The Engagement between Past and Present in African American and Caribbean Literature: Orality in the Fiction of Toni Morrison, Gayl Jones, Edwidge Danticat, and Olive Senior

by

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Paper submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of “Master in de Taal- en Letterkunde: Engels”

May, 2010
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I would like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Prof. Ilka Saal, for her advice and guidance which helped me to gain new insights into my topic, and for her enthusiasm which encouraged me to delve deeper. Special thanks to Dr. James Procter of the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, whose fascinating lectures on the Caribbean short story sparked my interest in the literature of the Caribbean, and to Prof. Susan Griffin who stimulated my interest in scholarly research in her “Scenes of Reading” seminars.

I would also like to thank my family for their warm support and encouragements, and my friends for standing by me during these stressful times and for being there when I most needed them.
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Introduction

Orality, “the exercise of human verbal communication” (Warner-Lewis, “Oral Tradition” 117), is the keystone of African society. Up until today Africa has remained a “site of enormous, long, and ongoing creativity in relation to orality” (Gunner 1) where religion, everyday relations and communication as well as the arts continue to be characterised by oral expressions. Over the course of the last four hundred years, people of African descent have spread across the globe and sometimes they left the mother country out of their own free will. More often than not, however, these people have had to leave involuntarily, for instance, an estimate of 11 million Africans were captured and shipped into the Atlantic slave trade (Klein xviii). The Africans who were taken across the Atlantic to work as slaves on farms and plantations in regions such as the Caribbeans and the United States undeniably constitute the largest group of “exiled” Africans within this movement of emigration, which is commonly referred to as the African diaspora. The African diasporic cultures, which developed subsequently in the aforementioned regions among the African slaves and their descendants, draw greedily from the “native African culture” that is steeped in orality (Hall 92). Therefore, these cultures unsurprisingly feature a “strong oral tradition” as their “predominant trait” (John 2).

When slave-traders started to ship off Africans on the Middle Passage, their oral culture and “verbal traditions” were the only things the African slaves could bring with them to their new homes (Warner-Lewis, “Oral Tradition” 117). Consequently, orality continued to be the keystone of their culture and even gained in significance: as they had lost the means to create other traditional arts, the African slaves were forced to rely on their voice and language as the only “outlet to express the emotions of their souls. [. . .] Their voices became the forms through which they practiced their arts” (Atkinson 13). During the years of slavery, orality
also came to be a source of strength and a medium for resistance. Orally transferred legends, such as the legend of the flying Africans which was told both in the southern states of the United States as in the Caribbean (Walters 4), were stories which would have provided the slaves with hope and strength.\footnote{The legend of the Flying Africans is a canonical folkloric tale in the African diasporic culture that tells of African slaves escaping slavery by flying back to Africa (Walters 4, Wilentz 21-22).} Oral expressions also provided the slaves with a means of resistance against their owners, such as might be illustrated by the development of creole languages in the Caribbean. These languages might have originated as natural results of the lingual melting pot formed by the islands, but slowly they also developed into a language of resistance as they defied the hold of Standard English, and consequently to a certain extent the hold of the oppressor (González-López 1). Stewart Brown also refers to the use of songs by female Caribbean slaves in the eighteenth century “for solace and as weapon in their struggle against their oppression” (xxvii) indicating the prominent place of orality in resisting subjugation.

Nevertheless, it should not be forgotten that initially “African American slaves [. . .] sought to write themselves out of slavery by mastering the Anglo-American belles-lettres tradition” (Gates and McKay xxvii-xxviii) and, similarly, the first Anglophone Caribbean writers followed the examples set by the British literary canon (Warner-Lewis, “Language Use” 25). Achieving literacy in Standard English and reading the works written within that tradition became important means for the peoples of the African diaspora in the struggle for emancipation and the first attempts at establishing their own cultural identity. Gradually, however, African diasporic authors came to acknowledge that to create a literature that was genuinely Caribbean or African American, they had to distance themselves from the Western canon and this “was made possible by turning to the forms of oral traditions” (Jones, \textit{Liberating} 179). Richard Wright concludes his work “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937) with the assertion that “[i]f black writers turned to their own vernacular traditions [. . .] black
literature could be as original and as compelling as black music and folklore” (qtd. in Gates and McKay xxxiv). This change in focus, from the Western tradition back to their own culture, allowed for the authors to create a distinct cultural identity as well as to acknowledge their roots within their work. In other words, by incorporating the oral tradition in their fiction these authors could give expression to their double heritage of both a scribal and an oral tradition.

Orality has always continued to play an important role in African diasporic culture, not only in literature but also in everyday life and culture as a whole. Consequently, it has had a significant influence on the formation of authors within these cultures from their childhood onwards. Olive Senior, a Caribbean writer, recalls that in the Jamaican village where she grew up stories and storytelling were everywhere: “storytelling was our entertainment, our radio and newspaper, and our socializing agent” (“Lessons” 41). In an interview with Marlies Glaser, she adds to the omnipresence of storytelling that of song: “[f]or every single night of our lives we were told stories, and orality pervaded the culture, because song is also important. People sang as they worked, and there were special work songs for all activities” (77). The African American author Gayl Jones has similar memories: the first stories she encountered as a child were “heard stories”, and she feels that her “language/word foundations were oral rather than written” as she “learned to write by listening to people talk” (Harper 692). As a result, the oral tradition has penetrated the written tradition and elements of orality continue to be abundant in African American and Caribbean contemporary novels and short stories. Oral expressions are employed by writers not only for the preservation of their heritage, but even more so for the enrichment of their creative possibilities. The vernacular tradition undeniably “continues to nurture it [the written tradition], comment upon it, and criticize it in a dialectical, reciprocal relation” (Gates and McKay xxxviii) in literatures

2 Throughout the paper “Caribbean literature” will be used to refer to “Anglophone African-Caribbean literature” unless otherwise specified.
across the African diaspora. The main function of orality in the written context, as well as its exchange with this context, in African American and Caribbean literature will be the subject of this paper.

   Because African American and Caribbean literature has had a similar history of development and there is a certain geographical closeness, African-Caribbean writers are sometimes also considered to be African American, especially if they have migrated to the United States. Anthologies and readers on African American literature, subsequently, might include Caribbean writers as well. *The Norton Anthology of African American Literature*, for instance, takes up work by Eric Walrond and Jamaica Kincaid, while *The Cambridge Companion to the African American Novel* includes a discussion of Caribbean writers such as Danticat who live in the United States, and refers to them as “Caribbean-American” authors (Anatol 70). I feel, however, that when exploring the function of aspects of orality in these bodies of work, it might be interesting to separate them and investigate African American and Caribbean literature side by side. For, despite having joint origins and a shared history of slavery, both cultures have also been through some very different socio-cultural developments.

   One of the most significant differences is undoubtedly the profound blending of cultures in the Caribbean, usually named “creolisation”. Caribbean society, as it exists today, originates in several vastly different cultures, including the European colonisers – mostly British, French, Spanish, and Dutch –, the African slaves that were introduced to the region to work on the sugarcane plantations, the East Indian indentured labourers who replaced the slaves after the abolishment of slavery by Britain in 1834, and the native people of the Caribbean region (Brown xvi-xvii, Hart 16-17) as the most significant ethnic origins. This

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3 Both authors grew up in the Caribbean: Eric Walrond in Guyana and Jamaica Kincaid in Antigua and Barbuda.
mixture of cultures creates a certain fragmentation as well as a heightened sense of rootlessness because contemporary Caribbean society cannot fall back on roots that connect all Caribbean people, and because, as Senior states, “there is no indigenous culture left in the Caribbean” (Glaser 81). The African-American community in the United States might share this sense of dislocation but as a community they have known – and continue to do so – the possibility to look back to Africa as a hold and as a firm base for their roots, history, and cultural identity.

Additionally, many Caribbeans migrated to the United Kingdom, Canada, or the United States in the second half of the twentieth century. As a result, there are but few Caribbean writers still writing in the Caribbean. This also affects Caribbean authors with a heightened sense of dislocation, even though the bond with home often remains strong; for example, Senior who migrated to Canada continues to see herself “as a Jamaican with a strong commitment to [her] homeland” (Rowell 484). In contrast to the stories of Senior, which are always set in Jamaica and never in Canada, the work of Danticat, one of the Caribbean-American writers, is frequently set in the United States, mostly New York; however, even these stories always reveal a powerful and undeniable connection to Haiti.

After independence, Caribbean society has also come face to face with the threat of “neo-imperialism” which “in the form of globalization, continues to thwart the pursuit of true independence and cultural hybridity” (Minto 628). This imperialism is primarily “United-States-led” (Minto 629) and poses a real threat not only to Caribbean economic independence but also to the region’s culture. Olive Senior discerns “a new cultural system” arriving in the Caribbean, the centre of which is “located somewhere between Hollywood and Dallas” (Rowell 487). This threat has been facing Caribbean culture from the second half of the twentieth century onwards, and it continues to be an undeniable influence on the region’s
literature – even in the works of writers writing from outside the Caribbean such as Senior and Danticat.

A last socio-cultural difference that should be noted is the remarkable situation of African Americans in the United States who unlike Caribbeans can be said to have never known true independence as they have always continued to live in the same country as their former oppressor. They have come to share in power as they have participated in politics, economy, and arts; yet they have never been able to claim a territory as their own, creating the aforementioned sense of dislocation. In addition to this, race has played a significant role in the creation of an African American cultural identity, more so than in the Caribbean. The United States has since the period of arrival of the first African slaves been no less of a cultural and ethnic melting pot than the Caribbean, yet the development of this melting pot has been vastly different. Americans of European, non-coloured descent might be seen as having “united” against African Americans in the process of establishing a cultural identity for themselves. This has lead to the severe racial segregation that lasted up until the second half of the twentieth century. The insistent dominant presence of the former oppressor might have strengthened the unrelenting presence of the trauma of slavery and is likely to have complicated dealing with this trauma. Each of the abovementioned socio-cultural factors has significantly influenced African American and Caribbean culture, and, as a result, its literature and its use of the oral tradition. This leads me to think that a side to side comparison of both literatures might be fruitful.

For the discussion of the use and function of orality in African diasporic writing, this paper will focus on the fiction of female writers because of the unique connection that exists between women and orality within the context of the African diaspora. Stewart Brown

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4 This does not mean, however, that Caribbean people are oblivious to race and skin-colour. Skin-colour has an undeniable importance and, as with the language someone speaks, it suggests a person’s status in society.
describes the role of women in the oral tradition as that of “a conduit of myth and legend” (xxvii), meaning that it was their contribution to the “verbal arts” – telling stories to younger generations – which has been crucial for the preservation of the oral tradition, and consequently also for its later use in literature (Brown xxvii). Women, however, do not only assume the role of protectors of tradition but also that of the link with the past as a whole. This idea is perpetuated in two of the works which will be discussed in greater detail in this paper: *Corregidora* by Gayl Jones and *Krik? Krak!* by Edwidge Danticat. In both works, the notion of mothers telling stories to their daughters plays a crucial role in keeping the past alive for various reasons, for example, to bear witness and to create evidence of past crimes as well as to provide a link with the homeland for emigrated Caribbeans. In the history of African American and Caribbean literature women have played other, more creative roles as well. As mentioned earlier, female slaves in the Caribbean composed songs of resistance and consolation, and the earliest poem composed by an African American was from the hand of the female slave, Lucy Terry (Gates and McKay 137).

It can be said then that women writers add an extra dimension to their work when they extensively employ the tradition of oral storytelling: as female authors they not only take on the role of storyteller, but they also assume the long-established role of the woman as the person in the community who ensures the endurance of tradition and the indispensable bond with the past. Hence, female writers firmly assert themselves within the oral tradition by telling their stories. Considering the age old role these women assume, it should not surprise that their stories are mainly concerned with the past and history, and that they continue to employ orality – the tradition in which they grew up – to address this past.

I have opted to discuss the works of two Caribbean and two African American authors in order to achieve a balanced overview of the use of orality in these two bodies of writing. Olive Senior and Edwidge Danticat are Caribbean writers working from outside the region, in
Canada and the United States respectively. The African American writers whose work I explored are Toni Morrison and Gayl Jones. The main works of fiction on which I have based my research are Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), Gayl Jones’s *Corregidora* (1975) and the short story collection *White Rat* (1977), Olive Senior’s collections of stories “*Summer Lightning*” and Other Stories (1986) and “*The Arrival of the Snake-Woman*” and Other Stories (1989), and finally, Edwidge Danticat’s *The Dew Breaker* (2004) and the short-story cycle *Krik? Krak!* (1996). My primary means of research was a close reading of these texts which I used as a starting point to compare the use of elements of orality not only on a formal level, for example, the use of the vernacular in dialogue and narrative; but also on a more abstract level, for instance, the recreation of an oral situation within a written context.

The first chapter of my paper provides an illustration of how orality functions in both African American and Caribbean fiction on a formal and a more abstract level. This examination of the similarities will provide an overview of the workings of orality in a written context which is indispensable to appropriately examine how these workings might convey different meanings and functions. Similarities are unavoidable because the use of the oral tradition was one of the only means left to the peoples of the African diaspora to create their own distinct voice; however, the primary function for which the oral tradition is used differs significantly. In both literatures the use of orality undeniably establishes a connection with the past but the nature of this relationship between past and present – which also encompasses a specific attitude towards the past – varies.

The second chapter discloses the nature of the past/present relationship established and mediated through orality in African American literature. The work of Morrison and Jones is characterised by the characters’ trauma which lies at the foundation of the stories, and which is brought to the fore mainly through oral expressions as well as a narrative structure revealing characteristics that are effectively oral in nature. In the final chapter, I will address
orality in Caribbean fiction, how its use in this body of literature differs from that in African American fiction, and how it creates and maintains a connection between the past and the present. This reveals a relationship that is not only a preservative movement but also a dynamic dialectic that helps to avert the threats of a North Atlantic modernity and aids contemporary attempts to construct a Caribbean identity.

With this paper I intent to illustrate why it might not only be fascinating but also indispensable to differentiate between African American and Caribbean literature when exploring their use of orality. I also strive to shed light on the different relationships between past, present, and future which both cultures encompass, and how these relationships not only trigger the use of orality but are also established through the use of the oral tradition. In both literatures, the dynamic between “tradition” and the present which is constituted by orality also seems to indicate a dynamic relationship with the past within the literature. However, the nature of the relationship between past and present that is mediated by orality differs significantly in nature in each of these two literatures, and therefore a difference in the key function of orality might be discerned. This exploration of orality’s key function might lead to a better understanding of the use of orality in relation to a literature’s socio-cultural environment as well as of the value the oral tradition still has in literature and in a primarily scribal society as a whole.
1. **Similarities in the Use of Orality in African American and Caribbean Fiction**

African American and Caribbean fiction have roots in the same African oral tradition, and consequently the nature of the use of orality in both literatures is frequently similar. Hence, the function of oral aspects within the written text in African American literature unavoidably coincides in some respects with the purpose of elements from the oral tradition in Caribbean literature. Additionally, the same holds true for the manner in which orality affects the form of the text in these literatures. It is without doubt useful to explore these similarities before focussing on the differences, because they will shed a light on the functioning of orality in writing in general as well as on the connection between these two literatures of the African diaspora. This chapter will explore the deployment of orality on two levels: a formal level and a more abstract one. Orality’s influence on a formal level includes, for instance, the use of vernacular and other speech characteristics to make the text look – and sound – more like a story that is told rather than written, and the abstract level refers to the use of elements from the oral tradition to create certain dynamics both within the text and between text, writer, and reader. The first section will handle the use of vernacular language in literature in both dialogue and narrative, which was one of the major turning points in both Caribbean and African American literature. The second part will take a closer look at the performative nature with which most African diasporic texts are infused, and which is a direct consequence of the authors’ roots in a strong oral culture. This performative nature also implies a reinstatement of the close audience-teller relationship which will be examined in the third part, followed by a discussion in the final part of the hybridity that is the result of the incorporation of orality in writing, and which typifies African diasporic literature.
1.1. Vernacular in Dialogue and Narrative

One of the most prominent and significant uses of orality that is shared by both Caribbean and African American literature is undoubtedly the use of vernacular, the imitation of colloquial, spoken language, in both narrative and dialogue. The use of Creole and Black English in this manner has not been self-evident in the history of these literatures. Originally the vernacular\(^5\) spoken by African Americans and non-white Caribbeans was considered less valuable than Standard English. Since creole languages were long considered to be “broken or approximate language systems” (Donnell and Welsh 11), and Black English was often considered to be a defective version of Standard English (Pullum 40), these languages were thought to underscore the supposed inferiority or ignorance of its speakers (Warner-Lewis, “Language Use” 26). Consequently, for nineteenth-century writers “it was generally simply taken for granted that the central character, along with his moral and intellectual superiority, would also be a speaker of standard English (and his language proof of these other qualities); this was unquestioned and unquestionable” (Jones, Liberating 127-28). Vernacular, or dialect, came to be used primarily for the sake of comic relief in both white and African American fiction (Jones, Liberating 125, Warner-Lewis, “Language Use” 34), and, as a result, in novels where African-Caribbean or African American characters use the vernacular, such as in William Wells Brown’s Clotel or, the President’s Daughter (1853), “the chapters which dramatize the relationships between blacks exist chiefly as amusing interludes” (Jones, Liberating 125).

Gradually, however, the colloquial speech came to be acknowledged as a language “adequate to meet any demand a serious writer might make on it” (Jones, Liberating 126). Zora Neale Hurston might have been among the first black writers to employ Black English –

\(^{5}\) Vernacular refers here to the Caribbean creole languages, such as Jamaican patois, and U.S. Black English or African American Vernacular English (AAVE).
rendered as it was spoken – in a serious and realistic manner in her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). In the Caribbean Eric Walrond was among the first to give in his fiction an “intimation of a different ‘way of saying’, of a speech that is distinctively West Indian” (Brown xx): for instance, in his short story “Drought” from the collection *Tropic Death* (1926). The Harlem Renaissance in the second decade of the twentieth century was a major catalyst of the new appreciation of the vernacular, and the movement allowed for a revaluation of the oral tradition as a whole. These changes affected all literatures of the African diaspora as African-Caribbean writers such as Walrond also took part in the cultural developments that originated during these years (Brown and Wickham 465).

In the second half of the twentieth century, further significant changes concerning the use of vernacular took place. In the Caribbean a number of linguistic studies of the Caribbean creole languages, starting in the 1960s, gave the status of Creole in society “a massive boost” (Donnell and Welsh 12-13), and this change did away with most of the prejudices towards creole language. In African American literature since the 1970s, many writers turned to Africa for inspiration and this went hand in hand with a growing attention to “the controversial issues of language and social identity” (Gates and McKay 2014). It was primarily the success of Alice Walker’s novel *The Color Purple* (1982), in which Walker used Black English to its full extent and potential, that initiated “scholarly interest in Black English not as a deficient form of standard English but as a language in its own right” (Gates and McKay 2014).

This employment of vernacular in fiction is of course not exclusive to the literature of the African diaspora. As Jones notes, the use of vernacular for comic relief “resembles the European literary tradition […] of treating servants and the lower classes comically, or as background figures […]” (Jones, *Liberating* 125) when portraying them mostly through their language. In twentieth century fiction, modernist authors started to frequently turn to the vernacular leaving behind the comical connotations it used to engender. James Joyce, for
example, prolifically employed the Irish English dialect in his novels *Ulysses* and *Finnegan’s Wake* (Jones, *Liberating* 5). However, what distinguishes the Western use of vernacular with that in Caribbean and African literature is the way in which the use of dialect in the latter literatures is fraught with extensive political, social, and cultural meaning.

To African American and African-Caribbean writers the vernacular became an important means of asserting a cultural identity. As Gates remarks “the Black English vernacular […] was a sign of black difference, blackness of the tongue” (*Signifying* 92). Therefore, for writers to write in the vernacular, was to affirm this difference and turn their literature into something belonging completely to them as the vernacular was a language that was truly their own. The use of colloquial language was, and is, a keystone in defining a Caribbean and African American literature and this take on vernacular language as an important concept in creating identity and culture, emancipating one’s cultural self, is illustrated by the term Kamau Brathwaite coined to refer to the creole vernacular: “nation language” (Donnell and Welsh 11). In other words, Brathwaite’s term reflects the idea that the dialect spoken by the former slaves – and not Standard English – represents the true language of the nation. Therefore, Creole – and this might be applied to Black English as well – was a language, a means with “the potential for cultural resistance” (Donnell and Welsh 12) as, among other things, the manner in which the oral culture and dialect was employed beyond the confines of dialogue was a definite breaking away from the British and American literary examples after which early African diaspora literature was modelled, both in the Caribbean and the United States.

In the Caribbean, the choice of language and dialect – in fiction as well as real life – has always continued to carry ideological and political connotations (Warner-Lewis, “Language Use” 25): while Standard English can roughly be classified as the language of the coloniser, Creole is perceived as the language of the people. Consequently, there has always
been a “concomitant identification between class and language code” (Warner-Lewis, “Language Use” 25) whereby higher-class citizens speak Standard English and lower-class citizens Creole. In other words, the kind of English someone uses indicates his place in society as well as in a community. A key notion in this respect is that of the creole continuum. This continuum refers to the many existing gradations of creole, with a “full” Creole on one end and Standard English on the other end. In everyday life, most speakers “naturally [select] registers of the language which [are] appropriate to particular contexts and situations” (Rohlehr 2). This concept of a continuum is applicable to texts dealing with Black English as well, for there exist many registers between Black English and Standard English. Many African-Caribbean and African American writers employ this continuum in their fiction: most texts make use of various gradations of the languages within the continuum. The alternation between these different languages is called code-switching, and is, subsequently, quite common in fiction of the African diaspora.

An excellent example of how writers might employ the creole continuum to add another layer of meaning or characterisation to their fiction can be found in Senior’s story collection “Summer Lightning” and Other Stories. It can be argued that the use of language in the narrative voice indicates the mindset of the protagonist for each of the stories. The stories narrated in a Standard English voice are often focalised by characters steeped in the values of higher-class Caribbeans – often more Western-minded, light-skinned individuals –, whereas a vernacular voice is used to identify more lower-class, darker narrators. The contrast can be used in a more nuanced manner as well, as “Do Angels Wear Brassieres?”, a story from the collection, illustrates. The protagonist, Becka, is a young girl who lives in the house of her aunt: the girl is surrounded by adults who speak a more standardised form of Creole and she obsessively reads the Bible, yet the story, focalised by Becka, is narrated in Creole English. This points out to the reader the truly stubborn nature of the girl and her refusal to simply
accept everything that is told her and that is written in the Bible – including its language. Instead she continually questions the book, even when facing the Archdeacon. This corresponds with what Marie-Annick Montout writes about Senior’s use of the continuum, namely, that the “[c]hoice of language in Olive Senior’s fiction, is a channel for the character’s revolt against the established norm or against its adoption when Jamaican communal values are at stake” (par. 4). Hence, like the girl, the narrative refuses to adopt Standard English as an additional indication that Becka is fully set on protecting her identity, refusing to give it up by conforming to her aunt’s values.

A similar use of Black English can be discerned in African American fiction. Yvonne Atkinson, for example, points out that the code-switching in Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* (1970), in this case between the Black English used by the characters and the Standard English employed by the narrator, indicates the inclusion or exclusion of a person in a community. According to Atkinson the characters speaking Black English “are part of their community and so is the reader who understands their inclusion without the explanation provided by the narrator” (“Black English” 15). In Jones’s story “White Rat”, which deals with a light-skinned black protagonist and his frustrations surrounding the fact that he is often perceived as being white, the narrator’s use of Black English is another clear indication of the narrator identifying himself as black and thus belonging to the respective community.

Due to the connotations and the importance ascribed to the vernacular it is not hard to understand why Maureen Warner-Lewis remarks that “[t]he authentic depiction of Caribbean [or African American] life thus demands sensitivity to speech culture [. . .]” (“Language Use” 29). The vernacular is undoubtedly one of the most essential means in literature of the African diaspora in portraying characters as well as in adding an extra dimension to the text.
1.2. Written Performance

The use of colloquial language in dialogue and narrative, as discussed above, is one of the main features that give rise to another of African American and Caribbean literature’s shared elements of orality: the performative character of these written texts. The vernacular is an important part of this performative quality, for as Warner-Lewis notes, “performance is intrinsic” to vernacular speech (“Language Use” 25). In addition to this, many authors employ in their text numerous elements that are characteristic of spoken language as well as a first-person narration, techniques which further heighten the performative quality of their stories. Authors such as Senior and Jones develop from these characteristics – and the performance aspect that is intrinsic to them – stories that are highly mimetic of genuinely oral tales. This type of stories can be called “‘performance texts’ or ‘stories in the moment of performance’ [. . .]” (Simpson 831) and occur frequently in both African American and Caribbean fiction.

These texts approximate the Russian Formalists’ notion of “skaz”, which refers to “a text [that] seems to be aspiring to the status of oral narration” (Gates, Signifying xxvi). According to Boris Eikhenbaum, the Russian Formalist who coined the term, “skaz” “bears witness to a discontent with traditional literary speech” and its key feature is an “orientation toward the word, toward intonation, toward the voice, if only in its written transformation” (qtd. in Ogden 538). The voice to which the skaz text is oriented tends to be “an emphatically non-literary one, speaking colloquially, in dialect” and this quality is also reflected in its “approach to storytelling” (Ogden 528). Henry Louis Gates classifies texts which privilege the notion of skaz as “speakerly texts”: texts which allow “the representation of the speaking black voice” (Signifying 112). In other words, as the skaz texts represent the Russian peasant’s voice, dialect, and storytelling (Ogden 528), so do the “speakerly texts” reflect in writing these features as they are employed by African Americans, preferring the colloquial and spoken forms above the traditional style of written narratives.
Performance texts often allow for the author to add additional layers to a story and thus, for instance, to disclose additional information about the narrator without explicitly doing so. Senior’s story “Real Old Time T’ing”, for example, is characterised by many elements designed to give the story the appearance of one that is being written down exactly as it is being told. The story is “mimetically oral” (Simpson 831) and from the opening lines of the story this quality is clearly fore-grounded:

Is the one name Patricia did start up bout how Papa Sterling need a new house for it look bad how their father living in this old board house it dont even have sanitary convenience. Sanitary convenience! So it don’t name bath house any more? Then if she so hot on sanitary convenience why she down here a buy up all the old water goblet and china basin she can find a talk say is real country this and how she just finding her roots [. . .]. But we wont go into all the ups and downs she did have in her life before that piece of luck drop into her lap. And is luck fe true mi dear. (Senior, Summer 54)

The text shows distinct characteristics of spoken language such as the omission of the copulative verb “to be” in the fourth sentence: “Then if she so hot on sanitary convenience why she down here [. . .]” (Summer 54). The story is also narrated from a first-person point of view which emphasises the conception of the story as a “performance text” for it presents the narrator as being in the process of telling his/her story. In the final two sentences, the use of “we” and “mi dear” clearly establishes the existence of a storyteller and a listener. Since the story is narrated in first-person and no other voice is heard, the reader is designated as the listener. In other words, the story is a definitive simulation of an actual oral situation.

Moreover, the text itself is not only an example of a text mimicking performance, the speech characteristics encompass a great deal of performance as well: the attitude, character, and behaviour of the narrator can easily be imagined by the reader as they are firmly embedded within the written lines. For instance, the narrator’s sneer, “Sanitary convenience!”, followed by the question “So it don’t name bath house any more?” (Summer 54) expresses a defensive
attitude of someone slightly offended by the younger generation’s desire to alter longstanding customs.

Senior’s use of other speech characteristics such as the interjectional fragments and remarks inserted in “Real Old Time T’ing” is not only meant to emphasise the oral quality of the text: upon close inspection they prove to be elements through which the reader might access the many layers of text. Through the remarks and asides which the narrator makes, she could be said to foreground unwittingly the psychological foundations underneath the seemingly trivial anecdote she tells to the reader. This illustrates Hyacinth Simpson’s claim in “Voicing the Text” that “[a]s with dramatic monologues [. . .] the speaker’s inadvertent self-revelations are integral to the overall meaning of Senior’s performance stories” (832). A closer look at the narrator’s sneer at the term “sanitary convenience” discloses a deeply-rooted anxiety over the gradual replacement of the traditional Caribbean ways of life by the modern, American ones. The sneer appears to suggest that the narrator considers the Caribbean culture and habits still valuable; however, the narrator’s utterances further on in the story reveal a more complicated attitude. The attentive reader might deduct from her description of Miss Myrtella, who spent most of her life in England, that the narrator is in fact doubtful of the Caribbean culture’s value when opposed with a more modern society, for she remarks, “I don’t know if I would spend all my life in foreign and get accent like Miss Myrtella and then end up back down in these backward parts [. . .]” (Summer 57). By having the characters tell their story in a seemingly unmediated manner – in other words, by writing “the story as if it were being told” (Senior, “Lessons” 41) – Senior is capable of enclosing implicit information about her characters which is left to be unearthed by the reader.

Not all texts are this explicitly performative, but this does not mean that they do not encompass the performance aesthetic of the aforementioned texts. Instead of foregrounding this aesthetic, however, they embody it in more implicit ways. Morrison’s novel Beloved, for
instance, is an obviously mediated story, narrated mostly in a third-person point of view; yet, the text is structured according to the principles that govern all orally told stories. The oral principles structuring the story correspond, as Edward Dauterich points out, with those that Walter Ong has specified as being characteristic of orality, the most prominent features being the use of repetition and the additive nature of the narration. Accordingly, *Beloved*, like the “performance texts”, can rightly be considered “an oral text” (Atkinson 14, Sale 42).

The most explicit marker of *Beloved*’s performative nature is without doubt the repetition within the text as it is a quintessential element in oral storytelling and very prominent throughout the novel. The use of repetition can be said to occur on two levels, the level of word-groups or epithets and that of images and larger stories, and these levels can be seen as giving expression to two “psychodynamics of orality”6 as defined by Ong. The repetition of word-groups such as “those good hands” or “crawling already? girl” (Morrison, *Beloved* 93, 96, 110-11) is a reflection of the oral expression’s “reliance on formulas to implement memories” and discloses the aggregative nature of the oral expression in opposition to the analytic one of the written expression (Ong 38, Dauterich 30). The recurring images and stories-within-the-story, such as the story of the murder of Beloved, could be seen as revealing the “redundant or ‘copious’” quality of orality, necessary for the continuity of thought: whereas a written text offers the reader the possibility to return to earlier passages, “the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered” (Ong 39), and consequently repetition is required to keep “both speaker and hearer surely on the track” (Ong 39-40). *Beloved* can thus undeniably be said to be an inherently performative text, and although the novel might not overtly resemble an oral narrative it can definitely be regarded as a story in the process of being told.

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6 “Psychodynamics of orality” is a phrase used by Ong and refers to the manner in which the mental reality of an oral culture is structured and how this is expressed in their narratives.
The stories in Edwidge Danticat’s short story collection *Krik? Krak!* present a similar example as they might at first sight not seem to be performance stories in the same way as those of Senior and Jones. However, the collection’s title firmly asserts that the stories are to be approached with the oral tradition and its performance in mind: *Krik? Krak!* refers to the “‘Crick’ / ‘Crack’ device’ with which the storytellers from the francophone Caribbean traditionally assemble their audiences” (Warner-Lewis, “Oral Tradition” 130-131). Thus, Danticat emphatically indicates that these stories have to be perceived as if they would be directly narrated to the reader by a Caribbean, a Haitian, storyteller.

Danticat’s story collection, the abovementioned performativity in *Beloved*, and the stories by Jones and Senior suggest that stories by African American and Caribbean writers can be argued to be often – if not always – embedded in a context of storytelling, and, as a result, they are invariably performative in nature. The works by these four authors give an excellent impression of how performance is intertwined with the literature of the African diaspora, albeit in many different forms and in both explicit and implicit manners. Performance is interlaced with African American and Caribbean fiction because it is intrinsic to the oral tradition, and accordingly to the literatures that draw on this tradition as well.

**1.3. Call-and-Response: Seeking Engagement**

Performance in the African oral tradition implies the presence of the call-and-response pattern, and consequently this pattern is another feature that is inherent to nearly all creations with ties to the oral tradition. One of the pattern’s most explicit manifestations, the earlier mentioned “crick/crack-device”, illustrates its most basic principle: storytelling and everyday conversation within the African tradition requires not only performance by the teller but also by the audience. The device “can be perceived as forming a contract between teller and audience, a contract which has to be initialled before the story can begin” (Senior, “Lessons”
and this participation by both sides is required not only at the beginning but also
during the telling of the story. Accordingly, “[t]he ‘Crick’/‘Crack’ device is by tradition
interspersed throughout the narration as a means of ensuring audience alertness and to
heighten suspense by slightly delaying the recount of events” (Warner-Lewis, “Oral
Tradition” 130-31). In other words, essential to the call-and-response pattern is the rejection
of a passive audience and the engagement of one that actively participates in the construction
of the narrative.

This call-and-response pattern is the expression of the antiphonal structure that
governs the African oral tradition (Warner-Lewis, “Oral Tradition 117), and consequently it
has left an explicit mark on all those arts that are influenced by this tradition. Blues music
might be the most obvious example among the popular forms in which the pattern manifests
itself (Jones, Liberating 195), but literature is rather strongly affected as well. The call-and-
response pattern can manifest itself quite literally, for example, in Jones’ novel Corregidora.
In several instances, the consciousness of the protagonist, Ursa, is represented by italicised
imaginary call-and-response dialogues with her former husband, Mutt:

“Ursa, have you lost the blues?”
“Naw, the blues is something you can’t loose.”
“Gimme a feel. Just a little feel.”
“You had your feel.”
“Are you lonely?”
“Yes.”
“Do you still fight the night?”
“Yes.”
“Lonely blues. Don’t you care if you see me again?”
“Naw, I don’t care.” (97)

However, what is most intriguing about this pattern is the effect it has on the reading
of African diasporic texts: how it requires the audience, the readers of the texts, to react to
what they have read; in other words, how this pattern might reach beyond the boundaries of the written text. The structure of *Call & Response: the Riverside Anthology of the African American Literary Tradition* (1998) illustrates how deeply the call-and-response pattern has permeated not only into the literary text but also into the perception of African diasporic cultures as a whole. This anthology organises all of its – fictional and non-fictional – texts according to the contrapuntal structure of the African oral tradition. In the view of this collection, all African American literary texts should be seen as responses to the developments in society at that time as well as to non-literary texts such as the speeches of Martin Luther King Jr. When the perspective is further broadened, it could be argued that all texts in African American and Caribbean culture embody or seek the response, the engagement, of the reader in one way or another.

By aiming to procure the reader’s engagement, the authors in fact aim to strengthen the bond between reader and writer. This establishes a bond similar to the one that exists between storyteller and audience in the context of oral storytelling. By re-establishing this connection with their readers, authors of the African diaspora might be seen as undoing some of the distancing that has occurred in the transition from a dominance of oral to a dominance of written literature. Warner-Lewis points out, “the further removed from their oral and aural origins both fiction and poetry have become, the greater has grown the distance between the authorial voice and the reader” ( “Language Use” 26), a distance which eliminates both the strong antiphonal roots of the literatures and the close connection between audience and what is told. Authors like Morrison voice themselves the desire to “overcome the alienation that pervades the text” for “it’s not just about telling the story; it’s about involving the reader” (Conner xxiii), and Senior states that her model in writing are those “fictions which [ . . . ] have relied on the language of the storyteller interwove with the responses of the participants”
(“Lessons” 41). The ways in which this engagement might be brought about are plentiful and can be embodied in both formal and structural characteristics.

The most straightforward technique in which readers are urged to participate in the storytelling occurs in “performance texts” narrated in a first-person mode which directly address the reader. The direct address of the reader instantly draws him/her into the story by making him/her part of the conversational context which the story is designed to imitate. Senior’s story “Real Old Time T’ing” illustrates this perfectly as the use of words such as “mi dear” and “we” throughout creates the feeling of a bond, enveloping the reader in a conversation with the narrator. Another way in which authors seek to bridge the distance and generate the participation of the reader is the use of vernacular. According to Warner-Lewis, “Standard English operates as [a] distancing mechanism” (“Language Use” 26), and consequently use of everyday speech makes it easier for the reader to connect with the author. It sparks interest and engagement, for it can be said that the author writes in the language of his/her assumed audience, and subsequently, this produces a more easily accessible text with which the reader is more likely to connect. In other words, the sense of inclusion in a community created by the use of vernacular as discussed earlier plays a significant role in drawing in the reader.

Other texts literally make room for the reader to “enter” the text and participate, or respond. Morrison, for instance, is conscious of the “holes and spaces” she leaves for her readers to fill in (Tate 125), for instance, by writing down dialogues in Black English: as it is essentially a spoken language, a transcription of Black English is always incomplete lacking many essential features such as pitch. Morrison expects her readers “to fill in those gaps with communal knowledge” (Atkinson 14) and thus to participate actively in completing the story. Another manner in which these “holes” for the reader might be created is by leaving stories open-ended. This can be done literally as many of Senior’ stories have, for example, an open
ending or “offer the reader some kind of decision-making” (Senior, “Lessons” 43). The holes, however, can also occur within the text: in Beloved, several of the characters’ stories do not attain full closure. For instance, the reader does not find out what happens with Sethe’s sons or Halle (Sale 43-44). The reader is consequently invited to start thinking upon the possible fate of the characters in these stories.

The reason for this insistence upon engagement is the result of the call-and-response pattern which permeates the African diasporic cultures in which these writers grew up: as mentioned earlier, the pattern is part of traditional formal storytelling as well as everyday conversations and music. The importance of these responses in the original oral context is crucial to the “existence” of the story. Senior points out in “Lessons from the Fruit Stand” that the listener’s responses are “in the nature of an ongoing critique” and “the teller would be shouted down and replaced by another” if the audience deemed the story not worthy of listening to (41). Hence, it is the listener who determines whether or not a story is brought to its conclusion. From this intense collaboration in oral storytelling stems the “insistence” of authors such as Morrison and Senior upon the fact that “a story [exists] because of consensus; because of that collaboration between teller and listener, [. . .] between the writer and reader” (“Lessons” 41). Just like the listener who might walk away or shout down the teller, the reader can end the participation and “stop reading the story” (“Lessons” 41) at any given time. Therefore, the reader is to be engaged, to be urged to reflect on the story and thus to fully realise the story’s potential for meaning.

1.4. Orality and the Written Text: a Fertile Hybridity

Despite the prominent position of orality in the African diaspora, it is wrong to simply assume that this indicates a primacy or alleged superiority of the oral over the written tradition from the point of view of the authors. Instead, authors from both the African American and
Caribbean traditions appear to seek a working merger between both traditions, a functioning hybridity that respects orality and writing equally. Toni Morrison’s novels, for instance, “integrat[e] oral and written expression without emphasizing either form hierarchically” (Dauterich 27). In their fiction, African American and African-Caribbean authors use characteristics from both traditions so that these traditions might reinforce each other and move beyond their boundaries. It is Senior’s belief that “the writer coming out of this [the oral] tradition must not only engage with the tradition, but must build on it, extend both the narrative technique and the possibilities for meaning in the story” (Senior, “Lessons” 41); hence, when integrating both the oral and the written tradition, elements from both can be used to achieve the expansion of possibilities Senior advocates.

Of course, it cannot be denied that from the prevalence of oral characteristics in written fiction a great respect for the voice and the spoken word might be deduced as well as an acknowledgement of its powers. The oral tradition is, in other words, of undeniably great value to these authors. This is expressed both formally and thematically, for instance, in the insistence on the use of the vernacular as previously discussed, or in the character’s reliance on elements from the oral tradition, such as speeches or songs. The power of the oral expression might be illustrated by a scene in *Corregidora* where the description of a picture of the Portuguese slave-owner Corregidora is followed by an oral portrayal of the man by the grandmother. As Janelle Collins argues, the grandmother’s depiction “both supplements and overpowers the literal description of the image in the photograph” and in this scene Jones, “through narrative emphasis, [. . .] highlights the affective force of oral traditions” (10).

The “exorcism” of Beloved, near the end of Morrison’s novel, provides another excellent example of the power ascribed to orality. Beloved is chased off by a group of women relying on the “mere” power of voice (*Beloved* 307-8). Another way in which Morrison recognises the power of words and storytelling is contained in the way in which she
conceives of telling stories as a means of feeding Beloved (Beloved 69). This underlines the vital connection between the storyteller and listener as described earlier and emphasises the importance of storytelling as a whole by equating it with Beloved’s “source of life”. Yet another example of the strength of orality and the respect it consequently receives from writers is presented by one of the stories by Danticat from her collection Krik? Krak!. The story “Nineteen Thirty-Seven” is a testimony to the power of stories, including both tales and everyday gossip (Brown xxxii). It discloses what the power of the spoken word might bring about: how a couple of whispered words are enough to condemn a women to the hands of abusive prison guards for the rest of her life, while at the same time a story might also provide the strength and hope to survive.

Nevertheless, each of the authors discussed in this paper seems to advocate that writing is to be valued equally. This is revealed both in the writing itself – for the authors embraced the literary tradition to share their stories – as well as thematically within the story, primarily in terms of the characters’ relation to literacy. Characters do not shy away from literacy but understand the potential that is inherent to the written word. This is shown quite explicitly in Senior’s story “Arrival of the Snake-Woman”, from the eponymous short story collection. Despite the villagers’ penchant to keep the old ways of life, they accept the power of the written tradition as is illustrated by their concerns over the oral agreements on land ownership. The villagers realise that the oral agreements on landownership might be insufficient and even invaluable in a society governed by written laws and contracts. Mother Miracle fears to lose her land, “for even though Mother Miracle’s father had given her a plot of land, he had never given her a paper to go with it and everybody knew that the white people and the law which supported everything they did only dealt in paper” (Arrival 20). Additionally, the narrator discloses that the newcomers, parson Bedlow and his wife, do not
win over the villagers with their prayers and medical care but with the “book-learning” they offer:

> What bound the people to them was the book-learning which they were passing on to the children in the little schoolhouse which they built. Nobody in the district wanted to give up this thing, the magic that was contained in black and white squiggles on paper [. . .] This was the true source of power [. . .]. (Arrival 23)

Even though the writing is nothing but “squiggles” to the villagers, they are aware of its “magic”, the power contained within. Their vehement desire to make sure their children have access to it, indicates that they understand and recognise the value of the written text when it comes to the transfer of knowledge.

What is remarkable is how these traditions are fused together, these authors opting for “intertwining aspects of oral tradition expression with writing without claiming precedence for either” (Dauterich 28), and attaining new modes of expression as well as new functions in fiction while doing so. The use of vernacular in writing, as described in 1.1, allows to add additional meaning, while Senior’s use of asides in a written text mirroring a spoken one allows her, for instance, to foreground the psychological motivations that lie beneath a seemingly trivial bit of everyday storytelling. Writing provides Senior with the context in which she can consciously insert these remarks but it also provides the reader with a context in which he can go back and think the story over. This conscious welding together of the written and the oral expression allows Senior and other authors to recapture some of the traditional storyteller’s art. Walter Benjamin argues that the modern “short story”, for instance, “has removed itself from oral tradition and no longer permits that slow piling of one on top of the other of thin, transparent layers which constitutes the most appropriate picture of the way in which the perfect narrative is revealed through the layers of a variety of retellings”
(“Storyteller” 6). However, by combining orality and a written context, the author can work consciously on, for instance, the oral strategies she uses to tell the story. Rather than in retelling, the layering is then contained within the process of writing.

This hybridity is presented by Dauterich as being one of the qualities that makes a work uniquely African American, in addition to Henry Louis Gates’ conception of “Signifyin(g).” Taking into account the stories of Senior and Danticat, it has to be concluded that this hybridity is also a recurrent element in Caribbean fiction designating it as truly Caribbean. Conclusively, it should be argued that this hybridity – which does not aim at a perfect balance but rather a fertile synthesis – is what is unique to the culture of the African diaspora. This synthesis gives expression to the double heritage of African American and Caribbean writers who stem from both the written and the oral tradition, and consequently it is a testimony to their roots while at the same time it provides them with a way to create something that is entirely their own, a way to claim their place in the literary universe.

These authors do not simply combine but they also create: they strengthen both the written and the oral tradition by opening up new modes of expression that allow them to incorporate more meaning in a story in many different ways. The explicit occurrence of this type of hybridity in the works of Morrison, Jones, Danticat, and Senior suggests that this kind of fertile hybridity between the literary and the oral tradition is what connects the literatures of the African diaspora, rather than orality in itself. This practice of hybridity also enforces Paul Gilroy’s claim in The Black Atlantic (1993) for a diasporic model – the Black Atlantic – that prefers a synthesis of cultures above ethnic absolutism (3). In Gilroy’s view, an “intercultural positionality” is central to the Black Atlantic (6); in other words, the essence of the African diasporic culture can be found in an acknowledgement of all different cultural influences, both African and Western.

7 The concept of “Signifyin(g)” will be further explained in chapter 2.
2. African American Fiction and Orality: Undoing the Entanglement with the Past

As mentioned in the introduction, the function of orality is in both Caribbean and African American literature connected to the mediation and establishment of a relation between past and present, tradition and modernity. Since the nature of this relation differs, the key function of orality differs as well. The characteristics of the use of orality that differentiate these literatures will be explored in the following two chapters. What seems mainly to distinguish the use of orality in African American fiction from the use in Caribbean literature is that African American instances of orality seem to coincide quite often with instances of trauma. That is to say that, more than in African-Caribbean fiction, the traumas present within the text – or at the base of it – appear to manifest themselves on both thematic and textual levels, frequently contained within aspects of orality. The text itself is subsequently affected by the characters’ traumatic experiences as well as the manner in which the characters – and sometimes the author – engage with and attempt to recover from said trauma by means of elements from the oral tradition. This chapter will explore the manner in which orality gives expression to trauma, and how trauma is confronted in African American literature by means of oral expressions.

2.1. Voicing the Unspeakable: Oral Manifestations of Trauma

All three African American works discussed in this paper, Beloved, Corregidora, and White Rat, are marked by traumas that seem to affect the structural, formal, and thematic levels of the texts incessantly. What is remarkable is that each of these manifestations is most often connected to a kind of oral expression and these expressions occur – as illustrated by the previous chapter – on any of the three aforementioned levels. This is most notable in the novels Beloved and Corregidora, in which the key trauma is the inherited trauma of slavery,
and which explore slavery’s consequences on more personal levels such as identity. This trauma lies close to the root of African American culture and has continued to affect its literature from the first slave narratives up until now. *Beloved* covers the story of Sethe, a runaway slave, and the effects the aftermath of slavery continues to have on her life: although she has escaped, she is never truly free. In *Corregidora*, Jones tells the story of Ursa, a jazz singer in the 1940s, whose mother and grandmother were both fathered by the same Portuguese slaveholder who owned her great-grandmother and grandmother. Jones explores in this novel how Ursa’s upbringing – her past – continues to influence her; that is to say, how the trauma of the previous generations continues to affect her life and identity. In *White Rat*, the traumas are not so much traumatic experiences as traumatic legacies. That is to say that the characters seem to be struggling with what previous generations have left them: the stories deal with the effects of a problematic or deficient upbringing, the issue of race and skin colour, and prejudices concerning mental health.

Accordingly, *Beloved* and *Corregidora* might be regarded as excellent examples of post-traumatic writing. The influence and extreme hold the past might have on the characters becomes especially clear in a passage from *Corregidora*, which illustrates the role of generations and the power of storytelling in the passing on of a trauma. When Ursa visits her mother, Mama tells her about overhearing how Great Gram told her mother “how Corregidora wouldn’t let her see some man because he was too black” (124). While Ursa’s mother is telling her this story, Ursa remarks that “Mama kept talking until it wasn’t her that was talking, but Great Gram. I stared at her because she wasn’t Mama now, she was Great Gram talking” (124). This passage illustrates how, when each generation passes on the story of the slave-owner by means of the stories they tell their daughters, the woman telling the story actually becomes the woman who experienced the abuse at the hands of Corregidora, and accordingly, how by telling these stories the memory of the “Corregidora women” becomes...
the memory of the teller, “as strong with her as her own private memory” (Corregidora 129). This fragment illustrates the extent of the hold of the past, of history, which is connected to this trauma, and it reveals how the memory of the first two women becomes a collective memory, supplanting personal stories, and consequently complicating the formation of a true identity. Ursa’s mother, for instance, changes her story about her relationship with Ursa’s father – she tells Ursa he was just someone she met briefly at the depot where she worked, whereas it was someone with whom she built up a personal relationship – so it would enforce the Corregidora story and strengthen its hold on her and her daughter.

At times when the traumatic past appears truly to permeate the text and it affects the text literally, the manifestations coincide with features that are essentially oral in nature. The hold of the past is, for instance, embodied in the repetitive nature of the text in Beloved and Corregidora: the repetitions are constituted of memories of the past, memories that relentlessly and uncontrollably arise in the minds of Sethe, Paul D., and Ursa. They might be seen as these characters’ form of “acting-out”, especially in Corregidora where the italicised memories and the – imagined or recalled – conversations between Ursa and Mutt truly interrupt the text. This repetitive motion within the text coincides fully with the redundant or “copious” nature of the oral text as observed by Ong and explained in chapter 1. Additionally, the interruptive fragments in Corregidora are instances of undeniably oral interaction: they include call-and-response patterned dialogues, fragments that explicitly mimic a blues song, and stories told by the “Corregidora women”.

The traumatic nature of the past in Beloved – primarily the traumas of Sethe and Paul D. – manifests itself mostly in instances of silence and a lack of words. Sethe’s stories of Sweet Home and her escape are not to be told (Beloved 69) and Paul D.’s old songs are unfit

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8 In an interview with Amos Goldberg, Dominick LaCapra explains “acting-out” as follows: “Acting-out is related to repetition [. . .] the tendency to repeat something compulsively. This is very clear in the case of people who undergo a trauma. They have a tendency to relive the past [. . .] with no distance from it” (2).
for his new life with Sethe and Denver: “[h]e couldn’t go back to “Storm upon the Waters”
that they sang under the trees of Sweet Home, so he contented himself with mmmmmmmmm, 
throwing in a line if one occurred to him [. . .]” (*Beloved* 48-49). Paul D. returns in other 
words to the most primitive form of orality when inhibited by the past to articulate what he 
really wants to say. Whereas Judith Misrahi-Barak interprets silence as another category
alongside orality and literacy (n. pag.), these elements of silence and wordlessness belong in 
fact to orality for they are as important to oral culture as storytelling and gossip. Orality goes 
beyond language and is a matter of voice as well as of the absence of both language and 
voice. Not only do silences and pauses structure conversations and songs, it is also important 
for any listener or reader to “list[e]n for the holes” as Ella listened for “the things the fugitives
did not say; the questions they did not ask” (*Beloved* 108) as these holes are as meaningful to 
the story told as those words that are actually spoken. Therefore, the silence of Sethe, for
instance, can also be seen as an instance of orality conveying the intensity of her hurtful past
to the reader.

These instances of orality within Morrison and Jones’s fiction – the storytelling by the
characters, as well as their songs and the narrative’s structure – are thus often concerned with
a revisiting of the sites of trauma. A closer look discloses, nevertheless, that the primary
function of orality in these cases is not merely the remembering of trauma itself nor is it the
preservation of these memories. Instead, orality serves to provide the characters with a way to
handle their trauma and even work through it in some cases. The following sections will
explore the ways in which orality might prove to have a “healing” function not only for the
characters within the text but also across the boundaries of the text as orality might help to
break the hold of the past despite its prominent function in continuing it.
2.2. Confrontation with the Past: No Mere Remembering

Upon reading the novels and stories discussed here it becomes clear quite easily that orality plays an important role for the characters in the untangling of their troubled pasts. Nearly all of the characters turn to a certain aspect of the oral tradition in an attempt to make sense of the past and its hold on the future. This proves the healing function orality might have on a thematic level, and subsequently, orality’s role as such within the African American culture. That is to say that the turn to orality by the characters to help them in dealing with the past is indicative of the potential of orality to “heal” the past – or at least to provide the space to do so – beyond that which is contained within literature.

2.2.1. Orality as an Healing Aid in the Confrontation with the Past

In Corregidora, the blues proves to be Ursa’s hold in dealing with the past: throughout her life singing her songs has been a way to express her feelings, as she admits to herself that “[e]very time I ever want to cry, I sing the blues” (46), and it also helps her “to explain what [she] can’t explain” (56). Moreover, the blues is not only expression to Ursa as her songs and her feelings appear to be one: “It was as if I wanted them to see what he’d done, hear it. All those blues feelings. That time I asked to try understand my feeling ways. That’s what I called it. My feeling ways” (50). As Collins formulates it, Ursa’s “blues singing [is] a vehicle for both feeling and understanding feeling” (22). Through the blues Ursa can voice feelings she would otherwise be unable to articulate, and this allows her to make sense out of these emotions.

After a quarrel with Mutt during which Ursa is thrown down the stairs, she has to undergo a hysterectomy which inhibits her from producing the “generations” she is morally obliged to bring forth, and, as a result, the act of singing gains in importance still. Having lost her uterus Ursa has lost the ability to carry out the task she has to perform as a “Corregidora
woman”, a task her mother, grandmother, and great-grandmother have performed before her: to have children, to give them the Corregidora name, and to tell them the Corregidora history. In addition to this, she also has to confront her loss of identity as a woman with which the surgery leaves her. The only manner for her in which she might deal with these feelings, this crisis, and in which she can continue the tradition of the Corregidora story is by singing the blues. In one of the “dreamed” segments, she begs her mother – who strongly opposes the singing of blues – to “let [her] give witness the only way [she] can” (53): her songs, fuelled by the collective history of the “Corregidora women”, are her only alternative to the bearing of children. Additionally, these songs are also Ursa’s personal confrontation with the past in which she creates room for herself, so she can find her own place within both history and the present. Ursa formulates this as follows:

I wanted a song that would touch me, touch my life and theirs. A Portuguese song, but not a Portuguese song. A new world song. A song branded with the new world. I thought of the girl who had to sleep with her master and mistress. Her father, the master. Her daughter’s father. How many generations? (59)

Singing the blues becomes for Ursa a healing process that eventually might help her to untangle the iron grasp of the past on her life and her present identity.

The characters in *White Rat* have to deal with a restricted present situation which is the result of a troubled or even traumatic psychological legacy. Orality often helps these characters to find a way out of their troubled situations, or at least to make some sense out of them. Through oral expressions such as storytelling, language, or dialogue they appear to create a personal freedom within the strict confines posed by their history – be it a personal confining legacy or a collective one, such as the constructs of racism and race. The powerful oral voices of the characters in *White Rat* provide them, as Casey Clabough argues, with “thematic means of escape and acquiring agency” (77). This is illustrated in the story “White
Rat” in which the eponymous protagonist struggles with his light-skinned, near-white appearance. White Rat struggles with his appearance because it sets him apart from the black community to which he feels he truly belongs. Moreover, he is not only excluded from the community he wants to take part in but he is also repeatedly assumed to belong to a white community from which he explicitly wants to distinguish himself. According to Clabough, the protagonist is “traumatized when he and his friends [. . .] are arrested out-of-town for drunk-driving, and he is forced to stay in a cell with white prisoners” (89). However, I feel White Rat’s trauma is present long before he is put in jail among white people, and what I would consider to be White Rat’s real “trauma” is his struggle with the problematic societal construct, or legacy, of race and skin-colour: he has to come to terms with the collective trauma that is attached to the notion of skin-colour and this struggle is further complicated by his position as a light-skinned African American.

Moreover, skin-colour entails much more than mere appearance as it is irrevocably connected with a cultural identity and this exacerbates White Rat’s situation. Although White Rat identifies himself as black and aligns himself with this community, when dealing with strangers his whiteness forces upon him a cultural identity he cannot find himself in, a cultural identity that in fact entails a suppression of what he considers to be his true identity. Moreover, this cuts him off from his friends and family, as is illustrated by the incident in the prison. This struggle is further complicated by his personal past: his father – also light-skinned – hated “hoogies [white people][. . .] worser than anybody” (White Rat 5). If White Rat were to accept his identification by others as a white man, he would not only deny himself – deny who he believes himself to be – but also the identity his father has fought for. Hence, White Rat feels the pressure to assert his racially based identity as black not only for societal reasons but also to stay true to himself and not to disappoint his father. The first person narration of this speakerly text clearly discloses how White Rat goes about doing this: as
noted in the first chapter, the protagonist affirms his black cultural identity by means of a distinct employment of Black English. The fact that White Rat is very conscious of his language, and more specifically, of the particular dialect he employs becomes clear when he refers to the possible nicknames for whites the black community employs: he remarks that his father called them “hoogies” whereas “up North [. . .] they call em honkies” (5). Through his use of this vernacular he firmly asserts himself as belonging to the black community.

Another excellent example of how orality might help to free the White Rat characters can be found in the story “Asylum”, in which a woman of colour is locked up in an asylum run by white doctors. The woman’s identity as a black woman can once more be established through her distinct use of Black English which sets her apart from the other characters. Wolfgang Karrer makes the interesting observation that this woman “uses dialogue to assess knowledge claims as a means of empowerment” (100). In her dialogues with the doctors and her niece, the narrator gains complete control: through her choice of words she manipulates the people around her into doing what she wants them to do. When the woman’s niece comes to visit and asks her how she feels, the woman scares her away: “I say I’m feeling real fine except everytime I go sit down on the toilet this long black rubbery thing comes out a my bowls. It looks like a snake and it scares me” (White Rat 70). The following lines suggest she says this on purpose, for at the asylum “[she] don’t bother nobody and they don’t bother me” (70): staying there appears to be preferable to living outside, and after having scared her niece there is no one left to take her away from there. As Clabough asserts, “she controls the content and meaning of language and, subsequently, her situation” (85), and this aids her in breaking from the constraints put up by her status as both a black woman and an older woman, for – against all socially-constructed odds – she manages to keep control of her own fate.

Orality proves to be crucial in the characters’ dealing with their traumatic past in Beloved as well. Sethe’s trauma, as explained before, is at first marked by silence, which
indicates an initial stage wherein she makes no attempt to come to terms but instead forcefully and unsuccessfully tries to forget. A change occurs when she starts telling Beloved the stories of her past, and she discovers that, despite the hurt, telling her story has a beneficial quality to it:

It amazed Sethe [. . .] because every mention of her past life hurt [. . .] she found herself wanting to, liking it. Perhaps it was Beloved’s distance from the events itself, or her thirst for hearing it – in any case it was an unexpected pleasure. (69)

Before Beloved’s arrival, Sethe did not really have any true listeners: Denver hates the stories in which she does not take part and would therefore not have been a proper listener of the stories that preceded her birth (Beloved 74), with Baby Suggs Sethe “had agreed without saying so that it was unspeakable” what happened before she arrived at 124 (Beloved 69), and even with Paul D. Sethe can never really talk about her past because “the hurt was always there” (Beloved 69). It could be argued that in Beloved Sethe finally finds an “empathic listener”9 who is willing to listen to the stories, in whom she can confide, which helps her to take the first steps towards a “working through”10 of the past.

The therapeutic power of the oral tradition is further emphasised when Sethe is in need of Baby Suggs comforting words:

Nine years without the fingers or the voice of Baby Suggs was too much. And words whispered in the keeping room were too little. The butter-smeared face of a man God made none sweeter than demanded more: an arch built or a robe sewn. Some fixing ceremony. (101)

9 In “Bearing Witness or the Vicissitudes of Listening” (1992), Dori Laub stresses the importance of the listener to which the “testimony of the trauma” is told and who is “the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time”. The listener has to really listen to what the witness has to say, in order for the process of telling to become a genuine step in the direction of a healing process (57).

10 According to LaCapra, “[i]n the working-through, the person tries to gain critical distance on a problem, to be able to distinguish between past, present and future” (Goldberg 2).
Sethe decides to go to the Clearing with Denver and Beloved to conduct a minimalist version of the ceremonies once held by Baby Suggs, yet without Baby Suggs preaching, without her leading the group, and without her urging women and children to use their voice to laugh and cry, men to dance, and tell them all “that the only grace they could have was the grace they could imagine” (Beloved 103) the ceremony goes awry. Without the actual ceremony, which was deeply embedded in the oral tradition, the Clearing loses its healing power: because the ceremony is devoid of Baby Suggs’ “healing call to different sections of the community” (Sale 42), there can be no healthy response. As a result, the “fixing ceremony” becomes nearly fatal to Sethe when Beloved starts to strangle her. This instance makes clear that Beloved is not the empathic listener Sethe so sorely needs: she does not listen for Seth’s benefit but only for herself. Rather than allowing Sethe to tell the stories as they come to her naturally, she forces her to speak. Beloved does not recognise the traumatic nature of Sethe’s past, hence she fails to be “a [true] witness to the trauma witness” (Laub 58) as she only listens to Sethe’s stories with the intention of feeding herself. The scene in the Clearing discloses that, rather than working through her past, Sethe is increasingly becoming subject to it as a result of being forced to tell her stories so that they are a witness to Beloved’s existence, as opposed to being a witness to her own story.

The vitality of voice in the process of healing continues to be stressed throughout the novel: near the end of the novel Beloved is chased off by a group of women who rely purely on the power of their voice. Sethe likens her experience of Beloved’s exorcism to the experiences she has had at the Clearing with Baby Suggs:

For Sethe it was as though the Clearing had come to her with all its heat and simmering leaves, where the voices of women searched for the right combination, the key, the code, the sound that broke the back of words. Building voice upon voice until they found it, and when they did it was a wave
of sound wide enough to sound deep water and knock the pods off chestnut
trees. It broke over Sethe and she trembled like the baptized in its wash. (308)

This illustrates why the fixing ceremony went awry without the necessary “healing”, without
any attempt at voice: orality is needed to ward off the hurtful past.

The literal confrontation with the past, the elimination of Beloved, makes an end to
Sethe’s deconstruction which began with the strangling in the Clearing. This eventually
allows for Sethe to integrate the past into her life, and she is helped in this by Paul D. who
proves to be a true empathic listener and a more healthy listener than Beloved: he knows what
the relationship with the past can be like, and he recognises the need to turn away from it at
times, which strongly contrasts with Beloved’s desire to revel in it. Because Paul D. also has
to confront a traumatic past, he - unlike Beloved – can “recognize [. . .] and meet ‘the gaping,
vertiginous black hole’ of the experience of the trauma” (Laub 64), and consequently he can
offer Sethe the possibility to talk about her past without forcing her. With Paul D.’s aid Sethe
starts to realise that she, and not her the past, is her own story’s true protagonist: “‘She
[Beloved] left me. [. . .] She was my best thing.’ [. . .] ‘You your best thing, Sethe. You are.’
[. . .] ‘Me? Me?’’” (Beloved 320-21). After this realisation, the past no longer inhibits Sethe
and Paul D.’s stories from taking a prominent place. As a result, they can finally put their
stories next to each other and start thinking about “some kind of tomorrow” (Beloved 321).

2.2.2. Healing Beyond the Text: Signifyin(g) and History

The above examples illustrate the potential of healing inherent to the oral tradition for
the characters within the novel; however, this is not limited to fiction but is valid for the oral
culture as a whole as well. It hints at the potential for healing which texts employing oral
characteristics might have. Works such as Corregidora and Beloved address the
characteristics of orality to reach out beyond the boundaries of the text, and subsequently take
on the restorative role that used to be filled by orally told stories. This is a response to a phenomenon observed by Walter Benjamin: Benjamin argues that in the transition from oral to written storytelling “the novelist has isolated himself” and that he “is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others” (3). In other words, the function of the contemporary storyteller – as compared to the traditional oral storyteller – has seriously deteriorated, according to Benjamin, for the traditional storyteller was “[i]n every case [. . .] a man who [had]counsel for his readers” (3).

Authors of texts that engage with orality seem to actively counter this “deterioration”, and Morrison for one explicitly desires to write a literature that might “give nourishment” (LeClair, qtd. in Rushdy, “Daughters” 587). Morrison explicitly points out that African American novels are to take up the role of the black oral historical tradition, that they should “clarify the roles that have become obscured” (LeClair, qtd. in Rushdy, “Daughters” 587), in order for these novels “to be healing” (Rushdy, “Daughters” 587). The use of oral elements within the novel is valuable in this respect as they help enhance the possibility to engage the reader – as illustrated in chapter 1 –, and consequently to undo the isolation of the writer. Sale points out that, for instance, “call-and-response patterns provide a basic model that depends and thrives upon audience performance and improvisation, which work together to ensure that the art will be meaningful or functional to the community” (41). In other words, the nature of the oral culture itself is directed towards being valuable for the community, and the literature employing it can once more be valuable as well. In African American literature this value seems to be primarily directed towards this restorative confrontation with the past.

One of the most remarkable ways in which this “healing” of the past might be accomplished is through the repetitive structure of novels such as *Beloved* and *Corregidora* of which it should be noted that the re-occurring elements are never merely repeated, but that each time a story or scene is repeated, it is slightly altered. This revision of each repetition is
an additional characteristic of the oral narrative as analysed by Ong. He observed that “narrative originality [in oral cultures] lodges not in making up new stories but [. . .] [that] at every telling the story has to be introduced uniquely into a unique situation” (41-42), thus, every time an element is repeated it has to be altered to the new situation. Ong adds to this that the goal of this revision of repetitions is to bring the audience to respond. Therefore, “Repetition and Revision” (Parks 8) is an excellent means to undo the novelist’s isolation.11

Considering the fact that this practice of “Rep & Rev” is “a concept integral to the Jazz esthetic” (Parks 8), it infuses the text with a musical quality. Sale observes that in Beloved this kind of repetition on the level of phrases with small variations, such as in “[h]ow loose the silk. How jailed down the juice [. . .] How loose the silk. How quick the jailed-up flavor ran free [. . .] How loose the silk. How fine and loose and free” (Beloved 32-33), creates individual songs within the text. Additionally, the use of “Rep & Rev” can also affect the structure of the entire text and give the work a “structure which creates a drama of accumulation” (Parks 9). This occurs in Beloved where the novel’s first half is structured by the retelling of Sethe’s story from the escape from Sweet Home until the death of Beloved “from a number of different perspectives” (Sale 45). It should be noted that in Corregidora the musical quality not only originates in the use of “Rep & Rev” but that the repetitive ancestral voices narrating the story of Corregidora further enhance the novel’s bluesy nature with a distinct call-and-response pattern.

Morrison has explicitly stated to seek to imitate in her fiction “the one other art form in which black people have always excelled and that is music” (Stepto 28) in an attempt to fully restore “the oral quality of language” (Conner “Introduction” xxiv) and “to be like something that has probably only been fully expressed perhaps in music” (Morrison and

11 “Repetition and Revision” or “Rep & Rev” is a term coined by the African American playwright Suzan-Lori Parks who extensively employs the technique in her own works.
Mckay, “An Interview” 426). Her insistence on striving towards this musical aspect as well as on writing “healing” novels, points to a special quality of music and song, a possibly “healing” quality that was already hinted at in the importance of blues songs for Ursa in *Corregidora*. In his life’s story, Frederick Douglass mentions the supposedly restorative function of song, which was held to “lift sorrow”, as he writes:

> Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slave represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow [...]. (9)

The novels are thus permeated by a musical quality which transforms them into spaces where the past might be made sense of, as is the case in *Corregidora*. However, this does not only include Sethe and Ursa’s past: the “healing” function of the novels is mainly achieved because the texts as a whole are in themselves a revision of earlier texts. The novels offer an attempt at restoring what is contained within them: the struggle with a history of slavery. *Beloved* and *Corregidora* are both examples of a “neo-slave narrative” (Dubey 187, Rushdy, “Neo-Slave Narrative” 87), they are “improvised” renditions of slave narratives. That is to say that they take up an older, traditional text and revise and retell it. These novels adhere to Henry Louis Gates’s concept of “metatextuality” which states that texts “seem to revise at least two antecedent texts, often taken from different generations or periods within the tradition” (Gates, “Black Literature” 290).

Gates further developed this idea into the concept of “Signifyin(g)” in *The Signifying Monkey*, in which he defines Signifyin(g) as a specific sort of repetition and revision, a practice Gates considers to be “fundamental to black artistic forms” (xxiv). Signifyin(g) originates in the oral tradition, occurs in both everyday conversation and storytelling, and refers to an engagement “in certain rhetorical games” (Gates, *Signifying* 48). Basically, these
“games” encompass repeating what someone sells has said and changing the meaning through subtle manipulation of language: it is “repetition with a signal difference” (Signifying xxiv). From this rhetorical game, Signifyin(g) gradually developed into a form of African American literary criticism. It was first adopted as an intertextual device when African American writers started to imitate – to repeat – white texts. Gates points out that this “black formal repetition always repeat[ed] [Western texts] with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use” (Signifying xxii-xxiii); in other words, the turn to orality which marked the beginning of a truly African American literature – as discussed in the introduction to this paper – was in itself the reflection of an inherently oral practice.

This intertextual practice of Signifyin(g) developed further and eventually it also occurred within African American literature and “[b]lack texts [now] signify upon other black texts” (Gates, Signifying xxvii). In other words, an African American text typically seems to respond to and revise an earlier text. This revision of earlier black texts is undoubtedly a development in the “quest of the liberated voice” (Liberating 178), which Jones describes in Liberating Voices. This search for a fully liberated voice is part of the African American quest to create a literature that is “self-authenticating” (Jones, Liberating 178) and revision of earlier texts forms an important part of this quest as it allows for African American writers to build on what their predecessors did, further freeing the voice presented in, for instance, slave narratives or in Hurston’s Their Eyes were Watching God. This literary Signification can be motivated or unmotivated, which corresponds to a parody or a pastiche respectively: a text employs motivated Signification to offer a negative critique on an earlier text, whereas a text employing unmotivated Signification can be construed as an homage to an earlier text (Gates, Signifying xxvi-xxvii).

In the case of neo-slave narratives such as Beloved and Corregidora, the texts signify upon the nineteenth-century slave narrative, and by extension on the narrative of history that
is contained within them. The Signifyin(g) in *Beloved* and *Corregidora* is undeniably motivated, for these novels express a negative critique towards the nature of the historical discourse in the slave narratives by the likes of Frederick Douglass and William Wells Brown. These narratives strive towards a certain “documentary realism”, an objectivity, and present what Sale calls a “master version of history” (Dubey 195, Sale 42). These master versions of history “value certainty and exactitude” and “collapse the multiplicity of voices available at any given historical moment”: they leave no room for other perspectives (Sale 42). *Beloved* in particular offers an alternative to these master versions as the story of Sethe is told from various perspectives. Through the repetition and revision within the text, the novel offers an alternative to the typically dominant linear historical narratives of the slave narratives as the multiple retellings of, for instance, the infanticide do away with the ambition to give an authoritative account of “the Margaret Garner case”, the inspiration for the story of *Beloved*, and instead offer “several contradictory versions of Garner’s (hi)story, which exist simultaneously, yet complementarily” (Sale 42). These novels refute the suppressive linear narrative which inhibits other views of the past, and this is crucial for the process of integration of the past in the present as opposed to its interruptive presence.

Additionally, Morrison observes that slave narratives, despite their attempt at documentary realism, were forced to “drop a veil over these proceedings too terrible to relate” due to contemporary conventions (“Site” 190-91). She sees it as her task – as a black female author – to “rip the veil” and to “fill in the blanks that the slave narratives left” (“Site” 191, 193-94). She asserts that these gaps often concern the slaves’ interior life (“Site” 191) and in this respect both *Corregidora* and *Beloved* present a significant revision of the slave narrative: these novels defy the slave narratives’ objectivity as they create the space in which both the personal narrative of a former female slave as well as the narrative of a woman descending from slaves, whose life continues to be determined by slavery’s after-effects, can exist. By
writing the novels as a first-person narrative and a story in performance, Morrison and Jones literally give a voice to women who were previously mostly silenced, and they provide a direct access into the interior lives of these women.

The combination of repetition and revision, which Signifyin(g) entails, is crucial in this respect as it makes possible the refiguring necessary for the revision of history displayed in these novels, and, more importantly, it is crucial for the healing of the past attempted within them. Repetition signifies the return of the past, which is a key element in posttraumatic writing; the revision, however, indicates, as Parks points out, that a situation is experienced anew (9). This is what occurs in both *Beloved* and *Corregidora*, which repeat and revise slave narratives: whereas the slave narratives were the literal representation of the trauma, the neo-slave narratives approaches the narrative from a new perspective, providing the slave not only with a voice but also with an inner voice. *Beloved* and *Corregidora* allow for a more personal experience of the events of slavery as well as a multiplicity of experiences. What makes this revision possible can be illustrated by means of Parks’s illustration of the Rep & Rev pattern as follows: “A → A → A → B→ A” (9). This implies that the final A will be different from the preceding As, for it carries the echo of the B with it. This translates intertextually – in the case of the neo-slave narrative – into the idea that the repetition of a slave narrative in the twentieth century simply cannot be the same because of the African American literary works that are between the “original” slave narrative and its repetition, the neo-slave narrative. Additionally, I feel that this also suggests that the refiguring, or revision, of slave narratives is possible only because of this Rep & Rev structure in which the B affects the A, the final repetition.

This entire process is paramount to the “healing” of the past by means of the oral tradition. Rep & Rev logically implies the “literal incorporation of the past” (Parks 10) because it repeats what has been said or written before, but it is also the incorporation of a
refigured past. As such this dynamic provides an alternative to the dealing with trauma in Western posttraumatic literature: instead of seeking to construct a linear narrative to break from the “repetitive circularity of the past” (Codde 65), African American literature is offered the possibility of restructuring the past and incorporating it into the present by a device that is inherent to the oral tradition, and which does not necessarily require the construction of a linear narrative. Hence, because of the literary works in-between the slave narrative and the neo-slave narrative that have gradually freed the African American voice, Morrison and Jones can refigure the slave narrative by means of oral expressions that were discarded and neglected in literature at the time the slave narratives were written. As a result, the reading and writing of these neo-slave narratives can be beneficial and initiate a healing of the trauma of slavery.

Through the Signifyin(g) of slave narratives, the stories are transformed in more personal accounts and the relationship between reader and writer is reinforced by the first-person narratives which disclose the characters’ inner lives. New and multiple perspectives, as in Beloved, invite the reader to different views, and allow him/her to approach the trauma of slavery with a “fresh” vision. Consequently, it can be concluded that, for instance, in Beloved “the horrors of slavery and the sometimes equally horrific responses to it by the (formerly) enslaved are not simply denied, or justified, or explained away, but are presented through an empowering use of oral traditions and languages so that they become digestible” (Sale 44). This is true for both Beloved and Corregidora, as through an intricate network of elements of orality – especially repetition and revision – the history of slavery and its aftermath is made “digestible” in both novels, so that readers might find a space to deal with the past within this fiction as well as have the novels offering them a guideline, a hold, in this process. These works of fiction do not only employ the oral tradition within the text but they also manage to fulfil the tasks that once belonged to the oral tradition, and which are necessary within the
community to come to terms with the past so that the past might be moved from a dominating position to one where it is integrated in the present.
3. Caribbean Fiction and Orality: Struggle for a Caribbean Future

In Caribbean, as in African American fiction, aspects of orality are often mediating or indicative of the relationship between past and present that underlies the stories; however, in Caribbean literature this connection might at first sight appear to be more passive. It is seemingly only concerned with remembering the past rather than the confrontation with it, as is the case in African American literature. Nevertheless, a more thorough analysis discloses a dialectic connection between past and present, tradition and modernity, that permeates the literature of authors such as Danticat and Senior, and which is equally intense as the African American past/present relationship. Moreover, this relationship ultimately constructs the indispensable base on which a Caribbean future is to be build. This chapter will illustrate why the relationship with the past mediated by orality might seem to be more “passive”, despite Danticat’s engagement with the trauma of Haiti’s turbulent history. This will be followed by closer look at Danticat and Senior’s work, which will reveal the true dynamics that underlie the use orality in Caribbean fiction. These dynamics, aided by and contained in oral expressions, will be disclosed to concern a culture attempting to restore the past and to engage with it.

3.1. Relationship with the Past and History: Foregrounding

Remembrance

Sometimes the relationship between past and present of which the oral expressions in Caribbean literature are indicative encompass a connection with a traumatic past as well. However, the engagement with the traumatic past appears to be less thorough and confrontational than in Morrison and Jones’ fiction. This can be illustrated by Danticat’s
treatment of Haiti’s national traumas¹² and the personal traumas originating therein. In her story collection *Krik? Krak!* and the novel *The Dew Breaker*, Danticat’s characters struggle with the silence that envelopes their traumatic experiences. However, this struggle does not display the same working-through or Signifyin(g) of history as do the works of Morrison and Jones. In “Night Talkers”, one of the chapters in *The Dew Breaker*, a young man, Dany, visits his aunt in the desperate need to break the silence shrouding the event of his parents’ death and to tell her he has located their murderer. However, he never manages to bring himself to tell his aunt of what he knows before she dies, and, as a result, he remains caught in his memories and silence. Dany is, nevertheless, fully aware of the beneficial quality narrating the experience might have had, as becomes clear when he is talking with Claude, a boy living in the village who killed his own father. The protagonist realises that “Claude was a palannit, a night talker, one of those who spoke their nightmares out loud to themselves. Except Claude was even luckier than he realized, for he was able to speak his nightmares to himself as well as to others [. . .]” (*Dew Breaker* 102, my italics), which not only indicates that a healing quality is inherent to the Caribbean use of orality as well, but also that it is experienced as such by the people of the Caribbean and that it is not a latent quality.

Dany and his aunt are both also night talkers, yet they can only speak their nightmares at night. When Dany recites his story in his sleep, he wakes up his aunt by speaking his nightmare out loud, yet she acts as if she has not heard the full story. She appears to have only heard him call his parents’ names but she admits as well that she should have let him tell his story earlier, when she “showed no interest in hearing what he had to say” (*Dew Breaker* 83). Dany grasps this acknowledgement as a cue to question his aunt about his parents but by the time he has plucked up enough courage to tell her what he has found out about their death,

¹² The national traumas with which Danticat primarily engages are the massacre of 1937, when president Trujillo demanded the execution of Haitians in the Dominican Republic, and the dictatorial regimes of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier.
sleep inhibits his aunt from listening and by morning she is dead. This fragment discloses that both Danticat and her characters are aware of the need to try and break the silence as well as of the difficulties involved with it. The traumas of Danticat’s characters often remain trapped in silence within the stories despite this awareness of the potential for healing, because the space in which they are to express themselves is lacking.

Trauma is thus certainly present in Danticat’s work, both in orality and in the stories themselves, but it is a lot less pervasive than in the works of Morrison and Jones: the text is not affected by haunting memories and orality in itself is not the location of working-through trauma. Danticat seems to be less vehemently set on confronting the past to transform it, to make it “digestible”, by means of orality. Instead, she appears to be mainly concerned with lifting the silence that has historically enveloped the Haitian traumas in order to give a voice to them. Even if her characters do not manage to break the silence literally, she does so on a more abstract level by providing them with their own “voice”. A good example of this can be found in *The Dew Breaker* which tells the story of a former Haitian torturer living in New York by means of the stories and memories of characters whose lives were once affected by him.\(^\text{13}\) Within this novel, Danticat provides each character with a separate space in which he or she can tell their story. This space is made available through Danticat’s use of short stories, out of which the novel is built up. Even though these stories do not share the immediate oral appearance of *Corregidora* or “Real Old Time T’ing”, their form is a direct expression of orality: in the Caribbean, the prevalent occurrence of the short story is closely connected to the form of oral narration and thus to the oral tradition as a whole. The use of short stories in a culture such as the Caribbean can be seen as nearly unavoidable in this respect for, as Laurent Lepaludier writes, “new literatures such as African or Caribbean literatures [... ] often plunge

\(^{13}\) “Dew breaker” is Danticat’s translation of the Creole term “shoukèt laroze” (a person who shakes the dew) which refers to “a legal authority of a certain small village”, under the Duvalier regime, “who controlled that village [... ] with force and sometimes [... ] by torturous means” (Danticat, Interview).
their roots in ethnotexts: traditional tales, myths, plays or songs” and “[t]he short story provides a fitting form to these texts because of its brevity” (par. 14). This statement is supported by Senior who argues that the stories told to her – and other female Caribbean writers – while growing up, were always short, and that, as a result, they started to write short stories (Dubois and Devoize, n. pag.). The form for which many Caribbean writers, including Danticat and Senior, opt is thus in itself indicative of oral expression.

Danticat’s choice to compose a novel like The Dew Breaker out of different short stories is also an expression of the intention to undo the novelist’s isolation. By “telling” different stories, imitating the manner of oral storytelling, Danticat explicitly positions herself as a storyteller and the reader as her immediate listener.14 The short stories open up a distinct space for each character’s story: they allow for each character’s perspective on their connection to the dew breaker without any judgement by the narrator. This becomes most clear in the novel’s eponymous, final story, “The Dew Breaker”, which is that of torturer-turned-barber himself, in which he is portrayed as both a perpetrator and a victim. The short story form’s elliptic nature further strengthens the relationship between the reader and the story told: the separate stories which sometimes seem to be entirely unrelated because the relationships between the characters are never explicitly stated, are in fact intricately connected, and it is up to the reader to complete the puzzle so that he/she might get the complete picture. The reader is thus closely connected to the story and becomes a listener of the characters’ story: he/she witnesses the stories even when they are not explicitly directed towards him, such as that of Dany, which the protagonist only tells in his sleep. The deployment of short stories constructs an intimate space in which the characters are heard: they can be construed as intimate exchanges between storyteller, character, and reader/listener. By drawing in the contemporary reader as a(n) (empathic) listener to these

14 Danticat’s strong urge to clearly establish this relationship is also reflected in the collection’s title Krik? Krak!, as explained in 1.3.
stories, the stories also become part of the reader’s memories as he witnesses them, and consequently they are integrated into the present, freed from the silence that retained them in the past.

The characters in Olive Senior’s stories seem not to be concerned with “working-through” the past at all; nevertheless, the past is an undeniable presence within most of her stories. In “See the Tiki-Tiki Scatter”, for example, the past is intrusively present within the songs the protagonist and her grandmother sing each night. These are songs from earlier times, “from the War” (Arrival 84), yet their precise origin is unknown – “But what War?” (Arrival 84) – and although they seem to carry unknown emotional connotations for the girl’s grandmother, the protagonist shows no desire to further explore the songs’ history. Instead, she treasures them as relics from the past, and for the young protagonist these songs begin to harbour a certain comfort, a world in which she can express herself as opposed to the present world surrounding her. The girl seems to disappear into the songs – the past –, fleeing from her grandparents’ house and gardens where she cannot be herself and where she is often considered to be a nuisance. She takes to singing the songs while dancing on the walkway at the edge of a pond no one else is interested in. The pond is the only place she can claim for herself, and, more importantly, the distance from the house allows her to fully express herself through her interpretations of the “war songs”:

Her favourite though, was “Oh break the news to Mother” for with this she could be as loud and expressive as she pleased and in the afternoon, Grandpa, nobody would hear her.

Oh burr-EAK the NEWS to MOTH-er
And TELL her that I LOVE-er (Arrival 87)
The singing of these songs turns into a sort of ritual, the pond and the possibility to sing become a refuge to the girl, and she returns to them every day when her tasks are done and she is left to herself:

She gave the song each time new interpretations, new flourishes. And this could go on for the entire afternoon.

La da da di la da da

For I’m not coming HOOOOM. (Arrival 88)

Other Caribbean writers have deployed “the journey ‘home’” – which is also a symbol of a nostalgic image of the past for those Caribbeans living in “exile” – as a panacea for, for example, relationships that have gone awry, usually pointing out that such a use of the past is problematic (Anatol 81). In this story, Senior reveals that the approach of the protagonist to the songs – which represent her panacea – is equally treacherous. Gradually, the girl starts to lose herself more completely in the “ritual”, and she starts spinning more intensely while dancing and singing until she dangerously nears the edge of the pond:

Instead of putting her all into expression, into interpretation of the songs, she now rattled them off at quite a pace for she felt a speeding up of everything as if the world itself had gone out of control and was speeding up too. (Arrival 89)

Losing herself in her songs, the protagonist appears to become suicidal, and the ending leaves her fate unclear, suggesting, however, that she might throw herself into the water. The last line of the above fragment indicates that the protagonist, who above all lives in the past – in her songs – rather than in the present, can no longer keep up with world around her, and that this leads to a precarious situation in which she no longer has any hope of finding peace in the present.

In Senior’s fiction, however, the past is not always as thematically contained within orality as past and tradition are in the first place present in her adherence to the form and the
features of the oral tradition. She places emphasis on the recreation of the bond between reader and writer, and insists on writing all her texts “as if [they] were being told” (“Lessons” 41). Senior also displays a distinct preference for the subjects of oral storytelling: her stories centre on everyday events. She engages with the forms that constitute the oral tradition in everyday conversations, and, as a result, her stories often mimic anecdotal storytelling or contain the dynamics of gossip. Her stories do not so much recall the past as they are in fact voices narrating directly from the past: Senior’s stories are, like “See the Tiki-Tiki Scatter”, mostly set in colonial times or shortly after independence – unlike the stories by Danticat which sometimes cover contemporary settings. “Arrival of the Snake-Woman” is one of Senior’s stories in performance and an example of these voices from the past: it is narrated by a young man who recalls his youth in a rural Jamaican village in the nineteenth century and centres on the arrival of an East-Indian woman – Miss Coolie – as the wife of one of the men in the village. As Senior’s characters tell their stories directly to the reader, they make felt the lingering presence of the past in Caribbean culture to the reader in an even more direct way than the stories by Danticat that are often stories told in a twenty-first century setting people from the past.

In short, the past – as recalled in Caribbean fiction through stories and songs – is not meddling with the present nor is it as entangled with it as is the case in African American fiction. In terms of trauma theory, it could be argued that characters in stories such as these by Danticat have made the first step in the direction of working-through, but that despite the voicing of their past they appear to remain for the most part caught in a stage of “acting-out”. This notion is reinforced by characters such as the girl in “See the Tiki-Tiki Scatter”, who becomes the victim of a more than suppressive presence of the past. The designation of the function of orality in Caribbean literature as a medium of acting-out is, however, not entirely correct. Although it might be argued that the Caribbean culture has not yet come as far as the
African American culture in terms of working-through the traumas of their past, when focusing on orality and its function in literature it can be concluded that this entrapment in a phase of acting-out is not at play here. The strongest argument to dismiss the idea that Caribbean literature reflects the culture’s acting out is the notion that the past/present relationship mediated by orality is not an involuntary return of the traumatic past that interrupts the text, but that it is a distinctly conscious return to the past and tradition that is not necessarily traumatic in nature.

Caribbean literature reveals a distinct need to access the past and it is wrong to assume that the past is merely a lingering presence, or that the Caribbean are stuck in the past. There is, for instance, a lot more to “Arrival of the Snake-Woman” than a preservation of memory and a somewhat nostalgic longing to a former home, and as Senior indicates in “See the Tiki-Tiki Scatter”, there is little benefit to be found in fully escaping into the past. Caribbean fiction tries to accomplish a healthy relationship with the past by attempting to construct a genuine dialectic, one that is mediated by the oral tradition and is as such represented in Caribbean fiction.

**3.2. The Dynamic Nature of the Function of Orality**

As a result of the Caribbeans’ turbulent and fragmented history, the link with the past is a necessity in both Caribbean fiction and culture as a whole. A closer look at the way in which the past is approached through the use of the oral tradition discloses how authors as Danticat and Senior not merely preserve the past but actively employ and call upon it in order to found a strong and fertile connection between past and present. This link is paramount in the construction of a base on which a Caribbean culture can make an attempt to ground itself when facing contemporary and future cultural challenges.
3.2.1. Caribbean Culture and Identity: Rootlessness, Modernity, and Neo-Imperialism

To understand the nature of the relationship between history and present as it exists in the Caribbean and returns in the use of orality in the region’s literature, it is useful – if not necessary – to glance at the cultural problems with which region has had to deal since its discovery in the fifteenth century. The origins of Caribbean culture are nothing less than tangled and complex, which continues to affect the society today. When Senior was asked if “the immigrant condition” affected her poetry after having moved to Canada, she answered:

[. . .] I would say no. Because I come from a part of the world – the Caribbean – where the “immigrant condition” or the condition of “displacement/exile” is one of the outstanding themes of life and literature, since this is a region characterized throughout history by both immigration and emigration. People in the Caribbean are constantly on the move and these are the proto-typical multi-cultural societies. So I was asking questions about “roots” and “identity” long before I came to Canada [. . .]. (Ede, n. pag., my italics)

The Caribbean are a location of immigrants and one of the immediate challenging consequences of situation is that this culture does not have a shared history beyond that of colonisation by Europe and the United States. Therefore the notion of a Caribbean culture is in fact problematic, as the Caribbean continue to consist of a grouping of many different cultures.

According to Simon Gikandi, the Caribbeans – more specifically, the African slaves, the native population, and later on the East-Indian labourers as well – were “denied their subjectivity, language, and history” upon entering “the terrain of the modern”. Gikandi conceives of this terrain of the modern as initiated by Columbus’ discovery of the New World, and, as a result, the ruling concepts of what is generally considered to be modernity are mainly a North Atlantic – and thus the coloniser’s – construct (Writing 1-2). Moreover,
Orlando Patterson points out, these peoples “were not allowed freely to integrate the experience of their ancestors into their lives” (qtd. in Gikandi, *Writing* 6). In other words, the Caribbean people were subjected to “a North Atlantic modernity that, among other things, has silenced history” (Fumagalli 68). 15 This state of being robbed of its history became problematic for the Caribbean, especially after independence: when the Caribbean nations had to start looking for a national identity, they did not have the necessary roots to which they could go back, and wherein they might ground their identity.

As a result of these historical developments, Caribbeans across the region continue to work towards a Caribbean culture, and, according to Senior, Caribbean writers in particular are currently dealing with the complexities that surround finding “new ways of coming to grips with who we [the Caribbean people] are” (Glaser 82). She argues that Caribbean artists strive to work towards “a notion of creole culture”, and that this “shared culture” is “the ideal” as only this culture would be able to comprise all that is truly Caribbean (Glaser 81). However, the development of this pan-Caribbean culture, a Caribbean culture that might help to overcome the rootlessness which has continued to exist until today, is complicated by the notion of a neo-imperialism. This neo-imperialism, as briefly mentioned in the introduction, has commenced shortly after independence and comprises an economic dependence of the Caribbean through, for instance, tourism, as well as a cultural imperialism coming from the West and, above all, from the United States. Senior has explicitly expressed the concern that this cultural imperialism “is not only inhibiting the possibility of developing our own natural cultures but of developing a pan-Caribbean culture” (Rowell 487) because it imposes a Western culture upon the islands that pushes aside the unstable, fragmented Caribbean one.

Although the threatening presence of a neo-imperialist West results in a certain amount of contempt for Western culture in the Caribbean, Western culture also exerts a large

15 Paul Gilroy mentions a “Euro-American modernity” as well (*Black* 25).
amount of attraction on people from the region. The Caribbean thus entertain an ambivalent stance towards modernity (Gikandi, *Writing* 1), and this stance is often reflected in Caribbean fiction. For instance, in Senior’s story “Real Old Time T’ing”, the tension which originates in this ambivalence gives rise to most of the actions in the story. As explained in chapter 1, the rendition of an orally told story in writing allows for Senior to disclose how an elder Caribbean narrator looks down upon the younger generation’s adoration of the “new” Western culture, while unwittingly revealing to the reader in asides and remarks that she is herself intrigued and enthralled by it. It gradually becomes clear that the narrator even tends to consider modern culture to be of more value than what the Caribbean has to offer. In other words, Western culture poses a genuine threat to the development of a culture that is truly Caribbean, and this situation has greatly influenced Caribbean literature.

To counter the neo-imperialist threat and defy its destruction of the possibility of a real Caribbean culture, the Caribbean need to reconnect with the history from which they were separated, and which can serve as a strong foundation for a Caribbean culture. If this creole Caribbean culture is the only hope for a Caribbean future then a connection with the past is indispensable, for past and future are intrinsically linked. C. L. R. James considered separation from the past to be horrible loss and stated: “I do not wish to be liberated from the past, and above all, I do not wish to be liberated from its future” (65, my italics). A distinct relationship with the past has also been argued by Kamau Braithwaite to enable a genuinely Caribbean future:

In the Caribbean, whether it be African or Amerindian, the recognition of an ancestral relationship with the folk or aboriginal culture involves the artist and participant in a journey into the past and hinterland which is at the same time a movement of possession into present and future. Through this movement of possession we become ourselves, truly our own creators, discovering word for object, image for the Word.” (350, my italics)
Because orality is the foundation of all culture, and consequently the one cultural element linking all cultures that came together in the Caribbean, “oral characteristics” can rightly be seen as “speak[ing] to a realm in which the strongest and most empowering aspects of who we are collectively as a people is maintained” (John 2), therefore it is primarily orality through which Caribbean writers attempt, as Patterson formulates it, “to anchor the living present in any conscious community of memory” (qtd. in Gikandi, Writing 6). The final two stories of Danticat’s collection Krik? Krak! illustrate, for instance, how only through storytelling and oral word games the protagonists, contemporary Haitian women living in New York, can connect with their homeland and the women of their family history: through orality the connection with the past is established and maintained. While using oral expressions in writing is in itself a return to a certain kind of “root”, an attempt to reconnect with a shared history, the oral expressions do not only “remember” the history and tradition, they also connect the past with the present in a dynamic way that actively interlaces both in different ways, in search for an appropriate grounding for culture as a whole. Hence, orality is not only used by Caribbean writers to distinguish themselves from the literary tradition of the oppressor, but also, and foremost, to make sense of the amalgam of cultures in the region and to extract from it a base for a cultural identity and a possible Caribbean future.

The most significant way in which this connection with past is established in Caribbean society is through the act of storytelling. The importance of stories in general is continually emphasised throughout Krik? Krak! and is contained within Mrs. Azile’s statement that “[w]e know people by their stories” (Danticat, Krik 185). In other words, people’s identities are enclosed within the stories they tell, and, as the collection gradually discloses, in the past of which these stories tell. In Danticat’s short story collection, all stories are subtly connected to each other through the tradition of storytelling. Although the stories at first appear to be unrelated, it becomes clear when reading the entire collection that the
characters are all somehow linked to each other: sometimes through bloodline but invariably through the stories that are told about them.

The primacy of stories over bloodline becomes exceedingly clear in the connection between the young pregnant woman in “Children of the Sea” and the women in “Caroline’s Wedding”. Grace and her mother, who bear no relation to the young woman who died while trying to flee from Haiti to the United States in the collection’s first story, hear her story when attending a mass in memory of the fugitives in the penultimate story. The nature of the passing on of stories in this collection as described above or from mother to daughter in particular, underscores the difference between the nature of storytelling between generations in African American literature. For instance, in Corregidora the story that is shared by the generations is one and the same that suppresses the individual story of each woman, and this contrasts strongly with the handing down of stories in Danticat’s short story cycle. In Krik? Krak! each woman has her own story which is passed down from generation to generation, keeping the personal story of each of them intact. Although these stories sometimes narrate of traumatic events, the tradition of stories in itself – the storytelling – is not affected by this: this clearly indicates that orality’s primary function is thus not to express nor to deal with trauma.

In the collection’s epilogue, Danticat explicitly emphasises that more than anything women are the driving force behind the passing on of stories throughout generations:

The women in your family have never lost touch with one another. [...] With every step you take, there is an army of women watching over you. We are never any farther than the sweat on your brows or the dust on your toes. [...] You thought that if you didn’t tell the stories, the sky would fall on your head. [...] Silence terrifies you more than the pounding of a million pieces of steel chopping away at your flesh. [...] And over the years when you have needed us, you have always cried ‘Krik?’ and we have answered ‘Krak!’ and it has shown us that you have not forgotten us. (222-24)
In this fragment, it becomes clear that an “axis between the past and the present” is primarily formed by “the maternal” (Davis 73): the maternal embodies the perpetuation of stories by women, by mothers narrating them to their children. This is, in other words, the continued realisation of the traditional role of women in storytelling as earlier explained in the introduction. Through the oral tradition the past is actively kept alive, even among those Caribbean women living outside of the Caribbean region, as the women in “Caroline’s Wedding” show: Caroline and Grace, the two American-born daughters, continue to play the free association game that was used by a secret society of women in Haiti shortly after the 1937 massacre and to which a reference is made in “Nineteen Thirty-Seven”. Despite the girls’ increasingly American tastes, the association game – based on the call-and-response pattern – continues to be a major part of their lives, “sometimes [they] would play half the night, coming up with endless possibilities for questions and answers, only repeating the key word in every sentence” (Krik 165), and even as young women, on the eve of Caroline’s wedding, the sisters play the game their mother taught them when they were little (Krik 164-65).

The importance of the tradition of storytelling for identity is also present in the emphasis that is laid upon the memorising of the names of the women from the stories. Tied irrevocably to these names are the stories of the women whose names are memorised. Hence, as the epilogue suggests, by merely reciting their names a daughter might then give “testament to the way that these women lived and died and lived again” (Danticat, Krik 224). In “Between the Pool and the Gardenias”, the protagonist calls out the names she would have given to her daughters – all of them stillborn –, and these names turn out to be those of the other female protagonist in the stories collected in Krik? Krak!. Who her daughters would have been, would have thus been partly defined by the women before them, who would have been “boiling in [their] blood” (Danticat, Krik 224) should the girls have lived to carry these...
women’s names and the stories that accompany them, which they would have heard and learned by heart as they grew up, like their mother before them (*Krik* 94).

These stories indicate how storytelling creates an active link with the past that shapes the identity of later generations. In short, Caribbean writers such as Danticat do what the first Caribbean were not allowed to do and inscribe their ancestors into the present; Senior realises this by letting the people from the past speak directly to the reader. These two authors thus both take part in creating the connection with the past and history, and underline the importance of doing so.

### 3.2.2. The Dynamic and Dialectic Relationship Between Present and Past

The establishment of a connection between past and present is, however, not only aimed at undoing the loss of history suffered at the hand of (neo-)colonialism or the reaching for a communal base for a pan-Caribbean cultural identity. This suggests a too one-dimensional dynamic, whereas there can be found a true dialectic relationship between past and present – Caribbean history and North Atlantic modernity – that serves as the ground out of which a Caribbean future, a shared Caribbean culture, might arise. The return to the past is a necessity when trying to find grounding; however, a full return to the past – going back to the tradition and rejecting modernity fully – should be avoided. As Senior lays out in “See the Tiki-Tiki Scatter”: the present is lost sight of when the past is focused on too intensely, and this might have negative consequences, for it can lead to a loss of the capability to deal with and have grip on the present.

As a full return to the past and a rejection of modernity as a whole would not be able to provide the Caribbean with a possible future, there exists a need for a Caribbean modernity, a modern culture that acknowledges the history of the suppressed peoples of the Caribbean, and that can exist as a valuable equivalent to the aforementioned North Atlantic modernity.
Gikandi points out that for the Caribbean people “of African and Asian descent, the central categories of European modernity – history, national language, subjectivity – have value only when they are fertilised by figures of the ‘other’ imagination which colonialism has sought to repress” (Gikandi, Writing 4). Hence, Caribbean modernity cannot be reached only through a retaining of tradition, but instead, the first step towards a Caribbean modernity is a form of creolisation. In addition to the creolisation of cultures that is at the heart of Caribbean culture, a creolisation between what is truly Caribbean and North Atlantic modernity has to take place. The “creole culture” as proposed by Senior can therefore also be seen as the realisation of a Caribbean modernity.

In writing, the first steps towards a creole culture, and thus a Caribbean modernity, become reality as the literary creolisation which characterises Caribbean literature reflects the creolisation between history and present. More specifically, the creolisation between the scribal and oral culture illustrates the dialectic relationship between the elements from the written tradition, which symbolise (neo-)colonialism’s presence, and Caribbean culture, symbolised by the oral tradition. Gikandi argues that “[s]o long as creolisation is overdetermined by colonialism and neo-colonialism, it still carries the Manichaesnism of the colonial situation and the violence it engenders” (Writing 19); as a result, in the case of literary creolisation, it is necessary for the writers to find a syncretism between both that equally acknowledges both traditions. As argued earlier, orality encompasses what is at the root of the Caribbean, and therefore a revaluing of the tradition helps to break the hold of North American modernity and makes possible an equal relationship between Caribbean history and modernity. It is important to realise that this does not mean both traditions have to be present in equal proportions: as both Senior and Danticat realise, a selection has to be made of what can be used and what not. Although chapter 1 shows that hybridity between the scribal and the oral tradition is a feature of both African American and Caribbean literature,
this hybridity is emphatically foregrounded in Caribbean literature as it is one of the main features in creating a Caribbean modernity.

C. L. R. James asserted shortly after a Caribbean literature came into existence that in Caribbean writing there is a “need to confront the past and to retrieve useful knowledge from it” (Gikandi, Writing 51, my italics). The reference to the retrieval of “useful” knowledge emphasises the difference between the tendency to merely conserve the tradition, and what Caribbean writers attempt to do: namely, to retain from the oral tradition what might be useful to them and to create from this a pragmatic syncretism – a personalised hybridity – between the oral and the scribal tradition. Senior argues against the notion of merely preserving the past in an attempt to get in touch with one’s roots as well, as is illustrated in “Real Old Time T’ing”. The character of Patricia, a young woman, tries to compensate for her love of Western luxuries by buying up the old things discarded by the villagers. However, she is so desperate to “[find] her roots” (Summer 59) that she no longer manages to distinguish between what is valuable and what is not: “Patricia so greedy she want everything, as long as is old time ting. [. . .] Everybody a laugh and say Patricia must be opening junk yard a Kingston” (Summer 60-61). Caribbean writers such as Danticat and Senior realise that to preserve an entire tradition without alterations is impossible and not very useful.

According to Senior, there is only one suitable way in which a writer coming out of the oral tradition is to approach his or her culture’s past: he or she “must not only engage with the tradition, but must build on it” (“Lessons” 41). This is clearly shown in the works of Senior and Danticat as neither of these writers merely turns to the oral tradition randomly employing elements in order to preserve or reinstate the tradition. Instead these authors use, on the one hand, modern elements to enrich the stories typical to the oral tradition, allowing, for instance, an elaboration on the anecdotic themes of conversational storytelling, or by continuing the tradition in writing. In the epilogue to Krik? Krak!, Danticat, for instance, not
only emphasises the oral transmission of stories but she also illustrates how this element might gradually be taken up in writing. She shows how the writing of authors coming out of the oral tradition is “fed” by the voices of the women before them and how these voices – and the stories of these women – continue to resound in the stories and names that are written down:

You remember thinking while braiding your hair that you look a lot like your mother and her mother before her. It was their whispers that pushed you, their murmurs over pots sizzling in your head. A thousand women urging you to speak through the blunt tip of your pencil. (Krik 222)

On the other hand, they also use the oral tradition to extend upon the written tradition: by re-entering the written story in a more traditional storytelling context they accomplish a reconnection with the reader allowing for a closer interaction between reader and text, and they expand the possibilities of the writer as Senior illustrates with her use of asides in “Real Old Time T’ing”.

In “Arrival of the Snake-Women”, Senior provides the perfect example – counselling her readers – on how to make use of both the past and the present in a fruitful manner. The character of Miss Coolie is the embodiment of how the “old” might prove to be a source of renewal in the right new context. Although seemingly “[c]ut free from her past” (Arrival 44), Miss Coolie’s eyes which still reveal the ghost of the Ganges, her choice of East-Indian names for her children, and her preference for saris disclose her irrevocable and undiminished connection to her homeland (Arrival 45). Nevertheless, she managed to find opportunities in her new environment that allowed her to employ her past productively: for instance, through the pawning of her traditional gold bracelets she manages to set up a shop in her new town that will eventually allow her to become one of the most prosperous and powerful villagers. If Miss Coolie would have been fully cut off from her past or if she had not managed to employ
what her new environment had to offer, these developments would most likely not have been possible. Emphasis should also be placed on the personal aspect of this syncretism for everyone ought to determine for himself which aspects from both cultures are worth to be retained. The difference between which elements from the oral tradition Senior and Danticat chose to use illustrates this: for instance, unlike Senior, Danticat finds less use for purely formal imitation of spoken stories, but she devotes a lot of attention to recreating and foregrounding the process and importance of oral storytelling in her writing.

Caribbean literature moves beyond a simple hybridity into a fertile creolisation which results in a pragmatic syncretism that breaks down the limitations posed by the North Atlantic modernity, infusing it and enriching it with the oral tradition. Orality plays a key role as it makes possible the revaluation of history that eventually breaks down the North Atlantic dominancy in writing. The combination of elements from both cultures moves far beyond the mere sum of its parts as the literary creolisation gives rise not only to countless literary possibilities but also to the beginnings of a Caribbean modernity.
Conclusion

The analysis of the African American and the Caribbean employment of orality and the oral tradition has unearthed striking differences both in these literatures’ most prominent dealings with the past, and in the manner in which the present in these works is engaged with or affected by the past. Oral expressions encompass these past/present relationships, contain them and bring them to life, which is a fascinating aspect that is, however, easily overlooked. Only a close analysis of the use of orality discloses a telling discrepancy between the approach of the past in both cultures, and although it might be tempting to either collapse both African American and African-Caribbean literature, or to fully separate them when studying them, such an approach risks to miss the subtle nuances in the deployment of the oral tradition that constitute this discrepancy. It is important to keep in mind that this differentiation is not exclusive and that the function of the use of orality might overlap in some cases: for example, the bond with ancestors and a reconnection with history is also established in African American literature, and examples of a certain degree of a rewriting of history can also be found in Caribbean literature. Nevertheless, there is an undeniable difference in the prominence of each kind of past/present relationship within the employment of orality, and this shows that it is advisable – if not necessary – to make a distinction between these two literatures.

The literature of these two cultures thus discloses the remarkable way in which African diasporic cultures have developed different attitudes towards the past and history. African American authors thoroughly deal with their culture’s past: orality is used in African American literature to make the integration of the past in the present possible so that the characters – and the African American community as a whole – can resolve the suppressive presence of the past and move on. The relationship with the past in African American literature is thus a difficult one, but through literature, and with the aid of orality, the culture
attempts to work through the problematic aspects. The Caribbean, however, treat the past in a more preservative way; that is to say that at the centre of the use of orality in Caribbean literature is the desire to restore in writing the history the Caribbean were once denied, and to create a genuine interaction between past and present that will eventually produce a future. In other words, Caribbean literature is not concerned with making the past less dominant but rather with making it more present. Caribbean culture accepts the difficult elements of the past and foregrounds a use of the past in a dialectic relationship with the present, a constant conversation that focuses on producing an alternative to North Atlantic modernity. Hence, it is wrong to suggest that Caribbean literature reflects a state of melancholy, for its relationship with the past is far more complex and the present is not subject to the memories of the past. Some Caribbean literature does engage with a traumatic past, yet not as prominently as in African American fiction and not necessarily by means of orality. Considering the prominent place the oral tradition takes in the writing of each of the authors discussed above, these relationships with the past which are mediated through the oral elements in the texts can be seen as indicative of these cultures’ main attitude towards the past.

The exploration of the function of orality in African American and Caribbean fiction thus sheds light on a shared preoccupation with the past as well as with its place and integration in the present, and at the same time it reveals a profound difference in the nature of these relationships between past and present, tradition and modernity. Consequently, these cultures’ stance towards the past, mediated by orality, helps to create an image of how these two cultures, which have the same origins, have developed in very different directions as their socio-cultural environment has infused them with different dynamics that have affected their worldview and dealings with history and society. This emphasises once more that the use of the oral tradition goes beyond aesthetics and politics, and that it not only reflects these cultures’ worldview and dealings with history but that it also plays an active role in them.
Hence, further exploration of the employment of orality in African American and Caribbean literature proves to be interesting not only from a purely literary point of view but also for a better understanding of the deeper cultural dynamics.

Although much has been said and written about the use of the oral tradition, its use is so diverse and prominent that there is still a long way to go to reach a comprehensive discussion of this topic. Moreover, writers continue to play with the interaction between the oral and the written tradition, finding new ways in which they might incorporate aspects of orality in their fiction. For instance, to accompany her novel *Getting Mother’s Body: a Novel* (2003) Suzan-Lori Parks released a CD on which she performs the blues songs that are used in the novel to typify one of the characters. In other words, she continues to explore how both traditions might enrich each other. African American and Caribbean authors never cease the exploration of their double heritage, and as contemporary society will continue to present them with new challenges, orality will provide these writers with the strength and means to respond to these challenges. Although now more than ever orality’s most traditional elements are taken up in writing – including the relationship between teller and audience and the storyteller’s task to counsel –, the oral tradition is also adapting to contemporary culture and eagerly employs what it might offer to aid these traditional forms in conveying their message. Above all, the study of orality’s aspects in writing shows how the oral tradition continues to be of significant value in contemporary literature, and how it still is an indispensable keystone of modern African diasporic society.
Works Cited


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