SOUTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY

Brown Working Papers in the Arts & Sciences

Volume VIII

(2008)



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Recommended Citation

Timothy Mark Robinson, (2008) "Postmodern Negotiations and the Ancestral Presence in African American Fiction," Brown Working Papers in the Arts and Sciences, Southwestern University, Vol. VIII. Available at: http://www.southwestern.edu/academic/bwp/vol8/robinson-vol8.pdf.

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As descendants of New World slavery within North America, I maintain that Americans of African decent continuously endeavor to make order out of the chaos that corresponds with atrocities suffered during and after the Middle Passage. While North America and much of Europe experienced a so-called Age of Enlightenment, nearly one and a half million Africans experienced disruptions of kinship bonds, religious practices, and verbal forms of communication.[1] These components are necessary for any ethnic or racial group to advance. As various slave communities began developing in the New World, elements of African culture found efficacy through carefully selected retentions, as well as reinterpretations and syncretiztions based on Euro-American and West African world-views. The relationship between Africa and African Americans might never have the relevance that it once did. In fact,

[1] A Historical Guide to World Slavery (1998), p. 274: "It is now known that from 1444 to 1860 an estimated 11.7 million Africans were carried from Africa across the Atlantic. Of these about 380,000 were taken before 1600, 1.9 million in the seventeenth century, 6 million in the eighteenth century (the peak of the trade was in the last quarter of that century) and about 3.3 million after 1811. About 9.8 million of these Africans arrived in the Americas, with the largest contingent going to Brazil (3.9 million); another 3.8 million went to the non-Hispanic West Indies, 1.6 million to the Spanish American islands and mainland, and fewer than one-half million to the United States."

many African Americans do not have the benefits of accurately tracing their precise familial heritage in America or Africa. Unlike a majority of White Americans, links to an African American's point of origin approximate an absence that may remain indefinite, perhaps forever. Successful restoration and recovery of available information from the past relies on a keen sense of awareness and a needful desire to understand American history and its impact on Black identity and consciousness. In most cases, however, tracing one's heritage reveals certain economic and social privileges denied many African Americans. Traditionally, elders kept records of their family's histories and passed these accounts on by way of storytelling. Infrastructures within communities informed and influenced an individual's understanding about what went on before and provided a foundation for an individual's development. Depending on an individual's desired choices, their affiliations and commitments to cultural institutions determined their knowledge. Outside of the Black family, Methodist or Baptist churches, Historically Black Colleges/Universities (HBCUs), barbershops and hairdressers represent institutions where African American lives found agency and authority through an emphasis on oral traditions.

A key aspect of modernity, from the Euro-American perspective, consigns particular emphasis on the written tradition rather than oral forms of communication revered in Black communities. Integration into the dominant

culture necessitated transmitting oral cultural systems into viable written forms. In African American literary fiction, I believe that restoration and recovery of memories, histories, and facets of African American culture comes in the form of an indispensable literary presence that Toni Morrison calls the ancestor. It is through the ancestor, says Morrison, that the triumphs or failures of the central character are determined:

> [It] seems interesting to me to evaluate Black literature on what the writer does with the presence of the ancestor. . . these ancestors are not just parents, they are sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom. (Morrison "Rootedness" 343)

As a guide for a novel's protagonist, the ancestor operates as a repository for discussions about African American identity. The association between history and fiction becomes an integral part of the literary imagination in many African American novels. These characters, called ancestors, serve as a viable vehicle for nuanced explorations of cultural and historical memory, and as a result, hold special significance for African American audiences. My approach in this essay will expand on the concept of Morrison's ancestor by examining the ancestral presence from a postmodernist framework. While modernists from the Harlem Renaissance, mainly Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, and Claude Mc Kay, often represent an ancestor as a living person, I maintain that some writers of postmodern fiction do not utilize a living ancestor, rather these

writer's place special emphasis on a non-living entity, such as a place, monument, or object.[2] I refer to the latter three representations of the ancestor as an ancestral artifact or ancestral object.

Prior to the 1970s, Black communities functioned somewhat successfully in segregated enclaves that supported the enduring legacy of Black families. While I remain convinced that integration assisted in equality and upward mobility for many African Americans, I also theorize it devalued traditional African American communities at such a fantastic rate that it diminished the solid infrastructures within these communities. Black businesses, Black leadership, and Black intellectuals became absorbed into larger society with little regard to tradition and almost instantaneously disregarded those formal and informal institutions that once served individuals.[3] Gradually, African American families and communities became immersed in a state of postmodern crisis. No longer respected or even present are many links that once instilled knowledge of the self and the past. Prior to this point, select members Black enclaves, called elders, served as one of these links. Varying in form and in function, elders were pastors, teachers, principals, doctors, lawyers, shop owners, barbers and beauticians; they were grandmothers, grandfathers, and a

[2] Some Black make it apparent that they are consciously aware of or find particular influence through the postmodern condition. Other writers are less conscious of its effects.
[3] Cruse, Harold. The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual. Like Cruse, I argue that the problems facing many African Americans today are a failure to enhance the political, economic, and educational arenas. Integration policies should have addresses inequalities within communities as well as outside Black communities.

host of aunts and uncles that represented important role models—all of whom effectively interacted within Black communities; the question becomes, what happens when elders are no longer viable or even present? Will something replace that former connection? This question presents a central objective to my essay "Postmodern Negotiations" which contemplates postmodernity and the manner in which contemporary Black writers utilize the ancestral artifact in an increasingly postmodern world. I argue that August Wilson and Toni Morrison appear to represent ancestral artifacts as a critique and effect of postmodernity on people of African decent. If the past is crucial to the development of African American identities, as many argue, then what might occur as we move further from modernity and into a new paradigm shift that some argue constitutes postmodernity? How might Black writers negotiate and embody Black culture, history and memory within Black fiction in the age of postmodernity?

Black Modernity and Double Consciousness

In order to investigate the phases of modernity, I will use August Wilson's play The Piano Lesson in order to set a framework for contrast with Morrison's use of the ancestral artifact in her seventh novel entitled Paradise.[4] While Wilson finds great success at incorporating an ancestral artifact as a

[4] The Piano Lesson takes place during the Great Migration (1920s) and Paradise occurs during the Civil Rights and Black Power Movements (1960s).

piano, I argue that Morrison initially mitigates or rejects the living ancestor and replaces it with an ancestral artifact in order to address the weakening of traditionalistic formations within social structures and to explore possibilities for successful adaptation to shifts in modernity. In Paradise, the ancestral artifact, the Oven, confounds and confuses generations in the towns of New Haven and Ruby. The Oven, or ancestral object, sits in the center both towns and at one time, it functioned as a meeting place and an area where women prepared and shared family meals. Other ceremonies such as weddings and baptisms also took place at the Oven. However, as the modern world and its values intruded upon their segregated sanctuary, they took the Oven apart and moved their families to a new location they christened Ruby. The current generation has little or no use for the Oven and as a direct result of its presence; the relationships within the town become strained. The object has no use, except to a select number of men that remain tied to its historical significance. Morrison ultimately acknowledges that a crucial component to individual and collective stability rests in an understanding of the past through the presence of the living ancestor, a character named Lone.

I hold the opinion that a consequence of postmodernity results in some African American writers holding primacy to an ancestral artifact through which the past finds acute accessibility and cultural values may possibly achieve viability, primarily through ceremonial or ritualized performances and

expressions. The piano in Wilson's The Piano Lesson provides a suitable example of performative qualities of an ancestral object. Wilson's theatrical production addresses how the Charles family eventually adjusts to and negotiates their existence in the agrarian South to living in the urban North—this movement, known as the Great Migration, brought with it the present generation's conflict and adjustment to America's industrialism, capitalism and consumerism. This transition also forces the Charles family to negotiate their traditional family bonds with modern values. The Great Migration and industrialization merely constitutes one of five areas that influenced the lives of Black Americans. A centralizing theme of migration from the South to the North reflects only one significant shift of modernity and Black existence in America.

Black modernity consists of five transitions that have occurred over time. Prior to Africa's exposure to chronological forces of modernity, Africans maintained their existence in pre-modernity or state of antiquity. The advent of international slave trade and contact with the Spanish, French, Dutch, British and the States correlates with the initial paradigm of modernity. Particularly affected by slavery in the Americas were West Africans. Coinciding with the slave trade or Middle Passage is the second phase of modernity, a gradually developing but decisive paradigm shift of institutionalized racism in the North and South. Slavery inscribed racialized differences in America until 1876. Next,

a tertiary shift in modernity, corresponding with the abolishment of slavery and legal inscriptions, reinforced the notion that Black people in America are subjects rather than chattel. The Emancipation Proclamation and Reconstruction become official documents of this shift, but unfortunately these documents did not echo the psychological or private sentiments of many White Americans at that time which resulted in the destruction of Reconstruction. The fourth shift, the Great Migration, chronicles African American movement to industries within northern cities which produced crucial social and economic advancements. Alain Locke's concept of the New Negro and W.E.B. Du Bois's instructions for the Talented Tenth mirror the newly college educated and elite classes of Black America. The fifth shift occurs during the Brown versus The Board of Education, the Civil Rights Act of 1964, school integration and Affirmative Action reform policies. This shift inextricably informs life for larger segments of African Americans. I believe that although African Americans continue to negotiate their place in America, we now live in an age of postmodernity, but a large number of influential and canonical Black writers remain diligent to exploring the inaccessible, forgotten, or the too-painful-to-remember past.

The relationship between African Americans and modernity presents a subject worthy of much discussion within African American social, philosophical, political, and religious thought. Morrison considers one aspect

of modernity—the shift from the oral tradition to the written tradition and responses to modernity by people of African American descent:

> [It] seems to me that the novel is needed by African-Americans now in a way that it was not needed before...Parents don't sit around and tell their children those classical mythological, archetypal stories that we heard years ago. But new information has got to get out and there are several ways to do it. One being [the novel]. (343)

A key component to understanding Morrison's fiction lies in the value she places on the complex nature of Black families and communities. She laments the loss of traditional kinship ties and community in The Bluest Eye, Song of Solomon, Tar Baby and Beloved. Sociologists Anthony Giddens, Jean François Lyotard, S. N. Eisenstadt, and Jean Baudrillard point out that the Western world shall eventually experience significant changes within traditional family structures. The altering of family relationships affects identity formation as well as relationships outside familial structures. Perhaps even more translucent are current dissolutions of the nation-state, representing yet another crucial change in formations of national subjectivity.[5] Giddens and his contemporaries primarily focus on these anxieties within a Euro-American framework; Morrison, Conrell West, Henry Louis Gates, bell hooks, Paul Gilroy, Patricia Hill Collins, and Lewis Gordon, however, explore relationships between Blacks

[5] The development of the European coalition and the Euro is an example of this change.

and modernity.[6] I am particularly interested in 1) the manner in which transformations and adjustments to modernity influence trajectories of African American existence and 2) modernity's connection to the development of familial and communal institutions and 3) how these shifts in modernity find illustration within Black fiction.

Morrison's fiction frequently draws attention to the way in which lessons and stories about the past are told within Black cultures. But what are the origins of modernity as its relationship to people of African descent? What constitutes an initial shift from pre-modernity (West Africa/Middle Passage) to subsequent phases of modernity (slavery/Reconstruction/Great Migration) and, more importantly, what are the consequential effects on Black people, particularly Black people in America? I began this essay by outlining the primary consequence of modernity and I particularly emphasized an original effect—the dispersals of African diasporic people in North and South America which ruptured many ties to culture, especially language and familial institutions. As a result of this fragmentation, the struggles to achieve literacy and retain orality emerge as counter-cultural responses to Euro-American hegemony and provide an often tenuous, yet decisive entry into written traditions. In Pioneers of the Black Atlantic: Five Slave Narratives from the Enlightenment, 1772-1815, Gates maintains that "Black people had to

represent themselves as 'speaking subjects' before they could destroy their status as objects, [and] as commodities, within Western culture" (2). "The paradox," he argues, "of somehow containing the oral with the written, precisely when oral Black culture was transforming itself into a written culture" gave rise to the trope of the Talking Book, a "disjuncture between the oral and the written" (4). Gates identifies the Talking Book as a literary device in the writings of John Marrant, James Albert Ukawsaw and Olaudah Equiano (4). In spite of abrupt shifts within modernity, African American writings retained, adapted, and made visible various connections between orality and written discourse creating distinctive literary tropes that effectively passes down cultural values, historical events, and personal memory—one method of transference is possible through the inclusion of an ancestor figure. From where does this literary ancestral presence derive and what are its connections to modernity? The answer to this question originates within ancient or pre-modern Africa.

During pre-modernity, many West African cultures not only emphasized oral traditions, but also veneration of elders and the deceased. The dead were often referred to as ancestors and from these central figures of pre-modernity emerged the foundational frameworks for the literary ancestor. Now, as a residual and reinterpretation of the elder and spirit worship in written pose, ancestors represent a modern didactic literary device that expresses not only the

many distinctive elements of Black culture but also history. In addition to representing communal and individual memory, Morrison stresses that the ancestor initiates a sense of order out of chaos within a fictive text. The stronger the ancestral presence, the greater the foundations of order--the absence of an ancestor produces a sense of disarray in the work of fiction. In her book, Who Set You Flowin': The African American Migration Narrative, Farah Jasmine Griffin mirrors Morrison's observation by looking at the place the ancestor inhabits and it is within her concept of the ancestor, migration narratives emerge as a mode of discourse in African American literature. According to Griffin:

> Although the narratives tend to represent the South as a site of terror and exploitation, some of them also identify it as the site of the ancestor. The role of the ancestor in Southern sections of the migration narrative is of great significance to the development of the text. If the ancestor's role is mitigated, then it is likely that throughout the course of the narrative, the South will be portrayed as a site of racial horror and shame. In this instance, the ancestor will be of little use on the Northern landscape. If, on the other hand, the early Southern sections stress the significance of an ancestor, or the blood of any recently deceased black person, then the South becomes a place where black blood earns a black birthright to the land, a locus of history, culture, and possible redemption. If the South is thus established as a place of birthright, then the ancestor will be a significant influence in the migrant's life.[7]

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[7] Farah Jasmine Griffin, Who Set You Flowin" The African American Migration Narrative (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), 3, 5.

While these dichotomies appear simplistic in their assumptions about the nature of a literary text, as Morrison and Griffin point out, the ancestor figure provides a useful criterion to explore and evaluate Black literature.

Defining the Ancestor

I distinguish three possible manifestations for the ancestral figure as it appears in African American literature. A writer may depict an ancestor as a living person that serves as a direct central support system for individuals and communities within the fictive text. The ancestor might also provide a slightly less defined but similar role as an apparition or spirit. Lastly, the ancestor figure might become an object of veneration by an individual or community.

Living and spiritual ancestors typically act as physical or spiritual healers for either the main character, for their representative communities, or act as a panacea for both simultaneously. Typically, though not always, living and spiritual ancestors appear as women rather than men. A possible reason for this literary construction may become apparent if we view the maternal and caretaker of Black families as closely associated with Black women.

I hold the opinion that an ancestor holds the potential to become a *deus ex machina*; that is, a character purposely introduced in order to resolve conflict or plot dilemma that hold the possibility of hindering the element of suspense. In order to circumvent such a character or relic becoming a cliché literary device, a writer may introduce severe flaws or eliminate the ancestor or

ancestral artifact. Instead of completely resolving issues of conflict, the ancestor offers only guidance; the degree to which the ancestor's support alters the actions or views of the protagonist is dependant upon that protagonist's free will rather than a pre-determined fate.

Part of the ancestor's significance lies in it ability to connect to the remote or recent past to situations in the present by recalling specific memories or events. The ancestor's interactions affect the next generation and ensures that this former period of time has not been forgotten or dismissed and may have a similar influence on the reader. I am convinced that the ancestor sanctions a blurring of boundaries between the past and the present, reality and fiction, and also between the reader and the text. All three seem essential characteristics of the ancestor figure.

The blurring of boundaries between the past and the present reveals ancestral time—a point in which the ancestor tells a story or the narrator reveals information about the life or existence of the ancestor.[8] Ancestral time allows the writer to use the ancestor in order to pass down corresponding events that explain cultural and historical backgrounds of African Americans. The idea that little or no difference exists between the living and the dead also appears as a rather fashionable theme in traditional African cultures and within

[8] I borrow and expand on the term "ancestral time" from Matthew Wilson that appears in his essay "The African American Historian: David Bradley's The Chaneysville Incident"

literary imaginations of African American writers. Non-differentiation between life and death accompanies the final and most captivating attribute of the ancestor because it provides unlimited space for exploring metaphysical or different ways of perception.

Explorations of magic and enchantment sometimes develop in African American folklore and folktales, and the ancestor may align closely with unbelievable events that do not normally happen in the real world. In the folktale "The People Could Fly" or "All God's Children Got Wings," the ancestor's presence permits a breakdown between realities, thus dividing the real world and the supernatural world as well as offering possibility and hope.[9] Thus, these latter three aspects of the ancestor mentioned may engender indistinct textual limitations within the pragmatic novel. That is to say, ancestral figures divide associations of the real and physical world and construct new, complex episteme of existence.

The Ancestral Medium and the Subject-Object Displacement

The source of conflict in the Piano Lesson provides another useful example of the ancestor. Boy Willie and Bernice's disagreement concerning their treasured family's heirloom, centers on their perceptions of it usefulness and purpose. For Boy Willie, the piano is an anachronistic commodity and

[9] In some stories of the "flying African," the elder Toby is the instrument that recalls the lost words which permits Africans to fly back to Africa; in other variations, it is an ancestral object, a magic hoe, that enables the Africans to escape and return home to Africa.

righteously should be sold in order to purchase land that his ancestors resided for generations under slavery. Boy Willie's desire to equate the concept of owning land with freedom and possibility furthers his assumptions that the only functional aspect of the piano is monetary. On the other hand, Bernice desires to keep the piano in order to teach her daughter how to play it and, most of all, it serves as her own reminder of the past enabling her to venerate deceased family members whose images are represented on the piano. However, Bernice becomes so obsessed with its historical significance and the loss that it represents, she cannot move on from the past. The piano overshadows Bernice's and Boy Willie's kinship ties and it becomes even more important than their relationship as siblings. Their negative reactions to each other initially demonstrate the negative aspects of venerating an ancestral artifact above present family relationships. On the other hand, the piano is the medium by which the past is successfully recalled by the family elder, Doaker.

Jean Baudrillard's theory of subject-object displacement seems useful in discussing why a writer might employ an ancestral object. The ancestral object, while still calling to mind the past, seemingly replaces the living ancestor in fundamental ways. Baudrillard suggests that since objects, signs, and symbols increasingly appear to have more relevance in our lives, and as we move further

into the postmodern world, we may find artifacts as useful way of recalling the past in literature and other cultural productions.

In Fatal Strategies, Baudrillard describes the switching of roles between objects and subjects as reducing the subject to "inert passivity" in which the object "plays out its ruses and social relations."[10] Baudrillard suggests that this phenomenon performs as a postmodern construction.[11] In the 19th century, the struggle for many African American writers was writing themselves and the lives of people like them as subjects. Replacing the ancestor (subject) with an ancestral or cultural artifact (object) marks an interesting but controversial move by writers such as Wilson and Morrison.

In a similar manner, the piano poses as a postmodern literary device. The piano's flaw centers on its inability to communicate its significance to either the play's characters or the audience. Doaker acts as a surrogate speaker for the ancestral artifact, the piano. Doaker, however, should not be viewed as the ancestor; for it is only through his storytelling does the piano possess any meaning. Only later in the play does the piano conflate time and space, degenerate the boundaries between life and death, as well as breach real world and metaphysical existence. When the ghost of Sutter follows Boy Willie to the North, the battle between Sutter's ghost and Boy Willie becomes physical as

[10] Stephen Best, "Jean Baudrillard," in Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory," ed. Irena R. Makaryk (Buffalo: U of Toronto P), 246-48.

[11] Or high modern if you consider Gidden's ambivalent use of the term.

well as physiological metaphor for wrestling with the past. Bernice instinctively plays the piano in order to exercise the ghost of Sutter from her home and to save Boy Willie. In other words, this particular ancestral artifact approaches a functional presence, but only in the respect that Bernice understands its importance—she comes to terms with the past and once again plays the piano. As the piano retains considerable meaning about her family's past—informing the reader that Bernice has "not forgotten her ancient properties."[12] It is the medium by which Bernice calls on her ancestors to assist in the fight against Sutter, and as a result there exists a kind of communication between and among the deceased generations so that understanding and realizing the value of the past becomes possible. Although the end of the play shows that Bernice will remain the piano's caretaker—the long term fate of the piano remains uncertain. Perhaps the need for this particular ancestral artifact will change over time or the piano's connections between it and the memories of slavery or other significations might no longer have relevance.

The Living Ancestor: Removal and Recoup

In a similar manner, while Wilson relies on the ancestral object as a medium by which the feminine mystique recollects the past, Morrison consistently puts faith in a living or spiritual presence of feminine power as a repository of cultural and historical memory. In an instance of what I refer to

[12] Morrison, Toni. Tar Baby pg. 298.

as the subject-object switch, Morrison initially uses an ancestral artifact, the Oven, as the ancestral presence in Paradise.[13] The prioritizing of the object over the subject critiques the condition and the attractiveness of valuing objects above human interactions. In response to this area of the postmodern condition, Morrison concludes Paradise by honoring the living ancestor as subject instead.

Readers will notice that tremendous conflict exists between the old and younger generations of Ruby and that this argument centers on the words inscribed on the ancestral artifact: Does the Oven convey the message, "Beware the Furrow of his Brow," "We are the Furrow of His Brow," "Be the Furrow of His Brow," or simply, "The Furrow of His Brow?" Disagreements between the youth and their elders about their history unfold in a tense conversation. One of these elders, Miss Esther, declares that she traced the words on the Oven with her finger when she was a child and knows the accurate inscription and its meaning. The younger generation scoffs at her and tags her recollection "finger memory" (Morrison Paradise 83). As a result, Miss Esther may be seen as a dismissed ancestral figure. Relying on the elder generation's interpretation of history through memory intensifies the conflicting views of the past and the present. The idea that interpretation, meaning, and historical facts vary depending on the person telling it can be

[13] Son in Tar Baby is the notable exception.

problematic, and Morrison complicates both the oral and written documentation.

The Oven, as an artifact, creates chaos in the town of Ruby while the living ancestor, Lone, brings the generational and gender conflicts of the novel into perspective. By emphasizing townspeople's failure understand the inherent meaning of the ancestral artifact's inscription, Morrison also argues for the impact of social contact and adapting traditions and rituals so they may function within the given society. Morrison's conscious development of the ancestor as an aesthetic device in critiques the validity of an ancestral artifact and glorifies the living ancestor over the artifact. Moves like these by Morrison and other African American writers further suggest that in contemporary African American cultural productions, uncovering, remembering and understanding the past remains an important aspect African American identity, but unlike Wilson, Morrison critiques the ancestral artifact's usefulness by suddenly ending with a sharp focus on the female ancestor figure.

Lone is both mentor and guide to others in the community and like many traditional ancestors, is an agent of healing—both spiritually and physically. Her sudden appearance at the end of the novel initiates a dramatic momentum shift in the reading and interpretation of events and may be a testament concerning Morrison's stand about the limitations using an ancestral artifact as a literary device.

Rallying help for the Convent women, Lone's existence, in many ways, permits the narrator to portray Ruby as a dysfunctional false "paradise" where the women of the community are continually oppressed—especially independent women who share strong bonds of kinship (Morrison Paradise 270). As the ancestor, Lone represents a site of memory, and her reflections on the changes within Ruby and New Haven reinforces the townspeople's narrow interpretation of righteousness and authority. The Morgan twins, Deacon and Steward, share one memory, one purpose, and one belief. They interpret the words inscribed on the sacred Oven through a rigid approach that emulates the Founding Fathers of the town. "The twins believed it was when [their grandfather] discovered how narrow the path of righteousness could be that [he] chose the words for the Oven's lip" (Morrison Paradise 14). Their righteousness extends to the silent domination of the women in their town and their decisions to eliminate the women who reside in the Convent reflect their determination. The men in Ruby exhibit an irrational fear concerning the female presence, and these sentiments are echoed through Lone's stepmother and her warning regarding their vocation as mid-wives. Men are "scared of us. To them we're death's handmaidens standing between them and the children their wives carry." In the process of helping life come into the world, the midwife appears as"interference" because they [give] "orders, [and] on whose secret skill so much depended." Ruby's dependency on the mid-wives occurs at

a crucial moment of generational lineage and succession and this "irritated the men" (Morrison Paradise 272). Lone reveals the prejudices that the men in the town of Ruby have toward women.

Whereas most of Morrison's ancestors have implied unique paranormal abilities, without question Lone possesses a special power that reflects different ideologies from Westernized philosophical viewpoints. In African American novels, the interface between the real world and the afterlife are common occurrences, and Lone is the connector of West African religion and Christianity. In addition, Lone's heightened sense of awareness extends to the reader, explaining major conflicts within the novel. She Ruby's former mid-wife, and as the mid-wife, she interfaces between life in the real world and death in the spirit world. Lone believes in the supernatural and the narrator, too, accepts her abilities, seemingly without skepticism:

> It was said she could read minds, a gift from something that, whatever it was, was not God, and which she had used as early as two, where she positioned herself to be found in the yard when her mother was dead in the bed. Lone denied it; she believed that everybody knew what other people were thinking. They just avoided the obvious. Yet she did know something more profound than Morgan's memory or Pat best's history book. She knew what neither memory nor history can say or record: the 'trick' of life and its 'reason' (Morrison Paradise 272).

This passage relates directly to fundamental questions that are central to the ancestor. How will the reader interpret the text? Will the reader view the supernatural presence of Lone as an indication of the resurrection and survival

of the women residing in the Convent, or will they holdfast to the death of the women who are shot at the beginning of the book? As the ancestor, Lone permits another plausible ending. The reader's acceptance or resistance to supernatural events will ultimately decide on his/her final interpretation. In addition, the reader's own cultural background may also influence his/her interpretation.

As important sites of memory, ancestral artifacts sometimes allow for expressions of the past and at the same time produce meanings that permit future development within the communities they are performed. In Morrison's Paradise, the townspeople in Ruby fail to do this because they refuse to adapt the Oven to the needs of their community in a meaningful and productive way. That is not to say that all African Americans writers use the ancestor in the same way. Like Wilson's play The Piano Lesson, Gloria Naylor's novel Mama Day, successfully achieves using the ancestral artifact. In Mama Day, the people of Willow Springs demonstrate the ability to adjust and thrive with the changing times by adapting their tradition of the Candle Walk. The Candle Walk combines ancestral memory with the needs of the community and does so with the approval and guidance of the ancestral mother, Miranda "Mama" Day. The citizens of Ruby, on the other hand, find their way of life deteriorating as a result of their faith in the Oven.

Traditions, like culture, must be dynamic and should embrace the past without hindering future existence. This instruction includes the ancestor's role where or not it comes in the form of a living person or an artifact. Nana Peazant, the ancestor in Daughters of the Dust, realizes the significance of honoring the past, present, and future. Nana Peazant gathers one of her "scraps of memories" from her tin box and ties it around the Bible with a string. She then instructs all of her descendants to honor her tin box and Bible with a kiss before her family crosses over to the mainland. Her synchronization of religious traditions allows a breakdown of the barriers of time and offers the best guidance on not only how to respect the past, but also how to reconcile the past with the modern present.

As Jean Baudrillard argues in Fatal Strategies, postmodernity transforms subjects into objects and the subject-object switch morphs the living ancestral figure into an ancestral artifact. In summarizing Baudrillardian theories of postmodernism, Stephen Best affirms Baudrillard's belief that:

> [W]e have entered another radically historical era- -post modernity- - passing from a metallurgic into a semiurgic society. The disenchanted world of industrial production, based on incessant growth, energy output, transformation, and differentiation, comes to an end with the rise of media and high technology and the proliferation of cultural images and signs. These forces negate meaning in a white noise of 'information,'

> dissolve individuals and social classes into a homogenous mass, and collapse the distinction between reality and unreality.[14]

Baudrillard perceives postmodern existence as "an abstract, electronically processed reality governed by codes, signs, simulations, information, computerization and cybernetic systems" that dominates individual and collective identities. I maintain that race challenges modern philosophy and also "truth, society, meaning, power, history, class, reality."[15] In Paradise, the ancestral artifact replaces the living ancestor and becomes a false idol. Morrison assails the "proliferation of objects and its hegemony over the subject."[16] The Oven, as object, creates chaos while the living ancestor, Lone, is heroic in assisting the women in the Convent. The people of Ruby possess a corrupt faith in the object instead. Similar to Baudrillard's warnings of the object's ability to function as a hindrance to social relations, I argue that social interactions between the community and the ancestor are a consistent and critical factor in all Morrison novels. By emphasizing the people that reside in Ruby and their failure to be in touch with or understand its significance, Morrison argues for the necessity of social relations and their development. Her conscious development of the ancestor as an aesthetic device in postmodern literature critiques the ancestral artifact by glorifying the living

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14 Stephen Best, "Jean Baudrillard." Encyclopedia of Contemporary Literary Theory: Approaches, Scholars, Terms" ed. Irena R. Makaryk (Buffalo: U of Toronto, 1997), 248.

15 Best, 248.

16 Best, 248.

ancestor over the object. The ancestral artifact, much like the living ancestor, also blurs the boundaries between reality and the supernatural. Ultimately the Oven's memory is mis-read and fails to properly guide the people of Ruby; this failure leads the living ancestor to take on the role of venerable presence in Paradise.

Whether the ancestor is a living person, an apparition, or an object, the ancestral presence remains closely entwined with the idea of ancestral sites of memory, history, and African American cultural traditions. Ancestors keep individual minds and collective memories alive by intervening in human affairs and changing the course of the lives of main characters and these characters establish vital counter-historical perspectives from dominant society within literary constructions. As literature and history have progressed, so has the presence of the ancestor in African American literature. The manner in which subsequent generations of African American interpret the ancestor may reveal relevant aspects of our current history and is certain to have a pertinent role in the development of African American literature.

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