

# The Custodians of Culture and Orature

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**Abstract:** Apropos this rubric, it is difficult to oversee the contribution of Gay Wilentz in his book, *Binding Cultures*, which explores the cultural affiliation between African and African American women writers such as Nigerian Flora Nwapa and Ghanaians Efua Sutherland and Ama Ata Aidoo, writers who focus on the role of women in passing on cultural values to future generations, and African American writers Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, and Paule Marshall, who self-consciously invoke African culture to help create a more integrated African American community. These writers present a reality which conveys not only the diverse and varied experiences of women but also illustrate the complexity of an existence that is fraught with dilemmas. There is a constant foregrounding of black women's resilience, struggle for survival and unfaltering determination to change their circumstance of marginality. In their own voice, these women writers have confronted the sources of oppression and have identified generational and cultural continuity passed on by women as the construct which has held their communities together. These writers have not only undertaken recursive journey into their foremothers' orature but have also documented this mothering process of cultural transmission thereby keeping these traditions alive. Thus, these women writers seem to be concerned with the role of women as "custodians of the traditions." The writers underscore the primary role of their foremothers, as well as their own role to our community of readers. In this regard, the use of orature as a method of education and the orality of the writing style of each author is important. The authors redefine the dialectics of residual African based culture by uncovering aspects of their communal heritage veiled by hegemonic dominant discourse. In addition, I have attempted to explore the authors' sense of discovery/recovery of the self.

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## Introduction:

As part of reclaiming their cultural heritage these women writers also portray in their works that Africa and diaspora share the same umbilical cord; that they are forever connected, that they are the same, despite being bracketed by man-made boundaries. They are working to reunite the dislocated African communities through remembered linguistic and geographical ties. Since the African, the African American and the African

Caribbean share common ancestry, historical experiences, cultural traditions and spirituality, the literature which is derived from the same historical and cultural experience is the same. This provides a healing framework that is rooted in shared historical experiences and cultural heritage. They also produced narratives that add up to a larger collective story of a people grappling with shared and specific historical experiences. They forge a literature that is seamless with

African people's process of being and becoming. Gay Wilentz points to the dynamics of the uniqueness and oneness in the lived and shared realities of these writers which lends them a commonness of spirit. While much writing on black women has already uncovered the commonalities among women of the diaspora, formerly hidden by hegemonic western cultural/literary practice, it is also imperative to analyze how these cultural connections have been passed on within Africa and the diaspora through the writings of such representative women. In Africa and its diaspora, reconstructing history has been involved with an uncovering of heritage and emergent cultural traditions which oppose Eurocentric hegemony. The works not only attest to the continuation of African cultural heritage in the Americas as well as in Africa by writing emergent literature based on the residual cultural practices of an African past but also clarify how these values have been passed on by women through generations.

Gay Wilentz's concept of "generational continuity" – the passing on of cultural values and personal history- as traditionally a woman's domain, is pertinent, apropos of the matrifocal system of education in relation to the contemporary African woman writer as well as to the cultural continuity of African values and customs in the New World. The theological framework of this study hinges on the relationship between women and the oral tradition, particularly in regard to black women's historicity and women's role in orally transmitting the values and

mores of their culture. The importance of the oral tradition and orature in African society and woman's role in passing on the values of her culture as is fundamental. The discussion focuses on how the cultural traditions and value systems are passed down through the female members of the society, from grandmother to grandchild across time and the Atlantic to foster both modern African and African American cultures.

With respect to the oral transmission of customs and values from one generation to the next, since it is women who most often fulfill the role of tale teller and instructor, black women began to look back to their foremothers to recreate their stories. This is true for both African and African American women, but since the line between the Americans and their African past was forcibly broken by their dispersion into the Americas they have had to make a larger imaginative leap than their African sisters. Thus, contemporary African American women writers have had to take their search a step further to envision their African foremothers, and now sisters, whose use of oral traditions and storytelling to impart cultural values has been passed down from generation to generation. So, it is within a traditional African context, we see how the female characters pass on their cultural values and traditions and how the authors themselves, as women, communicate their cultural heritage to generations of readers. Through the telling of stories, the authors extend the cultural practices of the communities to words on a page. They reassemble the fragmented sounds of their foremothers'

voices, rendering explicit the implicit memory of African orature. In their oral literature these two women have told the story of their heritage to the children, the audience or the community of readers, just as their women characters pass on the cultural practices and traditions within the world of each book. In other words, my exploration shows that the writers utilize the role of story-teller traditionally ascribed to women to teach the community of readers black social history and to instruct about traditional practices, cultures and beliefs of black people. In addition, the women use their role to narrate the story of black womanhood. The writers tell us about black women's oppressions and marginalizations, but more significantly, they demonstrate time and again, the methods of resistance and struggle employed by generations of black women in Africa and across the black diaspora to maintain their sense of self-worth and to improve their societies. By using the creative power of their narratives, they purport to restore voices to those who have been silenced by conditions of exploitation and oppression.

Moreover, even in their differences in approach as well as in culture, country and continent, these writers' roles as African women storytellers and their diasporic commitment to tell the tale have remained constant. Their texts are informed by a consciousness of what must be passed on to future generations; the telling of the tale is paramount to the survival of the culture. The myths, legends, stories they heard themselves became a veritable raw

material for them to reclaim their heritage. In that way, they challenge the Eurocentric boundaries; the hegemony of the dominant culture which bracket their experiences. Although separated from traditional African culture assimilation and the imposition of the dominant cultural values, they aim to reflect on that part of their cultural heritage which has been denied by hegemonic (neo) colonialism. They bring women of African descent together to reclaim land, heritage and selves, to explore their identities, questioning and re-defining what that Africanness could mean, within their particular communities. Where slavery and colonization sought to dim memories of African presence in the world, they sought to recreate that presence and where African sense of self confidence and dignity was undermined, the writers created characters who are ready to accept and embrace who they are and reclaim their self-esteem and dignity, bearing in mind that they share the same umbilical cord. The question of embracing an African identity is inseparable from the restoration and recovery of historical memory that is central to African women writers' dialogue. This is because awareness of one's traditions and heritage may have helped women of Africa and the diaspora to survive the horrors of servitude and slavery and enabled them to keep the notion of their origins alive. Thus, for them, this orature has been a fount of material as well as of strength to write, in spite of the opposition. However, despite the connectedness and power gained from one's heritage, women still suffer the limitations handed down from their

African forbears, compounded by the otherness of being black and female in a patriarchal, Euro American society. Thus, women writers of African descent are already maintaining a black feminist theory which is largely concerned with re-informing and re-defining cultural and gender imperatives unique to the experience of black women throughout Africa and the diaspora. Their fundamental purpose has been to re-educate and re-inform and also for most black women writers (African and African American), to explore how they could pass on their cultural heritage to future generations, to continue the work done earlier by their foremothers and to look back into the experiences of women. The goal of this education, self-recovery and re-invention calls for African women writers who create images of courageous and confident African women ready to tackle today's tasks guided by African cultural and historical memories. Such images call for an alternative process of revalidation and reinvention of African humanity, the reconstruction and reassembling of fractured identities, the restoration of self-confidence, self-awareness and dignity and the reassertion of African world outlook.