

**Preserving African American Heritage Through Cultural Memory and  
Storytelling in Lalita Tademy's *Cane River***



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**Abstract**

This paper investigates the crucial role of cultural memory and storytelling in preserving African American heritage, as portrayed in Lalita Tademy's *Cane River*. It explores how oral traditions and communal narratives sustain identity and collective belonging during slavery, displacement, and systemic oppression. Employing literary, cultural, and historical perspectives, the study shows storytelling as a form of preservation and resistance, fostering empowerment and community cohesion. By analyzing memory, identity, and narrative interplay, it reveals the dynamic transmission of heritage across generations. Furthermore, the article situates *Cane River* within African American literary traditions and contemporary discussions on trauma and cultural politics, highlighting storytelling's function as a vibrant cultural archive. This archive empowers present and future generations to reclaim and celebrate their history and identity.

**Keywords:** Heritage, Identity, Memory, Storytelling, Tradition

**Préserver l'héritage afro-américain à travers la mémoire culturelle et la  
narration dans *Cane River* de Lalita Tademy**

**Résumé**

Cet article examine le rôle crucial de la mémoire culturelle et de la narration dans la préservation de l'héritage africain-américain, tel que présenté dans *Cane River* de Lalita Tademy. Il explore comment les traditions orales et les récits communautaires soutiennent l'identité et le sentiment d'appartenance collective face à l'esclavage, au déplacement et à l'oppression

systemique. En adoptant des perspectives littéraires, culturelles et historiques, l'étude montre que la narration constitue une forme de préservation et de résistance, favorisant l'autonomisation et la cohésion communautaire. En analysant l'interaction entre mémoire, identité et récit, elle révèle la transmission dynamique de l'héritage à travers les générations. De plus, l'article place *Cane River* dans les traditions littéraires africaines-américaines et les discussions contemporaines sur le traumatisme et la politique culturelle, en soulignant la fonction de la narration comme archive culturelle vivante. Cette archive permet aux générations présentes et futures de réclamer et de célébrer leur histoire et leur identité.

**Mots-clés : Héritage, Identité, Mémoire, Narration, Tradition**

### **Introduction**

The preservation of African American heritage is a vital cultural undertaking that continues to shape identity, community cohesion, and resilience within the African American experience. In an era marked by the historical traumas of slavery, displacement, and systemic oppression, storytelling and cultural memory emerge as powerful tools to resist erasure and foster collective belonging. Lalita Tademy's novel *Cane River* serves as a poignant site where these dynamics are vividly portrayed, highlighting the role of oral traditions and communal narratives in sustaining a rich heritage.

This paper seeks to answer the research question: How do cultural memory and storytelling function as mechanisms to preserve African American heritage in L. Tademy's *Cane River*? This inquiry is justified by the need to deepen scholarly understanding of the intersections between narrative, memory, and identity within African American literature and cultural studies, and to illuminate the ways in which storytelling acts as both preservation and resistance.

Existing literary and cultural scholarship reveal the complex nature of memory and storytelling in African American contexts. P. Gilroy (1993), in *The Black Atlantic* conceptualizes cultural memory as a transnational and diasporic archive that maintains Afro-diasporic identity across temporal and spatial ruptures. T. Morrison (1987), through works such as *Beloved*, foregrounds storytelling as a means of confronting trauma and reclaiming history. S. Hartman (1997) explores the recovery of lost voices and histories through narrative in *Scenes of Subjection*, emphasizing trauma and resistance. H. L. Gates Jr. (1988), in *The Signifying Monkey*, highlights the linguistic

and rhetorical strategies that underlie African American storytelling as a cultural practice. In *Multidirectional Memory* (2009), M. Rothberg discusses the shared, overlapping processes by which marginalized communities use memory to shape identity and political consciousness.

Grounded in these seminal contributions, this analysis subscribes to a multidisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates postcolonial theory, trauma studies, and cultural memory theory. H. Bhabha's (1994) concept of "cultural hybridity" and the "third space" informs the analysis of identity formation during historical dislocation, while C. Caruth's (1996) work on trauma and narrative underscores the reparative function of storytelling.

The paper posits that storytelling in *Cane River* operates not merely as historical recounting but as an active cultural practice that enacts preservation, resistance, and empowerment, thereby sustaining African American heritage across generations.

It is structured in three chapters: The first chapter examines the role of oral traditions and communal narratives in constructing collective memory and identity within *Cane River*. The second chapter explores storytelling as a mode of resistance against cultural erasure, focusing on how narratives confront and reinterpret trauma and systemic oppression. The final chapter situates *Cane River* within the broader African American literary tradition, analyzing how the novel's storytelling practices contribute to contemporary cultural politics and the ongoing reclaiming of heritage.

This investigation reveals how cultural memory and storytelling dynamically preserve African American heritage by fostering empowerment and continuity in the face of adversity, affirming the enduring significance of narrative as cultural archive.

### **1. The Role of Oral Traditions and Communal Narratives in Constructing Collective Memory and Identity**

This chapter explores how oral traditions and communal storytelling in L. Tademy's *Cane River* serve as foundational mechanisms for constructing African American collective memory and identity. It investigates the ways these narrative practices preserve history and foster a shared sense of belonging that resists fragmentation caused by slavery, displacement, and systemic oppression.

The analysis situates storytelling as a living archive where memory is performed, transmitted, and reimagined across generations, affirming the continuity of heritage.

### **1.1. Oral Traditions as Vehicles of Cultural Memory**

In *Cane River*, oral traditions are not merely narrative devices but pivotal conduits through which African American cultural memory is preserved and transmitted across generations. The characters in Tademy's novel embody the living practice of storytelling, shaping a collective archive of histories, values, and identities that resist amnesia and erasure borne from slavery and systemic oppression through vivid personal and communal narratives. For example, the novel opens with a poignant reflection on slavery's brutal reality: "This was the face of slavery. To have nothing, and still have something more to lose" (L. Tademy, 2001, p. 174). This framing underscores the precarious existence of enslaved ancestors whose stories become vital testimonies of survival. Tademy recounts the fearful experiences of enslaved women, highlighting systemic violence and familial disruption: "Only mothers with babies in their arms were allowed to come before the assessor's table as a family group [...] The slaves avoided looking at one another after the inventory... shoulders hunched and jaws slack" (L. Tademy, 2001, pp. 89-90). This harrowing portrayal preserves collective memory by refusing to sanitize the trauma.

This oral transmission manifests as a form of active cultural preservation that aligns with P. Gilroy (1993, p. 38)'s assertion in *The Black Atlantic* that: "the circulation of peoples and cultures within the black Atlantic refashions the experience of modernity", situating memory as a dynamic, trans-historical practice rather than a static record.

Moreover, Henry Louis Gates Jr. (1988, p. 55), in *The Signifying Monkey*, deepens this understanding by emphasizing the communicative power and rhetorical complexity of African American verbal traditions, stating, "Signifying is the linguistic mode by which black verbal art is performed, a subversive rhetorical strategy that draws upon repetition, revision, and indirection in constructing meaning". The storytelling in *Cane River* captures this complexity, enacted in communal settings where memory is not only recounted but relaunched as a vehicle for solidarity and identity formation.

Furthermore, S. Hartman's study of subaltern histories in *Scenes of Subjection* argues that "oral tradition becomes a critical avenue to reclaim lives and legacies rendered invisible by archival silences and historic violence" (S. Hartman, 1997, p. 16). Tademy's novel exemplifies this redemptive function by centering women's voices and experiences, thus offsetting the historical erasure typically encountered in written archives. Hartman insists that "the act of storytelling interrupts the dominant narrative and reveals the enduring spirit beneath the trauma" (p. 16).

The importance of recognizing and resisting these archival 'silences' is further articulated by M.-R. Trouillot (1995, p. 26). who warns that "the production of history is always a production of power; it involves silences as much as speech" Oral traditions in *Cane River* intervene in these silences, constituting a parallel archive that challenges hegemonic histories and fosters alternative spaces for remembering and belonging.

The vitality of storytelling in African American communities' rests in its nature as performative memory, an embodied, dialogic, and communal process. As evidenced in *Cane River*, oral traditions are central to preserving heritage, mediating identity, and enacting resistance by continuously reweaving the fabric of collective memory across time and experience.

## **1.2. Communal Narratives and the Formation of Collective Identity**

In *Cane River*, communal narratives function as powerful mechanisms for constructing African American collective identity, emphasizing shared experiences and histories that bind individuals into a cohesive cultural community. L. Tademy (2001, p. 237)'s narrative vividly captures how family stories passed down orally within communal spaces embody a collective consciousness that survives racial oppression and historical fragmentation. "Three generations of women out on the front porch, four counting little Emily, trying to put words around a past and a future that could never be explained.", reflecting the collective memory and identity passed through generations. This intergenerational act of storytelling fosters a sense of belonging that is central to African American identity, which scholars recognize as fundamentally relational and dialogic.

Communal storytelling in *Cane River* illustrates how identity is forged collectively: "If this baby could not have a last name, at least it would have protection from someone who did" (L. Tademy, p. 53), highlighting identity's importance through familial and communal belonging.

Here, the significance of identity linked to family protection and communal care is clear, and this fact illustrates belonging even without formal recognition. This collective narration creates bonds uniting individuals into a cohesive whole: “Each of the three [black women] stood rooted in the cookhouse,” (p. 9). In the same line, Suzette “felt rooted to this spot.” (p. 32). These moments reflect a deep connection to place and heritage, emphasizing how identity intertwines with family history and community ties. Storytelling here functions as a vital act of reclaiming belonging: “The world didn’t start with you, Suzette. I’ve been through it.” (L. Tademy, p. 38). This generational assertion highlights storytelling as a conduit of shared experience and resilience, reclaiming belonging through the continuity of family narratives.

T. Morrison’s (1987) concept of “rememory” is particularly insightful here. Morrison describes rememory as a process by which past traumatic events are recalled not just individually but communally, such that memory actively shapes present identity. Answering Denver’s question about what she was talking Sethe explains:

I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place-the picture of it-stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there, in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw is still out there. Right in the place where it happened. (T. Morrison, 1987, p. 43)

In *Cane River*, communal narratives operate as sites of rememory, where personal and collective histories merge, allowing the community to negotiate identity anew while honoring ancestral legacies.

M. Rothberg’s theory of “multidirectional memory” further illuminates this process by highlighting how marginalized communities engage in shared acts of remembering that extend beyond singular histories. Rothberg (2009, p. 23) observes, “Multidirectional memory acknowledges the intersectionality of memories, allowing different histories of trauma and resistance to coexist and inform one another”. This framework fits *Cane River*’s communal storytelling, which interweaves familial, local, and diasporic memories, constructing a rich tapestry of collective identity.

H. Bhabha's (1994, p. 56) "third space" concept also deepens understanding of how identity emerges in spaces of cultural negotiation and hybridity: "The production of newness and novelty cannot be confined to the already known or the past". The communal narratives in *Cane River* probe this "third space," wherein African American cultural identity is continually reimagined through dialogue between past and present, oral traditions and contemporary realities.

Moreover, these narratives are not static but performative, involving communal participation and reception that reinforce social bonds and affirm shared identity. The communal storytelling in *Cane River* thus functions as a dynamic process that constructs identity collectively, providing a cohesive counter-narrative to fragmentation imposed by histories of dislocation and oppression.

Collective identity formation through communal narratives in *Cane River* exemplifies the deep interconnection of memory, storytelling, and identity in African American life, emphasizing the importance of relational histories and shared cultural expression as sites of resilience and empowerment.

### **1.3 Storytelling as Identity Performance and Transmission**

In *Cane River*, storytelling transcends mere narration to become a performative act essential for shaping and transmitting African American identity. Tademy's novel illustrates storytelling as a dynamic, embodied practice where memory is not fixed but actively lived, shared, and reproduced within the community. This process of storytelling serves as a vital link between generations, allowing identity to be continuously renegotiated and reaffirmed despite the disruption caused by slavery and systemic racism.

The narratives in *Cane River* perform identity actively: Eugene moved closer to Suzette and put his coat around her. "I think you are so vibrant, Suzette. So full of joie de vivre. You make me forget myself." (L. Tademy, p. 32) This expresses moments of identity escape and fluidity within personal relationships, illustrating how interaction can provoke shifts in self-understanding. Identity is shown as fluid and evolving: "Your little-girl days are done." (p. 10) This passage marks a pivotal moment where Suzette transitions from childhood innocence to the demands and harsh realities of adulthood, signaling the evolution of her identity shaped by external pressure through repeated storytelling, identity lives and breathes.

Besides, P. Gilroy (1993, p. 41) elaborates on the performative dimension of cultural memory, stating, “Cultural memory in the Black Atlantic is a form of embodied practice; it connects past and present through acts of remembrance that are also acts of survival”. In *Cane River*, the act of telling historical family narratives embodies this concept, with stories serving simultaneously as remembrance and as affirmation of resilience.

Gates Jr. (1988, p. 88) in discussing African American verbal traditions, affirms that “signifying is a mode of performance, a way in which black communities negotiate meaning through language, repetition, and reinterpretation”. Tadey’s use of storytelling mirrors this by inviting dialogic participation where identities are performed and revised, ensuring their vibrancy and relevance.

Furthermore, C. Caruth (1996, p. 7)’s work on trauma and narrative highlights the testimonial aspect of storytelling: “The narrative testimony not only reveals trauma but also enacts a healing process through communal recognition and engagement”. In *Cane River*, storytelling operates as testimonial performance, where trauma is witnessed collectively, and identity emerges through this act of shared bearing of witness: “Don't be so eager to judge, Suzette. You can't tell how heavy somebody else's load is just from looking. The Lord doesn't give us more than we can carry, but he's putting it to the test with Madame Doralise. A shame, with M'sieu Philippe coming from such a good family.” (L. Tadey, p. 18) This reflection acknowledges the unseen burdens borne by individuals and the collective endurance they demonstrate by bearing witness to one another’s suffering.

Moreover, storytelling as transmission in *Cane River* reflects the understanding that identity is not a finished product but an ongoing performance carried out within communal contexts. The novel’s narrative thus enacts memory as a living tradition where storytelling is crucial for sustaining identity over time, passing cultural knowledge and values from one generation to the next.

This performative and transmissive nature of storytelling emphasizes its centrality in preserving African American heritage. The narrative demonstrates how storytelling functions as a living archive, continuously shaping the identity of the community through engagement, enactment, and transmission.

## 2. Storytelling as Resistance Against Cultural Erasure and Oppression

This chapter examines the function of storytelling in *Cane River* as an act of resistance against cultural erasure and systemic oppression. It focuses on how narratives confront historical trauma and reframe oppressive experiences to restore dignity and agency. By reclaiming marginalized histories and identities through storytelling, the novel enacts resilience and defiance, making storytelling a powerful tool in the struggle for cultural survival and empowerment.

### 2.1. Narratives Confronting Historical Trauma

In *Cane River*, storytelling serves as a deliberate confrontation with the trauma endured by African Americans through slavery, segregation, and systemic racial violence. L. Tademy's narrative gives voice to the silenced history of her ancestors and community, narrating the brutal realities of their lives while affirming their resilience. The novel's stories act as both testimony and resistance, an essential means by which trauma is witnessed, acknowledged, and transformed within the African American collective consciousness. The novel confronts trauma head-on: "She [Suzette] couldn't walk or sit up in bed in the same position for long, and the thoughts that had always chased one another around in her head were gone. There was only sleep, pain, nursing, rocking, and more crying., affirming the importance of confronting pain for survival." (L. Tademy, p. 4)

Similarly, Morrison (1987), describes trauma as something that is not simply a story of the past but a powerful memory that persists in the present, demanding to be told and heard. This understanding resonates deeply with *Cane River*, where the retelling of familial suffering and survival serves to break the silence imposed by history. For her part, S. Hartman, analyzing the "afterlife of slavery," argues that "trauma is layered and ongoing, shaping the social realities of descendants through acts of forgetting and remembering" (S. Hartman, 1997, p. 14). In *Cane River*, storytelling counteracts this layered trauma by making the invisible visible, filling the gaps left by dominant historical accounts. Hartman emphasizes that "narrative reclamation is a form of resistance that revives the humanity and agency denied by systemic violence" (p. 14).

Yet, Cathy Caruth offers a theoretical lens on trauma's narrative necessity: "Trauma is experienced as a betrayal of knowing, and the narrative becomes a site where trauma finds its

shape and can be transmitted with the potential for recognition and survival” (Caruth, 1996, p. 4). The communal storytelling in *Cane River* performs this vital act of testimonial transmission, enabling trauma to be processed in a collective, healing context rather than being internalized as isolating pain.

Moreover, the novel’s depiction of trauma intersects with cultural memory studies, as M. Wallace (1978) asserts that African American storytelling is a radical act of cultural survival that actively challenges historical silence and forgetfulness. Through repeated communal recounting, *Cane River* embodies these storytelling practices as sites of cultural resilience and collective empowerment. Thus, narratives confronting historical trauma in the novel perform critical functions: they restore voices to the silenced, confront systemic erasure, and foster communal healing through remembrance and resistance.

## **2.2 Storytelling as Reclamation of Agency and Dignity**

In *Cane River*, storytelling emerges as a crucial act of reclaiming agency and dignity for African Americans whose histories have long been marginalized, distorted, or erased by dominant power structures. Lalita Tademy’s narrative foregrounds oral history as an empowering practice through which characters assert their humanity and rewrite oppressive narratives imposed by slavery and segregation.

Storytelling, in the novel, restores dignity and agency. On enduring hardships with dignity, Elizabeth, talking to Suzette remarks: “Don't be so eager to judge, Suzette. You can't tell how heavy somebody else's load is just from looking. The Lord doesn't give us more than we can carry, but he's putting it to the test with Madame Doralise” (L. Tademy, p. 18). On the exercise of agency despite limited bargaining power: “My time is past,” Françoise said. “Now we must secure the best position for you that we are able.” (p. 66). The assertion shows intergenerational efforts to maximize agency under oppressive circumstances.

Gates Jr. (1988, p. 92) articulates the potent subversive capacities of African American verbal traditions in *The Signifying Monkey*, where signifying “is a rhetorical strategy that turns language into a tool of empowerment and identity assertion, challenging the dominant discourses of racial

subjugation”. The storytelling in *Cane River* enacts this tradition by transforming painful histories into affirmations of survival and cultural pride.

P. Gilroy’s (1993, p. 52) notion of the “Black Atlantic” as a space of counter-memory parallels this reclamation, viewing African diasporic storytelling as an act of resistance against historical silence. Gilroy writes, “The recuperation of memory through narrative is not only a recovery of lost identities but an active remaking of selfhood and community that defies erasure”. Tademy’s novel exemplifies this through its detailed remembrance of her foremothers’ struggles and triumphs.

Hartman (1997, p. 61) emphasizes the restorative potential of narrative in reclaiming subaltern histories within *Scenes of Subjection*, noting, “Storytelling reconstructs fragmented identities and restores the dignity that is often denied to those surviving histories of violence”. Her insight aligns with *Cane River*’s portrayal of storytelling as a means of healing wounds inflicted by dehumanization.

Additionally, the oral histories in *Cane River* serve as “an archive of resistance” where the act of remembering is inherently political. Toni Morrison’s perspective underscores the urgency of narrative reclamation as a survival mechanism amid marginalization. Through these storytelling practices, *Cane River* reveals narrative not only as a tool for preserving memory but as a powerful site for restoring agency and dignity within the African American collective identity.

### **2.3. Storytelling as Community Cohesion and Empowerment**

Storytelling in Lalita Tademy’s *Cane River* is not only a means of preserving memory but also a powerful instrument for fostering community cohesion and empowerment among African Americans. The shared act of recounting histories and experiences creates a collective identity that fortifies social bonds and sustains resilience in the face of ongoing marginalization. Tademy’s portrayal of multi-generational storytelling within families and communities reveals its vital role in nurturing solidarity and cultural vitality. Storytelling is a communal practice of healing and empowerment: Narratives weave individual experiences into collective strength: “Sometimes good came out of hurt [...] (L. Tademy, p. 229).

Toni Morrison (1987)'s concept of "rememory" elucidates this communal process, as she explains that "Rememory" operates in the community, not just in the individual, which means that the past is not only witnessed but collectively held; it is a source of identity and empowerment". In *Cane River*, these communal narratives serve as repositories of collective rememory that unite characters across time, enabling them to draw strength from shared legacies.

M. Rothberg (2009, p. 34). introduces the idea of multidirectional memory to describe how communities engage with overlapping histories of trauma and resistance, building solidarities that transcend singular memories. He writes: "Multidirectional memory enables us to understand memory not as zero-sum competition but as a dialogic process of mutual influence and intersection" Tademy's novel exemplifies this by weaving the collective stories of families into broader diasporic and historical contexts.

Bhabha (1994, p. 60) 's theory of the "third space" further clarifies how storytelling situates identity in a cultural negotiation space where hybridity and new meanings emerge: "The third space displaces the histories that constitute it and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, and new sites of collaboration and contestation" The communal storytelling in *Cane River* functions within this space, offering a site for voicing and reinventing cultural identity that resists hegemonic erasures.

Through these shared storytelling practices, *Cane River* creates a cultural archive that empowers community members by affirming their interconnectedness and collective agency. The novel demonstrates that storytelling is not only a remembrance but a living, mobilizing force essential to sustaining African American community life and strength.

### **3. Situating *Cane River* Within African American Literary Tradition and Contemporary Cultural Politics**

This chapter situates Lalita Tademy's *Cane River* within the broader African American literary tradition and contemporary discourses on cultural memory, trauma, and identity politics. It explores how the novel's storytelling practices dialogue with historical and modern African American narratives, contributing to the ongoing project of reclaiming and celebrating African American heritage. The chapter also examines the novel's role in contemporary cultural politics

as a vibrant archive that enables present and future generations to engage critically with histories of trauma and resilience.

### **3.1. Dialogue with African American Literary Tradition**

L. Tademý's *Cane River* occupies a significant place within the African American literary tradition, participating in a longstanding dialogue that foregrounds storytelling as a vital means of cultural preservation, identity formation, and resistance. The novel's multi-generational narrative echoes the thematic and aesthetic concerns of canonical works by African American authors such as Toni Morrison and Alice Walker, weaving personal and communal histories into a tapestry that resists erasure and affirms resilience. *Cane River* situates itself within a continuum of African American literature. The novel extends traditions of resistance and identity, and traces family lineage through stories that keep the past alive, insisting on the ongoing impact of slavery and racism on present identities.

Gates Jr., (1988, p. 78) in *The Signifying Monkey*, identifies African American literary expression as marked by "a complex play of repetition and difference where language acts as a site of struggle and empowerment". Tademý's narrative strategy embraces this "signifying" tradition by enacting dialogue between oral and written forms of storytelling, merging historical documents with imaginative re-creation to produce a vibrant intertextuality.

Gilroy (1993, p. 48)'s conception of the "Black Atlantic" broadens this dialogue to a transnational framework, asserting that African diasporic literature "negotiates modernity through a double consciousness shaped by displacement and cultural hybridity". *Cane River*, while grounded in the American South, participates in this "Black Atlantic" by connecting localized family struggles with broader diasporic histories of resilience and survival.

Contemporary critiques also highlight how *Cane River* enhances African American literary conversations by focusing on women's experiences specifically. Alice Walker (cited in hooks, 2000, p. 45)'s idea of "womanism" as "a black feminist ethic that centers African American women's stories and struggles" resonates with Tademý's emphasis on the matrilineal narratives that drive the novel, illuminating the intersections of race, gender, and history.

In this way, *Cane River* not only dialogues with tradition but also expands it by offering richly textured narratives that reclaim silenced histories and foreground the centrality of female agency within African American cultural memory.

### **3.2. *Cane River* and Contemporary Discourses on Trauma, Memory, and Cultural Politics**

Tademy's novel can be situated within contemporary discourses on trauma, cultural memory, and identity politics, exemplifying how literary narratives engage with the legacies of systemic violence while fostering cultural resilience and empowerment. The novel engages with the legacies of systemic violence while fostering cultural resilience and empowerment. The novel's intricate storytelling exposes the ongoing reverberations of historical trauma within African American communities and the role of memory work in contesting marginalization. Cultural trauma scholar Jeffrey C. Alexander (2004, p. 19) notes that "Trauma is more than a psychological wound; it is the foundation of group identity when the memory of collective suffering is publicly recognized and ritualized." *Cane River* enacts this public recognition by making communal trauma narratable and accessible through family histories, thereby constructing a cultural ethos grounded in survival and resistance amid pain.

Furthermore, Ann Cvetkovich argues in *An Archive of Feelings* that "the transmission of trauma across generations challenges traditional historical accounts by centering effects, memory, and the embodied experience of marginalization" (A. Cvetkovich, 2003, p. 20). Tademy's narrative foregrounds these embodied memories, providing an archive of African American women lived experiences that confront the silence and invisibility imposed by mainstream histories.

In the same token, M. Rothberg (2009, p. 34) 's theory of "multidirectional memory" is also key, suggesting, "Memory can operate in a multidirectional way that allows histories of trauma and resistance to coexist, interact, and strengthen each other". *Cane River* embodies this multidirectionality by situating personal family histories within broader narratives of African American and diasporic resilience, highlighting the collective strength that emerges from remembering traumatic pasts together. In terms of cultural politics, M. Wallace (1990, p. 102) aptly

reminds that “African American literature’s act of remembering is inherently political, as it disrupts dominant discourses that seek to erase black history and identity”.

Through memoir-like storytelling and historical reenactments, *Cane River* contests erasure by reclaiming and re-inscribing the African American experience at the center of cultural memory. Thus, *Cane River* participates actively in contemporary cultural politics by transforming trauma into a source of cultural vitality, where memory enables community healing, political awareness, and the preservation of African American heritage.

### **3.3. *Cane River* as a Vibrant Cultural Archive for Future Generations**

L. Tademý’s *Cane River* functions as a vibrant cultural archive, preserving and transmitting African American heritage through its rich multi-generational narrative. The novel’s storytelling goes beyond recounting history by actively constructing a living repository of identity, memory, and resilience that engages present and future readers in an ongoing dialogue with the past.

Historical novelist and critic H. Benedict (2012, p. 45) observes that family sagas like *Cane River* “serve as an essential archive for communities whose histories have been written out of mainstream accounts,” and that these narratives “become spaces of reclamation, cultural survival, and education”. Tademý’s novel exemplifies this role by meticulously chronicling her ancestors’ experiences, family struggles, and triumphs, thus creating a deeply personal yet collectively resonant cultural record.

The novel’s power as a cultural archive is further affirmed by scholar Gates Jr. (1988, p. 101), who remarks that African American storytelling “constitutes a dynamic archive wherein history becomes a performative act of cultural survival and political assertion” . *Cane River*, through its oral traditions embedded in the narrative, opens a dialogic space where memory is continually preserved, revised, and transmitted, ensuring that heritage remains vital and present.

The ongoing relevance of *Cane River* lies in its invitation for present and future generations to actively participate in storytelling traditions. As cultural theorist P. Ricoeur (1991, p. 141) notes, “Narrative identity is both a product and producer of culture; it forms the horizon within which communities understand themselves and their histories”. Tademý’s novel becomes a vessel for such narrative identity, cultivating a shared cultural consciousness that resists historical erasure.

In a nutshell, *Cane River* stands as a vital cultural archive, preserving African American heritage by transforming stories of trauma, survival, and identity into a living legacy accessible to future generations. It challenges silences, amplifies marginalized voices, and sustains communal memory through the transformative power of storytelling.

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, Lalita Tademy's *Cane River* stands as a profound testament to the power of storytelling as a communal practice that preserves African American cultural memory, nurtures healing, and asserts agency amid the historic traumas of slavery and systemic oppression. The novel reveals how oral narratives are not merely passive records of the past but active, dynamic processes through which individuals and communities reclaim identities that dominant histories have sought to erase. Through detailed portrayals of intergenerational storytelling, *Cane River* demonstrates the transformative capacity of memory to forge communal cohesion and resilience, enabling characters to forge solidarity across fragmented histories.

Central to this study is the finding that storytelling operates as a pivotal site of cultural resistance and empowerment. Narratives function as living archives in which trauma is acknowledged, wounds are collectively mediated, and dignity is reconstructed. The concept of rememory, as articulated by Toni Morrison, enriches this understanding by situating memory as both a shared and performative act, one that continuously shapes and reshapes identity and empowerment in the African American experience.

This research highlights the significance of *Cane River* within African American literary traditions as it bridges personal histories and collective legacies, offering a model for how storytelling can sustain marginalized communities against cultural erasure. The findings affirm the vital role of narrative in the transmission of cultural values, collective identity, and political agency.

Ultimately, the study of *Cane River* opens pathways for understanding storytelling as an indispensable human practice that is essential not only for preserving heritage but for sustaining hope and empowerment in the ongoing struggle for recognition and equity.

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## **Biography**

Moussa Ouattara is a scholar and an assistant professor in American literature and civilization, with a research focus on social and cultural dynamics within American societies. His academic work encompasses gender issues, African American identity, as well as social change and social norms. He served as Head of the English Department at Peleforo GON COULIBALY University in Korhogo (Côte d'Ivoire) from March 2016 to December 2024, where he contributed to the institution's academic influence and mentored numerous students and researchers. His career reflects a steadfast commitment to scientific excellence and pedagogical innovation.

### **Biographie**

Moussa Ouattara est enseignant-chercheur et maître-assistant en littérature et civilisation américaines, spécialisé dans l'analyse des dynamiques sociales et culturelles au sein des sociétés américaines. Ses travaux de recherche s'articulent autour de la question du genre, de l'identité des Africains Américains, ainsi que des mutations sociales et de la norme sociale. Il a occupé la fonction de Chef du Département d'Anglais à l'Université Peleforo GON COULIBALY de Korhogo (Côte d'Ivoire) de mars 2016 à décembre 2024, où il a contribué au rayonnement académique de l'institution et à l'encadrement de nombreux étudiants et chercheurs. Son parcours témoigne d'un engagement constant en faveur de l'excellence scientifique et de l'innovation pédagogique.

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