AGAIN, HONORING AUGUST WILSON:
HOLDING HALLOWED CULTURAL GROUND

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IN THIS MONTH OF REMEMBERING, READING and raising up the work and life of August Wilson (April 27, 1945--October 2, 2005), arguably the most successful and celebrated playwright in U.S. history, I reach back in the practice of *sankofa* to retrieve and bring forth again some essential elements of his artistic understandings. Clearly, one is unavoidably impressed with his unswerving, deep-rooted love and appreciation of his people and culture as the central source of his grounding, his expansive grasp of human life and his impressive creative production. Indeed, he said of Black people and his work, "What I tried to do . . . in all my works is to reveal the richness of the lives of the people who show that the largest ideas are contained in their lives and that there is a nobility to their lives."

It is this unquestioning, uncompromising, richly unlimited valuing of our people and their culture that not only defines Wilson's work, but serves as a model of excellence worthy of preservation, emulation and transmission to this and future generations. For he rightfully reaffirms *the fundamental Kawaida contention that there is no people more noble or holy, no history more sacred, and no culture more ancient, rich, revealing and instructive than our own*. And we are greatly impoverished and grossly mistaken to believe and act otherwise. For there is no sanctuary, salvation, hope or worthy future for a people that loses faith in itself and looks to others, even an oppressor, for value and validation. Indeed, it is inside ourselves, as a people and a culture, that we find indispensable meaning, models and maps to encounter and understand the rest of the world, embracing both our own particularity and our shared humanity with others.

This marking also reminds us of his classic speech in 1996, "The Ground On Which I Stand" and the hommage he pays to the Black Power Movement in the 60's, which he described as "the kiln in which I was fired and has much to do with the person I am today and the ideas and attitudes that I carry as part of my consciousness." We remember also with great respect his friend and co-worker Oba Rob Penny who worked with him from the beginning, building with him space and structures for their work and its continuation and helping to ground him in nationalism and cultural nationalism, especially Kawaida which he acknowledges in interviews.

Although there are numerous resources of Black life and human history from which August Wilson drew, from Bessie Smith, Blues and Romare Bearden to Messenger Muhammad and Malcolm X, it is interesting to note he also embraced and built on two central concepts of Kawaida philosophy which played a key role in the Black Arts and Black Power Movements. These two concepts are: (1) the centrality of Black culture to art, life and liberation and an expansive conception of Black culture; and (2) the Kawaida definition of Black Power: the collective struggle to achieve and sustain three things - self-determination, self-respect and self-defense. Thus, Wilson says, "The ideas of self-determination, self-respect and self-defense which governed my life in the 60's, I find as valid and self-urging in 1996." It is

within this framework that Wilson begins, develops and ends his classic speech.

Stressing the indispensability of self-determination in art and life, he asserts, "The ground I stand on has been pioneered by my grandfather, by Nat Turner, by Denmark Vesey, Marcus Garvey and the Honorable Elijah Muhammad. That is the ground of the value of one's being, an affirmation of his worth in the face of this society's urgent and sometimes profound denial." It is this ground that he finds reaffirmed in the Black Power Movement of the 60's and "felt it a duty and honor to participate in that historical moment."

Self-determination, he tells us, means that "It is time we took responsibility for our talents in our own hands. We cannot depend on others . . . to do the work we should be doing for ourselves." Thus, he concludes, "It is time to embrace the political dictates of our history and answer the challenge to our duties." This means rejecting "art that is conceived and designed to entertain White society," and cultivating and sustaining "art that feeds the spirit and celebrates the life of Black America by designing its strategies for survival and prosperity." This pays rightful homage to a tradition which evolved "when the African in the confines of the slave quarters sought to invest his spirit with the strength of his ancestors by conceiving in his art, in his song and dance, a world in which he was the spiritual center, and his existence was a manifest act of the Creator from whom life flowed."

It is in honor and memory of and commitment to this tradition of self-determination that Wilson makes one of his most memorable and definitive statements concerning his art and aesthetic theory. He says, "I stand myself and my art squarely on the self-defining ground of the slave quarters and find the ground to be hallowed and made fertile by the blood and bones of men and women who can be described as warriors on the cultural battlefield that affirmed their self-worth. As there is no idea that cannot be contained by Black life, these men and women found themselves to be sufficient and secure in their art and their instructions." It is his understanding that "it was this high ground of self-determination that Black playwrights (and other writers and artists of the 60s) marked out for themselves."

The issue of self-respect is rooted and reflected in Wilson's repeated reaffirmation of the reality and richness of our culture, capable of containing and expressing all ideas. He calls on artists and us as a whole to bear witness in their works and lives to the exquisite and evolving reality of being and knowing Black. He rejects the fanciful post-racial ruminations about essentialism, post-Black and fluid identities. Artists are to create and maintain a distinct and self-defining space in the theatre and arts in which to stand. In fact, they must, he says, reject the "role of mimic" and rented minstrel which the appeal of money and social madness often induce. Rejecting those clumsy White attempts at "benevolence" claiming colorblindness, he states, "We want you to see us. We are Black and beautiful , . . . and are not ashamed." Indeed, we are an ancient, noble and accomplished people.

There are constant assaults on our sense of ourselves, our work, our history and our very presence, August Wilson tells us, not only in the field of art, but also on the taxing terrain of daily life. He defined us as a people in a long historical process of freeing, reassembling and repairing ourselves and forging a new future of creativity and

prosperity. So, all "assaults . . . that demean and ridicule and depress the value and worth of our existence, that seek to render it immobile and to extinguish the flame of freedom lit eons ago by our ancestors upon another continent, must be met with a fierce and uncompromising defense." Indeed, he says, "If you are willing to accept it, it is your duty to affirm and urge that defense, and that respect and that self-determination."

THIS POINTS INEVITABLY TO A SELF-DETERMINATION that chooses and lives the life-affirming and world-preserving ways of our culture; a self-respect that recognizes and reveres the dignity and divinity within us; and a self-defense that honors and holds the hallowed cultural ground on which our ancestors stood, we stand now and our children will step on with a sense of righteous awe and welcomed obligation.▲

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