

The Liminal Epistemology of Apocalyptic Disability in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Fences*

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□ ABSTRACT □

This article highlights the African American reconfiguration of the conventional Apocalyptic perception of disability in two plays by August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988) and *Fences* (1987). Wilson's focal plays present a flexible adaptation of Apocalyptic disability that counteracts cultural absolutism. They highlight the effaced role of African reality in proposing liminality as a valid epistemology to destabilize the presumed pattern that shapes the traditional Apocalypse. So, Wilson's dramaturgy visualizes an Apocalyptic disability that maintains a liminal construction, being a projection of various social and cultural experiences, a missing gap in Wilson's scholarship. Ultimately, I address the cultural context where disability and African culture intersect to free the subjugated pathologized black other from dominant imperial paradigms.

Keywords: Apocalypse, liminality, liminal construction of disability

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التصور الحدّي لمفهوم "الإعاقة في طور نهاية العالم" كما يقدمه الكاتب المسرحي أوغست ويلسون في مسرحيات "مجيء جو تيرنر و ذهابه" و "أسوار"

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□ ملخص □

يبرز هذا البحث التوجّه الأمريكي الإفريقي لإعادة تصور رؤيا نهاية العالم فيما يخص تعريفها للإعاقة و ذلك في مسرحيات "مجيء جو تيرنر و ذهابه" (1988) و "أسوار" (1987) للكاتب المسرحي أوغست ويلسون. إذ تقدّم هذه المسرحيات تعديلاً مرناً لمفهوم "الإعاقة في طور نهاية العالم" بشكل يقاوم الإستبداد الثقافي. حيث تركّز هذه الأعمال على الدور المغمور للتصور الإفريقي لواقع السود و الذي يقدم مفهوم "الحدية" كمعرفة تصويرية شرعية لزعة النمط المفترض و المعتمد لأنموذج نهاية العالم. يمكن القول إنّ مسرح ويلسون يتخيل بشكل رئيس إعاقة ذات تشكّل حدّي في طور نهاية العالم كونها تعبّر عن تجارب ثقافية واجتماعية مختلفة. في هذا السياق، لا يزال هذا المنحى غير مطروق في الدراسات التي قدمت عن مسرح ويلسون. في النهاية، يهدف هذا البحث الى تكريس السياق الثقافي حيث تتقاطع الثقافة الإفريقية مع مفهوم الإعاقة بشكل يحرر الماهية السوداء المهمّشة بشكل مرضي من القوالب الإمبريالية المسيطرة.

الكلمات المفتاحية: رؤيا نهاية العالم، الحدية، التشكّل الحدّي للإعاقة

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Introduction:

This article addresses the African American resumption of the long standing Apocalyptic rendition of disability in two plays by August Wilson, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1988) and *Fences* (1987). Wilson's plays share the pattern of the decade-by decade chronicle of the African American experience called the "Pittsburgh Cycle" that addresses the pervasive impact of the blacks' great migration to the North and continuing racism. In these plays, Wilson's mythpoetics elicits African reality, a suppressed part in the Western cosmology and epistemology. The effaced black context suggests the rite of liminality as an alternative to rethink the established system of morality that underlies the Judeo-Christian Apocalyptic perception of disability. In essence, Wilson's plays rethink the traditional paradigm of the Apocalypse that maintains the postulated categorization of disability as a definite loss of mental and physical integrity. By engaging the rite of liminality, Wilson's plays suggest a liberatory construction of disability that is contingent on two existing and clashing realities.

Methodology:

The genre of Apocalyptic literature presents a rationalization of the world that is meant to relieve people who are traumatized by historical or social disruption (Rosen, 2008: xi-xii). Its narrative framework is concerned with a revelation that is usually "mediated by an other-worldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial, insofar as it involves another supernatural world" (Wagner, 2012: 150). Such traditional paradigm of the Apocalypse becomes one demonstration of reality for it already involves an epistemology of perceiving the world. In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode emphasizes this standpoint and argues that "the paradigms of Apocalypse continue to lie under our ways of making sense of the world" (1967: 28). Kermode's observation is crucial in identifying the integral role the paradigm of the Apocalypse plays in conveying a dominant reality. On the other hand, the Biblical paradigm of the Apocalypse sustains a generic norm that assumes the role of the exiled figure in initiating collective transformation and realization of origin in the end. In Leonard Thompson's *The Book of Revelation* (1190), the Apocalypse is presented through the figure of the Biblical John who lives in enforced exile on the island of Patmos. Opposed to and alienated from the existing social and political order, John predicts the overthrow of a corrupt world and the everlasting reign of the New Jerusalem. Through this revolutionary and subversive prophecy, John imagines himself as the consciousness of the collective and declares that all boundaries must be eradicated to complete the dream of a perfectly integrated community at the end of history (Thompson, 1190: 5-10). So, as a genre that addresses the underprivileged, the Biblical narrative of revelation unveils a collective pattern of hope that entails destruction of margins in the human community and rebirth of a new community. Arguably, the Biblical Apocalyptic notions of dominant reality and collective transformation establish rigid narratives that privilege cultural polarity and project linearity. Such rigid structures transform the Biblical Apocalyptic model into a grand narrative that underlies absolutism, a problematic aspect that this essay contests.

Literature Review:

I. The Apocalyptic Genre:

A review of scholarly works reveals the challenging revisions of the grand narrative that shapes the Apocalyptic genre. Critics have observed that recent adaptations

of the Apocalyptic narrative disclose a renewed religiosity that projects recent anxiety about the approaching end and understands radical continuity as part of underlying design (Rosen, 2008: xvii). On the other hand, theorists have addressed the problematic form of the Apocalyptic genre, which accounts for the emergence of new Apocalyptic paradigms. In this concern, Jacques Derrida, in "Of an Apocalyptic Tone Recently Adopted in Philosophy," contends that "by its very tone, the mixing of voices, genres, and codes, and the breakdown *le détraquement* of destinations, Apocalyptic discourse can also dismantle the dominant contract or concordat" (1982: 89). So, the Apocalypse becomes an inherent revelatory destabilization of every meaning, origin, and end, which is inherent in language and a continual unveiling of whatever lies hidden beneath any social veil. Derrida's argument suggests the continuous deconstruction of the Apocalyptic grand Narratives through a process of local revelations that contradict the collective model. Derrida's theory could expound the postmodern revisionary perceptions of the Apocalyptic genre that seems to have "emancipated itself from its historical and biblical roots" so that "there is no common agreement on the form, content, or function of Apocalyptic thinking and writing" (Broeck 1985: 94). This change in Apocalyptic storytelling has been fathomed as response of a culture that is "caught up by a crisis that challenges the very undergirdings of its makeup" (Dewey, 10). For instance, the Judeo-Christian deity of the paradigm has been replaced by an alternative deity figure or relocated in a human figure. In such case, both alternative models would have godlike power to endow or deny life and possess, as defined by Elizabeth Rosen, "omnipotent or omniscient" abilities (2008: xxiii). Also, the vision of the idealized or perfected place has become the new way of seeing. So, people do not inherit a new world but a new way of understanding the old world (2008: xxiii). Rigid delineations have also been abandoned in favor of more flexible depictions that contribute to plurality and ambiguity that are of stronger influences (2008: xxiv). Moreover, the postmodern refusal of linear structure and rigid tyranny of time has destabilized the core of the original Apocalyptic narrative. Defiance to privileged culture or point of view is most noted in the postmodern adaptations of the Apocalypse.

II. The African American Apocalyptic Pattern:

One example of the challenging responses to the Apocalypse is the pervasive African American reconfiguration that becomes a justifiable response to racial oppression. In this context, the Apocalyptic paradigm becomes symptomatic of the contradiction between America's democratic ideals and the daily realities confronting the majority of African Americans and the ensuing paradox of their time. Thus, the early African American imagination of the Apocalypse has marked the overthrow of oppressive white system and return to the prelapsarian existence and the oral mode of expression (Montgomery, 1996: 7). Such African American vision entails the reassumption of the Scriptures in terms relevant to the Blacks' own reality and theology. For example, dramatist Amiri Baraka relies on the rhetoric of Apocalypse in crafting his creative works that include signs of impending doom and destruction. Baraka foresees the Apocalypse as a violent destabilization of the white power structure. Also, African American critiques and novels have liberated the trope of the Apocalypse from the traditional Eurocentric analysis and integrated an Afrocentric understanding grounded in black culture. For instance, James Baldwin's *The Fire this Time* is recognized as a twist of the Apocalypse using Black culture's own language, style, trickster tales, and legitimate folk heroes.¹ Moreover, many African American novelists are acknowledged for their attempts to reverse or subvert the

¹ See Clenora Hudson-Weems's backcover review of Baldwin's work.

notion of the world-end in mainstream America by suggesting Africa as an alternative to the Biblical homeland, being the source of a renewed sense of the self and community for the race (Montgomery, 1996: 14).

III. August Wilson's Apocalyptic Model:

The scholarship on African American playwright August Wilson reveals how his dramaturgy does not project a passing concern with the notion of the Apocalypse as it offers a challenging poetic sensibility to consider. In this respect, Wilson's body of criticism and dramaturgy is similarly concerned with the Apocalyptic epistemology of reality for the "underprivileged" (Rosen, 2008: xii). Yet, Wilson's epistemology implicates uncovering an effaced Black reality. In "The Ground on Which I stand" (1996), Wilson contends that the Cultural Imperialists "refuse to recognize black conduct and manners as part of a system that is fueled by its own philosophy, mythology, history, creative motif, social organization and ethos. The idea that blacks have their own way of responding to the world, their own values, style, linguistics, religion and aesthetics, is unacceptable to them" (1996: 7). Thus, Wilson foregrounds the artistic awareness of the African reality. He contends that Black dramatists "reserve the right to amend, to explore, to add [their] African consciousness and [their] African aesthetic to the art [they] produce" (11). As such, Wilson's mythpoetics of the Apocalypse is shaped by the integration of codes from Africa's cultural reservoir and continuum. In this respect, critics have focused on how Wilson engages with the myth of end-time theology in his own terms that reflect aspects of the postmodern sensibility as well. Some scholars have underscored the visionary nature in certain Wilsonian plays and demarcated them as a meditation on Apocalyptic history even chronicled in Baldwin's *The Fire this Time*. In *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, Harry Elam explains how the trajectory of Wilson's work is toward an eschatological Apocalypse that affirms a "new future through the revelations of the past's impact on the present. In particular, embodied ritualized acts of sacrificial death in Wilson's plays offer practical sites for personal and social transformation" (2004: 25). Elam presents a pertinent claim regarding Wilson's maintained uncertainty and rejection of the Apocalyptic myth's absolutism and its underlying system of morality.

However, the scholarship of Wilson's drama reveals certain gaps that are related to his challenging integration of body politics, disability in particular, which could redirect the traditional Apocalypse. Wilson's engagement with disability has been addressed by many critics. For instance, Kim Hall refers to the way Wilson's dramaturgy challenges assumptions by invoking images of disability, especially in *Fences*, to embody experiences of racial and economic oppression (2011: 289). On the other hand, references to chronic illness in the context of redemption are only limited to how Wilson transforms certain deranged characters into "spectacle characters" or agents who have redeeming qualities. In this respect, readings of Wilson's *Fences* and *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* redirect black madness as the repository of communal memory. In "August Wilson," Elam observes how *Fences* presents the mad Gabriel whose mission lies in the invocation of a racial memory, an African inheritance. Elam affirms that Gabriel's ritualistic and spiritual enactment is an exhibit of a syncretic cosmology, the presence of African tradition within New World religious practice (2001: 859-60). Also, in "August Wilson, Doubling Madness, and Modern African-American Drama," Elam links Gabriel to the Yoruba god Ogun who is the first to survive the fourth stage of tragic terror and disintegration through his titanic will (2000: 628). In a third article "Fools and Babes," Elam argues that Wilson deconstructs the stereotype of the madman who lacks wisdom. Elam examines the Wilsonian paradigm of

the “seriously taken madman” which is central to Wilson’s primary cultural project that aims at the revelation of the African presence in contemporary African American generation (2004: 63-64). In “Black Madness,” Mark Rocha asserts that Gabriel is the embodiment of the Wilsonian representation of black madness which is deeply imbedded in “vernacular telling community” (1993: 193). Rocha’s contention endorses Gabriel’s value as both teller of inexplicable stories and son of the god Esu whose stories make each member of the community heard and “told” in existence (193). Like Gabriel, Loomis, in *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone*, has been read by Elam and Rocha as a prototype of Wilson’s model of the “seriously taken Black madman.” Again, these readings locate Wilson’s recovery of African memory in the site of mental disability to imply that Gabriel’s and Loomis’s madness is subversive, being the repository of collective connection with the African past and cosmology. However, such readings suggest the construction of Gabriel’s and Loomis’s “Black madness” as definite pathology that projects agency. In general, it can be inferred from these critical readings that Wilson’s model of redemption seems to maintain the scientific and theological discourses of disability which mainly relocate the site of transformation within the boundaries of definite mental disorder. So, such scholarship sustains an epistemology of disability that, despite subversive, is still a symptom of psychological and physical incompleteness as inscribed by the imperial white reality. Ultimately, Wilson’s scholars still pair black identity with the white-coded exile that is designed as a monolithic symptom of color disability associated with blackness in the first place. Thus, these studies do not address how the intact African memory, as a present and valid reality, projects completeness, contributes to the irresolution of black disability, and reimagines the Apocalyptic pattern.

On the other hand, studies that investigate the presence of liminality in Wilson’s dramaturgy do not address its implications regarding body politics, disability in particular. For instance, Elam suggests that liminality figures prominently through “ritualized remembering” in Wilson’s works. And Wilson’s form “refigures breaks both personal and collective in time, space, and identity, to restructure morality” (2004: 25). Elam reiterates that these liminality rituals drive simultaneously toward “transformation and self-determination” (Bell, 2010: 170). Elam argues that the liminality of time also provides a metaphor for the characters’ own dilemma and developments. The characters and Wilson’s dramaturgy are at once within and outside of history (2004:13). So, no connection between liminality and disability is observed.

IV. Scientific and Theological Readings of Disability:

Disability has always been constructed as a sociocultural and political category. In the social and scientific reading of disability, disabled or impaired figures are expected to lack mental or physical integrity and suffer from ensuing dysfunction. Medical studies find problems in the disabled individual body rather than in the disabling society that stigmatizes and systematically limits individuals who experience a wide range of impairments. These studies follow the culturally constructed standards of the “ideal normal body” which tend to marginalize disabled bodies. They posit a typical standard for whole and healthy bodies, a perspective that fails to incorporate relevant themes such as cultural exclusion and social accommodation (Schumm, 2011: xiv). Postcolonial writers have addressed the treatment of disability and disabled or health-marginalized people in their works. They identify the use of the stereotype of the disabled as the “worst enemy” to the “able-bodied.”² Other critics expose how religion mimics the medical models that connect

² See the online report on “Disabling Imagery and the Media,” 1992.

disabling bodily conditions with physical abnormality that requires diagnosis and cure. In this context, disability is ascribed to a “lack” of physical ability caused by limitations of culturally defined “normal” bodies (Schumm, 2011: xiii). Physical abnormality is then rendered into individual spiritual deficiency. So, there is a persistent tendency to associate disability with individual sin, which leads to spiritual alienation and anxiety in the private sphere.

In the context of transformation, the socio-religious implications of disability pair impaired people with two extremes that project solitariness: definite failure or amnesiac agency. Deemed physically or psychologically helpless, impaired people are denied survival in a structured society and ultimately cannot endure a chaotic society. These claims entail that people with disabilities can barely function in “regular” society. Thus, when society itself dissolves into chaos, the first to die are often those who have to rely on others. In case they appear, especially in the gaming community, they are generally considered hopeless and unable to survive without the assistance of others.³ Such inevitable assistance is yet another way to suggest that able-ism permeates society. In the Biblical configuration of transformation, the disabled become divine intermediaries and agents of the Apocalypse, for alternative worlds are created or destroyed then redeemed by the homeless and crazy. However, their Apocalyptic agency is limited as it requires an amnesiac disability marked by loss of memory and self-recognition that, again, sustains the disabled’s isolation and failure of social engagement. Either reading, disability is demonized as a chronic symptom of solitary amnesia. So, the recipient of divine revelation is always depicted as the deranged or disabled who no longer acknowledges his old life or identity (Rosen, 2008: 82). As such, Apocalyptic transformation is demonized as a physical and psychological pathology, a consistent perception in the scholarship of the Apocalypse.⁴

However, certain studies have questioned the theological demonization of the disabled. They identify the problem that religion and disability have been addressed from the perspective of a single religion that is dominated by white perspectives. Such studies have promoted interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and interreligious dialogues regarding disability and religious diversity. They all call for readings of disability as varied experiences that are not fashioned as a monolithic grouping or generic category. Thus, my reading proposes the challenging case of liminal formation of disability that Wilson’s plays conceive in response to different realities, a prevailing white reality and an effaced African reality.

V. Liminality in Rites of Passage:

Rites of passage refer to the change of status for an individual or a group and signify transitions in the passage of time. British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner and French ethnographer and folklorist Arnold van Gennep have addressed a variation of these rites following an interest in observing African tribal rituals of passage, specifically those of the Ndembu tribes of Zambia. According to Turner, when the male subject comes of age, he is to be initiated as an adult into the Ndembu tribal community and has to go through what van Gennep calls the “liminal phase” (Turner, 1969: 94). In the liminal period, the “initiant” experiences a problematic stage following a blurring of social distinctions” (Venegas 2005: 202). Van Gennep and Turner have expanded such understanding of passage and liminality, and suggested their relevance in both traditional and hypermodern

³ See the blog on “Disabilities During the Apocalypse,” 2014.

⁴ David Lashmet contends that “it might be best to imagine apocalypse as a psychological phenomenon, as a ‘plague of madness’, as much as a biological epidemic” (2000:58).

societies that are analyzed as structures of positions (Turner 1967: 93). According to van Gennep, rites of passage are subdivided into three stages: separation (preliminal), transition (liminal), and incorporation (post-liminal) phase (1908: 26). Rites of separation symbolically disengage the individual from an existing status in the social structure. The liminal rite signifies the creation of a tabula rasa in which the initiate undergoes the elimination of a taken-for-granted practice under the authority. After this separation, the former social status no longer applies to the individual. In the transitional or liminal stage, the individual has no clearly defined status or role (1908: 26). The postliminal rite is the phase of incorporation where the "initiant" is incorporated into a new identity and re-enters society.

Liminality communicates confusion, inferiority, and seclusion. According to Turner, liminality marks a status of fluidity that is "essentially ambiguous, unsettled, and unsettling" (1974: 274). Liminars are defined by a neither/nor status that defies all social categories (Turner, 1967: 97). They no longer retain their pre-ritual position but have not yet acquired the status granted upon the completion of the passage. This undecided position transforms them into symbolic outsiders in any society. Turner argues that the liminar's "outsiderhood" (Willet, 2001: 139) generates structural inferiority (1974: 231). Being an outsider, the liminal individual is often marginalized and cannot but display submission to the society's values and norms. Also, the myriad taboos enforced on the liminars limit their social interaction and maintain their structural invisibility (Turner, 1967: 98). Liminality also precipitates seclusion. The liminar's status of neither/nor defies all social arrangements that contribute to a final designation of the liminar as a person. This mystified status causes other members of society to apprehend any direct interaction with the liminars who become non-persons.

VI. Disability and Liminality:

Disability scholarship reveals an established analogy between the drawbacks of liminality and disability. Many researchers analyze the similarities between the liminal status during rites of passage and the status of individuals with disabilities. Marilyn J. Phillips writes that the majority of those with a permanent disability can never be cured, restored, or normalized in a physical sense. They are therefore perceived "as suspended between the sick role and normality, between wrong bodies and right bodies" (1990: 851). In a number of cultures, the physically disabled are not even considered human. Also, structural invisibility of liminality, the inevitable result of losing or being without a social status, is mainly aligned with what Michelle Fine and Adrienne Asch generally call the "roleslessness" of persons with disabilities.

More particularly, some scholars align disability with "permanent liminality." Recognized as an unending flaw, permanent liminality is no longer a social space of inbetweenness that eventually realizes a new social position. Definitely, unending liminality produces "a permanent outsider status, losing its power to connect the self and the other in everyday life" (Willet, 2001: 142). This situation is most analogous to the case of disabled people who often face constant socially-created barriers that prevent them from realizing their social reintegration. According to Jeffrey Willet, physical disability functions in modern society as a status betwixt and between everyday assumptions about "normal" physical strength and functioning. This creates a situation of "permanent liminality, or a failure to be incorporated" (2001: 137). Based on this analogy, Willet argues that individuals with disabilities are in the potentially unending, liminal stage of a symbolic rite of passage. Thus, locating disability within the context of "rite of passage" redirects its designation as an experience of permanent liminality.

Objectives:

The previous review of scholarship on liminality and disability reveals its integration of monolithic norms that dismiss varied social structures. Obviously, liminars are positioned at margins arranged by one society. The disabled are also categorized by the social barriers and taboos of a certain disabling society that denies full participation for all its members. However, this scholarship does not consider the two constructs of disability and liminality in light of varied social realities that may co-exist. The concurrent presence of two, often clashing realities, would further problematize the formation of both liminality and disability and extend their specific ambiguity and plurality. In this context, rites of passage separate the individual from an existing point in a certain social structure. Yet, not necessarily the same case occurs in the other social reality. As such, the liminal rite does not guarantee a complete removal from the pre-liminal stage that involves varied former social statuses or practices. So, the transitional or liminal stage now signifies that the individual is both a viable member of a social group and an outsider in another. Thus, even the formation of liminality becomes problematic, with no clearly uniform roles in varied structures. This unresolved rite applies to disability where its formation becomes unresolved in the presence of varied realities. An individual may suffer from definite physical, mental, or sensory impairments according to the norms of a certain society. But the same individual may retain full agency in another social structure. So, the liminality of disability here refers to its unresolved construction in the first place.

A visualization of an Apocalyptic disability that projects a liminal construction shapes my reading of Wilson's plays. And as mentioned before, disability as a projection of various social and cultural experiences is not examined in Wilson's scholarship. As such, my reading examines the relation between unresolved disability and the Wilsonian Apocalypse, particularly in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Fences*. In this concern, I explore the cultural terrain where disability and effaced African culture interconnect to re-imagine the black identity as free from the constraints of white cultural imposition and redirect the correlation of blackness and disability.

In Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, the repercussions of slavery cause mental traumas that are almost disabling. The play, set in a boardinghouse in Pittsburgh around the fall of 1911, is the second in Wilson's *The Century Cycle* series of Blacks' migration. It chronicles the struggle of former enslaved African Americans in the hostile North that sustains racial discrimination and exploitation. In a structure that conforms to the realism genre, the play features the daily lives of the boardinghouse's residents as they search for their identities while sustaining their African legacy. A representative freed migrant is Herald Loomis, a displaced black man who temporarily resides in Pittsburgh's boardinghouse. Having undergone bondage to the white slave-catcher Joe Turner for seven years, Loomis is uprooted from the South and separated arbitrarily from his family. So, he embarks on a journey of search for his lost wife Martha Loomis. In this white reality of rupture, Loomis is considered an impaired figure because of his seeming signs of mental pathology identified as uneasy discord of languages. He is described as "unable to harmonize the world forces that swirl around him" (1.1. 14). Loomis's physical appearance further suggests his mental confusion. He "wears a hat and a long wool coat" in mid-August (1.1.14). Loomis's subsequent reactions suggest his being utterly disoriented by the experience of slavery and project his discursive cacophony. He gets agitated when Bynum Walker, a "conjure" man, sings the song "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" (2.2.67-69). Also, he will not join the community's African call-and-response "juba" that celebrates the name of the Holy Ghost" (1.2.52). He again gets mysteriously enraged and warns about the

community's unanticipated destruction, not salvation, by Christ. His reaction is interpreted as a fit of hallucinations that require his sequestration (1.2.53). Loomis's apparently enigmatic appearance and disharmonized language seem to deny his public interaction. For instance, Seth Holly, the owner of the boardinghouse, does not trust Loomis. Because of Loomis's mysterious wanderings and obvious unemployment, Seth thinks he might be a thief. So, Seth will not tell Loomis about the location of his lost wife. He even attempts to kick Loomis out after witnessing his fit of rage. According to the conventions of this white reality, Loomis could be read as a misfit whose seeming disorientation alienates and denies his integration into the disabling society. In this respect, Loomis has been considered by critics, such as Elam and Rocha, as a prototype of Wilson's paradigm of the "seriously taken Black madman." Such readings would sound logical based on Loomis's direct psychic reactions.

However, integrating the effaced perspective of the African reality reveals a liminal construction in Loomis's disability as it is marked with full mnemonics of integrity. Loomis's search turns to project solid retention of the African cosmology. The play's stage directions indicate that Loomis is "driven not by the hellhounds that seemingly bay at his heels, but by his search for a world that speaks to something about himself" (1.1. 13-14). This performative description will turn to imply that Loomis displays constant attachment to the African reality. Loomis perceives a vision of bones that walk over water and then sink. Loomis tells Bynum: "I done seen bones rise up out the water. Rise up and walk across the water. Bones walking on top of the water" (1. 2. 53). Considering the African reality, this vision is a clear archetypal narrative of the African ancestors who died on slave ships en route to the American shore. Loomis's account continues and the bones are transformed into either enslaved or dead Africans. Loomis's revelation clearly indicates that his separation from the African world is not complete as he still retains a consistent African history. In light of the African reality, Loomis's vision challenges his imposed definite disability. It does not present a manifestation of a deranged mind but a discursive projection of intact memory, clarity, and consistency, hence Loomis's unresolved disability.

Loomis's full retention of ancestral memory generates his challenging visibility. Loomis's liminal disability defies the socially-coded impairment as negation, exile, and lasting breakdown. Again, assuming the suppressed African reality problematizes the white-imposed disability to highlight Loomis's visibility. Loomis is fervently connected to the "bones people" who first experience slavery on the American shore. He identifies with their struggle: "They black. Just like you and me. Ain't no difference" (1.2.54). Loomis even feels as if he is lying there with the others, and he panics when he realizes that he is not able to stand up (1.2.56). Having an ancestral bearing, Loomis's own narration is thus encoded within the myths of origin of the African American community. As such, his story of cultural and familial rupture also becomes a diasporic rhetoric for it is about all slaves at emancipation who had been denied their African heritages and separated from their families. And his quest for revival is the account of myriad disrupted Africans who seek a restart. This generational struggle is extended to the play's African American community whose colonial dispersion is symbolized by the temporary setting of the boardinghouse in which the characters find themselves. So, Loomis's plight is a conduit to the other characters who become overwhelmed by white oppression. Each character presents one facet of Loomis's struggle with the white discourse of slavery, rupture, and eternal search. Mattie Campbell, a tenant of Seth's, is similarly distraught by the loss of her little girl, her old boyfriend, and eventually Jeremy, her new mate. Jeremy is a young tenant who

struggles with the police and loses his job in the end. Seth is unable to get a loan to start his own tinsmithing business. Bynum is a freed slave and, like Loomis, desires a new start symbolized in his quest for the shiny man. Moreover, these characters become more connected through their stories about Loomis's symbolic search for his wife. So, Loomis's narrative of white-foisted plight becomes the historical chronicle that directs and connects the whole African American community presented in the play. Thus, Loomis's suggested disability becomes liminal for it retains his collective integrity and recognition and inscribes his diasporic discourse of shared plight and sough revival on the whole community.

Loomis develops mutual relations with the community and foregrounds his collective agency. Loomis does not conform to the dominant codes that denounce disability as precipitator of intimidating enigma and social fear. Loomis's unresolved impairment projects empathy and identification that develops into communal confession. For instance, Mattie feels comforted and shares with Loomis her mutual loss of a mate. Bynum gets close to Loomis and discloses his search for the liberatory Binding song. Bynum tells Loomis: "That song rattling in my throat and I'm looking for it" (2. 2. 71). Most importantly, Bynum recognizes and predicts the effaced liberatory facet of Loomis's trauma: "See, Mr. Loomis, when a man forgets his song he goes off in search for it ... till he finds out he's got it with him all the time. That's why I can tell you one of Joe Turner's niggers. 'Cause you forgot how to sing your song" (2. 2. 71). Bynum identifies Loomis's power of trickery and believes that, while enslaved, Loomis trapped Turner by deliberately forgetting his song. So, Bynum understands why Turner was hoping to steal Loomis's song, but could not. Bynum's realization transforms the supposedly disabled Loomis into an African trickster. Bynum's understanding of Loomis as a trickster may rethink his earlier description. Loomis's season-mismatching clothes could be read as a calculated coordination that reflects his defiance to definite and restrictive designs. So, he may be "[deliberately] unable to harmonize the world forces that swirl around him" (1.1.14). Thus, Loomis's liminal disability is definitely not a marker of social paranoia or failed integration. Rather, the community now has a remarkable access into Loomis's thinking. So, Loomis's trauma becomes a facet of typical and anticipated reality for his Black community. Thus, the integration of the African reality rethinks Loomis's supposedly definite disability and presents the element of predictability that would contribute to healthy inclusiveness.

Loomis's unresolved disability revises the restrictive paradigm of the Apocalypse. As previously mentioned, narratives of the Apocalypse have displayed the inclusion of disabled figures as possible exiled leaders of the mythical rite. Such Apocalyptic paradigm is pathological as it does not free the disabled from the socially-arranged drawback of seclusion. It rather sustains their limited agency that denies full memory and eventual interaction. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, Loomis can be read as the trickster figure who refuses to harmonize the traditional divine revelation and "seeks to recreate the world into one that contains his image" (1.1. 14). Unlike the case of the exiled harbinger of the Biblical revelation, Loomis communicates with other harbingers. Being a repository of African history, Loomis fully acknowledges the other voices recognized in his diasporic discourse of dislocation. Bynum who binds people in their struggle, being privileged by his encounter with the shiny man, is a potential inclusive harbinger. So, before the rite of passage is initiated, both Loomis and Bynum conduct a therapeutic recollection of the ancestral travel. When Loomis imagines the Africans' bones, Bynum is invited to guide him through the process of recollection (1.2.53-56). Bynum adds his vision of the shiny

man who connects people to Loomis's inclusive ancestral chronicle. As such, the incorporation of the suppressed African reality projects Loomis's "unresolved" Apocalyptic paradigm as an open communion of harbingers that defy the exclusive structure of the traditional Apocalypse.

Loomis performs a sacrificial rite that can be perceived as a challenging revision of the paradigm of the Apocalypse. Loomis encounters his wife Martha (now Martha Pentecost) who presently symbolizes the Biblical epistemology, being a member of the Evangelical church. Martha tries to convince Loomis that Jesus is his only savior: "You got to open up your heart and have faith, Herald. This world is just a trial for the next. Jesus offers you salvation" (2.4. 93). However, Loomis engages his agency to directly denounce the Biblical paradigm of the Apocalypse that presents Christ as the only redeemer of the community. He confronts Martha: "I don't need nobody to bleed for me. I can bleed for myself" (2.4.93). Again, Loomis's consistency and integrity are highlighted. He previously denounces the Christ-centered juba dance: "Stop it! Stop![...] You all sitting up here singing about the Holy Ghost? What's so holy about the Holy Ghost?" (52). Now, his similar argument with Martha rules out signs of derangement. For Loomis, the white conceptualization of the Apocalypse involves external harbingers who are limited and do not cultivate a communal sensitivity. These harbingers would not free Black history from colonial determinacy, liberate Black subjectivity from white-imposed disability, or uncover full Black mobility. Instead, Loomis performs his freedom and bleeds himself, again with the help of Bynum: "LOOMIS slashes himself across the chest. He rubs the blood over his face and comes to a realization" (2.4. 93). By so doing, he announces the onset of his destabilization of the conventional Apocalypse that foregrounds exclusion, isolation, and ensuing disability.

The viability of Loomis's therapeutic model lies in its liberation of the whole Black subjectivity from white discursive restraints. This process of freedom starts with dissociating discourse from the white-coded history that inscribes definite endings and sustains the stigmatization of blackness as disability. Loomis's major discursive mobility is suggested in his proclamation "My legs stood up! I'm standing now!"(2.4.93) that functions as a liberatory continuation of the ancestral story of "Bones." As such, the African history of slavery is no longer a discourse of immobility and death. It acquires a new start and implication through a Black-defined Apocalypse. Loomis's Apocalyptic paradigm represents an archetypal liberatory Binding song that marks his new start:

Having found his song, the song of self-sufficiency, fully resurrected, cleansed and given breath, free from any encumbrance other than the workings of his own heart and the bonds of the flesh, having accepted the responsibility for his own presence in the world, he is free to soar above the environs that weighed and pushed his spirit into terrifying contractions. (2. 4. 93-94)

Loomis's free discourse and subjectivity are suggested in Bynum's new identification: "Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money!" (2.4.94). Bynum's remark suggests that amnesia of one's old self is not a prerequisite in Loomis's Apocalyptic discourse. So, he still retains his old identity, Herald Loomis, as he becomes the shiny man, the Black designation of the harbinger in Loomis's Apocalyptic paradigm.

The full agency of Loomis's rite is demonstrated by its inclusive and indeterminate force. Loomis has a cultural bearing and embraces an open communion of harbingers. As such, his own rite is extended into other Apocalyptic rites by other harbingers in the community. For instance, Bynum, through Loomis's ritual, recognizes that he has found his shiny man. He can now realize his therapeutic Binding song that connects black

subjectivities according to a reality that is free from white codes and restraints. As such, he can initiate his own revival and constantly secure others' redemption. So, Loomis's inclusive and open-ended paradigm cannot be realized without rethinking the definite and exclusive conceptualization of his disability and visualizing its liminal construction in light of the African reality.

Wilson's *Fences* presents a traumatic case of war injury that could cause physical and mental impairment. The play, set in a black neighborhood in Pittsburgh of the 1950s, is the sixth installment in the Pittsburgh cycle of the African American experience. *Fences* is often considered a modern tragedy of black men's lives that are ultimately crushed by the pressure of racism. Yet, it foregrounds the black male's episodes of defiance to social restrictions and his reverence for family heritage. In *Fences*, Gabriel Maxson is a black war-veteran who has been enforced to undergo the Great migration. This grand experience comprises a white-foisted reality that safeguards racism, animosity, and colonialism. During World War II, Gabriel experiences brain damage and undergoes surgical implantation. As a mark of his physical trauma, Gabriel has "a metal plate [...] in his head" (1.2. 24). The play suggests that the tragic reality of war has also caused Gabriel's mental disorder labeled by the white reality as both amnesia and confusion in Gabriel's identity. The first appearance of Gabriel in *Fences* projects his amnesia: "He carries an old trumpet tied around his waist and believes with every fiber of his being that he is the Archangel Gabriel" (1.2. 26). From the white perspective, Gabriel is mentally impaired as he suffers from oblivion and self-confusion signs. He identifies himself as the archangel who announces the end of the world in the Biblical Apocalyptic narrative. Gabriel's claim suggests amnesia of his identity as an African American veteran. Gabriel's subsequent dialogue with Rose Maxson implies that he is confined to a language of delusion only. He informs Rose: "Did you know when I was in heaven ... every morning me and St. Peter would sit down by the gate and eat some big fat biscuits [...] Better get ready for the judgment" (1.2. 26-27). Gabriel's psychic association seems to bar his incorporation into the disabling society. He faces communal efforts that deny him social engagement and even household's attempts to confine him to a mental institution. So, Gabriel's narrative suggests a reading that he is definitely a mentally challenged misfit whose derangement projects his seeming social derision and cultural insignificance. This reading would sound consistent based on Gabriel's own direct gesture of confusion.

However, considering the effaced African reality, the formation of Gabriel's disability becomes liminal for it does involve intact memory. Again, Gabriel's physical description is crucial to recognize his physical and psychological liminality. Gabriel "carries a chipped basket with an assortment of discarded fruits and vegetables he has picked up in the strip district and which he attempts to sell" (1.2. 24). In the disabling white reality, as presented in the play, selling discarded crops becomes a sign of derangement that projects confusion. However, Gabriel's basket of castoff fruits and vegetables also suggests revival, being an attempt of recovering and giving them value. Integrating this standpoint reveals how the basket's function recalls the mythic calabash held by Yoruba god, Esu-Elegbara. The calabash communicates creation by locating Esu-Elegbara's *ase*, the "very *ase* with which Olodumare, the supreme deity of the Yoruba, created the universe" (Gates, 1988: 7). In light of Esu-Elegbara's calabash, Gabriel does not project signs of amnesia as he still retains his full memory. He becomes a visible conduit to the African cosmology and performs the mythic *ase* through his profession that promises possible redemption.

Gabriel's retention of Esu-Elegbara's memory generates his challenging visibility. Gabriel's malleable disability is not consistent with the dominant social designation of impairment as a definite marker of inferiority, seclusion, and permanent failure. Again, recognizing the veiled perception of African reality complicates the conventional conception of disability to highlight the effaced visibility of Gabriel. He displays strong African orientation being the carrier of Esu-Elegbara's memory. Esu-Elegbara is also recognized as the "divine linguist" who exists on the crossroads. He becomes the mediator of the "meta-level of formal language, of the ontological and epistemological status of figurative language and its interpretation" (Gates, 1988: 6). So, Esu-Elegbara controls the discourse of the universe through his linguistic multiplicity. Recalling the scarred Esu-Elegbara, Gabriel's language communicates with the rhetoric of his community. Gabriel's white-foisted plight inscribes the collective thinking that directs the whole African American community presented in this play. Each member of the Maxson's household voices out a symptom of Gabriel's ethical, spiritual, and economic struggle with colonial forces. So, Gabriel's plight is a conduit to all other characters who become obsessed by the language of dislocation, economic insufficiency, survival, and cultural disconnection in the North.

On the other hand, the fact that each character is in touch with Gabriel foregrounds his communal agency. Even Troy Maxson, Gabriel's brother, admits to Lyons his closeness to Gabriel: "I don't know what happened to him [Troy's father]. I done lost touch with everybody except Gabriel" (1.4.53). Challenging the established signification of apprehension that stigmatizes disability, Gabriel's unresolved impairment projects comfort that generates the others' communal interaction. Thus, Gabriel's liminal disability is definitely not a marker of permanent liminality or permanent failure of incorporation that entails submission. Rather, the whole community becomes remarkably reincorporated into Gabriel's thinking. In other words, Gabriel's trauma acquires a normalized status by becoming the standard that arranges his Black society. Thus, the presence of the African reality redirects Gabriel's disability into a liminal conflation of abnormality/normality that would create an inclusive society.

In Wilson's *Fences*, Gabriel's unresolved disability rethinks the pathological paradigm of the Apocalypse. Gabriel is the recipient of divine revelation who retains full recognition and inscribes an inclusive discourse of shared plight. Being a repository of African communal memory and language, Gabriel fully recognizes himself as a member and mediates with the other voices recognized in his pathological discourse. So, before the rite of passage is initiated, both Gabriel and Troy conduct a therapeutic conversation. Gabriel informs Rose: "Say, Rose ... you know I was chasing hellhounds and them bad mens come and get me and take me away. Troy helped me. He come down there and told them they better let me go before he beat them up. Yeah, he did!" (2.1. 67). So, Troy is presented as another harbinger who participates in illumining the route of communal redemption. Unlike the case of the exiled harbinger of the Biblical revelation, Gabriel presents an inclusive model. He invites a circle of harbingers to conduct the passage of communal redemption. This incorporation of the suppressed African reality explains why Gabriel refers to himself as the Archangel Gabriel who sits with St. Peter. He is definitely Gabriel, being the mediator who maintains a communal relation with various harbingers of the Apocalyptic reality. On the other hand, Gabriel's inclusive model that leads redemption creates a plurality of harbingers who problematize the closure and seclusion that shape the traditional Apocalyptic paradigm.

Integrating the African model of resurrection, Gabriel then initiates a “dance of atavistic signature and ritual” (2.5.101). The play’s reviews reveal how some audiences have read Gabriel’s final performance as failure to produce sound from his horn and an ultimate sign of derangement that cues ill-timed laughter. Certain critics integrate the African perspective to view Gabriel’s “attempts at speech and his trance-like dance movements” as “silent only to the onlooker,” being a “closed communication between him and the spiritual world that only he, in this hypersensitive state as African conduit, is capable of receiving” (Shannon, 2003:103). This African-oriented reading still accentuates Gabriel’s isolation as a drawback of white-coded disability. Following his experiment with the instrument, Gabriel announces Troy’s arrival in heaven by blowing his horn and alerts St. Peter to fling open the Pearly Gates for him (2.5.101). Again, this performance has been interpreted as a sign of derangement. Some audiences even believe that Troy is a scoundrel who deserves indictment rather than celebration.⁵

However, Gabriel’s final performance cannot be perceived as a limited or isolated rite. His ritualistic dance overthrows the trumpet being the language of the white reality (2.5. 101). Most importantly, Gabriel’s concluding horn gesture signifies the realization of an alternative language of passage that liberates the Black subjectivity and community at the same time. The viability of Gabriel’s rite is demonstrated by its collective connection and development into other Apocalyptic rites by other harbingers in the community. Gabriel’s announcement of Troy’s death follows his earlier communion with the other harbinger, Troy, to map out their therapy. So, being an inclusive mediator and member of a communion of harbingers, Gabriel initiates Troy’s Apocalyptic rite. Troy is the other harbinger whose death becomes an extension of Gabriel’s dance and leads to an Apocalyptic passage that responds to the African reality. Troy is no longer isolated being overwhelmed by financial pressure. He realizes communal interaction and reconciliation with the Maxson family on the day of his funeral. And the Maxsons are no longer strained or disunited because of social, racial, and economic barriers (2.5.99). Troy’s death then becomes a therapeutic rite that does not conform to white-coded prerequisites of isolation and limitation. It even signifies life through Troy’s son, Cory, who continues his song “Blue.” Cory asserts his readiness to initiate his own freedom. As such, Troy’s death displays the harbinger’s communal sensitivity, inclusive discourse, and indeterminacy. Thus, Gabriel’s unresolved disability suggests a liberatory pattern of Apocalypse that does not foreground isolation.

In Wilson’s two focal plays, the liminal construction of Apocalyptic disability undoes the imperial Apocalyptic rite that has effaced its unresolved nature and contributed to its monolithic formation. Both Loomis and Gabriel are the agents who conduct an Apocalyptic return to the white-free epistemology presented by the African reality. As such, Wilson’s alternative to the Apocalyptic paradigm is a transformation precipitated by unresolved disability that frees the black body from generic categories.

Conclusion:

Wilson’s dramaturgy presents his poetics of disability that defies established mythologies and orthodoxies and reworks the narrative of revelation in African codes. In particular, Wilson’s *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* and *Fences* present a flexible adaptation of Apocalyptic disability which refuses to privilege absolutism or one culture or another. So, the plays disrupt dominant value judgments and normalized conceptions of

⁵ See Wilson’s interview with Roger Downey, 1988.

disability. By so doing, they also free the subjugated pathological black other from a privileged and imperial epistemology. Also, such liminal formation of disability constructs an Apocalypse that is responsive to two different realities at work.

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