It is fair to say that by now August Wilson has become America's preeminent contemporary playwright. His decade-by-decade portrayals of African American historical experience, seven of which have been produced to date, have been deservedly acclaimed, their dramatic rendering of African American life permanently inserting black voice and story in the American theatrical canon. Alan Nadel's edited collection of essays on the plays of August Wilson presents a splendid array of critical approaches to Wilson's work, an annotated bibliography, and Wilson's own apparently controversial statement, "I Want a Black Director," which is discussed by Michael Awkward.

The most satisfying aspects of the collection as a whole are its theoretical and critical variety, its interdisciplinarity, and its clarity. The consensus binding the volume is the problem of historical representation; in the course of their considerations, most of the authors not only illuminate one or several of the plays, but also develop critical frameworks that are immensely suggestive for other aspects of African American literature. Ann Flecher addresses the problem implicit in Wilson's canonization: "Wilson is in danger of becoming authenticated as Great Literature," she writes (15). This is a problem because attributing transcendent meaning to his historical project occludes the question of historical consciousness which is his main concern. "History is a moment Wilson's characters can never catch up with; they have to keep going back and starting again" (12). Applying modern dramatic theory and a deconstructionist reading to questions of historical consciousness and historical blindness, Flecher examines how Wilson reveals not marginalized history but a history that has always been there and which "takes place in the unseen present," in concert with the dominant history that is always implicit (17). Craig Werner contrasts August Wilson with the musician Wynton Marsalis, seeing both as engaged in a neoclassical project that involves negotiating immersion in African American cultural expression and mastery of "classical" European musical form. His central argument is prefaced by a complex examination of the deeply rooted musicality of Wilson's plays, his use of the jazz impulse, "clarifying (blues) realities and envisioning (gospel) possibilities." It is followed by five "improvisations" that briefly extend his arguments into textual commentary.

Sandra Adell reads Wilson's Ma Rainey through Houston Baker's "blues matrix" and Walter Benjamin's "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction." In a brilliant reading of the play, Adell argues that Wilson addresses the loss of what Benjamin calls the "aura" of the original in the act of reproduction. The blues recording, then, is "art that is divested of its Being, for the . . . mechanically reproduced sound of the blues will always lack the presence, in time and space, of the 'unique existence' that assures its authenticity" (59). Adell terms Ma Rainey's truth Dionysian, in Nietzsche's sense in The Birth of Tragedy. The band members' debates and Ma's own explanation of the blues ("The blues help you get out of bed in the morning.... This be an empty world without the blues. I take that emptiness and try to fill it up with something. ... The blues have always been there.") construct a Nietzschean scenario, in which Toledo is the sacrifice that tragedy demands. John Timpane's essay pursues the question of whether the excluded and empowered read history differently. For him, history, in Wilson's plays, takes the form of a crisis of reading. **Fences** and Ma Rainey are his focus; in both, he argues, the central character's inability to acknowledge change comprises historical misreading, and has tragic consequences. Timpane's essay is helpful and informative, but other essays in the collection, for example Flecher's, invite us to see beyond it. The Aristotelian precepts he invokes rely on an audience's knowledge of dramatic action rather than its knowledge/experience of historical event. The essays that show how Wilson challenges the audience's understanding of history render complex the ironies and historical ruptures that Timpane posits.

Nadel's own essay in the collection reads **Fences** and Joe Turner's Come and Gone against the metaphor of property and its historical meaning, particularly the connection between property rights and human rights, for African Americans. It comprises a particularly effective and interesting entry into the latter play, in which, according to Nadel, Wilson's use of "the song," as well as the restless seeking of the characters for each other, enacts a reclamation of humanity. Michael Morales, in his essay, sees Wilson's task as "a simultaneously reactive/reconstructive engagement with the representation of blacks and the representation of history by the dominant culture"(105). How then, he asks, does one make sense of Wilson's use of the mystical, the world of ancestral visitation, the ghosts in Joe Turner's Come and Gone and The Piano Lesson? His response is that they invoke an active relationship or kinship bond between living and dead, akin to African practices of oral history and such devices as the memory boards (lukasa) of the Lubas and the brass plaques of Benin. In his reading, for example, Berniece's shutting of the piano comprises a neglect of the ancestors, and a danger both to them and to succeeding generations. He argues that the "historical is always metaphysical and the metaphysical is always historical," and that Wilson's use of the supernatural is not metaphorical but rather a use of " 'ancestral legacy' to differentiate his own historical tradition as well as to emphasize the 'cultural retentions' of his characters" (113). This excellent essay clarifies Wilson's use of the supernatural in a fashion that for me now underpins all other discussions of this issue.

Mark William Roacha's contribution is also remarkable. It is an essay that won my increasing respect as it progressed, for it constructs a rigorous rhetorical analysis of Wilson's Two Trains Running in terms of African American linguistic practices of signifyin(g) and "loud talking," based primarily on the work of Henry Louis Gates and Claudia Mitchell-Kernan. Not only is it illuminating with respect to the play, but it is richly suggestive of ways of considering racially specific audience response to a variety of African American theatre. Should a collection be done on African American dramatic theory, I would propose it for inclusion. Joan Fishman's essay explores another issue that is rarely tackled--the relation between visual and literary arts, specifically August Wilson's well-known debt to and abiding interest in the work of Romare Bearden. It is a useful and pioneering effort.

Three essays in the collection address Wilson's handling of women. Sandra Shannon, who also provides the volume's annotated bibliography, observes that in each of Wilson's plays following his early Jitney! there emerges "a singular African American woman [who] manages to wrestle free from prevailing social restraints or domestic concerns to, in some way, affirm a separate identity" (151). In this essay, each of the resulting portraits of the female characters is interesting; however, Shannon's conclusion, uneasiness over what she sees as a conservative portrait of women, produced, for me, an unsatisfying entry into Wilson's work. Harry J. Elam, Jr.'s essay on women in Wilson's plays, which employs contemporary feminist dramatic theory, particularly the notion of the "male gaze," also finds in Wilson a patriarchal investment, and so an ultimately conservative stance. While the conclusions of these two critics are, in some respect, undeniable, the third essay, for me, provides a richer reading of what Wilson accomplishes through his female characters. Missy Dehn Kubitschek's point of entry is gender analysis. She argues, with stunning results, that Wilson's male and female characters "speak not only different but opposing languages" (183). The resulting analyses of the various plays, particularly the gendered interplay among the characters, are rich. Again the reading of Joe Turner's Come and Gone is, for me, the benchmark of the approach taken. Kubitschek's approach to that play describes Bynam and Bertha as African American spiritual workers whose advice is better understood by characters of the same gender. Her reading of the separate spheres that for Shannon and Elam mark Wilson's conservatism with respect to gender slips that yoke by harkening back to earlier, non-European notions of separate spheres of spiritual power rather than to nineteenth-century European hierarchical models. Her resolution does not, of course, completely resolve the ways in which Wilson's women are typically represented as depending on men for completion; it does, however, make women central to analyses that explore the presence of African heritage and practice in the plays.

The final essays in the collection are Wilson's own statement "I Want a Black Director" (for the film version of **Fences**) and Michael Awkward's analysis of that statement. Wilson concludes his remarks with an appeal that only directors of the racially or ethnically specific group portrayed be employed to make films whose subject is itself the representation of that group's specific expression. Awkward's lengthy and interesting analysis takes up a variety of issues. He explores the relation of originary text to its film version and the question of whether whites can "learn enough to internalize or reproduce features of the complex 'ethos,' " the task that Wilson insists requires a black director. Awkward argues that they can and points out that, given the hybrid theatrical tradition in which Wilson works--indeed, the "double-voiced" nature of much of African American art--the position that whites cannot, in a meaningful way, participate in the creation, or provide appreciative reception, of African American artistic production is a dangerous one because "it seem[s] to echo those of unself-reflective white racists [who] seek to justify their perception of exclusive caucasian rights to citizenship, and indeed, location on American shores." Awkward provides a reading of **Fences** which argues that the play itself queries "the advisability of protectionist imperatives" (215), and he argues that, ultimately, Wilson's position insists that white entrepreneurial forces turn their attention to meaningful change rather than asserting control of African American cultural production. Wilson's stance, and the controversy it has generated, is to be understood in the larger context of the persistence of racism, the economic benefits accrued by white control of black artistic production, and the dominant society's willful resistance to change. Awkward's essay is, I think, extremely thoughtful and important. I missed in it, however, any consideration of Wilson's long association with Lloyd Richardson, the intimacy of shared artistic intent that characterizes that relationship, and the right of an author to retain control over the translation of his work from one medium to the other. Awkward is right to query, as he does so thoroughly, the fallacy that race alone insures the integrity of such an enterprise, that satisfying interracial collaboration is not possible. However, one can read Wilson's position as a refusal to engage in the meaning of that collaboration, a position that is, I think, completely reasonable, both politically and artistically.

Which brings me to the superb title of the collection, "May all your **fences** have gates," which Nadel tells us Wilson inscribed on Nadel's copy of his plays. At their best, both artists and scholars do provide gates, not definitive readings, but points of entry to our own individual explorations. I admire this collection because it does just that, multiply, wonderfully, with the care, thoughtfulness, and high regard that August Wilson truly deserves.

**Authors:**

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