Resurrecting ‘Phantom Limb[s] of the Dismembered Slave and God’: Unveiling the Africanisms in Gem of the Ocean

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Resurrecting “phantom limb[s] of the dismembered slave and god”:
Unveiling the Africanisms in Gem of the Ocean

ARTISIA GREEN

“It’s not potentially destructive at all. To say that I am an African, and I can participate in this society as an African, and I don’t have to adopt European values, European aesthetics, and European ways of doing things in order to live in the world…”

—August Wilson, Conversations with August Wilson

“You will understand Gem through Olokun.”

—Julianna Sarr, personal interview

At the helm of the August Wilson 20th century cycle is Gem of the Ocean (2003). On the surface, this play chronicles the first generation of the post-emancipation era and the first family of the Wilson Cycle—Aunt Ester and her protege, Black Mary; the formidable Eli and Solly Two Kings, the harbinger of justice; Caesar Wilks, the town constable; and the determined Citizen Barlow. The year is 1904 and the black heirs of the Constitutional promissory notes entitling them to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness are attempting to cash out. The search has begun for the fruits of freedom (King). After 250 years of enslavement, notions of liberty meant non-restricted movement and access to education. It represented the reunifying of families, the acquisition of land, and labor that produced a living-wage. However, in Gem Wilson argues that “so far, [freedom] doesn’t mean very much” (Dezell 254) describing its injustices and resultant grief as “a mighty big ocean” (Wilson, Gem 60). Despite the abolition of slavery, African Americans continued to suffer from discrimination and destabilization. Anti-black violence and quasi-slavery legislation formed the basis of an ensuing tide of white-supremacy which demoralized newly freed African Americans. Structural injustices—sharecropping, merchant liens,peonage systems, and Jim Crow—prevented many African Americans from migrating North and West in the hopes of escaping legal, political and economic subjugation.

In spite of these tensions, Wilson has been quoted as saying that “[these characters] figure out how to live in the world.” He continues on by explaining that at the center of [Gem] is the incredible spirituality of African people who honor their ancestors. They have concepts of God—trees that have spirits. All of these things have been part of their belief system” (Dezell 254). It is this belief system—the character of their African cultural heritage—that should be wholly embraced lest they fall victim to the limitations of the law and the trappings of American materialism.

As all of these ideals blend into art, Gem offers a duality for the masses. On the one end its dramaturgy is fashioned after the paradigm of the West, “the age-old dramaturgy handed down by the Greeks and rooted in Aristotle’s poetics” (Lyons). However, within Wilson’s poetic form lies the “phantom limb[s] of the dismembered slave and god” (Okediji 3). Beneath Gem’s Judeo-Christian tropes and pseudo-American patriotism is a Yoruban cosmology situated within the characters and the architecture of the text. Yoruban ideals instilling historical and ancestral pride not only offer equality for the black self-image, but further propel the black psyche beyond the limits of the oppressor into the realm of deities. Wilson’s employment of such an African aesthetic—Oriṣa archetypes, sacred objects and spaces, and Yoruban temporal coordination—positions Gem as one of his “spirit-centered texts” [with a] primary function of [evocating and dramatizing] spiritual conditions and spiritual activity” (Rahming 36). This essay seeks to illuminate the play’s spiritual potency by first discussing the characterizations informed by Oriṣa archetypes while simultaneously noting significant objects and spaces, followed by comments on the temporal coordination of the architecture of the play.

**Oriṣa Archetypes, Sacred Objects and Spaces**

Wilson describes Gem’s characters as “a series of tributary streams linked back to the ocean from which they find impulse” (Wilson, "Sailing"). This “impulse” is shaped by one of the four defining B’s of his dramaturgy—Romare Bearden’s collage technique, most particularly his juxtaposition of African masks and African American faces (Herrington
Wilson's employment of Òrìṣà archetypes marries each character with an expression of a Yoruban divine consciousness. Olarosa, Ògún, Òṣùn, Aşanjú / Sàngó, and Òsòsi are the Òrìṣà archetypes that shall be discussed in this section of the essay.

Olarosa, or “the god la stands at the door,” is the guardian of homes. Situated at the homes’ entrance and armed with a sword or stick, he keeps watch for impertinent and unknown entities. For the past twenty-five years, Eli has stood watch at 1839 Wylie Avenue, declaring to each unknown guest and those who he believes enter with ill intent that, “This is a peaceful house” (Wilson, Gem, 7). His protection over the house also extends to the outside of the domain. As a function of his status as helper and guardian, he spends the better part of Act I building a wall “to keep Caesar on the other side” (Wilson, Gem 14). The construction of the wall is significant. Among Yoruba creation stories is the belief that when the Òrìṣà descended from ìlẹ̀-ìfè to earth, what remained of their existence were rocks—òkútá or all seeing eyes—which contained their ìsẹ́ or “power to bring ideas and desire into being” (Washington 14). In the ìfá/Òrìṣà tradition, worshippers collect the rocks from natural places associated with particular deities. In Gem, it is Rutherford Selig who collects these rocks for Eli during his travels along the river. Òṣùn—the deity associated with rivers, lakes and streams—is the Òrìṣà most invoked in this instance. Wilson draws upon a material element in one of her creation stories, her association with honey, when he writes about Aunt Ester’s house. It is Harmon in Radio Golf (2005) who calls our attention to the sweetness of the home:

HARMOND: You should feel the woodwork. If you run your hand slow over some of the wood you can make out these carvings. There's faces. Lines making letters. An old language. And there's this smell in the air.

ROOSEVELT: That's them mothballs....

HARMOND: No.... The air in the house smells sweet like a new day [Wilson, Radio Golf 61–62].

Undoubtedly the sweetness of 1839 Wylie Avenue is related to the ìsẹ́ invoked by the building of the wall with rocks collected from Òṣùn's river. Eli says, “I want a wall.... The way [Caesar] going he gonna have everybody in jail (Wilson, Gem 14). The wall is Eli's determination to make the home an asylum, a fact which Black Mary makes clear to Caesar in Act II:

BLACK MARY: 1839 Wylie Avenue is a house of sanctuary. It ain't up to you to decide. The Bible say, “A place of refuge shall be given unto you and whosoever counsel therein shall he be made also clean, for I have given unto the master of that abode a place above the law, for the law is a punisher of men, and I seeketh their redemption” [Wilson, Gem 79].

The design and implementation of the wall is Eli's attempt at creating environmental harmony between tensions that become evident over the course of the play, tensions between Òṣùn's sweetess, a function of her preference for peace, diplomacy and negotiation, and the resolute enforcement of the law by Òsòsi (who shall be discussed elsewhere). The wall is also the theoretical demarcation between the material and spiritual realms with Aunt Ester's house as the metaphysical site of accessing such spiritual transcendence.

In Radio Golf (2005) we learn that the door to 1839 Wylie Avenue is red. Although not specifically mentioned in Gem, the red door is as Olarosa and the wall—a hindrance to “death, sickness, tragedy, loss and obstacles” (Neimark 10). Red noted by Robert Farris Thompson “is the supreme presence of color” (Thompson 6) and is known for its ability to avert malevolent forces as attested to by two Yoruba parables. One says, “The original three cloths of the Egungun were of the color red. They terrorized the witches. They terrorized the forces of pestilence. Afterwards, whenever important elders died, these powerful cloths were added to their corpse and the body rose up as Egungun” (Thompson 219). Another states:

“Once there was an epidemic, we are not certain what it was, we only know what the god of divination says it was—a dreaded illness that killed thousands, leaving deadly little spots broken out on people's bodies. Diviners told us to carry three red cloths, called eku [cloths of salvation], to a certain spot and sacrifice there, to save the city. At this place the carriers of the cloth met the spirits of disease. The latter fled at the sight of the three red cloths” [Thompson 219].

Thus, the color added to the door of the house protects those who live within and in conjunction with the wall, speaks to a spatial landscape influenced by Yoruban cosmology.

Assisting Eli with the building of the wall is the refuge seeking Citizen Barlow. He evokes the archetype of Ògún, the machete wielding deity of creation and destruction who sits at the forefront of industrialization. The guardian of truth, Ògún is responsible for clearing internal and external obstacles from the path that would impede spiritual growth. Ògún's steady determination to see a task through to completion is evidenced in several
ways through Citizen—he makes his own way from Alabama to Pennsylvania even though all the roads were closed and returns to Alabama to see Solly’s sister, Eliza’s safe passage to the North. Both Citizen and his archetypal forefather, Ogun became victims of their misdirected anger and as a result caused innocent men to die. Note the following praise story of Ogun which speaks of their similar fate:

Having defended the village of Onire from destruction, Ogun walked to the well for a drink of water. As the people of Onire saw him walk through the streets of their village they pleaded with him to leave. In rage, Ogun raised his adá, and the water from the well turned red.

When he realized that he had killed the people of his own village, Ogun felt ashamed and went to live in a hole in the ground. As he made his way into the Earth, he left a chain dangling from the hole and told the people of Onire that they could summon him by pulling the chain [Fatunmbi, Ogun 14].

With wounded pride, Ogun massacred his own community because they failed to recognize his humanity. However, they did not recognize him as he was covered in the evidence of his recent battle. In a similar vein, the mills’ failure to recognize Citizen’s humanity (through insufficient pay and room and board arrangements) sparked his anger which led to a series of events for which he was directly responsible—the death of Garret Brown and the subsequent fragmentation of Mr. Brown’s family, an uprising at the mill, and its eventual closure. The guilt and shame he experienced from theft, lying by omission, and murder drive him to climb through Aunt Ester’s window (his attempt to circumvent Eli who delayed his audience with her at the front door).

The bucket of nails, a lasting symbol of his crime, is another symbol of importance. The nails are an expression of the ironwork of Ogun, referencing both his industrialism and his function of clearing blockages. Citizen states, “I stole a bucket of nails. The mill wouldn’t pay me so I stole a bucket of nails. They say Garret Brown stole it and ran and jumped in the river. I told myself to tell them I did it but every time I started to tell them something got in the way” (Wilson, Gem 44). His fear of consequence became his blockage. In appropriating the bucket of nails, Wilson draws upon minkisi phenomenology—the Nkondi. The Nkondi is a particular type of Kongoese spiritual medicine in the form of a figure, activated to enforce oaths, affect illness or cure, and hunt and punish transgressors of harmony. Activation is usually caused by the insertion and striking of a nail within the figure, but it can also be effected by burial curses. striking the earth or driving wood into the earth’s surface. If the Nkondi is invoked to enforce justice, the perpetrator can be punished with many things including chest pains or pressure. Citizen references the void he feels at his center twice in Act I; “I feel like I got a hole inside of me” (Wilson, Gem 23) and again, “It’s like I got a hole inside me. If I ain’t careful seem like everything would leak out that hole” (Wilson, Gem 44). Thus, Citizens’ misdemeanors invokes a figurative Nkondi. The nails, becoming a source of guilt, continuously strike at his center, becoming the crisis which sends him agitatedly to Aunt Ester and subsequently, the womb of the spirit realm in search of renewal.

Upon meeting Citizen, Aunt Ester likens him to one of her sons saying, “Junebug ... a good boy. Just a rascal of a man” (Wilson, Gem 20). This symbolic descriptor stands as a proverbial Chekovian gun. The Junebug or Scarabaeus Sacer is a sacred insect to the Egyptians. A dung beetle, it repeats a cycle of collection, underground storage, and reproduction in animal excrement. As such, the Egyptians likened it to their Sun god, Khepri (“He who is coming into being”)—the god of creation, the movement of the sun, and rebirth. In likewise fashion, it was Ogun who descended into what Wole Soyinka calls the “chthonic realm, the seething cauldron of the dark world will and psyche, the transitional yet inchoate matrix of death and becoming” (Soyinka 142). As his predecessors, Citizen travels to the City of Bones, where “[his] void is filled with matters in fusion. This [journey becomes the new] beginning ... of [his] time and life” (Fu-Kiau 22–23).

His search for renewal does not immediately begin with the descent to the City of Bones. Aunt Ester first sends him on a search for two pennies—an extension of an idea raised in another play of the Wilson cycle, Two Trains Running (1990)—that each man must participate in his own liberation. In Two Trains, West recounts his experience of going to see Aunt Ester to find out if his wife was in heaven. His question goes unanswered because of his refusal to throw twenty dollars into the river. He is chided by Holloway who retorts, “That’s what your problem is. You don’t want to do nothing for yourself. You want somebody else to do it for you. Aunt Ester don’t work that way. She say you got to pull your part of the load” (Wilson, Two Trains, 76). In the following exchange of Gem, Wilson reiterates the idea that freedom does not come without a cost:

BLACK MARY: What’s the two pennies for? Why he got to find two pennies?
AUNT ESTER: That’s only to give him something to do. He think there a power in them two pennies. He think when he find them all his trouble will be over. But he need to think that before he can come face to face with himself [Wilson, Gem 47].
Aunt Ester sends Citizen upriver to retrieve these necessary ritual items. The location (upriver) and the material element (copper) evoke Osun, the divinity, as stated earlier, associated with small bodies of water as well as copper, brass and gold. Her mirror, which she is also known to carry, represents the surface of the river, an element that can be used for self-reflection. Citizen has to “wake up,” come face to face with himself in this mirror, and learn to see himself through the light of his own eyes. To illustrate this point, Aunt Ester invokes the ancestral Garret Brown as a model of inspiration. “He didn’t care if anybody else knew if he did it or not,” she says. He knew. He did it for himself. He says I’d rather die in truth than to live a lie. That way he can say that his life is worth more than a bucket of nails. What is your life worth Mr. Citizen? That’s what you got to find out” (Wilson, Gem 45).

Only Citizen himself can determine the value of his life. Such singularity is captured in the symbolism of the single piece of iron—the other necessary ritual item—Aunt Ester asks him to retrieve from Jilson Grant. “The iron,” she says, “would have made [him] strong ... of heart” and given him favor with God (Wilson, Gem 62). This ritual item evokes the Odù of which Ogun was birthed, Ògàndàmèjì. The ninth of 256 Holy Scriptures in the Ifà orature, Ògàndàmèjì speaks of the “fighting, disputes, imminent hostility ... financial problems and opposition from enemies” he would face in the adventure of his life. The Odù also reassures Ogun that by making the appropriate sacrifice (which happens to include a single chain link) he would never die (Epega 35-38).

Besides Aunt Ester, it is also her protégé Black Mary who assists Citizen in his discovery of self and spiritual renewal. In the first of two isolated moments between herself and Citizen, he tries to arrange a late night rendezvous, suggestively encircling Black Mary’s waist from behind. In pushing him away, Wilson draws a parallel between this moment and lines from a praise chant of Osun:

Osun (embodiment of grace and beauty)
The preeminent hair-plaiter with the coral beaded comb
Powerful controller of the estuary
Propitiator-in-chief of Òkù (the City of Lagos)
A copulent woman
Who cannot be embraced around the waist [Abiodun 10].

Black Mary intently demands a level of accountability Citizen has yet to experience. Thus, the play is not solely about his search for the just rewards of citizenship but, also about his developing manhood—his becoming. She states, “You got a woman in your hands. Now what? What

you got? What you gonna do? Time ain’t long, Mr. Citizen. A woman ain’t but so many times filled up. What you gonna do? What you gonna fill me up with? Love? Happiness? Peace? What you got, Mr. Citizen? I seen it all. You got something new? ... Something I ain’t seen?” (41). In archetypal fashion of Osun, Black Mary becomes the “impulse” of attraction and unification, an impulse Wilson captures here but also suggests in an earlier stage direction in Act I, “Citizen and Black Mary stare at each other” (Wilson, Gem 26). However, just as the estuary regulates the river’s flow into the ocean, Black Mary polices this encounter by refusing his manner of physical communication—grasping her from behind—as the lack of intimacy prevents him from seeing the fullness of her womanhood and places the weight of their would-be encounter on her. He becomes another taker.

Regarding all the former takers in her life, Leroy, John, Cujoe, Sam and Robert, she says, “they use you up and you can’t hold them. They all the time taking till it’s gone. They ain’t tried to put nothing to it. They ain’t got nothing in their hand. They ain’t got nothing to add to it. They too busy taking. They taking ‘cause they need.” (Wilson, Gem 42). However, the momentary romantic tussle in the sheets he seeks will not assuage his loneliness nor fill his feelings of insufficiency—the hole inside of him. Everyone who comes to see Aunt Ester comes with the need for restoration. Thus, with what will Citizen fill Black Mary up? During this gentle and nurturing confrontation, Black Mary hints at what she makes soundly clear in Act II, “You got to be right with yourself before you can be [emphasis mine] right with anybody else” (Wilson, Gem 73). As he prepares to escort Solly back to Alabama, Citizen recalls her challenge asking, “Black Mary, is you right with yourself? ‘Cause if you is I believe when I come back down from Alabama I’d come by and see you. If I was still right with myself. Then maybe we could be right with each other” (Wilson, Gem 76).

Black Mary like Osun inspires, sparks the desire to create, and generates the passion that seeks abundance (of knowledge, money, love, sweetness, etc.). She becomes Citizen’s inclination to be better.

Aunt Ester’s oneiromancy provides clues about Black Mary as her protégé and further evidences the ways in which her character is shaped by Osun. Aunt Ester says,

She had seventeen rings and I give her a dime for each one of them. That was in a dream I had about Black Mary before I known her. I had that dream and the next day Black Mary knocked on the door and asked me if I had any laundry that needed washing. I told her to go upstairs and make that bed ‘cause anybody willing to do laundry was welcome to stay here. That’s three years ago. She been here ever since [Wilson, Gem 18].
The seventeen rings is another manifestation of Òsun, who was the seventeenth Òrîṣà to descend from heaven to earth (the other sixteen were male). This is confirmed in the Ódu, Òṣẹ́tùra of Òfà sacred orature:

It was divined for the sixteen Ódu
Who were coming from heaven to earth
A woman was the seventeenth of them....
They never knew she was an àjé.
When they were coming from heaven,
God choose all good things;
He also chose their keeper,
And this was a woman.
And all women are àjé.
And because all other Ódu left Òsun out,
Nothing they did was successful [Abiodun 16].

In "Hidden Power: Òsun, the Seventeenth Ódu," Rowland Abiodun states, "[Òsun] is believed to have the power to influence the destinies of men, women, and the [Ò]rîṣà, and that Òsun's presence is crucial to the sustenance of life and order on earth" (Abiodun 11). Black Mary manages the daily affairs of Aunt Ester's way station and is her student assistant in all the rituals performed. Thus, the dream prophesies that Black Mary stands to become Aunt Ester's ultimate promise of survival and evolution—that is, if Black Mary decides that she wants to do so. Aunt Ester spends the majority of the play awaiting a decision that finally comes in Act I. Black Mary agrees to change her name to Ester Tyler but, declares she will negotiate the role on her own terms. She tells Aunt Ester, "Your way ain't always the best way. I got my own way and that's the way I'm doing it. If I stay around here I'm doing it my own way" (Wilson, Gem 74). As stated earlier, it is Black Mary (Òsun) who controls how the river flows into the ocean.

Solly Two Kings is another character determined to act under his own principles. A self-emancipated slave, he changed his name from Alfred Jackson to Solly Two Kings and declared the former dead. As referenced in the text, it is tempting to read this labeling as a type of Christian figuralism—the referencing of two Old Testament Kings, Solomon and David. However, what lies beneath this naming is the conjuring up of two Òrîṣà archetypes—Aganju (the way Solly functions) and Sàngó (the disposition he carries). His embodiment of the archetype of Aganju is first suggested in his leadership of the Underground Railroad but, also as owner of "the hand of justice" that set fire to the mill. Aganju is believed to be a primordial Òrîṣà or ìrùnmòle associated with Saint Christopher under the syncretism of Yoruba religion with Catholicism. Aganju is a mediator of the earth's mysteries. He resides at the open mouth of a volcano and is the spirit of the ensuing wilderness and new life that forms after the eruption. He is known primarily for his intermediary role as the ferryman who safely transits departed souls from one plane to another. As a conduit of hope, Aganju is the ancient one that freedom seekers call upon to assist in navigating troubled waters. A comment by Baba Raul Canizares, author of Aganju, Santeria and the Spirit of the Òrîṣàs of the Volcanoes and Wilderness bears repeating in full here:

According to Roman martyrology, Christopher's [Aganju's Catholic avatar] birth name was Offerus, the son of a heathen king. It is said that Offerus grew to over seven feet tall. He decided to put himself at the service of the most powerful man on earth. He first served a king said to be the most potent in the world, but the king was terrified of the Devil. Offerus then sought out the Devil, only to find out that Satan was afraid of Christ. He then declared his allegiance to Christ, in time [becoming] the disciple of a hermit who told him he should give himself in service to Christ. The hermit baptized Offerus, changing his name to Christopher (Christ bearer) ... he took up the task of carrying people across a raging stream as his duty to Christ. He [became] the Patron of travelers.... It is thought that his hour is sunrise, for he is thought to be one with the sun. This association with the rising sun makes Aganju an Òrîṣà people seek when they need hope, when they literally need to experience the dawn of a new day [21-22].

Christopher’s name change and his status as liberator and progenitor of new possibilities become part of the Yoruba mythology Wilson draws upon in developing Solly’s character. When he burns down the mill, Solly as his Aganju archetype, becomes “the hand of justice” smiting oppression with a cleansing fire (Wilson, Gem 24) invoked in Act I by the Reverend Tolliver. When Aunt Ester admits to her no-confidence in the veracity of Solly’s implication in the mill arson, he enters from her room and declares the truth. Solly says,

Yeah, I burned it down! The people might get mad but freedom got a high price. You got to pay. No matter what it cost. You got to pay. I didn't mind settling up the difference after the war. But I didn't know they was gonna settle like this. I got older I see where I'm gonna die and everything be the same. I say well at least goddamn it they gonna know I was here. The people gonna know about Solly Two Kings [Wilson, Gem 75].

His last statement signifies the majestic disposition he carries in the manner of his Sàngó archetype. The fourth ruler of the Òyo kingdom, lover of dogs, and women, Sàngó is a deified ancestor and another primordial
Orisâ. Sângó is known for his virile temperament, volatile personality, dignified walk, and his fierce commitment to enforcing justice. Believed to be the only Orisâ besides Olodumâré and Orúnmílá to rule the skies, he strikes with thunder and his lightning rod is truth's illumination. Wilson draws upon Sângó literature through Solly's associations with pure collection, his talk of two women—"one for each arm" (Wilson, Gem 18) and his walking stick—the metaphor of both the âje, Sângó's double-headed axe of liberation and destruction, as well as Aganjú's wooden staff, the oar of his ferry boat. When Caesar comes to arrest Solly for arson, Solly strikes him on his knee and in the warlike manner of a titan he proclaims, "I'm under God's sky, mother——r! That's what I'm under!" before running out of the door (Wilson, Gem 70). The walking stick (a reference to both his atavistic forefathers as with it he directs and strikes) is also a testament to his liberation of others. Inscribed on it are sixty-two markings, narrating the number of individuals he and Eli led to freedom on the Underground Railroad. At the beginning of the play, Solly is planning his last rescue mission to Alabama for his sister, Eliza. She would mark sixty-three or nine when reduced to a single digit, which in Yoruba numerology is the number of both Aganjú and Òyà, who represent transitions and endings.

After stowing away on Selig's wagon and getting as far as West Virginia, Citizen tells Aunt Ester that Solly decided to return to Pittsburgh and "bust [the people that were arrested] out of jail," as "he didn't feel right being free and rest of the people in bondage" (Wilson, Gem 82). Upon spotting Selig's wagon, Caesar starts shooting to Solly's eventual demise. As Solly slips in and out of consciousness on Aunt Ester's floor repeating, "So live" (Wilson, Gem 81) Aunt Ester's prophetic dream in Act I is recalled. She says,

I dreamed you had a ship full of men and you was coming across the water. Had that stick and you was standing up in this boat full of men. You come and asked me what I was doing standing there. I told you I wanted to go back across the ocean. I asked you to take me. You said you had some work to do but that you would come back. Told me you had a magic stick and when you come back you would part the water so I could walk across. You come on back and all your men had drowned and the boat was sinking. You said you was going to get another boat and some more men. Said you would come back and smite the water. Then you walked off with that stick. Said you was going to Alabama (Wilson, Gem 18).

As he is moved to the kitchen table, Solly's life force drains as he begins to traverse the twelve gates of the City of Bones. Successfully passing through each of the gates, he initiates another earthly return. The evidence of his reincarnation is implied through the stage directions which read, "Citizen takes off his coat. He puts Solly's coat and hat and takes Solly's stick. He discovers the letter from Solly's sister in the hat. Eli pours a drink and raises it in a toast," saying, "So live." Citizen exits without a word (Wilson, Gem 85). The play has taken a circuitous journey, ending where it began with Eli and Citizen. Yet, in this structurally Sankofic moment, the Gem of the Ocean sails to the height of its spiritual power as does Citizen before walking out into world. Renewed with a sense of purpose and ever so thoughtful of his "duty to life" (Wilson, Gem 68). Citizen exits heroically.

Seeing events through to the end is a trait of Òsò, the guardian of the forest and protector of the environment. He is archetypally portrayed in Caesar, the town constable. Òsò, who works closely with Ògùn, identifies the shortest and most meaningful route to an individual's spiritual evolution and gets to core of any situation, speaking the truth about that which hinders progress, spiritual and otherwise. He is known as the enforcer of the law and guardian of the path of ethical behavior. An oríkì or praise story of Òsò speaks of leaving his favorite bird in the care of his grandmother while hunting for food for his family. When he returned several months later, he discovered that the bird had been eaten. Enraged, he charged one of his arrows of precision to strike the heart of the offender. It was his grandmother he heard cry out several moments later (Ifánmì, Òsò 6). Wilson echoes this story, alluding to the eventual demise of Caesar's familial and social relationships due to his strong principles. Through his staunch maintenance of the American legal system Caesar, as does Òsò, makes his ethics and position clear in the following statement: "People don't understand the law is everything... There ain't nothing above the law. Everything come under the law. You got to respect the law. Unless you dead" (Wilson, Gem 36). However, Òsò's end goal of righteousness, as the oríkì teaches, did not justify the means he employs to enforce it. Suffering lies in the wake of his consciousness about murdering his grandmother as it does for Caesar when Black Mary declares, "I don't know who you are. But you not my brother. You hear me, Caesar? You not my brother" (Wilson, Gem 84). Killing children who steal bread, evicting (underpaid) families who are late on rent, and using religion subversively to deny, control or enforce actions demotes him as a proverbial "brothers' keeper." Black Mary denies him the benefit of the family bond and leaves him with the law he prays.

This provides an entry point for discussing Aunt Ester, the physical embodiment of the ancestors. Nearing three hundred years old, Aunt Ester
already defies the laws of man and as she impresses upon Citizen, determines for herself what has value. In the following didactic moment between herself and Caesar, who has come to arrest her for aiding and abetting Sally, she speaks on the matter of papers, their value, and the law she represents:

I see you got a piece of paper. I got a piece of paper too.... It say on there Ester. That's a Bill of Sale for Ester Tyler. That's me ... Mr. Caesar, you can put the law on the paper but that don't make it right. That piece of paper say I was property. Say anybody could buy or sell me. The law say I needed a piece of paper to say I was a free woman. But I didn't need no piece of paper to tell me that [Wilson, Gem 78].

She repurposes her Bill of Sale as the *Gem of the Ocean*, a boat which provides Sally, Black Mary (whose previous journeys were alluded to in the text) and Citizen the necessary means of passage to the City of Bones. Wilson, as he has done in other plays, appropriates a song title for the boat's moniker but revises its meaning. *Columbia, the Gem of the Ocean*, is not simply a 19th century battle hymn but, a legal document of servitude, now emblematic of a barge of freedom. "Whatever happen you hold on to that boat. You hold on to that boat and everything will be all right," she says (Wilson, Gem 63). In "*Gem of the Ocean* and the redemptive power of history," Harry Elam states, "the medium of enslavement becomes now the method of transcendence" (Elam 82). Not only is the journey on this vessel transcendental but, by insisting that he hold on to the *Gem*, Aunt Ester reminds Citizen of the black American historical condition Wilson spoke of in his Bill Moyers interview and the need for remembrance:

it [is] criminal that after hundreds of years in bondage, we do not have a thing like the Passover, where we sit down and remind ourselves that we are African people, that we were slaves.... Part of the problem is that we don't know who we are, and we don't recognize the value of claiming that, even if there's a stigma attached to it [Moyers 74-75].

For Wilson, holding the *Gem* becomes "a thing like the Passover" and a 19th century American war ode becomes a praise chant for situating oneself on the ancestral shrine of their African origins—the City of Bones. While the lyrics to David T. Shaw's 1843 song are not explicitly sung in the text, Wilson invokes them in the titular of the play and name of Aunt Ester's Dumasian ark (Dumas 1974)—"O Columbia! the gem of the ocean, the home of the brave and the free, the shrine of each patriot's devotion, a world offers homage to thee" ("Columbia, The Gem of the Ocean") It is in the realm of the Òríṣá, Olókan, the owner of the ocean, where author Patrick Bellegarde-Smith writes:

"These fragmentary remains stood ... dismembered bodies discarded on the ocean's floor—the residue, the 'collateral damage' from the trade between three continents: Africa, the Americas, and Europe. The depth of the ocean is still the domain of Olókan, a Yoruba deity transmogrified by some in the Americas as the 'patron saint' of the black race. The bones were laid thick; they made a brittle carpet upon which slave ships glided and memories derailed" [Bellegarde-Smith 1-2].

Referring to the historical archive that is her narrative quilt, Aunt Ester describes the City of Bones as "half mile by a half mile.... Pearly white bones ... the center of the world" (Wilson, Gem 52). The City of Bones is approximately 1600 meters in circumference, the size of four average running tracks. A sacred number in Ifá, sixteen represents the original number of Òríṣá who descended to earth, the primary number of Odu within Ifá sacred orature, and references the Sixteen Truths of Ifá. The sacred corpus, as other religious texts (written or orally maintained), narrates "epic and cosmological myths about gods, goddesses and antecedents" (Ogunyemi 82). It describes human encounters with the divine and speaks to a variance of experiences that one may confront over the course of their life in the material realm—joys; challenges and their solutions; and notions of destiny. Thus, it can be argued that the City of Bones—the material evidence of the ancestors as a source of spiritual wisdom—is an embodied sacred text or what Vincent Wimbush calls a signifying scripture, an "elevated object [imbued with 'spiritual and metaphysical meaning'], symbol, ritual, place, person or activity that helps [humans] focus attention on issues critical to the human experience: explore where they came from, deal with lack of knowledge or power, address the unknown, [and] manage trauma and pain and the other ongoing challenges of their existence" (The Institute for Signifying Scriptures). Rather than written vernacular, their guidance which must be actively sought is a narrated book whose orature (sometimes falling on deaf ears) is delivered by culture bearers of the Wilsonian Cycle—Aunt Ester, Bynum, and Stool Pigeon for example. In *Joe Turner's Come and Gone* (1986), Wilson reminds us that by 1931, few were consulting the book. In the preface to the play Wilson tells readers that, "newly freed African slaves wander into the city. Isolated cut off from memory, having forgotten the names of their gods, only guessing at their faces, they arrive dazed and stunned"? Seventy-seven years later, the book seems to be largely forgotten. Stool Pigeon in *King Hedley II* (1999) says:

The people wandering all over the place. They got lost. They don't even know the story of how they got from tit to tat. Aunt Ester know. But the path to
her house is all grown over with weeds, you can't hardly find the door no more. The people need to know that. The people need to know the story. See how they fit into it. See what part they play [Wilson, King Hedley II 8].

Gem's positionality within the cycle is Wilson's redress to the slow death of Aunt Ester—the ancestral presence—in the material world and the consequential wandering black Americans in his cycle faced between 1911 and 1988. He goes back to pick up the dropped ball (Wilson, Two Trains 109) to strengthen the link between Africa and the characters.

Temporal Coordination

Gem of the Oceans' plot line, limited locale, cast size, and well-made resolution are signifiers of a climactically structured play. Such a play begins late in the plot, working towards the climax. The characters provide us with necessary exposition, the time frame of the play is significantly compressed (compared to episodic); scenes, locales, and characters are limited; and the plot is packaged neatly with no loose ends. Gem's action spans five days, with the rising action taking place during Friday and Saturday, the climax on Sunday, and the falling action/denouement, Monday and Tuesday. However, Wilson uses what I refer to as an Ethnocultural Dramatic Structure (EDS) to arrange the sequence of events within the plot. EDS is a structural framework for transposing a given culture's philosophies of time within the dramatic structure of the play. Gem's plot is mapped in accordance with the traditional Yoruba week calendar.

The Yoruba week calendar (Fig. 1) comprises a seven day cycle characterized by daily attributes that resulted from events which occurred in Yoruba creation stories and days on which to venerate specific Òrìṣàs (Neimark 50–53). The Odù Oturapọn-tura explains the purpose of the cycle stating, “Òrùnmíláz òrìṣà created [the days of the week] for the purpose of observing marriages and birthdays, for starting a business or moving into a new home, and so on. The days of the Òrìṣà are also accounted for within these seven days for important observance of whatever may happen on the day of a particular divinity” (Epega 505–507). Thus, the week cycle is a way of organizing one's daily affairs so as to effect the most favorable outcomes. Philip Neimark's The Way of the Orisa sheds light on the mythology behind the characteristics of each day and its ruling divinity. The table below provides an overview of the week.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gem 1.3–5</th>
<th>Sunday—Ojó Àkú</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day of long life and tranquility; ascension; immortality; and settling disputes—Obatala, Òrùnmilá, Òrì</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gem II.1–4</th>
<th>Monday—Ojó Ajé</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day of commerce; initiating of educational, social programming; financial success—Yemoja/Olòkun</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gem II.5</th>
<th>Tuesday—Ojó Iségun</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day of victory—Ògún, Òsósi</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wednesday—Ojó Òṣè</th>
<th>Day of confusion; the day opens the door and goes out—Óyá</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thursday—Ojó Bá</th>
<th>Day of fulfillment; creation; ancestral return; return of sun to its normal course—Sàngó</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gem Prologue</th>
<th>Friday—Ojó Ètì</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day of trouble, prolonged struggle; fight, procrastination; postponement; impossibility; or quarrel—Óṣùn</td>
<td></td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gem 1.1–2</th>
<th>Saturday—Ojó Àbáméta</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Day of three suggestions; three evil resolutions; three negative incidents; or three wonders—Èṣù</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 1. Yoruba Week Calendar

opens with his arrival at 1839 Wylie Ave looking to get his soul cleansed. He insistently queries Eli about an immediate audience with Aunt Ester. However, Eli informs him that she only works with clients on Tuesdays—the day of victory over enemies and challenges. Thus, his journey to the City of Bones is postponed. The second delayed event (which is not revealed until the following scene) is Garret Brown’s funeral. Originally planned for Friday, it was interrupted by Caesar who informed the Reverend Flowers that providing funerary services for a man who committed suicide “was against the law. The Christian law” (Wilson, Gem 11).

Saturday (1.1–2) is devoted to exposition. The characters testify to the circumstances of the world that influences their lives. Interwoven in the fabric of this day are stories of three men who were all falsely accused—the Kentucky citizen turned outlaw after being indicted for horse stealing,
Jesus Christ, and Garret Brown, whose previously interrupted funeral takes place mid-afternoon. Each of these men, who themselves could be seen as three wonders or whose stories and the experiences contained therein seen as evil resolutions, walked to their deaths, “not, like the quarry-slave at night, scoured to his dungeon but, sustained and soothed by an unaltering trust” (Bryant, Gem 59) in their innocence. Through these three examples, Wilson illustrates the notion of living and dying in truth resolutely. Furthermore, both Jesus Christ and Garret Brown were falsely accused of committing offences against the law; their lack of impartial hearings and subsequent deaths ignited varying levels of mayhem before new beginnings and peace ensued. The lore is that Christ’s death saved the world. Garret Brown’s suicide saved him but arguably was the catalyst for Citizen’s spiritual renewal as well as the instigation the mill workers needed to contest their disenfranchisement. Reading them as both victims and saviors echoes sentiments surrounding the mythology of Oluorogbo, son of Moremi and Olujare of 14th century Ilé-Ifé. Oluorogbo, thought to be the Yorubanized Messiah, was sacrificed to a river goddess, Esinmirin, by his mother after she consulted with the goddess on the best strategy to appease unruly tensions between Ilé-Ifé and Igbo soldiers. In exchange for her services, Esinmirin requested the martyrdom of Moremi’s only son. It is believed that his death restored order within Ilé-Ifé, but historical accounts differ as to whether Oluorogbo “was a victim of lawlessness” (and subsequently his mother’s immortality and glorification) or “savior of his people” (Ogunyemi 87).

Sunday (I.3–5) is the day of settling disputes. Events that occur on this day build to the tipping point or are resolved. Thus far, mill workers have been on strike for three days in a row in defiance of management at the mill and have now begun rioting because their demands have gone unheard. Caesar and his ilk make over two hundred eighty-five by my count” (Wilson, Gem 43). She presses her closer to a final answer by repeating her age, “going on three hundred years now...two hundred eighty-five by my count” (Wilson, Gem 43) and reminding her that she can’t figure out the mystery of life in advance but “trust the adventure” (Wilson, Gem 43). After conferencing with Black Mary, Aunt Ester turns to Citizen asking, “Tell me about the man you killed. Tell me what you done, Mr. Citizen” (Wilson, Gem 44). He finally admits to stealing the bucket of nails and watching Garret Brown die instead of confessing to the crime in order that he might save his life. Citizen is then prepared for his journey to the City of Bones by being sent to Blawnox to collect items necessary for the ritual. I.5 ends with Solly, who believes that “making the people owe is worse than slavery” (Wilson, Gem 56) “[settling] the difference” (Wilson, Gem 61) and burning down the mill. Thus, three days after the death of Garret Brown, Act I ends with the symbolic fiery Phoenix rising at the hand of the black Christ bearer—Solly as Aganju.

On Monday evening (II.1–4) three new adventures are initiated. Solly prepares to leave for Opelika. Less than twenty-four hours later Citizen returns from his journey to Blawnox with his two pennies and descends to the City of Bones. Black Mary finally declares that she will take up Aunt Ester’s mantle and become the keeper of the ancestral memories.

Finally, Tuesday (II.5), the day of victory sees the fulfillment of goals. Solly ascends to Gatekeeper status upon death. In the opening of Act II he tells Citizen, “That’s where I’m going when I die.... Got Twelve Gates and it’s got Twelve Gatekeepers. That’s what I always wanted to be. A Keeper of the Gate” (Wilson, Gem 56). A spiritually renewed Citizen returns to Alabama to retrieve Eliza and reconnect himself with his cultural roots in the South. The return South at the play’s conclusion, seen here and in another Wilson play, The Piano Lesson (1987), harks back to one of Wilson’s earlier arguments: “[black Americans] would have been better...stronger if [they] had stayed in the south” (Biggsy 212). Coincidentally (or not), it is the south where all must return, “in order to rise to the highest level of [our] spiritual and cultural attainment,” says Malidoma Some in his 1994 text, Of Water and the Spirit (279). The counterclockwise traverse and descent South on the African Cosmogram (regardless of the geo-ethnic population—Kemetic, Yoruba, Bakongo, etc.) leads to the attainment of spiritual wholeness. One has an understanding of the world of the living and the realm of the ancestors.

Wilson’s usage of an Ethnocultural Dramatic Structure—a Yoruban temporal construct—allows for a discussion about the architectural formation of Gem’s plot without dependence on the dramatic constructs of Western classicists. The cyclical nature of the Yoruba week calendar inherently embodies Western dramaturgical nomenclature and sensibilities—
stasis, disturbance, rise of conflict, climax, and restoration. Wilson’s employment of EDS as an expressive mode challenges the “hegemonic aesthetic priorities” Paul Carter Harrison writes about in “Toward a Critical Vocabulary for African Diaspora Expressivity” (2014) and expands the theoretical lexicon of critics who continue to evaluate plays like Gem, informed by Africanisms, through the white gaze.

Gem of the Ocean possesses a polyrhythmic dramaturgy that speaks on multiple levels. Although crafted with dramaturgical traditions and cultural references of the West, the black aesthetic—his sourcing of Yoruba cosmology and ritual in his character development, references to sacred objects, plot construction and spatial landscapes—is evident and perhaps predominates. Dramaturgical excavations which lift the veil and reveal such aesthetic markers can impact productions in striking ways. Actors can draw upon narratives and mythology of the Òrìṣà in creating riveting characters with clear, efficacious goals as it is the divine symbols upon which the characters are modeled that provide Gem with such gravitas. Reviews such as the one Ben Brantley wrote in the New York Times of the 2004 Broadway production of Gem miss the point of Wilson’s employment of such majesty and otherworldliness. Writing on the difficulties of “playing a metaphor,” Brantley writes, “[the characters] are more like pieces of parchment on which legends of the past and maps to the future have been drawn in swooping strokes of ink” (Brantley, “Sailing”). However, in a personal interview with the author Harrison stated, “it is the gods [who are] working through the actors ... characters for the salvation of the community” (Harrison). The fact that it was written after King Hedley II (1999) is key to understanding that Gem is about the rebirth of a people, their psyche, and their community. Thus, it is through the playwright and subsequently the actors that the gods are awakened and pulled down as their presence is necessary to the community’s survival. It is important to privilege such cosmology and ritual within the text when producing and/or teaching Gem. Furthermore and despite Wilson’s admitted Borgesian influence, conceptual frameworks rooted in “magical realism” should be problematized as the cultural narrative Wilson draws upon is sacred, functional, and African; not magical, which implies fantasy and fiction. An application of Reggie Young’s term “spiritual realism” (Young 134) should better illuminate the metaphysical world in Gem and achieve Wilson’s goal of presenting “black art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of black America” (Wilson, “Ground”). The “strategies for [black America’s] prosperity and survival” in Gem of the Ocean are the “opportunities [Wilson creates] for the characters, [readers, and viewers] to renew or redeem themselves” and “reconnect [with] their values and beliefs [and] sacred elements of the culture” (Young 135).

NOTES

1. Research conducted for this essay was supported by a 2014 NEH Summer Institute grant. My findings do not necessarily reflect those of the National Endowment for the Humanities. A version of this essay titled “Their Song Is a Play: Mapping the Symbols in Gem of the Ocean” was presented at the 28th Annual Black Theatre Network Conference, “Our Play’s the Thing.” I would like to thank the following people who assisted in the intellectual and spiritual development of this essay—either through discussion, textual reference, and editing: Paul Carter Harrison, Joy King, Corey J. Roberts, and Julianna Sarr.

2. While Yoruban cosmological evidence is given primacy, I wish to acknowledge that there are indices in Gem of other Africanist spiritual traditions. What is recognized is labeled accordingly.

WORKS CITED


King, Martin Luther, Jr. "I have a dream." Lincoln Memorial, 28 August 1963.


