

## Displaced Self in Polyethnic America: Rhizomatic Identity of African American Flâneur in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*

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Received: 2021/05/09

Accepted: 2022/09/10

### Abstract

The figure of flâneur as a cosmopolitan wanderer in the existential quest for the self can find its transregional manifestation among African Americans as the ceaseless travelers who have similarly been forced to relocate self in the hostile polyethnic land of America. It is the self whose ongoing trans-regional mode of existence and its performative actions find appropriate incarnation in postmodern African American dramatic context. Being distinguished by their performative identity in negotiation with the other and a quest for the displaced self, Wilsonian character can be the best manifestation of flâneur in contemporary time. Besides, considering Wilson's special focus on the determinative role of the marginal character called the warrior spirit in being the authentic narrative of African American history, this study, applying Baudelaire's definition and Benjamin's theory of flâneur on Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* (1990), aims at demonstrating how Boy Willie as one of the warrior spirits of Wilson can be the potential manifestation of African American flâneur. Drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's postmodern theoretical concept of rhizome in *A Thousand Plateau* (1980), it also seeks to explore how the significant identity transformation of Boy Willie to African American flâneur can be a proper conduit for Wilson's postmodern recursive dramatic vision for remapping African American history. Moreover, it also sheds light on how rhizomatic Wilsonian flâneur can regain Africanness in America while disclaiming any privileged thinking subject in the dichotomy of Black and White.

**Keywords:** August Wilson, Baudelaire's and Benjamin's flâneur, Deleuze, Guattari, rhizome, *The Piano Lesson*, warrior spirit

### How to Cite:

Dayani, R; Hadaegh, B (2024), Displaced Self in Polyethnic America: Rhizomatic Identity of African American Flâneur in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*, *Journal of Language Horizons*, 8 (3), 7-34.

<https://doi.org/10.22051/lghor.2022.36009.1488>

homepage: <http://lghor.alzahra.ac.ir>

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## Introduction

Wilson's fourth play in the Pittsburgh Cycle, *The Piano Lesson* (1990) with its setting in the thirties, dramatizes the debate of Boy Willie and Berniece, the Charles's siblings, about the piano around which the dramatic conflict of the play revolves. According to Bissiri's (1999) comment on Wilson's attempt "to achieve the preservation of black African identity through theater performance in terms that are quite reminiscent of ritual theater" (p.111), what can be highlighted in this play is the significance of characters' performative reaction towards the piano as the conduit for self-realization. To Berniece, the piano is a shrine for memorial of her ancestor, that is dusting in the parole of house while for Boy Willie it is a commodity which can help him reach financial success meaning his own land in the south. It is implied that the defining role of performance to ritual theater is the pivotal role of performative characters to Wilsonian drama. To pursue his agenda of stimulating unconscious or ignored African sensibility, Wilson has configured performative identity for his characters which requires them in the process of ceaseless negotiation "psychic and spiritual intermingling of self and others" (Olaniyan, 2009, p.30). Therefore, character's ability to articulate and "perform identity" defines the major concern of *the Piano Lesson*. Moreover, characters' confrontation and struggle with the piano representing their heritage and their slavery past is to reconsider "the historical and personal significance of slavery" and to demonstrate how African Americans are going to deal with it while it has haunted their present (Üsekes, 2009, p. 94). Being the permanent wanderer for the lost identity in the polyethnic land of America (Bogumil, 1994, p. 465) and well-known for their performative identity, Wilsonian characters can be strongly reminiscent of the figure of flâneur proposed by Baudelaire and Benjamin who has "insatiable appetite for non-I" (Baudelaire, 1970,p. 9), "existential attempt to discover the secret of being" (Tester, 2014, p. 8) and is a performative spectator and actor (Schipper, 2017, p. 193) in the metropolitan America. In addition, this study, exploring African American flâneur in *The Piano Lesson*, seeks to not only identify Wilsonian character with African American flâneur but also more significantly to trace how the rejected version

of flâneur, described by Benjamin as “a spy of capitalist” (1998, pp. 425, 429), can turn into component flâneur in capitalist society and be authentic archivist of African American history in the Great Depression of 1930s haunted with achieving American Dream.

### **Review of Literature**

Notwithstanding, having this intriguing association with Wilsonian characters and dramatic context, flâneur has hardly been the main issue of the aforementioned context but the main focus of fictional and non-fictional world. Accordingly, its analytical power nominated him as a methodology to analyze the modern and postmodern urban landscape of a society (Castro, 2009; Lane, 2002) while its temporal and spatial expansion can be exemplified in modern and postmodern various literary genera, such as Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49*, Iain Sinclair’s *Lights Out for the Territory*, José Cardoso Pires’s *Lisboa: Livro de Bordo*, Edmund White’s *The Flâneur*, David Kirby and Allen Woodman’s picture book *The Cows Are Going to Paris*, Yan Lian’s and Ramsey Nasr’s poetries and Woody Allen’s *Midnight in Paris*. With this in mind, flâneur’s trans-regional mode of existence calling for the transnational identity of many immigrants wandering in the host land has rarely been the main argument of African American drama especially those of August Wilson’s. However, the early transnational incarnation of African American flâneur in only one of Wilson’s plays, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1986), has been explored by Dayani and Hadaegh (2021). *The Piano Lesson*, like the fourth play of *Pittsburgh Cycle*, *Joe Turner’s Come and Gone* (1986), can appropriately accommodate the trans-regional expansion and postmodern manifestation of flâneur which itself will function as the suitable candidate for carrying Wilsonian dramatic agenda. However, the distinctive feature of African American flâneur of *the Piano Lesson* is its decentered violent characteristic, called “warrior spirit” (Nadel, 2010, p7) and more significantly its performance towards the economic crisis of the 1930s. Accordingly, it can be described as the character daring fight with the obstacles in his way and the kind of African American who, as Wilson explains, looks “around to see what the society has cut out for them, who see the limits of

their participation, and are willing to say, 'No, I refuse to accept this limitation that you're imposing on me . . .'" (Moyers, 1989, p. 179). The antagonistic forces of Boy Willie have associated him with flâneur's spirit of connecting with non-I, such as white society to deal with the capitalism of 1930s. On the other hand, this flânerie spirit of interconnecting with the other can be reminiscence of "Rhizome" proposed by Deleuze and Guattari in *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1987) which can be a suitable framework to evaluate postmodern identity of African American flâneur. On the other hand, the postmodernity of performance of Wilson's character is significant to reinforce when he is known as the pioneering figure in the New Age Post-Revolutionary developmental epoch of African American theater (Pinkney, 2004, p.12).

With retrospect to the immense bulks of scholarly works and publications with various critical discourses on *The Piano Lesson*, it is requiring to see whether the aforementioned identity has been explored. In the same vein, most scholarly works on this play have explored how Wilsonian characters deal with the debates on the piano and the legacy of slavery past (Tackach & Benoit, 2008; Rudolph, 2003; Morales, 1994; Boan, 1998; Scott, 2016). Of utmost concern of these scholarly works is how they seek to shed light on Wilson's recursive representation of African American history in the contemporary America while refocusing on character's reaction towards past, and consequently their reconstruction of present time. However, while some other discussions, such as Londr'e's (2007, pp.113-123) clarify the vital performances of main characters, such as Boy Willie in emancipation and representation of historiography of Black Community, they rarely concentrate on the postmodern engagement of Black and White and the past and the present in American hostile society from Deleuzian perspective, and how a decentral character, such as Boy Willie might be identified with flâneur, and thus the best candidate for following the postmodern recursive vision of the playwright. The postmodern Deleuzian performance is the main concern of Robert LaRue's (2011) study when he found the appropriate statue for postcolonial individual in what Deleuze and Guattari theorized as a the rhizomatic statue in *A Thousand Plateaus*. By interconnecting two theories of

postcolonialism and Deleuzian, LaRue's research has made the application of the latter's theoretical framework on African American context of Wilson's play possible. Much the same is true when Bruce B. Janz (2001) in "The Territory Is Not the Map Place, Deleuze and Guattari, and African Philosophy" has sought to rethink African philosophy through taking the concepts proposed in *A Thousand Plateaus* as the clues. Furthermore, while at the core of all critical commentaries on Wilson's play lies the assumption that Wilsonian characters are wanderers in search of their lost identity, they have not exceeded this fundamental to justify how being the lost wanderer in existential quest in the 1930s can play a determinative role in carrying Wilsonian project of postmodern historiography with special focus on tracing character's process of transformative identity from "consumer materialism" (Morals, 1994, p.109) to the narrator of African American history. To this end, besides exploring Wilson's postmodern inclusive dramatic vision for his characters configuration, this study attempts to intensify this non-counterdiscursive vision through finding postmodern African American manifestation of white flâneur whose versatile cosmopolitan nature reciprocally calls for multifaceted hybrid nature of Black Americans. Meanwhile, the "Rhizomatic Cosmopolitan And Wilsonian Recursive Vision In *Joe Turner's Come And Gone*" explored the postmodern African American flâneurs with concentration on the characters who can be identified with competent flâneurs at the time of their appearance and specially on their performance in early stages of immigration when Black Americans were obsessed with reunion and immigration in the economic constraints of the 1930s (Dayani & Hadaegh, 2020). Regarding the fact that flâneur's trans-regional mode of existence as African American in the 1930s has not been the focus of studies of dramatic art or Wilson's plays, the following parts seek to examine how a decentered Wilsonian character as the manifestation of Benjamin's rejected version of flâneur can survive as competent flâneur in the polyethnic American society of the 1930s. Moreover, both flâneur and Wilsonian blacks are prone to be significantly identified as a nomadic non-dualistic identity proposed by Deleuze and Guattari's nomadological postmodern perspective in *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987). The main focus of this

study is how Wilsonian antihero infatuated with achieving White's social standing can dismantle counterdiscursive encounters with dichotomy of White/Black and regain his lost Africanness to accomplish Wilson's agenda of representing his characters as "Africans in America" (Young, 2011, p.142). Nonetheless, the present study seeks to identify the decentered Wilsonian character as the potential flâneur through examining its gradual identity transformation throughout the play while challenging Benjamin's critical statement that the flâneur being enmeshed with commodification of capitalism cannot survive as the competent flâneur. Accordingly, the vital inquiry of the present research is how the decentered Wilsonian flâneur can exceed the capitalist values of the 1930s which was not the challenging economic situation of flâneur of early era of *Joe Turner's*. In this sense, the first part will identify one of the main characters, Boy Willie, with Baudelaire and Benjamin's flâneur while the second part in three parts, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari's concept of rhizome, becoming and body without organ, is to examine African American flâneur's social historical performance towards the central conflict of the play and his possible phases of identity formations. *Plateaus'* theoretical framework serve suitable for studying African American flâneur in terms of its centrality on the absent of any binary opposition and instead the constant existence of rhizome in unrestricted assemblage with opposing elements. In other words, Deleuzean anti-transcendentalist concepts can serve Wilson's crucial attempts at disclaiming any privileged thinking subject or African American's position in opposition to the white. Finally, it sounds safe to claim that warrior spirits as one of the manifestations of African American flâneur is a rhizomatic wanderer who can be the best narrative conduit for representing the true history of African Americans as the dramatic agenda of Wilson.

## **Discussion**

### ***Boy Willie: African American Archivist***

Boy Willie is one of the focal characters who bears remarkable resemblance to flâneur. He has been decentralized by Wilson to illustrate "various phases of his identity formation" and to make him his primary spokesman (Clark, 2009, p. 50). Regarding his gradual identity transformation

as the main dramatic agenda of the play, one can find the beginning of the play remarkable. Initially, Boy Willie shows slight resemblance to some of the flâneur's features as wandering "traveler" in constant movement (Baudelaire, 1970, pp.6-11). Nevertheless, his financial goal of roaming for selling goods makes him identical with Benjamin's definition of failed flâneur (1998, p. 429) afflicted by the commodification of the 1930s. As it is evident, the play is depicting the time of Great Depression of the 1930s which hits African Americans the hardest because they have recently experienced financial constraints, and now they have found some legitimate jobs in discriminated white society. Explaining the problems Black deal with during the 1930s, Wilson says:

*Today I would say that the conflict in black America is between the middle class and the so-called underclass, and that conflict goes back to those who deny themselves and those who aren't willing to. America offers blacks a contract that says, "If you leave all that African stuff over there and adopt the values of the dominant culture, you can participate." ... The ones who accept go on to become part of the growing black middle class and some areas even acquire some power and participation in society, but when they finally arrive where they arrive, they are no longer the same people...They've acculturated and adopted white values (Lyons, 1999, p. 2).*

All of these burdens make Boy Willie appear initially as the quester of economic freedom through selling heirloom piano, and thus possessing ownership of land. Desperately occupied with his monetary goal, Boy Willie cannot acknowledge the historical function of piano as lineage kinship bound to their heritage; therefore, unable to find his self-worth in other places in relation to the ownership of land and economic thriving (Morales, 1994, p.106). Following his avid for personal freedom in commerce depart from community, he can be the Benjamin's rejected version of flâneur who is a passive observer wanderer, "a spy of capitalist" and its advertiser (Benjamin,1998, pp. 425,429) rather than being that active observer of the city intended to mingle with non- I of the crowd (Hanssen, 2006, p.43). Still, looking further into other parts after

the initial conflict of the play and observing Boy Willie's later performance render to anticipate Boy Willie's significant identity transformation from failed flâneur to flourishing competent flâneur. With this in mind, referring to Wilson's comment on the play in his interview with Kim Powers, one can apprehend the crucial role of Boy Willies: "The importance of history to me is simply to find out who you are and where you've been. It becomes doubly important if someone else has been writing your history" (1984, p.52). By the same token, Morales' notion that Boy Willie is one of those characters assuming the role of man of memory by "recounting the history of the piano carvings to Maretha" (1994, p.107) witnesses to Boy Willie as a repository of history and archivist flâneur when he struggled to emphasize Wilsonian notion of knowing one's historical origin:

*Boy WILLIE : You ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. [ . . . ]. If you did that she wouldn't have no problem in life. She could walk around here with her head held high. [...] Mark that day down with a special meaning. That way she know where she at in the world. You got her going out here thinking she wrong in the world. Like there ain't no part of it belong to her (Wilson, 1990, p. 93).*

Along with that, Boy Willie is one of the residences of blues' metaphysical space, and thus the repository of musical tradition which is a great conduit of representing development of Black history for Wilson (Adell, 1994, pp. 52-53). As a performer of blues, being repertoire of African American life, Boy Willie also carries community history, the kind of function that is not so irrelevant to historical gaze of flâneur (Hanssen, 2006, p. 11). In other words, the Blues is narrating the life of African Americans as long as it "constitute archives of Black culture" (Elam, 2004, p.30). In the same vein, Boy Willie as blues musician is "expert at reproducing unrestricted mobility locomotive made possible" (Elam, 2004, p.37) which nominates him as the potential flâneur. Even more strikingly, Boy Willie's single-mindedness and his decisive act of remoting the piano or fighting with material obstacle in his journey towards self-realization are suggestive of his potentiality for being "a runaway



slave” (Boan, 1998, p.269); a flâneur who is eager to change the disorder around and make his new world out of that alien world in which he is both an outsider and a native observer (Tester, 2014, p.3): “Boy Willie: But my mama ain't birthed me for nothing. [...] I got to mark my passing on the road. Just like you write on a tree, "Boy Willie was here." [...] Trying to put my mark on the road” (Wilson, 1990, p. 98). In other words, it is the merit of Boy Willie’s philosophy of achieving what he wants out of his free will that appropriates him for being identity quester (Boan, 1998, p.269) or that “doing not being” identity Benjamin found struggling for “existential completion” by leaving his comfort zone to “bath in multitude” (Tester, 2014, p.5). Thus, Boy Willie along with his aggressive warrior spirit is prone to be evolved as the component flâneur.

The revolutionary statue of Boy Willie’s historical perspective has been dramatized in the powerful sequence of the play when he himself spurs Sutter’s ghost’s apparition and invites him into a personal battleground: “Hey Sutter! Sutter! Get your ass out this house! Sutter! Come on and get some of this water! You done drowned in the well, come on and get some more of this water!” (1990, p. 109). Significantly, not only Sutter’s ghost signifies collective hallucination but it embodies slavery past haunting their present (Morales, 1994, p.111) and ongoing white’s pressure over Black’s life which should be exorcised to “reestablish kinship ties” (Nadel, 2010, p.194). Therefore, fighting with Sutter’s ghost is fighting with slavery past and its burden as a way of binding to ancestor, and thus metaphorically regaining Africa in American society. The revolutionary identity formation of Boy Willie is evident from “consummate materialist” (Morals, 1994, p.109) and of the early stage to “historical materialism” (Benjamin, 1998, p. 460) or flâneur with historical perspective. In fact, the play is reflecting the period of the economic prestigious of white by owning land and Euro-Americans’ exploitation of African Americans who have been serving the labors of the land. Boy Willie’s struggle for selling the piano to buy white’s land and enjoy the equal rights as whites (Üsekes, 2009) suggests his obsession with capitalist value. Boy Willi’s different performances towards the piano, and consequently his identity transformation

from consummate materialism to historical materialism evokes the process of flourishing as the competent flâneur with historical gaze and understanding. It is this historical gaze that necessitates reconnecting and reassembling with the torments of past or Sutter's ghost in order to actualize the past, as flâneur does, in the present in a way that the past is "what has been" and always is rather than being stratified in the past (Hanssen, 2006, p.229; Benjamin,1998, p.458). While rejecting Sutter's apparition as something in the mind, Boy Willie seems to acknowledge the burden of the past in a way that his performance represents the moment of remembrance of slavery past, and thus the moment of awakening. Referring to flâneur's treatment with the past, one can find Boy Willie's moment of awakening equal to awakening of the historical past which, once being actualized, lies with the higher grades of actuality in comparison to its time of existence in the slavery past (Hanssen, 2006). The significance of this imaginary fighting relies in the fact that, as Benjamin (1998) explains, awakening and dreaming is a dialectical image. The moment of awakening is the immersion into one's dream time. There is a paradoxical simultaneity in which the figure of awakening liberates from its common connotation of clarity and dream liberates from its association with darken (Hanssen, 2006). Accordingly, it is "the revolutionary completion of the past, the explosion of past possibility in the actuality of the present" that Boy Willie's life-and-death struggle" contributed (Hanssen, 2006, p. 11). With this in mind, Boy Willie's confrontation with Sutter's ghost does not provide him with ownership of Sutter's land or gaining capital but earn him self-expression, self-realization, and figurative ownership of Africanness and Africa (Nadel, 2010; Londre, 2007).

In fact, it is on Boy Willie's initial configuration as "warrior spirit" and then its transformation into blues legacy, associated with flâneur's tendency in reordering chaos (Tester, 2014, p.5) that the dramatic arc of the play relies. Boy Willie's performance in line with Bernice's playing piano finally culminates in communal redemption (Nadel, 2010). It seems safe to claim that Boy Willie's revolutionary identity transformations from passive consumerist wanderer to historical active observer can be manifested as African American flâneur, and

thus nominated as the appropriate character for accomplishing Wilsonian dramatic agenda of gaining African sensibility and authentic historiography. Boy Willie's performance can be the best conduit for representing counter-hegemonic while it is rejecting privileging any either binary of White or Black. The postmodern performance of African American flâneur of Wilsonian dramatic context can shed light to the application of the postmodern nomadological perspective of Deleuze and Guattari.

### ***African American Flâneur; Rhizomatic Solution***

Referring to postmodern concepts proposed in *Plateaus*, such as rhizome, becoming, and body without organ, one can delineate how Wilsonian African American flâneur has postmodern nomadological perspective and performance towards events of the past, and thus how he can be determinative in depicting Black's historiography in the 1930s when most of Black Americans struggled to have economic thriving and regaining their lost African identity. In terms of pivotal concern of *the Piano Lesson* over deciding about selling or keeping the piano and also about frequent apparition of the Sutter's ghost, Boy Willie's redemptive role can be identified with a potential flâneur. Deleuze and Guattari (1987) defined Rhizome as nomadic state of existing in multiple lines without any definite point of departure and destination while are prone to mingle with "heterogeneous" elements, "ruptures" or "block" in their way to experiment other multiplies and thus self-expansion (*A Thousand Plateaus*. pp. 8, 69-70). Hence, as the writers assert, "the rhizome is an acentered, nonhierarchical, nonsignifying system" that works by "variation, expansion, conquest, capture, offshoots" (*A Thousand Plateaus*.p.1). In this sense, rhizome for Black's life means their movement and struggle in making connection between two contradictory elements of the past and the present when some memories of slavery past can be one of the functioning blocks in the process of their becoming-black. Those blocks or the ruptures in their present life make ordeal for them in a way that "de-stratification" of the challenging past and haunting their present, are demanding and appeal "deterritorialization of the majority" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 69-70). Following what Eugene W.

Holland (2013) explains about deterritorialization and becoming, we can perceive that orchid and the wasp –favorite example of Deleuze– as two contradictory heterogeneous elements construct rhizome. The former deterritorializes the latter by imitating its image and then the wasp in return reterritorializes the former by being orchid’s reproduction tool (p.39). In fact, deterritorialization is experiencing and maintaining consistency in connection with varieties without any imitation or imposing any unity or organization (Holland, 2013, p.9). Important to notice in the process of becoming is that imitation is not mere resemblance or the reproduction of something, but it is capturing codes of one different organization or system to have “a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp”( Deleuze & Guattari,1987, p.10). This interconnection between two contrary lines is called “a parallel evolution” that Deleuze and Guattari quoted from Remy Chauvin (1987). Evolution and becoming of two unrelated elements are suggestive of multiplicities of rhizome when one line or circle extends its connection outside of its own territory and into lines of flight to increase its territory (Norton, 1986, p.85). While the Great Migration was African American’s attempt to make distance between their present and the ghosts of the slavery time (Young, 2011, 137), rhizome converts it into interconnection and “conjugation” with those ruptures to create an “assemblage” or combining of various elements which is “increase in the dimensions of a multiplicity” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp.8, 256). Accordingly, flâneur’s constant wandering and mobility from one place to another during indefinite period of time is the same rhizome process of becoming on “the plane of consistency” since their rambling encounters them with various divergent entities and multiplicities leading to their freedom (1987, p.255). By the same token, it can be claimed, as Wilson emphasizes, it was “carrying the burden of the past” (Boan, 1998, p.263). In the first crucial conflicting moment in which Wining Boy struggles with Boy Willie’s attempt at carrying the piano with rope and wheel out of the house (Wilson, 1988, pp. 104-105), Boy Willie is still affected by his monetary goal of selling the Piano to gain ownership of the land; he is an exploitative white man enforcing to sell the piano or African’s property and ancestor while a black

man, here Wining Boy, is standing against him. Wining Boy's protesting performances are to create an awakening moment for Boy Willie to regain his Black identity through acknowledging Sutter's ghost dramatized in his "death-and-life fight" in the following sequence of the play. Feeling the presence of Sutter, all characters asked Avery, the preacher, to bless the house and the piano while Boy Willie still believed in no ghost in the house but in Berniece's mind: "Ain't no ghost in this house. He needs to bless Berniece's head. That's what he needs to bless" (Wilson, 1988, p.107). It is this powerful sequence anticipating resolution of the play when Avery's tools of blessing were inefficient and the scene is left for Boy Willie to spur Sutter into his personal battleground as starting up the stairs to fight him:

BOY WILLIE Come on, Sutter!

[...] *(The sound of SUTTER's GHOST is heard. As BOY WILLIE approaches the steps he is suddenly thrown back by the unseen force, which is choking him. As he struggles he frees himself, then dashes up the stairs.)*

BOY WILLIE Come on, Sutter!

*(There are loud sounds heard from upstairs as BOY WILLIE begins to wrestle with SUTTER's GHOST. It is a life-and-death struggle fraught with perils and faultless terror. BOY WILLIE is thrown down the stairs. AVERY is stunned into silence. BOY WILLIE picks himself up and dashes back upstairs.)*

[...] *(There are more sounds heard from upstairs. DOAKER and WINING BOY stare at one another in stunned disbelief (Wilson, 1988, p.109).*

Knowing Boy Willie as an obstinate man holding fast to his disbelief in any ghost (Boan, 1998, p.260), the readers, along with Doaker and Wining Boy, are stunned by finding him in this outburst against the threat he had been ignoring. Inviting Sutter's ghost to battle and involving in so pertinacious fighting, Boy Willie is provoking flâneur's appetite for any divergences or any non-I to acknowledge his identity, and consequently is evoking mingling with "lines of flight" in the plane of consistency of rhizome (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.256). The lines of flight or ruptures are those obstacles and diversities that

rhizomatic being deals with and is eager to interconnect with to expand the dimensions of the self (Bogue,1989, p.108). Here, we witness the process of becoming in which Boy Willie as “the subject of becoming” makes Sutter’s dominancy detached from its majority and in this “deterritorialization” Boy Willie is withdrawn from his minatory (Holland,2013, p.9). Finally, in his last triumph for removing the ghost, he regains his blackness and Africanness while experiencing becoming-black. In other words, through this assemblage and conjugation with such divergent entity as Sutter he has uprooted Sutter’s, and thus whites’ aggressive power. In this light, Boy Willie has deterritorialized white’s society and consequently found that permanent dwelling in the domain of white society (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.105). In other words, he deterritorialized white society by subverting its social standards and traditional cods, such as class structure (Bogue,1989, p.88) which deprived Blacks of their rights. In sharp contrast with his previous vision of making deal with Sutter’s family to buy their land and thereby gaining ownership and emancipation, Boy Willie mingled with Sutter’s ghost and regained his black identity and ownership of his ancestral land Africa instead:

*(A calm comes over the house. [...]. BOY WILLIE enters on the stairs. He pauses a moment to watch BERNIECE at the piano.)*

BOY WILLIE Wining Boy, you ready to go back down home? Hey, Doaker, what time the train leave?” (Wilson,1988, pp.110-11).

Instead of forgetting and ignoring the ongoing terror of whites, its acknowledgment, in the form of deterritorialization, can contribute to Blacks emancipation (Menson-Furr, 2009, p.120). Obviously, it has been accomplished through both flâneur’s mingling with non-ego and rhizome’s becoming-everything in conjugating with ruptures that he “reduces oneself” to “trait” or “abstract line” and finds “one zone of indiscernibility” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.280) with others where black and white, oppressed and oppressing are not distinguishable from any “forms of subjectification and signification” (p.190). Therefore, the resolution of the play is not counter-discursive vision of black against white but, as Wilson claims, recursive vision of retaining African sensibility in African American society (Clark, 2009). From nomadological

perspective of Deleuze and Guattari, it is through disengaging from “molar being” of black and white or American and African individuality that the subject of becoming or becoming-Black will be emerged (Holland, 2013, p.107). Through this becoming, Boy Willie undergoes that “body without organ,” that body out of its molar function of being black and African to engage with white’s body, to “prolong his self” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.280) and add more dimensions to his being which now as flâneur has tendency to experience all infinite (Baudelaire, 1970, p.9). Now, he, as a body without organ or without his individuality, is “a full body clinging with multiplicities” rather than his own subjectivity (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.30). It is the deterritorialization or subversion of white’s restrictive social codes that made the body without imposed subjectivity and subjugation possible (Bogue, 1989). Unlike Boy Willie of first stage, present Boy Willie is deprived of his individuality and materialism of capitalism demanding him to sell his ancestor for gaining the land. It is worthwhile to remember what Elam (2009) claims about initial Boy Willie that he is “caught up in an agrarian vision of the American capitalist dream, and [he] associates the acquisition of wealth and property with masculinity” (p.132). Therefore, it is due to the activation of his potentiality of being flâneur and experiencing body without organ that he can be “abstracted from the Self”, constructed by “subjectification” of capitalism (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp.158, 457) and relocate his social and political identity. If Bernice’s simultaneous playing piano to exorcise the ghost is ritual renewal and way of regaining protection for Blacks, Boy Willie’s becoming-black has the same function of exorcising and more significantly “restorative” ritual praying of ancestor, the qualities that its absence has been felt in Avery’s preaching and praying (Young, 2011, p.108). Additionally, Boy Willie’s becoming can underscore the significance of the intersection of African-American cultural practices and the identity formation Wilson intends to emphasize (Clark, 2009). Experiencing Africanness is itself embracing pure intensities, experimentation and means assemblage (Londr’e, 2007) with divergences, and thus the freedom of which capitalism had deprived Boy Willie and other Blacks. Boy Willie’s death-and-life struggle with the ghost is that rhizome motion and free

movement of body without organ (BWO) that is flowing in “all directions”, out of any forms and becoming “destratified, decoded, deterritorialized” (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.40). In the same vein, we can claim that *Plateau's* BWO has been greatly incarnated in flâneur's “insatiable appetite for the non-I”, “his passion and profession to become one flesh with the crowd” and in his “immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude...in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite” (Baudelaire, 1970, pp.9,11) since body without organ “cuts across assemblages [...] without contour” as “a line of nomad art and itinerant metallurgy” (Deleuze and Guattari,1987,p. 507). Here, by itinerate metallurgy, the writers of *Plateaus* mean the same deterritorialization or transformation out of any prepared framework without any inclination towards positing dichotomy

### ***Becoming-Present and Counter-Narrative of Slavery***

We should refocus our attention back on how the present time of Wilsonian characters has inextricably informed by their past correlative objective of which is the piano as memories of family's sacrifice. Therefore, all sympathetic or critical attitudes towards the past can be evaluated by the quality of reaction that each character will have towards the piano (Pereira, 1995). As Wilson asserts, the central issue is how Black American, carrying the torment of past, “are going to use it?” and If “the real issue is the piano” (DeVries, 1987, p. 25), as slavery past and African American legacy, therefore their approach towards it is more significant as it shaped the dramatic framework of the story. The final crucial sequence of the play dramatized the resolution of present through the conduit of the past when Boy Willie collectively intertwined with his past through fighting with the ghost of the slavery past. It is the same actualization or presentation of the past in the present that contributes to Wilsonian counter -narrative of history. Likewise, it reminds us of the historical gaze of flâneur in “blast [ing] [...] his finds out of the homogeneous course of history, rescues them from their context (Wohlfarth, 2006, p. 19) to rhizomatically de-stratify the homogeneity of established history in order to reconstruct it rather than simply repeat or represent it (Hanssen,



2006, p.19). As it is mentioned before, in the process of becoming, Boy Willie has deterritorialized and “tipped the strata” of signification, stratification, and subjectification “away from the plane of organization” of capitalist society (Holland, 2013, p.111). In conjugating with the past, this African American flâneur is in the process of becoming-present in that he, as haunted by slavery past, is withdrawing the past from its majority while the feature of the present, as redeemed from the past, is detached from the minority. Therefore, de-territorializing and blasting the past from its homogeneity, African American becomes present free from past’s torment or “something-other-than majoritarian”-slavery past (Holland, 2013, p. 105). It is this vital moment in the play that an African American can regain his African sensibility and redemption by the virtue of being configured as rhizomatic flâneur in dealing with multitudes and ruptures of American society. These deterritorialization and historical responses of character towards the past are that necessary “counter-hegemonic process” that Scott (1972) believes “are not captured in mainstream historiography, but for Wilson [...] they embody the very foundation for remapping a vibrant subjectivity which sustained the new black migrant community of the North” (p.28).

With this in mind, it should be emphasized that the transformation, experimentation, and awareness coming out of rhizome are not only undergoing various becomings, becoming-black, becoming the present, and the creation of new world of potentialities (Burger, 1985, p.34) but also it is the creation of new slave narrative. Here, Wilson’s statement that history is to “find out who you are,” “where you’ve been,” and more significantly who “has been writing your history” (Shannon & Williams, 2004, p.52) implies the significance of writing your history while you are aware of your identity and origin. Hence, the performance of Wilsonian character is making history as his storytelling is generating Black history (Londr’e, 2007). In this sense, referring to Harrison’s (1989) discussion on Black storytelling “resistance to static exposition and fixity of conclusion” (p. 120), we can concentrate on various stories Boy Willies along with Doaker and Wining Boy narrates about the piano, the Charles family, Parchman Farm, and the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog that while are sometimes in

conflicting details, they “augment one another to merge into whole historiography of the play” (Wilson, 1988, p.114). Harrison’s statement finds their narration’s proclivity towards flexibility and experimentation in picking up stories they remind us of their generations. Thus, it is not farfetched to claim that flânerie and rhizomatic movement are within the flexible nature of Black Americans’ narrations attempting to summon both convergent and divergent historical lines of history in contrast to stable institutionalized master history of white society. As Londr’e intensifies (2007), in *the Piano Lesson* there are “plenty of history” that “is simply not the kind of history we learn in school” (p.114). Collective performance of Boy Willie and Berniece all are nomadic and rhizome to write their history at the same time when they are relocating African self and identity in American society. It is the same collective memory or “blood memory,” that is Wilson’s “dramatic landscape” helping him to “redefine African Americans’ identities through the re-imagination of their history” (Shannon, 2009, p. 26).

In addition, flâneur’s movement and desire to mingle with the slavery past to blast it out of its harmony and reorder his present, his rhizome confrontation with ruptures of past to deterritorialize it for undergoing various becomings all are counterpoints of Boan’s “black folk tradition of call-and-response” (1998, pp.268-289). The call is the slave narrative carved on the piano and the response is Boy Willie’s effort and reaction towards his slavery past and how he will “translate” it “into reality” of his present to achieve emancipation (1998, p.246). More stunningly, we can remember what Eduardo Cadava comments on Benjamin’s point of view towards history:

*For Benjamin, the truth of history does not involve the representation of an “eternal past” but rather the production – in relation to an agent and a present moment [...]– of an image. This truth of history is performed when we take the risk of making history rather than assuming it to belong only to the past. It happens, in other words, when we understand historicity as a kind of performance rather than as a story or a form of knowledge (1997, pp. 71, 72–3).*

Therefore, the relationship between the past and the present is in

simultaneity in which one apprehend, as Gourgouris (2006) asserts, “the *now*” in tandem with “*what has been* to form assemblage” (p. 221). In this sense, Boy Willie’s performance of deterritorializing past is the truth of history, understanding historicity, and making history rather than just knowing about the past.

### ***Visible and Invisible World; Nomadic Historiography and Redemption***

Flâneur’s “no repugnance for the things of metaphysics” (Baudelaire, 1970, p.9) qualifies him for accomplishing Wilson’s dramatic project of integrating African sensibility into his realistic play through intersection of invisible and spiritual world (Young, 2011, p.142). In other words, African American flâneur is capable of strolling between visible and invisible, mystical and realistic realm (Tester, 2014, p.5), the intersection that configured the realistic foundation of the play to set ritual revival as a way to redemption (Young, 2011, pp.132, 142). As Young (2011) discusses, Boy Willie’s fight with the ghost as the resolution of the play has been criticized by many critics, such as Berkowitz claiming that the ending is “a theatrically weak climax, since the mystical element seems imposed on the essentially realistic play” (Young, 2013, p.105). However, mystical spiritual elements of the play along with the realistic part of the play are mirroring the experimental nature of African American dramatic text, and thus its potentiality for being rhizome. In other words, asymmetrical mobility of flâneur between two divergent entities necessary for assemblage and becomings (Burger, 1985) necessitates the coexistence of two conflicting worlds of real and eternal, realistic, and spiritual which is itself at the center of African American psyche (Young, 2011). Black flâneur’s becoming-black is informed by assemblage between and intersection of these two conflicting divergent worlds or lines out of which comes “the zone of proximities” rather than resemblance and analogies (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.272). Not only does the inclination towards keeping mobility and multitudes of life denote flâneur’s desire to be with infinite (Baudelaire, 1970) but also refers to mapping or “cartographic” ((Holland, 2013, p.40) perspective of rhizome. It is the “cartographic” view in

contrast to the photographic view with tendency towards repetition that requires openness to multitudes and divergences to have reconstruction rather than imitation and repetition (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.12). By the same token, Wilson's cartography and re-historicizing African American experience are in contrast to mainstream historical studies of this period as Great Migration, the revival of which is experimentation or what Scott (1972) calls "outlaw cultural forms" (p.18). By the same token, representing magic and supernatural as the unassailable parts of African American culture, Wilson validates embracing spiritual world of ancestor within present time as a medium of salvation (Scott, 1972).

If supernatural is a way of awareness and a "truthful account of black history" for Wilson (Scott, 1972, p.20), then it is worthwhile to consider what Deleuze and Guattari propose on history:

*History is made only by those who oppose history [...]. That is not done for provocation but happens because the punctual system they found ready-made, or themselves invented, must have allowed this operation: free the line and the diagonal, draw the line instead of plotting a point, produce an imperceptible diagonal instead of clinging to an even elaborated or reformed vertical or horizontal. (pp. 295-6)*

Accordingly, Boy Willie in his connection with supernatural freed the line and produced that diagonal movement he himself created rather than moving based on the defined system that white history has dictated for Blacks. Therefore, such a rhizomatic mobility of black flâneur is opposite to the history at the same time that it is making history: "all history is really the history of perception, and what we make history with is the matter of a becoming, not the subject matter of a story" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987 p.347). "Minoritarian becoming" (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p.291) that Boy Willie has experienced in his assemblage with the ghost is representative of all decentered characters that Wilson prefers to characterize for re-historicizing and remapping history. These minoritarian becomings are full of "immanent potential" that "lies for propitious change," and thus valid narration of history (Holland, 2013, p.137). If

Boy Willie is one of those cultural figures with historical gaze, he can be called “universal figures” and “anti-memory” of Deleuze and Guattari (1987) in their debate on writing history (p.470). In this light, there is a difference between State history and Minoritarian becoming. While the former tries to increase the developments of its past to reproduce State rule, the latter “de-codes the actual determinations of the past” to change direction of history (Holland, 2013, p.137). In this counter movement, minoritarian becoming experiences the plane of consistency in the present, and thus the maximum potential of “become-otherwise in the future” (p.137). Becoming-everything contains undergoing experimentation and transversal directions against the linear development of history that always written by “the victor” or white society (p.138). With this in mind, Wilsonian flâneur in his connection with diversities such as magic, supernatural or ancestral roots is decoding, de-stratifying the system of organization or state history (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, p. 292) that claims slavery time is past and thus approaching emancipation. Decoding and de-stratifying state history is revealing the ongoing racial discrimination and permanent aftermath of slavery past during post-reconstruction era.

What should be pinpointed is the recursive dramatic vision of Wilson underlying all events in his play. In the process of history making, there is priority neither with past nor with present, nor with Black or White. Every becoming the character experienced is not in hostility with the medium of becoming (Bogue, 1989, p.75) or the whites but his conjugation and assemblage is that emancipation and freedom or “the zone of proximity”:

*Becoming-revolutionary remains indifferent to questions of a future and a past of the revolution; it passes between the two. [...] It constitutes a zone of proximity and indiscernibility, a no-man's-land, a nonlocalizable relation sweeping up the two distant or contiguous points (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, pp. 292-3).*

Subverting the binary of White and Black has been accomplished through the zone of proximity in which two distinct and heterogeneous entities, such as White and Black are not to captivate or exploit any place or land but “hold together in a topological relation of ‘vicinity’” (Bogue, 1989, p.151). It is a

debate that Morales (1994) raises to examine what specific “philosophy of history” has been emerged from Wilson’s dramatic work specially focusing on *the Piano Lesson* (p.105). In the same vein and in retrospect to the historical performance of character in becomings, Wilson has a historical project in representing Blacks’ life and identity. In other words, as Morales (1994) explains, Wilson has “simultaneous reactive/reconstructive engagement with the representation of blacks and the representation of history by the dominant culture” (p.105). As Boy Willie is expanding the dimensions of self in the process of becoming in connection with divergent lines, he is representing the state history and the culture of this dominant culture. What makes difference between state history and minoritarian becoming is the latter’s flâneur desire to experience non -I and its rhizomatic tendency in assemblage with divergences (Holland, 2013, p.137). These divergences are visions, magic, ghost, and supernatural elements that have characterized Wilson’s historical project as “an experiment in African American historiography” (Morales, 1994, p.106). Character’s link with ancestors, ghost, and supernatural is the link between living and dead, the present and the past, and the manifestation of expansion of history and obtaining self-worth (p.106). Therefore, it is the connection with these mystical elements that differentiates mapping perspective of Wilsonian characters from tracing perspective of state history or white society. By the same token, this finding clarifies and signifies what Wilson really means when he explains that his project “more and more concerned with pointing out the differences between blacks and whites, as opposed to pointing out similarities. We’re a different people. We do things differently” (Rothstein, 1990, p.8). African American rhizomatic flâneur is quite distinct in that he as a flâneur has the ability to “celebrate the unanticipated” and to “domesticate the potentially disruptive” (Fergusson, 2013, p.31), as an African American is from Africa of “always, already hybrid” (Richards, 1999, p.92) and as rhizome they are ready to mingle with lines of flights (Norton, 1986, p.85): “The nomad exists only in becoming, and in interaction” (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p. 430). Cartographic or mapping performance of Wilsonian character represents distinct narratives of history provoking nomadic point of view of Deleuze and

Guattari that so well Bruce B. Janz (2001) explains: “History becomes another map, another way of charting and defending space and determining citizenship” (p.399). Wilsonian dramatic agenda of history writing is what Deleuze and Guattari calls “Nomadology”:

*History [...] is always written from the sedentary point of view and in the name of a unitary State apparatus, at least a possible one, even when the topic is nomads. What is lacking is a Nomadology, the opposite of a history. (p. 23)*

In retrospect to Black flâneur’s simultaneous engagement with variety of mystical and historical world in African American context of Wilson, one can pinpoint the postmodern perspective of *Plateaus* in that performance of Wilsonian character is postmodern in the virtue of the process of constant destruction and reconstruction of self through deterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari, 1987, p.160). In a similar vein, Susana Vega- Gonzalez (1972) defines this postmodern agenda as a kind of remapping of the “dualistic vision of reality [that is the either/or], typical of the Western culture, [which] gives way to a symbiotic hybridity that puts into question traditional binary opposites such as [...] natural/supernatural, good/evil, life/death, past/present” (as cited in *August Wilson’s Pittsburgh cycle*, p. 29). In this way, this “symbiotic hybridity” is equivalence of the zone of proximity and becoming-imperceptible emerging out of flâneur’s becoming in which any call for their “molar aggregate” or function of oppressed and oppression has been eliminated (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp.273, 279). To become imperceptible, as Deleuze and Guattari (1987) explains, is through being like everyone else to the extent that it contains being unnoticed and undistinguishable from black or white:

*To be a stranger, even to one’s doorman or neighbors. [...] Not everybody becomes everybody [...], makes a becoming of everybody/everything. This requires much asceticism, much sobriety, much creative involution: [...] eliminate the too-perceived, the too-much-to-be-perceived. (p. 279)*

In this sense, the plane of consistency or flânerie of Boy Willie, desiring to become non-I, cannot be defined by any opposition between its own experimental destratified plane and the stratified strata of organization. It just

wanders between the strata and animates them through constant deterritorialization (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987, pp. 69-70). Again, it is the reminiscence of Benjamin's materialist historian or flâneur when he moves between the past and the present and creates "the revolutionary completion of the past, the explosion of the past possibility in the actuality of the present" (Hanssen, 2006, p.11). The same rhizomatic flâneur as materialist historian can be found in another Wilson's play *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* named Loomis who finally acknowledged his miserable past through rejoining it as one of the ruptures in his way (Dayani & Hadaegh, 2021, p.15). More stunningly, Wilson has tried to "re-animates the marginalized ancestral voices of the African American past, silenced by the oppressive power of the Euro- American narrative of nation", through characterization of his nomadic characters (Scott, 1972, p. 29), historical awakening figure of flâneur who can be the representative of the true concept of history, who "invites the dead to the table" (Benjamin, 1998, pp. 480,912). Thus, the outcome of this assemblage with the past, the ruptures or divergences is what Morales (1994) calls "historical self-definition" ( p.111).

### **Conclusion**

To sum up, pursuing his self-realization and existential quest in confrontation with divergences of slavery past, lines of flights, and metaphysics in polyethnic American society, African American flâneur penetrates to extract eternal reality of life. As Ferguson (2014) concurs, it is the physiognomy of competent flâneur to "channel" or "to use productively" "upon what he sees" and not "to lose the detachment required for creativity" (p.30). Therefore, the active integration with the torments of Sutter's ghost's apparition in the house is in line with the intellectual activity of flâneur and flânerie. It is reaching this level of competency and involution into BWO that Boy Willie has been configured upon. He is now an unorganized or destratified body free from subjectification of capitalism and white society after having assemblage with ruptures. With this in mind, performing as true flâneur is tantamount with performing as free, nonstratified Black capable of retaining Africanness and reconstructing African American historiography. To put it differently, flâneur's



eagerness to make meaning out of what he sees and his experimental encounter with the world around is African American assemblage and interjection with their slavery past and their present as the dominant world around them. If Black flâneur's narrative and re-narration of past means actualization of past into present in a way that "what has been" is "always", then flâneur is in plane of consistency in which he deterritorializes the present narrative of Black history by re-narrating and re-voicing their past. As Bissiri (2001) asserts, *The Piano Lesson* dramatizes Wilson's agenda "to achieve the preservation of black African identity through theater performance in terms that are quite reminiscent of ritual theater" (p. 111) which is the actualization of African legacy and presence in their contemporary time.

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