

RE-IMAGINING CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY IN AUGUST WILSON'S *JOE TURNER'S COME AND GONE*

Owen Seda

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9056-2979>
Tshwane University of Technology,
Pretoria
owenseda@mindbuzz.net

Khatija B. Khan

University of South Africa
khankb@unisa.ac.za

ABSTRACT

Forced migration and separation, which are integral to African-American history, coupled with the juridical, social and racial restrictions of slavery, inaugurated an insidious form of dislocation for African Americans: they lost their spiritual anchor in the gods of traditional Africa. With this loss came physical and ideational restlessness, which worsened with emancipation and merely occasioned another quest—a re-union of the physical, social and spiritual. In this paper we argue that Wilson, in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, foregrounds spirituality as the freed slaves' primary anchor for self-authentication, and that this self-authentication and emancipation must be predicated on the subversion of Christian perspectives of personal redemption and on giving mainstream Christianity an African resonance. We further argue that Wilson presents personal redemption through deliberately subverting the metaphysical belief system the freed slaves were inducted into during slavery, namely Christianity. In other words, Wilson turns Christianity on its head to argue for a more Afrocentric approach to spirituality and personal redemption. The restless wanderings of his characters in search of freedom from physical bondage become a metaphor for a spiritual search. We argue that Bynum's "Shiny Man" in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is an Afrocentric allusion to the Christ-like figure as the bearer of eternal redemption.

Keywords: re-inventing; dislocation; emancipation; spiritual; redemption; subversion



INTRODUCTION

Critics and chroniclers of African-American history and culture have often identified the twin concepts of migration and separation as an integral part of African-American history and culture (Pereira 1995). They have further observed that in spite of the official proclamation of emancipation in 1863, the history of African Americans since 1865 appears to have been one of a constant search for a sense of belonging and identity due to the disruptive experience of slavery. It is almost as if the black man's ceaseless search came to constitute some kind of entrapment. While the attainment of freedom from slavery may have been deemed to be an end in itself, the proclamation of emancipation only served to set members of the black race on yet another winding road of dispersal in search of identity and a sense of self-worth. Nowhere is the essence of this enduring spirit of dispersal and a new search captured better than in Wilson's preamble to *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* where he writes:

From the deep and near South the sons and daughters of newly freed African slaves *wander* into the city. Isolated, cut off from memory, *having forgotten the names of the gods and only guessing at their faces*, they arrive dazed and stunned, their hearts kicking in their chest with a song worth singing. They arrive ... seeking to [shape] the *malleable parts of themselves* into a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth. [emphasis added] (75)

In this paper we argue that forced migration and separation, coupled with the social restrictions and confinement of slavery, induced a significant and even more insidious form of dislocation for the African Americans, namely spiritual dislocation, as the African slaves were abruptly transplanted from their metaphysical roots in African ancestor worship. For the transplanted blacks, the forced severance from Africa into slavery via the long, arduous and perilous trip across the Atlantic into the so-called New World resulted in the loss of a spiritual anchor in the gods of traditional Africa. This anchor could have provided much-needed spiritual succour for the dislocated black races as they faced the challenges of slavery in the New World. With this loss came physical and ideational restlessness, which did not end but rather worsened with emancipation. In other words, soon after freeing the African slaves from physical bondage and the mental turmoil that came with it, the emancipation occasioned another quest, that of a re-union of the physical with the social and the spiritual. Whereas physical emancipation from slavery was good in itself, ironically for those who migrated to the industrial conurbations of the north, emancipation most probably brought along lonely individualism at a time when African Americans were in dire need of a bond that would provide them with a sense of security and belonging.

Judging from the above, the events portrayed in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* seemed to suggest that the freed black races were able to identify a viable spiritual sanctuary for themselves only after they could anchor their quest for physical, social and economic emancipation. In this paper we argue that Wilson presents a play in which self-authentication and empowerment for the freed slaves can only come about

if it is predicated on a perspective of personal redemption that is rooted in African metaphysical belief systems. We also argue that, unlike in Western theism, this approach to personal redemption is often subsumed under group redemption rather than regarded as individual redemption. In other words, Wilson seems to portray personal redemption as something that can only come about through spiritual re-unification and identification with an African belief system that is, however, not dissimilar to what the freed slaves were inducted into during slavery, namely Christianity. Following some of the key tenets of a post-colonial reading strategy, our analysis foregrounds a syncretic or hybrid interpretation of the presentation of religion in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* to argue that Wilson essentially turns orthodox Christianity on its head to make a case for an Africa-centred approach to spirituality as the bearer of personal redemption for the freed slaves. In this we depart from previous readings of Wilson's work, such as that of Rudolph (2003) who posits a dichotomised contest between Christianity and African Traditional Religion (ATR) in the same play, insisting on a binary approach through which she comes to the conclusion that "The characters are forced to choose between Christianity and ATR, and Wilson subtly guides his characters to choose ATR and overcome" (562).

Our approach in this paper is that the descendants of freed slaves will have been better positioned to identify the spiritual anchor to their personal salvation if that anchor was first subverted and they proceeded from what they (i.e. the descendants of freed slaves) were already familiar with following the slave experience, namely Christianity. The enduring sense of restlessness and wandering in searching for something tangible (the so-called "malleable parts of themselves"), with which Wilson opens the play, becomes only but a metaphor for the spiritual search during which everything else will be revealed.

DISPLACEMENT, INSURGENT MEMORY AND HYBRIDITY

As is often the case in diasporic narratives, the subject of displacement in all its physical and psychological manifestations seems to be the main focus of a significant number of Wilson's plays. In his celebrated ten-play cycle, Wilson presents the identity of African Americans (both physical and spiritual) as something that was largely forged in motion. This observation is corroborated by Mazrui (1986) who makes the point that perhaps no other member of the human race has travelled longer distances under pressure than the black race. This travel naturally came with the re-shaping of the destiny and identity of the black race. Being second in Wilson's ten-play cycle that focuses on the historical experience of African Americans in each one of the ten decades of the twentieth century, it comes as no surprise that the characters we encounter in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* are equally struggling or wrestling with issues of personal identity, location and spirituality. It has to be borne in mind that *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is set in the

1910s, a few decades after emancipation. This makes it a play about man and society in transition and it heightens the play's theme of wandering and search. It also helps to sustain the play's enduring metaphor of the road, something that has been observed by a number of other critics of Wilson (Plum 1993; Rudolph 2003; Shannon 2016; Wilson and Goldfarb 2001). In any case it must be noted that Wilson's use of the metaphor of the road to denote African-American history is implied by the very fact that his ten-play cycle focuses on the historical choices and experiences of African Americans in each one of the ten decades of the twentieth century. Southern slaves' north-bound migration after emancipation is another validation of the metaphor of the road. This is in addition to the historical antecedent of forced removal from Africa to the New World through the slave raids, which is yet another validation of the metaphor of the road insofar as it describes African-American history. All this leads Pereira (1995) to characterise black American history as a history of "separation, migration and re-union." Nowhere is this characterisation of African-American history more poignant than in the first three plays of Wilson's ten-play cycle, namely *Gem of the Ocean*, *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*.

In this paper we argue that the effort of Wilson's characters to forge "a new identity as free men of definite and sincere worth" does not only refer to physical and economic well-being. It also refers to spiritual well-being wherein the former has to be predicated on the latter. However, this spirituality has to be approached from the perspective of contemporary Christianity into which African-American slaves were already inducted and with which they were familiar because of slavery. However, in order for this Christianity to have meaning, it must be Christianity with an African resonance. Given this nuance, and in agreement with Pereira (1995), we view Wilson's characters as facing three basic struggles, namely location (in the form of migration), separation (in the form of identity), and re-union (in the form of spirituality), with spirituality (or re-union) being the most difficult challenge to overcome. Without settling the spiritual struggle, the other two struggles can only remain elusive and well-nigh impossible to deal with. The question therefore arises: on whose terms must the transplanted African Americans settle the spiritual struggle? In attempting to answer this question, the critic cannot stray too far from the observation of Said (1994) that for subjugated races, the process to recover the past always produces multiple traditions and institutions, which make it difficult to assume a reductionist approach to tradition and belief as singular or monolithic. In such processes of recovery, it is therefore not possible to recuperate whole or totalised and authentic notions of tradition and identity. For the African diaspora (such as we find in Wilson's plays) and indeed in most of post-colonial Africa, this is the case not least because of the experience of cultural encounters and hybridity.

It is in light of Said's (1994) observation mentioned above that Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* provides an interesting site of analysis for the way in which the general inability to recuperate an originary spiritual or metaphysical identity allows the playwright to explore a dominant Western spirituality (Christianity). The playwright re-examines and presents it in such a way as to subvert its supposed monolithic

dominance. In his play, Wilson re-imagines Christian spirituality by approaching it from an alternative viewpoint that seems to re-centre marginalised knowledge and spirituality, namely ATR or ancestor worship. Only in this way will Wilson's characters be better able to make sense of Christian spirituality and use it to achieve personal redemption. In this, Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* is a validation of the observation of Howell (1995, 165) that, when confronted with a dominant knowledge system, indigenous knowledge will often "appropriate it and use it according to local perceptions," that is, on its own terms. Howell's observation is corroborated by Gilroy (1993) who writes that in situations of cultural contact and negotiation (such as we find in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*), indigenous cultural institutions of Africa and the black Atlantic "exist partly inside and [are] not always against the grand narrative of [Western] enlightenment and its operational principles" (48). It is precisely in this that a post-colonial approach to religious syncretism finds valency in our reading of re-imagined Christian spirituality in Wilson's play. In other words, rather than adopt a simplistic or binary approach leaning towards confrontation and contestation between Christianity and ATR, we encounter in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* a case of mutual dependency through co-option between the two religions. Bynum's ancestral worship, which is rooted in ATR, is thus able to co-opt the more dominant Western Christianity in order to achieve greater impact among the descendants of African Americans in their ceaseless search for identity. In this, Wilson's re-imagination of Christian spirituality can be read as a form of insurgent memory. Unlike simple indigenism, which places inordinate and unscientific emphasis on the enduring cultural authenticity of dominated groups without acknowledging issues of hybridity and syncretism, insurgent memory is a counter-discursive site that negotiates and avoids a confrontational approach between concepts and beliefs, opting rather for appropriation through subversion. It explores ancestor veneration, visions and trance, drums, song, music, and myths and legends about the origins of men in order to create a locus from which descendants of Africans can formulate a better appreciation of their contemporary situation and their destiny. This is exactly what we encounter in Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* as the following analysis will demonstrate.

CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY RE-IMAGINED

That the characters in Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* have a reasonably firm grounding in the Christian religion is certainly without doubt. This is clearly evidenced in the play's opening stage directions where we are told that the descendants of former slaves arrive from the Deep South "carrying bibles and guitars." Yet in spite of that ostensible spiritual grounding in Christianity, they still "arrive dazed and stunned." That they arrive in the north looking "dazed and stunned" is "part and parcel of their baggage [of] a long line of separation and dispersment" as Wilson describes a few lines later. If these characters do have some grounding in Christian spirituality, Wilson presents

that spirituality as being largely hollow, incomplete, and in dire need of a Damascene moment or something extra that will make it whole.

Whereas post-emancipation mass migration from the Deep South to the north (such as we find in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*) may be viewed as confirmation of freedom, it in fact constituted another form of displacement and dispersal. This is because the descendants of former slaves were uprooted from the relative security of bounded lives (albeit as captives) as well as the communalism of the south and its distinctively African-American traditions. These were traditions that had a strong affinity with the communal spirit of the slaves' ancestral homes in Africa in contrast to the loneliness and individualism of the industrial north.

One of the main figures through whom Wilson re-imagines Christian spirituality is Herald Loomis. Loomis is one of the play's central characters. He arrives at Seth Holy's boarding house from the south in the company of his eleven-year-old daughter, Zonia. Loomis wanders north in search of his long-lost wife, Martha Pentecost, from whom he has been separated for seven years after he (Loomis) was captured and forced to work on a chain gang by a group of unrepentantly racist southern whites (represented in the play by Joe Turner). Although Loomis has been a deacon of long-standing in the Christian church, he still comes across as a brooding character and a man with some lack in terms of his spirituality. He is described in the play as "a man driven not by the hellhounds that seemingly bay at his heels, but by his search for a world that speaks to something about himself. He is unable to harmonize the forces that swirl around him" (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, 81). Herald Loomis's Damascene moment or moment of revelation finally comes to him not through the singular aegis of his long-standing membership of the Christian church as a deacon but through Bynum's intensely African juba dance. This happens one Sunday evening when Bynum, the shamanist and root worker whose identity and spirituality is firmly located in ATR, co-ordinates the juba dance, which brings together all the boarding-house residents in a call-and-response sequence, and Loomis is finally able to locate his metaphorical new song or true identity (and hence his new social status). This occurs when the juba dance induces Herald Loomis to fall into a trance. While in this trance, Herald has visions of an encounter with the bones of his long-gone African ancestry rising from the ocean, washing ashore, acquiring flesh, and breathing into him (Loomis) a new breath of fresh air and a sense of purpose to life that he has never enjoyed before.

Some critics of Wilson, such as Rudolph, have argued that Wilson's characters in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* are "struggling with and wrestling over their ideas of religion and god" and that "Wilson sets up a dichotomy between the role of Christianity and African Traditional Religion [and that] in each of these plays, the characters are forced to choose between ATR and Christianity. They have also indicated that Wilson subtly guides his characters to choose ATR and overcome" (2003, 562). In our analysis we depart from this somewhat dichotomous view of the issues at stake. We see the two religions as not necessarily in mortal combat but illuminating one another in re-imagined

ways. Although Bynum's juba dance is essentially steeped in ATR, it is essentially a hybrid form that fuses these ancestral chants with the idea of the Holy Ghost in order to come across as a syncretic fusion of ATR and Christianity. It is only through this syncretic approach to religion that Herald Loomis's Christianity acquires the sort of potency that finally enables him to get to self-knowledge. In other words, Wilson re-imagines Christian spirituality insofar as the Damascene moment in Loomis's Christianity only comes about because of cross-fertilisation with aspects of ATR via the juba dance. It must be recalled here that, in any case, the origins of the term "syncretism" are to be found in the discipline of comparative religion and a phenomenological approach to religious studies, which were established in the 1920s and 1930s respectively. The term syncretism indicates mutual respect and reciprocal exchange of values and beliefs.

Bynum's "Shiny Man" is yet another example of re-imagined Christian spirituality in Wilson's play. From the descriptions of this intensely mysterious character (the "Shiny Man"), whom Bynum, the shamanist root worker, describes right from the beginning of the play, there is no doubt that Bynum's "Shiny Man" is something of a re-incarnated mortal, most probably in the mould of an ancestral figure who keeps appearing and disappearing to the living in strangely mysterious ways. In this, Bynum's "Shiny Man" belongs within the realm of ancestor worship and ATR. However, in order to enhance his potency and relevance within a contemporary post-emancipation context, Wilson essentially renders the "Shiny Man" a syncretic cross between a re-incarnating ancestral figure and the biblical prophet John the Baptist. This is done in such a way as to appeal to the adherents of modern Christianity with which the descendants of freed slaves are already familiar. Just like the biblical prophet John the Baptist, Bynum's "Shiny Man" is described as "One Who Goes Before and Shows the Way" (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, 79) inasmuch as the biblical John the Baptist prophesied the coming of Christ. Like the biblical John the Baptist, Bynum's "Shiny Man" seems to enjoy a rather unconventional and largely Bohemian lifestyle on the road, and it is he who gives Bynum the power of the binding song, which serves as the play's enduring metaphor of identity. That ceaseless search for a distinctly African-American identity similar to Bynum's binding song is what all the characters are looking for. For Wilson, these various characters can only find that identity if its bearer (i.e. the "Shiny Man") appears to them in a manner approximating that of the biblical John the Baptist with whom they are already familiar. In this way, Wilson re-centres an African belief system by presenting it through a re-imagined Christian spirituality.

Wilson also re-imagines Christian spirituality in the play's last scene when he deliberately casts Herald Loomis in a way that parallels the image of Christ the Redeemer in an ultimate act of self-sacrifice for the benefit of the human race as a whole. Having finally located his long-lost wife, Martha Pentecost, Herald Loomis slashes his chest with a knife in an act of self-flagellation or self-sacrifice. In this, Herald's action is significantly comparable to the biblical Christ's voluntary act to offer himself to suffer on the cross for the redemption of humankind. Just like the biblical Christ, Herald's

sacrifice is steeped in the power of blood to wash away sin and immerse the individual in eternal salvation. Herald Loomis's significant moment of self-sacrifice that is akin to a Christian symbol of eternal salvation is reinforced by the playwright's stage directions, which read as follows:

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 (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, 111).

What is interesting about this episode is that in spite of its sustained likeness to the crucifixion, Herald Loomis constantly denigrates the same Christian religion on which his act of self-sacrifice is constructed. As Loomis indicates during his rant, something is wrong and something does "not fit right" (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, 110) if Jesus can only give salvation after the individual dies. In this respect Wilson turns Christian iconology and its attendant belief systems on its head in line with the tenets of ATR by propagating an approach to redemption in which man has to bleed for himself in order to be saved while he is still alive rather than dead. Thus, after bathing in his own blood in a manner that is similar to bathing in the blood of animal sacrifice (as we find in ATR), Herald Loomis shouts, saying, "I don't need nobody to bleed for me! I can bleed for myself," following which he also declares triumphantly, "I'm standing! I'm standing! My legs stood up! I'm standing now!" (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, 111). Significantly also, Herald Loomis's moment of redemption becomes a communal moment of revelation for Bynum, the shamanist root worker and grounded representative of ATR, who closes the play with the equally triumphant shout: "Herald Loomis, you shining! You shining like new money!" (*Joe Turner's Come and Gone*, 111).

By transforming Herald Loomis from the ordinary mortal that he is into someone approximating a conglomeration of the venerated biblical prophet John the Baptist and a Jesus Christ-type character, complete with the halo shining above his head, Wilson re-imagines Christian spirituality. Together with Bynum, Herald Loomis becomes a living incarnation of the long-lost song or spiritual identity that the descendants of freed slaves will need in order to anchor their quest for locational, social and economic emancipation.

REFERENCES

- Gilroy, Paul. 1993. *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press.
- Howell S. 1995. "Whose Knowledge and Whose Power?: A New Perspective on Cultural Diffusion." In *Counterworks Managing the Diversity of Knowledge*, edited by R. Fardon, 164–81. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203450994_chapter_8.
- Mazrui, Ali. 1986. *The Africans: A Triple Heritage*. New York: Little Brown.

- Pereira, Kim. 1995. *August Wilson and the African-American Odyssey*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press.
- Plum, Jay. 1993. "Blues, History and the Dramaturgy of August Wilson." *African American Review* 27 (4): 561–67. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3041888>.
- Rudolph, Amanda. 2003. "Images of African Traditional Religions and Christianity in *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson*." *Journal of Black Studies* 33 (5): 562–75. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0021934703033005002>.
- Said, Edward. 1994. *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Vintage.
- Shannon, Sandra, G., ed. 2016. *August Wilson's Pittsburgh Cycle: Critical Perspectives on the Plays*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland.
- Wilson, Edwin, and Alvin Goldfarb. 2001. *The Living Theatre: A History*. Boston: McGraw-Hill.
- Wilson, August. 1988. *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. New York: Plume Penguin.
- Wilson, August. 2004. "Joe Turner's Come and Gone." In *The Creative Spirit: An Introduction to Theatre*, by S. Arnold. 3rd ed., 75–111. Boston: McGraw-Hill.