

## Acting Out “Cool”: “Coolness” as a Mask in August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*

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### Abstract

Traditionally, men construe their sense of masculinity through their roles in the society as the provider, the protector as well as the breadwinner. However, many African American men cannot fulfill these normative norms and are doomed to fail. In order to formulate some strategy to cope with, and stay grounded in challenging and unstable times, they have developed and performed a “cool pose” or “tough-guy” image to conceal their anger and disappointment. While the cool pose has its advantages on behalf of black masculinity, it can also be destructive to African American manhood when taken to the extreme. In light of Richard Majors and Janet Billson’s “cool pose” theory, this article analyzes “coolness” as a gendered practice, and its destructive consequences in Levee’s actions and thoughts in August Wilson’s *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1985). Levee, the protagonist, desires to succeed in the world of whites by abandoning his African sensibilities. Because of his desire to perform hegemonic masculinity, he is deformed to varying degrees for his “coolness” that turns into the black rage. In other words, he transfers his own identity struggle with “normative masculinity” onto others, i.e. women and friends. Thus, acting “cool” is presented by Wilson to be the method by which African Americans try to cope with the reality imposed on them yet not being able to create an alternative state.

**Key Words:** August Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, American drama, cool pose, black masculinity studies.

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# ‘Cool’ Gibi Davranmak: August Wilson’ın *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* Adlı Oyununda Bir Maske Olarak ‘Coolness’ Analizi

## Öz

Bilindiği üzere, erkekler erkeklik duygularını toplumdaki “koruyucu,” “tedarikçi,” “evin direği” rolleri üzerine inşa ederler. Ancak, bu normatif rolleri yerine getiremeyen çoğu Afrikalı Amerikalı erkek öfkelenip, kendini ötekileştirir. Böyle zamanlarda kızgınlıklarını ve hayal kırıklıklarını gizlemek ve sakin kalmak için “sert adam” imajı ya da “cool duruşu” geliştirip, bu role bürünürler. “Cool duruşu” siyahi erkeklik açısından avantajlı gibi görünse de, aşırıya kaçıldığında çok tehlikeli olabilir. Bu makale, Richard Majors ve Janet Billson’ın “cool duruşu” teorisi çerçevesinde, “coolness” kavramının August Wilson’ın *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1985) adlı oyunundaki Levee karakterinin üzerindeki yıkıcı etkilerini incelemektedir. Afrika kökenini unutan Levee, tahakkümcü, beyaz merkezli toplumsal anlayış tarafından senaryolaştırılan ve yönetilen bir performans ve rol ile var olmaya çalışır. Sadece “gerçek” erkekliğin sınırlı bir tasvirini kabul ettiği için güç sunan, özdeşleştirdiği sistemi eleştirmek yerine, Levee, normatif erkeklikle olan kimlik mücadelesini başkalarına, diğer bir deyişle, çevresindeki kadınlara ve arkadaşlarına yıkar. Bu yüzden, Wilson, Afrikalı Amerikalıların üzerlerine empoze edilen gerçeklikle başa çıkmak için benimsedikleri “cool duruşunu” irdelerken, alternatif bir duruş sergileyememelerini örneklerdir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** August Wilson, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Amerikan tiyatrosu, cool duruşu, siyahi erkeklik çalışmaları.

August Wilson stands out as one of the most influential and important playwrights of contemporary American theater. His plays are almost classically well-made, with strongly individualized characters, realist settings and action. While depicting the black male experience in the twentieth century, Wilson’s *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, which consists of ten plays set in different decades of the twentieth century, mirrors cultural issues crucial for a more elaborated account of black manhood in the United States. In each play, Wilson invokes the question of being a black male and American, exploring the presence of an imposing, unresolved past and the unfulfilled promises of the American Dream.

In response to the varied critiques concerning his focus on male characters, Wilson contends in an interview with Sandra Shannon (1995) that he writes about black men because he is a black man, and it is the view from which he perceives the world (p.222). Throughout *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, he reveals the inauthenticity of the hegemonic masculinity that precludes conformity to idealized archetypes and denies black men a place. Wilson believes that the reason why many black males suffer from masculinity crisis is because of the fact that the majority of black males become inured to gender that privilege hegemonic masculinity as uniform, standard, uncontested and exemplary. Forced into performing these standards, black males find themselves sinking into blind hopelessness. With *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* (1985), Wilson conveys Levee's story of manhood as measured against "the cool pose" and he continues to chronicle black performance crisis with specific references to the norms of manhood in the 1920s. In presenting the events of a single recording session in the 1920s August Wilson, as Katherine O'Callaghan (2018) notes, had not only "authored a footnote to cultural history," but also "lighted a fuse that snakes and hisses through several anguished eras of American life" (p.259). In light of Richard Majors and Janet Billson's "cool pose" theory, this article analyzes the concept of "coolness" as a gendered practice, and its destructive consequences in Levee's actions and thoughts in August Wilson's *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. Levee, the protagonist, desires to succeed in a white world by rejecting the spiritual and cultural connection with the African American community. Because of his desire to perform hegemonic masculinity, he is deformed to varying degrees for his "coolness" that turns into the black rage. Thus, acting "cool" is presented by Wilson to be the method by which African Americans try to cope with the reality imposed on them yet not being able to create an alternative state.

### **The Plight of Black Masculinity**

Even though the construction of masculinity has been studied in different historical periods, a generally agreed upon history of masculinity has not emerged until very recently. One of the best

attempts to provide a “sketch of a vastly complex history” is the short chapter entitled “The History of Masculinity” in R.W. Connell’s *Masculinities*. R. W. Connell (2005) defines hegemonic masculinity as a kind of masculinity that a culture favors above others, one which “subliminally” defines what is normal for males in that culture, and imposes that definition of normality upon other kinds of masculinity (p.76). Its fundamental function is to authorize not only the dominant position of men, but also the dominance of particular social groups of men, along with their power, values, wealth and beliefs over other groups. Broadly speaking, each historical era produces its own version of hegemonic masculinity, which operates both on an external level, in terms of social roles and relations, and on an internal level, in terms of definitions of self (p.77). Hegemonic masculinity is, by its nature, contradictory since it appears to stand still but indeed is always changing. Its normalizing function means that it often lays claim to universals and seems to allude to static and enduring values. However, in reality, it is in a perennial process of changing (p.77).

Despite the attention that has been paid to the issue of gender performance and hegemonic masculinity by various scholars, there is still not a sufficiently large body of academic studies on sexuality and gender dealing with troubled manhood. Judith Butler’s *Bodies That Matter* helps reconstruct scholars’ perception of masculinity within the framework of the social and cultural production of gender. In *Bodies That Matter*, Butler (1993) describes “performance” as “that discursive practice which enacts or produces that which it names” (p.13). Butler’s theory asserts that the production of gendered identity occurs through “the citation and reiteration of social norms, conventions, or laws” (p.23). A man begins to fulfill the expectations of society by acting out these performances, codes, norms and styles repetitively. In other words, reiteration systematically makes the illusory identity stable and natural. Butler calls this repetitive performance of socially constructed gender identity “performativity” (p. 13). Masculinity is not then a matter of choice, because through reiteration, actions “precede, constrain, and exceed the performer and in that sense cannot be taken as the fabrication of the performer’s

‘will’ or ‘choice’” (p.234). Thus, reiteration becomes the “mechanisms for the production and articulation of gender norms governed by already accepted norms, simultaneously regulating and constraining” the performativity of masculinity (p.234).

In *Scripting the Black Masculine Body* (2006), Ronald Jackson states that almost every single writing of masculinity stresses hegemonic masculinity and its performance contributing to the First and Second Wave of Masculinity Studies (1980s-1990s). However, it should not be forgotten that not all American men are alike. In fact, what it means to be a man in America depends mainly on one’s ethnicity, class, race, sexuality, age and even the region of the country from which he comes from (Jackson, 2006, p.128). Creating the Third Wave of Masculinity, scholars such as Ronald Jackson, bell hooks, Richard Majors, Janet Billson and Robert Staples highlight ethnic and racial masculinities in the United States. As bell hooks states in *Black Looks: Race and Representation* (1992), literature on hegemonic masculinity

does not interrogate the conventional construction of patriarchal masculinity or question the extent to which black men have internalized this norm. It never assumes the existence of black men whose creative agency has enabled them to subvert norms and develop ways of thinking about that challenge; patriarchy (p.89).

Essentially, the masculinity literature presumes complicity with hegemony, and never questions whether or not black men’s exclusion from mainstream society has impacted the ways in which they have constructed their masculinities (Jackson, 2006, p.128).

In “The Black Male: Searching Beyond Stereotypes,” Manning Marable also suggests that being black and male is the leading tragedy of America because African American males are defined by the term and terminology of mainstream capitalist-driven society with stereotypes—violent/criminal, sexual and incompetent/uneducated individuals—and by “various institutional means perpetuating and permeating within [their] entire culture” (p.17). Black men have responded with their own brand of masculinity that challenges stereotypes. For instance, Clyde W. Franklin has suggested that black men

may embrace a conformist masculinity and try to imitate the hegemonic model’s behavior and attitudes in order to belong (p.369). They may also adopt a ritualistic model by trying to mimic African masculinity. However, they are different in that they do not believe in hegemonic rules and institutions, yet still play the game (p.369). It is this prevailing set of a stigmatized condition of blacks, as Ronald Jackson argues, that makes it extremely hard to theorize black masculinities in the same ways as white or other marginalized masculinities (p.128).

“What does the black man want?” (Fanon, p. 8) — one of the major questions in Black Masculinity Studies — has been at the center of recent attempts to theorize the complexity of the black experience. Over the last twenty years, studies in black masculinity have radically and thoroughly altered critical understandings of black men. As David Marriott (1996) illustrates in “Reading Black Masculinities,”

[e]arlier sociology of race relations theories of black masculinity, in which black kinship structures were shown to be based on socially dysfunctional gender relations, tended to view black male sexual cultures as the pathological reflections of white hegemonic masculinities. Many of these studies analyzed black male identification with racist stereotypes of sexual superiority as an hyperbolic inversion of white masculinity and saw a form of mourning for white paternity as the lost object of desire which requires a compensatory cultural narrative (p.185).

Today, the crisis in black masculinity is more commonly considered and questioned in detail, a fact whose basis lies in the emasculation and social death of black men under colonialism, slavery and hegemonic masculinity. Indeed, as the above-mentioned scholars point out, the social construction of the masculinities of non-white men is more troublesome and confining than that of white men in general. As Richard Majors and Janet Billson (1992) argue, being black and male “has meant being psychologically castrated—rendered impotent in the economic, political and social arenas that whites have historically dominated” (p.16). In their involvement in hegemonic masculinity, they have construed manhood as: “procrea-

tor,” “protector,” “breadwinner,” “provider.” Yet, a preponderant majority of black males do not have “consistent access to the same means to fulfill their dreams of masculinity and success” (p.1). It was only quite recently that they came to terms with the normative notions of masculinity—“thrift, perseverance and hard work” (p.1)—which have not brought them the same palpable benefits enjoyed by white males. As black masculinity scholars Majors and Billson (1992) suggest, many African American males “have become frustrated, angry, embittered, alienated and impatient” (p.1). As a result, a great deal of black males has become incredulous towards the actions and words of hegemonic culture.

Even though there exist new approaches to “coolness” and Black Masculinity Studies such as bell hooks’ *We Real Cool: Black Men and Masculinity* (2004) and Natalie Hopkinson’s and Natalie Y. Moore’s *Deconstructing Tyrone: A New Look at Black Masculinity in the Hip Hop Generation* (2006), which analyze black masculinity from a variety of perspectives, and present a multifaceted picture of African American manhood (p.30), Majors and Billson’s groundbreaking analysis of “coolness” and black masculinity is still valid and it can be observed in today’s black male’s performance of masculinity. They still do perform that is, live up according to the expectations of social and ideological norms, which makes their observations and interpretations all the more relevant and interesting because of the fact that African American men still have to “perform” that is, act out “cool” in order to survive in a hostile social environment.

### **Levee’s Performance Crisis**

How have African Americans defined their masculinity is a major question that appears to particularly attract August Wilson’s attention. Whereas his plays present a variety of sociological, historical and cultural factors conducive to the above mentioned question, majority of Wilson’s male characters conform to hegemonic masculinity in *The Pittsburgh Cycle*. What all of Wilson’s male characters more or less are aware of is the fact that there exists a settled perception of masculinity in mainstream society. The existence of this perception

is indicated through the white characters in the plays. In the whole cycle, there are only three white male characters who appear onstage. However, according to Henry Louis Gates (1997), “one of Wilson’s accomplishments is to register the ambitious presence of white folks in a segregated black world—the way you see them nowhere and feel them everywhere” (p.55). Although Wilson’s focus is clearly on the black male residents of the Hill District, there is simultaneously the constant presence of the mainstream white society. Even in the white men’s absence, they “are very much present since they clearly circumscribe and govern the lives and potentialities of the black” males (Usekes, p.115). For the 1920s, August Wilson wrote *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (1985) which illustrates the struggle for power in the music industry in urban America. Contrary to its title, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is not really about the blues singer, Ma Rainey. Yet, it is, Levee, the trumpeter that relays August Wilson’s concerns about the crisis in black masculinity.

In the 1920s, as Kim Pereira (1995) suggests, African American music was in a perennial state of change, fracturing into new modes of expression (p.13). As he conveys, “[t]here were the addictive rhythms of ragtime; the twelve bar call and response of the blues; jazz, swing, and the big band; be-bop and dazzling virtuosity; and fusion and the marriage of acoustic and electronic instruments” (p.13). August Wilson sets his *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* in this world, in a studio in Chicago in 1927. The importance of this date is vigorously repeated during the play, “because much of the action flows from a conflict between proponents of the old and new forms of black music, between the blues and swing” (p.16). Wilson’s blues characters are gifted musicians. Yet, their talent does not allow them to move up the American hierarchy. Thus, as he does in other plays in *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, Wilson suggests the inevitable African American prerequisite of embracing their indigenous ancestral past so as to alleviate present persecution.

In terms of black masculinity, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* is different from the other plays in *The Pittsburgh Cycle* because it stages the most destructive and unmotivated instances of the “cool” exemplifying how the “cool pose” works destructively in African Ameri-



cans' lives. Through the protagonist Levee, Wilson illustrates to his contemporary African American audience how the performance of "the cool" leads to self-destruction and displaced violence.

In Majors and Billson's (1992) identification, there exists an intricately interwoven relationship between black masculinity and the "cool pose." They argue that "the ironclad façade of the cool pose is a signature of true masculinity, but it is one dimensional. If it fails, masculinity fails" (p.28). Formulating their argument on W. E. B. Du Bois' *Souls of Black Folk* (1993), which begins with the argument of the masked or veiled African American psyche, Majors and Billson locate "double-consciousness" within "the cool pose" context. In his preeminent text of African American cultural consciousness, Du Bois (2007) introduces the notion of the "twoness" of African Americans: "One ever feels his twoness" Du Bois elucidates, "one ever feels his two-ness,--an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (p.xiii). Since performing "cool" constitutes the basis of the masculine identity of black males, it requires a great deal of physical and psychological performance and energy. As Majors and Billson (1992) suggest, for black males whose "masculinity is determined so completely by the cool pose, unmasking is equivalent to being stripped off their masculine identity and being defenseless" in the mainstream society (p.29). In other words, for African Americans, the cool pose is a way of saying "you might break my back but not my spirit"(p.29). It is the African American men's "last-ditch effort for masculine self-control" (p.29). However, when they are disunited from the "cool pose," there emerge two significant outcomes: "rigidity and aggression." In other words, "a potpourri of violence, toughness, and symbolic control over others constitutes a prime means"(p.33) through which African American men can act out masculinity. As Majors and Billson (1992) point out, "violence has become a readily available and seemingly realistic tool for achieving these critical social rewards; it is in this sense that violence can even become a form of achievement when everything else has failed"(p.33). Hence, *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom* displays how, when restrained and then set off, "the

cool” brings about destruction. Moreover, it is the only play in *The Pittsburgh Cycle*, in which the entire African American community that Wilson valued so much is metaphorically influenced, particularly with the slaying of the character named Toledo who, by virtue of his sophistication, represents the future of the black community.

In order to understand Levee’s excessive preoccupation with coolness, it is necessary to overview his choice of the swing as opposed to the blues, which constitutes the play’s major argument about black masculinity. Levee is, like other musicians, a transplant to Chicago, not a native. Thus, his “cool” posturing is also made complex because of this fact. He is not only assuming a specific form of masculinity, but also exemplifies as African American, southern transplant, and new generational masculinity mindset that further complicates his specific performance of the cool pose. Levee believes that manhood can be achieved through individual achievement, and dedicates himself to mastering this process. In the 1920s, as Kate Dossett (2009) suggests, “black-owned businesses in the retail, wholesale, and service sectors of Chicago grew by nearly eighty percent” (p.566). Similarly, another manifestation of this individual achievement was the way in which black males presented themselves in the society. Thus, this growing economy became the source for a new vision of masculine identity based on consumption. In his *Manliness and Its Discontents: The Black Middle Class and the Transformation of Masculinity 1900-1930*, Martin Summers (2004) points out the historical significance of the setting and the changes in masculine norms connected to the 1920s, in particular the move from production to consumption as the main way of asserting masculine identity. Accordingly,

middle class Americans increasingly unlinked manhood from the market, at least from the orientation of the producer, and began to define it in terms of consumption. One’s manhood became more and more defined by the consumer goods one owned, the leisure practices one engaged in, and one’s physical and sexual virility (p.8).

In spite of his indigence at the beginning of the play, Levee’s purchase of Florsheim—a luxurious shoe brand in the United States—for

\$11 exposes his eagerness to buy into the materialism of the American Dream and to look “cool” in his struggle to be like a white man. Levee desires to carve out a space for himself by establishing his own band instead of playing in Ma’s, believing that this will allow him to be in control of his own livelihood, proving his manhood. According to Susan Abbotson (2000), Levee’s music is a “true reflection of his contemporary (and future) society, especially in the North. Amiri Baraka describes the newer jazz styles that developed from the blues in the late twenties as a more urgent music that ‘took its life from rawness and poverty of the grim adventure of ‘big city livin’”(p.103). Motivating himself in this environment, in order to assert his independence from Ma Rainey, Levee has written his version of the song, which attracts attention of the white producers Sturdyvant and Irvin, who represent the white exploitation of black music. Obsessed with making money, they prefer to deal with black performers “at arm’s length” (Wilson, p.9). According to them, swing is what people want: “They want something they can dance to. Times are changing. Levee’s arrangement gives the people what they want”(p.49). As Davarian L. Baldwin discusses in his *Chicago’s New Negroes: Modernity, The Great Migration and Black Urban Life* (2007), by the 1920s, “important events turned the tide and forced” jazz music “to engage working class consumer demands in a way that placed” it at the center of the white interest (p.170). Thus, Sturdyvant and Irvin act according to popular demand and underestimate the power of the Ma Rainey’s music which promotes a spiritual and cultural connection with the African American community. Thrilled by the encouragement of the white producers, Levee acts out “cool” believing that he will be able to cope with the conflict and anxiety caused by hegemonic masculinity. With his cool jazz which offers “a potentially new deal,” Levee aims to gain a little more self-control (Abbotson, p. 101).

Indeed, from the very beginning of the play, Levee’s excessive pride contribute to his indifferent attitude toward Ma and her music. In their discussion about art in Act I, particularly the future of the blues, Levee, previously unable to date with a girl, furiously states that the blues is just “old jug-band music” (Wilson, p.17). In a reprimanding manner, he underestimates the other members of band, saying

I ain’t like you, . . . I got talent! Me and this horn . . . we’s tight. If my daddy knowed I was gonna turn out like this, he would’ve named me Gabriel. I’m gonna get me a band and make me some records. I done give Mr. Sturdyvant some of my songs I wrote and he say he’s gonna let me record them when I get my band together. (p.17)

When the entire band begins to rehearse, Levee plays something different. Although it is not his business to decide which version of “Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom”—“a song about a black clog dance popular in the 1920s”(Rutter, p. 69)—is going to be played, he snobbishly interferes in Cutler’s plans, implying that he will be a complete man, when his music is consumed by mainstream society. As Toledo puts it in Act I, Levee assumes himself to be “the king of the barnyard. He thinks he’s the only rooster know how to crow” (Wilson, p.46).

According to Majors and Billson, performing “cool” boosts African Americans’ pride and helps them face conflict and anxiety that is aroused by the performance of hegemonic masculinity. While Majors and Billson analyze how the “cool pose” helps bring balance, stability, confidence, as well as a sense of masculinity to those African American males who adopt it, they also examine how the “cool pose” works destructively in African American lives. Accordingly, the “cool pose” embodies “the kaleidoscopic brilliance of the black male self. People are drawn to the power of the cool black male because he epitomizes control, strength, and pride. He presents a mysterious challenge. He is charismatic, suave, debonair, entertaining”(p.2). However, as Majors and Billson state, being “cool” could be more significant than life itself. That is, performing coolness can lead disastrous consequences. Apparently, it may help explain why black males die earlier from “suicide, homicide, accidents and stress-related illnesses” and why “black males are more deeply involved in criminal and delinquent activities; that they drop out of school and are suspended more often than white men; and that they have more volatile relationships with their community”(p.2). Majors and Bilson (1992) explain that the excessive performance of the “cool pose” can deteriorate black males’ relationships, get black males in trouble with their communities and “reinforce an aloofness that stems from living too far from his deeper emotions”(p.37).

Because of his disloyalty to Ma Rainey, and his lack of cultur-

al identity as opposed to excessive “coolness,” Levee is motivated by his vigorous sense of individualism and detachment from his community. By neglecting the blues, Levee turns his back on the most important aspect of African American musical heritage. Kim Pereira conveys that Levee’s denial of the blues is also a refusal of a fundamental part of his masculine identity as a black man: “a part woven into the fabric of all the traditions that inform his sensibilities” (Majors and Billson, p.18). In other words, while trying to rediscover his manliness through new music, Levee rejects the blues as defining his identity.

Historically, as Majors and Bilson explicate, the performance of “cool,” which has played a significant role in the social and cultural development of African Americans, goes back to West Africa. Apparently, “coolness was central to the culture of many ancient African civilizations. . . . As an ancient and indigenous part of black culture, the idea of cool bears a spiritual meaning: sense of control, symmetry, correct presentation of self, and sophistication” (p.58). As they maintain, “coolness is a part of character — *ashe*. . . . A noble confidence and mystic coolness of character, *ashe* reveals an inner spirituality and peace that marks the strongest of men. True *ashe* is a reflection of true inner turmoil and anxiety” (p.58). Though this mask, as they elucidate, African Americans were able to survive in their “grim transfer of Africans to the Americas via enslavement” (p.58). In their bondage, black males learn that a male stands for being responsible and a good provider for himself and his family. For them, though, “this is not a straightforward achievement” in reality. As a matter of fact, “outlets for achieving masculine pride and identity, particularly in political, economic and educational systems, are more fully available to white males than to black males” (p.31). Consequently, since they have been denied access to many opportunities in the mainstream society, they developed some kinds of alternatives. The most prized possession of black males is their identity or “*ashe*.” Thus, creativity and imagination are the only limits in establishing a personal status based on “posturing, prevarication and coolness” (p.59). As Majors and Billson (1992) state, in the mainstream society, black males have mastered the art of concealment and have constructed

masks (p.2). Thus, in order to cope with the hegemonic masculinity, some black males have built a symbolic world. Having been deprived of a uniform, standard, uncontested and exemplary manliness, African Americans must invariably "prove to themselves that they are men, worthy as well as powerful" (p.2).

Since Levee has placed his search for "ashe" in the performance of hegemonic masculinity, he will never obtain the identity he is striving for. Because of his excessive "coolness," he never understands what Toledo tells him at the beginning of the play:

As long as the colored man look to white folk to put the crown on what he say . . . as long as he looks to white folks for approval . . . then he ain't never gonna find out who he is and what he's about. He's just gonna be about what white folks want him to be about. That's one sure thing (Wilson, p.27).

As a matter of fact, Levee's dedication for swing, and in general for modernization, could, normally, be a precisely judicious choice. However, Levee selects to adopt swing music, so that he can escape from his tradition, which further cuts off him from his community. Thus, when Levee makes music, unlike the other members of the band, he does not connect with his community in the emphatic and communal way that August Wilson values. His gravitation towards swing, and use of the blues in a detrimental way, is indicative of how he deals with hegemonic masculinity. In contrast to the other members of the band who express their oppression through their music, Levee thinks that through swing, he will run away from the grief and pain caused by hegemonic masculinity: the two components that make up his excessive preoccupation with the "cool." He fails to understand the fact that in order to come to terms with his own "ashe" (Majors and Billson, p.58), he must get in touch with his past. His fascination with "coolness" obscures his own past and its power.

At the end of Act I, the audience learns that there are reasons behind Levee's excessive performance of the "cool." Wilson illustrates why Levee avoids his ancestors, what his outrage is, and how his past sparks of his ongoing resentment. In Act I, he explains in detail how he is capable of handing the white man as follows:

I was eight years old when I watched a gang of white mens come into my Daddy's house and have to do with my mama any way they wanted. It was coming on planting time and my daddy went into Natchez [Mississippi] to get him some seed and fertilizer. Called me, say, "Levee, you the man of the house now. Take care of your mama while I'm gone." I wasn't but a little boy, eight years old. (*Pause*.) My daddy had a knife that he kept around there for hunting and working and whatnot. I knew where he kept it and I went and got it. . . . I tried my damndest to cut one of them's throat! . . . He [one of the white men] reached back and grabbed hold of that knife and whacked me across the chest with it (Wilson, p.55-56).

The experience reveals why Levee has to resort to adopting a cool pose. Clearly, Levee's "cool pose" masks a troubled and painful childhood, filled with violence, rape and the lynching of his father. According to John Hanlon (2002), Levee "sees his father's wily acts of revenge as instructive on 'how to handle the white man,' but the larger story suggests that the son is merely fated to repeat this kind of futile attempt at a single-handed leap into the dominant class" (p.107). As Majors and Billson (1992) argue, the detrimental and vicious side of "the cool pose" stands for a person's isolation from the African American community. Accordingly, "the masking of true feelings interferes with establishing strong bonds with families and friends. Unfortunately, for the black male who constantly puts himself under pressure to prove his manhood and who is simultaneously unable to show and discuss his feelings and fears" the risk exacts a very severe consequence (p.41). In *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*, this risk drives him. In his choice of music, in addition to making more money, his aim is to avoid any encounter with despair and pain. As Philip E. Smith (1992) states, "Levee's solution for the problems of black people is to forget them, as Irvin and Sturdyvant have urged; he sings and dances a few lines of 'Doctor Jazz': 'When the world goes wrong and I have got the blues / He's the man who makes me put on my dancing shoes'" (p.181). However, as Charles Patrick Tyndall (2002) suggests,

Levee, fleeing from his past should raise a red flag for Wilson aficionados; any Wilson character that avoids or does not respect his/her past is going to be used to teach a lesson. According to August Wilson, ignoring one's history (including the negative events) always leads to tragedy (p.55).

As the other plays in the cycle illustrate, Wilson’s characters have unfinished business, unresolved issues with the past, with their history. As Alan Nadel (2011) points out, the blues formulates an alternative history encoding the African American experience overlooked by official historical documentation (p.10). Ma Rainey conforms this in Act II, “white folks don’t understand the blues. They hear it come out, but they don’t know how it got there. They don’t understand that’s life’s way of talking. You don’t sing to feel better. You sing ‘cause that’s a way of understanding life”(Wilson, p.66). Because she regards the blues as history, she suggests that African American life would be empty without the blues. Thus, she “takes the emptiness and [tries] to fill it up with something”(p.66). As Doris Davis (2010) asserts, Ma Rainey functions “as integral counterparts of the blues and African folklore motifs that envelop” Levee and other male characters (p.165) who fail to “realize the presence of self that enables her success in the patriarchal and racist arena in which she functions”(p.174).

Ma Rainey also emphasizes the importance of the blues and its contribution to the entire black community. For example, as Kim Pereira (1995) points out, it is noteworthy that a nonmusician plays an important role in recording (p.20). In other words, such characters signify a synergistic force between musicians and the rest of the community. The inarticulate Sylvester, Ma’s nephew, represents those black people with little or no voice in the African American community. By letting him perform the introduction of the song, Ma Rainey suggests that the isolated characters in the African community can participate in the blues as well—all black people have a voice through their music—and, in a larger sense, that they can contribute to the successful advancement of black culture. Unlike the other members of the band, Levee’s vociferous opposition to Sylvester’s role highlights how he is imprisoned by his “cool pose.” He never understands what Toledo points out about the black community: all black males “got to his part. I ain’t talking about what I’m gonna do . . . or what you or Cutler or Slow Drag or anybody else. I’m talking about all of us together. What all of us is gonna do”(p.32). Taught to



believe that a real black male is “fearless, insensitive, egocentric and invulnerable”(Hooks, 2004 p.57). Levee closes off all his emotions that interfere with his coolness.

Along with Ma Rainey, Toledo persistently stresses the significance of the black community in the play. He attempts to create historical contexts so that Levee would figure out the consequences of the performance of hegemonic masculinity. When the bass player Slow Drag, and the guitarist Cutler, bond through naming, Toledo explains that they are performing an African ancestral retention ritual, a bond of kinship. Calling attention to the performance of hegemonic masculinity, he insists in Act II,

we done sold Africa for the price of tomatoes. We done sold ourselves to the white man in order to be like him. Look at the way you dressed. . . . that ain't African. That's the white man. We trying to be just like him. We done sold who we are in order to become someone else. We's imitation white men. (p.76-77)

His role in the band, in more musical terms, is to supply the notes, not just the melody; he retrieves the historical circumstances that have brought Levee to this time and this place.

As Majors and Billson point out, compensating for feelings of insecurity and inadequacy has directed African American men to question what it means to be a man and many black males respond to the demands of hegemonic masculinity by striking a “cool pose.” By performing “cool,” African American males are indoctrinated “to view every white man as a potential enemy, every symbol of the dominant system as a potential threat”(Majors and Billson, 1992, p.41). As a result, they are unwilling to expose their innermost feelings since “playing it cool becomes the mask of choice”(p.41). Nonetheless, this choice demands a stiff price in suppressed energy and repressed feelings that generally emerge as black on black crime. Reminiscent of Majors’ and Billson’s warning of the negative consequences of the performance of “cool,” Toledo anticipates the fact that Levee’s performance of “cool” may bring about failure in his life. As he conveys in Act II,

Some mens got it worse than others . . . this foolishness I am talking about. Some mens is excited to be fool. That excitement is something else. I know about it. I done experienced it. It makes you feel good to be fool. But it don’t last long. It’s over in a minute. Then you got to tend with the consequences. You got to tend with what comes after. That’s when you wish you had learned something about it. (p.73)

According to Majors and Billson (1992), some of the elements of the cool pose include aloofness, emotionlessness and self-control, and the characterization of Levee as always ready to pick up fight with his fellow musicians or behaving in an obsequious manner towards the white producers seem to go against him being defined unequivocally as cool. There is no doubt that Levee struggles throughout the play to assert his masculinity and the other band members often see him as and call him a fool, alluding to his coolness. In his warnings against the consequences of the performance of excessive “coolness,” Toledo also dwells upon the black masculinity crisis that occurs with the estrangement of black males from their African bonds. As he points out in Act I,

we are the leftovers. The colored man is the leftovers. Now, what’s the colored man gonna do with himself? That’s what we waiting to find out. But first we gotta know we the leftovers. Now who knows that? You find me a nigger that knows that and I’ll turn any whichway you want me to do. I’ll bend over for you. You ain’t gonna find that. And that’s what the problem is. The problem ain’t with the white man. The white man knows you just a leftover. ‘Cause he the one who done the eating and he know what he done ate. But we don’t know that we been took and made history out of. Done went and filled the white man’s belly and know he’s full and tired and wants you to get out the way and let him be by himself (p.44-45).

The concept of being a “leftover” leaves African Americans outside the trajectory of hegemonic America. Since Toledo knows that black men have to navigate a world in which white men have made the rules, he portrays the mainstream history as a process of waste and discontinuity. In a sense, he desires to reformulate a version of history that will center on black manhood. Thus, he asks, “now what’s the colored man to do with himself?” (p.44) This question

is critical not only in this play but to *The Pittsburgh Cycle*. In that sense, self-determination as opposed to the black masculinity crisis becomes a critical objective identified and supported by August Wilson. Self-determination connects with the notion of defining alternative images of black masculinity.

During the play, Levee plays “cool,” plays the accommodating black to Sturdyvant and Irvin and, what is more threatening, to other black males excessively. When Sturdyvant offered less money than he has expected for his songs, Levee’s dreams about being in control of his manhood are shattered. Angered by Sturdyvant, Levee transfers his rage to Toledo, whom he murders at the end of the play for accidentally scuffing Levee’s Florsheims. Levee’s stabbing Toledo for a trivial reason reveals that he is incapable of controlling his “coolness” and that coolness is an incomplete mechanism to control the oppression imposed by American society. It is a mask that is bound to be exposed, for it is a repressive mechanism that temporally conceals anger and violence under a serene façade. Levee’s inability to control his coolness is transferred to Toledo, which highlights Wilson’s “most poignant and insightful social commentary, the disappointments and frustration of oppression divide the race” (Hanlon, p.108). Whereas the “cool pose” has provided him with different grounds on which to establish a healthy “ashe” (Majors and Billson, p.58), Levee is unable to realize the ideal that Toledo and in a larger sense August Wilson has presented.

## Conclusion

Wilson’s engagement with African American masculinity historicizes and anticipates the increasing interest in African American Studies and Masculinity Studies in light of Black Lives Matter Movement. Moreover, there has been a recent revival of the works of Wilson, mostly through cinematic and stage adaptations. Actor Denzel Washington has pledged to bring all ten of the Wilson’s plays to the screen over the course of a decade, and has already done so as the producer of *Fences* (2016) and *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* (a 2020 Netflix feature, starring Chadwick Boseman and Viola Davis

to great critical acclaim). Washington’s adaptation is based on the original play and never breaks free of its stage artifice. Through his stunningly intense adaptation, Washington reminds Wilson’s legacy, who passed away 16 years ago, to his contemporary audience and makes sure that “Wilson is taken cared of” (Scott, 2020).

In *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom*, Wilson presents the problematic and problematized nature of black masculinity and its consequences on the African American community. His black characters either experience a masculinity crisis or come to a new understanding of themselves in relationship to structures of power and systems of privilege. While actual confrontation with hegemonic masculinity works to produce a revisionist definition of black masculinity for some of his black male characters, those who reject confrontation with this reality are doomed to fail. Ultimately, *Ma Rainey’s Black Bottom* suggests that black manhood cannot be determined by external acquisition, but through internal pride, self-definition as well as self-determination. August Wilson demonstrates this dynamic of black male empowerment through various images of black men of different ages and of different historical circumstances. As Keith Clark (2002) argues, by depicting black men within a community of black men, “Wilson’s plays foreground multiple conceptions of gender that are often contradictory and conflicting” (p.102). Therefore, August Wilson’s portrait of black masculinity is not static. In the play, devalued by society and marked by their performance crisis, black males negotiate with each other and the hegemonic masculinity as they attempt to reclaim their masculinity. The complete liberation from the performance crisis will occur, as Wilson suggests in an interview with David Savran (2006), when black males “begin to make a contribution to the society as Africans” (p.296).

The cool pose, thus, for Wilson is a strategy for a black man to respond to the society, which leaves no room for his individual existence. “Coolness” is an alternative to hegemonic masculinity, as a strategy of survival and as a way in part to achieve the status connected to hegemonic masculinity. The “cool pose” not only helps the black male to construct and maintain a certain kind of charisma and impression, it also covers the ages-old emotions repressed. The

“cool,” thus, become the tormenter rather than the outlet of repression and it devalues and destroys the status and hopes of the African American society, rather than glorifying it and providing it with opportunities for a social and individual change. The dichotomy of the black masculinity under the “cool pose” practice is, as Wilson observes, self-destructive and a development of a pseudo-self: Turning the whole practice into a psychological crisis, an identity problem. In other words, the crisis exists and continues to determine the fate of African American males and it seems as if August Wilson’s wisdom that is, going back to the African roots, rediscovering “African-ness” is adapted and will continue to exist.

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