. Decades before King so eloquently characterized this injustice, Booker T. Washington was soundly upbraided by blacks who saw his so-called "accommodationist" theories as a veritable waiting game. Still earlier, various slave narratives acknowledged the cruelty of enforced waiting. Frederick Douglass, Harriet A. Jacobs, and Olaudah Equiano all recount incidents in which their only recourse involved immobility, stagnation—waiting.<sup>1</sup> Whether waiting for their eventual emancipation or for an opportune time to escape, each experienced the accompanying helplessness, the degradation, and the ultimate frustration of long delays.

This same strategy of perpetuating racial oppression through the twisted logic of waiting is a prominent feature in one of four chronicles by the now-Broadway-famous Afro-American playwright August Wilson. His 1984 play *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* is a disturbing look at the consequences of waiting, especially as

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it relates to the precarious lot of black musicians during the pre-Depression era. Although the play features a still shot in the lives of several members of Ma Rainey's 1920s band, it is also suggestive of the many and varied oppressive forces under which the entire Afro-American population labored at that time. From education to employment, blacks got the smallest share of the American pie, while clinging to an often self-destructive ideology of tolerance. Through the actions and the dialogue of three crucial characters—the blues singer Ma Rainey, her piano player Toledo, and her trumpet player Levee—, Wilson conveys the damage that prolonged periods of waiting have caused the Afro-American artist.

Although *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* revolves around the life of the one-time blues legend Ma Rainey, Wilson includes her not as a leading lady but as a less conspicuous, though uninhibited, commentator on the callous, white-controlled music industry. A recent contributor to *Current Biography* writes,

Because Wilson's intention was to depict an imaginary incident in the career of Ma Rainey, not to write a biography, he avoided the extensive study of her life that might have had a "straightjacket" effect on his portrait. His interest was in what lay behind the blues, music that he believes represents the total experience of blacks in the earlier South. (53)

Ma Rainey is no more a leading lady than the black band members or white promoters are leading men. Instead, she has a pivotal role, deflecting attention to the circumstances rather than to the people.

Detained by a freak car accident involving her nephew, Ma Rainey comes late to a recording studio where she is scheduled to perform several of her popular works for an album. Already irritable because of this, her white promoters, Sturdyvant and Irvin, grumble as she continues to stall by demanding a Coca Cola, complaining about the chilly studio, and insisting that her stuttering nephew Sylvester be allowed to announce her on the album before she sings.

While Ma Rainey tries the patience of her two promoters, her musicians waiting in the basement band room, all of whom are black males, bicker and taunt each other in deceptively simple repartee. Their conversations, which slip from the correct spelling of *music* to an existentialist discussion of black history, gradually intensify and unexpectedly erupt in a fatal stabbing. The self-made philosopher and pianist Toledo inadvertently steps on the new Florsheim shoes of the ambitious though disgruntled trumpet player Levee. In a gradual chain of events, this otherwise commonplace incident leads to murder. Apparently still angered by the recent refusal of one of Ma Rainey's promoters to launch his musical career, Levee, during several moments of extreme anger, stabs Toledo in the back.

That the play highlights the goings-on of the rehearsal prior to the actual recording session is a fitting strategy to advance the waiting motif. Forever practicing to become but never actually "arriving" describes each of the musicians' predicament. For the most part, they realize the futility of practicing what they already have perfected and rebel in various ways against the pressure exerted upon them to perform. They play for very brief moments, frequently stopping because of petty errors and disagreements. Indeed, a combination of distractions seems to conspire to disrupt the session. Levee's new Florsheim shoes, Ma Rainey's speech-impaired nephew Sylvester, her attractive companion Dussie Mae, along with an angry policeman and an extremely late Ma Rainey, destroy any coherence that either Irvin or Sturdyvant hopes for. More importantly, the chaos of the rehearsal session mirrors the group's subconscious resistance to their manipulation.

The play's namesake, Gertrude Pridgett "Ma" Rainey, provides a powerful symbol of the tensions felt by thousands of African-Americans who became part of the massive post-World War I exodus north known as the Great Migration. Her popularity in Northern cities during the mid- to late 1920s was supported largely by Southern blacks, who found in her blues songs solace from the alienation and disillusionment of city life. Her down-home, earthy style, her naughty lyrics, and her rugged looks were welcomed by weary Southern blacks, no longer impressed by the deceptive glamor of the North. Her blues, therefore, was a gift to her people, for she intimately understood their miseries. In his warm tribute to the blues legend, Sterling Brown roundly commends her for this gift:

O Ma Rainey,  
Sing yo' song;  
Now you's back  
Whah you belong,  
Git way inside us,  
Keep us strong. . .  
O Ma Rainey,  
Li'l an' low;  
Sing us 'bout de hard luck  
Roun' our do';  
Sing us 'bout de lonesome road  
We mus' go. . . . (62-63)

What attracted Ma Rainey's black audience were the exclusive invitations she extended to them through her lyrics—invitations to commiserate as well as to acknowledge proudly the existence of their mutual culture. If they could not reverse their misfortunes, at least they were able to grapple with their enormity. For downtrodden blacks, singing or playing the blues was the only source of relief from the pains of waiting. This source of relief continues in

the lyrics to classic hymns and blues songs such as "I Will Wait on the Lord," "By and By When the Morning Comes," "How Long Blues," and, more recently, tunes such as Otis Redding's "Sitting on the Dock of the Bay." In one of Ma Rainey's less rambunctious moments in the play, she explains similar medicinal, as well as the instructional, qualities of her blues:

You don't sing to feel better. You sing 'cause that's a way of understanding life. . . . The blues help you get out of bed in the morning. You get up knowing you ain't alone. There's something else in the world. Something's been added by that song. This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something. (82-83)

Understandably, Ma Rainey felt more comfortable among her own people. Those who truly connected with her ethos were not distracted by what critical Northern blacks and whites perceived as her physical ugliness. As a matter of fact, they wanted and expected her to present an image totally out of line with that of the polished Northerner. Her gold jewelry, her magnificently adorned gowns, her healthy frame, and her raucous lyrics were like familiar landmarks to the weary traveler. As the rich symbolism of her nickname suggests, her Southern fans saw in her the comfortable familiarity of home and unconditional acceptance.

For all of her concern to inspire the lives of her people, Ma Rainey's own life was punctuated by episodes of misfortune and grief. At the source of her blues was her own disgust with the conditions of her life. Just as she had enjoyed popularity and good fortune, Ma would also fall upon financial hard times. For a variety of reasons, chief among which were the onset of the Depression and changing regard for the blues singer, Ma Rainey's career ended with her return to performing as part of various circus lineups, then eventual seclusion. After the death of her mother and sister, she returned to a home she had wisely bought earlier in Columbus, Georgia, when money had flowed more freely. Unlike her young rival Bessie Smith, Ma Rainey was a maverick popularizing her singing style at a time when both racism and sexism were rampant in the music industry. Refusing to modernize her style, her lyrics, or the jug band music which brought her fame, she forged a place in blues history.

August Wilson is faithful to Ma Rainey's unsinkable nature. He is careful in emphasizing the thick skin she has acquired as a result of "knowing" what whites really think of her and her music: "They don't care nothing about me. All they want is my voice. Well, I done learned that, and they gonna treat me like I want to be treated no matter how much it hurt them" (79). She plays their game, but she

never lets them forget that she is in control of her music, even though they stand to gain huge profits from her talents—possibly more than she. Although her brash character suggests her ability to transcend the degradation around her, she does not hesitate to let her band members know that she, too, is a victim: “As soon as they get my voice down on them recording machines, then it’s just like if I’d be some whore and they roll over and put their pants on. Ain’t got no use for me then” (79). Ma Rainey’s victimization is no secret. She preaches about it; she rubs her promoters’ faces in it; she schools her band members, her girlfriend, and her nephew about it. Still, Ma Rainey is essentially just as oppressed as her colleagues are. Her cantankerous attitude and her marketable talent are the only edges she has on her colleagues.

One of the most prominent features of the play’s structure is the inordinate amount of time which lapses before Ma Rainey’s entrance. Thus, her timing is crucial in establishing the initial tension in the play. Capitalizing on the knowledge that both the reader and the viewer subconsciously expect the sassy blues singer to grace the stage at any moment, Wilson manages to upstage her entrance by focusing instead upon seemingly trivial conversations among her band members. Not only does Wilson make the rehearsal group wait for Ma Rainey, but he strategically places the audience on hold as well. Subconsciously they experience, in some measure, the frustration of waiting and its accompanying effects upon the cast. As a result of the delay, what they learn about the various idiosyncracies of the troubled group serves as a context for understanding their motives when they are finally in the company of Ma Rainey.

Ma Rainey’s tardiness also serves as a means of equalizing her role in the play with those of her band members: She becomes one who *interrupts* rather than instigates the ongoing action of the play. Wilson’s strategy to divert some of the attention away from Ma Rainey and onto her band members shapes the audience’s perspective and allows them to look more scrupulously at the frustrated lives of other characters who, under less oppressive circumstances, could have reached or perhaps even surpassed Ma Rainey’s own precarious fame. Wilson regrets such wasted talent among blacks. When asked in a recent interview with television journalist Bill Moyers what it means to have his streetwise black brothers, who are Philistines to the art world, acknowledge his work, Wilson replied,

It says that it could have been any one of them, that there is a tremendous amount of talent that is wasted; that for every Louis Armstrong

there are a hundred people whose talent gets wasted; that there are no avenues open for them to participate in society, where they might prove whatever is inside them. Those same people have vital contributions to make to the society. (172)

Confined to careers as backup musicians for a soon-to-be-defunct blues singer, Ma Rainey's band offers a depressing commentary upon the many ambitions of blacks that have become no more than pipe dreams. The careers of the fatalistic group of black musicians hang in the balance as they wait for "Madame" Rainey, wait for their meager wages, wait for the sanction of a white promoter, or wait for their big break. Like the paranoid derelicts of Eugene O'Neill's *The Iceman Cometh* or the neurotic duo of Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, their rhetoric far exceeds their actions. Destined for oblivion, they remain in a never-ending state of waiting.

As the title of a play depicting the pre-Depression frustrations of black musicians, "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" sets a tone that is simultaneously risqué and defiant.<sup>2</sup> To Ma Rainey's black audience, the image of a black bottom undoubtedly conveys sexual overtones and lively folk humor, yet the title also sends a stinging message of disrespect to their white oppressors. The implicit anger and frustration of the song title is clearly conveyed by the bitter monologue of Clay, the protagonist of LeRoi Jones's classic *Dutchman*:

Old bald-headed four-eyed ofays popping their fingers . . . and don't know yet what they're doing. They say, "I love Bessie Smith." And don't even understand that Bessie Smith is saying, "Kiss my ass, kiss my black unruly ass." (34)

The double entendre of the title and its lyrics provides a temporary emotional respite for blacks at the mercy of ubiquitous oppression.

The blues represented to the Afro-Americans of Ma Rainey's day a means of ventilating otherwise inexpressible reactions to the harsh realities of life in America. Over the last sixty years of their threatened survival in America, it has continued to sustain them in times of deep turmoil. It continues to give expression to their worst fears and their greatest triumphs. It acts as a griot of their African tradition as well as an omen of a not-so-certain future. For many, the blues has been a most dependable antidote for the "tranquilizing thalidomide" which Reverend King saw as the culprit preventing a long legacy of obstructed progress among Afro-Americans.

Music—more specifically the blues—is more than just a pas-time for Wilson's characters. Although the ease with which they perform and the casual air that permeates their pre-rehearsal dialogue may suggest somewhat nonchalant attitudes, the music of this group is the very thread which holds the weary edge of

their lives together. Moreover, it is their universal means of communicating among themselves even as they face gross differences in intellect, ideals, and personalities. Wilson recently explained the underlying significance of such nonverbal communal language among blacks:

The blues are important primarily because they contain the cultural responses of blacks in America to the situation that they find themselves in. Contained in the blues is a philosophical system at work. You get the ideas and attitudes of the people as part of the oral tradition. This is a way of passing along information. If you're going to tell someone a story, and if you want to keep information alive, you have to make it memorable so that the person hearing it will go tell someone else. This is how it stays alive. The music provides you an emotional reference for the information, and it is sanctioned by the community in the sense that[,] if someone sings the song, other people sing the song. They keep it alive because they sanction the information that it contains. (Moyers 168)

Unfortunately, blues artists of the 1920s did not have the financial resources to market their own talent, nor, without white mediators, did they have unconditional access to the Jim Crow establishments of the time. Strong-willed black artists like Ma Rainey compromised and tolerated white promoters for the sake of sustaining their art, while others, such as Billie Holiday and Bessie Smith, became casualties of the systemic racism of their times.

In several recent publications, August Wilson has consistently noted that the careers of blacks have traditionally been limited to sports and music. Yet he also acknowledges that even these areas became targets for racial discrimination. As Ma Rainey's case illustrates, the music industry—which suffered no lack of excellent black talent—was unmercifully pirated and regulated by opportunistic white promoters. Thus, although sports and music offered blacks outlets for practicing their own creative talents, few were able to go on to develop financially stable careers while engaged in either interest.

Despite the virtual monopoly on all potential avenues for upward mobility among blacks in the United States, Wilson regards the ability to read as their sole possible salvation:

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

But being able to read without what Wilson calls “the warrior spirit” or the courage “to say, ‘No, I refuse to accept this limitation that you're imposing on me’ ” (Moyers 179) can prove just as frustrating as remaining forever illiterate.



Not only can the pianist Toledo read, but he also is able to perceive and explain complex human relationships in terms of elaborate rhetorical analogies. Yet, for all of his eloquence, he lacks the necessary impetus to effect any change in the status of his career. He does not have the "warrior spirit" which transcends imposed human limitation. As the only member of the band who can read, Toledo has the most potential to escape the oppressed lot of the other musicians. However, this distinction does no more for him than spark brawls spawned by jealous bickering within the band and, ultimately, lead to his death.

Because Toledo lacks the "warrior spirit," he does not realize the magnificent potential of his literacy or his musical talent. Instead, he misuses his abilities on an unappreciative, plebian audience and does nothing to promote his own proven skills. Although his intellect allows him to comprehend and rationalize the tactics of his white oppressors, his wisdom merely ricochets off the heads of fellow band members, who see his frequent pontifications as attempts to belittle them. For example, Levee cannot comprehend Toledo's unsolicited discussion of mutability. Alarmed that the studio's location has been changed, Levee seems oddly melancholy as a result of the mere shift of the band's rehearsal space.

Toledo even tries to educate the guitarist Slow Drag on certain cultural aspects of the African tradition evident in their language. Again, his efforts are met with suspicions and hostility. Instead of prompting a genuine interest in the history of their language, Toledo evokes strong denials of any affiliation with an African past.

Toledo's intellect is alien in this environment of paranoia and jealousy. His attempts to educate his peers go unappreciated and uncomprehended. Consequently, he wastes a talent that, under more productive circumstances, could have been nurtured toward a financially as well as emotionally rewarding career. He creates a sad image of an overqualified black forced to choose between playing his music and seeking a more stable means of support. Ma Rainey has learned to manipulate her oppressors and manages to earn decent wages. Toledo has no such control over his life. He professes to know the white man's oppressive strategies and clothes himself in impressive sounding intellectual jargon, but he does not take any steps toward his own liberation.

In his depiction of this philosopher/musician, Wilson shows what has become of a once-promising solution to the black man's problems in America. Toledo is a disappointing mutation of W. E. B. Du Bois's reconstructive idealism, which depended upon educating the "talented tenth" of the black population who, in turn, would pass on their knowledge to other members of the race. Toledo

channels most of his knowledge toward self-righteous mockery. Toledo thinks he has mastered the art of understanding the ways of man, yet he is sorely lacking in the art of doing.

The most latent, and ultimately the most destructive, effects of waiting are featured in the cynical trumpet player Levee. Driven to physical aggression against one of his own, he becomes a native son of the groveling capitalism around him. Under the guise of retaliation for a temporarily soiled pair of Florsheim shoes, Levee wields a blade into another black man with a fury which—to one not familiar with the history of his mental anguish—seems absurdly incongruous with the otherwise trivial act of misplacing a foot.

Because of the blatant image of a stabbing death, an unsympathetic viewer might perceive Levee's action to be monstrous. However, his conversations throughout the play give various reasons for a pre-existing cynicism. He brings with him to the recording session a history of negativism which spans his entire life. For example, as an eight-year-old, he watched white men rape his mother. In addition, his business arrangement with Sturdyvant is not proceeding as he had hoped. After agreeing to purchase lyrics Levee has composed, Sturdyvant squashes the trumpet player's ambitions to start a band of his own so that he can play his more upbeat, avant-garde arrangements. Added to these setbacks is Levee's incompatibility with Ma Rainey. He cannot yield his ambitious nature to the strict control that she exerts over her band and her promoters. He constantly rebels against the sovereignty that Ma Rainey has over what and how the band plays. Inevitably, because of their irreconcilable differences, Ma Rainey has no choice but to fire him.

Yet Levee's cynicism is not restricted to the white man or to Ma Rainey. Like others of Wilson's black male characters—Troy Maxson (*Fences*), Boy Willie (*The Piano Lesson*) and Harold Loomis (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*)—, Levee has concluded that God and the white man are one and the same. Motivated by this simple equation, he simultaneously rails against the white man for a history of abuse and against a now-alien God for allowing it to persist. Levee is quick to question the whereabouts of the white man's God, for example, as he recalls a black minister's missing his train to Atlanta one night and being surrounded by a group of jeering whites who stripped him of his cross and Bible and made him dance until they grew tired of watching him.

Unlike Toledo, Levee is illiterate. His inability to easily determine the difference between fact and illusion or abstract and concrete make him a target of Toledo's humor. Toledo relishes

playing a spelling game with Levee that both embarrasses him and exposes his handicap to his colleagues. Levee's illiteracy becomes the cause of his antisocial behavior and prompts unwarranted suspicions within him. Unfortunately, these misguided suspicions are directed not at those who actually wrong him but toward those who mean him the least harm.

The immediate circumstances of Toledo's death make Levee into another in the long line of stereotypical black men who have resorted to violence. A superficial analysis would more than likely view Levee as the chief villain of the play. To the casual viewer who draws a clear line between good and bad, Levee could very well be the universally familiar negative image of the black man that continues to be promoted by various elements of the media, for he follows the pattern of violence that has become expected of his entire race. However, August Wilson invites an examination of the real culprits in this waiting game-turned-homicide: In his interview with Kim Powers, he calls the violence against Toledo "a transference of aggression from Sturdyvant to Toledo, who throughout the play has been set up as a substitute for the White man" (54).

Despite Levee's genuine ambition to excel in the music industry, he is sucked under by the swirling vortex of oppression. If isolated and studied strictly in terms of his sociological relevance, Levee might easily serve as the basis for a viable case study on the root causes of black-on-black crime in the United States. His character mirrors the all-too-familiar results of the black male's battle to survive in a white-dominated society. No longer convinced that the Christian's God is the black man's ally, Levee resorts to annihilating members of his own race to appease his frustrations at having to wait for others in order to actualize his ambitions. Thus, Levee, like many one-time-ambitious, creative young black hopefuls, becomes disillusioned, self-defeating, and ultimately violent.

Each of August Wilson's four completed plays emphasizes "the choices that we as blacks in America have made" (Moyers 167). However, the playwright is also concerned about the oppressive forces which have precluded many of those choices. To this end, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* provides a provocative look into the world of several black musicians who have little or no control in determining the course of their professional lives. Even as they create and enjoy their music, the origins of which may be traced to their own African ancestry, they are forced to yield their primary rights of ownership to whites, who prey upon them. Waiting becomes the sedative that allows such predators to keep the personal aspirations of these black musicians forever in the bal-

ance. Waiting also stifles their "warrior spirit," the absence of which leads to noticeably neurotic compensations in their characters. Waiting becomes a dominant motif in the play, affecting each member of the band, as well as Ma Rainey, in some awkward manifestation. In addition to Ma Rainey's unrefined and boisterous personality, the extraordinary behavior of her pianist and her trumpet player suggests latent reactions to figurative road blocks placed before them.

Sadly, the careers of Ma Rainey, Toledo, and Levee can all be described in the subjunctive—"might have been," "could have been," "should have been." Wilson's director/mentor Lloyd Richards calls their condition "the black people's 'deprivation of possibility'" (Reed 93). When white capitalist greed, combined with economic depression and racism, minimizes or totally erases their choices, then desperation sets in to dull their creative forces. Potentially first-rate musicians have to limit their professional growth and longevity because of a conspiracy to milk their musical talents. As Toledo slumps to the floor with Levee's knife in his back, the causal equation of their misery becomes poignantly clear. Dumfounded as to what should be done about the homicide, Cutler, in the play's concluding irony, seeks advice from the same oppressive white promoter who continues to foster, nurture, and perpetuate the root cause of Toledo's death.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup>In the slave narratives alluded to here, waiting proves to be a strategy as well as an annoyance to African-Americans. See the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Jacobs's *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African*.

<sup>2</sup>As recorded in Sandra Leib's *Mother of the Blues* (142-44), the lyrics to "Ma Rainey's Black Bottom" are as follows:

#### **Man (speaks):**

Now, you heard the rest. Ah boys, I'm gonna show you the best. Ma Rainey's gonna show you *her* black bottom!

#### **Ma (sings):**

Way down South in Alabama,  
I got a friend they call dancin' Sammy,  
Who's crazy about all the latest dances,  
Black bottom stomps and the Jew baby prances;

The other night at a swell affair,  
Soon as the boys found out that I was there,  
They said, "Come on, Ma, let's go to the cabaret,  
Where that band, you ought to hear me say,"

#### **Chorus:**

I wanna learn that dance,

Don't you see the dance you call your big black bottom,  
That'll put you in a trance;

All the boys in the neighborhood  
They say your black bottom is really good,  
Come on and show me your black bottom,  
I want to learn that dance.

I want to see the dance you call the black bottom,  
I want to learn that dance,  
Come on and show that dance you call your big black bottom,  
It puts you in a trance;

Early last morning 'bout the break of day,  
Grandpa told my grandma, I heard him say,  
"Get up and show your old man your black bottom,  
I want to learn that dance."

Now I'm gon' to show y'all my black bottom,  
They stay to see that dance,  
Wait until you see me do my big black bottom,  
I'll put you in a trance;

**(Instrumental break, during which the man speaks):**

Ah, do it Ma, do it honey. Lookit now Ma, you gettin' kinda rough there! You ought to be yourself, now, careful now, not too strong, not too strong, Ma!

**Ma (sings):**

I done showed y'all my black bottom,  
You ought to learn that dance.

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