



Indigenous African Aesthetics and the Ancestral Memory of African Americans in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*

Bed Nath Sharma 

Department of English, Prithvi Narayan Campus, Tribhuvan University, Pokhara, Nepal

Article History: Submitted: 27 April 2026; Reviewed: 15 May 2026; Revised: 1 June 2026

Corresponding Author: Bed Nath Sharma, **Email:** bed.sharma@prnc.tu.edu.np

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3126/ojes.v17i1.97242>

Abstract

This article explores the relationship between identity and heritage in the context of African American history shaped by slavery and systematic discrimination in Wilson's play *The Piano Lesson*. This relationship is portrayed in Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*. To explore this relationship, this study raises two research questions: How are indigenous African aesthetics and indigenous African American aesthetics connected through the symbolism of the piano that stands for ancestral presence, communal identity, and rituals? In what ways does the ancestral memory shape the characters' identities and actions? To answer these questions, this paper aims to trace the aspects of indigenous African aesthetics and ancestral memory in the play through the lens of Robert Francis Thompson's theory of Indigenous African aesthetics, which excavates the ancestral presence, spiritually charged artefacts, and communal responsibility in the African American expression. Using a close textual analysis of dialogues, music, language and artefacts, the paper examines how Boy Willie and Berniece present their competing responses to the piano. The findings reveal

that enacting and enlivening the artefact enable the restoration and continuity of ancestral memory. Moreover, according to the indigenous African aesthetics worldview healing and continuity depend on the active remembrance, not as a burden but as a sustaining foundation for African American identity.

Keywords: African Americans, ancestral memory, heritage, identity, indigenous aesthetics

Introduction

African American literature, mainly the genre of drama, underscores on the pain of being displaced from their original homeland, and a desire to reconstruct identity, memory, and culture in a foreign land. As the most influential African American playwright of the twentieth century, August Wilson consistently chronicles this struggle in his Pittsburgh cycle, a ten-play series on the Black life in America across decades. Set in the 1930s *The Piano Lesson* (1987) is a seminal drama for its focus on heritage, ancestral memory, and cultural responsibility.

In this play, the piano- as an object of familial, cultural and historical significance-

Copyright 2026 © The Author(s). This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0) License.



is at the core of the drama. Mainly, it carries within it the carved history of enslavement, suffering and survival. The central conflict lies between Boy Willie and his sister Berniece over its sale to buy the land of their former master. Boy Willie plans to sell it, whereas Berniece dismisses this plan. However, beneath this struggle lies a deeper aesthetic and philosophical question: What does it mean to inherit African cultural memory in an African American context?

This paper argues that *The Piano Lesson* revolves round indigenous African Aesthetics, adapted through the experience of slavery and their identity as African Americans. On the surface, the play does not depict African rituals in their original forms. However, it seeks to preserve the core values of ancestral art by extending respect to music, oral tradition, communal memory, and their Black Vernacular English. Taking these attributes in hand, Wilson highlights the idea that though there may be a desire to adapt to the demands of the modern world, it is vital for African Americans to stick to their culture, memory and artifacts for their identity. The play suggests that commodifying ancestral memory and realization of its economic value over spiritual, familial and ancestral values is suicidal, whereas acknowledging and enlivening it enables healing.

Literature Review

August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* has been under constant scrutiny by the literary critics since it was published in 1990. The drama offers a compelling portrayal of African American aesthetics coupled with their desire for assimilation and economic wellbeing. It has been widely discussed in academic and cultural studies for its depiction of recreation of new identity, slave narrative, Africanness, fusion of black urban and rural life, and reflection of the piano as the metaphor of their identity.

Boy Willie's residence in North is temporary because he wants to create his

new identity by purchasing the same land where most of his ancestors were once enslaved. Using the family's piano in order to buy Sutter's land in South is an effective means to recreate a new identity for Boy Willie. Brian Crow and Chris, in this regard, argue:

Unlike most of Wilson's characters Boy Willie's residence in the North is only temporary, he has no desire to stay and will leave as soon as he acquires the money to buy Sutter's land. For him, the sale of the piano and acquisition of the property are the most appropriate and effective use of their inheritance and he is critical of his sister's attitude towards the piano. (54)

As seen above, Boy Willie's ultimate attempt to sell the piano and buy the former master's land sheds light on his nascent desire for economic liberation and a sense of victory over the former master.

Meanwhile, Boan Devon examines the drama from the locus of slave identity of Charles family. Two sold slaves' bodies are carved into the piano. In Devon's perspective, the call in the play "consists of the slave narrative that has been carved into the body of the piano" (264). He observes that it is a metaphor for the communal identity. In the same vein, the sense of Africanness is present in the drama. The presence of Sutter's ghost makes one think about the presentation of supernatural elements in the drama, which functions as the powerful factor to postpone Boy Willie's plan to sell it and buy Sutter's land. In this regard, Amadou Bissiri views that "Sutter's ghost also allows Wilson's to dramatize such other aspects of the African sense of the supernatural as its ubiquity and omniscience" (100). He highlights the idea that the play consists of several instances of spiritual elements. They are connected to the family of Boy Willie and the core elements of African American belief system.

In Yusef Salam's perception, the drama depicts "the nasty clashes and beautiful

fusion of black rural and urban life” (23). This is true in the sense that it amalgamates the life of both South and North. In a different context, the drama consists of characters that represent African traditional religion and Christianity. They usually question the role of spiritual forces in their lives. Amanda M. Rudolph points out: “Character after character questions the role of God in his or her life. Will God help the Black person get ahead?” (574). Wilson expands the ideas of both ATR and Christianity in his play. The detailed exploration of the play echoes that the majority of the characters indulge on the discussion of whether God can liberate them.

Similarly, the play is a testimony of how Berniece and Boy Willie consider the piano. Anisa Jaine Wardi argues: “The piano is a living text of history- his great grandfather carved the family’s story of enslavement, births, deaths, and marriages onto its surface. As a result, Berniece refuses to sell it, believing that this cultural artifact materializes her family. In this way, the play crystalizes the characters’ ongoing relationship to the past” (509). They consider the piano in different ways. For Boy Willie, it possesses a materialistic value, whereas Berniece considers it as a symbol of familial, cultural and historical significance. Coupled with this analysis, Harry Elam, Jr. considers Sutter’s ghost “as history itself, not only a supernatural element in the play” (112). This assertion transforms the play from a family drama into historical allegory.

Boy Willie and Berniece clash over the possession of the piano. They have different perspectives on the piano and its attributes. Jermaine Singleton observes: “The lives and Berniece are laced with a general, every day-use resistance that bears the traces of the real source of this trans generational haunting. Though Berniece believes ghosts to be mere folk superstition, she also believes them to be walking around the house” (47). Berniece believes that the

ghost signifies trans generational haunting, whereas Boy Willie dismisses it.

The piano not only reflects the soul of Charles family, but also of the whole African community. Kriti Kumar Ramesh Pimpliskar and Sudhir V. Nikam assert: “The piano in the play represents the soul of Charles family in particular and all Africans in general. While assessing about the Christianity in the play, it’s evident to introduce Christian religious preacher like Avery” (2). The presence of Avery reveals that the play also accommodates biblical faith. However, even if he performs some rituals, he fails to resolve the family’s crisis.

The play invests more space for supernatural elements, and readers are attracted towards them, more than the plot itself. Halim Shanjida, et al affirm: “August Wilson used supernatural elements in “*The Piano Lesson*” to explore human nature and create mystery, suspense, and tension throughout the play. More than the plot itself, the spirituality and supernatural elements have invested the readers and audience in it (58). However, they are the part of the plot itself, which create mystery, suspense and tension.

Existing scholarship on Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* stresses on racial identity, slave narratives, women’s issues, historical allegory, and cultural heritage, religious values and supernatural elements. The play has been analyzed through different lenses, such as African American history, trauma theory and DuBoisian double consciousness. These studies have provided valuable insights on history and identity, considering the piano as a symbol of inherited trauma and resistance. However, this paper employs Thompson’s concept of African Aesthetics values in the African diaspora through the artifact “the piano”. Such a study departs from the existing scholarship by focusing on Indigenous African Aesthetics in *The Piano Lesson*. It sheds light on the piano as a symbol that stands for ancestral presence, communal memory, spiritual continuity,

and integration of art and everyday life, not merely as a symbol of heritage.

Theoretical Framework: Indigenous African Aesthetics

The analysis of August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* from the perspective of indigenous African aesthetics and ancestral memory is based on Robert Farris Thompson's theory of African aesthetic retentions, reflected in *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro-American Art and Philosophy* (1983). In this context, he has focused on African artistic and philosophical systems that have "survived the middle passage in transformed yet continuous forms" (3). His analysis centers on Indigenous African Aesthetics as an extension of African epistemologies rather than any derivative of Western aesthetics.

To stretch this discussion, there is a corollary connection between Indigenous African Aesthetics and Indigenous African American Aesthetics because the same artistic philosophy is continued even in African American context. Indigenous African aesthetics emphasize ancestral presence, spiritually charged objects, communal memory, and the connection between artifacts and social life. Similarly, the indigenous African American aesthetics echo the same spirit. The piano in the drama functions as a vessel of ancestral history. Although it a European instrument, its meaning is transformed by carving, storytelling, music, and ritual use. The carved images in it reflect African visual traditions that encode genealogy and collective memory. In addition, blues and orality extend African rhythmic and performative aesthetics into an African American context. In this regard, both the indigenous aesthetics share the common elements of memory, orality, community, and spiritual continuity. Thus, Indigenous African aesthetics overlap with Indigenous African American aesthetics.

Indigenous art practices possess more

unique elements than western notion of art. Indigenous African aesthetics overlap with nature, culture, memory, and spirituality. Thompson stresses that in African Indigenous traditions, art is "inseparable from moral purpose, spiritual force, and social responsibility" (13). In this sense, art is directly connected with communal life, rather than any passive representations. To illustrate, the piano in the play is not only a musical instrument but also an embodiment of ancestral memory and authority.

Thompson's aesthetic philosophy amplifies African communities' belief on ancestral presence. African communities consider the ancestors as "spiritually active members of the community rather than figures confined to the past" (6). Artistic forms-such as carvings, masks, and ritual performance- serve as mediators between generations. Shedding light on Thompson's insights, the piano in the drama becomes what he terms a "material carrier of ancestral memory" (88), symbolizing the connection between the living and the dead.

Ancestral presence is coupled with the notion of spiritual and material worlds. Thompson dismisses rigid distinctions between sacred and secular realms, arguing instead that "material forms are spiritually charged and historically conscious" (129). This idea supports the occasional appearance of Sutter's ghost in the drama.

Besides a spiritual realm, Thompson identifies rhythm, blues and improvisation as defining features of Indigenous African aesthetics. Rhythm is the patterned flow of sounds, movements, words, or events that creates a sense of repetition, pace, and continuity. Similarly, Blues is an African diasporic musical tradition that expresses pain, survival, and hope through rhythm, repetition, improvisation, and emotional storytelling. In addition, improvisation is the creative ability to adapt, innovate, and express oneself spontaneously within a shared cultural tradition. He observes that African impressive forms privilege

movement, variation, and impressive vitality as signs of resilience and selfhood” (121). The blues performance by Winning Boy embodies his transformation from suffering and discrimination into expressive endurance in the play.

Another dimension of Thompson is the idea of communal memory and ethical responsibility. He maintains that African Aesthetics stresses on creative identity, stating that “art speaks for the community and its ancestors, not for the isolated individual” (14). This assumption sheds light on Berniece’s desire to save the piano over Boy Willie’s desire to sell it in the play.

Following the line of aesthetic artifact as communal memory and ancestral memory, spiritual dimension, orality and music, the major characters’ concern to the piano, Sutter’s ghost, ancestors and rhythm are taken into consideration to explore the idea of Indigenous African aesthetics and ancestral memory in the play. In essence, following the line of Thompson’s theoretical framework, this paper evaluates Indigenous African aesthetics and ancestral memory.

Critical Analysis of Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*

Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson* highlights the piano as the embodiment of slave narrative, family history, suffering, communal identity and responsibility. The play revolves around a conflict between Boy Willie and Berniece over the family legacy ‘the piano’ that stands for their family history. However, in the play’s final scene, Berniece invokes her ancestral spirits through the piano, thereby driving the ghost away. Eventually, Boy Willie abandons his plan of selling it, and every member of his family accepts the piano as a living testament to their heritage. In this regard, the past is never distant and alienated. It is rather materially, aesthetically and spiritually present, as signified by the piano, and emotionally active in the lives of the characters.

The piano, widely illustrated in this section, was bought by Boy Willie’s grandfather in exchange of his wife and a child. He carved the immediate family and various scenes from the family history into the piano. In this context, Doaker narrates the history behind the piano. He recounts that Boy Willie (Boy Willie’s grandfather) “carved all this. He got a picture of his mama Esther.....and his Daddy, Boy Charles” (44). In this sense, the carving transforms it into a visual record of family history, turning into memory rather than a neutral object. It becomes the legacy of Charles family connecting at least three generations: Boy Willie’s grandfather, father and Willie himself.

Berniece, Boy Willie’s sister, believes that the piano embodies familial memory. For her, it reflects father’s death and mother’s grief. She even hesitates to play it as it is rooted in personal and inherited trauma. She recalls that “Mama Ola polished this piano with her tears for seventeen years” (52). Berniece further elucidates, “Then she rubbed the blood in.....mixed it up with the rest of the blood on it” (52). Both the instances reveal that it is irrevocably connected with pain and loss, explaining that Berniece’s silence is understood as an act of emotional survival, signifying her silence and survival.

In spite of all these emotional and communal significance of the piano, Boy Willie considers the piano from a different perspective. For him, it could be an opportunity to buy land and gain independence. Boy Willie states, “Sutter’s brother’s selling the land. He say he gonna sell it to me. That’s why I come up her. Get Berniece to sell that piano and I will have the third part” (9). He considers this purchase of land as a means of obtaining freedom and ownership. They were denied of such freedom and ownership in the past. He wishes to convert the piano as an inherited suffering into some tangible advancement, which requires its sale.

Overlapped in the above sentiment, Berniece opines that the piano can never be interpreted in terms of commodity and money. At this juncture, Boy Willie and Berniece contrast as she views "Money can't buy what the piano cost. You can't sell your soul for money. It won't go with the buyer" (50). For her, the piano lies beyond any monetary value. This standpoint surfaces the moral conflict of the play: Can history be exchanged for money? Although such arguments appear in the play, they are just the part of Boy Willie's desire to gain independence and achievement that he would realize in a true sense. The ultimate destination of this discussion is to consider the piano as an embodiment of familial, communal and historical legacy.

The appearance of Sutter's ghost time and again in course of the play adds up a layer of supernatural dimension. It further signifies the persistence of unresolved history. For Avery, the preacher, the appearance of Sutter's ghost represents unresolved business and suggests some religious intervention. The reference in the play hints at the instance that the piano was brought from their former master, Sutter, and it was Boy Willie who had pushed Sutter into the well. The parenthetical remark in the drama "(Again, the presence of Sutter is felt)" (103) troubles Boy Willie. For him, "Ain't no ghost in this house" (104). He dismisses any reliance on ghosts, and tries to confront it physically. However, his audacity coupled with physical force does not help him. So to say, the appearance of Sutter's ghost signifies that injustice still grounds, hinting that physical force cannot overcome inherited injustice. For this, they are expected to play the piano and revitalize the spiritual dimension associated with it. It means they can gain justice only by channelling the spirit of the piano.

Music and improvisation in the play help to articulate memory and endurance. For Winning Boy, who sings in the memory of late members of community, the piano

consists of multiple voices and speaks for multiple generations. Winning Boy sings:

Hey little woman what's the matter with
you now
Had a storm last night and blowed the
line all down
Tell me how long
Is I got to wait
Can I get it now
Or must I hesitate (101)

His blues performances as illustrated above reflect how music transforms pain into expression. Blues are the integral constituent of Indigenous African aesthetics. They are the vehicles of improvisation, orality and rhythm, which play an instrumental role for survival and continuity.

The tussle between Boy Willie and Berniece on its material value and legacy respectively stretches even up to the climax. However, towards the end of the play the scene centres on Berniece playing the piano to confront Sutter's ghost. The moment takes everyone in the play back to the past. She pleads her ancestors calling their names:

Mama Berniece
I want you to help me
Mama Esther
I want you to help me
Papa Boy Charles
I want you to help me
Mama Ola
I want you to help me (107)

By playing the piano and invoking her ancestors, she moves from silence to action and performance and from fear to audacity and engagement.

The act of playing the piano does not only just acknowledge the past, but also paves the way forward because the significance of the piano is timeless. The ghost is driven by enlivening the piano. Boy Willie is closely witnessing all these phenomena. He no longer talks about selling the piano to buy the land. He rather admits: "Hey Berniece.....if you and Maretha don't keep playing on that piano.....ain't

no telling.....me and Sutter both liable to be back”(108). This expression holds a gravity of the message that playing the piano is significant in the sense that it is enlivened and makes folks get connected to their ancestry. Boy Willie’s understanding highlights the idea that the piano must be preserved rather than exploited in one or another form. In this regard, he refrains from the plan to sell the piano, and gets submerged into its legacy.

Overall, *The Piano Lesson* dramatizes indigenous African aesthetics and ancestral memory. The piano, orality, blues, spiritual dimension, ancestry and communal identity are taken into consideration as the evidence to support the claim. Towards the end of the play, Boy Willie admits the idea that the piano carries the power of healing and emotional solace. In this regard, the healing and continuity arise when individuals approach inherited history honestly. Thus, the piano serves as a lesson through melody: the lesson of spiritual dimension, ancestry and communal gravity.

Conclusion

To conclude, Wilson reflects that past is never a dunk but it shapes the life and choices of posterity. In this regard, ancestral memory is not merely a record of the past, but a living force that looks for recognition and engagement. As a matter of fact, the play presents history having an active presence rather than just a material object. Through the piano Wilson dramatizes the importance of ancestral memory on the African American identity and moral choice. The play portrays the tussle between two major characters, i.e. Boy Willie and Berniece. The former rooted in economic progress and self-determination and the latter preservation and spiritual dimension. Both of them may have valid logic. However, the final section of the play affirms that material advancement alone cannot fight against burdens of historical injustice. It is dramatized through the act of Berniece playing the piano, which drives

away Sutter’s ghost. It also enlivens the ancestry and ancestral memory. In this sense, the piano serves as the locus of the play, for it stands for familial history, communal history and spiritual dimension. Moreover, the aspects of orality, rhythm and storytelling are also enacted in the play through the representing dialogues and blues of Winning Boy. In this context, *The Piano Lesson* reflects indigenous African aesthetics and ancestral memory, mainly through the holistic dimension of the piano and the aspects of communal identity, reverence for ancestors, and presence of orality, rhythm and storytelling. Therefore, the true survival and life of African Americans depends on their active relationship with ancestral history, rather than commodifying and dismissing it.

Works Cited

- Bissiri, Amadou. “Aspects of Africanness in August Wilson’s Drama: Reading *The Piano Lesson* through Wole Soyinka’s Drama.” *African American Review*, vol. 30, no. 1, 1996, pp. 99-113.
- Boan, Devon. “Call and Response: Parallel Slave Narrative in August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*.” *African American Review*, vol. 32, no. 2, 1998, pp. 263-71.
- Crow, Brian and Chris Bonfield. *An Introduction to Post-colonial Theatre*. Cambridge UP, 1996.
- Elam, Harry, Jr. “August Wilson, Doubling, Madness, and Modern African-American Drama.” *The Past as Present in the Drama of August Wilson*, U of Toronto P, vol. 43, no. 4, Dec. 2000, pp. 100-30.
- Pimpliskar, Kriti Kumar Ramesh and Sudhir V. Nikam. “Spirituality and Religion in August Wilson’s *The Piano Lesson*.” *Purva Mimaansa*, vol. 2, March 2021, pp. 1-4.
- Rudolph, Amanda M. “Images of African Traditional Religions and Christianity in Joe Turner’s *Come and Gone* and *The Piano Lesson*.” *Journal of Black Studies*, vol. 33, no. 5, 2003, pp. 562-75.

- Shanjida, Halim, et al. "Willing Suspension of Disbelief in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*." *International Journal of Literary Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3, Nov. 2024, pp.55-60.
- Singleton, Jermaine. "Some Losses Remain with Us: Impossible Mourning and the Prevalence of Ritual in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*." *College Literature*, vol. 36, no. 2, 2009, pp. 40-57.
- Thompson, Robert Farris. *Flash of the Spirit: African and Afro American Art and Philosophy*, Vintage Books, 1983.
- Wardi, Anissa Janine. "The Coloured Man Can't Fix Nothing with the Law: Carceal Spaces in August Wilson's *The Piano Lesson*." *Journal of African American Studies*, vol. 17, no. 4, 2013, pp. 506-17.
- Wilson, August. *The Piano Lesson*. Penguin Group, 1990.
- Yusef, Salman. "Wilson's *The Piano Lesson* Plays at Black Spectrum." *The New York Amsterdam News*, vol. 23, 2002, pp. 14-20.