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Diversifying Children's Literature by the Retelling of Folk Tradition and Orality in Afro-Caribbean Stories

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Diversifying Children's Literature by the Retelling of Folk
Tradition and Orality in Afro-Caribbean Stories

Senior Project Submitted to the
Divisions of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

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Introduction

Children's Literature fits under a broad scope ever since it's conception in Britain during the mid 1800's. As a result, its definition incorporates various forms of media, ranging from novels to picture books. Because of the diversity in the content that's considered Children's Literature, the goal is to dissect the use of picture books and its impact on children. More specifically, understanding the history of Children's Literature, diversity and representation within the genre, and the dynamics that come into play between adults writing literature for children. Understanding the background of these points will help clarify the connection between Euro-centric norms and how colonization deeply influences Afro-Caribbean Children Literature.

The first stories that took place in Britain included a mixture of pictures, rhymes, riddles, stories, alphabets and lessons on moral conduct, spearheading the direction that the genre would continue to head in¹. One of the earliest forms of this comes from John Newbery and his publication of 'Instruction and Amusement'- *A Little Pretty Pocket-Book* in 1744, successfully becoming the first commercialised book for children. His success came from marketing instructive material that adults thought their children would need in a way that was entertaining for the children. This heavily influenced the trajectory of Children's Literature as further works incorporated this balance of providing entertainment for children and teaching them lessons at the same time. Examples of this range from more recent stories such as *The Very Hungry*

¹ Grenby, M.O :The Origins of Children's Literature

Caterpillar exploring themes of time and growth through the development of a butterfly and the way children interact with their environment in *The Snowy Day*. However, the definition of what is considered Children's Literature alters due to the way authors write for their audience, such as writing solely for children or for adults that read the book to the child². Keeping in mind the wide scope of media that's considered Children's Lit, the two sources *Janjak & Freda go to the Iron Market ale Mache an Fe* by Elizabeth Turnbull and "My Daddy (for my father)" by Paul Keen Douglas are published in two different contexts.

Douglas' poem "My Daddy", produced in his poetry book *Again* was published in Trinidad and Tobago. During that time, Douglas had a reputation as an oral poet for his stories that he would recite to multiple audiences. As a result, his work was well known around the country and his target audience was a mix of adults and children. Despite this, the curriculum of the schools helped shape the way he formulated his art, represented by his inclusion of always adding a couple of poems written 'proper' English. On the other hand, Turnbull's book was printed in America, by Light Messages Publishing. Therefore, it brings into contrast the two as the works are produced with two different audiences in mind, Douglas for a primarily Caribbean audience and Turnbull for a primarily white audience. However, Children's Literature as a genre has a history of being a predominantly white space as most of the stories reflect white characters. Based on statistical research from 2018, 50% of children's books were based on white characters with second place at 27% being animals. As a result, Native American (1%), African American (10%), Asian Americans (7%) and Latinx (5%) all together shared around 23% of the remaining books. Thus, there is a disproportionation amount of stories, where it focuses on white narratives

² Grenby, M.O

in the United States, generating a superiority complex where white children always see themselves reflected in the media that they consume. The problem that arises from this is that minorities fail to see children that look like them in the books that they read, subconsciously enforcing this notion of whiteness as better. On the other hand, white children lack exposure to a pool of diverse stories, which inflates their sense of self. Part of the reason why most of these stories are created for a white audience is because white stories sell more particularly in America as the statistics relate to American Publishing companies. Due to this, a cycle is formed where it becomes hard for other stories to sell due to the popularity of a particular archetype being sold to audiences. Furthermore, the authors of these books are mostly white people which creates a dominance in all areas in terms of audience, creators, and content.

Both of these texts highlight an Afro-Caribbean child as the main character and are two examples of literature written for children that tackles the ideas of history, diversity, and representation in the field. Utilizing techniques of dialect and folk tradition, these stories express the values of the traditional Caribbean culture that have been passed down through orality. Therefore, the text forms into a new genre that draws upon European literacy and Afro-Caribbean orality, creating a style unique to Afro-Caribbean Children's Literature. Due to this, Caribbean daily life exists side by side with globalized Western norms³, influencing the content and the nature of its work. As a result, this relationship heavily impacts the way folk traditions function in West Indian Children's Literature, "The West Indian children's folk tradition mirrors this ongoing continuum composed of overlapping stages-- a process marked by growing self-knowledge, but also by ambivalence. Such ambivalence can be imputed to West

³ James, Cynthia From Orature to Literature in Jamaican and Trinidadian Children's Folk Traditions pg 164

Indian migratory tendencies; lingering colonial prejudices; the paucity of publishing opportunities (and thus minimal self-representation): and the slow adaptation of interactive, participatory cultural modes to print technology. But oral and folk traditions are regaining importance as the development of literacy and the role played by storytelling are better understood.”⁴ Due to the enforcement of European formal education and Western norms in the Caribbean, the cultural identity of Caribbean writing comes into conversation with European standards of literacy. Therefore, the question arises for the author on how to integrate nuances of language that reflect the dialect spoken between people in the country which results in understanding how to tackle colonial prejudices and lack of self-representation as a whole. Ingrained into Caribbean schooling systems, proper English is referred to as the default correct way to read and write, stifling the creativity and uniqueness of the Caribbean writer. However, the adaptation of folk tradition and incorporating the essence of storytelling within the narratives help counteract the restraints that Europeans put around Caribbean Literature.

Another issue that arises due to the colonization of the Caribbean is the role that race plays in Children’s Literature. As Europeans established a form of English Literacy in the Caribbean, (and French for others colonized by that country such as Haiti), a split between the two forms of speech became known as ‘proper’ and ‘broken’, with Caribbeans who speak with an accent placed in the latter. Separating the two further pushes this agenda of superiority and inferiority, revealing the stigma against Caribbean accents. The use of ‘proper’ and ‘broken’ also highlight the positive and negative connotations of these words that dictate the interpretation. English and French, which are languages forcefully taught to colonized countries, are deemed as

⁴ James, Cynthia pg 165

the correct way to speak while their accent and the adaptation of the language represents the ‘wrong’ way to speak. Furthermore, race in Children’s literature enhances this distinction between children of color and white children due to the way they are thought of and represented. “Racial Innocence, *Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights*,” by Robin Bernstein sets the scene for when the idea of innocence arrived, “In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, however, a competing doctrine entered popular consciousness. In this emergent view, children were innocent: that is, sinless, absent of sexual feelings, and oblivious to worldly concerns,” From this point on, childhood has been associated with innocence and changed from the notion of being born with original sin into the world. This shift in mindset of what children were capable of feeling allowed adults to prescribe children with ideals of how childhood works. However, as Bernstein points out, this idea of innocence belonged solely to white children as it was used as a political tactic, “ In each case, propinquity between a White child and an African American adult transferred innocence from white childhood to a political endeavor: abolition or post-Reconstruction romanticization of slavery, respectively,” The depictions of minorities during this time drastically varied during this time period. Majority of the art about African American children were created with very exaggerated features deemed black, derogatory words and stereotypes littered all over the page. For example, the art of the time by multiple mid century artists such as Sol Eytinge, Lilly Martin Spencer, and Eastman Johnson represented black children as mischievous imps, preening fools, or content slaves. During this time, many of the commercial art of the time reflected these descriptions. Another work of Bernstein’s ‘Signposts on the Road Less Taken: John Newton Hyde’s Anti-Racist Illustrations of African American Children’ brings up the cover art by the McLoughlin Brothers which has

blatant stereotypes, “The cover of the McLoughlin Brothers’ book is wholly dehumanizing, from the child’s grotesquely caricatured face to the hopelessly botched schoolwork to the racial epithet,” Noticing the difference in the perception of black and white children by American society contributes to the way childhood is intertwined with racism. Racist undertones were also subconscious in many of the works of authors that came after this time period ushered into the mid 19th century. Dr. Seuss books are a prime example of racial undertones being prominent in all of an author’s books. ‘Was The Cat In The Hat Black? *The Hidden Racism of Children’s Literature, and the Need for Diverse Books*’ by Philip Nel explores the background of Seuss’ education and environment, “One of Geisel’s favorite childhood books, Peter Newell’s *The Hole Book*, follows a bullet’s comically disruptive journey through its pages, including one where a Black mammy points to the hole in the watermelon, and addresses, in dialect, a group of wide-eyed Black children: “‘Who plugged dat melon?’ mammy cried,/ As through the door she came./ I’d spank de chile dat done dat trick/ Ef I could learn his name’”. Seuss remembered this book so well that sixty years after reading it, he could still quote its opening verse by heart,” As a result, many of Seuss’ early work consisted of stereotypes and racial epithets that mirrored the *Hole Book*.

There was a transition in Seuss artistic style as he started to stray from racial depictions and began to speak out against prejudice. However, his background in racial stereotypes reared its head when it came to his later works of the Cat in the Hat, “‘children’s culture has a special ability to preserve (even as it distorts) and transmit (even as it fragments) the blackface mask and styles of movement, which persist only in Raggedy Ann and the Scarecrow but also in the faces and gloved hands of Mickey Mouse and Bugs Bunny.’ To her list, we can add the Cat in the Hat.

In many ways, Seuss's twentieth-century black cat matches Eric Lott's description of the nineteenth-century blackface minstrel," The mannerisms of the Cat in the Hat and the way he's dressed mimic older black caricatures such as Zip Coon and a black faced Mick Rooney.

Compared to the history of Suess and the types of work he created in his earlier years, there is a correlation between the racial unconsciousness of the animated field. Combining these two ideas together in Suess's mind develops a character that resembles minstrelsy in a new fashion pushing the stereotypes of African Americans that is hugely popular in American culture. The transition of blackness from white people in black face, to black people in black face, to animals who mimic black face traditions forms this complex history. As a result, for younger children that learn caricatures of blackness associate those behaviors with animal characters like The Cat in the Hat. This generates a cycle, enforcing feelings of inferiority in minorities and supporting the claim of white superiority in American culture. The success of Suess's The Cat in the Hat book, and its multiple sequels and event adaptation into a movie propelled it into a household name.

The parallels of the Cat and blackness are intertwined in a way that the Cat adopts historical identities of blackness through the creative outlet of Seuss. Thus, it serves as a reminder for the history of black Americans connected to the stereotypes that have defined them since slavery. Another connection is in the name of the 'cat' as it was a term that was popular to refer to jazz musicians as cats during the early 1930s. Examining the *Cat in the Hat Songbook* there is a scene of the 'Cat' replicating the sounds of a trombone player and recreating the actions, "Seuss's Cat lacks the overt caricature of Disney's apes, but he does mime playing a trombone during lyrics that recall the term 'be-bop': 'I can beep a beeper. Beep, beep, beep!/ I can boop a booper. Boop, boop, boop!/ So, if you need a fellow who can boop and beep,/ I'm the

boop-boop booper that you need!/ Beep, beep!/ Plunk, plunk!/ Strum, strum!/ Boop, boop, plink!’” This indicates that the structure of stereotypes are still deeply rooted within American society as it develops and evolves with the times. While some forms of caricature are more noticeable than the others, the fact remains that distinctions are incorporated in a new form that keep them in the forefront of American culture. Therefore, subconsciously there are ideas about minorities that are reiterated through adaptations that continuously reinforce white superiority. The Cat embodies white America’s idea of blackness which translate into subconscious associations between the actions of the Cat and black people. His outlandish behavior and exaggerated motions work in the same fashion as Disney characters that mimic certain accents or act in a particular manner synonyms for stereotypes of minorities, such as the hyenas in *Lion King*.

So if there is evidence for a strong connection between the Cat and blackface ancestry, what makes it difficult to remove images from American culture? It is because it is rooted in American culture that to distinguish between the Cat and black face is impossible because they are synonymous, “People don’t see the blackface ancestry of the Cat for the same reason that they don’t see the blackface ancestry of Bugs Bunny, Mickey Mouse, or the Scarecrow. These images are so embedded in the culture that their racialized origins have become invisible,” (Nel, pg 52). Ambiguity develops when animals such as black cats and apes are imbued with stereotypes because they personify human behaviors. Personification in this style creates a duality of viewing characters as not humans but their behaviors mimic negative ideas of minority people. Children who read these stories now are unable to differentiate between the nuances of the Cat’s stereotypical behavior and the animated style of cartoon characters. Therefore, it

creates a generation that inherits American's history that subconsciously has the past vividly in their development. This opens up a divide of the stories of 'others' who fail to fall into a white narrative. This is problematic because anything that doesn't directly represent an white style of cultural life or views automatically becomes placed in the category of us versus them. For the development of a child, this causes a gap in both the education of all children reading popular children's books. For minority children, they lack a substantial amount of books that reflect main characters that look like them and the ability to relate to stories. As a result, people of color are omitted in different forms of media which creates white dominant spaces leaving minorities limited opportunities from entering those spaces. On the other hand, white children only seeing themselves in books generates a comfortability of their stories becoming the norm and minorities as others. Furthermore, it restricts the ability for all children to understand people who come from different walks of life. Diversity in storytelling helps formulate a balance between understanding self and comprehending the lifestyle of others.

Understanding the context of how racial theory for children developed in America can give insight into the cultural representation in the Caribbean. Due to the underlying associations of race, those ideas would translate into the culture of a society where colonization has a major impact on the relationship between people of color and white people. Thus how children are written for would fit a thematic style that puts a specific style of writing on a pedestal, particularly a European style that has exerted influence over the Caribbean. Themes of race are prevalent in terms of discrimination Caribbean writing because the majority of the population are people of color, but covert due to the influence of colonization. A sense of inferiority in

alignment with the content of the work impacts the way Caribbean writers are able to identify themselves with their work.

There is a duality that exists between adults writing for children and the lack of diversity of children's books. Majority of popular, well known, children's authors are white adults which makes diversifying the genre more difficult. If the demand for stories focuses on white audiences then publishers must sell work that appeals to the demand. As a result, there is a cycle of supply and demand where the focus is on having white narratives at the forefront because that is what generates the most income. There are white authors who attempt to broaden the scope of the genre by creating work that represents people of color. However, on a larger scale, the majority of the books made place white children in a variety of stories fiction and non-fiction. This opens their perspective and allows them to see themselves reflected in multiple roles.

Chapter One

Afro-Caribbean Literature utilizes idioms and storytelling as a form of passing messages from the adult to the child. As a result, Afro-Caribbean Children's Literature becomes this morph of spoken stories in a written form. The tradition of a storyteller and the audience has always been a part of Caribbean culture and is used as a mechanism to teach. Spoken stories passed down through families connect children with their ancestors through a bond since generations of their ancestors also heard these stories. Oral tradition transformed in Caribbean Literature by the way it's utilized by fictional parents to still transfer these messages, but through written media.

Oral tradition evolved into a larger part of Caribbean identity through its adaptation into written media , "The oral traditions of the Caribbean region are thus not simply receptacles containing the *materia* of culture in static, compliatory, preserved form. They are, rather, streams meandering, or urging, across the landscape of history, merging with the diluting flow of other tributaries, and transforming into broader yet more discrete currents of cultural identity," ⁵ Therefore, oral tradition in Caribbean Literature uses idioms and proverbs as a form of conversation between generations of people. As a result, 'merging with the diluting flow of other tributaries' alludes to the connection between the combination of oral tradition with new forms of cultural identity, such as literature. This idea of oral tradition as a continuous morph of many different aspects of culture represents how it puts Caribbean forms of writing in its own category with folk tradition. These ideas are malleable enough to adapt and merge older ideas of Caribbean culture with newer concepts of identity.

⁵ Rodriguez, Emilio Jorge, *Oral Tradition and Recent Caribbean Poetry*

The first stages of the transition from orality to literature in Caribbean culture lacked the stylistic features that the original Creole orality valued. As a result, the tales being told when transferred to Standard English felt more of a literary novel instead of a combination of literary elements and story telling. A breakthrough in Afro-Caribbean children's literature occurred after Sir Phillip Sherlock and Andrew Salkey wrote their stories that included cultural references that specified Caribbean life, differentiating them from the first books written. In comparison, novels written by Jekyll (1907), Beckwith (1924), and the Herskovits' (1936) included riddles and songs about Anansi, a tricker that has its origins in West Africa, that were documented verbatim onto the page.⁶ What separates Sherlock's work from the rest was his inclusions of creation myths by the Amerindians alongside the retelling of the stories by Anansi.⁷ His addition of folk tradition adds context for the reader and enhances the story for the reader.

Salkey also contributed to this with his works that were published, such as *Hurricane* (1964), *Drought* (1966), *Riot* (1967), and *Jonah Simpson* (1969) which include a variety of folk-based materials. Salkey's work differs from the other styles of Afro-Caribbean Literature because of trying to recreate the liveliness of a storyteller in print form by using both Creole and Standard English in the narration and the speech of his characters.⁸ Making a distinction between orality and literature text solidifies orality as an artform instead of associations from European critics as inferior.

⁶ James, Cynthia, *From Orature to Literature in Jamaican and Trinidadian Children's Folk Tradition* pg 166. Creole folktales borrowed ideas from the authors of this period in creating books like "How the Crab Got a Crack on its Back," that became connected to the education of West Indian children readers. James highlights other works that trace back to West Indian history before colonization and the Western style of telling stories.

⁷ James, Cynthia, pg 166

⁸ James, Cynthia, pg 166

The history of folk tradition traces even further back to the writings of Europeans that visited the Caribbean, such as *Hamel, thee obeah man* (1827); *Marley, or the Life of a Planter in Jamaica* (1828); and *The Adventures of Jonathan Corncob* (1787)⁹. The writers who documented the lifestyle of Caribbean people through folk view (worldview)¹⁰ analyzed them through the lens of being “savage” or “primitive”. Identifying cultural differences in a derogatory light separates the form expression in the Caribbean as wrong and the European as right. Therefore, having Afro-Caribbean Literature that places both orality and literature in conversation with each other to present a message to younger generations highlights its uniqueness in a category of its own. Even though orality is tied to Caribbean history, there is also a link to European colonization that imbues it with a duality. As a result, this duality reflects the relationship of the Caribbean with an oppressive European colonial influence that altered the way that orality is represented in Caribbean societies. European literary critics continued to negate the importance of folk tradition in literature by reviewing as inferior, “ For some Western critics it was preposterous some 20-30 years ago (and some still persist in this attitude) to think that such “savagery” and “barbarisms” as the use of “folk” materials could be included in literary text.”¹¹ Consequently, this mindset deters European critics from validating Caribbean writers that included folk tradition within their writing because of the content that they created.

The European assessment of Caribbean art holds bias due to bringing over their style of ‘literary’ text and forcing Caribbean countries to adapt this into their curriculum. After instilling this into multiple countries, writers in Caribbean decided to utilize this to record all of the folk

⁹ Roland-Santiago, Serafin *Thematic and Structural Functions of Folklore in Caribbean Literature: The Case of “Written” and the “Oral”* pg 2

¹⁰ Roland-Santiago, Serafin pg 2

¹¹ Roland-Santiago, Serafin pg 2

traditions that used to get passed on orally. However, when European critics saw the use of folk tradition and creole languages in literary text, they rejected it, “Welsh reminds us of early accounts of European travellers: “... creole languages are figured as ‘broken English,’ ‘degenerate’ linguistic forms which were thought to reflect the alleged ‘depravity’ and ‘uncivilized’ or ‘childlike’ status of their speakers” (Welsh 416). This thought still pervades in the minds of many First World critics.”¹² This distinction between Creole and English with the former being recognized as lesser continues this theme of Caribbean inferiority. The derogatory associations made by European travelers transferred through generations of critics creating a power dynamic between the two. Moreover, it’s another example of how colonization by Europe warped their Caribbean identity in a way that was assumed to be better for those colonized.

In the field of academics, a distinction was made between folklore and literature, as folklore “was supposed to be studied by folklorists and anthropologists but not incorporated into the ‘literary forms of genres’”¹³. Creating this distinction between folklore and literature ultimately targets and specifically excludes the Caribbean demographic of work being recognized as a “literary” genre. Therefore, this separation highlights another example of folklore being situated under literacy from the colonizer lens. Developing a boundary between literature and folklore diminishes the value of the work that incorporates both, which were created by Caribbean writers. Furthermore, it reveals the lack of acceptance of other cultures by the European definition of literacy. There also lies an underlying criticism of Creole and other Caribbean dialects as forms of illiteracy due to its exclusion from European work.

¹² Serafin, 3

¹³ Roland-Santiago, Serafin pg 3. Santiago goes on to say that writers were supposed to use “correct” standard English in the narrative voice; literary criticism was also to use “standard English”. Citation hereafter in text.

Currently, a shift in literature occurs due to the development of oral tradition by oral societies that are including folk tradition into their stories. As a result, a struggle between the “institutionalized” highly structured literary forms and genres, and the dynamic flexible “oral” formats, i.e, the folk contents and forms are rise to the surface¹⁴. This clash between literature and oral has developed into a “new form of literary-written tradition which has evolved into *literary-written-oral* tradition” (Serafin, pg 3). The new terminology of literary-written-oral defines the creation of a form of work that has orality and literature coexist on the same platform. Creating a category of its own that specifically separates the two symbolizes a resistance to a combining of the two as a collaborative art form. This action speaks back to the history of the orality and how European commentators degraded the value of folk tradition. Instead of a cultural blend of identities, it hones in on the utilization of literary elements in the retelling of folk tradition. Therefore, according to Serafin, “Writers are not only weaving folk materials into their narratives, but the whole text is being transformed into a written-oral phenomena, into performance” (pg 3). Qualities of performance associated with a written-oral phenomena links back to the original nature of folk tradition, which would be transferred through story tellers, or more specifically recognized as *griots*. Inclusions of folk materials keep alive stories that were passed down by generations of Caribbean societies that reflect the culture and identity of those pre-colonization.

Folk tradition disrupts the power dynamic between European and Caribbean that’s established a dominance of European models,

¹⁴ Roland-Santiago, Serafin pg 3. Santiago attributed this rise to oral tradition in literature to a ‘revenge’ by oral societies. He distinguishes the orality of oral societies and literature as Diversity and Sameness respectively. In doing so, he claims that literature spread through global civilization highlights ideas of Sameness, taking away the fundamental identity of orality which uses folk tradition as a form of individuality, or Diversity.

“Institutionalized (mainstream formal) culture, viewed in European models of literary forms and genres, and in the ‘great’ centered-traditions of art is clashing with the peasants and the folks’ cultural and artistic manifestations, that is, folk expressive culture is bringing forth a ‘resistance’ to metropole-centered-dominance. One of the important facets of folk culture is its ‘revolt’ against colonialism and neo-colonialism. This can be seen in many instances of verbal/oral folklore. This is also true in many, if not all, post-colonial societies.” (Serafin, pg 4)

This resistance mentioned by Santiago gives agency for Caribbean writers to challenge the definition of good art. Furthermore, it acknowledges a discriminative view of European models of literacy that judges the legitimacy of the art created based on status. Incorporating folk stories in the composition of these works tackles this issue of one cultural style of art as superior. Having folk culture defined as a ‘revolt’ against colonialism and neo-colonialism allows it to stand as a it’s own identity instead of an amalgamation of European and Caribbean cultures. It’s important to reiterate a difference between literary-written works and literary-written-oral because of the fact that Caribbean writers utilizing this style were lesser. Moreover, this separation allows the growth of West Indian societies to have a sense of their own identity in a post-colonial society where the influence of European colonizers still have a heavy influence today. Embracing the identity of folklore grants modern folklorists the ability to broaden the scope and definition of what folklore means.

The evolution of folklore changes the way that it’s associated in the modern context as it becomes more relatable to fit present-day societies, “Modern folklorists have gone beyond this folklore paradigm and have discovered that ‘folk’ and folklore’ is not only limited to ‘peasants,’ but also includes urban social groups, such as, truck drivers, office and factory workers, ethnic groups, professions, university students, etc. Therefore, the early “folk” discussion in Caribbean criticism is now on newer and improved social grounds because the folk have been re-discovered in the city (Selvon, Lamming), in the yards (Mais, James, Mittelholzer), in the factories and on

the streets.” (Serafin, pg 4) A renewal of folk tradition through a modern lens changes the identity of who folk tradition can apply to. As a result, it expands the meaning of folk and transcends through generations and occupation. Consequently, a tie to the definition of folk brings together the past and the present as well as unifying the history of Caribbean identity. The connotation of folk also shifts from this sole association of “peasantry” to a broader context that doesn’t target a specific demographic. Folk tradition can incorporate various people that come from different levels of status which breaks the negative connotation of the art form. Instead of this association with subservience and lower-economic status, folk branches out to a wider audience and changes the ideas of folk identity.

A change in folk identity means a change in the definition of folk should adjust to incorporate it’s larger scope. Santiago refers to this as the ‘folk consciousness’ which West Indian writers integrate into their writing,

“The use of folklore materials is not simply a “blending” of folklore and literature (the function of folklore in the thematic aspects), though sometimes the literature is “sprinkled” with folklore to make it “exotic”, but in general terms the West Indian writer is striving towards more serious matters (the structural functions); it is not just a sprinkling but the ‘substance of life’ which is sought for, that is, the **folk consciousness** imbedded in Caribbean texts. Therefore, when folklorists or literary critics write about ‘folklore in literature’ the following terms should be used cautiously; blending, mixture, inclusion, imbedding etc. These terms are utilized by European centered discourse in order to ‘erase’ or place in a lower category, usually at the bottom, the peripheral viewpoints and perspectives of Caribbean writers and critics.” (Serafin, pg 4)

Reiterated in this quote, West Indian writers aim to capture the essence of folk tradition in literature instead of a combination of folk and literary elements. Folk consciousness defines the essence of this movement as it insinuates that folk references in literary writing are meant to connect back to the history of orality in Caribbean culture. European critics attempt to undermine the importance of orality but claim that the use of it inside literary attempts to bring a unification

of both styles. However, by doing so, it emulates the power dynamic between European and the Caribbean and puts European writing in a higher category of skill or technique. The way it's included symbolizes the idea of exotifying Western literature with stories of Caribbean.

Therefore, another connection between the history of Europe and the Caribbean that ties back to colonialism by the way it's viewed as a commodity by Europe. Instead, the art made by West Indian writers focuses on highlighting the way of life of previous generations within the community.

Santiago indicates a way to validate Caribbean writing through recognizing the diversity between the texts instead of compiling them together, "A more suitable discourse in 'folklore and literature' discussions should be one that indicates dynamic interaction, overlapping tensions, centered-peripheral dominance, amalgamation, and most importantly, the fusion of **Caribbean folk consciousness** with the creative process of literary production." (Serafin, pg 5). The goals of critics should feature the incorporation of folk consciousness instead of considering the two as one. This recognition allows folk consciousness to keep its identity in an European space which has historically attempted to erase its presence. Considering the power dynamic between the two, defining this distinction recognizes that European criticism acts as a form of a modern assertion of dominance. However, acknowledging the use of folk consciousness gives Caribbean writers their own platform for criticism as well as appreciation for the work produced.

Referring back to the works by Sherlock and Salkey, they illustrate the continuum from orature to literature in the West Indian children's folk tradition during the early documentation and literacy phase.¹⁵ As a result, their work could be defined under a lens of a combination of

¹⁵ Cynthia, 168: To use the word continuum in the definition of the relationship of orature to literature symbolizes the early stages of relationship between the two. Two Trinidadian writers that James brings up, Paul Keens-Douglas and Albert Ramsawack become the focus of the article in bringing a change to

orality and literature, marking the first step to forming a Caribbean identity in a European style. Therefore, the next step past the assimilation of orature in literary text came through the works of Paul Keens-Douglas and Albert Ramsawck. During the Black Power Movement and a resistance to neo-colonialism, dialect propelled itself to the forefront of the conversation in terms of Caribbean identity, “Language became one channel of protest as people asserted their indigenous identities in the face of Western cultural hegemony. In the English-speaking Caribbean, the advancement of Linguistics as a field of study was challenging old perceptions about the inferiority of Creole (especially with regard to literacy), as mass education spread,” (James, pg 168) Compared to the previous references of being considered ‘savage’ by European writers, Caribbean advancement of linguistics as a field of study counteracts this measure. In contrast, the focus on the importance of the language represents its legitimacy in Caribbean countries. Working towards dismantling European systems in place that regard Caribbean languages in the context of literature as inferior supports the idea of Diversity instead of the Sameness paradigm. In order to have a claim as a “combination” of cultures in literary-written-oral texts, both the orality of folk tradition and European formats of literacy must be regarded on the same stature of importance.

While the works of Douglas opened the doorway for a new form of orality with his joint live performances alongside the books he wrote. In doing so, he assisted in innovating a new folk tradition which incorporated orature, literature, and digital forms of these performances when CD’s became a part of the commercial market. However, even with this influx of material that supported orality, there were limitations of it creating a new identity. The new form of orality

Caribbean Children’s Literature and orality in the confines of ‘old prejudices’ also referred to as European influences. Citations hereafter are within text.

became restrictive due to its commercialized use and eventually as a form to generate humor and entertainment¹⁶. As a result, people took pride in the work but forming an identity based on material was difficult due to its being heavily commercialized. Yet, Albert Ramsawack's work supported a shift in this dynamic with the multitude of books he wrote for children of all age groups.

Ramsawack was both an illustrator and writer and began producing children's folktale stories with the works "Anansi the Tricky Spider" and "The Greedy Goat: A West Indian Folk Tale" which were both published in Caribbean newspapers. Therefore, the majority of his work that came out after were short story collections that combine elements of folklore in it about rural East Indians. Despite this, Ramsawack use of orality comes from travels where he searched for people in the rural villages he wrote about that knew interesting stories or were storytellers¹⁷. The use of language by Ramsawack demonstrates his understanding of how orality in West Indian folklore embodies representation. When writing for teenagers, he applies Standard English as the main form of narration, but includes dialogue that attempts to recreate the authentic voices of his characters in Creole.¹⁸ Having these characters in the text work in a similar way to Douglas because it allows readers to identify themselves within the text that they're reading. Establishing the use of Creole in their 'authentic' voices signifies the connection to their roots before

¹⁶ Cynthia, pg 170. The use of folk tradition had been integrated into the daily lives of people in the Caribbean but at a cost. "Orality within the folk tradition had been rejuvenated and the range of its cultural content had been extended. However, where the earlier tales of the documentation-literacy period tempered entertainment with serious messages of spiritual belief, moral values, and cunning, this new orality was stage-oriented and thrived on individual Creole quaintness, a quality that could draw ridicule. Thus it was more susceptible to subversion and dismissal. In other words, enactment no longer for the in-group, but was being rifled and distorted by commercialism."

¹⁷ Cynthia, 170.

¹⁸ Cynthia, 170. James goes in depth by stating the differences between Ramsawack's work for children and teenagers. His assumption that he doesn't want "to confuse" children with writing in Creole shows the lasting effect of colonialism on the Caribbean. At this stage, children are confused about their indigenous language and assimilated to feeling more comfortable in reading and listening to Standard English.

colonization. There's also an attempt by Ramsawack to normalize the use of Creole in the literature by introducing it through the dialect of the characters. Furthermore, he is recognized for his ability to mix folk and story elements from various cultures into one.

One example of this stems from Ramsawack's children's tale that combines Creole obeah(magic), and Western Cinderella tradition to produce *Flamme Belle*. One of the main reasons this stands apart from the rest is because it signifies the Creole oral revival during the documentation-literacy phase which had not been the case since colonization of the Caribbean. Before European standards of education became the norm, there was a stronger influence of West African culture on Caribbean populations. This text combines two major cultures that have shaped the West Indies and functions in a way that acts as a form of rebellion against European ideals, "But before Flamme Belle could have had such a happy pass, she suffered a skin affliction that made her a cross between the Trinidadian Soucouyant and European Sleeping Beauty, thus situating her French Creole or patois names (Flaming Beauty/Bright Flame) between both traditions. Her skin affliction is cured by the equivalent of a West indian bush bath administered by the old man with whom she lives -- a man endowed with obeah powers," (Cynthia, 172). The Soucouyant in Trinidadian folklore is known as an old woman who would shed her skin during the night and would turn into a ball of flame to look a victim to suck dry. As a result, there's a contrast between the lore of the two cultural stories which creates a duality within her as a character.

Flamme Belle's affliction being cured by the West Indian old man symbolizes the revolt against the dominance of Western influence from Ramsawack's book. Consequently, the old man represents the power that West Indian writers have to separate the amalgamation of

European and Caribbean cultures inside their work. Furthermore, the old man being endowed with obeah powers amplifies this because the only way for her to be cured is through magic that's native to the West Indies. As a result, the association illustrates that West Indians hold the power to create a cultural shift in the power dynamic that Europe intends to enforce of superiority. The gap in generation between the old man and Flame Belle mirrors the state of West Indian culture as it's shaped by the European model. In order to combat the dominance of European styles of living, younger generations have to stay in contact with their roots and understand their history.

The term *oraliture*, coined by Ernest Mirville, draws a distinction between texts that doesn't always fall under the category of literature. It's definition by Rodriguez claims, "The concept of *oraliture* can be applied to recent poetry of the Anglo-Caribbean region in which the writer intends the text to be a product of secondary status, and performative orality to be the immediate end or primary purpose, with the auditor being encouraged to participate in the creative act of through personal contribution and response (a tradition as ancient as the art of story-telling)."¹⁹ As a result, this concept of *oraliture* can also be applied to Afro-Caribbean Literature due to the performative nature of one person reading the text to another, such as the parent to the child. Therefore, having this performance of the text by the adult to the child enhances the message of the novel based on its delivery. However, adults reading stories to children isn't unique to Afro-Caribbean culture, raising the question if we should include all forms of Children's Literature or even Caribbean Literature because of the definition of *oraliture*.

¹⁹ Rodriguez, Page 8

The distinction between the genre of Children's Literature and Afro-Caribbean Children's Literature in terms of *oraliture* derives from the story-telling aspect woven into the narrative of Afro-Caribbean works. Both *Iron Market* by Turnbull and *Eight Day* by Edwidge Danticat include forms of story-telling that incorporate Afro-Caribbean roots of proverbs and idioms. *Iron Market* contains inclusion of Creole and English diversifies the text for its readers and encourages parents that know the languages to speak to their children in both while reading. Incorporating both languages features another aspect of Caribbean culture that shows ties back to slavery in the West Indies, "Standard English and Creole jostle with each other in the creation of a Caribbean linguistic identity. This identity resists amalgamation. The indigenous syncretism emanating from the mixing of peoples signifies not a blend of cultures, but rather the similar economic and social conditions of colonization and the West Indian plantation."²⁰ Creating a distinction between Western and Caribbean culture empowers the folk tradition that defined the way that previous Caribbean generations communicated and learned about the world. The use of Creole and English within the texts that are written represents the duality of the work. The Caribbean writer has to choose between which language to write in, causing a divide in the genre itself. When combined, the text itself becomes an embodiment of the complex relationship between the West and the Caribbean instead of a joint collaboration of cultures. Furthermore, it puts into context the uniqueness of Caribbean oral tradition and its staying power despite the colonization of the Caribbean.

²⁰ Cynthia, 165. The complexities of a Caribbean lifestyle intertwined with Western norms leave younger generations isolated from the folk tradition of their grandparents. As a result, forms of media evolve alongside Western culture which encompass folk forms. According to James, 'new hybrid forms of folk forms with their bases in ancestral orality compete with electronic and print media.

An example of oral tradition within a Afro-Caribbean text would be the interaction between Freda and Mr. Joseph in “Janjak & Freda go to the Iron Market *ale Mache an Fe* ” by Elizabeth Turnbull. Freda and Janjak go to the Iron Market, a huge shopping hub in Haiti, with their godmother who has to pick up groceries. While at the Iron Market, their godmother leaves the children with Mr. Joseph to meet other *machanns* or vendors. A vendor himself, Mr. Joseph sells food items and offers the children some fruits called *keneps* which are similar to grapes. While Janjak agrees whole-heartedly, Freda hesitates by saying that they don’t have any money to buy the fruit. In response, Mr. Joseph says “‘As our elders say,’ Mr. Joseph responded, breaking off a generous cluster of *keneps* for each child, ‘He who doesn’t eat alone never knows hunger.’”²¹ Here, Mr. Joseph uses an idiom as a way to teach a lesson to the children. In this way, the use of ‘our’ when referring to elders creates a sense of unity between Janjak, Freda, and himself.

The action alongside the quote enhances the meaning of the idiom as Mr. Joseph ‘breaks off a generous cluster of *keneps*’ for the children. The act of breaking off a good portion of the fruit for the children to have for free symbolizes Mr. Joseph belief in the message of the saying. Sharing food embodies the act of giving to others when they lack the resources for themselves. In that moment, Mr. Joseph exhibited qualities of kindness and a sense of morality that aligns with caring for others.

Themes of community and awareness of others are present in the quote, highlighting the value of those attributes in Caribbean cultures. For a person to eat with others causes them to ‘not know hunger’ to function in two ways. In a literal sense, anybody that consistently shares

²¹ Elizabeth, Turnbull, 9 *Freda and Janjak Go To The Iron Market*

the food that they have with others would always have other people around to share that meal. James' quote on the use of manipulation of language served to keep stories comprehensible...²² However, metaphorically, the concept of sharing those meals incorporates the notion that those people that you share the meal with could potentially return the favor. Inviting others to share meals spreads the wealth to those that may not have food at that moment and builds connection between people in the community. On the other hand, 'not knowing hunger' doubles as a proverb for someone who knows hunger and decides to share with people so others don't have to go through that experience. The underlying theme of helping others occurs in multiple of the other interactions that Janjak and Freda have in the text.

The next instance of this happens in the conversation between Mrs. Jean and Freda after there's an incident at the market. A farmer's goat runs away and causes a mess by knocking over the goods from multiple stalls, leaving Mrs. Jean's clothes stained. As a result, Freda and Janjak decide to help Mrs. Jean despite the attitude that she gave the children earlier when Freda touched her goods. When Mrs. Jean asked why the children decided to help her, Freda responds with, "We didn't do it by ourselves. The broom vendor, soap vendor, and the man by the water pump all helped. It's like our *marenn* taught us. 'Many hands make light work.'"²³ The saying by Freda represents the way oral traditions can transfer information between generations. Freda's internalization of the quote alongside the use of it in her explanation to Mrs. Jean symbolizes the impact of the message. Her grandmother teaching her the importance of collaborating with others drives the idea of community that grounds this theme within the text. Furthermore, the themes of helping each other in needs also reflect the quote by Mr. Joseph that was previously mentioned.

²² James, pg 165

²³ Turnbull, 21

In response to the assistance that she receives from the children, Mrs. Jean decides to give the children the scarf that Freda examined earlier after learning their godmother's birthday will happen soon. After handing the scarf to the children, Mrs. Jean informs the children about another quote, "There's another saying from our elders. 'The spoon goes to the house of the bowl; the bowl must also go to the house of the spoon.' We must help those who help us," she said. "Take this to your grandmother and tell her that Mrs. Jean from the Iron Market says she should be very proud of her grandchildren."²⁴ The analogy of the spoon and the bowl highlights the concept that people return favors that others have done for them. In this case, the children help Mrs. Jean without Mrs. Jean asking for their help as well as the children not asking for anything in return. Recognizing this, Mrs. Jean's attitude towards the children shifts as she grants them a gift that they can give to their grandmother.

The use of the spoon and the bowl as a reference alludes to a literal translation of the spoon and the bowl needing each other in order to function. The undertones of using a spoon and a bowl implies the bond between the two entities as dependent on each other. To eat the content of the food inside the bowl, the spoon is used to pick up that content meaning that they rely on each other to function. Furthermore, people have the ability to eat from the bowl without the use of the spoon, yet it would make the maneuver harder for that person. Compared to the relationship of Mrs. Jean to the children, the metaphor places Mrs. Jean as the bowl and the children as the spoon due to the nature of how the children helped her. Mrs. Jean could have cleaned the mess up on her own, but the assistance from the children made the entire situation

²⁴ Turnbull, 23

much easier. As a result, getting the scarf from Mrs. Jean brings the story full circle as the children are able to give their godmother a gift for her birthday.

In each of the idioms used by different characters in the text, one of the main messages repeated for the reader is the importance of helping others. Different settings are incorporated throughout this text to get across the messages in a style unique to each situation. Mr. Joseph shares his fruit with the children first, Freda helps Mrs. Jean without being prompted to, and Mrs. Jean gives the children a scarf for their assistance. Subsequently, each of their quotes are related to their experience and gives the reader a sense of their character. Mr. Joseph represents generosity in the form of donating while having a certain resource in abundance. He sacrifices part of his profit in order to provide for the children a snack during their visit to the market. Freda and Janjak assist Mrs. Freda despite the way she accused the children of dirtying her clothing goods. By reaching out to multiple people to help while they didn't have the resources themselves allowed them to fix the mess much quicker than leaving Mrs. Freda alone. Finally, Mrs. Freda's change of heart after receiving assistance shows her true nature and ability to recognize her mistake in how she approached the children. Each of their stories correlate with the quote that recites upon helping someone else within the community.

Chapter Two

Dialect and its use in Caribbean Children's Literature has altered the way that children are able to keep a connection with older traditional norms. Douglas utilized this technique by writing with accidentals in his texts as well performing in talk tents, which were places that held comic shows fictionalizing the flaws of ordinary citizens²⁵. The importance of these comedy shows alongside his writing for a growing children audience came from his ability to combine common threads of folk tradition and storytelling that both adults and children could connect with. As a result, Douglas became one of the best storytellers in this time period, due to his innovative nature of straying away from the aforementioned folk traditional stories that people had heard repetitively, such as Anansi. His inclusion of Tanti in his work brought ties to a Creole icon that all countries in the Caribbean were familiar with, unlike how specific the Douen (ghost children who would lead children who didn't listen to their parents astray in the forest) would be to Trinidadian culture. This inclusiveness allowed Douglas to reach a wider audience despite there being sub-categories. While Douglas wrote stories intended for all ages, there were tales that were specifically for children which included dialect. In these works, he tackled a range of issues, one being the representation of fatherhood in the West Indies,

“Another children's classic is ‘My Daddy’ (which Keens-Douglas dedicated to his own father), a tribute to West Indian fatherhood, which is usually much maligned:

My daddy is de bes'
 Don't tell me nutten,
 My daddy is de bes'!
 My daddy could drive de fastest,
 His car is the bes'
 My daddy strong, strong,
 Ask mommy, ask her.
 My daddy does lift weight,

²⁵ James, Cynthia page 168

Ask him if yu tink ah lie
 Yu ever hear 'bout Maracaibo?
 An' Venezuela? An' all dem kind ah place?
 My daddy been all dere,
 My daddy travel far.
 (Douglas 85)" (Cynthia, 169)

The use of Caribbean dialect in this passage reflects the narrator's authentic appreciation for their father, as well as highlighting the natural interaction between the narrator and the person they're talking to. Douglas' transferring the oral pronunciation in the written work gives the piece a sense of originality and features the nuances of language. The punctuation and alternative spelling of words function as an indication for the accent in which the narrator will continue to talk to the person their address. Contrary to standard English, the emphasis of specific words in Caribbean dialect places the stress of different words in certain locations such as "bes" and "bout". Deconstructing these norms of European standards in Caribbean work keeps the tradition of Afro-Caribbean Literature alive in a written text, preserving it for future generations.

Douglas works towards breaking stigmas of West Indian fatherhood with his tribute poem to his father. His starting statement of "'my daddy is de bes'" immediately sets the scene and tone of the narrator and their father's relationship in a positive light and becomes reinforced through its repetitive lines in the poem. Followed by "don't tell me nutten", this association of their father's imagination in the narrator's mind will not be swayed by outsiders about the proficiency that their father is able to execute these tasks. Furthermore, by association, the materialistic items that the father owns also becomes a part of the narrator's identity for his father, such as "his car is the bes"". Including a mixture of activities that the narrator's father does implicates capabilities in a multitude of tasks while he goes about his daily life. Mentioning his father's expertise from driving to travelling implicates a sense of freedom and one of

possibility for the amount of diverse Children in the Caribbean that read this poem could connect to the content in a way that includes their stories into the genre. References to Maracaibo and Venezuela improves the scenario setting of giving the youth a way to associate themselves in the literature that their reading compared to colonial schooling of the Caribbean that focuses on the accomplishments of Britain and France. Douglas' strength comes from focusing on the subtle everyday experiences of Caribbeans that solidifies their identity.

The narrator continues to boast about the various activities that his father could do, from playing musical instruments to creating buildings as an architect. The wide variety of possibilities that their father acts as a mirror for the narrator because it showcases someone who looks like them in many different roles. This broadens the horizon and expands the conception of what's possible for the narrator in the future because there's an example of someone close to them who fulfilled those roles already,

"An' my daddy could sing an' tap
 An' play violin an' saxophone,
 An' dat eh all,
 He could read tea-leaf too.
 He could even read cocoa-grounds.
 An' my daddy popular,
 When yu hear he passin',
 Everybody callin' him,
 Temps! Keens! Dougie! Ah-ha!
 My daddy popular, popular!
 An' my daddy have seven child,
 Me an' 'bout twelve more
 I am de best!
 Plenty people owe my daddy,
 But my daddy say God good.
 My daddy does talk 'bout Cosmic,
 My daddy an' God does get on.
 Yes, my daddy is de best,
 My daddy is de best daddy!
 Wha' 'bout your daddy?"

(Douglas, pg 86)

The narrator then focuses on the social aspect of their father's behavior and how they get along with other people, Douglas applies popularity as a way to enhance the narrator's admiration due to the amount of attention that the father receives. In this case, the idea of popularity coexisting with the notion of respect, as people recognize the narrator's father as he walks by. Here, the father's personal relationships act as a guide for the narrator due to admiration of people knowing who the narrator's father is. Douglas crafts this interaction in a light that displays the father in a positive way when connotation of his popularity could be due to behaviors unbeknownst to the narrator. Moreover, the mention of the narrator's father having several children after the narrator's rant on their father's popularity further proves this duality. On one hand, the father's popularity could potentially be related to the fact that he has many children and so people in the area know of his relationship with multiple women and children. In addition, the notion of multiple people owing the father, what exactly they owe is unknown, sheds some light on flaws in the father's personality.

Normally, these associations of having multiple children and people being debt to them has ties to themes of adultery and gambling which would explain the father's popularity. However, through the eyes of the narrator, these qualities are something that continues to boost the child's perspective of the father despite possibly having an immoral affiliation associated with it. Douglas makes a subtle commentary on the influences that role models have on children with this section while using humor. The delivery of these lines about the father's popularity and amount of children also include sly remarks from the narrator in comment to those statements, such as the "I am de best!" about his father having a lot of children. Staying true to the lines of the poem, despite the amount of siblings the narrator has, they believe they are the best child and

their father is still the best father you could ask for. This nativity captures the essence of childhood admiration for a figure and in a comic way comments on the children comprehend events different from adults. Douglas is aware of the stigmas that Afro-Caribbean fathers face of being promiscuous and absent in the lives of children. However, using innocence as a tool to convince echoes the notion of the idealistic child playing out the reality that adults create for them. In this sense, a child that's proud of their father for having several children and while they're considered the favorite child panders to this notion of children being naive. Therefore, Douglas does a good job of drawing on the ignorant nature of kids in order to showcase social issues that are a commonality in Caribbean culture.

To close out the poem, the narrator reiterates their sentiments of their father being the best, and asks the person they're talking to about their father. This continuity for the narrator about their father's talents and having this sense of admiration allows them to take ownership and take pride in who their father is. Consistent use of "My" represents this ownership in a way that internalizes the feelings of an attachment to their father and how they idolize his actions. Closing out with "Wha' 'bout your daddy" not only opens the door for the person the narrator's talking about to think about their father and what they appreciate about them but for the reader as well. Children after reading this poem would compare their father to the narrator's to see the similarities and differences of what their fathers can do and build an appreciation of their father.

Conclusion

The lack of diversity in stories in Children's Literature functions in a way that amplifies the power systems that function in society today. By having a dominant culture of white western children's literature, the future generation of children would only be able to acknowledge the social norms of what belongs to their own culture. As a result, in the larger context of other countries such as Trinidad or Haiti, it's disproportional the lack of representation they see of themselves in the text they read compared to their white counterparts in America. Even in their own countries, the style follows a European format in an attempt to erase Caribbean values from the text meant for Caribbeans. As a result, it's not only imperative to keep writing stories that reveal the true nature of Afro-Caribbean culture but to make sure they reach a larger audience as well.

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