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RELIGIOUS SYMBOLISM IN AUGUST WILSON'S *THE PIANO LESSON*

by

PEDRO E. ALVARADO

Under the Direction of Brett J. Esaki, PhD.

ABSTRACT

In many of his plays, August Wilson uses religious influences from Africa and from Western Christianity to depict the dichotomy between Black people in America and White people in America. In *The Piano Lesson* Wilson explores these themes in greater detail and, through an elaborate carving on a piano, shows how the combining of traditional African religions with a westernized version of Christianity can create a uniquely African American experience and expression of religion and spirituality. This thesis discusses the religious integration found in *The Piano Lesson* and argues that the Charles family ancestors are active agents with decision-making authority regarding the piano, their ancestral burial grounds.

INDEX WORDS: Religious symbolism, African art, Ancestral lands, African burial grounds, African altars, The Great Migration, Theater, African American Theater, August Wilson, The Piano Lesson

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PEDRO E. ALVARADO

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my wife, Anastasia Alvarado, for giving me the opportunity to go back to school and “redeem the time.” I love you with an unending love!

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1 INTRODUCTION

August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* tells the story of siblings Boy Willie and Berniece Charles, who live during the Jim Crow era, clashing over an extremely valuable heirloom in the form of a piano. The two siblings are ideologically separated from one another with regards to how they each view the piano. They are also geographically separated from one another as Boy Willie lives in Mississippi and Berniece lives in Pittsburgh, PA. Their conflict is over whether Berniece should allow Boy Willie to sell the family piano and use the money to buy the Mississippi plantation their family once worked as slaves or to keep the beloved heirloom in the family. Their ideological differences, geographic locations, and the time-period during which they live influence the position that each sibling holds regarding their piano and fuels each of them as they argue over who will decide what to do with the piano. While Boy Willie argues that he should be able to sell the piano for practical purposes and Berniece argues that the piano should remain in her custody for sentimental reasons, I will argue that the decision over what to do with the piano belongs to neither Boy Willie nor Berniece individually. Rather, I will argue that their family piano is the final resting place and abode for the Charles family ancestors and that the ultimate authority regarding the disposition of the piano is a communal authority that is shared between Berniece, Boy Willie, and the Charles family ancestors.

The scholarly debate over who has the right to determine what happens to the piano usually revolves around Berniece and Boy Willie. August Wilson scholar Harry Elam, Jr. says, "The argument between brother and sister plays out as a dialectical debate for which the audience must construct a synthesis. Wilson creates convincing and rational arguments on both sides of the divide" (*The Dialectics of August Wilson's "The Piano Lesson"*, 2000, p. 362). Elam suggests that Wilson provides enough evidence to give both Boy Willie and Berniece a

legitimate right to decide what becomes of the piano, but Wilson leaves it up to the audience, or in the case of this textual analysis, the reader, to fuse these diametrically opposed views of the piano into a single, reasonable, and common sense decision regarding the piano that best serves the Charles family and not an individual member thereof. Further to the two-sided argument, African American Literary scholar Devon Boan also places the debate strictly between Berniece and Boy Willie. He says:

Boy Willie, the great-grandson of the slave whose art graces the piano, has come north to Pittsburgh to claim his half of the piano, which is currently in the possession of his sister, Berniece. He is a ruffian, and feels that the proceeds from the sale of the piano offer him his best chance to escape the economic and social oppression that has burdened the men in his family since slavery. His dream of escape is blunted, however, by Berniece's unwillingness to sell what is, for her, a sacred icon of the family's sacrificial legacy. Throughout the play, then, the piano becomes a touchstone by which antithetical attitudes about the past may be evaluated (Boan, p. 263).

Boan also suggests that there can be a reconciliation of ideas between Boy Willie and Berniece if the past of the Charles family and the piano are appraised appropriately. Additionally, African Literature scholar Amadou Bissiri also limits the debate to being only between the Charles siblings. Bissiri says of August Wilson, "He, for instance, dramatizes, through the conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie over the piano, the past as encapsulating or evoking the present and the future" (Bissiri, p. 101). Bissiri suggests that a potential outcome of the conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie can result in either the Charles family history being relegated to a meager historical footnote or their family history will be brought afresh to the collective consciousness of the Charles family members. Each of these scholars' arguments is entirely valid when the text is approached in a binary manner and consideration over who the rightful decision maker is only includes Boy Willie and Berniece. Nevertheless, this comparative religious studies analysis of the text increases the number of contenders for the piano to include silent characters

who are present in the text but who are only seen as an artist's rendering: the Charles family ancestors.

African Religion and Philosophy scholar Barry Hallen demonstrates that in many African cultures, a carving, or any work of art for that matter, is a religious or spiritual artifact. It is extremely rare in African cultures for a work of art to be created simply for the sake of creating art. Typically, there is always some underlying religious or spiritual purpose to the work's creation. It is widely believed that African art is created for the purposes of and with the ability to do many things in the spiritual realm. African art is used "to serve instrumental ends – to worship, to perpetuate the memory of an ancestor, to serve as one component of a masquerade, to protect the user or the community from harm, to promote fertility, as a sign of authority and governance, and so on" (Hallen, p. 237). Within the text of the play it is explicitly stated that the carving on the piano was originally commissioned by Mr. Nolan to "perpetuate the memory" of the slaves that he traded as the price of purchase for the piano in order to bring comfort to Miss Ophelia, who missed her slaves to the point of physical illness. What Mr. Sutter did not anticipate, from this view of African art, is that in commissioning the carving, the enslaved African artist doing the carving endowed the piano with the spiritual power of African art. In the case of *The Piano Lesson*, when Berniece and Boy Willie's great-grandfather, Papa Boy Willie, carved the various images of his family along with scenes from their lives, he, in effect, created a religious sculpture. It is the understanding of the piano as a work of African art and a spiritual artifact that informs the decision making process as it relates to the fate of the piano. Therefore, throughout this textual analysis, emphasis will be given to how African art, the use of altars, the integration of African and American religions, as well as how the integration of African and

American cultures work together to frame and support the argument that the Charles family ancestors are the decision makers with regards to where their piano should reside.

2 PLOT SUMMARY

Before going any further, the following synopsis from the published edition of the play and other information is being provided to give some much-needed background to those who are unfamiliar with the text.

In his second Pulitzer Prize winner, August Wilson fashions a haunting and dramatic work. At the heart of the play stands the ornately carved upright piano that has been gathering dust in the parlor of Berniece Charles's Pittsburgh home. When Boy Willie, her exuberant brother, bursts into her life with his dream of buying the same Mississippi land that their family had worked as slaves, he plans to sell their antique piano for the cash he needs to stake his future. Berniece refuses to sell, though, clinging to the piano as a reminder of the history that is their family legacy. (Wilson)

The reason this conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie exists is because they have joint ownership of the piano, but the text never provides any explicit evidence regarding who has the right, or the authority to decide what happens with the piano. Essentially, the conflict is presented as Boy Willie wants to sell the piano and Berniece refuses to let him. What makes Berniece and Boy Willie's situation such a quandary is that the two siblings have diametrically opposed perspectives over the piano and they each only consider what they want without any regards to what anyone else, past or present, may want.

To Boy Willie, the piano is nothing more than a highly valuable piece of furniture with which he hopes to secure his own financial future. In Act I, Scene 2, Boy Willie argues, "Now I want to get Sutter's land with that piano. I get Sutter's land and I can go down and cash in the crop and get my seed. As long as I got the land and the seed then I'm alright" (Wilson). Boy Willie views land ownership as a way of creating wealth by generating recurring revenue whereas the piano, at least in its current state, does not benefit anyone, financially or otherwise. Boy Willie even goes so far as to indicate that if Berniece was using the piano to earn some additional money, he would relinquish any claim to it. He says, "...if you say to me, Boy Willie,

I'm using that piano. I give out lessons on it and that help me make my rent or whatever. Then that be something else" (Wilson). But Berniece is not using the piano. As far as Boy Willie is concerned, she is just holding onto it for sentimental value and that gives him the authority to sell it. The facts that Berniece is not using the piano to earn any income and that it just sits in the house collecting dust, gives Boy Willie the impression that he should be able to do with the piano what he pleases, which in this case is to sell it.

For Berniece, the piano is a whole lot more than a down payment for a piece of real estate. It is a connection to her deceased parents. In Act 1, Scene 2, Wilson wrote nearly four pages of Doaker and Wining Boy (the uncles of Boy Willie and Berniece) sharing with Lymon (Boy Willie's friend) a history of the family's piano. Through their synopsis of the Charles family history, Wilson gives Lymon as well as the play's readers and audiences a backstory that brings understanding to the debate between the Charles siblings while simultaneously creating sympathy for Berniece's plight, which is to keep the family piano despite her brother's best efforts to sell it. The text states that Berniece and Boy Willie's great-grandparents and their grandfather were enslaved. Robert Sutter, the man who owned them, traded their great-grandmother and their grandfather to a white man in Georgia, Mr. Nolan, so that Mr. Sutter could give the piano as an anniversary gift to his wife, Miss Ophelia. Mr. Sutter did not trade their great-grandfather, however. Miss Ophelia loved the piano, but she loved having the two traded slaves around even more and became gravely ill when Mr. Nolan would not trade them back. To cure her illness, Berniece and Boy Willie's great-grandfather was called to the Sutter house to carve their pictures into the piano. Their great-grandfather not only carved the images of his wife and son into the piano, but he also carved various other pictures including scenes from their life together and his own parents. Mr. Sutter was furious, but Miss Ophelia loved it and

recovered her health. The carvings of the slaves that were traded for the piano saved Miss Ophelia's life.

In addition to what is carved in the piano and how the carvings got there, Berniece's sentimental feelings for the piano were increased by her father's death. She and Boy Willie's father, who was named Boy Charles, were the first in their family to be born free. As a free man, he was perpetually preoccupied with the piano. According to Doaker, he, Boy Charles, and Wining Boy's grandfather carved their family's history onto the piano, "He got all kinds of things what happened with our family" (Wilson). Their grandfather carved at least three generations worth of images of people and events onto that piano and it became an obsession for Boy Charles. One day Boy Charles convinced Doaker and Wining Boy to help him steal the piano from the Sutter family, which they did successfully. Boy Charles stayed around the Sutter plantation to make it appear that everything was normal, but things went awry when Sutter got home and discovered the piano was gone. In my estimation, Sutter instinctively knew that Boy Charles had something to do with it and went to Boy Charles' house and burned it down. Boy Charles tried to escape on a train to the next county, where his brothers had taken the piano, but was caught on the train and was burned in a box car along with four "hobos." Dependent upon one's point of view, Boy Charles' stealing of the piano can be seen as either an act of heroism or it can be seen as a fool's errand that cost him his life. It is likely that Berniece viewed her father's stealing of the piano as a little bit of both. Nevertheless, with his death, Boy Charles's joined the ancestors who were carved into the piano. Boy Charles sacrificing his life to free his family's history is a part of the reason that Berniece has such an affinity toward the piano, but it is not the final reason.

With the same level of commitment that Boy Charles exhibited by sacrificing his own life to acquire the piano, Berniece and Boy Willie's mother cared for the piano until she too joined the ancestors who were carved into the piano. While talking about her and Boy Willie's saint-like mother, Berniece says, "Every day that God breathed life into her body she rubbed and cleaned and polished and prayed over it" (Wilson). Additionally, Berniece believes that the way a person treats the piano is an indicator of the quality of their character. Just a little further on in the same speech, she rails at Boy Willie, "You always talking about your daddy but you ain't stopped to look at what his foolishness cost your mama. Seventeen years' worth of cold nights and an empty bed" (Wilson). There is a tremendous dichotomy between the way Berniece perceives the moral character of her mother and that of her brother and that perception is directly proportional to the way they each treat the piano.

This is, essentially, the "dialectical debate" to which Harry Elam, Jr. refers. But Berniece and Boy Willie's divergent opinions are informed by much more than the explicitly stated reasons in the text. *The Piano Lesson* takes place in 1934 when the socio-political and economic circumstances of the United States was in tremendous turmoil. The entire country was in the midst of greatest national economic crisis of the 20th century, the Great Depression (Weisenfeld). This meant that not only black folks were looking for work, but white folks were too. And when white folks, especially during the Jim Crow era, were desperate for jobs, the availability of jobs for black folks was at an extreme low. According to Eyclopedia.com, the unemployment rate for blacks in 1934 was 50%. This is compared to 24.9% of the rest of the country (Black Americans 1929-1941). This bleak economic outlook with its limited employment opportunities can be viewed as further motivation for Boy Willie's desire to sell the piano.

At the same time the entire country was dealing with the Great Depression, Black people were also in the midst of the Great Migration from the South to the North. In two separate interviews, Wilson discussed his thoughts on the Great Migration. In a 1989 interview, Wilson said, “We came to the North, and we’re still victims of discrimination and oppression in the North. The real reason that the people left was a search for jobs, because the agriculture, cotton agriculture, could no longer support us. But the move to the cities has not been a good move. Today, we still don’t have jobs. The last time blacks in America were working was during the Second World War, when there was a need for labor, and it didn’t matter what color you were” (Moyers). From this bit of interview, one may assume that Wilson understood at least two things about the Great Migration. The first being that even in the North, black folks were still oppressed and discriminated against. The second is that the reason black people left the South was to find work and, ostensibly, a better life with better opportunities in the North. It appears that Wilson believed that black folks left the South, where agricultural jobs were waning, for the purpose of finding a job in the North. Yet, despite the potential for greater success in finding a job, Wilson felt it would have been better for Black folks to stay in the South as the culture that African Americans created for themselves over the course of slavery and reconstruction was established in the South and inextricably bound to the South. Wilson went on to say in a New York Times interview, “We were land-based agrarian people from Africa. We were uprooted from Africa, and we spent over 200 years developing our culture as black Americans. And then we left the South. We uprooted ourselves and attempted to transplant this culture to the pavements of the industrialized North. And it was a transplant that did not take. I think if we had stayed in the South, we would have been a stronger people. And because the connection between the South of the 20’s, 30’s and 40’s has been broken, it’s very difficult to understand who we are” (Rothstein,

p. 2). With this statement, Wilson suggests that the collective strength of contemporary black people would be greater today if they had remained physically connected to the culture they created for themselves in the South which was largely rooted in farming and agriculture.

Wilson's thoughts on the Great Migration are extremely helpful in understanding why he wrote *Boy Willie* with such a tremendous desire to stay in the South regardless of what his family has been through. *Boy Willie* symbolizes those things which are immediately tangible. He appears to be only interested in what he can comprehend through his senses and appears to have little concern for things that transcend the here and now. His chief concern throughout the text is selling the very tangible piano to obtain ownership of the very tangible land where the Charles family was once enslaved to make a very tangible living by farming.

Berniece, on the other hand, is responsible for the care and protection of the piano. She has rejected the status quo of life in the South and the pain that it has visited on their family. Berniece perceives that it is more important to safeguard the family history that has been immortalized in the carvings on the piano because they are the embodiment of the family's intangible, sacred heritage. Wilson scholar Sandra Shannon puts it this way, "The pictorial history carved into its surface by the great grandfather of the currently embattled siblings, Berniece and Boy Willie, appreciates its monetary and sentimental values. Thus, it becomes just as endearing to Berniece's memory of her family's past as it is valuable to her brother's future security" (Shannon, *The Good Christian's Come and Gone: The Shifting Role of Christianity in August Wilson Plays*, p. 139). The difference between the value that Boy Willie places on the piano and the value that Berniece places on the piano is based on how they each perceive the piano. Boy Willie views the piano as a means to an end, but Berniece perceives the piano as a connection to the past. Boy Willie wants to offer up the piano as a sacrifice on the altar of

commerce to buy land, but Berniece believes that human sacrifices have already been made to acquire the piano and to keep it. To Boy Willie, the piano is just a piano, albeit a valuable piano, but just a piano. To Berniece, the price of her father's life and the depth of her mother's devotion makes the value of the piano worth more than any price that could be paid for it. Boy Willie finds the piano valuable because of the money he can make from its sale, while Berniece's finds its value in the preservation of her family's sacred heritage which is found in the carvings that transformed the piano into African art and a religious/spiritual sculpture.

3 THE PIANO AS AN ALTAR

One of the ways in which the Charles family piano functions as a religious artifact is as an altar. When Africans were kidnapped and brought to the Americas, the enslaved were forbidden from practicing their own native religions. As a result, they participated in their traditional folk religions secretly while publicly performing the Euro-American version of Christianity that was forced upon them by their oppressors. A part of their traditional folk religions, as it is with Christianity, is the use of altars. Dependent upon the region of the African continent from which the enslaved descended and the religious tradition of that region, the use of altars may vary, but their use of altars was, and still is, common. For example, amongst Africans from the western part of the continent, where Yoruba is the dominant religious tradition, “the altar is referred to as ‘face of the gods,’ a place for appeasement, where votive pottery is placed and cool liquids are poured from vessels” (Thompson, p. 50). For the Yoruba, these altars are the place where their gods, or Orisha, are invoked to receive prayers, supplication, sacrifices, etc. They are typically adorned with colors, fabrics, and other objects that represent the god or gods they are there to worship and are the visual representation of their divinities. Religion scholar Albert J. Raboteau says, “Prominent among the African *orisha* and *vodun* of *candomblé* are... Shango, god of thunder, whose emblem in Bahia, as in Africa, is the double-edged ax, and whose ‘thunderstones’ are kept on the altars of Nago-Gege cult houses” (Raboteau, p. 19). These altars are also the place where the living go to invoke the spirits of their ancestors for guidance and protection. For the Charles family, their piano was the place to which Berniece retreated for protection and to call upon the ancestors for help in exorcising Sutter’s ghost.

For enslaved Africans who descended from Central Africa, where Kongo is the dominant religious tradition, the altar is considered “to be a ‘turning point,’ the crossroads, the threshold to

another world.” (Thompson, p. 50). In this reading, it is at this crossroad and threshold that the Charles’s family piano grants residence and passageway between the spirit world and the natural world. Sutter’s ghost enters the Charles family’s tangible, physical realm in an intangible, spirit form by way of their piano. When Boy Willie shows up in Berniece’s home with the news of John Sutter’s death, the son of the man who is believed to be responsible for killing their father, Berniece sees John Sutter’s ghost.

Sutter’s death was surrounded by mysterious circumstances that Boy Willie attributes to the Ghosts of the Yellow Dog, the hobos and their father who were killed after Boy Charles, Doaker, and Wining Boy stole the piano from Robert Sutter. The text implies that Berniece believes Boy Willie might have killed John Sutter and now John Sutter’s ghost is looking for revenge. The text does not provide any evidence to corroborate Boy Willie having anything to do with Sutter’s death, only Berniece’s suspicion. The text does, however, intimate that Sutter’s ghost found his way to Berniece’s home through the piano. When Sutter’s ghost appears, Berniece argues that he came looking for Boy Willie, but regardless of why Sutter’s ghost is in Berniece’s home, it is clear he was able to enter the Charles’ family home using the piano as a conduit.

Not only is the piano an altar by the standards of the Yoruba and Kongo religious traditions, it is also an altar by Christian standards as depicted in the Bible (Hayford). First, biblical altars were used to make sacrifices, much like those found in African religious traditions. According to the Old Testament in the New King James Version of the Bible, in ancient Hebrew traditions there are varying types of sacrifices that are required at specific times of the year. Each of these sacrifices was made on an altar. There was an annual ritual that took place on the Day of Atonement whereby the Jewish people brought animal sacrifices to be made by the High Priest for the forgiveness of their sins (*New Spirit Filled Life Bible*, New King James Version,

Leviticus 16.1-34). The sacrificing of these animals was done on one altar while the blood from the animals, which atoned for the peoples' sin, was sprinkled onto another altar. The Charles family piano also had a blood sacrifice associated with it. The blood sacrifice for the Charles family piano was also two-fold. But instead of sprinkling the blood of one animal onto two different altars the blood that was spilled from the Charles family came from two different people and was applied only to one altar. Berniece states in the text of the play, "For seventeen years she rubbed on it till her hands bled. Then she rubbed the blood in... mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it" (Wilson). In the first part of this statement, Berniece is referring to how Mama Ola took care of the piano. Mama Ola polished the piano so vigorously that her hands began to bleed. Mama Ola, however, did not clean her blood off the piano, instead she rubbed it into the piano and used it to polish the piano. Additionally, Berniece refers to Mama Ola mixing her blood with "the rest of the blood on it." This is clearly a reference to her father's death as a result of stealing the piano from the Sutter family. The Charles' family piano, by the blood that was spilled in its' acquisition and maintenance, can certainly be considered an altar of sacrifice.

Sacrifices were not the only use for altars in the Bible. Altars were also used to memorialize certain events that took place in the lives of characters (Hayford). Each of these altars was built specifically to remember what the Lord had done in the lives of these Biblical characters and to teach subsequent generations about their sacred history and heritage (Hayford). In this reading, the Charles' family piano, also serves as a memorial altar. Papa Boy Willie, who carved the images into the piano, made sure to fulfill Mr. Nolan's request of carving the images of Mama Berniece and Boy Walter onto the piano, but he went a step beyond that mandate and added scenes from their life together as well as the images of his own parents to make sure that whoever looked at the piano remembered from whence the Charles family came. The Charles'

family piano, like the memorial altars of the Old Testament, was not just for the benefit of the person who created it, but for the benefit of subsequent generations to teach them their history and remind them of their sacred heritage. It is for this reason, remembering the Charles family history and sacred heritage, that Berniece is so adamant about keeping the piano in the family. Conversely, Boy Willie, who has not spent nearly as much time in the presence of the piano as Berniece, has forgotten about or never fully understood their family's history and sacred heritage. His lack of understanding is another reason that he does not recognize the piano as being more than just a piano and contributes to his desire to sell it to buy the land the Charles family once worked as slaves.

4 AFRICAN AND AMERICAN RELIGIOUS INTEGRATION

The altar that was created as a result of carving an African sculpture into the piano is not the only type of African and American amalgamation. There is also a greater religious integration as well as a cultural integration of Africanisms and Americanisms. With regards to religious integration, enslaved Africans, over time, began to integrate many of the tenets and practices of the Christianity they were publicly practicing with their own indigenous religions that they brought with them from Africa and practiced in secret. Part of the reason this began to happen is that the enslaved Africans, who were not constrained by strict dogma and were open to different and complementary belief systems, found that much of Christianity is conducive to the practices with which they were already accustomed. Maureen Warner-Lewis posits that “a large number maintained traditional beliefs and practices alongside Christianity, using one spiritual resource to supplement and complement the other” (Warner-Lewis). St. Augustine of Hippo, an early Christian theologian who is held in high esteem in Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and the Anglican Community, and is African, by way of Algeria, took the thought of Christianity and indigenous African religions being complementary a step further. He stated of Christianity in relation to African religions, “What is now called Christian religion, has existed among the ancients, and was not absent from the beginning of the human race, until Christ came in flesh: from which time the true religion, which existed already, began to be called Christian” (Lugira, p. 45). St. Augustine believed that Christ was the fulfillment of the ancient African religions and that Christianity is the same religion of old, only now fulfilled in Christ. Thus, in addition to other complementary components of both Christianity and indigenous African religious traditions, the use of altars is one of the practices that was congruous.

Additionally, a traditional African religious concept that was greatly influenced by the institution of slavery is the belief regarding ancestral land. Laurenti Magesa suggests that, “Ancestral land, which means the space or location where the ancestors lie in death, is *home*. It represents the fulfillment of time, of human life, of history.” (Magesa, p. 58). This statement would seem to suggest that ancestral land must be a parcel of terra firma and would strengthen the argument that Boy Willie should be able to sell the piano and buy the Sutter plantation. But the text does not indicate where the Charles family ancestors are physically buried, which makes it impossible to know which plot of land could or should be considered the Charles family ancestral burial grounds. Furthermore, the text does tell us that Boy Willie and Berniece’s great-grandparents were separated from each other, their grandfather going with their great-grandmother, but does not provide any information with regards to whether they were reunited after emancipation or if their final resting places were even together. These unanswered questions make it nearly impossible to state unequivocally where the Charles family ancestral land is or that the Sutter plantation is the ancestral land of the Charles family. Furthermore, many enslaved Africans in the United States, as well as their descendants believed “that after death they shall return to their own country, and rejoin their former companions and friends, in some happy region...” (Ball). This would seem to suggest that for Africans enslaved in the Americas where they are physically buried is of no consequence because they are going to be returned to the place from whence they came and they are going to be reunited with loved ones and friends. Nevertheless, I am arguing that Magesa’s explanation of ancestral land is still applicable to the Charles family. While the text does not provide any explicit information regarding the whereabouts of the physical remains of the Charles ancestors, it does tell us that they are enshrined in the beloved and contested over piano. To a certain extent, it appears that even Boy

Charles, Berniece and Boy Willie's father, understood this. Doaker, speaking of Boy Charles preoccupation with the piano, states, "Say it was the story of our whole family and as long as Sutter had it, he had us" (Wilson). It seems that Boy Charles understood that the piano, because of the carvings, was the abode for their ancestors and that as long as the Sutter's owned the piano they continued to own the Charles's and control their family history. By virtue of their images being carved into the piano, the piano is the place "where the ancestors lie in death" thereby making the piano itself the ancestral burial grounds or the "happy region" to which the Charles family members return after death.

Further to the point of the integration of Africanisms and Americanisms in religion, the way that the length of time between the creation of the Charles family piano to the present generation of Charles's may have caused Boy Willie to be unable to discern the family history and sacred heritage found in the Charles family piano, the children of kidnapped Africans began to lose sight of the intentional blending of their traditional African religions with American Christianity. "African liturgical seasons, prescribed rituals, traditional myths, and languages of worship were attenuated, replaced, and altered or lost. Still, much remained..." (Raboteau, p. 16). This suggests that as the peculiar institution continued, each subsequent generation of enslaved Africans practiced what they thought was pure Christianity, when they were actually practicing a blend of American Christianity and the African religious traditions of their ancestors unaware. Many of the enslaved who were born in the United States and not imported from Africa could not remember which of the many religious traditions that were passed down to them were from Africa (Raboteau). As a result of this forgetting, from the time-period after emancipation through the Great Migration and beyond, a tremendous divide emerged in the religious lives of African Americans. This "forgetting" induced division was manifested in three ways. The first

manifestation is pastoral leadership. “Some preachers hailed the exodus as providential-as another sign of salvation history-and viewed it as the Second Emancipation, others expressed caution, urging the faithful to stay in place and work with progressive southern whites to improve social conditions” (Sernett, p. 359). This suggests that the “preachers” mentioned in the first half of the statement were the pastors of churches in the North who used the idea of the Great Migration as a second exodus to encourage blacks in the South to migrate to the North for the purpose of recruiting them to join their churches. Meanwhile, the “others” referred to in the second half of the statement are the pastors of churches in the South who began to see their already small congregations dwindle even further in size as their parishioners moved to the North. It was critical to the survival of churches in the South for the people to stay in the South. After all, if there are no people, there is no church. So southern pastors did everything they could to encourage their congregants to stay put. In the North, however, pastors welcomed migrants from the South with open arms, although the members of their churches did not always. Some northern pastors went so far as to advertise their churches in black newspapers in the South encouraging southern blacks to move to the North for better opportunities and, since you’re moving to the North, extended an invitation to join their churches (Weisenfeld).

The second manifestation of the divide was based on cultural differences between blacks born and raised in the South and blacks born and raised in the North. “These new migrants are accustomed to a rural religion. They find in cities not a perfect church, but one improved very much. They cannot easily adapt themselves to their new religious environment” (Sernett, p. 373). One of the cultural differences that was difficult for migrants to the North to adapt to, was the size of the churches in the North. While they were still in the South, they attended churches that were very small and whose congregations were made up of only a few extended families. This

type of church enabled the pastor to know every parishioner and to be an active participant in their lives, not just as a spiritual leader, but also as a cherished family member (Weisenfeld). Once they moved to the North, however, this dynamic changed significantly. During the Great Migration, especially in major cities like Chicago, New York, Philadelphia, and Detroit, mega-churches existed in the African American community and some of these churches had thousands of members (Weisenfeld). The sheer size of these church congregations caused many of the migrants to the North a great sense of consternation because they were used to being in significant and often close relationships with their pastor. The lack of relationship with the pastor was extremely difficult for people from the South to adjust to (Weisenfeld).

The final manifestation of the religious divide in the African American community had to do with the self-perception of blacks who were born and raised in the North. Generally speaking, these were the ones who wanted to get rid of anything that was even remotely African about their religion in an attempt to fully assimilate into what they perceived to be “American” (Weisenfeld). They turned to Christian denominations, like the Methodists, whose focus, at the time, was on having “high” church filled with a prescribed liturgy of hymns and homilies and devoid of any spontaneity and emotionalism. These church “members were deeply invested in their elite status and sought to distinguish themselves from their working-class neighbors” (Weisenfeld, p. 255). Feeling unwanted by the socially elite, migrants from the South preferred to stick with “low” church, like the Pentecostals, who had free emotional expression of worship without the trappings of ceremony, sacraments, and vested clergy. These “low” church congregations were also much smaller and were far more familiar feeling than the mega-churches. They are also the churches that remained most closely aligned with the African American blend of Christianity and traditional African religions (Weisenfeld).

5 AFRICAN AND AMERICAN CULTURAL INTEGRATION

The integration of religious Africanisms and Americanisms were not the only integration that occurred. There was also a cultural integration. Through this reading of *The Piano Lesson*, the central object, the piano, is used to establish a cosmogony in which two distinctly different cultures integrate into one. History of Religions scholar Charles H. Long stated, “Americans of African descent have been forced to deal with several heritages – those of Africa, those of the New World in the form of the cultural and political situation of the United States, and the heritage of a distinctive culture created in this country from this amalgam” (Long, p. 7). In the piano, we see this three-fold heritage made manifest. First, the heritage of Africa is plainly found in the carving itself as it is the carving, created by an enslaved African, that transformed the piano from a mundane, ordinary object, into a spiritual artifact. In the same manner that the African heritage is found in the carving, the New World heritage, the second of the three-fold heritage, is found exclusively in the piano. The piano was invented in Italy in 1709 by Bartolomeo di Francesco Cristofari, who was already a renowned harpsichord maker (National Piano Foundation). The third of the three-fold heritage, “the heritage of a distinctive culture created in this country from this amalgam,” (Long, p. 7) is when the piano, the European invention, was adorned with the African carvings in the New World. Wilson scholar Sandra Shannon seems to agree with the assessment that the piano in the text is representative of the African and American cultural integration. She says, “Central to The Piano Lesson’s conflict, an old piano simultaneously functions as an emblem of both African folk tradition and American capitalism” (Shannon, *The Good Christian's Come and Gone: The Shifting Role of Christianity in August Wilson Plays*, p. 139). The carvings in the piano show how these two disparate cultures began to co-exist blending together to form a new whole.

The sale and purchase of the piano moved rapidly throughout the artistic community and aristocratic class of Western Europe and the piano eventually made its way to the United States in 1770. Moreover, because pianos were, at that time, all handmade, they were extremely expensive and only the wealthiest could afford them. Therefore, owning a piano was a mark of one's wealth and elevated one's social status. Additionally, in the United States, owning slaves during the 18th century was another indicator of wealth. In fact, the more slaves a person owned, the higher up on the social ladder they found themselves (Andrews and Fenton). So, to own both slaves and a piano made one highly enviable within the community, at least by the standards of the slave owning class of the day (Andrews and Fenton). It is implied in the text that the Sutter family was one such family. They aspired to climb as high as they could on the social ladder. Likewise, during that time-period, it was especially important for women of quality to know how to play the piano for the purposes of teaching their offspring, although women were never allowed to play publicly. For the Sutter family, this was a win-win situation. Mr. Sutter already owned multiple slaves and was well connected socially, being extremely close with the sheriff as well as other municipal and county leaders, and now, with the addition of owning a piano, he hoisted himself up a few more rungs on the social ladder. For Miss Ophelia, she was finally able to secure her social standing amongst the locally elite women by owning a piano and being able to play it. Being able to play the piano would likely have been even more important to Miss Ophelia because that skill was her own accomplishment, separate from anything her husband had done for her. Be that as it may, after the Emancipation Proclamation was issued and the Union won the Civil War, Mr. Sutter could no longer count on owning slaves to maintain his social status, so his ability to remain in the upper echelon of society relied almost exclusively on owning the piano. The theft of the piano, therefore, would have been socially devastating for

John Sutter, the son of Robert Sutter and Miss Ophelia because, adding insult to injury, the people who dared to steal the piano from John Sutter, the first generation of non-slave owning Sutter's, was the first generation of free-born Charles's, the family that the Sutter's used to own as property. This provides another potential reason why John Sutter killed Berniece and Boy Willie's father, along with the hobos on the train, to re-establish some form of the hierarchy that had been flipped on its head by the Emancipation Proclamation and the Confederacy losing the Civil War. And, it is the loss of her father over the stealing of the piano along with her mother's great devotion to the piano that makes Berniece so determined to keep it in the family.

While John Sutter's most likely motive for the murder of Boy Charles was his stealing the piano, the text does not state that he had been looking for the piano. It can be argued, however, that the extremely high value of the piano and the lowering of his social status makes it a good bet that John Sutter had been trying to find the piano since its liberation from his family. John Sutter knew that the piano had been stolen from his family by the Charles family, yet he was unable to recover it. It was at his death, however, when Sutter made the transition from this tangible, profane world into the intangible, sacred world that the Charles family ancestors enabled him to discover the whereabouts of the piano that was once in his family's custody. And, according to Kongo tradition, the threshold created by the altar of the Charles family piano, enabled him to enter their world and attempt to exact revenge.

6 ANCESTRAL COMMUNICATION

Because, through this reading, the piano can be seen to have been endowed with spiritual power through African art, transformed into an altar, and the piano can be viewed as the Charles family ancestral burial grounds, it can be argued that the Charles family ancestors demonstrate their own sense of agency through the piano. Raboteau says, “It is believed that, as custodians of custom and law, the ancestors have the power to intervene in present affairs...” (Raboteau, p. 12). Accordingly, from the time that the Charles family ancestors took up residence in the ancestral burial grounds of the piano they began deciding for themselves whether they would allow their ancestral burial ground to be moved or not as well as where they would allow it and themselves to be moved and by whom. Furthermore, from this perspective it can also be argued that Boy Charles and his brothers did not steal the piano from the Sutter family, rather they redeemed their ancestors from bondage who, while no longer on the living side of the family, had been freed by the same Emancipation Proclamation as their descendants.

With this understanding in mind, a second look at Doaker’s telling of Boy Charles’ obsession with the piano and his idea that “as long as Sutter had it, he had us” (Wilson) is in order. Doaker is mistaken with regards to Boy Charles’ comments about the piano. I believe that what Doaker took as an obsession was actually a calling. The ancestors residing in the piano or, ancestral burial grounds, called out to the first free-born member of their family to provide freedom for them also. “The ancestors can communicate with their descendants especially if certain rites for the dead have not been performed” (Grewal, p. 160). Following this line of thought, ancestral agency over the piano and communication with their descendants, Boy Charles was instructed by his ancestors to have Doaker and Wining Boy help him remove them from the Sutter home and take them to the safety of the other, unnamed, county. But redemption does not

come without sacrifice, and as a result Boy Charles lost his life and joined his ancestors in their ancestral burial grounds of the piano. Further to the ancestral agency argument, it was the ancestors who permitted themselves to be moved to Pittsburgh. It was the ancestors who prevented Boy Willie and Lymon from removing them from Berniece's home and taking them back to the South. And, it was the ancestors who allowed the spirit of John Sutter to enter the Charles' family home to do battle with the Berniece and Boy Willie over the freedom of the entire Charles family, living and dead. From this view, if Berniece were to allow Boy Willie to sell the piano and remove it from the Charles family home, the spiritual power of the African art would be broken because the piano, removed from the ownership of Africans and placed in the hands of the White man who was the intended buyer, would then exist only as "artistic works for Western(ized) eyes" (Hallen, p. 238) devoid of all spiritual efficacy.

From this view, unbeknownst to any of the Charles family members, their family's ancestral burial grounds and their ancestors had been with them all along. It took a reckoning of their African ancestry with their American identities to make the ancestors presence manifest. August Wilson used the piano as a source of conflict between Berniece and Boy Willie to bring about this reckoning. In a 1990 interview with the New York Times, August Wilson states, "And I thought the woman would be a character who was trying to acquire a sense of self-worth by denying her past. And I felt that she could not do that. She had to confront the past, in the person of her brother, who was going to sweep through the house like a tornado coming from the South, bringing the past with him" (Rothstein, p. 2). Wilson intentionally created Boy Willie's desire to sell the piano to be the motivating force to make Berniece deal with the issues of her past. In so doing, the Charles family piano, endowed with the power of African art, became an altar and the crossroads between the past and present, the living and the deceased. When Berniece and her

grief induced unwillingness to play the piano, came face to face with Boy Willie and his greed induced desire to sell the piano, the ancestors were roused to action. Where the ancestors had been silent for many years, they awoke and orchestrated the final showdown between Boy Willie and Berniece to become the expulsion of John Sutter's ghost and the final destruction of any claim of ownership that the Sutter family had over the Charles family. In the same way the ancestors chose Boy Charles to be the Charles family's first redeemer and Mama Ola to be their first priest, the ancestors anointed Boy Willie and Berniece to take up their parents' mantles and to provide safety and care for the family's ancestral burial grounds until such a time as they join the ranks of the ancestors in the piano.

7 CONCLUSION

From the moment Papa Boy Willie carved the images of the Charles family ancestors into the piano, the family's ancestors became the ultimate decision makers with regards to the fate of the family heirloom. His carvings upon the piano did three things: endowed the piano with the spiritual power of African art, transformed the piano into an altar upon which sacrifices were made, and blended together African and American religious and cultural traditions. Each of the three things accomplished by the carving in the piano work together to establish the piano as the ancestral burial grounds of the Charles family and demonstrate that the Charles family ancestors are the decision makers with regards to the fate of the piano.

With this understanding of *The Piano Lesson*, the theories I have explored could potentially impact a production of the play. There are some potential dramaturgical implications for directors and designers of the play. Along with the understanding of the piano as the Charles family ancestral burial grounds comes several considerations. Since this reading of the text treats the ancestors as active agents, the director will have to consider whether to think of the piano as a prop or as a character. This decision will help the set designer determine where to place the piano on the stage and how prominently to display it. Then the property master has to determine how big the piano should be as well as what color. S/he will also have to consider how to dress the piano. The lighting designer has to figure out how to light it and whether or not to light it differently when it is being played. Since the piano is played several times, the sound designer will need to make decisions regarding how the piano sounds when it is played. S/he may want to consider if the piano sounds one way when Berniece plays it and another when Boy Willie or one of the other characters plays it. There are also performance considerations for the director and actors. The director will have to determine how/if to block the actors so as to demonstrate

the significance of the piano's presence. Actors will have to decide how the internal knowledge of the piano as the Charles family ancestral burial grounds effect their movements. Each actor will have to determine whether proximity to the piano motivates their movements or not. And, if so, they will have to determine in what way the piano motivates their movement. Each of these elements, when considered through a religious studies understanding of the text, brings with it dramaturgical, interpretive, and/or performance considerations that can be extremely helpful in determining how best to mount a production of this play.

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