1. The Dilemma of a Ghost: Early Black American Literature and Its Mournings/Moorings

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From eighteenth-century Afro-British American works like Olaudah Equiano’s *The Interesting Narrative* to twentieth-century West African playwright Christina Ama Ata Aidoo’s *The Dilemma of a Ghost*—first performed in Ghana in 1964—themes of restoration and harmony are central to the literatures of the African Diaspora. Ultimately, the critical import of Aidoo’s play is its attention to motherhood, the double bind of victimization and agency, marriage, naming, cohesive and fractured Africanness, unreconciled strivings, memory, myths of the wayfarer, the been-to, motherless children, ancestors, prodigal sons and daughters, routes and roots, slavery, freedom, black and white, lightness and darkness, fruitfulness and barrenness, and life and death itself. These are themes that are captured in the concept of mourning/mooring. The dynamic thrust of this work resonates throughout history as it responds intertextually to the call of eighteenth-century Afro-British American writers who first stood at the junction of the transatlantic triangle, caught between worlds that represented equally binding personal, communal, political, and aesthetic dilemmas—all related to self and identity.
Mourning/Mooring

Mourning/mooring signifies a range of figurative and literal expression used to describe the dilemma posed by inescapable cycles of conflict and accord. As a symbol, the metaphor of mourning/mooring captures the phenomenon of an imagined but nonetheless real state of lost African consciousness. Further, mourning/mooring suggests the deep sense of loss that pervades African consciousness in its attempts to reconnect with African ways of knowing, or the traditional systems of knowledge based on African worldviews that cohere and transform over time and space. Indeed, from displaced African to disenfranchised and marginalized Afro-British American, the black writers in this study underscore the point that their New World survival depends on successfully utilizing and adhering to nearly every aspect of their mourned African and non-African worldviews—fragmented or not—as these shards provide valuable tools with which to endure.

Mourning and mooring are posited as interrelated terms utilized to render explicit the constructed nature of Africa in African American literature and literary theories. My linking of these terms signifies simultaneously on both the method and motives for such refitting. Mooring denotes the process of being anchored or secured to a particular grounded position. A ship or other type of sea vessel is considered moored when it is anchored to or in a particular place. Unlike being docked—stationed at a specific place for a short time—when a ship is moored, it is secured firmly in place and is not likely to move for a long time. Correlatively, moor connotes the imbedded negativity affixed to the term as universal signifier of racial, social, and geographical darkness. This association with darkness speaks to the interrelatedness of mooring with mourning. Hence, the attachment to African values grounded in indigenously derived origins that mooring is meant to suggest is attended by a profound sense of loss that its complementary term “mourning” invokes.

Mourning denotes a sorrow over the loss of someone or something very dear or a longing for that someone or something. This inward mourning is usually manifested by some visible physical sign. There are representations of mourning in all forms of life: Animals “pine” and plants are said to grieve figuratively when they “droop” or “hang down.” For early African Americans, singing certain types of spirituals was considered a visible sign of mourning not only for the loss of a loved one in physical death but also for the loss of their freedom and their familial
ties as a result of slavery. The implicit comparison between questing for and identifying with a seemingly unrecoverable African consciousness and the immeasurable sense of loss and displacement that mourning connotes in my use of the term “mourning/mooring” is manifested in eighteenth-century literature through the integration of fragments that signify African worldviews.

Hence, my use of the slash signifies a reciprocal and fluid relationship between the two terms. Indeed mourning/mooring calls attention to our reliance on and negotiation of fragmented but nonetheless integrated interpretive strategies to construct and therefore interpret black American literature. Because interpretive renderings presume the existence of certain values and systems of knowledge, the translation of the texts and contexts associated with such literature insists upon our reliance on those structures and ways of knowing that are both indigenous and exogenous to the cultures that transmit these literary modes of expression.

The Dilemma of a Ghost

*The Dilemma of a Ghost* is a play about the marriage of Ato Yawson and Eulalie Rush, young people from two different cultures, countries, and continents—black American and continental West African, United States and Ghana, North America and Africa—who meet and marry while attending college in the United States. The play opens with a curious prologue by a mythical narrator—The Bird of the Wayside—whose cryptic poem and dialogue narrate the history of and foreshadow problems that befall the Odumna clan (Ato’s family). A significant aspect of the family’s history has to do with sacrifices that have been made by Ato’s family to send him to university in the West and the expectations the family has upon his return.

Certainly, the family understood that such forfeitures as their land and “family heirlooms” (70; Act 3) were investments in the security and wealth of the entire Odumna clan. At the very least, the community expected that Ato’s return would “mean the paying off of all the debts” (41; Act 1). However, as the Wayside Bird reminds us: “The Day of Planning is different from the Day of Battle” (2). The reality of this difference is evident when Ato returns home with an (unannounced) American wife, who is referred to as a “Black-white woman[, a] stranger and a slave” (53; Act 2). Moreover, it is believed that Eulalie’s habit
of spending all their money “buying cigarettes, drinks, clothes and machines” (73; Act 4) is the reason the family remains in debt. Even more appalling to his family is the fact that Ato has completely disregarded the traditional role of family in one’s marriage. Ato’s mother, Esi Kom, laments that “these days one’s son’s marriage affair cannot always be one’s affair” (79; Act 4). Either unable or unwilling to comprehend her grandson’s apparent amnesia concerning traditional customs and behavior, Nana insists that “it may be so in many homes. Things have not changed here” (79; Act 4). To the contrary, much indeed has changed, and in their very home. There can be no doubt that Ato’s actions make clear that he views marriage and childbearing as a matter of personal rather than communal concern.

More problematic is his failure to properly fulfill his responsibility as cultural interpreter and mediator. His failure to explain the cultural significance and importance of childbearing to Eulalie, even after she repeatedly questions him on this subject, coupled with his refusal to admit to his family that he and his wife have decided to “postpone having children” (37; Prelude), create a complicated situation for all parties concerned. Believing his wife to be barren, the entire family (including his mother, sister, uncles, aunts, and grandmother) appear at the apartment of Ato and Eulalie prepared to “wash her stomach with [medicine]” (81; Act 4) and perform ritual libations and offer prayers to ward off evil spirits who are preventing conception. Once again, even when presented with the opportunity to set the record straight, rather than admit his deliberate and egregious violation of cultural taboos, he lies. Ato responds to their questions by repeatedly insisting that nothing is wrong. Consequently, Ato’s been-to cultural ambivalence and amnesia are exposed, as the gap between his American wife and his African family widens. Moreover, for Eulalie, this failure to explain to his family why she and Ato haven’t had children is the final straw that exacerbates already existing marital conflict. The tensions within their marriage escalate into violence after a heated argument, during which Ato slaps Eulalie after she refers to “his people” as “narrow-minded savages” (87; Act 5).

Upon hearing about their fight, Esi Kom chides her son harshly for failing to deal fairly with either his wife or his family, warning that he has offended the ancestors by abusing this motherless child. Ultimately, it is Esi Kom who embraces Eulalie and accepts her into the family, and by extension the African community. Not surprisingly, it is Ato who is left standing in the middle of the courtyard, like the ghost at the Elmina Junction, not knowing which way to go.
Throughout this five-act play Aidoo uses the metaphor of the ghost differently to expose the sense of lostness that pervades not only issues of family and marriage at the local level, but also the global dilemma of cultural divides between continental Africans and African-descended people throughout the Diaspora. Like the problems that trouble the marriage of Ato and Eulalie, intercultural, familial, and intracultural impasses are grounded in conflicting views of history from both sides of the Atlantic. As the worlds within the play microcosmically collide, characters are revealed through ghostly visitations with their former selves, their ancestors, or the imaginary realms within which they attempt to reconstitute missing pieces of their fragmented worlds. For example, Ato’s confusion about his proper place upon his returning home to Ghana is exposed through a recurring dream about “two children in the courtyard singing [a] song about the ghost who did not know whether to go to Elmina or to Cape Coast” (62; Act 3). The boy in the dream is a “ghost of Ato’s former self” (29; Characters) and the crossroads at which the “wretched ghost” (61; Act 3) stands—Elmina and Cape Coast—are both former European (Portuguese and Dutch) settlements and slave-trading forts in this region of Africa.

Likewise, Eulalie is haunted by conversations between “the voices of her mind” (54; Act 2) and her dead mother. Sadly, these spectral voices do little to comfort one who mourns the loss of “someone she loves and knows to tell things to and laugh with” (55; Act 2). Instead, these otherworldly voices remind Eulalie of the sacrifices and suffering of a mother whose “hands [were] chapped with washing to keep [her] in College” (55; Act 2), the inability to “make a family out of Harlem,” and her disgust with “the whole of the States. . . . Congress, Jew and white trash, from Manhattan to Harlem” (55; Act 2). Even the reminder that she has returned to the “very source”—the Africa of her dreams—is of little comfort, as the “rumble of [real African] drums” (56; Act 3) contradicts her exotic African fantasies. However, it is the veiled conversations between two village women—under the mantle of harmless gossip about Ato, Eulalie, and the entire Odumna clan—that most vividly capture the dilemma of a ghost. Uncannily echoed are such societal predicaments as barrenness, fertility, prosperity, poverty, and, most tellingly, the antagonistic and seemingly infertile marriage of African and Western cultures.

Therefore, both in her creation of characters and in her depiction of the contexts in which such characters and worlds confront one another, Aidoo’s ghosts echo similar forces at work in the Africa and
Afro-America of the sixties—the historical period in which this play is written. Civil disobedience in the form of riots, sit-ins, school boycotts, rent-strikes, the formation of activist organizations such as the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), black nationalist organizations from UNIA Garveyites to Nation of Islam Muslims, as well as increased student activism on college campuses such as NYU, the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, police brutality and judicial abuses, are only some of the historical events that mark the literal landscape of Eulalie’s Harlem. Like the 1960s Afro-American worlds of political unrest and cultural maladies from which Eulalie retreats, Ghana, too, is plagued by apparitional forces that signify struggles to maintain cultural and economic independence.

This newly independent national is dealing with failed political expectations, unemployment, overwhelming taxes, and a troubled African leadership—most strikingly manifested in such figures as Kwame Nkrumah (Ghana’s first leader after its independence in 1957). Supported by funds raised from a poor Ghanaian family to send him to the United States to study at the university, and embraced by black Harlemites during his meager years in the United States, the dilemmas that aspects of Nkrumah’s complex life reveal are explored in the imaginary life of Aidoo’s Ato. Consequently, the relatively limitless problems unearthed in *The Dilemma of a Ghost* are made possible through both the dynamic structure and the multidimensional characters in Aidoo’s dilemma tale. Indeed, the list of paradoxes, quandaries, and mind-boggling predicaments are revealed through the fertile soil in which Aidoo plants the numerous seeds of discord, harmony, and irresolvable tensions her characters and their worlds confront.

Thus, in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Aidoo’s first play, the lack, want, failed expectations, and barrenness that weigh down the figurative world of ghosts in the play are not coincidentally those that also trouble Ghanaian and Afro-American society. Ato, Eulalie, the Odumna clan, people of the village, the community, the Wayside Bird, and the ancestors find themselves embroiled in chilling and alarming economic, cultural, and national crises. Put simply, Aidoo’s *Dilemma* provides a model for locating, unbinding, and articulating a black aesthetic that spans historical, geographic, political, inter- and intracultural divides, and, most importantly, one in which both continental Africa and the African Diaspora are equally troubled and considered—though necessarily from different cultural and critical landscapes.

Like Ato, the early black authors in this study remained ambivalent at times about what it meant to be an African. Like the Wayside
Bird, white-black woman Eulalie, the Odumna clan, and the developing African diasporas throughout the Black Atlantic, they, too (eighteenth-century black authors), mourned/moored their African, British, American, and Afro-British American selves as they attempted to recover, invent, and rename a place for themselves within a newly constructed Africa. Like Eulalie, they conversed with voices that beckoned them to an imagined African homeland. Like Esi Kom, we bring them—however problematically—back to our community.

Paradox of Mourning/Mooring

The restoration to which Aidoo’s *Dilemma* draws our attention in her play is neither as easily recognizable nor as attainable as it might seem. For African-descended peoples the concept of cultural reconciliation and recuperation of what was lost during the horrific era of transatlantic slavery—before, during, and after the Middle Passage—requires bringing up the dead to invoke the living. Thus, the ghosts of these enslaved, disfigured, maimed, displaced, and misnamed African peoples summon celebratory memorializing and re-memory of lost origins. Paradoxically, however, the ghosts of these African ancestors also dredge up and invoke sorrow and madness at those things that are wholly unrecoverable. Accordingly, the struggle to mitigate such overwhelming loss, and in a manner that loss itself neither names nor paralyzes African people, is a taxing and complicated one. For one thing, the invocation of ghosts, and the ancestral fragments and connections they offer to an otherworld, entails a complex braiding of multiple and fractured knowledge and interpretive strategies. For another, such weaving also—more often than not—compels Africans to reenter the Middle Passage, the place of rupture, metaphorically, figuratively, physically, psychically, and most of all cautiously. Herein rests a menacing dilemma. Such a return not only requires inhabiting deep and inconsolable spaces at the initial sites of devastation. Middle Passage reentry also entails confronting and further confounding an already difficult and frighteningly complex web of terror. In so doing, one risks entering a maze from which one may not wholly emerge.15

From these abysmal and unbounded depths eighteenth-century black American literature has emerged, bequeathing a historical legacy that continues to rise.16 The distinctive and unmistakable imprint of the Middle Passage can be seen in early black writers’ expressed attempts to document their historical quests and yearnings for simultaneous
connection and disconnection with and from Africa, Europe, and Afro-British America.

In fact, the paradox of collective yearnings for and objectification of seemingly unrecoverable African ways of knowing is an unconscious theme underlying many central motifs in early black American literature. Henry Louis Gates Jr. explores a simultaneous yearning and objectification in his articulation of one of the oldest literary motifs, the talking book trope. The talking book illustrates the underlying desire for lost African orality in the call for a speaking text that starkly contrasts the black slave’s need for literacy. Because orality is simultaneously absent and present in the written text, the book mocks literacy. In Gates’s terms, the talking book “reveals . . . the curious tension between black vernacular and the literate white text . . . the paradox of representing, of containing somehow, the oral with the written” (Signifying Monkey, 131–32; emphases mine). I emphasize the paradox of representing in the passage above to underscore the inextricable and problematic link between interpretation and representation for black writers.

One of the earliest dilemmas faced by Afro-British American writers was the problem of representing themselves, and since written expression was an important mode of representation, they necessarily confronted the conflict that the disconnect between orality and literacy posed for oral people in a literate world. First, they externalized or objectified both written and spoken language—demonstrating their awareness of the need to contend with this problem. Second, rather than merely mocking (or attempting to contain) the written within the oral, or its converse, they represented both forms of communication as desirable and necessary bridges between the different worlds—African and non-African—in which they lived. In so doing, early black writers symbolically engaged and acknowledged aspects of both worlds to which they were moored even as they mourned their limited access to either.

Hence, in addition to its metaphoric use, mourning/mooring doubles as a concept which highlights the unifying potential of engaging and theorizing the dilemma of self and identity in early black American literature. Specifically, this term suggests a doubled intertextual relationship in the notion of link and loss—or what might be termed an intratextual integration. For not only is there a link between the literature of these displaced Africans and their homeland, but also, more importantly, that link is directly attributable to a sense of loss of African consciousness. This sense of loss is amplified as Africans attempt to negotiate their lived experiences in a world that is completely contradictory to many
principles contained in African worldviews, whether on the cosmological or material level. These early black writers’ manipulation of Western language reveals an understanding of Western worldviews as well as an awareness of the tension and the contradictions between African worldviews and their lived experiences in the New World.

The works of Phillis Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano provide exemplary models and positions (Senegalese and Igbo) from which to view the competing contradictions inherent in the integration of African consciousness into early Afro-British American literature. To begin with, for each of these writers African consciousness suggests an awareness of one’s self as fundamentally African and essentially human. What is more, both Wheatley and Equiano assert this Africanness as a necessary stage in their development as Christians and as colonial American citizens. Africa occupies a critical space in the rhetoric, reason, and roots (routes) of each of these eighteenth-century authors—in the various ways he or she has constructed or imagined it. Certainly their respective works, though to different degrees, confront the ethical impasse one reaches when trying to integrate multiple identities, cultures, and philosophies into a single mode of being or persona. Such integration is especially difficult when one is African, and thus seemed by Western-ized standards not entirely human.

Furthermore, these writers were expected to symbolize the quintessential Afro-British American Christian—noble in African birth, British-American by acculturation, education, and association, and Christian by spiritual and cultural conversion. As a result, they had to proceed cleverly and cautiously in their attempts to expand upon such limitations. However, their works suggest they managed to rise above such limitations largely because they embraced what Robert Ferguson has referred to as “the problematicas of the unknown and indeterminate in revolutionary America.” Necessarily, Afro-British American writers of the American Enlightenment have dealt with “the first dilemma . . . [of] knowing where one stands” (33). They understood what their human rights were whether or not such rights were acknowledged by others. Further, they understood the moral (and religious) ground on which they stood.

Despite claims by black aesthetic critics like Amiri Baraka and Addison Gayle that early writers such as Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon attempted to transcend African elements of their multicultural identities, black writers rode the changing tides of racial and national contradictions, making the invisible visible by the mere fact of their
refusal to be invisible as Africans or Afro-British Americans—confronting in their respective works both the practical and abstract elements of the oppressive societies they inhabited. As a result, the parameters of both Christianity and the Enlightenment were extended to include Africans. Accordingly, their literary labors were arduous and fraught with irresolvable problems, both ontological and epistemological.

Consequently, early African American literature manifests visible signs of mourning, both the many thousands gone in the Middle Passage and the cultural connections that have been displaced and misplaced as a result of the transatlantic slave trade. Eighteenth-century black writers James Albert Gronniosaw (1770) and Venture Smith (1798), who appropriated the concept of Noble African Savage to assert their humanity based on a royal African lineage, attest to this Afrocentric mourning. When I speak of Afrocentric mourning or being moored to dysfunctional Western ways of knowing, I intend to draw attention first to the historical intractability and permanence associated with early black Americans’ unproductive assimilation of such ontologies and epistemologies. Next, I mean to focus on the link between physical and metaphysical states of enslavement because slaves are moored both to their masters and to their masters’ ways of knowing—both the physical material world and the underlying knowledge systems that attempt to construct and define these worlds.

Theorizing the Dilemma

In order to comprehend the vast conundrum faced by African-descended writers and narrators, it is useful to reflect on their diverse employment of and engagement of dilemma: (a) as a model for individual and communal cooperation; (b) as a means of describing the unique problem of simultaneously being neither African, nor British, nor American in colonial British America; (c) as a structure through which the complexity of blackness can be critically examined, extended, and represented; (d) as a symbol, signifier, and mediator of irresolvable linguistic expressions of sameness and difference; and (e) ultimately, as vehicle for successfully translating, navigating, and transforming the complex institutions (religious, educational, military, familial) that impeded their cultural recuperation.

Leon Felkins’s description of a game known as the prisoner’s dilemma provides a useful structure for considering the possibilities of dilemma as reconciliatory model:
The Prisoner's Dilemma is a short parable about two prisoners who are individually offered a chance to rat on each other for which the “ratter” would receive a lighter sentence and the “rattee” would receive a harsher sentence. The problem results from the fact that both can play this game—that is, defect—and if both do, then both do worse than they would had they both kept silent. This peculiar parable serves as a model of cooperation between two or more individuals (or corporations or countries) in ordinary life in that in many cases each individual would be personally better off not cooperating (defecting) on the other. (http://perspicuity.net/sd/pd-brf.html)

By extending the prisoner's dilemma to encompass the unique situatedness and sociohistorical context of a different but related category of captive/prisoner—enslaved Africans—we are able to explore critical implications of community mourning/mooring in the formulations of an eighteenth-century Black Atlantic worldview and the parallel development of an eighteenth-century black aesthetic. To begin with, a prisoner is not a slave, at least not as constituted in Felkins's model of the prisoner's game. Though both prisoner and slave share the unenviable condition of being captives, and therefore subject to their respective masters' authority, the prisoner belongs to a community of guilty persons who have been tried and convicted of crimes against his or her former community—namely, society. A prisoner, who was formerly constructed as a member of a community, is now reconstituted as a member of another type of society. The enslaved African shares no such guilt or conviction. In fact, the enslaved African was not even considered a person (human being) as such. Rather, African slaves were constructed outside humanity, and therefore considered “naturally” outside any community of humans (free or imprisoned). I want to emphasize the point that no crime has been committed, except of course if one counts that of the slaveholder, who has stolen property—that is, the systematic, “legal” removal of bodies from Africa to the New World during the historical period of the transatlantic slave trade. Although it might be argued that at least some eighteenth-century Africans who came to the New World were first slaves or prisoners of war (in Africa) who were sold by former Old World (African) masters, for a variety of reasons, including crimes against their former community, such qualification does not negate the extreme and fundamental difference between prisoner and slave.

For, even if the enslaved African were guilty of crimes against his or her African society so heinous\(^8\) as to warrant his or her subsequent
permanent removal, the societies into which enslaved Africans were forcibly immigrated did not admit them as members or citizens. This is so primarily because their enslavement, unlike the prisoners to whom Felkins refers, is both permanent and inherited. Moreover, even those blacks admitted as nominal citizens were subjected to codes and laws that bound the free and enslaved African as captives by degrees. The prisoner in Felkins’s model, though problematically so, is constructed as somewhat of an active agent who has been afforded the opportunity to legitimately escape the condition of imprisonment.

For the enslaved African no such choices exist. Even when opportunities for agency and pro- or re-action are allowed (as exceptions) the authorizing agents may rescind or violate any offers extended without cause or reason. Perhaps the most glaring difference between the prisoner and the enslaved (or nominally free) African is the condition under which freedom is extended—as a condition of inheritance. For example, one’s freedom could be determined from birth depending on (among other things) the condition of one’s mother—whether or not she was a slave. Moreover, as a condition of being actual property, rather than a human captive, a slave could be willed as an inheritance upon the death of his or her master. Of course, a slave could also be manumitted, as some were, by a master’s legal bequest, as both freedom and slavery were inherited. This unique aspect of the difference between those legally and illegally incarcerated emphasizes the multiple layers of complexity of dilemmas African Americans engaged. Actually, eighteenth-century Afro-British American writers often made use of such legal convolutions and employed them as strategies for (literal and figurative) escape and survival. In order to do so, they necessarily cooperated with and defected from all communities, those they imagined, constructed, and therefore mourned, as well as those in which they were imagined and constructed, and thus those to which they were also moored. Thus, if one substitutes prisoner with slave, the dilemma is even more complex as a model for individual and communal cooperation.  

Unbinding a Black Aesthetic

James Baldwin addresses this type of complexity straightforwardly in an interview (Spring 1963) with Kenneth Clark. Here, Baldwin recalls his response to his mother’s question about whether his “teacher was
colored or white, and [he] said she was a little bit colored and a little bit white. But she was about your color.” Using this description of his elementary school teacher as a smooth segue into an elaboration of the DuBoisean conundrum, he offers:

As a matter of fact I was right. . . . That’s part of the dilemma of being an American Negro; that one is a little bit colored and a little bit white, and not only in physical terms but in the head and in the heart, and there are days . . . when you wonder what your role is in this country and what your future is in it. How, precisely, are you going to reconcile yourself to your situation here and how you are going to communicate to the vast, heedless, unthinking, cruel, white majority, that you are here? And to be here means that you can’t be anywhere else.

Hence, Baldwin underscores the position (and positioning) of African Americans as directly within a political, psychological, and physical/geographical quagmire. Specifically he argues that to be “here” (in America) is to negate the possibility of being “elsewhere” (especially Africa). He points up the physical, mental, and emotional risks involved with any attempt to reconcile, represent, or otherwise reconnect with selves that are both foreign and indigenous. Even more problematic is the fact that both the foreign and the indigenous self have different meanings in different locations.21 However, it is in Baldwin’s Notes of a Native Son that we are most starkly reminded of the dilemma faced under such paradoxical and unwieldy ontological circumstances. Here, Baldwin argues that the very misrepresentations we hope to unmask and critique through signification we risk reinstating—and larger than life. Baldwin uses the character of Bigger Thomas as created in Richard Wright’s Native Son as an example of one type of ghostly dilemma that threatens to haunt the American imagination. Such representations, Baldwin argues, thwart African Americans’ attempts to reconstruct very distinct and particular knowledge about their multiple and complex American identities. In order to do so, though, Baldwin traces Bigger’s socioliterary antecedent in the figure of Uncle Tom—Harriet Beecher Stowe’s literary re-imagining of an enslaved black man—a composite figure based loosely on a fictionalized Josiah Henson—in her Uncle Tom’s Cabin.22 In the same breath that Baldwin indicts Stowe’s thorny sentimentality he casts serious doubt on Wright’s “more enlightened” stance. “Uncle Tom’s Cabin”—like
its multitudinous, hard-boiled descendants—is a catalogue of violence” focused on “unmotivated, senseless” brutality. Conceivably, if Stowe left “unanswered and unnoticed the only important question: what it was, after all, that moved her people to such deeds” (14), then Wright was equally culpable. Tragically, “in overlooking, denying, [and] evading his complexity—which is nothing more than the disquieting complexity of ourselves—we are diminished and we perish.” Exposing the gaps left by his literary predecessors, Baldwin reasons: “Only within this web of ambiguity, paradox, this hunger, danger, darkness, can we find at once ourselves and the power that will free us from ourselves” (15). Baldwin’s strategic location of black identification and empowerment within the realm of darkness is telling. Baldwin’s own evocative and almost insentient insistence upon rendering black life in its fullness and complexity announces the critical and apparitional impasse that belies confrontations of self and identity in African American literature before, during, and after this (early 60s) historical moment.

Pointing to the failure of history to account for and acknowledge such obstacles and constructions, Theresa Singleton contends that “many archeologists recognize a message of Langston Hughes’s poem ‘I, Too’: you cannot fully understand the European colonial experience in the Americas without understanding that of the African.”23 Thus, Singleton’s use of a literary reference to signify the response of African American archeology to catastrophism24 (7) illuminates the interdisciplinary nature and interrelatedness of the archeological and literary project of recovering Africa. Catastrophism refers to the “belief that all vestiges of African culture were destroyed during the Middle Passage and subsequent enslavement.” Singleton argues convincingly that catastrophism is largely responsible for “the reluctance to accept the possibility of African origins for African American culture.” Expressly “eager to suppress racist arguments that people of African descent were innately inferior to Europeans, antiracist scholars, including many blacks, embraced catastrophism[’s] [argument] that black Americans, deprived of their African culture, had fully assimilated into American culture” (7).

This articulation of the relationship between the European and African colonial experience in the Americas is particularly significant to reading early African American literature because the incorporation of previously misplaced African ways of knowing recovers Africa within a framework that acknowledges the problems inherent in outdated catastrophism and unproblematized Africanism. Africanism is a term coined by anthropologist Melville Herskovitz to denote “survivals of African
traditions and beliefs” in black American culture (Myth, 7). Singleton observes, as have others, that this attempt to identify “the presence of . . . African-derived cultural traits” can be problematic because “the archeological search for ‘Africanisms’ [whose] . . . primary purpose is to recover ethnic markers . . . [does] not examine the social complexities that affect why [they] emerge, persist, or change” (Singleton, 7–8). Clearly, such challenges to “Africanism” identify it as a valuable term to be problematized, extended, and more critically employed in analyses of African Diaspora cultures.

Grounded in and defined by contradictions that have been repeatedly directly, indirectly, and euphemistically applied to nearly every facet of black existence, the location of Africa invokes the condition of a pure dilemma as an irresolvable thing that should be wholly avoided. Yet “dilemma” insists upon immediate engagement, especially at times when such action seems either impossible or undesirable. The term announces itself as a deterrent to any action, as it forewarns us that attempts toward resolution or reconciliation of any issues embroiled in a dilemma will be fruitless. Further, consequences associated with attempted actions (whether proactive or reactionary) promise to sink one further into a quagmire of irresolvability. However, it is because African-descended existence is more often than not teeming with conflict that confronting rather than sidestepping problems—and at the most unlikely time or place—is so valuable. In fact, rather than creating impediments for resolving problems, such a method of dealing with problems actually offers strategic loopholes, however problematic.

Even more telling is the way in which the ultimate signifiers of a pure dilemma can be evaluated through the synonymous relationship between the terms used to underscore the competing premises of a horned syllogism. Put crudely, it is the way in which polar opposites, extremes, or any type of dichotomous relationship are referred to as “as different as black and white.” John Sekora exposes the predicament of the earliest Afro-British American autobiography in this way. When “white sponsors compel a black author to approve, to authorize white institutional power[, then] the black message will be sealed in a white envelope” (“Black Message/White Envelope,” 502). Thus, Sekora underscores the very perverse racial dilemma that impacts eighteenth-century ghost writing and the equally problematic contemporary critical attempts to unseal the envelope and reread its contents.

Moreover, the changing goals of African American archeology “from the study of a forgotten people to the study of the formation
and transformation of the black Atlantic world.” (Singleton, 1) parallels the progress made by literary studies during the past two decades. Namely, both disciplines have been actively engaged in landscaping and remapping the critical terrain of African spaces within African American culture and literature. Necessarily, the literary project of releasing an eighteenth-century black aesthetic from the confines of static, monolithic, and unproductively essentialized historical and cultural mourning/mooring is methodologically conceived within a similar frame of reference. Singleton’s archeological space enables the exploration and interpretation of the “extent [to which] African American culture is derived from African heritage” (7).

This study widens and unveils existing critical spaces for rereading and rewriting Africa into Afro-British America through its interrogation of eighteenth-century black authors’ engagement with coexisting dilemmas posed by the diverse African, British, and Afro-British American cultures and histories that construct Afro-British American literature. In so doing, I argue that scholars’ critical engagement with the complex and conflicted situatedness of African cultures within early black American literature requires a systematic analysis of the underlying philosophical and political question: What is “African” in African American literature?

Predictably, the dilemma associated with depicting an autobiographical self, recovering the biographical elements of an African life in narrative, as well as the compelling obstacles concerning black self and identity are all related to the metaphors of mourning/mooring. In discussions, scholarly, political, artistic, and otherwise—across the African Diaspora about and by Africana people—this sense of the unrecoverable, that which one simultaneously wants and yet resists reclaiming, remains at the center of the resolvability of issues related to African identity. Take, for example, the current debates among African scholars about the significance of language and its relationship to naming and identifying Africa and Africans. The most central question of “What is Africa?” that underlies considerations of who can be deemed authentically African is relevant to locating the persistent dilemmas facing black writers that both antedate and postdate the authors in this study, as such questions impact, and are extended to: what is African literature? Or, what is an African author? Not surprisingly, even questions about what constitutes an African language are matters of grave concern. Further complicating such issues are questions about how African languages can be said to more truthfully and more fully express a range of African
cultural, aesthetic, and sociopolitical phenomena. Moreover, the question of how interruptions and Western intrusions into the development and maintenance of African languages and consciousness have come to frame African worldviews has been engaged and in such a way that the whole notion of Africa demands careful and critical reinterpretation. That is to say, how does the question of Africa and its exploration, categorization, and archivalization both mask and unearth the peoples it claims to represent?

Notably, what are the connections between Igbo, Yoruba, Wolof, Fulani, Gikuyu, and other indigenous African cultures and communities that are both troubled by and reinvented to meet the demands of Western identification? Winthrop Jordan (among other scholars) argues that white and Western identity is constructed against black and African identity. Whiteness is defined by its negation of blackness. If this is so, then as the needs to reidentify—based on historical phenomena and social conditions—evolve, change, or otherwise manifest themselves in the actual lives of black and white people, the need to rewrite African identity remains a constant. Clearly, there is a need to confront the problems posed by perpetual attempts to colonize, enslave, and otherwise order mechanisms through which African-descended people attempt to represent collective and particular identities. At the same time, there is a need to resist, complicate, and otherwise unpack strategies and paradigms of appropriation—African and non-African—that remain at odds with the very purpose of cultural and historical self-recovery and identification they claim to uphold. For example, attempts to recover an African self through the locating of black difference in vernacular language or other structures of knowledge represent only the first stage in bridging the gap between Western and African ways of knowing. Additional critical work must be done to provide adequate frameworks for understanding how intracultural and intercultural existence is mediated.

Further, as scholarship has more than sufficiently argued, a mere inversion of white universals by black particularized universals only threatens to further embed African identity and knowledge within dysfunctional and damaging structures. Ironically, such seemingly radical reversals often result in the exploitation of blackness in the service of whiteness. Metaphorically speaking, black presence is emended, manipulated, appropriated, and cast into white presence. Elizabeth Fox-Genovese employs the metaphor of statue to capture the concept of casting black identity into white presence, with her probing question: “What if my statue is not myself?” Not surprisingly, even when one does attempt
to utilize existing white structures to recapture fragmented elements of black ones, the problem is not as obvious as the “fitting of a square peg into a round hole.” Rather, the dilemma is discovering what constitutes squareness and roundness, and, more significantly, in what contexts. Tragically, factors that affect black representation are so broadly situated that what at first seems liberating can in effect be paralyzing. Attempts to recover and reimagine Africa—especially within the historical moment of the invention of America—risks a return to the very static, encased, and frozen markers that originally named Africanness in order to project Americanness.

Paradoxically, then, American identity is defined (among other things) by a newly created and simultaneously negated African identity. Not surprisingly, this newly emerging African identity refuses the terms and designs of its ordering. Knotted in unbreachable and unbreakable boundaries, both Africa and America are questing toward more fully integrated and conscious knowledge of their respective political and cultural identities. Even the attempt to unravel the meaning of cultural and political identification seems to impede any progress as it insists upon an immovable sense of memory as knowledge upon which to substantiate itself. As in, if only Africa could remain African long enough for Africans to recollect and make sense and use of its remains. If only America could become America. If only the inherently constitutive components of America could be located and ordered quickly enough to settle once and for all: what it means to be American. Embroiled in the struggle for political, social, economic, and human suffrage, new identities are framed and identified, and new ideologies and ways of expressing them are enabled. Problematically, new tools have yet to be fashioned which enable concomitant coping mechanisms.

Importantly, the aesthetic of black presence and absence first comes to be articulated in the published writings of black authors, narrators, poets, and thinkers of the eighteenth century. Not unlike those who will come after them, such aesthetic delineation—conscious or unconscious—is not created in a single cultural, racial, social, national, political, or generational vacuum. Neither is their black aesthetic meant to be dislocated, e-raced, or otherwise subsumed under universal and mainstream structures. For, as much as the aesthetics of eighteenth-century blackness names (and unnames) through its appropriation of neoclassical secular and Judeo-Christian sacred texts and scientific and natural subtexts, eighteenth-century black writers reimagine and recollect their identities through a refashioning and reconfiguration of such texts and subtexts alongside culturally specific and syncretized African ones.
African-centered analyses, such as those put forward by Henry Louis Gates Jr., Houston A. Baker Jr., and others, encourage a consideration of how and in what context Africa is signified and focus heavily on the African ways of knowing that underlie the cultures and histories brought forth in the literature of early displaced Africans. Despite attempts to disengage them from African-centered worldviews, early black Americans remained moored to ways of knowing that validated their claims to African and Western humanity. This continuity is present in African ways of knowing whether they are indigenously derived or synthesized through integration with Western ontologies and epistemologies. 

Therefore, the incorporation of indigenously derived African ways of knowing into the study of eighteenth-century black American literature contributes syncretized models of interpretation that negotiate meaning and knowledge about the abstract and material existence of real people in various vernaculars, languages, utterances, and silences in African and African American cultures. This approach to reading literature is important, because these historical, social, political, and aesthetic hermeneutics interrogate the construction of African identities in the invention of Africa. As Anthonia Kalu argues, more importantly, they bear witness to “the African writer’s efforts to synthesize a transitional culture” based on “an understanding [of] the complementary relationship between ancestral and Africanized western knowledge bases” (“Oral,” 37). Such efforts presuppose the impossibility of arriving at discrete, pure, or wholly African ontologies and epistemologies and assume that “What is ‘African’ in African American literature” is also what is Afro-Briton and Afro-American.

That is, African worldviews are necessarily cosmically diverse in their formulation and implementation, because structures that mediate the multivalent mass of cultural identity formations (such as those characterized in Senegalese and Igbo national and cultural identities) are inherent in the African ways of knowing that underlie African worldviews. Although slavery and colonization have figured less prominently in the cosmic diversity of African worldviews, their contribution to the hybridity of worldviews across the Atlantic has been significant.

In order to theorize the way in which dilemma functions as a viable tool for eighteenth-century black writers as they inaugurate—consciously and unconsciously—a black literary tradition and a history of the history of black ideas, I adopt and adapt paradigms and methodologies from scholars such as Chickwenye Okonjo Ogunyemi, Erskine Peters, Lisa McNee, Anthonia Kalu, and others. Their readings of culture and literature illustrate the broadening scope of African American studies.
in its rigorous attempts to integrate African ways of knowing into the fields of literary and cultural criticism. Without continuing attempts to discover diverse ways of analyzing and theorizing early black American literature, scholars and theorists will find it difficult, if not impossible, to articulate and appreciate the complexity of not only black American literatures but also that of the cultures and peoples these literatures represent. Necessarily, theorizing such literature and its cultural groundings demands a theorizing of these underlying dilemmas out of which such writings are born.

It is therefore necessary to move beyond engaging dichotomous arguments about ownership, influence, and cultural warfare in the field of literary and cultural studies, implicit in the question of What is “African” in African American literature, by exploring the extent to which such arguments frame and influence contemporary readings of early black American literature. Further, it is fruitful to explore the need for self-interrogation and investigation by scholars and critics of black American literature, for such self-examination necessarily leads to questions concerning the impact of scholarly work on the imagining of Africa. As critics consider more carefully what kind of Africa is being constructed through literary analyses, both African- and Western-centered readings will exhibit more complex and thoughtful expressions of African identity, history, and cultural values in African American literature. Theorizing the dilemma rather than being bound by its limitations contributes to a “restora[tion] [of] the historical consciousness of the African peoples” (Cheikh Anta Diop, xv) through its approach to locating African ways of knowing in the earliest black American literature.

African modes of articulating the self and society based on an understanding of African historical consciousness exist simultaneously within a conscious knowledge of such binary Western ontologies and operate outside frameworks that characterize “typically Western” epistemologies, exemplified in Cartesian modes of philosophical discourse based on the cogito. One can see the dynamics of an African worldview or consciousness operating in the functional indeterminacy of Yoruban deities (i.e., Esu), in the complementary registering of blackness and humanness in the music and language of the Negro spirituals and the blues, in the multiple uses and users of the lappa (a versatile dish), and in the commonplace fluctuation between vernacular and formal African and Western forms of expression. This expansiveness and diversity in African American literature can be seen most clearly in its intertextuality or call-and-response. Scholars’ readings of these distinct aspects of African
literature have resulted in the development of specialized methods of inquiry that simultaneously re-member and recognize Western and African-derived influences and their respective ways of knowing. Their work is important, because it facilitates a more global and therefore more illuminative reading of early black American literature.

Abiola Irele highlights the integral relationship between African ways of knowing and African literatures:

The great fortune of African writers is that world views which shape the experience of the individual in traditional society are still very much alive and continue to provide a comprehensive frame of reference for communal life. The African gods continue to function within the realm of the inner consciousness of the majority of [West African] societies, and the symbols attached to them continue to inform in an active way. It has thus been possible for our poets in particular to evoke them as a proper, and indeed integral element of their individual imaginings. (The African Experience in Literature and Ideology, 196)

Irele’s assertions regarding postmodern African writers is particularly relevant to eighteenth-century Afro-British American literature’s construction of Africanness and contemporary scholars’ reading of it. It bears repeating that eighteenth-century black American literature manifests an awareness of the contradictory relationship between African worldviews and the lived experiences of Africans in the New World. In his pioneering work, “The Poetics of Ascent,” John Shields points to the African origins of Wheatley’s American self. He notes that “Phillis Wheatley . . . brought with her . . . a teeming repository of her African experience.” Moreover, Shields suggests that Wheatley “retained elements of her syncretized African faith, if not always consciously, at least just beneath the surface of her creative imagination” (53–54). Less explicitly, Mukhtar Ali Isani’s African-centered rereading of Wheatley’s concern with “the state of Africa and the welfare of the African” (“Gambia on My Soul,” 57) demonstrates her access to a comprehensive frame of reference for communal life that can be located in the “metaphysics of the irreducible” (53). Moreover, Wheatley’s “genteel but biting” critique in her “Letter to Samuel Occum” of the “Words and Actions [of America] . . . so diametrically opposite” (67) exists within a framework of African consciousness which privileges an interrelated rather than a differentiated relationship between interpretation and representation. Ironically,
the dilemma is that the great fortune of the African writer’s access to African ways of knowing has caused a great ontological hardship because of the incongruous and dysfunctional relationship (in the early African writer’s mind) between African and Western epistemologies.

This ontological hardship is evident in the tension between the mourning of imagined indigenously derived African aspects of one’s self and the mooring of one’s imagined self to Western-influenced ontologies. Paul Gilroy argues that “notable black American travelers, from poet Phyllis [sic] Wheatley onwards, went to Europe and had their perceptions of America and racial domination shifted as a result of their experiences there. This had important consequences for their understanding of racial identities” (17). Gilroy’s point about contradictions in Western worldviews (e.g., “race” in America vs. Europe) illustrates the reciprocal influences of Africans’ and Europeans’ experiences in Africa, whether real or imagined. Surely, for “notable black American travelers” such as Wheatley and Olaudah Equiano, the experience of Senegambia and Benin (Africa) preceded the experience of England (Europe). These African experiences may explain, at least in part, why—as Angelo Costanzo observes—“eighteenth-century [black] narrators had a closer connection to Africa that bespeaks a particularly African view of spiritual life” (25). Moreover, such African spiritual connection attests to the way African spirituality remained with African-descended people long after their forced physical removal from Africa. As Robert Farris Thompson in Flash of the Spirit has pointed out, this African spiritual consciousness continued to function in concert with black American Christian values and identity. And it is this Afro-spiritual presence that we recognize in the work of eighteenth-century African American writers.

Clearly, eighteenth-century Afro-British American writers were as conscious of national and racial identity constructions as are contemporary literary scholars. Early black writers’ awareness of the dysfunctional epistemologies that limited their existence in freedom and slavery stemmed from their connections to African ways of knowing and the contradictions between their African worldviews and Afro-British experiences. That these displaced Africans and their texts managed to survive by reconnecting with and rearticulating their fragmented African ontologies and epistemologies alongside Western ways of knowing proves the importance of integrating African ways of knowing into a reading of early black American literature. More important, such integration is also illustrative of their employment of the diverse dilemmas as strategic and aesthetic vehicles for reconnection and disconnection with their African, American, and Afro-British American identities. Approaching
early black writers’ works in this way will enable a recovery of suppressed African worldviews in the earliest American literature. Even as I suggest that African consciousness has to be recovered, I want to argue that it has not been entirely lost. I want also to suggest the extent to which early African Americans sought to identify their African worldviews through an embracing of the *Dilemma of a Ghost*—their mourning/mooring.

In *Moorings and Metaphors: Figures of Culture and Gender in Black Women’s Literature*, Karla Holloway manipulates the concept of mooring as connoting a “deliberately fixed” perspective and place. Both Holloway’s perspective and the recovery of African American woman’s interpretive space are based upon “cultural ways of knowing as well as ways of framing that knowledge in literature” (1). While Holloway’s focus is on primarily twentieth-century black women’s literary tradition, her assertions concerning the value of “establish[ing] a dialogue between theorists of language and literature” (21) as well as the significant attention she directs to the concept of “loss [that] characterized the colonial era” (20) of black American history parallels issues taken up in this study about the interconnectedness of the twin concepts mourning/mooring. Indeed, Holloway’s investment in—and her “deliberately fixed” (1) perspective on—“ancient [and unnamed, but nonetheless metaphorically ‘African’ women’s] spirituality” (1) exposes the dilemma faced by subdominant discourses that attempt to negotiate simultaneously empowering and disempowering Africanisms that have been historically moored to dysfunctional ways of knowing.

As a result, Holloway’s attempt to dislodge productive elements and fragments of woman-centered and African-centered theories to posit “an Afrocentric interpretive model for black women’s literature” (22) requires a strategic sidestepping to avoid overessentialized and totalizing structures that threaten to disembodied African women. Hence, Holloway confronts a seemingly static and therefore nonexistent space of black *elsewhere* as a necessary step toward diluting disempowering and dysfunctional epistemologies of race and gender—and through equally volatile fragments of African woman’s spirituality. Moreover, such discourses illustrate the extent to which systems of interpretation and analysis which seemingly continue to (re)invent a romanticized Africa do so, in fact, because such romantic links remain necessary cultural bridges.13

Put simply, to read early black American literature through an analysis of the ways eighteenth-century Afro-British American authors embraced dilemmas is to (re)read and participate in (re)reading literature in three central ways. This approach to dilemma speaks to, reads, and identifies traces and markers of African ways of knowing in eigh-
teenth-century black American literature. The dilemma is first theorized through a (re)reading of early black American literature and its writers as a talking book in which the author through his or her literature talks back to the critic. In this way the dilemma posed by the imaginary veil between a critic and her text are revealed as such, and thus the theory is freed to engage a literary work as one that speaks about some aspect of the author’s unique experience as similarly imagined, but nonetheless real, in his or her historical situatedness. The meaningful dialogue that occurs between the African author and the critic by way of the literature draws attention to the consistent internal dialogue between Afro-British American texts and their African, British, and Afro-British American audiences.

Structurally, the dilemma is momentarily and productively suspended, rather than resolved, in order to approach a text by having a conversation with it, not merely about it. Thus, the critic expects the author and her literature to speak even if her mode of expression requires translation. Moreover, while the dialogue is always productive it is not always harmonious, because the author and the critic do not always agree. Confrontation of and engagement with the horns of the dilemma function in the same manner as palava—a consensus is often achieved in the space of disagreement or difference. Having a conversation with an eighteenth-century slave narrative, for example, means that the critic attempts to address questions the narrative poses by repeatedly interrogating the multiple and diverse vistas from which the author speaks. Often the critic is required to converse or speak in different and unknown tongues in order to shed light on the author’s unique experiences, for example, as a displaced African in the New World. Fundamental to the critic’s demand for a more contextualized rendering of black American experiences is an approach to theorizing the dilemma of Africa through the achievement of meaningful dialogue that always leads back to Africa.

Though dialogue implies a verbal conversation between a listener and a speaker alternating roles as necessary for meaningful communication, in black American cultural contexts speaking and reading are orally and aurally integral. To “read” someone is to analyze his or her actions or reactions in a given situation at a particular historical moment. One is also considered to have been read when one has been told off or chastised for having what has been discovered to be maliciously deceptive actions and motives. This way of reading suggests a direct confrontation of an indirect action or motive. Thus, to apply this type of approach to a reading of early black American literature one must be aware of an
author’s simultaneously implicit and explicit modes of expression. Such a rendering requires a critical reading of a black text in light of its author’s use of direction as well as indirection to signify and/or simultaneously make a direct statement. It is not merely a question of whether or not “the shoe fits” as in “if the shoe fits wear it” (Gates, *The Signifying Monkey*, 83). Rather, reading as a form of translating, mediating, and imparting the literal and figurative meaning of an experience in black American literature is a direct address to the person wearing the shoes. This integrative aspect of reading literature through such a dilemma suggests interesting emendations to Afro-Western synthesized ways of knowing such as signifying.

The ongoing cultural, historical, and literary dialogues in which early black American literature participates constitute a significant factor in countering totalizing representations of the African experience in the Americas. As such, early black American literature through its counter-discourse becomes an interpretive site for (re)reading Africa in America. In this way, the literary recovery of Africa is possible through a reintegration of African consciousness into strategies of critical inquiry. While such strategies make possible the location of imbedded African contexts within self-narrating Afro-British American texts, the exposition and analysis of African and Western ways of knowing should not be entered into lightly. Necessarily, we must acknowledge that modes of critical analysis do not operate exclusive of their aesthetic, cultural, sociohistorical, political, or philosophical influences. Therefore, it is important to identify ways that transformative strategies both construct and deconstruct boundaries; both enable and disable transition between static and fluid interpretations of Africanness, African Americanness, and Americanness.

Moreover, focusing on attempts to silence African voices and African ways of knowing permits a negotiation and mediation of and between binary Western constructions and African texts, which attempt to speak, read, and significantly interpret (in) their own modes of cultural expression. Language is a key mode of cultural transmission for the black American writer because language, through its semiotic relationship to literature and culture, links black Americans to seemingly misplaced African worldviews. As I have argued earlier, the concepts of link and loss operate symbolically and simultaneously as anchors and connectors between early black Americans and the African ways of knowing that underlie their misplaced African worldviews. Eighteenth-century writers such as Equiano and Wheatley were ontologically sustained by their
discovery, early on, that mooring themselves even metaphorically to the shared experiences of Africans throughout the Diaspora anchored them more deeply in the cultural and historical foundations of the African ancestors they mourned. Importantly, attempts to locate such epistemological groundings through reconnection with the earliest threads of intertextuality in the tapestry of black American literature and culture remain critical to uncovering early Afro-British American aesthetic fragments.

African Ways of Knowing

My approach to early Afro-British American literature employs diverse expressive modes and interpretive strategies. In particular, I enlist certain tools and methods that will enable me to underscore the simultaneously incongruous and metonymic relationship between mediating forms of knowledge by and about Africans. This crisis of self-representation that early Afro-British American writers confronted required them to invent and recover ways of knowing that both centered and decentered Africa. Like these early writers, I have had to appropriate, integrate, and challenge strategies and modes of articulating the theoretical and political dilemmas imposed by ontological and epistemological Africanness. In so doing, I have realized both the transformative potential and the abortive essentialism that attend any recovery of Africa. As both a bridge to and a marker of the logical boundaries of African-centered scholarship, mourning/mooring establishes that which is problematic as potentially invaluable and productive. As interrelated terms, mourning/mooring mark(s) particular historic and geographic spaces of African American identification and uncovers problems associated with attempts to connect with African consciousness.

Further, the tenuous relationship between loss, link, and African ways of knowing which frames my examining of the dilemma of self and identity in eighteenth-century Afro-British American literature retains both the empowering and unproductive ideologies, but only in conjunction with indigenously grounded African ways of knowing. In this way, mourning/mooring structures and reinforces the integrative aspects of this text’s approach to reading early Afro-British American literature. As such, this logical grounding contributes to a systematic study that is necessary to “facilitate consistent and viable participation of people of African descent in the reinstatement of Africa’s and Africans’ contribu-
In some sense, mourning/mooring can be seen as a kind of reverse middle passage in the journey toward Africa for displaced Africans in the New World. This is the logic that governs the ways in which I manipulate the varied and diverse expressive modes and interpretive strategies that express African ways of being in early black American literature.

**Africanist Palava Structure**

The discursive structure that governs my translation and engagement of the multiple modes of expression voiced in African ways of knowing is grounded in the concept of an Africanist *palava* as outlined by Ogunyemi. *Palava* refers to “interpretation, both as textual analysis and as translation from one language to another . . . [and] misinterpretation through misreading or misunderstanding [that] generates *palava* or quarrel. The [role of the] critic as interpreter [is to] attempt to set the record straight, to resolve disputes through illumination to make a text more easily understood, especially as most are written in the language of the colonizer” (Ogunyemi, 96). One example of the kind of textual illumination made possible by an Africanist *palava* can be located in a rendering of Wheatley’s “Niobe” from an African-centered lens. Specifically, the young African woman poet troubles the multiple contexts within which divinity and motherhood can be interpreted by her diverse employment of neoclassical forms to effectively translate from African to Greek mythology. She conveys some startling recoveries and reinvention of Africa in her signification of images of water and life through the image of the goddess Leto (Latona), patron goddess of mothers, whose daughter Artemis (Phoebe) is depicted in classical portraits with her bow and quiver, as well as her water jug and bowl. For one thing, given Wheatley’s reported memory of the pouring out of water by her own African mother, such translations suggest the poet’s consciousness (mourning/mooring) of similar West African traditions. Such goddess traditions can be seen in contemporary Nigerian women writers. For example, in her novel *Efuru*, Flora Nwapa, the first published Nigerian woman author, invokes the image of the childless mother in the Igbo deity Mammywata, a postmodern barren goddess of water. Aidoo echoes a similar theme in *Dilemma*, as the Ghanaian mother Esi Kom embraces the African American motherless child Eulalie. As can be seen, the strategies for translation, interpretation, and representation of black aesthetics are boundless.
Therefore, it is critical to translate the problematic or misinterpreted components of a text in order to complicate the multiple meanings imbedded in conversations between the speaking text and its African and Western contexts. Such a method seeks not merely to resolve disputes, it seeks to unpack and interrogate the strands of disharmony. Neither is such an approach meant solely to illuminate perpetual conflict within an author’s text by a constant misinterpretation and distortion of the multiple expressive modes, methods, and interpretive strategies that constitute the competing dilemmas to which a text is mourned/moored. Rather, I intend to enhance my interpretation of and conversation with early African American literature by using a “greater variety of ingredients [for] a more zestful and rich [palava] sauce” (Ogunyemi, 100). In this way, “palava sauce as text . . . forms part of a revisionary tradition . . . [which produces] a counter discourse” (101). Palava is to discourse as reading is to signification. Just as the palava registers harmony in a necessary and productive but discordant tone, reading exposes an indirect action or motive through direct confrontation. Most importantly, the epistemological structure designated by palava is inextricable from the ontological logic of mourning/mooring, which negotiates simultaneously empowering and disempowering discourses of African-centered ways of knowing.

The logic and structure that govern this way of reading encourage continual critical self-interrogation of the ways and extent to which, as a critic, I, too, am participating in the invention of Africa. Hence, the self-referential nature of this approach demands that I use theoretical approaches, which reflect a diversity and vastness of African worldviews. The diversity of tools in my methodological approach is important for three reasons. First, they are diversely employed as communicative devices for translation and expression of African ways of knowing. Second, they emphasize the range of connotative functions that each of the African ways of knowing I employ suggests. Third and most important, they signify the legitimacy of these African ways of knowing as systems which mediate and facilitate literary analyses from the perspective of multiple constructed African worldviews. Together these approaches participate in the integrative and recuperative process of signifying what is African in African American literature. In his articulation of this process of recuperating Africa in African America, Gates insists that “whatever is black about black American literature is to be found in [an] identifiable black Signifying (g) difference (The Signifying Monkey, xxiv). However, as I confront the dilemma of naming, claiming, and strategically resituating
blackness or Africanness, I attempt to unburden critical voices from such limiting expectations. Not only is such a way of rendering (figuratively or otherwise) what is, essentially speaking, black or African in African America irresolvable, it is irreducible. To face this dilemma head-on is to free—to release and relocate—the black aesthetic.

Having presented the rationale, the logic, and the structure of a dilemma-driven method of reading eighteenth-century Afro-British American literature, I will briefly describe below the various approaches I employ in this study. They are signifying, speaking in tongues, *palava*, *taasu*, and *mbari*.

### Signifying

Signifying articulates a discrete and distinct black vernacular voice located simultaneously within early African American folk traditions and indigenously derived Yoruba African cultural origins. Specifically, signifying unites the figures of the Yoruban god of indeterminacy, Esu Elegbara, and the African American trickster, the Signifying Monkey, to create a theory of African American literary criticism. Esu’s indeterminacy is central to the complex role of mediation between representation and interpretation, literal and figurative in speech, writing and reading, and divinity and humanity. Signifying’s indeterminacy is also integral to the complex role of simultaneously implicit and explicit (re)creation in its dual gendered and genderless embodiment. Not only is the double-voicedness of Esu apparent in the physical characteristics, the doubled lips, pictured in varied depictions of Esu (and Signifying Monkey), but also in the various and varying myths that support the diverse roles enacted upon her/his metaphysical and physical being. Most importantly, the very nature of the indigenous myths of the origin of Signifying underlies the cultural diversity imbedded in the structure and form of African American literature, as it signifies on the interrelatedness of language and meaning in its oral and written form and content.

### Speaking in Tongues

In the same way that black signifying suggests intertextuality in its proffered meaning, speaking in tongues suggests intratextuality in its deferred meaning. “Speaking in tongues” is Henderson’s “trope for both glossolalia and heteroglossia” (123). She notes that speaking in tongues assumes two very different but related meanings of this term—the
ability to speak unknown tongues and the ability to speak different tongues. The Old Testament suggests a dialogics of difference and the New Testament a dialogics of identity, with both meanings being privileged in black women’s writing. Henderson performs an interlocutory function by interpreting the tongues of white male critics, white and black feminist critics, and finally the Bible (Scriptures). She “propose[s] a theory of interpretation based on . . . the ‘simultaneity of discourse’” which allows for a move away from the “‘absolute and self-sufficient’ otherness of the critical stance in order to allow the complex representations of black women writers to steer us away from ‘a simple and reductive paradigm of “otherness”’” (117; emphasis in original). In order to translate the meaning of tongues in an African-centered woman’s context, Henderson juxtaposes Bakhtin’s model of “conflict” and Gadamer’s model of “the potential of agreement” to signify “a form of self-relatedness” (120) that is crucial to her “notion of difference and identity underlying the simultaneity of [black women writers’] discourse” (120).

MOURNING/MOORING PALAVA

Simultaneously curative and creative, a syncretic blend of Senegalese poetics and Igbo duality constitutes a framework that interprets Afro-British American literature within more culturally specific African-centered contexts. Admittedly, such elements are not meant to wholly represent Africa or African ways of knowing as such. Rather, my use of a Senegalese poetic and Igbo duality represents one fraction of the possibilities enabled by such an approach. Methodologically, structurally, and imaginatively linked to African-centered frameworks, such theorizing embraces and engages rather than suspends and forecloses new knowledge about alternative views and insights into our understanding of the literary and cultural history of Africans in America.

AFRICANIST PALAVA

*Palava*, a homophone and feminine version of palaver, which refers to a kind of chitchat or empty talk between disparate people, signifies meaningful conversation that both quarrels with and builds bridges between such communities. As a strategic method for interpretation, *palava* enables scholars to translate critical fictions and facts through multifaceted interpretive mechanisms that are simultaneously commonplace and universal. Specifically, *palava* is a vernacular theory based on
a woman-centric vision of literature and is governed by the language of the commonplace as signified by the *lappa*, which is a piece of cloth used primarily by women but also available for use by men. This vernacular language makes use of both the practical (unisex) uses of *lappa*, and the theoretical concept of *palava* that signifies the underlying complementarity and consensus necessary for the participation of both men and women in cultural and national re-creation. Therefore, because *palava* is grounded in indigenously derived African ways of knowing, it functions as a viable structure through which African worldviews can be interpreted in Afro-British American literature. Ogunyemi’s description of the fabric *lappa* and its vast uses demonstrate *palava*’s universality and invite us to think critically about its symbolic textual ubiquitousness. “The simple two or three yards of fabric is versatile: it can be used as a dress, a blanket, a pillow, a curtain or screen, a mattress or sling, a wall decoration, or an *aju* to cushion and protect the head from the load it carries” (4). Thus, the *palava* as a concept functions analogously to the fabric *lappa*. That is, the language of *palava* is adaptable in its embellishment, indirection, and direction; in its simultaneous conveyance, displacement, translation, transmission, sustenance, inspiration, effect, and communication of African culture and African ways of knowing. Importantly, *palava* simultaneously integrates and disintegrates as it breaks down false or dichotomous boundaries—especially those of race, class, and gender.

Thus, *palava* as both organizing structure and an interpretive strategy facilitates ideological, linguistic, and spiritual remappings of African ways of knowing onto African cultural landscapes.30 Necessarily, the *palava* negotiates the different and unknown critical tongues of psychoanalysis, feminism, womanism, poststructuralism, and identity theories that construct identities only to silence them. *Palava*, through its insistence on maintaining ongoing dialogue with theoretical, historical, and literary texts, adapts existing interpretive strategies such as speaking in tongues in order to redirect the discursive desire (and thus resist the tendency) to rewrite our stories onto other(s). In doing so, *palava* counters dysfunctional dominant and subdominant rereadings of black American literature. Further, such agency is recovered by directly confronting unconscious and conscious attempts to enslave early black writers’ physical and spiritual texts and contexts.

Africanist *Taasu* and Senegalese Poetics

“*Taasu* is a form of praise poetry that [Wolof Senegalese] women perform
at family events... Taasu mark the subject positions of an individual agent, but also provide a discursive space for negotiating relationships between participants at these events during and through the exchange of gifts” (McNee, 25). My use of this interpretive strategy is particularly relevant to engaging the difficulties associated with poetic and autobiographical intersections of race, class, and gender in eighteenth-century Afro-British American contexts, from African perspectives and aesthetics. The use of Senegalese poetics provide a valuable link for reconnecting with African knowledge bases. Taasu is thus a West African Senegalese Wolof way of knowing that provides the foundational grounding for what I term Senegalese poetics. Operating with a structure guided by a Senegalese poetic means allowing culturally specific Senegalese forms such as taasu to take precedence when considering such elements of an English-language poem as the worlds it creates, the depth of characters and their interactions in those worlds, as well as the view or frame of reference from which the poet orders all the elements at play in the world of the poem.

Indeed, an equally, perhaps even more, empowering reading of agency in eighteenth-century black women’s writing is made possible through a recentering of the African female principle in our critical apparatus—reading, for example, Wheatley’s work through the lens of taasu. In her groundbreaking work Selfish Gifts, Lisa McNee emphasizes the critical import of taasu, through which “autobiographical discourse becomes autobiographical exchange” (25). What is significant about the taasu as a viable structure for interpreting and analyzing the works of early black women writers like Wheatley is that this African autobiographical poetic (in form and content) is particular to women. Indeed, taasu are “richly allusive, context-specific works that can best be understood if we consider their social function as well as their internal textual tools for creating meaning” (25). However, even as we approach taasu in their context-specific spaces, we must be careful not to oversimplify, conflate, or otherwise relegate these culturally specific African women’s songs to solely privileged gender spaces as happens in many traditional feminist readings of early black women’s texts. Indeed, the kind of freedom that this poetic form permits women to exercise through the execution of selfhood more fully occurs within multivalent contexts—some taboo, others quite conventional. Moreover, such freedom and self-exploration happens in the context of communities and histories that must simultaneously be remembered and recovered. Thus, viewing conventions of eighteenth-century black poetry through the structural lens of taasu,
with a view to imagining the poet Wheatley in the context of *taasukat* and griot traditions (writing and recording the history of Africans in the New World) permits us to theorize about how an Afro-British American aesthetic informed by indigenously derived African ways of knowing makes a difference in the way history is written and recovered.

However, because eighteenth-century Afro-British American poetry like Wheatley’s is equally informed both by other West and West Central African traditions—imagined and real—and Afro-Western synthesized poetics, my use of the term “Senegalese poetics” refers rather loosely to forms of writing, formalized interpretations of literature, and cultural interventions that privilege a synthesis of culturally specific African ways of knowing such as *taasu* and alongside a more generalized (but equally rich) composite of Afro-/Afra-Western ways of knowing. Therefore, I integrate West African Wolof *taasu*, Nigerian *palava*, African American signifying and speaking in tongues, as well Afro-Western biblical reinterpretation and other available symbolic structures of meaning such as Sankofa, griot, and Bird of the Wayside. Together, these constitute a Senegalese poetic. Doing so reveals the literal worlds, people, and circumstances that inform eighteenth-century Afro-British American aesthetics. What this way of approaching this literature suggests is that given precedence, African ways of knowing will draw back a curtain that has for far too long been covering what is behind African works such as Wheatley’s—Africa.

**Africanist Mbari and Igbo Duality**

While *mbari* generally refers to a physical structure built to honor Ala (an Igbo earth goddess), I utilize *mbari* as a metaphor to redirect attention to the African aesthetics that privilege (like the *mbari* structure) what is both good and bad in a society. As both a figurative symbol and once viable method of conflict resolution, this structure functions as a means to locate areas and issues that require attention from the community. Since needs and issues within communities shift and evolve over time, *mbari* as a physical structure is necessarily temporary. Further, it allows alteration, correction, and invention, and as a result it provides a functional structure through which aspects of Africa can be celebrated and recuperated and through which unresolved conflict can be addressed, if not wholly resolved.

Like most Igbo structures, *mbari* operates within a duality discourse—what scholar Anthonia Kalu (following Chinua Achebe) refers
to as the “tendency . . . of things to exist in pairs” (“Women and the Social Construction,” 283). Equally important to duality are such concepts as divine intervention, fate, luck, and destiny, which are reordered through an understanding of the role of *chi* as an internal mediating structure between human and divine purposes. The concept of *chi* (as a god, guardian angel, personal spirit, or spirit double) and its underlying duality, in conjunction with signifying, speaking in tongues, and *palava* provide nonquantifiable paradigms of complementarity based in African worldviews. One example of Igbo duality discourse at work is the kind of dialogue this African way of knowing permits about such seemingly Western Christian tenets as providence and predestination. Thus, Western ways of understanding crucial elements of the formation of self and identity are unpacked through Igbo duality. Such can be seen in the simultaneity of the oral and written in signifying, in the intersectionality and overlap of the symbolic and the material in the *lappa*, in the identification of the interpretive with the prophetic in speaking in tongues, and in the literal and figurative sojourn of the African women and men not only to themselves (as in *taasu*), but also to their mother’s and father’s houses (*mbari*).

Consequently, *mbari* not only honors and celebrates what is good in a community, but it also depicts those areas of conflict that need to be resolved. As a result, the art is temporary not unlike certain issues that plague or trouble a community. Moreover, as it is a temple of worship, the *mbari* shrine is sacred space that, while necessarily open for human viewing, is restricted to all but the deities for whom it was constructed. Chinua Achebe describes *mbari* in this way: “*Mbari* was a celebration through art of the world and the life lived in it. It was performed by the community on command by its presiding deity, usually the Earth goddess, Ana. Ana combines two formidable roles in the Igbo pantheon as fountain of creativity in the world and custodian of the moral order in human society. An abominable act is called *nso-ana*, taboo-to-Earth” (“African Literature,” 1).

Significantly, early black literature like the *mbari* suggests the value of functional structures through which aspects of Africa can be celebrated and recuperated, and more importantly those through which conflict can be creatively resolved. As such, Afro-British American poetic and narrative working out of such binary conflicts as Western/non-Western identity, European/African identity, and master/slave relationships is accomplished through early black writers’ creative handling of various rhetorical strategies as well as conventional literary genre expectations. Like the sacred *mbari* house in which all things—past and
present—are displayed and into which the builder cannot enter, such works operate from the outside, having already placed within the necessary tools for reconstruction and rebuilding of Africa. At the same time, both the material and the contexts for building—from the inside and outside—are continually being adapted, changed, and developing over time. Specifically, mbari, “the cosmic dualism [that] reverberates . . . in the symbolism of mbari” (54), is epitomized in the inspiration and method for its construction and reconstruction, its sacred space and secular designs, in its particular (otherworldly and earthly) calls to construct meaning, and through the communal participation necessary for its completion and appreciation.

Early black writers like Wheatley and Equiano can be analogously linked to the artist/builders of the mbari in important ways: First, like the mbari artists, these writers are “responsible for the . . . creation of an entire new world in general” (Cole, 218). Second, the figurative world of the writer, like that of the mbari artist, is “inherently imperfect, as any structure that attempts to summarize the world must be” (219). Lastly, like the mbari artists/builders, these writers as well as their works are derived from and belong to the sacred and material worlds and communities out of which they create. It is not only their collective writings or works that symbolically represent mbari; it is their lives as well. These early Afro-British American writers and their works are the sacred shrines that pay homage to their African ancestors and their African American descendants.

At the level of critical analysis, viewing their works as literary mbari permits an Africanist intervention into the Afro-British American text. This intervention and African way of seeing, like the literal mbari house, responds to a divine request—what Bassard terms a spiritual interrogation. This divine request to build an mbari house is typically manifested as a significant problem within the community that must be addressed. Marked by such characteristics as cosmic unity, idealized figures, ritual celebrations, and secrets, this shrine to communal conflict and the attendant dilemma as well as cooperation and wealth, the mbari is as much a shrine to dilemma as it is to agbara (god). “As much a social institution as a religious one. . . . Change is also embraced because mbari, the most profound offering known in society, contains somewhat paradoxically, much that is not spiritual” (Cole, 197). Of course this makes perfect sense in terms of Igbo duality, because no one thing ever wholly represents another in its totality. There is, in fact, always more than one way to be—and that simultaneously.

An understanding of the process of building an mbari house of the
Owerri Igbo is instructive in considering the implications of deliberately constructed frameworks whose purpose is to overtly and directly confront societal dilemmas. Moreover, the process of the mbari is in some respects as important, if not more valuable, to the society in which it is built, than is the actual shrine. However, one point must be made patently clear—the use of this culturally specific African way of knowing (mbari) is not in any way meant to signify that any sort of complete or whole rendering of any Igbo culture can be either absorbed or sifted through what is ostensibly a multicultural Afro-British American literary tradition which is steeped as richly in Western textures and structures as it is in African and Afro-Western ones. Igbo-born or not, mbari does not authorize us to construct a monolithic African, black American, or essential and Igbo identity out of, say, an eighteenth-century narrator’s Interesting Narrative.

Beyond the widely recognized dilemma of reconstructing precolonial Igbo histories—especially of the eighteenth century—due in great part to the unreliability of both oral and written sources, which is reason enough alone to dismiss superficial renderings of Africanisms onto African-descended cultures, one must recognize that the history of mbari, as practiced primarily by the Owerri region, is also difficult to pinpoint with regard to specific origins prior to 1850. Moreover, one would also have to deal with the inability to locate, for example, Equiano’s claimed birthplace in Igboland, and then determine if Owerri Igbo inhabited the region he refers to as Essaka. Add to this quite practical list of reasons even the issue of what a specific locating of Equiano’s actual origins in an Owerri Igbo culture at the historical moment of his capture—when he would have learned important elements of such a tradition as mbari from his childhood—would add to our understanding of the complexity of African fragments as epistemological shards for a more diverse analysis of this literature.

But, of course, as with taasu we are not attempting to use mbari as an overlay to assert a one-to-one correspondence between building an mbari shrine and writing a narrative such as Equiano’s. For one thing, the differences in form, context, and purpose are not analogous. The point of drawing upon mbari as an Africanist significatory practice and structure for analysis is to consider how shifts to an African register enable us to theorize the dilemma of eighteenth-century Afro-British American identity. More precisely, the point is to consider how African-centered ways of knowing, such as mbari (and, more importantly, the epistemological possibilities it suggests) constitute one method of
reconnection. Clearly, when one uses psychoanalytic theory to interpret and analyze the works of Chaucer, there is an understanding that the author cannot in any logical sense be said to have been consciously operating within a structure that such works as Chaucer’s predate. On the other hand, because Freud drew from sources in antiquity (Oedipus, etc.) to articulate what he termed phases of the psychosexual self, it is helpful to view a fifteenth-century work through such lenses. There will necessarily be echoes and parallels that lend a level of critical depth to an understanding of the literature and the culture to which we might not otherwise have access.

So, when I use mbari as a structure to analyze eighteenth-century Afro-British American literature, I take a step toward reconnecting with traditional African knowledge bases, however problematic. This is precisely what it means to confront the dilemma of a ghost.

**AFRO-WESTERN WAYS**

Signifying recovers submerged voices as necessary strands of thread in the poetic tapestry of the lappa. And, in so doing, signifying (re)marks upon each thread as central to maintaining existing African and Western textual patterns and creating new designs. Moreover, signifying through its analysis of both inter- and intratextuality illuminates the productive and nonproductive textual dialogues that translate literary meaning based on previously displaced African worldviews. As a result, signifying enables a rearticulation and interpretation of the threads that constitute the fabric of early African American narratives, poetry, epistles, and other genres of literature. To be sure, when a text signifies, it not only brings up the memory of a prior text, but it also remembers a host of other signifiers—authors, actors, folks, and other writings—constituted in contradictory and complementary worldviews.

**AFRA-WESTERN SPEAKING IN TONGUES**

Speaking in tongues utilizes a self-reflexive critical mode to translate and mediate internal and external dialogue along raced, classed, and gendered lines. In this way culturally encoded meaning is derived by speaking to, about, and in the tongues of black women, white women, white men, and black men, not discursively rescuing black women from white men, white women, and black men—through intersecting and replicating oppressions. Speaking in tongues rewrites dominant political
and spiritual epistemologies and broadens this scope of gendered and raced translations. Further, by exposing the simultaneous and necessary revision of dominant and “subdominant discursive order[s]” (Henderson, 121), speaking in tongues exposes attempts to bracket disharmony between (for example) raced or gendered communities. Thus, in concert with *palava*, speaking in tongues enables a gendered critique of racial oppression within “homogeneous and heterogeneous social and discursive domains” (121).

Confronting the dilemmas posed by competing structures of oppression—such as patriarchy and racism—through interpretive unbounded speaking in tongues, enables recuperative readings of African ways of knowing within early Afro-British American literature. It must be noted that what enables the unbinding of tongues is the integration of African ways of knowing—such as *taasu*, *mbari*, and *palava*. Moreover, such recuperation exposes the dynamic and vital impact of gender in the development of an eighteenth-century black aesthetic. What this type of development suggests is that gender is not a newcomer to the table of interrogated oppressions. Issues related to oppression and suppression of women’s texts and contexts have always been a part of *palava* between Africana people. Speaking in tongues involves interpretation, communication, and most of all an ear bent toward the speaking subject. According to historian Michael Gomez, Africans “reinterpreted the dogma and ritual of the Christian church in ways that conformed to pre-existing cosmological views” (10). If this is so, then we must pay careful attention to how “reinterpretation” of the Bible facilitated the process of Africanizing Christianity, and, by extension, symbolically translated a Western text into an African one.

**Emerging Patterns**

The motifs that constitute the approaches I have just described echo three emerging patterns at the heart of theorizing the dilemmas that frame and constitute the eighteenth-century Afro-British American texts in this study.

First, these approaches are governed by an ideology of integration. That is, the mourning/mooring of lost African consciousness, which guides these systems of interpretation, necessarily integrates individual and collective identities—which include women, men, and children. Signaling the real and imagined bases upon which competing and coop-
erating epistemologies—such as *palava*, signifying, speaking in tongues, *taasu*, and *mbari*—are constructed, an integrative ideology is crucial to facilitating links and unveiling disjuncture between indigenously derived African and Western-derived ways of knowing. Consequently, they are necessarily inclusive, bringing women, children, and men into conflict and harmony with each other. Moreover, ritualistic practices such as the building of the *mbari* shrine and the formal and informal ceremonies that attend *taasu* represent expressive modes that create a cohesiveness that serves and reconnects the community with tradition, ancestors, and intersecting yet parallel African and Western worlds.

Second, vernacular language is the primary mode of transmission of African ways of knowing. One of the more visible signs of mourning/mooring is the commonplace language that figuratively and literally links cultural loss and displacement in the New World with recovery of fragmentary linguistic survivals from West Africa. The fusion of sacred, secular, political, personal, and vernacular modes of expression translates the experiences of displaced Africans into polyphonic registers and rhythms. Consequently, this interlingual and intercultural dilemma yields an abundant marriage of distinct but complementary interpretive strategies, methods, and modes of expression. If we consider vernacular in the context of a figurative and literal return home, a return to one’s mother or father “tongue,” we can begin to apprehend the depth of linguistic power that is implied in vernacular. Indeed, the very concept of home for people of African descent points to the necessary negotiation, reintegration, and translation of familiar and foreign, sacred and secular, political and personal experiences. Such translation demands our re-consideration (an unbinding) of what and how “vernacular” is expressed through the voices of Afro-British American writers. One does not construct an *mbari* without preliminary conversations that require speech in more than one secret tongue. Similarly, *taasu* as a form of praise poetry is necessarily guided not only by vernacular but by context specific and appropriate languages for each performance, as well as the gift exchanges given in the form of words and other material exchanges. For example, *taasu* permits Wolof women’s voices to come forward in a way that frees them from taboos that conflate Senegalese griot traditions with either wholly male or essentialized female and communal characteristics. The reciprocal and practical nature of the exchange of gifts—the autobiographical praise poem that is at once communal and particular—demonstrates the need for translation and linguistic complementarity in the marriage of form and structure.
Third, spirituality is a key component that emerges either directly or indirectly in this approach. In its indirect form spirituality typically emerges as a trope, a figure of speech that is metaphorically linked with physical or spiritual darkness or death. In its direct form spirituality addresses the hermeneutics of an otherworldly self in both African and Western contexts. On a cosmological level, mourning/mooring is manifested as a veiled quest for unrecoverable African ways of knowing, which simultaneously transgresses and transmits foreign and alien modes of expression. None of the African ways of knowing I have been describing, even in the most secular contexts, can function entirely outside the realm of spirituality. However, what seems most striking about taasu in this regard are the extremely diverse poles of its ceremonial uses—from something as sacred as a naming ceremony or baptism to sabar (women’s parties which include taboo dances and songs). Of mbari little more can be added except that, like taasu, the spectrum of aesthetics from sacred to profane are all open for inclusion in the mbari shrine. And, of course, the god (agbara) for whom the mbari is built is always represented.

If, as scholar Michael Echeruo and others have lamented, “we have yet to develop adequate theoretical tools by which to read our own [African] writing” (“An African Diaspora: The Ontological Project,” 7), then it seems reasonable that looking to African structures and significatory practices such as palava, mbari, and taasu, as well as Afro-Western signifying and speaking in tongues, is part of the process of developing such tools. Alternative modes of analysis and matrices such as these provide the interpretive tools necessary to reach new critical depth in our study of early Afro-British American literature. Clearly, we must permit Africa and African ways of knowing to take the critical “lead” in our analysis and our choice for analytical models of interpretation. Surely, such a way of approaching literature requires a theorizing on multiple levels the dilemmas posed by these new tools and some of the old blueprints. It also requires us to learn new ways of understanding African knowledge bases with which we must necessarily reconnect.

These emerging patterns suggest the value of mourning/mooring as an organic blueprint for fragmentary reconstructions of Africa aesthetics within Afro-British American literature. Ultimately, to resituate, integrate, and recuperate is to journey back across the Atlantic to do battle with historical and contemporary dilemmas and, more radically, to invoke their previously dormant ghosts.