Teaching the Ancestor Figure in African American Literature Timothy Mark Robinson, Southwestern University

From the earliest African American slave narratives to contemporary African American literature, the ancestor figure has remained integral to African American literary tradition. Toni Morrison's articulation of the ancestor in "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," offers the ancestor figure as a useful criterion for evaluating Black literature. She identifies the ancestor figure as an indispensable presence that determines the success or failure of the central character:

[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. ("Rootedness" 343)

In *The Oxford Companion to African American Literature*, Trudier Harris articulates the initial theoretical framework for identifying the ancestral characters such as Minnie Ransom in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters*, Jack Crawley in David Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident*, and "the shiny man" in August Wilson's *Joe Turner's Come and Gone*. Both Morrison and Harris assert that the ancestor creates a space for interrogating generational influences and examining tensions that arise from the relationship between the past and the present.

I maintain that the ancestor figure operates as a repository for discussions about African American culture, and their use in fiction serves as a vehicle for the nuanced exploration of cultural and historical memory. Frequently the ancestor is represented as a living person, but it may also be represented as a non-living entity, such as a place, monument, or an artifact that symbolizes and memorializes the past. I hold that the ancestor provides a viable and interesting means to read and teach African

American literature given that the ancestor emphasizes distinct cultural and aesthetic traditions.

I will begin by identifying a useful technique to connect the concept of the ancestor with the student's own cultural background by having them create a cultural inventory and an autoethnography that considers the elder in their family (Bowles 138). Next, I will define the ancestor and examine common representations of the ancestor using William Melvin Kelley's *A Different Drummer*, Gloria Naylor's *Mama Day*, and Toni Morrison's *Paradise* as models for discussion. Throughout, I will provide an extensive catalogue of texts that draw on the literary figure known as the ancestor figure. My intent is to be broad in scope, yet specific enough in my definition of the ancestor so that it enables a clear understanding of the various functions of this literary device. I have divided this article into two sections, the student analysis section and the textual analysis section. I will conclude by presenting three essay questions—each question varies in its level of complexity and is designed for students in high school as well as students at the undergraduate or graduate level.

STUDENT ANALYSIS

Cultural Inventory and Autoethnography

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls culture "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (89). Students should begin considering cultural groups into which they were born and cultural groups in which they choose to participate, as a first step in creating a cultural inventory. (See Cultural Inventory: Part 1). They should pay particular attention to intersections between the various groups to which they belong. For example, what connections exist among their ethnic and recreational activities, their family structure and their religion, or the region where they live and their ethnic group? The analysis will permit students to

consciously reflect on aspects that make up their individual identity, their status as an **insider**, and **subcultures** that surround them.¹

CULTURAL INVENTORY CATALOGUE

Groups into which: you were born	Groups of which you choose to be a part:
Regional	Social
Religious	Religious
Political	Political
Family Type	Recreational
Socioeconomic	Educational
Gender	Occupational
Racial	Marital Status/Parenthood
Generational	

Part two of the cultural inventory involves creating a detailed list. Have your students choose from their ethnic, regional, or religious culture and list as many rites, rituals, ceremonies, values, beliefs, histories and/or artifacts of that cultural group. (See Cultural Inventory: Part 2).

The next assignment involves writing an autoethnography. Like an ethnography, an autoethnography is an analytical, objective, personal account about the self/writer as a part of a group or culture. (See PowerPoint: Autoethnography Defined). Direct students to write an autoethnography centering on the family elder that communicates some aspect of their cultural group. You will want to provide readings of autoethnographies from many different cultures. They may choose to focus on the tensions between their subcultures and the larger culture or

¹ The idea of creating a cultural inventory and autoethnography come from the College Composition packet at Miami University. I have modified this project to center on the elder or the person who transmits cultural knowledge from the past to the next generation. As a transmitter of culture through memory and history, the concept of the elder relates directly to the literary ancestor figure.

they may reflect upon the elements of their culture represented by the elder figure.

Students will explain, contextualize, and analyze the meaning of their cultural tradition and may include cultural narratives or stories that groups tell about themselves or to one another. Sometimes these stories communicate the tensions between their culture and the dominant culture. They should write what Geertz calls a "thick description" of one of their cultural traditions—their description must explain a ritual or an artifact that is closely associated with their cultural group. Students may want to stress the tensions within their own cultural groups as well. Emphasize that they are explaining these elements of their culture to an outside group and stating their stated meanings and underlying meanings (Geertz 5-6, 9-10). As an illustration, you can provide examples of tensions between the dominant culture and the subculture that are especially prominent in African American folk traditions, including the Br'er Rabbit/Tar Baby trickster tales, where signifying and other modes of indirection were utilized to critique American slave culture.

Andrew Lam's "Going the Vegetarian Route, for a Bit," as told on *National Public Radio* (NPR) offers a unique perspective of his grandmother's cultural traditions.² Tensions presented here are, in part, generational but are also cultural as well. "The Chinatown Idea," by Eric Liu, also offers another perspective of his grandmother and the tensions that exist between American culture and Manhattan's Chinatown.³ After providing a definition of the autoethnography and analyzing these examples, students should have a clear idea about how to proceed with their own autoethnography (See Autoethnography Assignment.)

Discussion Questions:

² The audio is available on the NPR website.

³ Liu's essay appears in *The Accidental Asian: Notes of a Native Speaker*.

Encourage students to consider the elder in their family (immediate or extended) and the role that the elder plays. What traditions do they embody? How do they pass down these traditions? Most illuminating is asking them what traditions they will pass down to their children. Why will they (or in some cases, won't they) pass down various traditions to the next generation? The purpose here is twofold; one is to have the students reflect on their own background, family histories, traditions and the role of the elder in their own family. Second, it allows the students to make connections with concepts that will be discussed shortly regarding the ancestor to their own familial background. Direct your students to share sections of their autoethnographies and encourage them to analyze various commonalties and differences they share with other students, especially as it pertains to the elder's position and function in their family.

Cultural Retentions and the Elder

The most direct area of transition between the autoethnographies and the introduction of African American literature is the idea of slavery and the transference or passing on of traditions from generation to generation. Early scholarship into African American literature centered on the existence and validity of a Black aesthetic. George Schuyler's "The Negro Art Hokum" and Langston Hughes's "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" are two foundational essays that students can read to initiate this discussion regarding identifying elements of Black art forms.

Another area of debate concerning Black culture centered on the effects of the Middle Passage and slavery; did slavery destroy all connections to African culture or are there aspects that were retained or reinterpreted? This is the main argument between Melvin Herskovitz and E. Franklin Frazier. Frazier believed that people of African descent lost all remnants of their cultural heritage as a result of slavery and argued that Black culture in America emerged independently from any West African influences. In *The Myth of the Negro Past*, Herskovitz, maintained the

opposite. He believed that there were retentions from Africa that survived and were re-interpreted. A lecture or assigning several readings on Herskovitz's and Franklin's work (or Lorenzo Turner's Africanisms in the Gullah Dialect) will provide transitions between discussing transference of culture—the passing down of traditions from generation to generation within the student's culture and the similarities and differences that exist for many people of African descent. Readings might include "Anansi the Spider". Anansi the Spider is a significant God in West African folklore whose status was transferred to locations where people of African descent were placed after the Middle Passage. In Jamaica and Grenada the spider god became Anancy. In South Carolina, the spider god became Aunt Nancy (the Americanized version of Anansi). Ananasi tales represent an important residual and reinterpreted element from trickster tales from Africa that made their way to America. Like Anansi, the ancestor figure represents another cultural retention carried from Africa to America. The ancestor figure in Black literature is an avatar of the elder—an often revered figure in Black families and in Black communities.

The deep-rooted reverence for elders in traditional African American families and the representation of the ancestor in literature approaches a similar act of veneration for elders and deceased ancestors in parts of West Africa. In *Roll Jordan, Roll,* Eugene Genovese maintains that when many slaves came to America, they retained the tradition of respecting elders (522). The elders in many slave communities passed on their wisdom and experience to the next generation, managed to care for the young children, and healed the sick in their communities by way of folk remedies. Genovese holds the opinion that early generations of African-descended people retrained a belief that the religious spirits of their ancestors continued to interact with those of the living (523). While ancestral veneration among African Americans to a large extent ceases to exist, the respect for elders in traditional African American communities remains; with these cultural formations in mind, you should point out to

students that African American writers often draw upon this tradition when representing the ancestral character in literature.

The Ancestor: Definition and Literary Examples

In undergraduate and graduate courses, Morrison's essay, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," Farah Jasmin Griffin's book, Who Set You Flowin', and Trudier Harris's entry on the ancestor in The Oxford Companion to African American Literature are excellent starting points for understanding the role of the ancestor. The ancestor, as represented in African American literature, embodies all facets of oral traditions—music (spirituals, work songs, blues, gospel, jazz, rhythm and Blues, rap) folktales, and preaching. Useful texts that support the use of oral traditions in Black literature include the introduction and first chapter to Bernard Bell's African American Novel and its Literary Traditions, Geneva Smitherman's Talkin' and Testifying, or Talkin' the Talk: From the Amen Corner to the Hood. (See Powerpoint Presentation: The Ancestor Defined)

Another characteristic, just as central to the ancestor as the oral tradition, is the ancestor's link to the remote or recent past which enables writers to recall memories or events. The ancestor's communal interactions, especially their contact with members of the next generation, enlighten the central character about the past to ensure that this former period of time has not been forgotten or dismissed. A film that communicates these relevant themes is *Daughters of the Dust* wherein Nana Peazant reminds her offspring that "The past is prologue." Like most ancestor figures, Nana allows a blurring of boundaries between scenes that take place in the past and those that take place in the present. She is a reminder of the old ways of living on Ibo Landing, a remote and isolated island of the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, and Africa. Memory and history then, are passed on via the ancestor. At this point, students should discuss what makes something a part of *history* and what

constitutes *memory*. The differences and similarities between the two should also illuminate the previous discussions concerning dominant cultural groups and sub cultural groups that were brought forth during the cultural inventory and autoethnography assignment. The significance of history and memory is a prominent feature in the lives of many people of African descent and it manifests in many Black cultural forms—especially in songs such as "Steal Away," "We raise de Wheat," or "No More Auction Block"—these cultural narratives, similar to Anansi the spider tales, represent systems of survival which were used to sustain the individuals and communities that were passed down orally.

In many respects, we can say that the ancestor functions as a "cultural anchor." As a site of memory, the ancestor becomes the cultural anchor through which folktales, religion, and cultural values are recollected and told to characters and to the reader. In many texts, the ancestor is an honorable, pious character that emulates Black Christian beliefs. With Moses and Jesus as archetypical figures, the ancestor performs similar benevolent acts and even performs miracles of healing. Ancestors are often respected leaders within the community where they reside. Particularly fascinating is the ancestor's intimate connection to Jesus in terms of a literal or figurative resurrection or rebirth. The ancestor provides connections to the supernatural and also includes a metaphorical and/or literal resurrection after death either in the mind of another character or as an actual apparition that interacts with reality. As may be expected of a people whose double consciousness figures prominently in their psyche, it is no surprise that the ancestor also demonstrates characteristics of West African ideology about life and death which in

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⁴ I borrow the term "cultural anchor" from Wilson J. Moses's Afrotopia_(38). Moses uses the term to classify Afrocentric thought as an anchor of values in order to "cope with the stresses and anxieties of modern life."

many ways is a stark contrast to Euro-American concepts.⁵ This non-differentiation between life and death accompanies the final and most captivating attribute of the ancestor—the ancestor provides unlimited space for exploring magic. As depicted in "All Gods Chillun' God Wings" in the *Norton Anthology* or Virginia Hamilton's "The People Could Fly," the exploration of magic and the supernatural sometimes develops through folklore and folktales. These folktales are an example of the systematic survival systems people of African descent used to combat slavery.

The presence of the ancestor may also be closely aligned with the spiritual world or the afterlife. In the film *Beloved*, Baby Suggs appears to Sethe, Denver and Beloved at the Clearing as Sethe tells them about Baby Suggs' role as preacher. Baby Suggs' presence is seen and heard, even after death, by Denver and is pivotal as she instructs Denver to leave the confines of her home and help her mother, an act she previously found difficult. The rift between life and death, the real world and the supernatural world, and the past and the present are weakened by the presence of some ancestor figures. (See Fig. 1)





Fig. 1: Scene from Beloved: Baby Suggs and The Clearing

The following section, the textual analysis section, will provide a way to approach the ancestor figure by using *A Different Drummer*, *Mama Day*, and Paradise in your classroom. Kelley uses the ancestor as an instructive presence depicting resistance to racism and oppression. *Mama Day* is perhaps the most complex ancestral figure in African

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⁵ For more information on African worldview on life and death and its retentions in America, see "Gullah Attitudes Toward Life and Death" by Margaret Washington Creel in *Africanisms in America* edited by Joseph E. Holloway.

American literature. She transmits elements of Black culture—from the oral tradition to voodoo—and is the connection between generations of women in her family. Naylor also characterizes Mama Day as an opposition to traditional representations of the Black matriarchal figure in American culture. The final text, *Paradise*, provides readers with an unusual ancestor figure that I call the ancestral artifact. Unlike Wilson who uses the piano in *Piano Lesson* as an ancestral artifact to assist Bernice and Boy Willie, the ancestral artifact in *Paradise* confounds and confuses generations in the towns of New Haven and Ruby.

TEXTUAL ANALYSIS SECTION

Black Masculinity and the Ancestor Figure

Not since Zora Neale Hurston's Seraph on the Suwanee, has a Black novelist written about White characters in depth as William Melvin Kelley does in A Different Drummer. The focus, however, is not exclusively about the wealthy and White Wilson family—the book also centers on members of the Black Caliban family. As a result, Drummer should initiate dialogue about whiteness in the Black literary imagination and blackness in the White literary imagination. My particular approach to Drummer introduces students to representations of Black men in American culture and how Black writers, similar to Kelley, have contested one-dimensional characterizations. Sterling Brown's essay "The Negro Character as Seen by White Authors" articulates the comic Negro, the brute, the exotic primitive, the tragic mulatto, the contented slave, the local color Negro, and the wretched freeman, as stereotypical images of Black characters in American culture (179). In addition to Brown's essay, the film Ethnic Notions, by Marlon Riggs, provides an introduction to representations of Black character and consciousness in American culture. I have students bring in contemporary images of these stereotypes and discuss how the image they brought in conforms to, contradicts, or is a amalgam of two representations—the results of your

discussion will be quite illuminating as to how little has changed since Brown wrote his 1933 essay.

Many, but certainly not all, Black writers redefine or add complexity to one-dimensional representations, but Kelley achieves this redefinition with the ancestral figure in the initial scene of Drummer. The ancestor figure is an African king that is taken prisoner aboard a slave ship. A close textual reading of these pages reveals a reinterpretation of the brute Negro. The slave, simply known as "the African," is characterized by his physical appearance, his authority, and his strength. The description of his "broad shoulders," "black skin," and sunken eyes that made his head look like "a gigantic black skull" evokes the stereotypical images of the Black man as savage (Kelley 13). Kelley's graphic description of the African cracking the skull of the ship's captain appears to reinforce further the imagery of his brutish nature. We soon learn the reason for his impassioned rage—the African is protecting his infant son (Kelley 14). Far from an objectification of a Black man, Kelley's majestic character goes to great lengths to protect his child from slavery. Although his attempts at liberation ultimately fail, the African initially uses his intellect to resist bondage and outwit his pursuers. Only in defeat does the African attempt infanticide to ensure his son will not be enslaved.6

Tucker Caliban, the African's descendant, also resists White authority, but Tucker comprehends the call to resistance in a different manner. After years of farming on his own property, he destroys the soil on his land and moves away from the town that his family has lived in for generations. His act triggers a mass exodus of other Blacks from the fictional southern state. Presumably, the presence of his ancestor's blood instructs Tucker from beyond the boundaries of death. Modern literature during the Harlem Renaissance often depicted mulatto figures as having

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⁷ In Beloved, Sethe attempts a similar act, but with Kelley's African we see resistance to the atrocities of slavery with a male character.

blood of two races—their African heritage reinforced the irrationality and aggressive sensuality while the White blood reinforced their ability to reason and maintain reserved passion. You can discuss genetic memory as a device in literature since many writers often refer to "the blood" as having some inherent component that ties a characters' behavior and in some instances, memory to one's ancestors. Although the ancestor figure is unusually abstract in *Drummer*, I use this work to demonstrate the ancestor's resonating influence with their descendants. Instead of apparition instructing and guiding Tucker to act directly, Kelley implies that the "blood" of Tucker's ancestor compels him to emulate moral courage. I view this as an example of supernatural qualities of the ancestor figure.

Resiliency and Black Women

In a similar manner to Black men, the representation of Black women is fraught with stereotypical literary images as caretaker, particularly in such novels as Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Thomas Nelson Page's In Ole Virginia, or Marse Chan and Other Stories. These images are not relegated to literature either. Aunt Jemima, whose radiant smile and red head scarf were once used to sell pancake syrup, represents one of the most recognized non-living commercial figures in America. In television, we witnessed an innumerable number of Black women who were the sole caretakers of their offspring in programs like Julia (Diane Carroll), What's Happening (Mable King), That's My Mama (Theresa Merritt), and (for the majority of its time on the air) Good Times (Esther Rolle). Nell Carter even portrayed a contemporary version of the mammy figure in Gimme A Break in the late 80s. You may use these visual images to remind students of the nurturing and resilient role of Black women and contrast that with representations of Black men in American culture. While this image rightfully takes into account the strength and courage of Black women, in Saints, Sinners, Saviors: Strong Black Women in African American Literature, Trudier Harris considers the

many representations of Black women in literature whose "strength becomes their reason for being" as one dimensional:

The landscape of African American literature is peopled with Black women who are almost too strong for their own good, whether that strength is moral or physical or both. Historically, Black writers have assumed that strength was the one unusable characteristic they could apply to Black women (109).

Harris's comment is particularly significant when we consider that many ancestral characters in African American literature appear as a mother or mother-like figure.

Moving Beyond the Stereotype

Depictions of Black woman during slavery focused on two images—the mammy /matriarch, and the jezebel. The jezebel characterized Black women as an over-sexualized, deceitful and voluptuous wench; however, the overlapping qualities of all three images center on the reoccurring theme of domination within her family. The mammy's visual representation, in contrast to the jezebel, included a handkerchief tied around her head, an apron, with an extremely dark complexion and large frame (Anderson 10). Patricia Hill Collins notes that the underlying connotation of this image centers on the Black female's lack of sexuality and sexual appeal. Rather than emphasizing her physical beauty, the mammy's sole existence emphasizes nurturing. Collins further notes her minimal interaction with her own children; the mammy figure cared for her White charges (Collins 72, 78). In Ethnic Notions, Barbara Christian observes that when the Black mammy did interact with her children, it was for the purpose of physical, and sometimes, violent chastisement (Riggs).

Similarly, the matriarch reinforced the Black woman possessing qualities normally used to represent men. The matriarch's aggressive nature, her fierce independence, and dominance over her family severed

connections between Black men and Black women. This figure's relationship to slave culture correlates with the replacing of the Black man with the Black women as head of household. As Michelle Wallace argues in "The Myth of the Superwoman" the Black woman's role has often been exaggerated and misrepresented: She was believed to be not only emotionally callous but physically invulnerable—stronger than white women and the physically equal of any man of her race. She was stronger than white women in order to justify performing a kind of labor most white women were now presumed incapable of. (138). Toni Cade Bambara, Morrison, and Naylor are especially aware of these strengths and often place a female character in the role of ancestor. Since Charles Chesnutt's "The Goophered Grapevine," the conjure woman figures prominently in Black literature. Naylor's Miranda Day, or Mama Day as she is affectionately called, holds the central power in her community, uses herbal medicines to heal, and possesses a heightened sense of awareness. The story focuses on Mama Day's niece Coca and her departure from Willow Springs to the United States and subsequent return to Willow Springs with her fiancé George. As the matriarch, Mama Day plays a central role in Coca's life choices. Mama Day is both an instructive force as well as and source of conflict. She is also cultural anchor, providing a key to central questions about the past, the present, and the future.

Since students are already familiar with the Black stereotypes, instruct students to do a close reading of Mama Day's physical characteristics. In what way does Naylor conform to or resist stereotypical figures like the mammy figure, matriarch or the conjure woman? In what way does Mama Day reflect the history and memory throughout the text? In what manner does Mama Day represent the ancestor figure? The answer to these questions should inform students about characteristics found in many ancestral figures in Black literature.

Mama Day has the qualities of a quintessential Black matriarch, but she also projects a certain feminine sexuality; you might, for instance, emphasize her playful relationship and professional rivalry with Dr. Buzzard as an indication of sexual tension. Are there any hints of sexual innuendo or symbolism in their scenes? Mama Day's sexual awareness is most evident when she goes to see a movie called The Milkman and the Old Maid. The movie turns out to be a pornographic film, but she sees it twice just to "be sure she could believe [her] own eyes" (Naylor 306). Her spirit, in other words, possesses characteristics of what her sister Abigail describes as wickedness. Naylor writes Mama Day in a manner of playfulness and mirth, and one would not necessarily ascribe these characteristics to an old spinster (as Mama Day consistently refers to herself), mammy, matriarch or ancestral figure. When one looks at Morrison's ancestors such as Baby Suggs and Pilate in comparison, it is apparent that Miranda Day has atypical characteristics as is a wellrounded character.

So far, I have demonstrated how Kelley and Naylor use a male and female ancestor in their work. The next section, however, looks at the ancestral artifact. What are the advantages or limitations in using an ancestral artifact over the living male or female ancestor? Does the use of an ancestral artifact limit or expand is ability to inspire connections between the past and the present or the ability to provide an instructive and benevolent presence?

Ancestral Artifacts

I posit that contemporary fiction sometimes negotiates the past in literature through the inclusion of an ancestral artifact instead. As an extension of the ancestor, the ancestral artifact functions as both a reminder of and a medium of access into the past. Similar to the male and female ancestor, the ancestral artifact permits the resurrection and revitalization of significant cultural events that permit characters to recall

memories of past dealing with African American experiences. August Wilson uses this strategy in *The Piano Lesson*. The piano is an ancestral artifact that permits Bernice to call on her ancestors to help Boy Willie fight the ghost of Sutter. Bernice's and Boy Willie's recognition and acceptance of the past allow a sense of closure on the immediate fate of the piano. You should use film or book of *The Piano Lesson* to discuss the function of the ancestral artifact as well as the way in which Wilson personifies the object.

Down in The Delta, written by Myron Goble and directed by Maya Angelou, is another film that uses a personified ancestral artifact, a candelabrum, called "Nathan." The candelabrum functions as a way for the family elder to recall lost and unknown memories from the family's history. For Loretta, the main character in the film, discovering her family roots is extremely important. Prior to coming back to the Delta, Loretta had little direction or future ambition. As the home of the ancestral artifact, the pastoral Delta is an idealistic place for Loretta's rebirth. In this space, knowledge about her family's past through Nathan's story provides her with the incentive to create a better future for herself and her children (Goble, Angelou).

Morrison often uses a female ancestor as a repository of cultural and historical memory. In an instance of what I refer to as the subject-object switch, Morrison uses an ancestral artifact, the Oven, as the ancestral presence in *Paradise*. The prioritizing of the object over the subject critiques the condition and the attractiveness of valuing objects that hold significance from the past instead of above human interactions. In response, Morrison concludes *Paradise* by honoring the living ancestor as subject instead.

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⁷ Interestingly, in an interview, August Wilson remarks that the original ending of *Piano Lesson* left the fate of the piano in question.

Lloyd Richards and Wilson re-worked the ending so the characters and the audience would have a sense of closure. See *August Wilson:*A Casebook. pgs. 229 and 252 for interviews with Richards and Wilson on the evolution of *The Piano Lesson*.

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. The elder, 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 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 the people of Ruby'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 and 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 artifacts usefulness by focusing instead on the living ancestor.

Inversion: The Living Ancestor

Lone is both mentor and guide to others and is an agent of healing—both spiritually and physically and 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. Lone's intervenes with the slaughter of the women in the Convent and she only appears as a major force at the end of the novel. As a class, you can discuss if Lone is more instructive to the reader than the Oven, and if so, then in what manner? How does Lone's sudden presence affect their reading of *Paradise*? What, if anything, is Morrison asserting about community, human interactions, memory and history through Lone's presence?

Rallying help for the Convent women, Lone's existence, in many ways permits the narrator to convey Ruby as a dysfunctional paradise where the women in 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 according to their relationship to the originators: "The twins believed it was when he discovered how narrow the path of righteousness could be that their grandfather chose the words for the Oven's lip" (Morrison Paradise 14). Her righteousness extends to the treatment of women, and this point of view is reinforced by Lone's stepmother who warns her that their vocation as mid-wives causes anxiety for men. 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 is the "interference, the one giving orders, on whose secret skill so

much depended, and the dependency irritated the men" (Morrison *Paradise* 272).

As a point of discussion, you should inform students that Morrison's original title for *Paradise* was *War*; her publishers encouraged a title change since the title may have been seen as a comment political comment on the Persian Gulf War. How or why might *War* be a more appropriate than *Paradise*? What type of wars are occurring in *Paradise*, and more importantly, how does the idea of righteousness and authority (as exemplified by Deek and Steward) compare or contrast to America's war policies?

Similar to Mama Day, Lone possesses special powers and represents a different ideology about life and death than most characters with a distinct Westernized philosophical viewpoint. In African American literature, the interface between the real world and the afterlife or otherworld commonly occurs in West African religion and also occurs in the Christian Bible. In addition to her heightened sense of awareness of reality, as the former mid-wife, Lone was the interface 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 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 resistance to acknowledging supernatural events will ultimately decide on their final interpretation. The students own cultural background may also influence their interpretation.

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. This paper explores the presence of the ancestor in three texts by African American writers and provides an overview of the representations of the ancestor figure. I focused on three—the male ancestor, the female ancestor, and the ancestral artifact In each case, the ancestor figures prominently in keeping individual mind and collective memory alive by intervening in human affairs and changing the course of the lives of main characters. The ancestor also establishes vital counter-historical perspectives from the dominant society.8 As I emphasize throughout this paper, history and memory of past events that affect the lives of African Americans comprise both individual and communal documentation for the instructive role of the ancestor. The information that I provide here may be viewed as lesson plans for an entire semester of African American literature or adapted to teach a section of an American literature survey course in American literature.

Essay Questions:

Many of the texts we have read this semester dealt with a cultural past that is either greatly discarded or greatly desired. It is the ancestor / elder that often embodies this cultural past. Choose one text in which the

ancestor was present and discuss their relationship with the main character/s. What is the function of the ancestor figure? What conflicts between the ancestor and the main character? Is their presence benevolent or instructive? Ambivalent or destructive? Provide specific examples from the texts to support your answer.

Separating time and space is not the best approach to discussions of postmodern literature, especially in the case of Naylor's *Mama Day*. Time and spatial conceptions frequently amalgamate with Naylor using the ancestor figure as a conduit and a way of expressing indivisible notions of time and space. Identify areas in the text where time becomes complex and the role of the ancestor is decisive.

Which of the three ancestors plays a more decisive role, the walking man, Connie, or Lone; which ancestral character has the most textual import? Identify instances of supernatural events where the reader is required to suspend belief. In what way will the reader read <u>Paradise</u>? Morrison sets up various interpretations, so write an essay explaining the various ways one can read *Paradise* and commit to your position.

Cultural Inventory

Purpose

This assignment asks you to think about yourself as a member of a particular culture or community by exploring such areas as rituals, practices, history and/or artifacts related to your family. It will be used as pre-writing for your first short paper, an autoethnography.

Think about yourself as a member of multiple cultures and/or communities by location and analyzing the significance of an artifact from your cultures(s). You are also asked to practice "thick description," a key

element of autoethnography, in this exercise. Consider using this invention activity for your first short paper.

First, identify the cultures in which you claim membership. Use the categories below as a guide or create your own.

Groups into which you were born: Groups of which you

choose to be a part:

Ethnic Athletic

Regional Social

Religious Religious
Political Political

Family type Recreational

Socioeconomics Education
Gender Occupation

Racial Marital

Status/Parenthood

Generational

<u>Step 2:</u> Choose an artifact from one of the groups or subcultures to which you claim citizenship.

Describe the artifact in objective detail, being sure to explore as many qualities of the artifact as possible.

<u>Step 3:</u> Next, explore the emotions and experience you associate with the artifact. What story about your culture does it tell?

<u>Step 4:</u> What family member holds this artifact and passes on its cultural significance? What is your relationship with this person?

Autoethnography Assignment

Purpose

Expanding on your cultural inventory, this assignment asks you to reflect

on your cultural group by composing an autoethnography.

Instructions

Using your free writing, homework, and the cultural inventory assignment

as starting places, construct an autoethnography that explores an event or

memory concerning your place within your racial or ethnic culture. You

may want to reflect on your childhood experiences—your family, your likes

and dislikes or particular events, rituals, traditions or role models that

shape your identity. You should especially focus on the elder in your

family and your relationship with that person.

Alternative 1: Think about a culture you participate in and identify with.

Your goal will be describe that culture to outsiders by focusing on a few

elements of it in detail. Use "thick description" to convey these elements

and reflect on the cultural values they represent and the role the elder

plays.

Alternative 2: Complete "Alternative 1" but instead of describing the

elements, conduct an interview with an elder member within your cultural

group. Place the elder's point of view and perspective of your cultural

group in dialogue, or perhaps in tension, with your own.

Alternative 3: Complete "Alternative 1" but instead of describing the

elements, find a document about this culture and reflect on how it

represents the culture or illustrates a unique aspect of the culture.

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Length

3-5 pages

Due Date

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