The cultural self: The novel as griot in African American fiction

Eric Christian Atkinson

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THE CULTURAL SELF: THE NOVEL AS GRIOT IN AFRICAN AMERICAN FICTION

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English Composition:
Literature

by
Eric Christian Atkinson
March 2011
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Approved by:

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ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the Western African oral concept of griot, as it utilizes nommo, the Bantu term which denotes the magical power of words to cause change, as a critical African American lexical lens. Traditionally, the West African griot is the repository of history and traditions of the culture. This man or woman preserves the social customs, the values of the culture and contributes to social stability through education, entertainment and ritual performance as a means to promote harmony and unity. In the broadest definition, a griot is the culture in the sense that through the collecting of stories, genealogies, histories, songs and rituals only to then disseminate them throughout the people so that everyone has the same shared history; a griot creates a shared community, a shared culture through their actions. I posit that in the written discourse of African American literature, the oral definition of griot has now been placed on the cultures’ fiction. The central idea is still paramount in that community values and traditions are passed on, but now through the written word; that the book itself bears the tradition of griot because it educates, entertains and
performs the ritual of culture creation by engaging the reader in the teller/listener dynamic which fashions unity and harmony from chaos. Essentially, through fictive narratives, these African American authors are indeed constructing social harmony through metaknowledge: that they are simultaneously commenting, constructing, creating and criticizing African American discourses from an emphasis of West African philosophical tropes: that the readers, culturally literate, become part of the story’s construction from the cultural context clues placed throughout the narrative. *Kindred* and *Parable of the Sower* by Octavia E. Butler, *Sent for You Yesterday* and *Damballah* by John Edgar Wideman are four such examples.
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African Americans, as a cultural group, frequently struggle with issues of identity as they attempt self validation. At its core there is ongoing strife between Afrocentric cultural definition and racial stereotyping from the hegemonic majority. The struggle can be characterized as an attempt to rescue “Africa, once lost, [which] has yet to be recovered; whereas America, as an ideal, has yet to be become home” (Gomez 177). Essentially, African American people are attempting to “self-consciously commit” to that “reaffirmation of the status of the African person and African people as bearers of dignity, of their right to a free, full, and meaningful life,” and of “their right and responsibility to speak their own special cultural truth to the world and make their own unique contribution to the forward flow of human history” (Karenga 6). African Americans struggle to wield the power to define themselves.

African American self definition, the shift away from focusing on the derogatory default designation of the
hegemonic "white" majority and placing the onus on the African American cultural group, is a contemporary phenomenon. This shift is characterized, through artistic expression such as literature, by an American "sub" culture that struggles to maintain some semblance of the African as well as come to terms with an American identity. W.E.B DuBois termed the struggle "double consciousness," in that African Americans have a "sense of always looking at [themselves] through the eyes of others, of measuring [their souls] by the tape of a world that looks in amused contempt and pity" (DuBois 9). The struggle of double consciousness is an attempt to reconcile, an endeavor in ethnological equilibrium, which would yield a true self-consciousness. The concept of griot employed in this thesis is to show how both sides of double consciousness create balance between the African and the American; creating harmony and unity through artistic expression.

In music, theatre and literature, African American artistic expression regularly engages in the Afrocentric aspect of community, which emphasizes a "highly communal rather than individualistic" perspective (White 34). This places the Afrocentric viewpoint at odds with, and secondary to, traditional Western European, Post-
Enlightened analytical thought. But as Afrocentric philosophy and scholarly efforts accrue validity, it has gained their own agency and developed its own rhetoric. The difference between the models is that, unlike in Western Enlightenment thought, Western African knowledge is not objective or central to reasoning; truth cannot be attained by the separation of the subject into discrete elements through analysis. Rather, in the Afrocentric viewpoint, being community based, the focus is on combining. What this means is that Afrocentricism centers “on the culture’s understanding of the interconnected order of cosmic, divine, natural, and human worlds” (Lipson, Binkley 81). The onus is on preservation, balance and unity rather than discovery; there is no separation between things or concepts, something essential for understanding in Western thought. In Afrocentric Philosophy, “force and matter are not being united ... on the contrary, they have never been apart” (Jahn 101). Throughout the different African American critical eras, the strength of the Afrocentric viewpoint thus relies on a storyteller/listener dynamic.

The contemporary rhetorical approach for African American literature, often termed Post Black Studies, still holds many tenets of the movements’ past: these include
DuBois’ double consciousness, the social definition of community creation in the Harlem Renaissance, the nationalist, politically based idealism of the Civil Rights Era, and the revisitation of a West African basis of rhetoric and theory which incorporates elements of structuralism, post-structuralism, deconstruction and formalism. Throughout the African American diaspora, and in different ways, many African American authors have sought to reconcile these various threads by utilizing historical, experiential tropes of the culture to construct the community through narrative. I submit that the notion of griot, because it utilizes the power of the word, nommo, should be more widely used as a literary critical lens because it builds community for all involved by relying on the storyteller/listener dynamic in which the teller does not impart the story as a whole but, instead, reveals clues for the listener to decipher. What this means is that for a correct understanding and interpretation, the listener must be culturally literate and a cultural context must be established. Therefore, in filling in the blanks, the listener becomes a part of the teller’s story. The problem is that the traditional Enlightenment viewpoint, in which truth and analysis is derived from careful dissection of
the text, is still the default position for many critics. Because the Afrocentric viewpoint cannot be "accommodated to European systems of thought, the African way of thinking [is] considered non-logical" (Jahn 97). Therefore, because the term griot does not adhere to customary logic, it is often dismissed. To counter this tendency, this thesis will foreground the fiction of Octavia E. Butler and John Edgar Wideman through the critical lens of griot as a means to construct an African American community and culture through narrative by utilizing nommo.

But first things first: The first chapter will give a frame of how griot fits within the contemporary definition of African American literature and theory to create a reconciliation through harmony and cultural memory. The next chapter will apply this critical lens to Kindred and Parable of the Sower by Octavia E. Butler, then in chapter three to Sent For You Yesterday and Damballah by John Edgar Wideman. Lastly, I will provide a discussion of how other African American literary works can be approached through this lens.

Traditionally, the griot is the human repository of remembered history and traditions of the oral West African culture. Griots are meant to serve three broad cultural
functions: “to perform rituals, entertain, or educate” all of which serve to enrich the civilization (Thomas Hale 35). In accomplishing the three expansive responsibilities, griots “fulfill a variety of roles; genealogist, historian, spokesperson, diplomat, musician, teacher, praise singer, master of ceremonies, and advisor” which leads to an ambiguous definition in western sociological terms (Rasmussen 361). The term griot goes far beyond the academic community in the sense that its definition encompasses a wide range of contexts and functions within the populace. In the broadest definition, a griot is the culture in the sense that it refers to the collecting of stories, genealogies, histories, songs and rituals only to then disseminate them throughout the people so that everyone has the same shared history. It is through the utilization of nommo, a Bantu term which denotes the magical power of words to cause change, a griot creates a shared community, a shared culture.

But because there is no one-to-one Western European equivalent, it is the nuances of griot that get cross-culturally mistranslated: a clear definition fails because of a transfer from spoken word to print and “the need to know the original languages in which the griots express
themselves” (Thomas Hale 114). In fact, Stephen Belcher has gone so far to posit that many of griot’s aspects “are lost in translation” because they are taken out of the original context (173). In this sense, it is important that the reader of the literary griot is the listener of the teller’s story. Therefore they must know the idioms, the language and references of the teller so elements of the story will not be lost. In other words, the listener must know the significance of the words used and the power that they wield. This is the very reason why in the traditional oral culture of West Africa, words are considered sacred and powerful: it is the only means to which the culture is passed on.

In a culture where words are given so much emphasis, the significance of a person with that “kind of verbal power that links them inextricably to those who hold other forms of power in society” would give them ambiguous social standing because, while simultaneously giving counsel to those in power, griots collect the stories and genealogy from all levels of society (Thomas Hale 317). The reason is that, in West African terms, griots are the wielders of nommo, “the life force, which produces all life, which influences ‘things’ in the shape of the word” (Jahn 124).
Nommo is an “African concept [in which] the word is a life force; the word is creator rather than created” even after it has been spoken or written (Ervin 92). Geneva Smitherman posits that “to use words to give shape and coherence to human existence is a universal human thing” in which “language is a tool for ordering the chaos of human experience” (77). So in this oral culture, the griot tells “stories [to] help give order to the human experience and encourage others around [them] to establish means of common living” (Thomas Hale 35). So griots use their knowledge of community, history, genealogy and tradition to maintain the society as a means to create harmony and unity. Shauntae Brown White echoes this when she states that griots “preserve the social customs and values of the culture and [...] contribute to social stability” (32). In other words, griots use “[r]hetoric, in the Afrocentric sense, [as] the productive thrust of language into the unknown in an attempt to create harmony and balance in the midst of disharmony” (Asante 35). In this sense, griot is less of a “thing” and more of concept meaning that fluidity is what characterizes it, not the rigidity of definition.

Further, in the Western sense, there are different kinds of griot. This is not to be mistaken for genre or
style, as in a traditional Western sense, where there are certain content elements of which a story must adhere in order to be placed in a category. Remember, at its core the griot is meant to bring cohesion, harmony, with its telling to combine, not divide and sub-categorize. Taking a page from Post Black Studies, “different griots” does not mean contrary or diametrically opposed means of telling but simply the way in which each story teller chooses to relay the story: Butler’s use of the first person personal or Wideman’s use of multi-faceted time are two examples. In approaching story telling from different emphases, there are different avenues taken toward harmonizing the community.

But in the Post-Enlightment sense, I must address different aspects of griot. The lexical griot is based upon the actual wording of the narrative, focusing on what is happening from a performative standpoint. Narrative griot focuses on the entire story through its elements of theme, character, tone and etc. In Essence, the lexical griot focuses on the words the story uses while the narrative griot focuses on the story told. It is important to note that the difference between the two is strictly in the Western Post Enlightenment model of analytical dissection;
that the naming of the difference between the two is
negligible: since both are meant to promote harmony and
unity within the culture, and because it comes from the
West African model, emphasizing the difference does not
lead to Truth, but breaks understanding.

I posit that in the written discourse of African
American literature is griot. The central idea is still
paramount in that the griot is meant to pass on community
values and traditions, but now it is the written narrative
that utilizes nommo for the sake of educating, entertaining
and ritual performance for culture creation. The novel
itself engages the reader in the teller/listener dynamic
which fashions unity and harmony from chaos and creates
balance. What this means for the African American culture
is harmony with the troubled, violent past, thereby
creating synchronization from disarray. The idea is that by
utilizing the societal, historical and philosophical tones
of consonance, the griot creates harmony by employing
stories that "are animated by the desire to preserve pasts
too often trivialized, built over, or erased, and to pass
them on" as a means to simultaneously preserve the culture
and keep traditions alive, in narrative form (Foreman 369).
Essentially, the traditional oral definition has been
transferred to the novel in the sense that, through the narrative, "the individual character remains socially and politically responsible to the community, but seeks also to understand the self" (Ervin 93). Butler and Wideman's narratives can be defined this way because, as griots, they do facilitate "the process of cultural recovery" by enabling rememory or rapprochement through cognizant utilization to invoke harmony within the culture and by engaging in teller/listener dynamic (Dixon 18-19).

Essentially, through fictive narratives, these African American authors are indeed constructing social harmony through metaknowledge: they are simultaneously commenting, constructing, creating and criticizing African American discourses through an emphasis on West African philosophical tropes, which yields interesting overtones and side effects.

When harmonizing occurs, identity is then constructed. Because the lexical griot emphasizes the storyteller/listener dynamic and the reader-as-witness, culturally literate readers then become part of the story's construction from the cultural context, responding to clues placed throughout the narrative. As James Paul Gee stipulates, identity is constructed through "[d]iscourse
[that] transfer[s] into, interfere[s] with, and otherwise influence[s] each other to form the linguistic texture of whole societies and to interrelate various groups in society" (14). I assert that through the griot model, these African American authors are further creating a sense of community derived from the aspects of West African culture and the American ideal, of which the reader must be aware. My assertion is that, through nommo, Octavia E. Butler and John Edgar Wideman are using the novel form as griot in a "concerted effort to reclaim [...] cultural heritage through the reinscription of the cultural in literary production and thus to restabilize the cultural imbalance of power" (Mehta 234).

African American literary critics, in an attempt to construct an identity for their own group of people, are really attempting to create a useful base of power for African Americans. When I use the word power it is not meant in the classic European sense of "right or authority," ability or competence, capacity, control, dominance or force, but more in the ambiguous notion of potential cause and effect. Power is meant as a general term: an antonym of impotence in which the power stems from an identifying action which quells the discursive
dominative identifying markers of the hegemony for the sake for efficacy (Concise OED 1125). It is not meant as the difference between passivity and activity or subjective and objective, but in how power “points out the irreducibility of temporalizing” the lack of power with having power (Derrida 126). In griot sense, since power comes from the word, it is a performative utterance in which the language is used not just for description, but in constituting or making power, because the word was spoken. So when the griot tells the tale and the listener hears it, this is where and how nommo’s meaning is understood and where a culture is valued and validated, through and for itself. It is precisely because of power, the culture has named itself.

As it is known, names have power: The power to define and identify, as it defines not only within, but also without a culture. For example, the ancient Africans who lived in the Nile valley, built megalithic stone structures and mummified the dead have been named and are known as, by the modern world, Egyptians. These people left extensive writings, and are possibly the most studied and written about of ancient cultures. Egypt influenced societies that followed, from the Greeks, the Romans, to Western Europe,
and arguably still permeate cultures today. With all of the study and understanding of these people, there remains a problem at a fundamental level: they referred to themselves as Kemetic, not Egyptian. In spite of our reverence for this culture, this mis-naming, at such a rudimentary level, slants further understanding of these people. In essence the foundation is skewed; therefore, the house itself is skewed, which means the mis-naming is the source for the lack of power. From a West African standpoint, as well as the African American, mis-naming is not simply slander or libel; because it incorrectly uses *nommo*, the name Egyptian sets a foundation in which further accepted misinterpretation can occur. Through the power of wielding *nommo*, the griot can speak the correct name so rightful understanding can begin. It is in this way that harmony can be attained.

The power dynamic plays a large part in the African American culture. So, at the rudimentary level of naming, the power of *nommo* does have a point: the discourse of the "African American" does not describe the "African American," because "African American" was there before the discourse signified it as such. Instead, hegemonically defined, it produces the "African American" it purports to
This is a discursive, reductive, semic train of thought linked to the semiotic\textsuperscript{1} in which, without proper naming, leads to discursive, subaltern, enthymemic reasoning, which only allows the properly defined African American’s to mimic themselves through absence, thereby creating a pantomime, a caricature, for the sake of a “proper” relation as a signified with the sign. Therefore, the power wielded by nommo dispels, as Homi Bhabha states, “traditions of trompe l’oeil, irony, mimicry and repetition” (126). The African American culture has been, and is, both subject and object of power.

This enthymemic lack of power is Foucault’s Panopticon in action: the hegemony is socially placed in the center, and every group that falls under its view is subject to its rules, not because the guard enforces the rules, but because the prisoners internalize the system and police themselves. For this to work, for accurate regulation of those subjected, “one needs to know the nature of the guilty person, his obduracy, the degree of his evilness, what his interests and leanings are” (Foucault 188). In essence, the guilty must internalize the rules, thereby

\textsuperscript{1} See Julie Kristeva’s \textit{La Révolution du language poétique} (1974).
defining themselves by the hegemonic characterization. To combat this, the griot critical lens African American aesthetic employs a converse memory or revisionist process, which utilizes the power of nommo, as a means “to engage the polemics of competing discourses that have the ability to counter oppressive, imperial Americanism” (Stweard-Shaheed 235). This combat allows the griot to be both signifier and signified in that, through the performative aspect of telling the narrative, it simultaneously reconstructs and recreates because it is both object and subject of the culture and the language. Throughout the literary history of African American authors, from Phillis Wheatley on forward, the narratives have collectively addressed topics of racism, slavery and equality as the cultural group has struggled with power and double consciousness to wield nommo for the sake of dispelling the panoptic and highlighting the body of the people, through and for itself. Octavia E. Butler and John Edgar Wideman are just two examples from the African American literary tradition that are griots that use nommo in which the listener becomes a part of the story.

Part of what makes Octavia E. Butler and John Edgar Wideman great storytellers is the notion that not only are
their narratives written for the collective group, but are also imbued with the Post Black Studies idea that there are multiple African American identities, simultaneously coupled with the notion of community. This new way of looking at African American identity highlights multiple facets that are fluid and layered in understanding race and identity. This lens does not claim an absolute allegiance to a nationalistic definition, rather the idea is to engage in what K. Anthony Appiah termed “identity play” which encounters meanings and symbols from within and throughout the culture. What Butler and Wideman are doing is creating a “contingency and fluidity of black identity” which has “to wrestle with the question of how to orient one’s self to the various options for black self-consciousness, and to do all of this while relating one’s self to the similarly fluid meanings and practices of the wider society” (Taylor 627). Essentially, the authors are expressing both a self reflection and an expression of the larger, wider culture as they attempt to dialogue with the broader identity of African American. In the case of Butler the griot emphasizes the relationship between Otherness, power and femininity, for Wideman it encompasses absence of voice, sense of time and power. In essence, the narratives
questions identity while presenting an aspect of an identity which the reader is to engage.

This critical lens of griot, which considers identity in a multifaceted way, has not always been at the forefront of the African American critical aesthetic. One of the challenges African American Literature faces is how it must constantly refer back to and is validated by the "rhetorical teaching in the western world [which] has canonized Artistotelian/Platonic rhetoric as Rhetoric" (Lipson, Binkley 1). At the beginning of the twentieth century, as the shape of what would become contemporary African American literature was forming, it was a time in which African Americans "were in the predicament of learning about himself and herself, about her native potential, her intelligence, her beauty, her historical contributions, her social standing and value to society, and her future prospects through the prism of American racism" (Gomez 179-180). The contemporary literature notion has expanded and embodies an "odyssey to realize the full potential of one's complex bicultural identity... In short, [it is the] quest ... for freedom, literacy and wholeness... [that is] grounded in social reality" (Bell 142-143). Historically, this quest for a reshaping and
reinterpretation of the African American image, at its auspices, has been a way to re-present "Black America" in new, progressive humane terms: it is meant to show, to echo Booker T. Washington, how the Negro should and could be valued because there was something worthwhile within the culture to contribute, not as former Africans now Americans, but as people. African American artistic expression, at the beginning of the twentieth century, is best characterized as a double aim struggle in which "the black artisan... [needed] to escape white contempt" (Dubois 9). The problem is that this mode of thinking stems not from self validation or self understanding, but from an attempt to dispel the widely held hegemonic definition for social acceptance and justification; it was a way to alleviate one oppression while advocating for another, subtler version. It meant, in the end, to be colonized again through education, social conformity and become Americanized by losing the African traces left. This was the era in which the griot concept was conspicuously absent as it was not about creating community or culture for the African Americans through nommo, but more about dispelling hegemonic myths and losing the subaltern stigma. This is the era in which the tradition of the culture, the
education of the culture and its entertainment were undermined for the sake of broader cultural acceptance.

The Harlem Renaissance saw the beginnings of a paradigm shift\(^2\) for African American identity. Authors such as Jean Toomer, Zora Neal Hurston, George S. Schuyler, Jean Fauset and Langston Hughes not only wrote fiction for by and about the African American experience, narratives "that addressed issues of ideal literary themes, cultural identity, and psychological reconstruction," as the previous generation did, but also wrote essays that defined the cultural identity\(^3\) as a means teach the community lessons of African American character and intellectual responsibility for and about itself (Napier 2). This is the era in which power, and the use of nommo, began to be utilized by the culture. The literature and criticism was about building a truthful, accurate social identity from within the community. This is the period when African American authors began to write about their authorship, their community, their society not strictly as a means for outside validation, not merely as a reconciliation of the

\(^2\) Magazines such as Colored American Magazine and Crisis, plus books like Pauline Hopkins' Contending Forces, preceded this and were the kernel for the Harlem Renaissance.

\(^3\) See Richard Wright's Blueprint for Negro Writing; Zora Neal Hurston's Characteristics of Negro Expression; Alain Locke's Self-Criticism: The Third Dimension in Culture.
double consciousness, not simply as a way of self-reflection, but in asking questions such as what it means to be African American? Can the double consciousness gap be bridged? How do we get back that Africa which was lost? With these in-depth questions, it is no accident that this is also the era that later scholars and academic critics would look to as the creation of the African American canon. This is the age in which the griot notion began to take shape as the authors and critics, from within the African American culture, began examining the community itself through the language of the people, in other words, nommo. Here are the beginnings of educating, entertaining and establishing rituals that later cultural movements would look back on.

However, not until the Civil Rights Era, with the Black Arts Movement, did self-defining African American Literature take full prominence. This is the "Black is beautiful," "Say it loud!" era in which the benefits of the Harlem Renaissance were reaped. This was the beginning of placing African aspects over the American; an attempt to redefine the sought after reconciliation through Afrocentric aspects rather than the default, dominate literary tradition. It was an era which the notions of
Booker T. Washington were replaced with self-referential definitions. This is the era in which Africanisms took center stage, which highlighted the use of nommo and griot. This was a time in which African American authors and critics attempted to frame the reconciliation to “show that their brothers in the audience will be able to understand that they are the brothers of victims, and that they themselves are blood brothers,” as they had done previously, but now through nommo, griot, signifyin’ and rememory not speech, tradition, signifier or repartee and rapprochement (Neal 1965). Authors such as Amiri Baraka, Genva Smitherman, Larry Neal, Jaheinz Jahn, Houston Baker, James Baldwin, Carolyn F. Gerald and Ralph Ellison, to name a few, took the African American aesthetic to a new level by championing African American nationalist ideals and spoke of displacing traditional European aesthetic values that have negative connotations for the African American community, through an artistic vein rather than a politically charged ideological. It was in this era that an active questioning of how African Americans should view history and their role within it. But problems began to rise as the movement became too preoccupied with establishing political agendas and dictating an ideological
absolutism platform and turned away from artistic aesthetic. It was a time in which the aspect of power, the authority or control, took precedent which meant that the communal and harmonizing aspect of griot was lost. It began to move away from the cultural expression reformation toward the politically based form of reformation; it was a step away from the culture itself. The Black Arts Movement, Houston Baker argued, was a platform that lacked the necessary rigor for serious analysis of the African American culture.

To get back to the African American artistic aesthetic, many critics, Larry Neal, Stephen Henderson, Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Houston Baker, to name a few, began incorporating elements of literary theory. Elements of the works of Foucault, Lévi-Strauss and Barthes were used to show hegemonic relational aspects specific to African American culture. This represented another shift in the paradigm as this era is defined by the tools of the art, theory and criticism, to define the art. This is the age in which the griot notion comes into prominence: where the tropes of the culture were used as a critical lens to

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discuss the culture and recover memory. It was an era in which aspects of nommo, power, force and agency, were not wielded separately, but more in the traditional West African sense of "never [having] been apart" (Jahn 101). In the previous eras questions were asked to ascertain what it is to be African American, what is the role of the African American in history, and the ever elusive double consciousness conundrum.

After the Civil Right Era, African Americans began using rhetoric to ask abstract questions. Instead of asking what, when and where, questions of discovery were posed—the why's and how's of African American aesthetics—which through Deconstruction and Post-Structuralism, place an emphasis on the culture through its own literary expression. African American rhetoricians began finding voice and validation through and of themselves. African American scholars began utilizing Derrida's notion of "presence," Foucault's notion of the "panopticon," to show, formalistically, that the epistemologically dualistic sign/signifier was meant to justify the Truth and to further validate the Western Enlightened viewpoint, was wholly invalid. The implication is that the traditional Western view is not the naturally appropriate; that the
connection between idea (ideals) and things is arbitrary and therefore subjective. This was the era in which, through the tools of the established tradition, African American theorists and critics quickly capitalized on dethroning and produced foundational works that were non-Enlightenment based, which highlighted "more attention to the 'lexical and conceptual fields' that permeate African American literary texts, or at least to pay attention to the 'semantic levels of black culture'" (Ervin 140). This is the era in which the griot did educate, entertain and uphold rituals for the sake for the community.

In the late 1970's through the 1980's, African American critics and theorists began constructing theory and criticism for by and about African American literature that did not stem from the traditional European or Classical viewpoint. This is the age in which nommo explained Africanisms in Western terms, which helped broaden the notion of griot. Karenga, Asante, Gates Jr., Morrison and West wrote on the subject of African American literature from the auspices of Afrocentric artistic viewpoint. Essays and academic articles abound that highlight how Egyptian (Kemetic) rhetoric is older and is
the basis for Greek philosophy⁵; how the genre of magic realism "reveals itself as a ruse to invade and take over dominant discourse(s)” (D’haen 195); how Bakhtin can be found throughout African American Literary theory because, through language and literature, individuals can attain meaning and identity as they are "both ‘voiced’ and able to ‘voice’” (Dorothy Hale 447). This was the era in which the African American language community took its own center stage, the era in which the academic writing was for, by and about the African American aesthetic because they were the “ones in power in the traditional academic community [to] create discourses that embody a typical worldview” (Bizzell 2). This is the era in which the discourse did educate, entertain and establish rituals.

So far this thesis has tackled the notion of how the griot utilizes nommo for the sake of power in literary criticism, but it has not addressed fictionalized accounts. The critical emergence of the griot interpretive lens is to not only “fill the gap,” but also to give purpose to African American Literature: griot’s employment allows for

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the trauma theory notion of moving from “acting out” to “working through” in that it “enables the patient to move toward healing” (Madsen 62). Through Butler’s griot, the identity it creates utilizes the feminine, first-person personal and adaptation. Wideman’s griot highlights multifaceted time of third-person present, voicelessness and free-indirect discourse. Each author’s approach is distinctive in the creation of community through nommo in that the stories they choose to tell, and how they choose to tell them, builds different aspects of community for the reader because each highlights something different.
CHAPTER TWO

IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

One of the tenets of post-modern African American rhetoric is that in telling a narrative is to invoke agency for the sake of the group and the individual simultaneously. The griot is meant "to engage in the question of agency ... [so that] writers [can] control their writing processes or are their writing processes—and indeed the writers themselves—constructed by their cultural settings" (Howard 349). What Octavia E. Butler has done to engage this is to use the traditional medium of novel fiction but in a way that defies the fixed, traditional genre definitions attached to it: The books Parable of the Sower and Kindred show how Butler uses her agency to dramatize and overcome an outsider’s definition of self, and how sociological norms, even if not used currently, still affect one’s cultural and personal definition of identity. She uses the literary form of fiction to reimagine a neo-slave narrative; her books function as griot to bring to light defacto social norms from within and without her culture. Her deliberate avoidance of
traditional composition and literary definitions, and her use of metaknowledge and the personal, exemplifies the use of nommo in narrative construction⁶.

By constructing a story made of real and fictive culturally relevant elements, Butler’s narratives are an attempt to dialogue with aspects of the whole of American history, not strictly through facts, figures and dates, but through relaying the more subjective and abstract human element. Essentially, her novels are constructing a history, through a type of slave narrative, as a means to connect African Americans with their cultural past and present. And in doing so, she is able to create a community through the shared stories and traditions that all members of the group now possess. As John M. Reilly argues, as an artist she is realizing her capacity to “make history” (90). She is employing, as Certeau posits, a narrative that “promotes a selection between what can be understood and what must be forgotten in order to obtain the representation of a present intelligibility” (4). Her narratives address the academic discourse of history making

identity construction through first-person narrative, feminine protagonists and adaptation as a character strength and flaw. By assembling her stories through these lenses, Butler’s griot is meant to explore gender identity, the victim/victimizer binary and the lack of feminine acknowledgement, in an attempt to resolve personal, cultural and emotional ideals as an agent of power through the investigation of nommo. As Butler is creating a story as a griot, she is simultaneously imbuing her narrative with the griot conceit; the novel itself is griot, but also the characters are griot because, through first person narrative, they are relaying their own story.

As Butler creates a narrative that affords her stories a means of exploration, it is important to know their impetus for successful understanding. It is in this way that Butler simultaneously challenges and fortifies pedagogy and text production as she creates something new by blending the personal with historical and cultural. Butler’s narratives are griot both in terms of the narrative in its entirety, and in relation to the characters throughout the narrative. Ultimately, Butler is utilizing the griot as a means to facilitate power for a group of people, as well as individuals within that group.
Essentially, her narratives are an attempt to cohere elements from many differing West and East African tribes into what is now known as African Americans.

Previous scholarship has highlighted elements of Butler's narratives as a means of felicity, of cultural validation within the literary tradition. Hoda M. Zaki, K. Denea Steward-Shaheed, Lauren J. Lacey, Marisa Parhman, Kelley Wagers and Sarah Eden Schiff are just some of the many contemporary Butler scholars. The problem with these approaches is not only that they are based in the Post Enlightenment model in that the dissection of the work is for the search of Truth, but also shows how none of their arguments benefits or detracts from the African American cultural group. The idea is that in generating this type of an African American critical lens does nothing but allow a different viewpoint: the argument does nothing with the knowledge generated.

Previous Butler scholarship addresses the effects of Butler's narratives through particular lenses, while the storyteller is absent. The articles are about interpretation and meaning, while this essay focuses on storyteller and its implication for the group as a whole.
One of the ways to attain better understanding is to look at the griot’s reason for writing the narrative.

Hoda M. Zaki tackles the notion of how Butler's narratives contain utopian elements, but simultaneously, “also includes the less hopeful forces of anti-utopianism and ideology” (239). Although explicitly discussing utopia and dystopia, Zaki highlights how being an African-American woman, Butler's narratives are a step away from the traditional because they tackle themes such as racism and sexism, through historical revision. This is important because it shows that the impetus for Butler's writing is not for the traditional but for the community she identifies herself with and the place for the individual in it. However, Zaki’s rhetorical approach highlights elements of the author’s impetus by analyzing its elements: she has taken the parts in order to show the whole. The problem with this is that, in separating the author from the narrative, only shows how it is related and defined by the Post Enlightenment model. In other words, in an attempt to validated and describe an African American literary aspect, the argument does the opposite because it breaks from the whole as a means to show its worthiness to the Post Enlightenment model.
While K. Denea Steward-Shaheed tackles the notion that Butler’s narratives, collectively, should be read as a means to assemble counter-narratives and memories that contrast the colonial model, she gives a frame to the movement in African American fiction that seeks “to re-Member and mythically reclaim more complex representations of the American slave experience” (234). Although she highlights the need for African American authors “to assemble counter-memories that contest the colonial archive,” she does not give the means by which is being accomplished (Steward-Shaheed 233). True, she does use Toni Morrison’s notion of re-memory in that it is meant to build a community through pieces lost, but in not showing the cultural benefit of how and why the need for African American authors to assemble counter-memories, her argument does the opposite.

Lauren J.Lacey argues for a multifaceted view of power representations in Butler’s narratives. She tackles the notion of power and how it operates. She argues that Butler’s protagonists, in understanding power, “find ways to respond to it that include demystifying dominant discourses, answering to those dominant discourses with subjugated knowledges, revising aspects of the prevailing
structures and myths that do not suit them, building communities that offer alternative models to traditional hierarchies, and embracing becoming over stagnation" (380). Lacey shows what Butler’s narrative is accomplishing but does not show what this understanding of power means for the African American community or why it should matter. Similar to Steward, but focusing on the relationship to power and how it makes identity, Lacey’s arguments falls into the same trap in that here is a critical lens used by Butler in her writing, but now that the knowledge is generated, she does nothing with it.

Marisa Parham tackles the notion of engaging and teaching the difficult subject matter Butler’s narratives theme through trauma theory. While engaging Fledgling and Kindred, Parham argues that Butler’s narratives create a space where one, in acknowledging the past, creates “encounters [meant to] teach us how many have made the transition from victim to survivor” (1321). In the griot sense, Parham’s argument is for the individual that denotes an acknowledgement of the trauma as a means a shift from victim to survivor, which has implications for the group, but she does not show how the group is brought together through the recognition, or what becoming a survivor means.
Kelley Wagers argues that history itself is meta in that its roots are in the literary. She argues that Butler "force[s] modern writers into a more intimate relationship with history, as well as a new concept of community, by investigating intersections between historical knowledge and imaginative narrative" (24). The implication of her argument is that Butler's writing denotes reconciliation and presents a truthful understandable remembering of the past that is not concerned with a palatable representation for the present. The problem is that the argument is an implication: keeping this aspect of her argument as subtext, Wager never highlights why it is important for writers.

In her analysis of Kindred, Sarah Eden Schiff argues from the lens that the narrative is an attempt, by bridging the realistic representation of the antebellum south and the fantastic elements of time travel to subvert dominant notions of history and reclaim identity in the process. Schiff's essay tackles the notion of duality as she follows Dana as she "engages with and modifies not just memory but also history" (Schiff 108). But in the griot sense, duality does not exist; it is a part of the whole. Also, once again, Schiff fails to show how the knowledge generated by
this critical lens benefits the African American cultural group.

For her book *Kindred*, the narrative’s impetus is clearly meant to harmonize the community with itself and its past. While attending Pasadena City College, Octavia E. Butler, “heard some remarks from a young [African American] man” about the shame and disgust he felt for the slave generation’s acceptance of repugnant behavior from their owners (Rowell 51). Butler recalls that “[h]e felt so strongly ashamed of what the older generation had to do, without really putting it into the context,” that he would have “lik[ed] to kill all these old people who have been holding us back for so long” (Rowell 51). This gap between generational perspectives was the germ that spawned *Kindred*. Butler “wanted to take a character ... back in time to some of the things that our ancestors had to go through, and see if that character survived so very well with the knowledge of the present in her head” (Rowell 51). The idea was to bridge that generational gap presented by utilizing a character that was acting as physical, emotional and psychic link between past and present. This is griot in the sense that in the attempt to bridge the gap, she is educating, entertaining and creating community.
In the novel *Kindred*, the protagonist Dana, an African American woman, is repeatedly, forcibly and inexplicably drawn into the past, taken from her husband, Kevin, a white man, to save Rufus Weylin from death. Far removed from bicentennial 1976 Los Angeles, it is during her second trip that Dana realizes she is not only on a plantation in nineteenth century Maryland, but also is the several times removed great granddaughter of Rufus. So she must save him if her family lineage is to survive.

Time travel is key to the plot in *Kindred*. Previous scholarship has focused on the novel as it functions with the genre of science fiction. But since the particulars of how and why the time travel is accomplished are explained only vaguely explicated by Dana: "... Rufus's fear of death calls me to him, and my own fear of death sends me home," shows where the narrative's focus lies (Butler, *Kindred* 50). Time travel here the bridge that brings understanding for Dana; it is trope which brings purpose to this narrative's griot. Its inner workings are not relevant. The mechanism of how time travel works is not as important but, rather, what is paramount is how it affects Dana, the novel's protagonist. Time travel is the means through which Dana becomes educated about the past: time is not a griot,
but what she learns through time is griot. In essence, she, a modern, educated and well read African American woman, having been thrust into this openly racist system, which limits her as a slave, must become a slave in order to survive. The implication is that time itself is a delusional mask worn by Dana, a representation of African American people, offering her false protection against social norms of the past. Because we see Dana stripped of her modern, protective perspective, shows us the Panopticon at work. Dana’s story is meant to teach the reader the consequences of complacency and lack of reverence for the past. The connotation here is that even though there is a lack of proximity from the whip, this does not mean its sting is not felt. This metaphor implies that even though the past may be a horrid blight, that in being so close to you, because no matter what you have accomplished to distance yourself from it. But also it is essential for identity construction in that you cannot know who you are until you know where you come from. Essentially, Dana is the medium which “serve[s] as both recovery of repressed historical narratives and a recovery from repressed traumatic memories” (Schiff 108). In this sense, the griot’s directed activity notion of power is exhibited
through and around Dana and her movement across space and time; by being both subject, because she cannot control the time travelling, and object to it, the story itself Dana is relaying, she is both the griot’s power concept and definition: She is the griot because she is telling the story and part of the story she is telling. This relates directly with what Patricia Williams has posited in that a modern, contemporary woman has become the “historically situated subject [...] exploring how [her] knowledge has been shaped by lived experience” which means that at the very impetus of the narrative, Butler has set the stage to employ Dana as an agent for agency (8). Within the narrative griot, then Dana is the living embodiment of griot, because she has lived through the experience, she is now the keeper of the tradition. Here, agency is created because the narrative engages and “forces the reader to both participate in the construction of meaning and to be conscious of that process” (Williams 8).

There are many examples of griots working simultaneously throughout this narrative. On her third trip through time, Dana, seated in the cook house, meets Sarah the cook. Dana only refers to her by her designated occupation which denotes the distance, the gap, between
them. As the narrative progresses and Dana learns that the cook is not just one dimensional, she realizes that Sarah’s apparent social acquiescence is really a thin veneer of “[q]uiet, almost frightening anger” because of having almost all of her children sold (Butler, Kindred 76). In this sense, Dana’s temporal shifts serve as a cue, an illumination, which the actual distance between the contemporary educated woman and the pejorative, nondescript term of “slaves” is nonexistent as both are forcibly participating in a system that is out of their control. This realization requires Dana to reevaluate her judgment of Sarah who is by all contemporary accounts a ‘mammy,” a woman that would be held in contempt during the militant nineteen sixties. The house-nigger, the handkerchief-head, the female Uncle Tom—the frightened powerless woman who had already lost all she could stand to lose, and knew as little about freedom of the North as she know about the hereafter (Butler, Kindred 145).

Narratively, Sarah’s story has an implicative background for Butler: as a child, Butler would sometimes be taken to work by her mother, who worked cleaning and doing laundry
for a wealthy white family, she would sometimes hear the obviously disrespectful ways people would talk about her mother. Like Dana’s first, modern impression, Butler states that “as a child I did not blame them for their disgusting behavior, but I blamed my mother for taking it” (Roswell 51). This also has a correlation with the beginning of the novel in that moving into their new apartment, Dana states, “We were still unpacking—or rather, I was still unpacking” (Butler, Kindred 12). The implication of that simple sentence denotes that although Dana and Kevin both are writers, their roles within the marriage, unquestioned by either party, is that Dana is the domestic while Kevin works in his office. Here, Butler narrates power distribution that surrounds Dana and her awareness and perception of it. Essentially, through the mechanism of time travel, Dana is allowed to learn the truth of Sarah’s motivations for perceived social acceptance. That the perceived gap between them is a modern construction, a denial of her own cultural, social and individual past. Butler’s own story, the story of the young man at Pasadena City College, and Dana’s personal and family story, combine in the griots ‘performed’ by the novel; the literal, fictive and implied narratives are all creating the group
because they are working together: working concurrently independently and within the group in order to create a re-memory, a space where gaps between past and present no longer exist because the griots' words facilitate the bridge between, for the sake of educating, entertaining and ritualizing.

The Point of Kindred's narrative is that memory becomes reactivated the moment culture is recovered, and it therefore breeds harmony. While simultaneous, the griot's working together in Kindred have highlighted different aspects of the culture. One of them is that time itself is a delusional mask worn by Dana, a representation of African American people, offering her false protection against the social norms of the past. Dana, having judged Sarah, is made to examine her own prejudices about her own culture; harmony comes to her by the resolution of the dissonance provided by the incorrect view of the past in pejorative terms. Thereby a corrected, fuller, richer audience, and community, is created by the narrative griot. Even though she has not lived this part herself, she is capable of comprehending "that they went as best as they knew how" (Parham 1320).
Throughout Butler’s books and short stories, the themes she uses are “implicit struggle[s] for agency, authority, and power” that “revolve around explicit conflicts of will and the survival of a heroine in a community of racial and gender equality” (Bell 344). Her stories, in examining different facets of power, rework and evaluate it through the griot lens. Whether it is through the lens of slavery, race, sex, acknowledgement, or authority, her stories mean to analyze the victim/victimizer binary, and how the relationship of both parties are actually complicit in contributing to the elevation of one with denigration of the other within that panopticon. In Kindred, Dana’s act of consigning her great-grandmother to be sexually violated so that her family may survive should be considered in this context. In this instance, through Dana’s deliberate act, what Butler has done rhetorically is to frame a catch-22 situation: if she betrays her great-grandmother to Rufus, her family will continue to exist, but at what cost? If she is loyal to her great-grandmother and protects her from Rufus, is the cost greater? Dana’s morally complicit act to allow her great-grandmother to be sexually violated saves the family but the cost is the propagation of a system of enslavement.
This is the means by which those who are objects of racism and slavery contribute to the system and continue to be a part of the panoptic system. Therefore the legacy of the system is politically accommodated by those oppressed by it and shows how the enslaved Dana is not merely the victim of slavery, but complicit in it. What Butler does here is to show how an identity is shaped by not only her and her family, but also by the outside hegemonic culture. In this instance, she must come to terms with her complicit act if she is ever to reconcile with it. Essentially, being confronted by a portion of herself she must acknowledge her inner workings if she is to gain an identity. What the griot has done here is to force the reader to struggle with not only knowing the consequences of Dana’s decision, but in identifying with Dana, judging her decision she was forced to make. This is a more intimate relationship with the notion power in that “they explore both its productive and destructive potential and rarely flinch from portraying power disparities as inescapable realities of existence” (Lacey 379).

Another manifestation of griot in Butler’s work can be seen in the manner in which her protagonists utilize power through non-dominant discourse means. With their
nontraditional settings, Butler stories create worlds where women, including nonwhite women, are in positions of authority because their “power is based on extrasensory abilities...rather than on racial, sexual or national domination” (Bell 344). Butler’s protagonists do not use their power in an aggressive fashion but in an egalitarian, harmonizing way. In Kindred, Dana is the exception in that her power is not based on something extra sensory but on that she is from the future: that she is an educated anachronism. What Butler has done with Dana here is to use the nineteenth century American model of manifest destiny to show that though she has been colonized as an African American woman; educated from within that colonial system she is also the colonizer as she condemns her great-grandmother. Therefore she is propagating the very system that colonized her. Since Dana is a metaphorical representation of the African American community, her act of betrayal connotes an inductive look at the community she represents and how that society not only betrays itself, but also the consequential cost of such betrayals. In essence, the griot shows how the system costs the community its self identity which defines enslavement through a willing participatory object for slavery.
Although far removed from the antebellum society in which she currently dwells, Dana's one true physical link confirms just how far her education and modern sensibility have removed her. During her second to last trip, Rufus, now a grown man is a little drunk, finds Dana and her great-grandmother Alice eating together. Upon seeing them together, "'Behold the woman,' he said. And he looked from one to the other of us. 'You really are only one woman. Did you know that?'" (Butler, *Kindred* 228). Although time travel gives Dana a physical proximity to the past, it is her image while she is there that defines her to those that surround her. When Alice, pregnant with Rufus' child, comes to the conclusion that "we're two halves of the same woman—at least in his crazy head," it suggests that even though Dana is an anachronism, that regardless of the span of time, the hegemony, represented by Rufus, views her as half a person (Butler, *Kindred* 228). The implication, as far as identity is concerned, is that the dominant community will perceive her one specific way. And because those also subjugated by that culture must adhere to the dominant view, they will witness something similar. What Butler has accomplished here, through the metaphor, is to ask if Dana really is the other half of Alice or her own person. Once
again, the griot has placed the question for the savvy reader to answer. Of course, from the griot standpoint, the idea of stressing identity for the individual is antithetical; it appears that Butler is doing just that. Except when you take into account that it is Rufus, the hegemonic representative, that is doing the identifying. The idea that Dana and Alice are the same person does not hold because the definition does not come from the community but from outside of it.

The victim/victimizer binary shatters by the conclusion of Kindred. In the end, Rufus sends Alice’s children away to Baltimore but tells her that they were sold. Alice, in desperation, hangs herself in the barn. Dana makes her last trip to the plantation to stop Rufus from killing himself. While she is there, she talks Rufus into freeing his children and “slowly, delicately, went to work on Rufus ... push[ing] him toward freeing more of them” in an effort to accomplish some good while she was still able (Butler, Kindred 254). This is the point in the story where Dana’s modern sense of self comes to the forefront: she is no longer the victim or victimizer as she is using her own definition. Essentially what this means is that in order for her to do so, Dana must relinquish the victim
identity. Therefore because the binary is broken, a new identity must take its place. Because the very things that have defined her and in turn define him, Alice’s suicide and Dana’s self-assertion, Rufus begins losing his grip on reality. He attempts to force Dana into the role which no longer defines her by forcing her to stay so she can take Alice’s place. Dana, in the midst of her rite of passage, at the zenith, while gripping the knife she has brought with her, realizes “how easy it would be for me to continue to be still and forgive him even this” and that “it would be so hard to raise the knife, drive it into flesh I had saved so many times” (Butler, Kindred 260). Even in this moment in which Rufus needs a victim to help propagate himself a victimizer, Dana’s new-found identity wavers. The implication here is that though she is not as the hegemony would characterize her, she is not a victimizer either.

In her narratives, Butler constructs griots that highlight the plights of those that are the down-trodden of the down-trodden. But it is in the execution of the narrative that shows how and what she chooses to highlight. In Kindred it was how time travel is a trope used to bridge the gap between Dana’s actual past as opposed to her view of it. Through Lauren Olamina, Parable of the Sower
utilizes a griot that creates harmony and unity through a different means.

As the story progresses, a character's survival in *Parable of the Sower* is dependent upon flexibility. The story, set in a post-apocalyptic world of 2024 Los Angeles, uses the dichotomy between Lauren's father's generation, those hungry for nostalgia, and Lauren's, which has never known life without the protection of the wall. Because she lives in a dynamic world of change, the walled community, (a metaphor for the rigidity in which she grew up) must fall if the protagonist is to come to defining herself. As the neighborhood gets repeatedly attacked and robbed ever more boldly, her father asks her if she thinks the world is coming to an end. Lauren thinks, "No I think your world is coming to an end, and maybe you with it" (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 55). As if alarming people is worse than the ever escalating truth, her father counsels her not tell anyone this because "these things frighten people" (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 56). Her father unwillingness to acknowledge the portent of the walled community's demise shows how his rigidity ultimately leads to his downfall. It is precisely because her power lies within adaptation that Lauren is able to survive when the wall collapses. It is
her flexibility within and without the confines of the wall that allow her to become what she needs in order to be successful in her journey northward, establishing a community of her own.

In *Parable of the Sower*, Butler utilizes griot in a different way than in *Kindred*: in emphasizing what it means to be female within and without the African American culture. Not only does this notion tackle "the status of the body and its mechanisms, set in relation to both that body’s social meaning in a given present and the possibility for what it might become in the future," it also seeks to topple the inherent “men” centered lens of the patriarchal power structure (Parham 1318). This novel’s griot illustrates power’s (nommo’s) operation, in that once the protagonist understands it, “they find ways to respond to it that include demystifying dominant discourses, answering to those dominant discourses with subjugated knowledges, revising aspects of the prevailing structures and myths that do not suit them, building communities that offer alternative models to traditional hierarchies, and embracing becoming over stagnation” (Lacey 380). Essentially, this griot “sets out to reverse a pattern and history of not taking women seriously, a pattern so deeply
ingrained that it can seem natural, like mere truth” through educating, entertaining and ritual from the narrative (Parker 136-137). Once again, the audience must be aware for correct interpretation.

In *Parable of the Sower*, certain characteristics highlight the novel’s feminism. The protagonist, Lauren Olamina, because of her mother’s drug abuse, is damaged in a very specific way: she has “hyperempathy syndrome” (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 9). This syndrome is completely illusionary in that, because her “neurotransmitters are scrambled,” she empathizes, feels, what she perceives another person is feeling, but only for her is it real (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 10). This echoes the Parker quote of the previous paragraph in that the hyperempathy syndrome metaphor is a physical manifestation of the deeply ingrained pattern of the feminine; that Lauren’s perception, because it is nonlogical in the patriarchal view, and outside of her, is false because it is a subjugated, internal knowledge. This is a metaphor for how the African American cultural group is to acquire relevancy in that the griot here educates through subversion: by highlighting a supposed detriment, it emphasizes the dominant power structure’s lack and
limitation. Because of Dana’s “Other” status, she understands the dominant discourse from her unique standpoint. Her supposed lack of power forces her to work with power rather than being controlled by it. In other words, it is precisely because of her hyperempathy syndrome that she can cope and adapt.

To contrast Lauren’s hyperempathy, her brother Keith becomes her foil in that his lack of ‘female’ is the embodiment of the wall and the patriarchal in its rigidity. His constant need to “show he was a man, not a scared girl,” only exacerbates Lauren’s “Other” quality in that the harshness of the post apocalyptic world defines her ability to feel as a weakness (Butler, Parable of the Sower 82). Keith views her as weak precisely because when she fights she feels every blow “as though [she] hit [herself]” which means she cannot fight for gain but only when she “ha[s] to fight” (Butler, Parable of the Sower 10). In opposition, Keith’s ambition is “to go to the big city and make big money” but is “never to[o] clear about what he’ll do” there, which demonstrates his ambition to wield power (Butler, Parable of the Sower 8). Having run away, Keith comes back home for a visit to tell his sister that in killing a man he “fe[l]t nothing. Nobody saw [him] do it.
[He] just took his stuff and left him there” (Butler, *Parable of the Sower* 97). Keith’s apathetic darkness only lightens Lauren’s empathy. Her ability to feel for herself and others marks her as hyper-feminine in that in order to define her as such, her foil must show her to be so. The griot used here shows, by the conclusion of the narrative, that Keith’s masculine role is self-defeating and ultimately leads to a perfunctory death, while Lauren’s adaptability ultimately reveals her as a leader, shaper and creator of a community. Since she did not have to become like her brother in order to survive and thrive, Lauren’s reliance on her feminine agency is what gives her the tools that allows her to triumph and compels her to success. This is another instance in which Butler has laid, within the narrative griot, a griot characterization, which requires a reader awareness and understanding of simultaneity and multiplicity. Essentially, the griot within this narrative is teaches about the positive aspects of working “with power rather than being controlled by it” (Lacey 380). The implication is that femininity does not have to be sacrificed in order to wield power. That Lauren Olamina is a protagonist “who must survive the tension between understanding of [her body] as [her] ‘own’ and also
recognizing [her body] in relation to pasts that exceed, leak into, the present moment” (Parhman 1318). This is an instance in which the narrative is constructed in such a way as to allow Lauren to be definer and defined, wielder of power and powerless while simultaneously being a cultural representative, individual and female.

One of the conflicts in Parable of the Sower revolves around the lack of acknowledgement as a female and the lack of identity from self naming. In the alien-as-other theme, she is ostensibly marked and shown as an outsider in her own community; because she is not truly apart of the community, she cannot be because her syndrome, she must be malleable. In this story, the struggle for the power of definition, of identity, comes when Lauren stops using her father’s definition for herself. When the book begins, Lauren is trying “to please him—him and the community and God,” and is having difficulty with it because, internally, she feels like “it’s all a lie” (Butler, Parable of the Sower 3). As the story progresses, the walled neighborhood in which she enjoys relative safety is destroyed and her family is killed. It is only then that her father’s definition crumbles. Just like the walled community that held her to the definition, the outside characterization no
longer exists so she is free to define herself. It is when Lauren breaks free of the wall that she begins to thrive because she has nothing to enclose upon her a definition, so she can adapt. One of the reasons she survives is that she does not hold on to the notion of nostalgia or that she is fixed into position; she sees the world for what it is. Therefore she adapts to its changing conditions. It is this ability to adapt that gives Lauren her power. Essentially, Lauren’s griot, her Otherness, gives her the ability to acclimatize herself to the new situation once the wall of the neighborhood collapses. Once the wall no longer binds her to the community, she is free to classify herself. It is because there the wall surrounding her no longer exists, she is free to name and rename herself as she chooses.

By highlighting different characterizations, Butler here is addressing the same question from *Kindred* in *Parable of the Sower*: What does it mean to be a woman in the world that defines her? She addresses this by placing her protagonists within a harsh world that is specifically geared to antagonize—Dana’s lack of identification with slavery, Lauren’s hyper-empathy in an apathetic world—as a means to explore self identity in which the characters are constantly bombarded with outside definitions. And in order
to be successful, the characters must employ their own agencies. In this instance, each griot is exploring self definition through the larger community. After much of the span of modern African American rhetoric is a means to establish communal identity, Butler here tackles the notion of the individual within that community as it relates to power for the people and the person.

But the most crucial instance of griot in both these novels, which I have avoided until this moment, is that both the novels are written in first person, by the protagonist characters that are writers; wielders of nommo.

Although a griot in her own right, Kindred’s Dana is not propagating and promoting the community in which she currently lives, she is building, shaping and teaching through her experience about the past. We see this evidenced at the beginning of the novel, which is the end of the story. At the end of the novel, after Hagar has been born and Dana is “home” with Kevin, upon making an honest and true connection with her family’s past, and with her help facilitates its future, and having written it down in what is the novel, Dana, in relaying her story, and because as a reader I am a part of that now, builds a community out of the past toward present by bridging the two. In telling
her story, and the reader reading about it, she has now wielded nommo and imparted the tradition, the teaching and the power of the community as it once was so that I, the reader, may understand and know it now. In all of its violence, its shame and emotional baggage, the truth telling and experiential, knowledgeable voice is needed for this reconciliation. In many ways it is an American story as Dana is a representative that allows the educated, modern audience to experience slavery. But since it’s the bicentennial and she’s married to a white man that travels with her, as he is the representative of the dominant, the story itself becomes a tale of America’s past and not merely a narrative of this woman’s plight through time and the dilemma of saving herself through saving Rufus. And the way Kindred resolves, the way it unfolds, illustrates how Butler has given a possible solution to the “double consciousness” conundrum by showing a protagonist that becomes a survivor, instead of a victim, of America’s shameful past, and the role her ancestors played in it. B Because Dana becomes a part of the historical narrative rather than learning through a secondary source, in that learning through the secondary is metahistory, the reader
learns the weight of history, its importance and how it is derived from its connection to the present.

Of the two Butler novels discussed in this chapter, _Parable of the Sower_ is the most blatant, in-depth and personally griot of the two: it’s a fictional autobiography. The book’s journal entry style, with frequent confessions, has a protagonist that is struggling with using her words truthfully and correctly to create a community of Earthseed. This can be seen throughout the narrative from its very auspices, the verse on the first page of the book relays the overall theme, to Lauren’s conversion of people, the trek northward and the establishment of the Earthseed colony, called Acorn, at the end of the novel. As in the books namesakes suggests, the parable of the sower is a warning, a cautionary-tale, of anti-communal activities, actions that people take which moves them away from working and interacting with the world; actions that take away from the community. Yet it is also a rite of passage tale in which the protagonist, in an effort to create community, must first learn from the great mistake her father’s community makes in fearing what is outside the wall and hoping for a return to the past.
Different than Dana in *Kindred*, Lauren Olamina is a griot who means to create a community that works and adapts within the world as it is, not walled off, enduring and nostalgic as the Robledo neighborhood of her father. People come to her because they need a community, not for protection, but out of necessity or lack of alternative. Her father’s walled community, a foil for her own, fails because it does not answer the needs of the community, but simply satiates the fear and exacerbates the illusion of safety behind walls and illusion. Lauren’s community is movement, literally and figuratively, as she moves people toward something. Earthseed’s flexibility is the antithesis to the rigidity of her father’s in that moving within the hostile world, they are interact, adapt and overcome hostilities, not walled off in avoidance of the world, wishing, hoping and waiting for the return of some once-upon-a-time. Lauren is a griot, a storyteller, teacher and a shaper of words that creates the community needed for more than just survival. The lesson here is that for the community to thrive, it must remain a dynamic thing that interacts and adapts to the world.

With a newly found identity formed, there is a price for *Kindred’s* Dana’s gain. Although in stabbing Rufus,
Dana's final transformation into a self actualized individual is realized, the price for this is in what she leaves behind; her left arm. The implication here is that though self actualization is the aim of the story, as it is a rite-of-passage tale, it comes at a price the customer must be willing to pay. In this instance the story not only functions as an exploration into defining herself, but also as a consequential tale for anyone who witnesses the story by reading it. The mythology that Butler creates in this story is a means to find a resolution for the quest for home, an abstract concept which offers security and happiness is a physical representation of "a place where something flourishes" (Concise OED 681). In essence, her search for identity is the underlying impetus, the motivation, of defining her role in the African American culture.

At the end of each of these stories, as far as defining themselves, the protagonists come to an identity resolution. Though the definitions they arrive at are always helped along by the circumstances in which they find themselves, the aim of the novels is for the characters to navigate, come up with strategies, through their respective Otherness to voice their concerns and problems. As actions
speak, it is precisely the protagonist’s ability to change, to break the victim/victimizer binary that allows a modified self definition to actively shape them. In essence, the circumstances they are thrust in only exacerbate their intrinsic qualities, allowing what is inherent to aid their survival. So Mahala and Swilky’s assertion is because Butler has “[broken] down the public-private dichotomy by activating feelings suppressed by traditional academic discourses,” by being not identifying herself as such is what she has employed (2). Butler’s notion of power is directly related to the reader’s participation. It is in this sense that power of the culture is created through the give and take of the story teller and listener to create the community.
The previous chapter discussed how Butler’s narrative griot employs the first-person personal, the feminine and adaptation in order to create harmony within and throughout the community. John Edgar Wideman’s narrative griot takes a different approach in that it tells the story by highlighting multifaceted time through third-person present, voicelessness and free-indirect discourse.

At the core of the lexical griot critical lens is in identifying how, where and by what means the narrative is bringing about cohesion from within and throughout the community to educate, entertain and uphold tradition. It is through coming together that harmony is created; therefore the culture is actualized and preserved because traditions are being observed.

John Edgar Wideman scholarship hones in on a particular feature of Wideman’s work, while supplicating the larger picture: they look at pieces of Wideman’s narratives, as they relate to the African American community, in an effort to explicate how those aspects
relate or explain the said community; a move that is predicated on the Enlightenment analytical model. Once again, as previously stated, the traditional default model, which allows one to analyze a portion for the understanding of the whole, is being utilized for the sake something that stems from a view in which elements are not separate and cannot be separated. Essentially, they have, in highlighting respective African American cultural aspects, subverted the narrative’s griot by removing the power of the relationship of the teller and listener. The articles, in an effort to show how they relate to the African American community, in fact do the opposite because the griot literary model is, at its core, about the unifying and harmonizing through the power nommo that it creates from within the community.

But African American literary critical lenses are not always about cohesive harmonizing through and for the sake of the community. Previous Sent for You Yesterday and Damballah scholarship emphasizes analysis predicated on the Enlightenment dissecting model in which elements, African American specifics, are pulled from the whole in a quest to discover Truth. John Bennion argues how the correlation of memory, time and character is present in this nonlinear
narrative style in which "time loop[s] rhythmically and point of view shift[s] rapidly" in Sent for you Yesterday (143). He shows how readers know about events before they happen, then re-experience them through another character; how past and present happening and working simultaneously layer the narrative. Because he has taken the elements out of the story to explain the story, as these are the tools a griot utilizes for communication, it is not griot because it is separate from its whole. In showing how it is a non-linear narrative, for the auspices of education, there is no tradition upheld.

Claudia Benthien's article discusses the dichotomy of ethnicity highlighted in the novel's albino character, Brother Tate, as he is a representative ambiguity of Otherness in which "the absence of color makes the body into something transparent and radically open to interpretation" (3). Closer to the griot lens, Benthien's argument highlights the social implications of Brother Tate's physical presence. By highlighting only this specific aspect of the story, instead of emphasizing in relation to the entire story, or to the people it is meant for, Benthien pulls it away from the whole which makes it fragmented.
Yves-Charles Grandjeat argues that the trap of binary thinking, concerning DuBois’ double consciousness, is not an either/or proposition. He argues that the combinations Wideman “weaves together [are] a heterogeneous, baroque fabric which includes elements of African mythology, the blues, Shakespearean drama, modernist fiction ... to name but a few” (618). This article demonstrates an answer, through Wideman’s writing, to the double consciousness dilemma. The idea being that all these combinations and doublings actually work together, creating something new each time a new double appears. Akin to syncopation in jazz, in which the characters are in some way go between’s from each supposed point on the binary, Grandjeat shows how the elements push and pull, with and against each other, while working together. By moving beyond the dichotomous either/or aspect of double consciousness, Grandjeat shows how one double begets another, not the answer to rectify the dichotomies.

Sheri I. Hoem characterizes the differences between pre and postmodern representations of the community elder. She argues that “Wideman’s writing both summons and undermines a nostalgic recuperation of the elder and racial continuity” by citing how New Historicists Stephen
Greenblat and Hayden White show that the text is known by many pasts (250). Hoem's argument highlights the trap of binary thinking can lead. But in highlighting one, specific point, because Wideman's griot narratives do not strictly adhere to this specific viewpoint, of what should be presented for nostalgic reconstruction to premodern values, other equally valuable aspects are lost. Also, her argument fails to show how the premise benefits the African American community.

Denise Rodriguez argues that Sent for You Yesterday is a “postmodern revision of [Ralph Ellison's Invisible Man which] marks a critical departure in the evolving tradition of black urban fiction” through Wideman’s use of music and invisibility as tropes (127). Through Henry Louis Gates Jr.’s Figures in Black, the purpose of the article is to show that the “historical changes that alter our environment and, by extension, our relationship to and perceptions of that environment, in turn cause us to reevaluate our surroundings through their literary representation” (128). The article emphasizes the difference between subjective and objective reading. Although there is a griot element in retelling a story, Rodriguez breaks from the unifying and harmonizing aspect
by examining the connotations induced by the tropes used to describe the city, yet upholds them by invoking the ancestral narrative of Ellison. By not addressing the narrative itself, and stressing abstracts of the narrative, Rodriguez pulls away from the griot lens in favor of a post colonial.

Sent For You Yesterday and Damballah are two parts of the Wideman’s Homewood Trilogy. Each novel consists of a third of the story’s entirety. Representing Homewood in thirds, through a series of short stories, allows Wideman to explore different facets of the harmonization of the community as it relates to the larger. Addressing the community through the stories of its members shows not only the commonality of the people, but also shows how each story relates in and through other stories, while relating to the bigger picture of Homewood. Wideman accomplishes this by utilizing tropes of the African American culture, which gives Homewood a more suggestive rather than objective frame: for meaning to occur, the reader must know the referent’s intent as well as the cultural implications. This makes the reader a part of the narrative as it engages in a dialogue with the trope, in which the metaphors and themes, instead of being distanced by
objectivity, become that of the reader because there is some assertion from the reader in the making of meaning. The overall encompassing Homewood narrative illustrates the push/pull effect of establishing identity between the community and those that reside in it. In essence, “each individual text in the series moves toward a reconciliation between the individual and his/her society” as a means to not only highlight the paradoxical nature of the black community’s fragility and resilience, but also to situate the reader, the listener, as member of the community because they now know the stories (Rodriguez 134). Wideman’s utilization of multiple griots allows for the larger narrative to be told.

Different griots tell stories in different ways for different reasons. One of the hallmarks of a narrative is in how time is utilized. Past, Present and future often coincide through multi-character third person explication that gives the narrative an objective quality while utilizing something more internal and personal. What this does is creates an intimacy, a personal knowing, from within, and throughout, the community: that though it is this one person’s story, it effects and concerns all others within the community. Because the audience is aware of
things before they happen and because characters speak of events before they were born means that there is a reconciliation with the past, present and future, which creates the community while it educates, entertains and cultural norms are upheld. This unique time feature makes the narrative nonlinear, in the traditional sense.

In *Sent For You Yesterday*, time is observed in a special way. The first narrator is Doot who is both a small child and a grown man in Homewood. At the beginning of the book is the young Doot explicating some background information about the characters Brother Tate and why he does not speak, his uncle Carl French, and how Doot became his nickname, all before the narrative actually begins, or Doot is even born. In relaying what has happened before, Doot implies that it has bearing on current narrative. This shows that linear time itself is irrelevant. Further, it shows that the "time" in which it happened, the moment the story was created and told, is of importance. In other words, because Doot is "linked to Brother Tate by stories, by his memories of a dead son, by [his] own memories of a silent, scat-singing albino man who was my uncle’s best friend," for correct understanding, the whole of the story of before, now and after must told (Wideman 17). Further,
as Doot is the narrator, it also entails that Brother Tate and Carl French cannot relay the story, which implies that they are not able to be griot because they are culturally incompetent, incapacitated or no longer a member of the community. Yet simultaneously, because Doot is relaying the story presently, it is his story as well.

Time is also a factor in how the background information is relayed before the story, which shows how the griot will operate throughout the narrative. Doot’s knowledge is one example which establishes, through the ritual of storytelling, therefore he is linked and culturally educated through the community which means it is just as much his story as any other person within the culture. The implication is that when he begins the narrative, he is the griot because the reader is now the listener of his tale, which means that through the act of imparting knowledge he has obtained through stories, whether he was actually present or not, is immaterial; because he is speaking the words, he is creating something therefore he must know. Subsequently, because the reader is listening, they become a part of the community because it is now their story.
Throughout the narrative, clues as to time's ambiguity can be found. This indistinction can be found even at the sentence structure level. The opening line of the narrative, "I am not born yet," demonstrates many layers (Wideman 17). Doot's declaration communicates where the narrator is situated within this story as he speaks out of linear time sequence. This first person omniscient approach to narration allows Doot to speak with the authority of those that had been present. It also gives weight, validation, to his story because it comes from the community, which makes him the voice of the community. Secondly, the word "yet" identifies Doot as part of the story just not its whole, and shows how the story is not finite with him. Thirdly, the sentence is constructed in the present tense, which would mean that it is happen presently. What this means is that though Doot is referring to things that have happened, things that will happen, as he is relaying it, it is happening presently. Wideman's use of ambiguous time, that time is nebulous and perspective based, highlights the community building and harmonizing aspect of griot while it educates and upholds traditions. This is further echoed in his use of voice.
Further layered in the narrative is Wideman’s use of voice. Traditionally, voice is a characterized as “an opinion or attitude, or means or agency by which it is expressed (Oxford CED 1628). This is to say that voice is the authority by which one speaks and is validated by others. But more than that, in a narrative, voice is the “distinctions between kinds of narrator in terms of how they address the reader” (Baldick 273). This is largely an objective standpoint in which the ‘speakers’ tone, style and personality color the perception of events within the novel. In the griot sense, voice is characterized as the means through which the harmonizing and unity are constructed. E.g. how does Doot relaying the story help bring reconciliation and unity to the group, and to those that read the narrative? Does Brother Tate, through absence of voice, tell the tale differently? How does Sent For You Yesterday’s voice fit within the Homewood Trilogy? The answer is that Wideman does so through absence.

Wideman’s use of voice is through deficiency and lack. Sent For Yesterday’s Brother Tate, the muted, albino African American, is just one representation of voice, or its lack, throughout the narrative. His silence is not defined in the traditional sense in that he does not speak,
but he “hum[s] and grunt[s] and groan[s]... scat sing[s] and imitate[s] all the instruments in a band” (Wideman 16). The difference being illustrated here is in that he is not speechless, he is voiceless. The distinction is in the reasoning behind voice itself: of being heard, understood and validated through the listener. Essentially, because he does not speak, but does communicate, only highlights what he cannot say or is unable to say. Brother Tate is griot in the sense that his rhythmic vocalizations, and his subsequent christening of Doot, show that though he does not use words he is a wielder of nommo. Yves-Charles Grandjeat argues that Brother Tate brother “has rhythm—or should one say that the brother is rhythm?” is only partially correct in that in his sound making, he has moved beyond the limitations of traditional words (616). The implication here is that Brother Tate’s voiced authority is not determined by words strictly in the traditional sense but in the rhythms in which his ‘listens,’ including the readers of the narrative, would “hear the silent music making wiggle his narrow hips... like the sanctified sisters moaning their way to heaven” (Wideman 16). This African American albino, a noise making voiceless man, operates through his physicality-lack; he exemplifies that nommo’s
power is not made finite by the traditional hegemonic sense of voice communication.

But Brother Tate’s voicelessness is also multifaceted. Being a tangible representation of “Other,” Brother Tate is a literal, physical depiction of the slippery social definition; his absence of color makes him a living, breathing illustration of the black/white binary. Because he can be seen and touched means he must be interacted with him instead of as an abstract idea: Brother Tate’s absence of voice and color only exacerbates Otherness. He directs “the reader’s attention to the dual stage on which the novel unfolds—one for seeing and one for sounding” (Grandjeat 616). Being the metaphorical syllepsis, in that one thing that is simultaneously applied twice, his physical presence and his broken-silence shows as a representative of the community and an outsider of it.

Voicelessness is not a character trait strictly of Brother Tate. An example of voiced characters being voiceless can be found in the novel’s prelude. Two nameless characters are explicating a dream and why it is frightening. The prelude’s entirety is unquoted dialogue, the implication being that though there are two individuals speaking, and without a way to ascertain who is talking,
the reader must discern the conversation by the tropes and elements present. The dreamer, later to be determined as Carl French, says that what scared him "[c]ouldn't put it in words then and can’t now. Ain’t no words for it, but I knew why. See, cause I wanted to scream. I wanted to cut loose and tell somebody how scared I was" (Wideman 10). Here, Carl French echoes Brother Tate’s voicelessness in that the traditional words fail him when he needs to express his fear. It is only a scream that would adequately articulate his voice. Interestingly, he does not scream “cause you know if you make a sound you’re gone” (Wideman 17). This shows that although he shares in Brother Tate’s voicelessness, he is voiceless because he chooses not to speak. It is for this reason he is not a griot because he will not, cannot wield nommo.

The voiced but voiceless aspect can also be found in Damballah. There are characters throughout the novel that exhibit African traditions through language, therefore they are griot, but not necessarily through the traditional voiced means. The difference is, these characters are wielders of nommo, but those in their cultural group choose not to listen. One of the novel’s overall themes is the juxtaposition of different griot characters in relation to

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the Homewood culture and the consequences for being so. Essentially, consequences are suffered when the griot and dominant discourses conflict, leaving the griot’s knowledge lost or fragmented. An example can be seen in the first short story which encompasses Orion, as he calls himself, or Old Ryan, as others call him, as he still holds African traditions and wishes to impart them before they are lost. As previously stated, naming is paramount to identity making. Orion’s dismissal of the dominant discourse’s Old Ryan moniker marks him as a dissident to the hegemony and a griot because he is using language to name himself. But he is also branded by his own community. When Aunt Lissy states that “Ryan, he a crazy nigger. One of them wild African niggers act like he fresh off the boat. Kind you stay away from less you looking for trouble,” she is voicing the community’s allegiance to the dominant discourse (Wideman 18). The consequence of his griot actions are that he is branded crazy by both the hegemony and his culture, which further ostracizes him as Other. Working through opposites, this narrative shows how the community is complicit in its own demise through the acceptance of the dominant discourse; how being branded Other is not strictly the work of the hegemony but of those
subject to it. The implication here is how the community
gave up itself for the sake survival and the quelling of
fear. The cohesion of the community only develops as an
answer to Orion's griot Otherness: a narrative of
inversion, the African is lost, the griot is lost, because,
although there is cohesion for the community, traditions
and education have vanished.

Voice also plays a part in the narrative's
articulation through Orion. Part of being a griot means
that Orion must tell the stories in order to pass them on
for the propagation of the community. He chooses a
character only defined as "the boy" who is fascinated by
Orion and watches him fish. The articulation of Orion's
story never comes from verbal contact. Rather, "Orion's
eyes on him and through him boring a hole in his chest and
thrusting into that space one word Damballah" articulates
the power of the word through and in action into "the
boy" (Wideman 20). It shows how, in a single word, Orion was
able to educate and uphold tradition. In that instance "the
boy," "[e]ven the words inside him have no clear referent,
for the sounds may be coming from Orion or the boy himself
as they are perceived," becomes not only a part of the
community once lost, but also a griot in that he now
possess the word (Hoem 252). The griot here is explicating that even though there is an active agency, within and without the community, working against the word and its power, there is culture present.

Related to multifaceted time through third person present and voice, the Damballah narrative also utilizes Free Indirect Discourse (FID). FID is traditionally defined not only as "a manner of presenting the thoughts or utterances of a fictional character as if from that character's point of view by combining grammatical and other features of the character's 'direct speech' with features of the narrator's 'indirect' report," but also as a "form of statement [which] allows a third-person narrative to exploit a first-person point of view, often with a subtle effect of irony" (Baldick 101-102). Simply put, "FID is a special technique, or style, used by narrators to convey what a character (in many cases, but certainly not always, a fictional character) thinks or says" as a means to blend the perspective of the narrator, the author and in some sense, the reader (Sharvit 353).

But FID has abstract implications in that, because it precludes verbal and non verbal mental events, it is representative. Instead of asking "Who is speaking?" FID
highlights perceptions, thoughts and feelings that inform the world within and without the work. It is used "to seek to provide answers for questions concerning specific utterances... such as: Whose words? Whose thoughts? Whose perceptions are these?" (Ron 18). It is a narrative style that demands a great deal from the reader in that the text "construct[s] and challenge[s] a critically aware narratee who is embedded within the text" (Lilienfeld 45). It is a style in which readers are asked to make sense of the text by drawing on their knowledge of histories, social construction and time periods thereby creating an intertextual connection between the reader and the text. Toni Morrison defines it as a way "[t]o make the story appear oral, meandering, effortless, spoken—to have the reader feel the narrator without identifying that narrator, or hearing him or her knock about, and to have the reader work with the author in the construction of the book—is what's important. What is left out is as important as what is there" ("Rootedness" 341). Essentially, FID is a way to explain a narrator that is both inside and outside the text simultaneously: it is as if the book is telling its story as the reader reads it. In that way FID is both oral and written in the sense that it maintains an aspect of orality.
of current "now" narrative presence through the written word. This makes the work both a passive-object of the reader's gaze and an active-subject that engages the reader by response making that narrative a spoken text. So by its representational aspect, FID unifies the reader with the text. Wideman's griot not only uses FID this way as a means to educate, entertain, and uphold tradition, but also to represent the culture, not report the culture, through the Other voice as it relates to the community.

In Damballah, FID is utilized through voice, and multi-facetted third person present time. The novel itself, as well as the stories it contains, are constructed so that the reader must assert their knowledge into the text for there to be meaning. For instance, the last story of the novel is titled The Beginning of Homewood. This is significant in that last story in Damballah, the third and last novel of the Homewood Trilogy, is the beginning of the whole story's entirety. In this personal story, personal in the sense that it is a directly addressed confessional to Wideman's incarcerated brother as an explanation of why the Homewood Trilogy was written, attempts to link the crimes of Sybela Owens, the escaped slave and the Homewood matriarch, and Wideman's brother, Robby. The griot in this
story shows how, in his need to connect the root with the branch, Wideman “felt the need to tell it” because “I was too close to you [Wideman’s brother Robby] and she [Sybela] was too far away” (Wideman 195). What this illustrates is that the trilogy’s voice, as a whole, was meant as a resolution, a harmony, for reconciliation with his family’s past and present: that the story must be told simply because it educates, entertains and upholds, as well as, creates tradition. In others words, by telling the story, Sybella’s story, Robby’s story that is also Wideman’s story, Wideman shows how it is also the readers story because it is being told to them. In this sense, Wideman’s personal narrative account demonstrates that the Homewood Trilogy is both passive-object and active-subject because of its voice, its presence in time and how the reader is required to be involved.

At its core, the griot critical lens is about harmonizing through education, entertainment and upholding traditions. John Edgar Wideman’s Sent For You Yesterday and Damballah uses his own family history as a way to bridge the gap, and to make sense of, his brother’s incarceration. The idea is that through voice, or its lack, the stories, as well as the characters, highlight areas where the
culture lacks, is lost, is found, is left and is picked up. Wideman utilizes nommo's power in a way to reconcile the whole story for the listener, as a means to craft a community through the culture it creates by those that read it.
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