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## Contesting Black Male Responsibilities in August Wilson's *Jitney*

According to August Wilson, the function of black theater, not unlike that of white theater, is “to create art that responds to or illuminates the human condition” (Shannon and Williams, 191). American theater in general, he argues, has the power to hold the mirror up to truths it has “wrestle[d] from uncertain and sometimes unyielding realities” (Wilson, *Ground* 53). If each of the plays in Wilson’s ten-play cycle meets this function and exhibits this power perpetually, of signal importance in each play is the construction and reconstruction of black male identities. While a number of critics have interrogated the comparative lack of women who take center stage in his plays,<sup>1</sup> few critics have investigated the sociocultural implications of Wilson’s pointed choice to write male-dominated, male-centered plays. A notable exception in this regard is Keith Clark, who, in *Black Manhood in James Baldwin, Ernest J. Gaines, and August Wilson*, examines Wilson’s reconfiguration of the black male dramatic subject, hinting at the sociocultural implications of that reconfiguration. Examining how Wilson “dissects the codes of conduct that govern blacks’ relationship to each other,” Clark emphasizes Wilson’s “black men’s excruciating attempt to gather together in the name of individual and collective affirmation” (99): “In situating a panoply of black male voices in central roles, Wilson envelopes his plays with multiple perspectives to convey the multifaceted nature of post 1960s black male dramatic subjectivity, a discursive figuration far more complex than a simple replication of Anglo-American patriarchal subjectivity” (101). *Jitney*, originally drafted long before Wilson conceived of the cycle, typifies, even at that stage in his career, Wilson’s use of multiple and varied perspectives

on black male identity. In this essay, I examine the way these perspectives contest seemingly stable notions of black male responsibility by complicating black male dramatic subjectivity.

Though it did not have its Broadway premiere until April 2000, *Jitney* is actually one of Wilson's earliest plays. Prior to *Jitney* he had tried his hand at poetry, and at least two of his plays were staged: *The Homecoming*, which was staged for Kuntu Repertory Theater in Pittsburgh in 1976, and *Black Bart and the Sacred Hills*, which was given a staged reading at Los Angeles's Inner City Theater in 1978 and then produced as *Black Bart* at Penumbra Theater in St. Paul, Minnesota, in 1980. But *Jitney*, first produced in 1982 at Pittsburgh's Allegheny Repertory Theatre, marked Wilson's declaration of himself as "a playwright" (Savran, 291). Inspired by his experience of Pittsburgh's actual jitney services, the play presents one jitney station in particular, run by Jim Becker and operated by four other drivers: Youngblood, a young Vietnam War veteran; Turnbo, a nosy instigator; Fielding, a former tailor whose life is now more defined by his dependency on alcohol than on anything else; and Doub, a level-headed Korean War veteran. Becker, the "boss" of the station, is a former mill worker who is well respected in his community by blacks and whites alike. (He is able to get the white foreman at the mill to hire new black workers on his recommendation alone.) Although other men frequent the station, as does the play's only on-stage female character, Rena, it is these four drivers (Doub, Turnbo, Fielding, and Youngblood), Becker, Booster (Becker's son), and the discourses these male characters raise that render the play such fertile ground for a meaningful discussion about black manhood and responsibility.

In response to the varied critiques of his focus on male characters, Wilson contends that he writes about black men because he is a black man, and it is the view from which he perceives the world (Shannon, *Dramatic* 222). In *Jitney*, he tells Sandra Shannon, he "simply wanted to show how the station worked, how these guys created jobs for themselves and how it was organized. . . . [H]ow these guys could be responsible" (56). David Krasner picks up on this theme, arguing that "the play's main ethical theme is responsibility" (159). Whether one agrees with his interpretation or not,

Krasner's repeated invocations of black male responsibility in the essay engage highly charged and often-problematic contemporary conversations on the same topic.

According to Krasner, Rena and Youngblood must "learn the importance of responsibility" (162); "The play . . . highlights characters possessing a sense of responsibility" (163); "Despite Turnbo's meddling, an important point about responsibility is made in criticizing young men for their lack of commitment not only to spouses but also to the community"; and *Jitney* "is meant to teach us that community and social responsibility must take precedence over selfishness" (167). That the black male (and the issue of responsibility as it relates to his success or failure) has been the subject of much "study" as of late is perhaps an understatement.<sup>2</sup> We can even include under this rubric Barack Obama's 2008 Father's Day speech at Apostolic Church of God in Chicago.

Reactions to Obama's speech, which focused on black male responsibility as it relates to fatherhood, were mixed at best. While people apt to argue that the absence of black male responsibility is the chief impediment to black male progress tended to approve of the speech, more progressive listeners were less enthusiastic. They argued that the speech and others like it diminish the sociopolitical and economic realities that limit or obstruct black male progress. These reactions suggest that conversations about black male responsibility must be as complicated as the issue itself. In its representation of black male identity as complex, varied, and understood through layered perspectives, *Jitney* adds an important dimension to the commentary on this aspect of black life and culture.

Wilson's revision of *Jitney* over the years reveals the centrality of that issue. As Joan Herrington notes in "Jitney," Wilson "barely touched" (113) the play's structure when he began to rewrite it. Adding only one scene, he focused instead on "the creation of much richer portraits of his characters . . . by illuminating the details of their lives and increasing the complexity of their relationships with one another" (114). The later versions of the play also reveal the effectiveness of the method of rewriting Wilson developed while working on the Goodman Theatre production of *Seven Guitars*. During that production, he discovered that

he could rewrite a play during rehearsals with the same — if not more — effectiveness than if he rewrote scenes and lines in isolation. Rather than rewrite *Jitney* from its latest draft, before rehearsals began, Wilson rewrote the play during rehearsals “in close collaboration with the director, and inspired by the art, life, and response of the actors” (113).

For years, Wilson worked almost exclusively with Lloyd Richards as the director of his major productions. When Richards was hospitalized as the Chicago production of *Seven Guitars* began, Walter Dallas stepped in to direct the play. Unlike Richards, who directed whatever Wilson wrote without much interrogation, Dallas was fully engaged in the rewriting process, and he allowed the actors to pose questions to Wilson and to make suggestions for changes in the script. Perhaps Richards and Wilson had worked together so long that they trusted each other enough not to question one another’s choice, or perhaps Richards believed that the play is the playwright’s, and the director’s job is simply to interpret and direct. Whatever the case, the change in directors from Richards to Dallas (and then to Marion McClinton when Dallas was not available to direct the Pittsburgh production of *Seven Guitars*) generated a spirit of collaboration that served Wilson well. Like Dallas, McClinton worked extensively with Wilson during rehearsals to make changes to the script. An actor himself, McClinton, who had played Fielding in *Jitney*’s 1985 production, also encouraged input from the actors. This method of collaboration facilitated Wilson’s desire to create richer portraits of his characters, and this enrichment, in turn, enhanced his ability to dramatize certain aspects of black male life.

Herrington notes, “As [Wilson] rewrote *Jitney* in the rehearsal room, his contact with the actors encouraged and significantly influenced his writing of the stories they told” (“Jitney” 120). Insisting that each character be portrayed as fully as possible, the actors encouraged Wilson to add small details to their characters’ stories. When Wilson gave Doub the phrase “just like I tell my boys” and included the word “railroad” in front of “pension,” Doub became both a father and a railroad man. “That made him somebody,” Wilson explained. “That little thing made Doub somebody. The railroad, the army, has two kids. The character prior to Pittsburgh didn’t

have that, he was just a guy” (Herrington, “Jitney” 120). Wilson’s interest in making Doub “somebody” speaks to his commitment to creating characters that transcend stereotypes, providing a sense of authenticity that helps the audience *sense* what is important rather than *hear* what is important. Herrington argues that Wilson’s reliance on characters rather than plot to develop his story line highlights his maturity as a playwright and his confidence in sophisticated dialogue.

The commitment to representing the complexity of his dramatic situation inevitably increased the structural challenges that plagued *Jitney*. At least some of these challenges can be attributed to the fact that it was one of Wilson’s earliest plays and that he wrote it in ten days. He tells Herrington: “When I started *Jitney* I didn’t know you weren’t supposed to write it in ten days. I just sat down and wrote it and didn’t make a big thing about it. When I go to it now I go to it as a skilled craftsman” (Herrington, “Jitney” 130). As the “skilled craftsman,” Wilson was confident enough in his abilities as a playwright that by the time *Jitney* premiered in its final form, he had become equally confident in his own aesthetic. Accordingly, he had few qualms about focusing on character and dialogue development rather than on unity to enhance the play’s credibility, despite critics’ frequent critique of his plays as structurally flawed in the sense that they seem disinterested in being traditional, “well-made” plays. As Clark notes, “Wilson’s multiple dramatic discourses . . . are rooted in black men’s retrieval and voicing of personal histories, which inform the plays’ thematic and formal configurations. Hence, personal story takes precedence over the erection of a seamlessly crafted dramatic story” (97). And even as his characters and their stories are dramatic fictions, they are often truer to life than stories of real people when those stories are presented in the abstract or packaged in the form of archetypes and/or stereotypes.

The diversity of the male characters in *Jitney* thus allows Wilson to reject all variations of the “fiction of archetypal masculinity” (Clark, 100). Throughout the play, Wilson reveals the inauthenticity of this fiction and has his characters reject it both because of and independent of the “virulently hostile hegemonic culture” (100) that precludes conformity to idealized archetypes. Rather than employ an archetypal hero, *Jitney* allows multiple characters and their stories to compete. This allows Wilson to

present layered and varied facets of black male identity and to interrogate the experiences that have shaped his characters' identity formation rather than to present their experiences out of context or in isolation.

Becker and Booster's father/son relationship and the experiences that inform it offer the most fertile ground for analysis in this regard. From the moment Becker enters the stage, Wilson indicates that Becker is responsible. Shealy says to him: "Say Becker, I been meaning to ask you. I got a nephew that's trying to make something of himself. You reckon you be able to get him on down at the mill?" (Wilson, *Jitney* 21). While Becker cannot guarantee anything, if the mill is hiring, he knows some people who "will be able to take care of [Shealy's nephew]" (21). For young men trying to "make something" of themselves, Becker seems to be the man to go to. Becker is equally responsible to his wife and shows no interest in Turnbo's attempts to get him to look at a woman in a *Playboy* magazine. When Turnbo and Youngblood argue over Turnbo's unwillingness to pay Youngblood for the coffee he bought at Turnbo's request, Becker squashes the argument, and later, when Turnbo actually pulls a gun on Youngblood, Becker settles that skirmish, too.

But Becker's quiet, responsibly lived life is more complicated than it seems. Eventually we learn that Becker's son, Booster, is being released from prison. Until Booster was imprisoned for murder, he had been Becker's pride and joy. A star science student on scholarship at the University of Pittsburgh, Booster was doing well until a white girl he was dating falsely accused him of rape when her father caught her with Booster. When the father reacted aggressively, Booster, not knowing that the man was her father, beat the man nearly to death. The same day Booster was released on bail, which Becker had posted, Booster killed the girl. Youngblood, hearing this story, responds, "Served the bitch right! . . . Served her right for lying!" (41–42). Unlike Turnbo and Becker, who see Booster's actions as hasty and unequivocally irresponsible, Youngblood and Booster, two of the youngest men in the play, seem to believe that Booster acted appropriately. Although Booster believes that he deserved to be punished, he preferred the consequences of his actions over being known for a rape he did not commit.

Wilson is careful not to privilege one perspective over another. Because

Becker believes that they could have fought the rape charges, he chastises Booster for not allowing the justice system to run its course: "We could have fought the lie. I had already lined up a lawyer . . . together we could have fought a lie" (55). Booster, who knows how unlikely it is that a jury would have believed him over a white girl or would set him free after he had beaten up a white man, defends himself by saying that a lawyer would not have made a difference: "I wasn't going the penitentiary for nothing. I wasn't gonna live a lie" (56). When Becker claims that two wrongs don't make a right, Booster retorts, "Sometime they do. Sometime you got to add it up that way. Otherwise it's just one wrong after another and you never get to what's right. I wasn't gonna hang no sign around my neck say 'rapist'" (56). Not coincidentally, Booster's rationale sounds a lot like Becker's concession to Doub that some things can't be understood: "After Coreen died I told myself I wasn't gonna ask no more questions. Cause the answers didn't matter. . . . I thought that would change but it never did. . . . I'm tired of waiting for God to decide whether he want to hold my hand" (36). Although both Beckers have given up on things being the way they ought to be, the elder Becker cannot understand Booster's recklessness, especially after that recklessness destroyed the dreams he had for Booster's life and after that recklessness killed Coreen, Becker's wife and Booster's mother, who decided to quit living after Booster was sentenced to death.

Wilson is careful to provide a context for both men's versions of their own reality. Booster claims that he grew up thinking that his father was "a big man" and wanting to be a "big man" too. Booster confesses to his father: "Everywhere you went people treated you like a big man. You used to take me to the barbershop with you. You'd walk in there and fill up the whole place. Everybody would stop cussing cause Jim Becker had walked in. . . . I wanted to be like that" (56). Booster's childhood vision of his father was shattered, however, when he overheard their landlord, Mr. Rand, yell that he should put Becker and his family out on the street "where they belong." In shaping the perception of Becker as ultra responsible, Wilson makes it clear that the family was unable to pay the rent because Becker had to help pay for the funeral of Grandma Ada. Booster, however, had expected Becker to demand that Mr. Rand get off of the family's porch.

When Becker, instead, “just looked at [Rand] and promised [he] would have the money next month” (57), Booster, no longer seeing his father as big, swore to himself that if he ever got big, he wouldn’t let anyone make him small. To Booster, being responsible means being big at all times and at all costs. As he explains to Becker, killing the girl was answering to a sense of responsibility: “I thought about you standing there and getting small and Mr. Rand shouting and Susan McKnight shouting out that lie and I realized it was my chance to make the Beckers big again. . . . I thought you would understand. I thought you would be proud of me” (57).

Becker, however, rejects Booster’s belief that a man should be big when being big threatens responsible action. Becker rejoins:

you want to come in here and ridicule me cause I didn’t knock Mr. Rand on his ass. You wanna know why? I’ll tell you why. Because I had your black ass crying to be fed. Crying to have a roof over your head. To have clothes to wear to school and lunch money in your pocket. That’s why! Because I had a family. I had responsibility. . . . I swallowed my pride and let them mess over me, all the time saying, “You bastards got it coming. Look out! Becker’s boy’s coming to straighten this shit out! . . . Becker’s taking this ass whipping so his boy can stride through this shit like Daniel in the lion’s den! . . . And what I get, huh?” (58–59)

Wilson presents both men as having equal justification for their actions. When Becker accuses Booster of killing his mother since she refuses to eat, talk, or move once she hears his death sentence (which is later reduced), Booster claims that it wasn’t her refusal to live long enough to see him die that kills her. Rather, as Booster sees it, she shuts down because Becker, “clinging to [his] rules,” turns his back on her (60). In short, their relationship is far too complex to be simplified into dichotomies of right and wrong.

Wilson refuses to choose sides or to resolve the tension between the men even at the play’s end. Becker dies in a freak accident at the mill, after having worked there for years without incident. And while Wilson admits that he took the easy way out in resolving *Jitney* by having Becker die at

the end (Shannon, *Dramatic* 63), he nevertheless was willing to forego the well-made, unified play for the sake of honoring his dramatic situation's complexity. Notably, however, Wilson does not have Becker die before his evolution begins. As Herrington notes, as *Jitney's* drafts evolve, so does Becker's willingness to stop clinging to the rules for their own sake. Eventually, he "adopts some of Booster's defiance as his own" ("Jitney" 127). Only after he disowns Booster, however, does Becker become rebellious. Having resolved to fight against the station's being boarded up, he tells the drivers, "When I first come along I tried to do everything right. I figured that was the best thing to do. Even when it didn't look like they was playing fair I told myself they would come around. Time it look like you got a little something going for you they change the rules" (Wilson, *Jitney* 85). He claims that he was willing to play by the rules because he was counting on Booster to "straighten it out." Rejecting that possibility, he adopts Booster's spirit of defiance and vows to fight the city. And even if his defiance is tempered (he plans to get a lawyer and to fight legally), we see the influence Booster has had on him. As a consequence, we begin to view their relationship as less destructive and mourn Becker's death and the strained father-son relationship on Booster's behalf.

Becker and Booster's relationship is not the only interaction that encourages *Jitney's* interrogation of responsibility as a posture that is easily recognizable or that is definitively "right." Youngblood, like Becker, tries to play by the rules. He accepts his civic responsibility when he is drafted and sent to Vietnam "to be shot at" (65), despite the racial inequality he knows he will face upon returning home. And he accepts his familial responsibility when he works two jobs to buy a home for Rena and their son. But when he learns that the jitney station is being boarded up in two weeks, he complains to Doub: "White folks ain't got no sense of timing. They wait till I get in the position to buy me a house and then they pull the rug out from under me!" (64). Doub, then, becomes the mouthpiece for black male responsibility: "You keep thinking everybody's against you and you ain't gonna get nothing. I seen a hundred niggers too lazy to get up out the bed in the morning, talking about the white man is against them. That's just an excuse. You want to make something of your life, then the opportunity is there" (65). Assuming the role of father figure, Doub

tells Youngblood, “Like I tell my boys, the world’s opened up to you” (66). When Doub suggests that Youngblood get Becker to try to get him work at the mill, responsibility’s gray area rears its head again. How open is the world really when after telling Youngblood that he can be anything — “a pilot or a engineer or something” (66) — the last option Doub presents to Youngblood, perhaps the only real option, is to work at the mill? Youngblood tells Doub, “I don’t want to work in no mill. I done seen what the mills do to people and I swore I’d never work in no mill. The mills suck the life out of you. . . . I’ll do anything but I don’t want that” (66). Doub’s only response is that “it ain’t all the time what you what. Sometime it’s what you need. Black folks always get the two confused” (67). Both men are right — Youngblood must be responsible to his own well-being — yet Youngblood must not confuse his wants with his needs. And Doub must not confuse the idea of opportunity with its reality. The fact that he concedes to the confusion of needs and wants rather than insists that opportunity and responsibility can go hand in hand highlights his own awareness that being responsible sometimes means accepting limited opportunities.

As he does with all the plays in the cycle, August Wilson uses *Jitney* to explore black culture — a culture that carries with it its own set of complications and its own desire to have these complications interrogated with authenticity and sophistication. This is why his call for black theaters is an appropriate one, for it is largely, though not exclusively, in black theaters that black actors and black directors will nudge black playwrights to reject simplified portrayals of black people and black culture and to depict both as complex and multidimensional instead. And it is in black theaters and in the American theater informed by black theater that we will find the power “to bring the light of angelic grace, peace, prosperity, and the unencumbered pursuit of happiness to the ground on which we stand” (Wilson, “Ground” 503).

## Notes

1. Consider Sandra G. Shannon’s “‘Ain’t I A Woman?’ Sojourner Truth’s Question Revisited in August Wilson’s *Female Characters*,” Shannon’s “The Ground on Which I Stand: August Wilson’s Perspective on African American Women,”

Harry Elam, Jr.'s "August Wilson's Women," and Tara T. Green's "Speaking of Voice and August Wilson's Women."

2. Among the many analyses on the subject are the National Urban League's *The State of Black America 2007: Portrait of the Black Male*; Demico Boothe's *Why Are So Many Black Men in Prison?*; Bruce Western's *Punishment and Inequality in America*; Earl Ofari Hutchinson's *The Assassination of the Black Male Image*; Jewelle Taylor Gibbs's *Young, Black, and Male in America: An Endangered Species*; Ronald Mincy's *Black Males Left Behind*; Mark Anthony Neal's *New Black Man*; bell hooks's *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity*; the *Washington Post*'s 2007 series on the black male and the series's corresponding book *Being a Black Man*, and, most recently, CNN's documentary "Black in America: The Black Man," which first aired July 24, 2008.