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# The process of empathetic bonding with Berniece Charles.

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THE PROCESS OF EMPATHETIC BONDING WITH BERNIECE CHARLES

By

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B.A., Alabama State University, 2008

A Thesis

Submitted to the Faculty of the

College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Louisville

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Department of Theatre Arts

University of Louisville

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A Thesis Approved on

April 29, 2016

By the following Thesis Committee

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Dr. Baron Kelly

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Professor Jerry Tolson

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my family, Cromwell A. Handy, Cynthia Johnson Handy, and Casey C. Handy, Esq., who have been supremely supportive of my every endeavor. I also dedicate this thesis to my Grandma Dorothy, my real Mama Ola, who is so full of zest for life, that she can laugh constantly, smile widely, and give me the most honest looks of both approval and disapproval. I dedicate this thesis to my Grandma Johnson, who always tells me to be a sweet girl; the best advice in the world. This thesis is dedicated to my Grand Daddy Johnson, who would be so proud if he were still on this earth. I also dedicate this thesis to the entire legacy of William Christopher Handy. This thesis is dedicated to Grand Daddy Loyce C. Handy. I thank God, and I dedicate this thesis to His divine plan for my life.

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## ABSTRACT

### THE PROCESS OF EMPATHETIC BONDING WITH BERNIECE CHARLES

Candice Handy

April 29, 2016

The rehearsal process of theatre art entails several steps leading up to performance. Traditionally, the ensemble will discuss together what is needed to produce the theatrical piece, the director will work with each scene individually, and eventually the ensemble will be able to perform the entire piece, with only polishing left to do before performance. This process varies depending on the type of genre that will be performed. The rehearsal process to produce plays that are written with realistic settings and plot lines often, but not always, involve these steps. In order for this process to be productive, as an actor I must take individual steps leading up to performance, in addition to working with the ensemble during rehearsal.

This thesis will analytically reflect upon the steps I took before and during the rehearsal process leading up to my performance of Berniece Charles, in August Wilson's, *The Piano Lesson*. In this examination, I will rediscover how these steps were necessary toward my understanding and portrayal of Berniece. In Chapter 1, I will justify my interpretation of Berniece based on character analysis that describes her socioeconomic status, her childhood, and her relationships with the other characters in the play. In Chapter 2, I will discuss August Wilson's use of musicality and blues inspired language



as a means of understanding Berniece's psychology. Lastly, in Chapter 3, I will explain how research and script analysis worked together with my imagination to physically, psychologically, and emotionally craft my performance of Berniece Charles.

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## INTRODUCTION

August Wilson was a prolific storyteller whose artistic contribution to our understanding of the African American experience is invaluable. The very first of August Wilson's work that I encountered was *Jitney*, which was produced during my undergraduate training in the theatre department at Alabama State University in 2007. I remember feeling inspired by the colorful, yet authentic language of the characters, and the twists and turns in the story's gradually developing plot. The story was so heartfelt, rich with Black colloquialisms, and universally relatable with hard moral lessons, that I knew at some point, I wanted the opportunity to play a role in August Wilson's masterful work. August Wilson created an authentic representation of African American culture that is relatable to all Americans:

His cycle plays become a way to dramatically present the troubled histories of African American culture and prove that the culture and its people have and can continue to meld itself and themselves into the American culture without losing connection with the African past. Wilson's non-African American audiences, moreover, are allowed the opportunity to recognize their connections to these once and oft-times ignored Americans (Menson-Furr, 211).

As stated above, August Wilson's work is an artistic piece of documentation that rightfully identifies African American culture as a component of American history,

beyond slavery and racial injustice. Wilson's commercial success in American theatre allowed the African American experience to become a part of mainstream artistic expression, as opposed to staying isolated completely from the American experience. W.E.B. DuBois' famous double consciousness theory, that "African Americans at the turn of the century viewed themselves through the 'veil' and were 'two warring souls'- the newly freed American citizens and the former slaves" (Menson-Furr, 213), is present in Wilson's writing. By merging these two conflicting ideas of the Black identity in his work, August Wilson's contribution to American theatre provides African American theatre artists a rich opportunity.

"With two Pulitzer Prizes, two Tony Awards and numerous additional accolades, August Wilson stands out as one of the preeminent playwrights in contemporary American theatre" (Elam, xiii). Every successful black actress that I admire, Viola Davis, Angela Basset, S. Epatha Merkerson, and Phylicia Rashad to name a few, have played at least one role in August Wilson's composition of plays. I was honored to portray the role of Berniece Charles, as the final performance of my graduate training experience. Berniece is one of the central characters of August Wilson's, *The Piano Lesson*, the 1930s installment to his ten play 20<sup>th</sup> Century Cycle. The honor of playing the role of Berniece came with the great responsibility of speaking August Wilson's words. The actor, Charles Dutton stated in an interview with Yolanda Williams Page:

To really realize August Wilson's work takes just as much emotional commitment, physical commitment, and overall sacrifice as it does with any other play or playwright. You have to be just as tireless and fearless to do August Wilson as you would Shakespeare. For August Wilson's plays

to retain their classical affinity, one must be committed when he does them (Dutton, 177, *August Wilson on Black Aesthetics*).

This thesis is a reflective examination of my entire process toward developing Berniece Charles. Chapter One is a character analysis of Berniece based on my dramaturgical research and script analysis. In Chapter Two, I will analyze how August Wilson's melodically blues inspired language, was a foundation that my performance became dependent upon. In Chapter Three, I will discuss the primary acting techniques I used in rehearsals and performance. These techniques aided me in psychologically, physically, and spiritually inhabiting of the character, Berniece Charles. Before I begin, I want to introduce the fundamental characteristics of Wilson's writing that are prevalent in all of his work and specifically present in *The Piano Lesson*.

August Wilson wrote a series of ten plays that chronicle each decade, from the 1900s to the 1990s, depicting black life during the post-emancipation period. Wilson's cycle explores the ideologies of African American culture. Some of Wilson's reoccurring themes include the effects of black oppression and migration such as black rage, homelessness, familial separation and sanctity, assimilation, psychological instability, incarceration, death, and loss of identity. Wilson wrote dialogue that illuminates these themes through use of traditional African aesthetics such as song, oral storytelling, spirituality and reverence to the ancestors (Tyndall, 166, *August Wilson on Black Aesthetics*).

It is necessary to offer a plot synopsis of *The Piano Lesson*, in order to identify events in the story that raise these important themes. Because there are characters mentioned in the play that never appear on stage, I will first introduce them in the form of

a genealogical roadmap. Delineating the Charles family lineage will assist in following the story more seamlessly.

### **The Charles Family Lineage**

The Charles family was held in slavery in Sunflower County, Mississippi and owned by Robert Sutter in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century. The great-grand parents, Papa Boy Charles and Mama Esther are named first. They are the parents of Willie Boy Charles. Willie Boy is described as a “worker of wood” (43). His ability to create anything out of wood made Willie Boy a profitable slave for Robert Sutter. Willie Boy marries Mama Berniece, a fellow slave. They have a son, Boy Charles, who they named after the patriarch of the Charles family, Papa Boy Charles. The family is separated when Robert Sutter decides to exchange Mama Berniece and Boy Charles for a piano, owned by another plantation owner in Georgia.

Boy Charles, later had three sons, Doaker, Wining Boy, and the eldest son, Boy Charles (continuing the family name). Boy Charles is the father of the main characters of *The Piano Lesson*, Berniece Charles and Boy Willie Charles. Boy Willie is named after his great-grandfather, Willie Boy Charles, who carved images of the family’s history on the piano.<sup>1</sup> At the start of the play, the piano now resides at Berniece Charles’ home in Pittsburg, Pennsylvania in 1936, approximately seventy years after the abolition of slavery. Boy Willie’s arrival at Berniece’s front door is the spark that ignites the ensuing

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<sup>1</sup> The images Willie Boy carved into the piano were of his wife, Mama Berniece and son, Boy Charles. He also carved images of Mama Ester, Papa Boy Charles, other passed Charles relatives, and important events of the family. Doaker Charles, the youngest grandson of Willie Boy, describes the images in detail in act one, scene two of the play.

events of *The Piano Lesson*. The conflict of the play centers on the piano that has been passed down by the great-grandfather, Willie Boy Charles.

### **Play Synopsis**

The play opens with the sounds of 30-year-old Boy Willie Charles, yelling from off-stage and banging on the front door of the Charles home<sup>1</sup>, where his sister Berniece Charles, 35, her daughter Maretha, 11, and his Uncle, Doaker Charles, 47, reside. Boy Willie has just arrived from Mississippi with his friend Lymon Jackson.<sup>2</sup> Boy Willie and Lymon have travelled up north to sell watermelons. The two of them ask Doaker for a drink to celebrate because “the Ghost of the Yellow Dog<sup>3</sup> got Sutter” (4). Berniece enters, angry that Boy Willie and Lymon have arrived noisily, and she asks the men to leave her house several times within the first scene of the play. Boy Willie tries to persuade Berniece that he decided to come to Pittsburgh to visit, but Berniece is suspicious of his arrival.

Shortly after Berniece exits back upstairs to get ready for work, Boy Willie tells Doaker that he has come to Pittsburgh to sell the family piano. Doaker tells Boy Willie that “Berniece ain’t gonna sell that piano” (12), and just as Boy Willie responds, “She ain’t got to sell it. I’m gonna sell it. I own just as much of it as she does” (12), Berniece runs downstairs screaming. Once Doaker calms her down, Berniece claims to have seen

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<sup>2</sup> Lymon Jackson, 29, is an old friend of the Charles family. He and Boy Willie served three years on Parchman Farm, the Mississippi state penitentiary, for stealing wood from a former employer. At the time that he and Boy Willie arrive in Pittsburgh, Lymon is dodging another legal charge against him back in Mississippi. Lymon was arrested for not working, due to unemployment.

<sup>3</sup> Three weeks prior to Boy Willie and Lymon’s arrival in Pittsburgh, Robert Sutter was found dead at the bottom of his well. There is a legend in Sunflower County, MS that the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog push white men down their wells to avenge the injustices committed toward blacks. The origin of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog legend is described in Doaker’s historical account of how the Charles family came to ownership of the piano in act one, scene two.

the ghost of Robert Sutter in the upstairs hallway. Berniece also claims that Sutter was “calling Boy Willie’s name” (14). Berniece asks Boy Willie and Lymon to leave her house again; blaming Boy Willie for the presence of Sutter’s ghost and for the death of her late husband Crawley.<sup>4</sup> At the end of the scene, Boy Willie explains to Berniece that he has come to Pittsburgh to not only sell the watermelons, but also to sell the piano in order to buy land. Berniece refuses to part with the piano, even though she has not played it for years.

In Scene ii of Act I, Winning Boy<sup>5</sup> unexpectedly arrives in Pittsburgh. He and Doaker drink and discuss the death of Cleotha, Wining Boy’s ex-wife. When Boy Willie and Lymon enter, all the men drink Doaker’s whiskey and discuss various topics such as, the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, the law and “the white man”, and working on Parchman Farm. They all break into song, “O Lord Berta Berta” (39). Eventually, Boy Willie starts to talk about his plan to sell the piano again, but Doaker interjects. The men gather around Doaker, as he begins a three-page-monologue, which covers the Charles family history represented by the carvings on the piano. Doaker explains to Lymon how this history is the reason why Berniece will not sell the piano:

See now...to understand why we say that...to understand about that

piano...you got to go back to slavery time [...] The piano was owned by a

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<sup>4</sup> When Boy Willie and Lymon were hauling wood for a former employer in Mississippi, Jim Miller, they stashed some of the wood for themselves to sell. They asked Crawley, Berniece’s husband, to help them load the wood and Boy Willie and Lymon would “cut him in” (Wilson, 53). Their plan was ruined when they were caught by some “white fellows” (37). Boy Willie and Lymon were arrested, but Crawley was killed in the accident.

<sup>5</sup> Wining Boy, 56, is the middle son of Papa Boy Charles. He is a nomadic piano player who is known for only visiting the family when he is out of money. Wining Boy also claims to be a successful musician, but no one in the family believes him.



fellow named Joel Nolander. He was one of the Nolander brothers from down in Georgia. It was coming up on Sutter's wedding anniversary and he was looking to buy his wife...Miss Ophelia was her name...he was looking to buy her an anniversary present. Only thing with him...he ain't had no money. But he had some niggers. So he asked Mr. Nolander to see if maybe he could trade off some of his niggers for that piano [...] So Sutter lined up his niggers and Mr. Nolander looked them over and out of the whole bunch he picked my grandmother...her name was Berniece...same like Berniece...and he picked my daddy when he wasn't nothing but a little boy nine years old. They made the trade off and Miss Ophelia was so happy with that piano it got to be just about all she would do was play on that piano (42-43).

As the story is told, Doaker explains that Miss. Ophelia eventually missed having Mama Berniece and Boy Charles around. Although she enjoyed playing the piano, Miss Ophelia "asked to see if maybe she could trade back that piano and get her niggers back" (43). When Mr. Nolander refused to trade the piano back for Mama Berniece and Boy Charles, Miss. Ophelia became depressed. In order to make his wife happy again, Robert Sutter told Papa Willie Boy to carve pictures of Mama Berniece and Boy Charles in the piano. However, Willie Boy not only carved pictures of his wife and son, but he also carved pictures of his parents, the day he married Mama Berniece, the day his son was born, and several other important events and faces of the Charles family history. When Miss. Ophelia saw the piano, "she got excited. Now she had her piano and her niggers too" (44). Later, Doaker says that he and Wining Boy helped their brother, Boy Charles

steal the piano. Boy Charles was then burned to death in a railroad car on the Yellow Dog line by white men seeking revenge.

When Berniece enters, she is pleased to see Winning Boy, but still aggravated that Boy Willie has not left her house. As Boy Willie tries profusely to persuade Berniece that selling the piano is the right thing to do, Act I rises to a climax. Berniece becomes so upset with Boy Willie's determination to sell the piano, that she physically attacks him and blames him again for the death of Crawley. Berniece exclaims that the piano is covered in the blood of their father, Boy Charles, and the tears of their mother, Mama Ola, which is why Berniece refuses to sell it.

Act II of *The Piano Lesson* is a series of more intimate scenes that delve further into the dimensions of each character in the play. In Scene i of Act II, Boy Willie and Lymon decide to hit the town and find women, while Doaker prepares to go work on the railroad. The audience learns in this scene that Doaker saw Sutter's ghost before Berniece did, but Doaker never told her. In Scene ii, as Berniece is preparing to take a bath, her suitor, Rev. Avery Brown comes to visit her. During Avery's visit, he proposes to Berniece and she rejects him. Berniece tells Avery that "[she] ain't ready to get married right now" (66) and Avery contests that Berniece is "just gonna drift along from day to day" (68), letting life pass her by. Berniece changes the subject and asks Avery to bless the house. The audience learns in this scene that Maretha has also seen Sutter's ghost. Later, Avery makes a futile attempt to persuade Berniece to forget about the past and play the piano at his church. Berniece refuses Avery, and describes childhood memories of Mama Ola forcing her to play the piano in order to hear Papa Boy Charles' voice. Scene

ii ends with Berniece asking Avery to leave, and Avery assuring Berniece that he will come and bless the house the following day.

In Act II, Scene iii Berniece throws Boy Willie and a woman named Grace <sup>6</sup> out of her house, and Berniece is later left alone with Lymon. Berniece and Lymon discuss life in the big city, the search for true love, and the stubbornness of Boy Willie. This scene ends with the two of them enjoying a passionate kiss. Scene iv begins with Lymon sleeping on the couch when Boy Willie runs in the house insisting that he help move the piano before Berniece returns home from work. It is discovered in this scene that Wining Boy has also seen Sutter's ghost. When Doaker catches Boy Willie and Lymon attempting to remove the piano, he tells Boy Willie, "Leave that piano set over there till Berniece come back" (84), forcing Boy Willie and Lymon to exit.

The final scene of the play begins with Boy Willie assembling a plank to carry the piano out on. While Berniece is hot combing Maretha's hair, Boy Willie is delivering lengthy speeches that express why he has a right to sell the piano. As the two siblings argue, Avery enters and tries to defuse the argument before he prepares to bless the house. Lymon enters the house with a rope. He has been out with Grace and he is anxious to get back to her. Berniece exits upstairs to get a gun. After she re-enters, Wining Boy, drunk from the festivities of the previous night, enters the house rambling none-sense and begins playing the piano to stop Boy Willie from removing it. Finally, Grace enters the house looking for Lymon and she feels the presence of Sutter's ghost. Grace and Lymon exit, and Avery begins to bless the piano by sprinkling water on it and reading bible

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<sup>6</sup> Grace is a woman that Boy Willie and Lymon met in a saloon. Lymon claims that Grace noticed him first, but she ended up going home with Boy Willie later that night. Grace shows up at the house again in the last scene of the play, and she leaves with Lymon.

scripture. Boy Willie interrupts and throws water all over the kitchen, telling Sutter to “get his ass out of the house” (105). Working himself into a rage, Boy Willie runs upstairs and gets into a life or death battle with Sutter. After Avery tells Berniece that he is not capable of exorcising Sutter out of the house, something comes over Berniece, and she goes to the piano, sits, and decides to play it. As Berniece plays the piano, she calls out for the help of her passed relatives, and serenity comes over the house.

### **Themes in *The Piano Lesson***

Family history is a central theme of *The Piano Lesson*. It teaches the audience that although it may be painful, family history must never be forgotten. August Wilson uses the piano to represent the Charles family’s history, which is deeply rooted in the humiliation of and generational resistance to slavery. With Boy Willie and Berniece arguing over the future of the piano, they function as representatives of two contrasting ideals regarding how to deal with the impact that the past of slavery has on the present. Berniece represents holding on to history, while Boy Willie represents letting the past go in order to progress.

How the Charles family came into possession of the piano, as told by Doaker, is what drives Boy Willie’s desire to buy property from James Sutter, a grandson of Robert Sutter. Since Papa Boy Charles sacrificed his life to steal the piano and ensure it belonged to the Charles family, Boy Willie believes he has inherited the right to do what he wants with the piano. Boy Willie perceives the past as a place to build from. Therefore, he is able to view the piano as a family legacy for monetary gain. Boy Willie’s insistence on selling the piano in order to buy land from his family’s former masters supports the notion that the pain and resulting injustices of slavery can be reconciled by attaining the

American capitalist dream. Elam asserts that Boy Willie believes Papa Boy Charles would have approved of selling the piano for property, if he were still alive:

The father was absented from their lives after an act of resistance, when he removed the piano from the home of the white landowner Sutter. Boy Willie perceives himself as following in his father's footsteps, and sees farming as the "family business." In addition, he imagines himself in a position to right the wrongs of racism that restricted his father's economic and social mobility. He believes that he is now able to purchase land that his grandfather worked as a slave and where his father toiled as a sharecropper, an option that was never available to his father (Elam, 132).

Boy Willie's desire to sell the family piano is his own way of paying homage to the family legacy. His sense of pride lies not in the piano, but in his ancestors. When he and Berniece are arguing in Act I, he says, "I take my hat off ever somebody say my daddy's name" (51). August Wilson spoke about the need for African Americans to not only remember their history, but also pass the knowledge of history down generationally. Below, Wilson articulates a challenge to the contemporary black community to embrace its past in order to validate its place in the future:

Writing our own history has been a very valuable tool, because if we're going to be pointed toward a future, we must know our past. This is so basic and simple; yet it's a thing that Africans in America disregard. For instance, the fact that slavery is something that blacks do not teach their kids-they do not tell their kids that at one time we were slaves. That is the most crucial and central thing to our presence here in America. It's

nothing to be ashamed of. Why is it, after spending hundreds of years in bondage, that blacks in America do not once a year get together and celebrate the Emancipation and remind ourselves of our history? If we did that, we would recognize our uniqueness in being African. One of the things I'm trying to say in my writing is that we can never really begin to make a contribution to the society except as Africans (Wilson, 27, *Conversations With August Wilson*).

Boy Willie echoes Wilson almost precisely when he says to Berniece:

If you want to tell her something tell her about that piano. You ain't even told her about that piano. Like that's something to be ashamed of. Like she supposed to go off and hide somewhere about that piano. You ought to mark down on the calendar the day that Papa Boy Charles brought that piano into the house. You ought to mark that day down and draw a circle around it...and every year when it come up throw a party. Have a celebration (90-91).

Like his father, Boy Willie is not afraid of death if it means sacrificing his life for freedom. This is evident in the final scene when Boy Willie challenges and then confronts the ghost of Robert Sutter. August Wilson uses Boy Willie to express the black community's need to let go of the pain of the past by accepting it, and then moving forward from it.

Berniece in opposition, remembers the past, but does not embrace it. Berniece holds on to the family's history by simply holding on to the piano. However, she neglects

the past by never actually playing the piano. Pain and fear motivate Berniece to hold on to the past, yet simultaneously disregard it. Berniece teaches the audience that to suppress the pain of one's past is to stay in bondage to it. Berniece's dramatic function is thoroughly described in the quote below:

Berniece is the protector and progenitor of the family's cultural heritage. Berniece controls the piano. In her rational and persuasive arguments for keeping the piano, and thwarting Boy Willie's efforts to sell it, Berniece relies upon the history, the legacy of familial sacrifice, both maternal and paternal, that have carried the piano to its current resting place. For Berniece, selling the piano would desecrate her parents' memories. At the same time, however, Berniece seeks to avoid the memories of the past. As a result, she neglects her duties as cultural progenitor. It is this position that Wilson seeks to critique in *The Piano Lesson* the question: 'Can one acquire a sense of self-worth by denying one's past?' [Berniece] must reconnect with the past so that she and her family might be freed from the negative psychological and sociological forces that haunt and inhibit their present [...] Berniece is a figure of conflict and contradiction. She both acknowledges and attempts to ignore the impact of the past on the present (Elam, *August Wilson's Play Cycle: A Healing Black Rage for Contemporary African Americans*, 94-95).

Berniece liberates herself from the pain of the past in the final scene of the play, when she plays the piano and calls on the assistance of her ancestors. Boy Willie seeks to avenge his family's history, so that he may become freed from the pain caused by the

memory of slavery. Therefore, both of the main characters have the same goal because they are experiencing the same feelings regarding their past. However, they take two different approaches to reconcile their feelings. Boy Willie and Berniece both use a form of rage to reconcile their painful past:

Boy Willie rages in a physical, determined, and passionate manner, and Berniece rages in a sentimental and emotional fashion. Wilson uses their conflict to structure the action of the play and to dramatize two differing approaches to dealing with the legacy of African-American history. Berniece embodies the peril of ignoring family history, while Boy Willie illustrates that revenge might not be the best solution for unifying a family. Their competing ideologies, however, are resolved in a way that suggests: revere your family history (Tyndall, 88).

Another important theme in *The Piano Lesson* is the functionality that African Americans have discovered in spirituality. In August Wilson's writing, he juxtaposes Christianity with traditional African religious practices. In *The Piano Lesson*, Avery Brown is the spokesperson for Christianity. Wilson uses Avery's failure to exorcise the ghost of Sutter out of the Charles residence as evidence that "conventional faith in Christianity proves insufficient in addressing [his characters'] social ills and racial injustices" (Elam, 177). It takes Berniece's direct communication with the past, which is manifested in the final scene when she summons her ancestors from the piano, to rid the Charles family of Sutter's ghost. Wilson is teaching his audience the resourcefulness of the African American culture in its creation of a unique identity, with spirituality used as



a primary example. He argues that African Americans have adapted the ideas and practices of the Christian religion to discover a unique African identity:

[African Americas] have taken Christianity and bent it to serve their African-ness. In Africa there's ancestor worship, among kinds of religious practices. That's given blacks, particularly southern blacks, the idea of ghosts, magic and superstition...Relating to the spirit world is very much part of the African and Afro-American culture (Wilson, 1982, *The Past as Present*).

August Wilson's use of spirituality in *The Piano Lesson* is also apparent as a subplot that is introduced well before the final scene of the play. Boy Willie and Lyman introduce the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog in the first scene of the play, and the topic continues to hold a significant place thematically, as racial redemption for Black men. Elam asserts that the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog are used to represent the spiritual world's involvement in equalizing the socio-political injustices present in America's post emancipation era. The characters in the play not only believe in the spiritual world, they need it in order to function in a discriminatory society:

Within the narrative of *Piano Lesson*, the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog represent a cosmic plan of correctitude. The actions of the ghosts, unbalancing with men at the well's edge, serves to balance the unequal system of southern justice. While there is suggestion that Boy Willie may have helped the ghosts in the mission, Wilson presents the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog as a real, tangible retort to lynchings and unequal justice (Elam, 1999).

The legend of the Ghost of the Yellow Dog is not directly based in the ideas of Christianity. “In Western cultural traditions, faith in otherworldly spirits or ghosts appears unreasonable and irrational and can be dismissed as mere folk superstitions” (Elam, 198). However, due to the hardships of slavery and discrimination, African Americans relied heavily on the saving grace of the supernatural world. “Many African [slaves] believed that death would be the gateway for their reincarnation in Africa” (Cone, 170, *The Past as Present*). Wilson’s purpose in using Black spirituality as a key plot point in his writing is elaborated on in the quote below:

Spiritual faith in the afterlife beyond became a way of infusing Christianity with African rites as well as methodology for surviving the overwhelming conditions of their existence. Wilson critiques and (w)rights this tradition not through political instrumentalism in this world, but through ritual practices that connect the spiritual; with the political, advocating not for liberation in the afterlife but in the here and now (Elam, 170).

Black migration from the rural South to metropolitan areas of the North is a significant theme in *The Piano Lesson* to discuss. The Charles family represents millions of Blacks who left Mississippi, and other areas of the rural South, in hopes of finding jobs to ensure a better quality of life and escaping the social injustices of the South. However, August Wilson uses Boy Willie to represent an anti-migration stance; an idea that was encouraged after many black migrants discovered that the quality of life the North promised was not much better than the South’s. Also Wining Boy, represents the

nomadic lifestyle of many of the newly freed southern blacks of the post-emancipation period:

The 1915 migration and those which followed created a variety of changes in the diffusion of Blacks throughout the United States. The number of Blacks migrating from the South into the North and west, increased from a mere 10.4 % in 1910 to more than a hundred percent increase (23.8%) by 1940 (Goodwin, 104).

The first mass migration of African Americans took place between 1862 and 1900 as a result of the Civil War and “the failure of the promises of Reconstruction” (Goodwin, 1). The rural South was in an economic state of poverty. The thriving business that kept the South wealthy was the production of cotton. However, the infestation of the boll weevil to cotton crops, “land erosion brought by floods and drought, decline of cotton prices, and the depression of 1920-21” (Goodwin, 18), were several conditions that caused the South’s economy to suffer. The South’s once bountiful countryside had become destitute, which resulted in a steady decline of black farmers:

The drought and depression of the 1930s concomitant with the New Deal agricultural policies brought about further declines in the Black farming population. By the time World War II began the decrease of Black farmers was down to 700,000. Together these factors led to an increasing out-migration of Blacks, primarily to the northern urban areas (Goodwin 18).

The North seemed promising for Blacks because the Southern economy had gradually become so poor after the Confederacy lost the Civil War. Studies show that the

Northern economy had indeed become promising for Black migrants in the early twentieth century due to a need for factory workers, which was that employment that called for man power, and not necessarily education. The causation of mass migration among southern blacks to northern cities is stated below:

Northern employers in many industries faced strong demand for their products and so had a great need for labor. Their traditional source of cheap labor, European immigrants, dried up in the late 1910s as the coming of World War I interrupted international migration. After the end of the war, new laws limiting migration to the US would keep the flow of European labor at a low level. Northern employers thus needed a new source of cheap labor, and they turned to Southern blacks (Maloney, eh.net).

In addition to the economic benefits that the North offered, blacks were motivated to move north for sentimental reasons as well. The Africans new found freedom provided an opportunity to escape the strict laws of the South, which sought to keep Blacks complacent in a state of bondage. “In order to stem the tide of its escaping labor force, the southern states passed very stringent laws to check the flow of the vagrant and landless Blacks” (Goodwin, 1). From the end of the Reconstruction Era until the Supreme Court’s decision in 1896, known as the “Plessy vs. Ferguson” decision, to constitutionalize “separate but equal” public facilities amongst Blacks and Whites, this was the South’s strategy to keep blacks as a labor force and of lower social status:

These largely freewheeling provisional legislatures set as their first task the establishment of laws controlling life for freed blacks, statutes that

effectively resumed prewar patterns of black exclusion from the South's public life. The measures controlled nearly every aspect of black life, with whites allowed to employ draconian remedies against blacks. These laws soon became known simply as the Black Codes (Packard, 42).

A few decades later, the Black Codes would "harden into a systematically and formally legislated Jim Crow system" (Packard, 42). The "Plessy vs. Ferguson" decision marked the beginning of the South's Jim Crow period, which lasted roughly one hundred years between the end of the Civil War and the conclusion of the Civil Rights Movement (Packard, 64). "Armored in the full force of statutory law, Jim Crow became what it meant to be Southern" (Packard, 65). The Jim Crow South was a nightmare for Blacks. Not only were they barred from any interactions with Whites, their facilities were not equal to Whites' at all. Specifically, "in the education arena, Blacks were also given cause to migrate to the North where they were afforded greater educational opportunities" (Goodwin, 19). White schools outnumbered Black educational institutions seven to two, and "White teachers' salaries were fifty to a hundred percent higher than those of Black teachers" (Goodwin, 19).

Racial segregation laws extended to public transportation, restrooms, water fountains, the workplace, and any situation where a white citizen felt uncomfortable in the proximity of a black person. The Jim Crow laws were in place to cajole the Southern Whites' fear that Blacks would rise against them to seek revenge for hundreds of years of brutal slavery. The laws were senseless, and Blacks faced severe punishments for petty crimes under the Jim Crow system. In addition, Jim Crow did not protect Blacks from the hostility of Whites who often took the law into their own hands:

In modern times, lynching means murder, by a mob large or small, of a man or a woman whom the members of the mob believe has committed a criminal act or a grave social wrong, which in the Jim Crow era most often meant a racial wrong. Occasionally, lynchings have served less as punishment for a specific transgression than as a spot for the perpetrators' amusement or as a bolstering of the lynchers' sense of self-importance or self-righteousness [...] Between 1882 and 1950, roughly five thousand men and women were lynched in the United States, and more than 85 percent of those crimes took place in the states of the former Confederacy or in the border states. African-Americans represented the great majority of the victims of what was, by definition, a participatory conspiracy. Lynching was for nearly a century Jim Crow's ultimate sanction (Packard, 129-130).

*The Piano Lesson* takes place in 1936, which marks the middle of The Great Depression. During this period there was a significant decrease in Black migration to the North. "No longer were jobs available for blacks in the northern centers. Thousands of Blacks were laid off. It was not until World War II that the migratory flow began to increase" (Goodwin, 19). However, despite the economic decline of The Great Depression and the South's constant efforts to scare Blacks from migrating, by 1970 a second mass migration brought approximately five million Blacks to northern cities (Boehm, 3). Migrants felt hostility from Northerners as a result of the increased population of Blacks settled in northern cities. Northern conservatives responded

negatively to having to share neighborhoods with Blacks and having to compete with Blacks for jobs:

Sadly, if predictably, the blacks who surged into the North's cities changed white Northerners' perception of these communities' racial equations, leading whites to see what had before been a "stable" situation as now a "problem." Not only were the new black migrants dramatically less educated than those who had long lived in the North, they were also suddenly viewed as rivals for the low-paying jobs held by poorly educated whites and, even more dangerously, were sometimes suspect as potential strikebreakers. The result was vastly increased racial tension in the North, more discrimination and racism, and all too often racial disturbances leading to rioting and mass murder (Packard, 111).

Although August Wilson sets the play in 1936 Pittsburgh, the harsh realities of that setting are not the focal point of *The Piano Lesson*. However, the significance of Black migration from the South to the North and how it affected the socio-economic condition of black people nationwide is present in Wilson's articulation of Boy Willie and Berniece's two opposing arguments regarding selling the piano. Wilson uses the main characters to represent contrasting ideas that Black scholars and visionaries of the past promoted for the advancement of the African American race. Pointing out the political perspectives that surrounded the Black migration phenomena in Wilson's writing is important to fully understanding the richness of *The Piano Lesson*.

In Atlanta, Georgia, Booker T. Washington, the remarkably accomplished educator, author, and well-respected voice of African Americans in the late nineteenth

century, delivered a speech to an all-White audience at the 1895 Cotton States and International Exposition. Washington's speech, remembered as the "Atlanta Compromise", was an assurance to Whites "that they had nothing to fear but much to gain from the black half of the Southern population" (Packard, 82), which would work hard to progress as a race, but was content with staying separate to Whites. Washington publically took the stance in this speech, that the Southern Black man should focus his future on "cultivating friendly relations with the southern white man" (Packard, 83) in order to advance, as opposed to fighting for equal rights. Washington's point of view was pro-assimilation:

To this dedicated educator, progress for Southern African-Americans lay in their community, in using vocational training as a means of improvement, and in accumulating the capital that, Washington judged, would more effectively than any other force break down the walls barring black progress. At a time when blacks couldn't even get an antilynching bill passed in Congress, he sadly concluded that the path he outlined in Atlanta represented the only practical strategy by which African-Americans might better their place in the nation's life [...] The record of white racism and discrimination against blacks would go from bad when he made his speech to far, far worse in the years that followed it (Packard, 84).

Booker T. Washington's emphasis on the necessity that Blacks cultivate skills in "vocational training" suggests a belief that Blacks should hone the skills that they already had available, due to their history of slavery, which prohibited the formal education of



Blacks. This contentment with the rural South's agricultural and hard labor employment opportunities as exclusive to Blacks is represented in Boy Willie's unwillingness to learn a new skill in order to settle in Pittsburgh. Boy Willie asks Lymon, who is adamant on staying in Pittsburgh, "Why I got to come up here and learn to do something I don't know how to do when I already know how to farm?" (46) Boy Willie's stance is that there is pride in farming and in living in his hometown, the Jim Crow South. Boy Willie shares the perspective of Washington that the Black man is able to get along with the White man if he makes himself equally successful. This is evident in Boy Willie's statement to Berniece, "If you got a piece of land you'll find everything else fall right into place. You can stand right up next to the white man and talk about the price of cotton..." (92).

Boy Willie is willing to assimilate in terms of surviving in the South; as a result he is anti-migration. However, he practices resistance by believing and behaving as if he is truly equal to the white man. He has no respect for the Jim Crow way of life as he proudly exclaims to Wining Boy, "I don't go by what the law say. The law's liable to say anything. I go by if it's right or not. It don't matter to me what the law say. I take and look at it for myself" (38-39). Boy Willie's proud proclamation and insistence on staying in the South, echoes a combination of two Black scholars, Frederick Douglass and W.E.B. Dubois. Douglass was mainly adamant that "the exodus was a confession by Blacks that they and their white neighbors were unable to live together in peace and prosperity" (Goodwin, 2). DuBois believed that the progress of the Black race was only attainable "By voting where he may vote, by persistent, unceasing agitation, by hammering at the truth, by sacrifice and work" (Packard, 83).

Despite the views of these Black activists, many Southern Blacks, who were experiencing the difficult circumstances of the South, insisted on out-migration to Northern and West Coast cities. Berniece represents this majority in her decision to move to Pittsburgh after the death of her husband Crawley. Like many Blacks of the time period, Berniece wants to escape the environment where she experienced the most pain, and where the threat of racial violence is prevalent.

Her experience is representative of hundreds and thousands of African Americans who migrated from the South to the North in the first half of the twentieth century in search of both spiritual freedom as well as economic opportunities. Thematically, however, Berniece's moving to the North also signifies a character flaw: her propensity to run away from problems (Wang, 99).

As indicated in the above quote, Berniece supports the notion that the migration of Blacks was a mistake. Although August Wilson uses Berniece to represent the sentiments of a large group of African Americans, he simultaneously critiques this group by characterizing Berniece as "still in mourning for her husband after three years" (3). Berniece's decision to leave the South did not free her from the pain caused by the death of husband, at the hand of racial violence.

August Wilson negotiates the attitudes and effects of Black migration in the early twentieth century in *The Piano Lesson*, through the reunion of family members who lament about their experiences before arriving in Pittsburgh. Perhaps Wilson's overall attitude toward Black migration is most poetically expressed in Doaker's metaphoric monologue in Act I, Scene I, speaking in terms of railroad travel. Doaker explains in the

monologue below, that many people restlessly move from place to place for various reasons, but lack the knowledge of how to get to their destinations. No matter the travelers' original location, in order to reach the desired destination, they must take the correct railroad. I interpret Doaker's metaphor to represent Wilson's belief that despite whether or not leaving the South was the correct decision, the black community will never reach a desirable future if it is incapable of realizing how to get there:

Now, I'll tell you something about the railroad. What I done learned after twenty-seven years. See, you got North. You got West. You look over here you got South. Over there got East. Now, you can start from anywhere. Don't care where you at. You got to go one of them four ways. And whichever way you decided to go they got a railroad that will take you there [...] But you'd be surprised how many people trying to go North get on the train going West. They think the train's supposed to go where they going rather than where it's going (18).

The themes present in *The Piano Lesson* provide important clues for crafting an authentic performance of August Wilson's work. I have learned in my graduate training, and specifically with my work on this particular play, that it is impossible to dissect a script too much in search of its meaning. Everything the playwright has written is useful information for the interpretation of the piece. In working with this script, I truly discovered the depth of Wilson's work, and appreciated his attention to the timeless cultural nuances of black people. It is my hope that this appreciation will be conveyed through my research and reflection of the overall process towards my developmental interpretation of August Wilson's, Berniece Charles.

## CHAPTER 1: CHARACTER ANALYSIS IN PURSUIT OF EMPATHY

For three months prior to the first night of rehearsal, I thoroughly analyzed and researched all of the non-fiction references August Wilson made in the script. I found that Sunflower County, which is where the Charles family is from, is a small rural town close to the coast line of Mississippi, where a large number of Blacks had migrated to work in the Mississippi Delta in the 1900s. I researched Squirrel Hill, where Berniece cleans houses for wealthy Whites, and in relation to Wylie Avenue, I knew she travelled for roughly thirty minutes every day to get to work. With careful examination I was able to deduce that Berniece was nine-years-old when her father was killed in a fire, and twenty-seven when her mother passed.

In addition, I also spent a great deal of time imagining Berniece's likes and dislikes. The conclusions I came to were based on a combination of information provided in the script and my imaginative instincts, which gave me a mental image of who Berniece is. For instance, that Bernice is perceived as a woman in mourning, according to Wilson and the other characters in the play, I was inspired to give her a favorite musical artist and song, which were Mahalia Jackson and "Trouble of the World." Based on the fact that Mahalia Jackson was a popular gospel blues singer during the time period of the play, I instinctively imagined that Berniece listened to this song everyday while she cried for her late husband Crawley. Examples of other choices I made, which resided only

within my private consciousness about Berniece, were that she despised people telling her what to do and that she was insecure about being single a mother.

This information that is gathered and imagined through script analysis and dramaturgical research is known as the script's "circumstances," in the vocabulary of acting (Adler, 31). Becoming familiar with the circumstances of *The Piano Lesson* was only the beginning of my journey toward crafting my performance of Berniece Charles. The more I examined the script and pursued insight into the historical setting of the play, the closer I came to truly understanding Berniece. After much analytical brainstorming about her actions in the play and how the environment affected those actions, I began making steps to convey Berniece by building an empathetic bond with her. It is my belief that it is my responsibility as a theatre artist to empathize with every character I receive the opportunity to play. In the endeavor of building a character, it is impossible to embody a dynamic and real interpretation of the character, under the playwright's circumstances, without genuinely empathizing with that character.

In this chapter, I will provide an insightful character analysis of Berniece Charles. This character analysis will allow me to rediscover how all of the facts led me to an intellectual comprehension that gradually transformed into an empathetic understanding of the character. Character analysis is the most fundamental and preliminary step toward the crafting of a performance. Especially in working towards a fully realized vision of August Wilson's work, complete dissection of the script is essential before attempting to act the script. Wilson wrote circumstances for Berniece that are as complex as any human being existing in real life. She is layered with external strength and internal weaknesses. The variances of Berniece's psychological, physiological, and emotional states are

justified in the script, by her actions and by the things she says. In analyzing her character, I could not afford to gloss over a single clue of insight into the internal life that motives Berniece's actions. Without a clear understanding of these motives, it would have been impossible to bring the character to life.

To conduct an in depth character analysis, I have found most efficient, the methods of the late Russian theatre practitioner, performance theorist, and founder of the world-renowned Moscow Art Theatre, Konstantin Stanislavski. During the early years of development of his work, Stanislavski led script analysis with a specific approach to the process:

While searching for a method of analysis which would fully disclose the essence of a play, Stanislavski for many years taught and applied the process of breaking up the play into its various episodes, analyzing and discovering the actions by having the director and the actors sit around a table with their scripts and pencils" (Moore, 47).

Stanislavski's approach to analysis is loosely referred to by modern actors as, "table work". Table work is a traditional part of the earliest days of the rehearsal process. The entire cast reads the play together to conduct table work, but it is the responsibility of each individual actor to analyze closely the actions of the character that he or she is playing. Stanislavski, later in his career realized that too many sessions of table work "led to serious errors because they divided spiritual and physical behavior" (Moore, 47). Therefore, he began allowing actors to analyze and discover psychological behavior while on stage, in action.

As I stated in the introduction, I do not believe it is possible to over-analyze a script. Stanislavski's realization was that action must be taken simultaneously during script analysis in order to discover the character's internal goals, as opposed to intellectually deducing them. I will delve further into the techniques used in character development in Chapter 3. For the sake of being clear and concise at this point of my thesis, I will break the character analysis up into three sections; each section analyzed by answering three basic questions: What do I (as Berniece) say about myself? What do other characters say about me (as Berniece)? What does the playwright say about me (as Berniece)? First, I will discuss the evidence that August Wilson provides about Berniece's daily life, including her occupation and her relationships with other characters in the play. Then I will analyze Berniece's childhood memories and assess how they affect these daily interactions.

The first piece of information learned about Berniece is that she is employed. This is a notable fact provided by Doaker, upon Boy Willie and Lymon's entrance in the first scene. Doaker states that "[Berniece] got to go to work in the morning" (2), after Boy Willie yells for her to come downstairs. The fact that Berniece holds a job seems like a simple observation at first glance, but it confirms specific character traits of Berniece before she even enters the stage.

I figured that Berniece must value being an independent woman, based on her ability to find and keep work in a suffering economy. Her employment establishes that she is providing for herself and for her daughter, at least to some extent. Berniece's employment also is indicative of her willingness to work in order to be self-sufficient. The limited options of employment for Blacks in the 1930s, makes it highly probable that

Berniece's job requires physical labor or vocational skill, but not an academic education. It is later learned that Berniece is a domestic worker, which also confirmed for me that she is likely in a healthy physical condition.

Knowing the type of labor that Berniece is engaged in on a daily basis, was one of the most useful characteristics, which contributed to my perception of her overall attitude towards her life. Doaker serves again as the informant of Berniece's affairs, in Act II, Scene i:

Berniece leave out of here early in the morning. She out there in Squirrel Hill cleaning house for some bigshot down there at the steel mill. They don't like you to come late. You come late they won't give you your carfare (58).

The fact that Berniece cleans houses for a living, allowed me to reason with her presumably negative and lack-luster attitude for life. Boy Willie says, "I see Berniece still try to be stuck up" (8), in the first scene of the play. Wining Boy says, "Berniece try to rule over you too much for me" (33), in the second scene of the play. In Act II, Scene ii, Avery tells Berniece, "Can't nobody get close enough to you. Doaker can't half say nothing to you. You jump all over Boy Willie" (67). These are only a few examples, among several moments, of which Berniece is characterized by the other characters with negative connotations. However, Berniece being a domestic worker, helps support my instinct that the male characters' interpretations of Berniece's attitude are misconstrued. If Berniece were truly the depressed and closed off woman that the men in her life depict her to be, she would not have the determination to go out into the world and successfully find work. She would not welcome Wining Boy with open arms into her home, in Act I,



Scene ii, and offer to fry him pork chops (50). Her “state of mourning” is only an undertone of her personality, and it does not motivate her every action. However, the hard labor and often unpleasant conditions of domestic work for black women, is certainly a considerable factor to explain some of the behavioral patterns that Berniece is accused of.

The conditions of black domestic workers during the post emancipation period are proof that Berniece possesses the strength to endure adversity. Doaker alludes to stringent circumstances of her employer when he makes the comment, “You come late, they won’t give you your carfare” (8). Doaker’s suggestion is confirmed by a historical account of the indecencies faced by domestic workers in the quote below:

The personal degradation of their work is so great that any white man of decency would rather cut his daughter’s throat than let her grow up to such a destiny.’ In the same essay, Du Bois described the exploitation that domestic workers are subjected to. He portrays them as prey to all sorts of indignities, such as having to enter and exit by a side door, receiving extremely low wages, and being subject to sexual exploitation by their employer (Staples, 15).

Although Berniece works in a high-end area of Pittsburg, she still struggles to make ends meet due to the low wages of domestic work. Doaker mentions to Wining Boy in Act II, Scene i of the play that, “Berniece ain’t got no money [...] She having a hard enough time trying to get by as it is” (58). Despite the low pay and possibilities of harassment, Berniece and Maretha survive. Her will is so strong that she refuses to marry Avery Brown, who, according to Doaker could provide a better quality of life. Doaker

asserts in Act II, Scene i, that “If [Berniece] go ahead and marry Avery...he working every day...she go ahead and marry him they could do alright for themselves” (58).

Although there is no explicit indication that Doaker helps Berniece financially, I concluded that the two of them share the rent. The fact that Doaker knows Berniece’s financial situation is evidence enough that they collaborate on paying rent, which is a help to the both of them.

Berniece’s determination to make sure her daughter, Maretha, becomes a school teacher is also evidence that Berniece endures harsh conditions in her field of work, and illuminates further her unyielding will. She gets up early in the mornings to clean houses, because she is willing to do anything so that Maretha can have a better life than she has experienced. When Berniece tells Maretha that “[She] and Avery gonna drop [her] off at the settlement house” (27), in the first scene of the play, this is an indication that Berniece pays for Maretha to take extra classes outside of regular school sessions. In Act II, Scene ii, Berniece describes to Avery the life she wants for Maretha: “Let her go on and be a schoolteacher or something. She don’t have to carry all of that with her. She got a chance I didn’t have. I ain’t gonna burden her with that piano” (70). Boy Willie criticizes the tough love that Berniece implements toward Maretha, when he says, “if you tell that girl that she living at the bottom of life, she’s gonna grow up and hate you” (92), but Berniece’s dedicated investment in Maretha’s future, is assurance that her daughter will succeed, and I believe that is what keeps Berniece going every day:

Historically, Black families (not mothers alone) were more likely to send their daughters to college because the boys were needed to help on the farm. Another compelling reason for sending the daughters to college was

to help them avoid becoming domestic servants in White households.

While household work can be, and is, a noble occupation, in the pre-civil rights movement era, it often entailed the risks of sexual harassment for many young Black women. During that period, only two occupations were generally available to Black women: domestic work or schoolteacher.

Thus, it was more important that they go to college and avoid those risks, since the sons had a greater variety of occupations, with less risk, available to them (Johnson, 164).

The above quote provides historical insight into Berniece's feelings about being a single mother. In the last scene of the play, Berniece makes the comment, "If you was a boy I wouldn't be going through this" (90), while combing Maretha's hair. On the surface, Berniece is seemingly frustrated by Maretha's inability to sit still while getting her hair styled. However, Johnson's statement could be reflecting that Berniece feels a specific pressure as a single mother to a black daughter, to make sure that Maretha is safe and afforded the opportunity to live a better quality of life. Although Berniece would likely experience the same level of anxiety in trying to protect a black son, it may come from a different place.

Of all the characters in the play, Doaker Charles spends the most time with Berniece, and consequently, he provides the most insightful information about her private life. Doaker is Berniece's uncle, the youngest brother of her father, Boy Charles' siblings. However, Doaker and Berniece's relationship is more comparable to that of two roommates rather than uncle and niece; further confirming the independence and self-sufficiency of Berniece. Berniece's ability to contribute to the rent puts her on equal

grounds with Doaker, freeing her of the typical domestic responsibilities of women of the time period.

Here's a woman who's still largely defined by men. Her function and presence in the world is in relation to them, basically in service to them. But I very pointedly have her uncle Doaker taking care of himself. It's no accident that he irons his clothes and cooks for himself. Someone else with a woman in the house would have her do all the 'woman things.' But it was very important to me that Berniece not do these things and that Doaker be self-sufficient. She still exists in relation to him, although she is trying desperately to define herself (Wilson, 245, *Past As Present*).

Many of Berniece's most insightful character traits are reported by her Uncle Doaker. His accounts of the happenings in Berniece's life are often more detailed and telling than Berniece exposes about herself. There are several moments in the play where Doaker discloses information about Berniece's life. For example, in Act I, Scene ii, when Wining Boy arrives in Pittsburgh, Doaker laments about how lonely Berniece is:

She doing alright. She still got Crawley on her mind. He been dead three years but she still holding on to him. She need to go out here and let one of these fellows grab a whole handful of whatever she got. She act like it done got precious [...] She stuck up on it. She think it's better than she is. I believe she messing around with Avery. They got something going (29).

Despite Doaker's crass way of saying that Berniece is not making herself available to men, in the above dialogue, Doaker is well intended. It is apparent that Doaker worries

about Berniece being alone because he constantly tries to persuade Berniece into marrying Avery Brown. He believes that is what is best for her. “That’d be nice. You all ought to go ahead and get married. Berniece don’t need to be by herself. I tell her that all the time” (96).

As much as Berniece values her freedom to be independent, she expresses a need for Doaker’s loyalty that parallels his innate need to protect her. Their relationship illuminates in Berniece, longing for a father figure and her inner youthfulness. After seeing Sutter’s ghost in Act I, Scene i, Berniece’s request for Doaker to escort her upstairs, “Come on. Doaker, walk up here with me” (16), is comparable to the moment her daughter Maretha is afraid to walk upstairs alone in Act II, scene v:

*(MARETHA is hesitant about going up stairs.)*

Boy Willie. Don’t be scared. Here, I’ll go up there with you. If we see Sutter’s ghost Ill put a whupping on him. Come on, Uncle Boy going with you (86).

Considering the central conflict of the play; the debate between Boy Willie and Berniece of whether to sell the family piano, Doaker’s respect for Berniece’s stance is evident. However, Doaker makes it clear that he does not necessarily agree with Berniece, that the piano should stay in the house. Up until Doaker’s confession that he saw Sutter in Act II, he makes an effort to stay neutral to the central conflict, as well as any disagreements between Boy Willie and Berniece. However, once Berniece and Maretha have both seen Sutter’s ghost, Doaker is forced to take a stance on the issue:

Sutter here cause of that piano. I heard him playing on it one time. I thought it was Berniece but then she don't play that kind of music[...] Berniece need to go on and get rid of it. It ain't done nothing but cause trouble (57).

Doaker's opinion, though in opposition to Berniece's, does not affect his loyalty to protect her. This loyalty manifests itself when Boy Willie and Lymon attempt to remove the piano in the last scene of the play, and Doaker sternly advises them to "Leave that piano set over there till Berniece come back. I don't care what you do with it then. But you gonna leave sit over there right now" (84-85).

The reverence that Doaker shows toward the piano during his speech in Act II, Scene ii, is essentially a pledge to Berniece's alliance. By telling Lymon the entire history of how the family came into possession of the piano, Doaker justifies Berniece's refusal to sell the piano, while obstructing Boy Willie's mission to sell the piano. Doaker claims that he is simply telling Lymon the story, in order to keep his neutral stance in the matter. However, he so affectively concludes the story with a re-statement of Berniece's case, it seemingly confirms his choosing the side of Berniece. "Now that's how all that got started and that why we say Berniece ain't gonna sell that piano. Cause her daddy died over it" (46).

Doaker is not the only male character that gets the opportunity to see some of Berniece's vulnerability. Boy Willie's friend, Lymon Jackson woos Berniece with his unsuspecting charm and simplistic conversation. In Act II, Scene iii, the audience sees an intimate side of Berniece. The openness between Berniece and Lymon shows that although she does not need a man, she is not opposed to having male companionship.

Bernice blatantly admits to Lymon that she is preparing herself for the right man to come along when he shares with her his frustration in not being able “to find the right one” (78). She responds to Lymon, “She out there somewhere. You just got to get yourself ready to meet her. That’s what I’m trying to do” (78).

Act II, Scene iii provides insight into the type of man that Berniece is preparing herself to meet. Lymon and Berniece’s conversation flows easily, as they both share pieces of themselves with each other. Although Lymon does most of the talking, Berniece allows herself to be engaged by what Lymon is offering. She acknowledges her approval of his company by responding with positive reinforcement of Lymon’s casual conversation:

I get me a job and little place and get set up to where I can make a woman comfortable I might get married [...] I hate living by myself. I didn’t want to be no strain on my mama so I left home when I was about sixteen. Everything I tried seem like it just didn’t work out. Now I’m trying this (79).

Berniece’s response to Lymon’s speech above, “You keep trying it’ll work out for you” (79), indicates that she respects Lymon’s endeavor to be independent. More importantly, Berniece’s support of the above statement is evidence that she is confident in Lymon’s ability to “make a woman comfortable,” which confirms that she views him as a suitable mate. The conversation leads into an intimate kiss between them. I believe that Lymon’s ability to humbly share a conversation with Berniece, without putting pressure on her to change, is what attracts Berniece to Lymon in this scene. Berniece prefers a man she can talk to openly, without judgment and with ease.

When Lymon notices her nightgown, he stimulates in Berniece, her sensuality. Earlier in the scene, Lymon is discussing the type of women he likes and mingles with in the saloons. Berniece casts judgment on these women by responding to Lymon, “I don’t know what them women out there be thinking about” (78). When Lymon responds with “mostly they be lonely and looking for somebody to spend the night with them” (78), this distinction that Berniece makes between herself and women “out there” suggests a denial to her own loneliness. However, she cannot resist Lymon’s simple and honest recognition of her womanhood:

You got on that nightgown. I likes women when they wear them fancy nightclothes and all. It makes their skin look real pretty [...] I don’t too often get to see a woman dressed like that (79).

Berniece needs the interaction with Lymon as a reminder that she is still a woman. Until this point of the play, the audience only sees Berniece standing her ground against Boy Willie, giving Maretha orders, and refusing the romantic pursuits of Avery. I interpreted the function of Berniece and Lymon’s relationship to be an opportunity for Berniece to realize that she is capable of experiencing the acceptance and intimacy she felt with her late husband Crawley, with another man.

The existing scene between Berniece and Lymon contrasts sharply with the earlier scene between Berniece and Avery, for Berniece and Lymon exhibit a sexual attraction unseen in her relationship with Avery. Avery tries to “unsex” Berniece and paint her as frigid in order to explain her denial to his suit. Her kiss with Lymon, however, shows that Berniece is still able to exercise and act on desire (Elam, 110).



Directly prior to Berniece's scene with Lymon, Avery makes his best attempt at wooing her to marry him, but Berniece's reaction to Avery is completely different than it is to Lymon. Although Avery pours his heart out to Berniece in Act II, Scene ii, she never expresses romantic interest in Avery at any point of the scene. In fact, Avery's aggressive expression of his desire to marry her, results in a completely opposite reaction from Berniece:

Now Berniece, I ain't got much in the way of comforts. I got a hole in my pockets near about as far as money is concerned. I ain't never found a way through life to a woman I care about like I care about you. I need that. I need somebody on my bond side. I need a woman that fits in my hand (66).

When Berniece replies with, "Avery, I ain't ready to get married right now" (66), the conversation becomes explosive. Berniece expresses to Avery her frustration with everyone telling her she needs a man in her life:

You trying to tell me a woman can't be nothing without a man. But you alright, huh? You can just walk out of here without me-without a woman-and still be a man. That's alright. Ain't nobody gonna ask you, 'Avery, who you got to love you?' That's alright for you. But everybody gonna be worried about Berniece. 'How Berniece gonna take care of herself? How she gonna raise that child without a man? Wonder what she do with herself. How she gonna live like that?' Everybody got all kinds of questions for Berniece. Everybody telling me I can't be a woman unless I

got a man. Well, you tell me, Avery, you know-how much woman am I?  
(67)

In the above speech, Berniece conveys a level of defiance toward the normal lifestyle of a young woman living in her time period. As both actor and analyzer of the text, I believe Berniece is bitter toward the double standard of society that women need men to validate their femininity, while men are always men regardless of whether or not a woman is present.

When Avery tells her, “you too young a woman to close up, Berniece” (66), after her initial refusal of his proposal, Berniece responds, “I got a lot of woman left in me” (66). In her rebuttal to Avery’s accusation, I suspect that Berniece’s refusal to re-marry is rooted in something deeper than simply mourning Crawley’s death. The fact that Avery assumes that Berniece is “closing up” because she does not want to marry him, illuminates a entitled attitude in Avery; one that suggests that men have the authority to decide when it is the appropriate time for women to lose some interest in sex. Berniece is aware of Avery’s belief that without a man in her life, she has nothing to live for. My research shows that this attitude was common among Black men, as they assimilated the values of their white ex-masters:

Most men are conditioned through the socialization process to believe that they are endowed with qualities of leadership and that women should play a subordinate role in human affairs. Black men cannot help but be affected by the stereotyped roles of men and women. To some degree, they internalize the same values of male supremacy that White men do [...] After the Civil War, there were

numerous cases of Black men demanding a superior position in the family. Even during slavery, the freed Black male became a patriarch because he had purchased his wife and children from their slave masters (Johnson, 165).

Although Lymon asks Berniece in Act II, Scene iii, “how come you ain’t married?” (78), he accepts Berniece’s response later, that she is not currently interested in anyone. By Avery pushing the issue of marriage, when Berniece clearly is not interested in him, he reflects male-egoism in his approach.

Berniece’s refusal to settle for Avery, however, is not a refusal of the institution of marriage. Marriage was an institution that many Black men and women strived for in the post-emancipation period.

After slavery ended, the freed slaves went to great lengths to have their relationships legalized. A legal marriage was a status symbol to a group deprived of such rights for two centuries. They married in record numbers, and by far the majority of Blacks were lodged in nuclear families by the beginning of the twentieth century (Gutman, 1976).

Berniece growing up in this era, seeing her mother married and then getting married herself as an adult, proves the respect she has for the institution of marriage. However, Berniece refuses to settle for Avery Brown, and the more he forces her, the further he pushes her away. The two of them do share a real love for each other, but in examining their relationship, I interpret it to be based on a need to feel a void within each other.

I learned more about Berniece's feelings about Avery, and all of the men she interacts with, by analyzing how a major event from her childhood affects her. Berniece's father, Papa Boy Charles, was killed as a result of stealing the piano that resides in Doaker and Berniece's living room. This piano is the center of conflict, as Berniece believes that selling it would be disrespectful to her mother, Mama Ola, who grieved for the rest of her life after Papa Boy Charles' death. Although Doaker's monologue explains Papa Boy Charles' justification for taking the piano out of Robert Sutter's house as an act of principle, Berniece is not proud of her father's actions. Berniece delivers the monologue below as a rebuttal to Boy Willie's point that selling the piano would honor the memory of their father. This was the first piece of text that I dissected and memorized in attempting to empathize with Berniece deeply:

Look at this piano. Look at it. Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years. For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in...mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it. Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it. "Play something for me, Berniece. Play something for me, Berniece." Every day. "I cleaned it up for you, play something for me, Berniece" (52).

In the first half of the monologue, Berniece gives Boy Willie and the audience a visual description of the way she remembers her Mama Ola after the death of her father. "She rubbed the blood in," Berniece says to describe how desperately her mother tended to the piano. Mama Ola put her blood and tears into taking care of the piano that her husband sacrificed his life over, in order to give it to the Charles family. Berniece even

creates the image of “the rest of the blood on it,” as the blood of her father covering the piano. In this monologue, Berniece is reliving her childhood experience by describing what her vivid imagination as a child showed her every day that her mother grieved over the piano. Doaker claims that Papa Boy Charles “died in 1911” (45), making Berniece roughly ten years old and Boy Willie five years old at the time. In Berniece’s description of Mama Ola’s mourning process, there is no indication that she ever comforted Berniece during the time of Papa Boy Charles’ death. Berniece was old enough to vividly remember her father’s death, and not having been offered the opportunity to heal from this tragedy, is a huge burden that Berniece carries throughout the play. In addition, seeing her mother grieve in an unhealthy manner, as indicted by her asking Berniece to “play something” on the piano every day, results in Berniece blaming her father for her mother’s misery.

In the second half of the monologue, Berniece expresses to Boy Willie that in his praising of their father’s actions, he is neglecting the memory of their mother. It is at this point that Berniece’s monologue begins to provide insight specifically into how her memory of her father affects the way she views all the men in her family. She points out that they have all followed in the footsteps of Papa Boy Charles, and the results of their actions always cause more pain for others:

You always talking about your daddy but you ain’t never stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama. Seventeen years’ worth of cold nights and an empty bed. For what? For a piano? For a piece of wood? To get even with somebody? I look at you and you’re all the same. You, Papa Boy Charles, Wining Boy, Doaker, Crawley,...you’re all alike. All this

thieving and killing and thieving and killing. And what it ever lead to?  
More killing and more thieving. I ain't never seen it come to nothing.  
People getting burned up. People getting shot. People falling down their  
wells. It don't never stop (52).

In accusing the men of all being alike; all “thieving and killing” for revenge, Berniece raises a significant point about her perspective regarding men. She does not have faith in their ability to make sound decisions. Berniece believes that men selfishly make choices based on their need to validate their masculinity. Things that are happening around her, which have caused her pain, have all been the result of men’s actions. In this portion of the monologue, Berniece goes beyond her childhood memories and references recent disappointments from her adulthood, which was caused by men. Three years prior to the time the play takes place, Bernice’s husband Crawley got killed for stealing wood with Boy Willie and Lymon. Berniece puts Crawley in the list of men she names, “you, Papa Boy Charles, Wining Boy, Doaker, Crawley,” as all being the same. They are all men in her family. By saying that Crawley, her late husband, was no different than the Charles men, Berniece expresses her awareness that Crawley caused his own death. She believes that Crawley made the same mistake as her father, despite the fact that she blames Boy Willie for his death.

Crawley was no different than the men in Berniece’s family, yet she was attracted to him, she married him, she had a child with him and during the play, she mourns his death. Rev. Avery Brown, who does not commit crimes and lives his life as a follower of God, is totally different from the Charles men. So, why does Berniece constantly reject him? Although Avery’s persistence to marry Berniece puts additional stress on her,

Berniece keeps Avery around as a friend, which I was perplexed by during my first few read-throughs of the script. By examining the moments in Act II, Scene ii, after Berniece has already evaded the subject of marriage, I came to the conclusion that Avery's strongly Christian lifestyle creates a re-assurance in Berniece. It is shown in this scene that Berniece needs Avery to listen to her problems and help her solve them. August Wilson's use of Avery to represent a presence of Christianity in the play, is what attracts Berniece to his friendship, but it simultaneously detracts her from him romantically.

Berniece never, at any point of the play, makes her own proclamation about her religious beliefs. In fact, Boy Willie speaks to Wining Boy about Berniece and her beliefs in Act I, Scene ii. He says that, "Berniece don't believe in nothing. She just think she believe. She believe in anything if it's convenient for here to believe. But when that convenience run out she aint's got nothing to stand on" (35). Boy Willie makes a valid claim about Berniece in this statement. If Berniece truly had faith in a higher power or even in herself, why then would she be afraid of the piano? The simple answer is that her childhood was too harsh for her to let go of. However, Berniece and Boy Willie are only five years apart in age, which means that he was old enough to have experienced the same traumatic events as Berniece. Why is Berniece so afraid, and Boy Willie fears nothing? Berniece's scene with Avery proves Boy Willie's point even more, that her faith in God is only important when it is convenient for her. Berniece asks Avery to bless the house, validating her faith in God, however, when Avery brings up the "Ghosts of the Yellow Dog as the hand of God" (69), Berniece refuses to believe this. She would rather believe, "Somebody down there pushing them people in their wells. Somebody like Boy Willie" (69). Berniece conveniently believes that God can rid the house of Sutter's ghost,

but it is impossible for God to have any part of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, who avenge the injustices of the past. What I learn from she and Avery's relationship is that Bernice needs support from someone with stronger faith than her. Bernice is internally weak in this regard.

The audience also learns in this scene that Bernice believes that the ancestral spirits carved on the piano will awaken if she plays the piano. Again, she expresses a strong belief in the danger of ghosts, opposed to the assistance of ghosts. Bernice confides in Avery, her fear about playing the piano:

...say when I played it, she could hear my daddy talking to her. I used to think them pictures came alive and walked through the house. Sometime late at night I could hear my mama talking to them. I said that wasn't gonna happen to me. I don't play that piano cause I don't want to wake them spirits. They never be walking around in this house (70).

This fear that Bernice speaks of in the above quote, of playing the piano is part of her emotional center. Bernice lives her life in fear every single day. The piano is more than a piece of furniture that Bernice has to look at; it represents her deepest fear that she will have to relive her childhood. She still believes, even as an adult, that the spirits of her ancestors present danger. Avery's faith in God makes him not afraid of anything. He constantly reminds Bernice that God is in control, which heals some of the anxiety she has about her past and the stress that Boy Willie causes her. This is precisely why Bernice enjoys her friendship with Avery; she needs Avery to make her feel safe.



Through-out the scene, Avery is not getting through to Berniece. He tries his hardest to get her to play the piano, but she refuses to and asks Avery to leave. However, what Berniece appreciates about Avery is in fact his unrelenting desire to keep pushing her to face her fears. At the end of Act II, Scene ii, it is indicated in the stage directions that Berniece does consider going toward the piano after Avery has made his case:

Come on, Berniece...set it down and walk away from it. Come on, play  
“Old Ship of Zion.” Walk over here and claim it as an instrument of the  
Lord. You can walk over here right now and make it into a celebration.  
(BERNIECE *moves toward the piano*) (71).

The fact that Berniece makes an attempt to fight her fear, is evidence that, somewhere deep within her, is a desire to move on from the past. I made the choice that Berniece enjoys having Avery around because he validates her strength. Her relationship with Avery suggests that she admires the way he lives his life, but this is not enough for Berniece to be attracted to Avery beyond friendship.

This friendship Berniece has with Avery is important. It is arguable that Berniece is taking advantage of him, which sheds light on another side of Berniece. She is well aware that Avery is romantically attracted to her, which is why Berniece does not hesitate to ask Avery for his help. On the surface, this seemed to reflect a manipulative quality in Berniece. However, I concluded that Berniece’s feelings for Avery must be real. The fear she has is real, therefore alleviation of that fear must also be real. The fact that Bernice is just as important to Avery as Avery is to Berniece makes the relationship genuine, even if their feelings for each other are not mutual in type. Berniece has an innate sense of nurturing that she does display with Avery when she accompanies him to the bank to ask

for a loan for his church in Act I, Scene i. When Avery pays her a visit later, in Act II, Scene ii, Berniece asks Avery about the bank loan, which reinforces her genuine care for Avery. Berniece has no romantic interest in Avery, but her love for him as a friend is apparent in the way that Berniece confides in Avery about her fears and the way that she shows her support for the development of his church.

The way in which Berniece deals with the men in her life is a reflection of her relationship with her father. His death is the reason why her mother had to suffer, and as an adult, Berniece suffers with the pain of losing her own husband. She knows no other way to handle death than to hold on to it because this is what her mother did. Her interactions with Lymon express a desire to move forward, but her experience with men has been too painful for her to let go. Berniece does not want to end up like Mama Ola, but by constantly blaming Boy Willie for Crawley's death, even though she knows this is not true, Berniece is proving that she is still holding on to the incident. This makes Berniece exactly like her mother, unable to fully engage all that life has to offer, due to the burden of the past

The circumstances that Berniece faces intimidated me. Although I learned a lot about her through text analysis and research of the time period, I was concerned about how I would portray Berniece's emotional center. Once the rehearsal process progressed to acting on our feet, I found techniques that I could use to empathize more deeply and fully with Berniece that went beyond table work.

## CHAPTER 2: EMPATHETICALLY BONDING TO THE MUSICALITY OF BERNIECE'S LANGUAGE

One of August Wilson's major influences was Blues music. This is made apparent in his writing through the use of rhythm, rhyme, repetition and actual song lyrics in dialogue. After the extensive textual analysis was done, the language of *The Piano Lesson* was what I connected to next. Berniece's use of language stood out to me as an accessible way into making more discoveries about her emotional and psychological life. In this chapter, I will pinpoint specific sections of the play that exemplify Wilson's poetry functioning similarly to music. My understanding of the language as music was a beneficial part of my realization of Berniece during the rehearsal process.

Wilson often uses repetition to create a specific rhythm within the language of the characters. This rhythm helps to define each of Wilson's characters, while driving the plot forward. In Act I, scene ii of *The Piano Lesson*, Winning Boy's monologue gives an account of what his life has been like as a travelling musician. It is no coincidence that Wining Boy repeats the word "piano" several times in this speech:

I give up that piano. That was the best thing that ever happened to me, getting rid of that piano. That piano got so big and I'm carrying it around on my back. I don't wish that on nobody. See, you think it's all fun being a recording star. Got to carrying that piano around and man did I get slow.

Got just like molasses. The world just slipping by me and I'm walking around with that piano (41).

Wining Boy is the musician of the play. Just as the presence of Avery represents Christianity, Wining Boy is representation of the Blues. In his nomadic lifestyle, he meets women, he wins and loses money, and he writes songs about his adventures. The moment the audience is introduced to Wining Boy in Act I, Scene ii, he is lamenting. After he delivers the sad news that Cleotha died, Wining Boy reminisces about how much he loved her. In this monologue Wining Boy uses repetition that informs the audience how much he regrets her passing.

You remember I used to run around down there. Couldn't nothing keep me still. Much as I loved Cleotha I loved to ramble. Couldn't nothing keep me still. We got married and we used to fight about it all the time. Then one day she asked me to leave. Told me she loved me before I left. Told me, Wining Boy, you got a home as long as I got mine (30).

In Wining Boy's reminiscent speech, he repeats the word "ramble," which is later used as a lyric he sings in a song close to the end of the scene. He sings, "I'm a rambling, gambling man" (47), and dedicates the song to Cleotha. Therefore, Wining Boy defines himself in song and in speech. Wilson poetically describes Wining Boy as "a man who looking back over his life continues to live it with an odd mixture of zest and sorrow" (28), which further supports the comparability of his dialect and characterization.

Berniece is similar to Wining Boy in that she also laments with repetition and rhythm. She often uses language as a weapon. The presence of characterization in her

dialect is a bit more subtle than Wining Boy's. However, once I realized how rhythmically Berniece spoke, I began to experiment with various line deliveries in order to find a connection to the character, and affect my acting partners in different ways.

The first example that stands out as Berniece's strategic use of language is in the first scene of the play. She is unfriendly to Boy Willie and his friend Lymon for arriving at 5a.m., and making lots of noise in the downstairs parlor. Berniece uses repetition to intimidate the two men.

He in my house. You say the sheriff looking for him, I wanna know what he looking for him for. Otherwise you all can go back out there and be where nobody don't have to ask you nothing (6).

In the above phrasing, I noticed how the playwright uses punctuation sparingly. The first two sentences are short, which indicates quick line deliveries with pauses in between. The third sentence is only a bit longer, but it repeats the phrase, "looking for him." My natural instinct was to deliver the first three lines quickly, but with pauses in between each, as the periods indicate that I wait for a response. The last sentence in the phrase has no punctuation, indicating that it should be said all in one breath. Despite my first instinct about this phrase, I explored it several different ways. On some nights, in rehearsal and performance, I delivered the entire phrase in one breath. On other nights, I delivered the first three sentences without taking a pause, and then pausing briefly before saying the last line. The exploration with line delivery based on the playwright's use of punctuation and wording, was useful in character development physically and psychologically. This was the first piece of text where I began to let the language affect me as the actor:

I think in our anxiety to fill the text with our own meaning, we often become too involved with what we are saying for ourselves, and how we are saying it; we overlay our own feelings and our own responsibility, so that we do not let the words go, let them free to change the situation and provoke a response (Berry, 20-21).

There were several parts of the play, where I found this kind of freedom to play with the way Berniece uses language. I found myself empathizing with Berniece more deeply, as I discovered how she spoke. Her tendency to repeat herself indicates her stubbornness and created an instinctual decision to within me to take on a sharp tone. Another example of this is in Act II, Scene ii of the play. Berniece is having a conversation with Avery Brown about Boy Willie's claim that Sutter fell down his well. No matter what Avery says, Berniece rebuttals with some form of the same phrase, "Somebody down there pushing them people in their wells" (69). The repetition that the playwright uses is deliberate, and it reinforces Berniece's quick and affirmative tone. In addition, my physical instincts were influenced. In the dialogue below, my body stiffened every time I said the words "Boy Willie" or "well" My physical gestures and movement about the space became quicker and sharper with the dialogue below:

Berniece. Somebody down there pushing them people in their wells. They ain't just upped and fell. Ain't no wind pushed nobody in their well.

Avery. Oh. I don't know. God works in mysterious ways.

Berniece. He ain't pushed nobody in their wells.

Avery. He caused it to happen. God is the Great Causer. He can do anything. He parted the Red sea. He say I will smite mine enemies.

Reverened Thompson used to preach on the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog as the hand of God.

Bernice. I don't care who preached what. Somebody down there pushing them people in their wells. Somebody like Boy Willie. I can see him doing something like that. You ain't gonna tell me that Sutter just upped and fell in his well. I believe Boy Willie pushed him so he could get his land (69).

Discovering character qualities in the musicality of language became important to mine and the entire ensemble's process. In the middle of rehearsals, the director would often yell "DRIVE IT" as an actor was delivering lines, especially during lengthy monologues. He also would smack his hand against a table during scenes as if his arm were a metronome, keeping the rhythm of the dialogue going at a certain pace. I watched the director become a conductor of a jazz band, instead of the director of a cast of actors.

Rhythm, tempo, and drive are all terms that were familiar to me long before I had any interest in acting. My background in music is an experience I used as a tool to speak August Wilson's words. My sense of musicality and rhythm was my biggest aid in initially developing Berniece, so much so, that I relied on it to convey her most emotionally charged moments when I could not connect to them internally. For example, the first monologue Berniece delivers is spoken at the end of Act I. It is the first time that she discusses in depth how she feels about Boy Willie's pressure to sell the piano. Berniece is forced to bring up the past for the first time in the play. By the end of the monologue she gets into a rhythm that expresses her loss of control. In rehearsals, I let

the words affect me by letting them flow out without pausing, in order to convey this emotionally charged moment. In performance, I was able to actually feel Berniece's frustration internally in this moment:

All this thieving and killing and thieving and killing. And what it ever lead to? More killing and more thieving. I ain't never seen it come to nothing. People getting burned up, people getting shot. People falling down their wells. It don't never stop (52).

August Wilson uses poetry as music in rhythm, rhyme and repetition. He gives the actors a sense of how dialogue should be driven musically. This helps the portrayal of the characters to become more specific and full. In addition, Wilson is musically inspired in specific word choice. The characters lament, while providing expositional information about the historical setting of the play. In this way, Wilson's writing is like Blues music is for African American culture:

It is a native American music, the product of the black man in the country, or to put it more exactly the way I have come to think about it, blues could not exist if the African captives had not become American captives (Baraka, 21).

Wilson expresses his sentiments about the Blues below. Echoing Amiri Baraka, he explains the historical value of the Blues; his major form of inspiration.

Blues is the bedrock of everything I do. All the character in my plays, their ideas and their attitudes, the stance that they adopt in the world, are all ideas and attitudes that are expressed in the blues. If all this were to disappear off the face of the earth and some people two million unique



years from now would dig out this civilization and come across some blues records, working as anthropologists, they would be able to piece together who these people were, what they thought about, what their ideas and attitudes toward pleasure and pain were, all of that. All the components of culture...So to me the blues is the book, it's the bible, it's everything (Wilson, believermag.com, 2004).

The Blues as historical doctrine for African American culture is signified most clearly in *The Piano Lesson* in Act I, Scene ii. While Berniece is out, all of the Charles men, and additionally Lymon, begin to reminisce about serving time on Parchman Farm. The men break into song, "O Lord Berta Berta," an old work song that they all remember. August Wilson incorporates this song to paint a picture similar to slavery, yet it is a spirited moment:

During the dark days of slavery the Negro who worked in the fields,, on the river as a roustabout, and on the railroad as a section hand made music as he worked. For them, singing was a necessity rather than a luxury (Lee, 119).

This moment signifies that, while all the men remember the struggles of being in bondage in the past, now, they can celebrate their freedom. When they were imprisoned they needed the song to get them through hard labor. In this scene, the men enjoy singing the song, which expresses the harsh realities of imprisonment. Although Berniece is not present, the lyrics to the song are indicative of experience being left alone. Alberta represents the wives of Black men are imprisoned, and are left alone until their husbands finish serving their time:

Berta in Meridan and she living at ease oh-ah  
 Berta in Meridan and she living at ease oh-ah  
 I'm on old Parchman, got to work or leave oh-ah  
 I'm on old Parchman, got to work or leave well  
 O Alberta, Berta, O Lord gal oh-ah  
 O Alberta, Berta, O Lord gal well  
 When you marry, don't marry no farming man oh-ah  
 When you marry, don't marry no farming man well  
 Everyday Monday, hoe handle in your hand oh-ah  
 Everyday Monday, hoe handle in your hand well  
 When you marry, marry a railroad man, oh-ah  
 When you marry, marry a railroad man, well  
 Everyday Sunday, dollar in your hand oh-ah  
 Everyday Sunday, dollar in your hand well (40)

The way in which August Wilson uses "Berta Berta" to tell the story of the Charles men is directly related to the historical function of the Blues. However, Wilson uses a direct reference to the origins of Blues, in his legend of the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog. Band leader and blues composer, known as the "Father of the Blues," William Christopher Handy composed several blues songs in the early twentieth-century (Lee, chapter, IX). Wilson reference's Handy's, "Yellow Dog Blues":

Wining Boy's account of meeting the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog has direct relationship to W.C. Handy's account of "discovering" the blues at a railroad crossing in Tutwiler, Mississippi, in 1903. W.C. Handy, the "Father of the Blues," jolted awake as he awaited his much delayed train, to the sound of a guitar and a black man singing: Goin' where the Southern cross the Dog (Elam, 200).

“Where the Southern crossed the dog” was Moorehead, Mississippi. Four trains met up there: the North dog, the South dog, the East Southern and the West Southern. In the late 1890’s (Lee, 139), “it became a fad of the Negroes in the little delta town and for miles around to go to Moorehead, Mississippi, on Sundays [...] As the trains speed through the fields on week days, the Negro tenant farmers leaned on their hoes and cried to them: ‘Gwan yuh yaller dog, I’s gwine ride yuh Sunday’” (Lee, 138-139). In Wining Boy’s account of his encounter with the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, there is a possibility that Wilson placed him in the same spot as Handy. Wining Boy’s story and Handy’s story share a similar tone that suggests that something magical happens in this location:

Nineteen thirty. July of nineteen thirty I stood right there on that spot. It didn’t look like nothing was going right in my life. I said everything can’t go wrong all the time...let me go down there and call on the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, see if they can help me. I went down there and right there where them two railroads cross each other...I stood right there on that spot and called out their names. They talk back to you, too [...] I didn’t want to leave. It felt like the longer I stood there the bigger I got” (34-35).

The way W.C. Handy would adapt old Negro spirituals he heard down in Alabama and Mississippi into blues, is comparable to the way in which Wilson wrote dialogue based on how he heard the blues.

The wailing that [Handy] heard among the roustabouts, the field hands and the workers on the levee took root in his mind, and he felt in his soul the apathy and despair of these downtrodden people, later expressed so admirably in his music” (Lee, 130).

August Wilson's connection with W.C. Handy was an important factor in crafting my performance. *The Piano Lesson* is about revering family lineage. As a blood relative of W.C. Handy, I felt a special responsibility in being apart of Wilson's Blues inspired cycle of plays. Like Berniece, I am endowed with the gift of song. I took piano lessons for many years, and learned to play band instruments as well. Musical training is not optional in the Handy family. My grandmother taught the generations after her to play the piano, and the generations before passed down the gift of music. As a youth, I saw playing the piano as a burden. I empathized with Berniece's desire to neglect her gift by reflecting back to my own childhood. To prepare for the final scene of the play, Berniece's big moment of freedom, I recollected back to hearing my father's voice yelling, "PRACTICE! Represent out family well!" I used the fear I had as an adolescent and a teenager of ruining the family name, in order to convey Berniece's dramatic experience in the final scene. Her experience became my personal moment of freedom. This process, in the technical terms of acting is called *Sensory Memory*.<sup>7</sup>

The special connection that Wilson has with the Blues was a solid foundation for me to build my character from. In Berniece's vernacular and in "Berta Berta," there is information provided, that gives insight into her emotional and psychological qualities. Her stubbornness, sharp tone, physical tempo, and her overall story. Berniece's language is her song. My musical background allowed me to have an empathetic bond with the character. I used this bond to deeply experience Berniece's true piano lesson; to embrace

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<sup>7</sup> Recollection of details and situations that have deeply moved an actor to assist him in achieving an inner justification that lets him enter into the character's experiences. Important to the Stanislavski system of acting (popularly called the Method in the United States) (Crawford, Hurst, & Lugerling, 319).

the calling from the past in order to become liberated in the present and move toward the future.

### CHAPTER 3: COMBINING RESEARCH WITH TECHNIQUE

Beyond all the dramaturgical research and script analysis that were fundamental to realizing Berniece Charles, the most important aspect of crafting my performance became the vivid use of imagination. While I was able to hear Berniece's voice through the musicality in her dialect, my imagination created the physical body of Berniece. This eventually evoked a psychological life for the character. However, until I allowed myself to mentally let go of the research, my intellectual understanding of Berniece was devoid of a genuine connection to the authentic circumstances that August Wilson so methodically offers in his work. To simply speak the text and let it drive my performance was not enough to fully internalize who Berniece is:

What the author has given you in the form of a written play is *his* creation, not yours; he has applied *his* talent. But what is your contribution to the writer's work? To my understanding, it is, or should be, the discovery of the psychological depths of the characters given you in the play. There is no human being who is obvious and easy to comprehend. The true actor will not glide over the surfaces of the characters he plays nor impose upon them his personal and unvarying mannerisms (Chekhov, 27).

The late Russian actor, director, teacher, and Konstantine Stanislavski's "most brilliant student" (michaelchekhov.org), Michael Chekhov (1891-1995), warns the actor that "dry reasoning kills your imagination" (25). For approximately two weeks leading up

to the first night of rehearsal, I read *The Piano Lesson* once through, per day. In every reading of the script I discovered something new about Berniece, thematic messages, historical connotations, etc. I came into the first night of rehearsal equipped with pages of notes that provided insight into the core essence of Berniece's identity. However, my thoroughly analytical realization of Berniece, consequently, stifled my creativity and validated Chekhov's warning to the actor.

The first two nights of rehearsals consisted of script analysis amongst the director and cast. Needless to say that I was well prepared for these rehearsals. However, the first night we began rehearsing with *blocking*,<sup>8</sup> I was completely frozen by my inability to translate my knowledge of the character, into active productivity. I missed my entrance three times in a row, yet I was standing in the correct spot, physically in a ready stance, and had my lines memorized. After the third time, the director yelled to me, "STOP ACTING! You're missing your entrance because you're too busy ACTING!" This was not the first time I heard this from teachers and directors during my graduate training, so I knew well what the director meant by telling me to, "stop acting."

As I progress further into higher levels of actor training, I gain a clearer and more concise understanding of the essence of the craft of acting, which is simply pursuing truth in my humble opinion. In my first year of graduate training, I was told that I had a dangerous habit of over thinking my performance during the rehearsal process. I was warned about my susceptibility to stifle my own creative impulses, by over analyzing my acting choices too early in the process developing a role. My movement teacher would always tell me, "Don't ask questions, just do it. Your impulses are always right."

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<sup>8</sup> Blocking: To work out all movement of actors (Crawford, Hurst, & Lugerling, 320).

I remember specifically why I missed my entrance three times that night at rehearsal. I was thinking deeply about how Berniece should enter the stage. Should she saunter, dart, or ease her way on? Based on what I knew about the circumstances of the scene, I was focused on trying to plan my entrance, rather than being inspired to actually enter. “The more you probe with your analytical mind, the more silent become your feelings, the weaker your will and the poorer your chances for inspiration” (Chekhov, 25). Based on Chekhovian methodology, the director was basically telling me to stop “thinking” about my performance and actually start doing it.

After the first few nights of rehearsals, I began probing my “Creative Imagination” by asking myself a series of questions about Berniece. The answers to these questions were not located in the script. I began searching my soul for the answers to create a vivid image of Berniece in my mind’s eye. Chekhov describes the *Creative Imagination* as a means of allowing the actor to visualize his character acting out specific scenes that are in the play:

But although Creative Images are independent and changeable within themselves, although they are full of emotions and desires, you while working upon your parts, must not think that they will come to you fully developed and accomplished. They don’t. To complete themselves, to reach the degree of expressiveness that would satisfy you, they will require your active collaboration (Chekhov, 23).

Questions that I asked myself about Berniece included: “What does she like most about her physical appearance? What does she hate about her physical appearance? What is her biggest dream? What does her deepest and darkest fantasy look like? What did she



look like as a child?” The more I began to think of Berniece in terms of a human being, living and breathing beyond the pages of the script, more questions began rushing into my mind, such as, “What genre of music did Mama Ola force her to play on the piano? What frightened her about Mama Ola? Where would she hide so she could hear her mother talking to the ancestors at night? What was her house in Sunflower County, Mississippi like?” Using my imagination in order to answer these questions, allowed me to really see Berniece. I began to see her facial expressions, physical gestures, and the colors of her clothing that my mind’s eye associated with collected ideas of Berniece:

The oftener and more intently you look *into* your image, the sooner it awakens in you those feelings, emotions and will impulses so necessary to your performance of the character. This “looking” and “seeing” is nothing but rehearsing by means of your well-developed and flexible imagination (Chekhov, 26).

Once I began fully engaging my imagination to develop Berniece, I could see her outside of myself. This was an accessible approach that allowed me to step into Berniece’s shoes and make the physical transformation. I saw Berniece as an upright woman, which is in total opposition to my physicality. To assist in ridng myself of my own physical mannerisms and replace them with Berniece’s, I wore restraining clothing for the entire first month of rehearsals. I wore jackets buttoned all the way up to the top to teach my spine to stay upright, never collapsing, so that my gaze could look down on the other characters. I always brought a pair of three-inch high heels and a pair of house slippers to rehearse in. The shoes I wore in rehearsal helped me begin to feel my vision of Berniece doing different activities, such as combing Maretha’s hair in the morning and

making herself tea late at night. Working towards embodying my image of Berniece's physique was an external foundation to start from in my journey of her psychological life.

It also distracted me from focusing on my analytical brain:

Stanislavski discovered that internal experiences and their physical expression are unbreakably united. "The first fact," said Stanislavski "is that the elements of the human soul and the particles of a human body are indivisible." The thesis of Stanislavski, that human psychological life-moods, desires, feelings, intentions, ambitions- is expressed through simple physical actions, has been confirmed by such scientists as Ivan Pavlov and I.M. Sechenov (Moore, 17).

Once I was able to embody Berniece's posture, I began to explore more specifically how she moved about the set, which is the house she lives in. Berniece spends most of her time on stage, in the kitchen area. I experimented with different ways that Berniece would go about completing simple tasks like washing dishes or making herself a glass of water, to discover the honest behaviors of Berniece and become supremely acclimated with her habitat. Without attempting to truly experience Berniece's sensations; the textures of the furniture she sits or leans on, the feel of her favorite drinking glass that forms a shape in the palm of my hand, the burn on my fingertips caused by the most worn out spot on her hot comb, etc, it would have been impossible to truly relax in the body of Berniece as a character who is alive and real:

All people are great actors because they accept exactly where they are.

Actors, however, are often terrified of the stage because on the stage they are abandoned in a place that is foreign to them. Suddenly, they are in the

play's circumstances and that is what is so foreign to them [...] In order to avoid this, actors must immediately make clear to themselves the circumstances of the play that is taking place on the stage (Adler, 30).

This process of acclimating myself with the affect that her home has on Berniece added to my ability to truly live on stage. Comfort ability on stage, discovered in interactions with other parts of the set, allowed me freedom to become ignited me internally during other moments of the play. During one rehearsal, the director advised me to use the familiar activity of washing dishes to propel my psychological instincts. At the climax of Act 1, Berniece attacks Boy Willie physically, as a result of their opposing views about the piano. Every time the actor playing Boy Willie said something I did not agree with, I lashed angry energy out on the dishes, and eventually this energy transferred to me hitting Boy Willie. The physical activity of washing dishes provoked my internal instinct to attack. This psycho-physical exploration helped me to develop the character beyond a physical performance:

As Michael Chekhov describes it, we are 'transforming the outer thing into the inner life, and changing the inner life into the outer event.' And the continuum between inner and outer-body and emotion-is the crux of psycho-physical co-ordination (Gordon, 28).

Under the play's circumstances, the piano is the most important set piece in Berniece's home. It receives immediate attention in Act I, Scene i, when Boy Willie says to Lymon, "See how it's carved up nice and polished and everything? You never find you another piano like that" (9). From this point of the play and throughout, the piano is a major topic of discussion. Berniece's first major moment of interaction with it is in Act I,

Scene ii, when she explains to Boy Willie that “Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years.” (52).

Berniece’s internally engrained memories of the piano, affects her interaction with it on stage. The set was designed so that the piano sat straight across from the kitchen table, in the parlor. It could not be avoided. Before we were able to rehearse the play on its actual set, however, the cast met for weeks in a rehearsal room, where a piano was located. This piano was used during the rehearsal process. It was an upright piano with a contemporary look, and no carvings. The rehearsal piano did not resemble the playwright’s description; not even remotely. However, I began to envision the carvings on the temporary piano in order to rehearse being affected by it in the same way that Berniece is.

The entire rehearsal process was roughly six weeks long. A month into the process was when fear and sadness finally began to sink into my spirit when I interacted with the piano. The director, and also my acting professor at the time, helped me with this process gradually. He prompted my imagination, in order for me to convey a deeper connection to the piano. He gave me atmospheric imagery, which induced the way I approached the piano in the last scene. This imagery evoked my senses naturally, which created in a shift in my internal response to getting closer in proximity to the piano. When moving toward the piano, just before Berniece is about to play it for the first time in Act II, Scene v, the director told me to “imagine that the path to the piano [was] covered in steel thorns.” This imagery caused me to slowly approach the piano, conveying the fear and anxiety of the result of touching its keys. Once I actually touched the keys, I had an internal reaction that was conveyed physically. My use of imagery

filled me internally, which allowed the song to escape my body differently every night of rehearsal and performance.

In the last two weeks of rehearsals with the temporary piano, I used my imagination to create my own atmospheric visuals. I could vividly see the piano covered in blood. During one rehearsal, I could vividly see the images coming alive and surrounding the it as I approached the piano bench. Therefore, by the time we were rehearsing on the actual set, I had fully realized responses to the affect of the piano on Berniece psychologically and physically. The moment I saw the piano that would be used in the production, completely decorated with detailed carvings and an antique cherry wood-like finish, I was brought to tears.

In combining all of the information I gathered about the play, with my imaginative and physical creation of the character, I was satisfied with my portrayal of Berniece Charles overall. I do not believe that the active implementation of rehearsal techniques cancels out the importance of script analysis. I found that the choices made by the imagination were influenced by my knowledge of the play's circumstances. The interactive exploration that takes place in rehearsal does however, re-focus my mind away from overly analyzed acting choices.

## CONCLUSION

While writing this thesis, I became less concerned with my performance in *The Piano Lesson*, and more concerned with Berniece's function in the script. The further I delve into the richness of August Wilson's work; it is apparent to me, as a young actress, that fully realizing it is impossible without numerous years of performance experience. The life of Berniece under the play's circumstances was impossible for me to completely empathize with in every single moment of the play. Regardless of whether or not the audience, the director, or my cast mates were aware, I knew there were parts of Berniece that my premature acting skills did not allow me to deeply connect to. However, through analyzing my rehearsal process and performance I gain a better understanding of the function of Berniece to the meaning of the play. This understanding will be beneficial if I am ever offered the opportunity to play this role again. I would like to conclude this thesis by discussing the insight into Berniece Charles, as a primary function to resolving the central conflict of the play that I gain from examining my performance of her final moment.

What is clearer to me while rediscovering the climactic moment of *The Piano Lesson*, is Berniece's overall journey. At the start of the play and throughout, the audience sees a stubborn woman, who is a victim to her fears. Berniece expresses a softer and more confident quality, which is the first sign of a change in her, in Act II, Scene iii by kissing Lymon Jackson. However, the entirety of her journey is signified by the play's final moment. In dissecting this moment, I discover August Wilson's purpose for writing

the play. By analyzing my performance of this moment, I learn that my own desires played a role in my interpretation of Berniece

The climax of Act II, Scene v, the final scene of *The Piano Lesson*, resolves the central conflict of the play, which is how to handle the Charles family's past. The fear and presence of Robert Sutter, who once owned the Charles family, has been a looming factor affecting every character in the play. In this scene, the presence of Sutter's ghost becomes forceful, and despite their fears, the Charles family must confront it. Boy Willy boldly provokes the ghost and attacks Sutter, while Avery Brown attempts to exorcise Sutter with bible scripture, but only Berniece has the power to save the family. The playwright describes what Berniece encounters in the moment she realizes her calling:

*It is in this moment, from somewhere old, that BERNIECE realizes what she must do. She crosses to the piano. She begins to play. The song is found piece by piece. It is an old urge to song that is both a commandment and a plea (106).*

After negotiating with my instincts about the above stage directions, I interpreted "from somewhere old" to be from within Berniece's psyche, which is filled with suppressed desire to conquer her fears. Before settling on this interpretation, I considered the choice that such poetic wording signified a supernatural experience in this moment. I could have interpreted, "from somewhere old," to be the past relatives of the family and they summon Berniece's spirit in this moment. However, this is not the first time Berniece communicates with the ancestors; she is affected by their memory throughout the play. The latter does not make a presence of the ancestors in this scene less powerful; nonetheless, but it is evidence that Berniece takes heed to this communication for the first

time since Mama Ola's death. I interpreted this decision to acknowledge her ancestors as, Berniece finally acting against her fears, and accepting the calling she fights throughout the play until this moment. This is not a supernatural experience for Berniece, but an act of bravery she allows of herself, despite the stronghold of her fears. In addition, once she begins to play the piano, Wilson indicates that "the song is found piece by piece", suggesting that Berniece struggles with this heroic decision. This initial struggle to discover the song is also where I justify her morality in this moment.

I do read Berniece's experience, however, to be an outer body connection with the ancestral spirits as the moment begins to heighten. The passion that Berniece possesses to break free of her fears erupts when her song gains strength and becomes fully realized. As the playwright poetically describes, "It is intended as an exorcism and a dressing for battle. A rustle of wind blowing across two continents" (106), Berniece begins to experience something larger than her. When she begins to chant, "I want you to help me" several times, and call on the assistance of her grandparents and great-grandparents, Berniece's experience enters into an undeniably supernatural realm.

Although it is arguable that Berniece's experience is still human a one; a truly heroic moment where she must battle with her inner self and no one else, this does not explain the reality of Sutter's ghost. The presence of Robert Sutter affects everyone in the house at some point of the play. I considered the ghost of Sutter to be a part of a shared consciousness amongst all of the members of the Charles family, to explore the possibility that Sutter's ghost only existed metaphorically. Not only is this choice more academically than intuitively driven (making it less interesting for dramatic depiction), it is disproved by the text. The legitimacy of Sutter's ghost having a tangible presence in



the house, is established where the playwright indicates that Grace senses the presence of Sutter. Upon her exit, Grace exclaims, “Something ain’t right here. I knew I shouldn’t have come back up in this house” (103). Grace serves as an outside witness to the real danger that the presence of Sutter’s ghost presents. If the Sutter’s ghost is real, the ancestral spirits must be real in order to save Boy Willie from his wrath.

Berniece initially demonstrates the power of her own human will, by deciding to play the piano in the climactic moment of the play, in order to save Boy Willie. This simple decision, leads Berniece to gradually succumb to the complete control of her ancestral spirits. This moment identifies her overall journey in the play in several ways. Berniece’s ability to let go of her fear in this moment is a metaphoric symbol of her transformation from victim to conqueror. In her gradual transformation from a conscious decision to an uncontrollably spiritual experience, Berniece literally ascends to her calling, as the link between members of her family who are alive and who are dead. This ascension I also interpreted to represent Berniece’s forgiving of Boy Willie, and essentially, the pain of lost loved ones. In the climax of the play, Berniece is literally and figuratively, lifted from the grips of her fear by finally playing the piano and revering her ancestors.

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