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Orality and the Sermonic Tradition in J. California Cooper's *Some People, Some Other Place*: A Study of the Narrative Voice

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ABSTRACT

This article scrutinizes the narrating instance and discourses in J. California Cooper's *Some People, Some Other Place* (2004). It argues that Cooper writes within a purely African-American literary tradition that exploits the power of orality embedded in the black sermon to bring order in the lives of the audience, more particularly women of different races and walks of life engaged in a quest for selfhood and wholeness. To show that the narrative voice replicates features of the Black sermonic tradition, its orality is first examined and it is argued that the narrator's language, particularly, in her opening address, resembles a sermon. How character's speech replicates the function of the Black Sermon in the African-American community has also been illustrated. The paper also explores how the character of Eula Too is emblematic of the truths disseminated in the network of sermons that populate the narrative.

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1. Introduction

J. California Cooper, whose date of birth is conspicuously absent from documents, is a versatile and talented author who distinguished herself in the fields of drama and fiction writing. She was already a prolific playwright before she became known to the public at large. In fact, she had produced at least seventeen plays by the mid-1990s, among which *Every time It Rains, Suckers, and Success, How Now: The Unintended, The Mother, Strangers, and Loners* are noted ones. All these plays written between the 1970s and the 1980s remain unpublished although they were performed. Cooper came to relative fame thanks to her short stories. She has published five collections of short stories including *A Piece of Mine* (1984), *Homemade Love* (1986), *Some Soul to Keep* (1987), *The Matter Is Life* (1991) and *Some Love, Some Pain* (1995). Her more or less recent literary productions also include novels and collections of short stories: *Family* (1991), *Some People, Some Other Place* (2004), *Wild Stars Seeking Midnight Suns* (2006), and *Life is Short but Wide* (2009).

J California Cooper assigns a functional dimension to her works, thus perpetuating the tradition of African-American literature as proposed by the practitioners of Black Art and writers such as Toni Morrison. In addition to this didacticism, Cooper's writings are characterized by their religious hallmarks, feminist stamps, and original oral narrating instances, especially in *Family* (1991) and *Some People, Some Other Place* (2004). The orality of her narratives and the special relationship, built between narrator and narratee, have not been the object of sufficient critical scrutiny. To date, only James Weaver dealt with this aspect of her works in his 2005 article

"Rehabilitative storytelling: the narrator-narratee relationship in J. California Cooper's *Family*."

With this background, this analysis scrutinizes the narrative voice in *Some People, Some Other Place*, and Cooper's self-conscious attempt to give her novel an oral form. It argues that Cooper subverts traditional paradigms of narrating and weaves the Black sermonic tradition into the tapestry of her novel to empower women in their diverse quests of self and wholeness; the narrator's oral story attempts to order the chaos of their lives and points at avenues of success based on love, literacy and communion. To illustrate these views, the narrating instance will be first studied focusing more particularly on the narrative voice in the novel to show how it recreates the form, the function, and language of an oral text, and replicates the grammar of the sermon. The discourses or messages conveyed in the characters' speeches throughout the tales of the various women looking for wholeness will then be examined. The paper will finally explore how the life of Eula Too, her fall and rise, epitomize the truths disseminated throughout the network of sermons that traverse the novel. Eula Too is proposed as a model of empowerment as she illustrates that the chaos of life can be re-ordered through faith in Biblical truths, self-struggle, resilience, love, literacy, perseverance and solidarity.

2. *Some People, Some Other Place*. Thematic Background

One of the most striking aspects of the *Some People, Some Other Place* resides, no doubt, in its narrating instance. As Gerard Genette (1980, P. 212) relevantly points it out in *Narrative Discourse*, in most stories, the reader cares little about who is telling the story because he is more concerned with its



unfolding. On the contrary, in *Some People, Some Other Place*, the reader cannot overlook the narrative voice because the narrator makes it her business to let the reader know about herself and leaves a network of traces in the story. Even before she starts recounting events, she introduces herself and puzzles the reader. Indeed, Hulala Too, daughter of Eula, as the reader will find out in the closing pages of the narrative, is an unborn child who can observe the story world and has a gift of seeing through people and learning their past. She is an extradiegetic narrator who sees from a window 'perched aloft,' as Manfred Jahn(1900,P:251)describes. She is not an angel, nor is she in Heaven, but from some other place, she is "able, almost in the twinkling of an eye, to look back through time, down upon the world and even at the ancestors she will have, if she decides to be born" (Cooper 1). However, she has limited omniscience, for although she knows the past and the present, she does not have the gift of seeing through the future; the narrative ends as she is being conceived by her parents.

The narrator progressively discloses her identity through clues given in the opening chapter of the novel. Thus, from the outset of the tale, the reader becomes concerned with discovering the identity of the narrator, wondering who the narrator's mother is, as it says, "Why? How would my mother get there? I burned with the desire to know the lives of my mother and the people in these houses on the street of Dream" (7). Maintaining the suspense and the reader's curiosity up to the end of the story, the narrator only discloses her identity in the last pages of the narrative, when she announces that she has to hurry now and finish the tale because she is about to be born.

Putting pieces of the puzzle together, the reader can then guess that the narrator is indeed the second daughter of Eula Too, the eponymous protagonist of the novel. This certainty about the narrator's real identity is acquired when the narrator first announces that she is packing up her luggage—heart, lungs, liver, kidney, ears, eyes—to come to life, and then describes her procreation live in the closing love scene between Lammont and Eula Too. The final page reads: "I am not sure what happened after that. I was rushing, battling my way to life. My father was full of seeds, all trying to beat me to the place I needed to be. The struggle in life begins" (368). At this point, the narrative turns from subsequent to live mode, and story time and narrative time merge, then the narrative reaches point zero. Still, entertaining the reader, the narrator signals the end of the story as she says in a familiar way to the reader, "I'm wondering if you and I will meet, dear listener. I must go now. Can not speak anymore. I am...going gone" (368).

Beyond illustrating the dramatic effects of the use of such a narrative voice in *Some People, Some Other Place*, the final words of the narrator also testify to the intent of the author to make the story sound oral.

3. Orality: Background and Features

It is necessary to survey the characteristics of an oral text to better grasp the orality of the narrative. For most scholars—Harold Scheub (1970), Ruth Finnegan (1970) and Richard M. Dorson (1960)—the first characteristic of orality resides in the presence of an audience. Dorson also considers in "Oral styles of American folk narrators" that voice constitutes a central tool of dramatization in an oral text. He further explains that "the writer writes for a private reader, the teller speaks to visible listeners.... The narrator



employs voice and body as well as words to dramatize his text... The audience, too, conditions the performance and so do external factors of time and place" (P.29). Others such as Joseph De Vito (1967) think that the distinctive features of an oral text reside in the language. De Vito (1967) believes that oral language has *communicative signals* (for example, "Well, in the first place"), more *orientation signals* (for example, "I can't think of what to say"), and more *consciousness of projection terms* (for example, "It seems to me"). For him, these oral signals are not used in written language because it depends mostly on substantive content. Tina L. Bennett and John Tracy Clinic (1977, P: 43-49), in "An extended view of verb voice in written and spoken personal narratives", label oral narrative as *unplanned* discourse, and written narrative as *planned* discourse. Characteristics of an oral text can be found in the interaction with the audience, the use of voice as means of dramatization, and the interactive nature of the language of the narrative voice. Furthermore, an oral text is unplanned. J California Cooper's novel contains most of the features of an oral text.

4. Orality of the Narrative in *Some People, Some Other Place*

Cooper's self-conscious replication of an oral text is first typographically signified by the use of italics to identify the narrative voice. It is also reinforced by the degree of closeness that the engaging narrator maintains with the reader who is constantly addressed throughout the narrative as "you." This feature of the grammar of oral storytelling can be illustrated from the opening pages when the narrator states: "In time, I knew my mother would one day, live at 903 Dream Street in the town of Place. I learned and will tell you her story and the stories on that

block. I will begin with my mother" (7). The use of "you" and the phrase "dear listener" to engage the narratee/ audience suggests not only the presence of an implied audience, but a constant interaction and contact with it as in a sort of call-and-response game.

A closer scrutiny of the narrative voice, in the above quotation, shows the great importance of voice in the dramatization of the story. Voice helps arrange the story and order events in a logical way, expresses the narrator's feelings and views on some issues raised in the narrative. Just like in oral stories, the narrative voice helps establish transition between events in the story; it achieves ellipses, analepses, and prolepses, thus weaving together the different stories of the characters: Eula, Lona, Ha, Maureen Iris, and Mme Elizabeth. While recounting Eula Too's story, for instance, the narrator alludes to the birth of Lona, a girl without last name who was abandoned by her destitute mother and welcomed by an orphanage, in "some other place in America," but tells the reader that she will tell him/her more about Lana soon (78). Many pages later, the narrator resumes the story of Lona: "I told you of Lona at the time of her birth. Now I will tell you how she come to be on Dream Street in Place" (216). Towards the end of the narrative, the narrator uses the same technique as a means to rush through events and operate an ellipsis, when she says "something is going to happen soon. I feel it. And I am getting weaker. I must hurry to finish my story before I am unable to continue" (352). This last communicative signal illustrates the unplanned nature of the tale.

In written narrative, the reader usually gathers information from contextual clues inserted in the natural unfolding of events or characters' speech or is simply left to predict things. On the contrary, in an oral



performance, the narrator can provide clues, explain, comment, and give his own positions. For this reason, oral stories are often non-linear, for they contain many anachronies or deviations from the main story line. The traditional oral tale is not only interactive, but also full of anachronies because the griot inserts additional details to the story through the use of complete analepses. The complete analepses enable him to incorporate parasitic episodes, describe objects, comment on events and shape his story. Ahmadou Hampate Ba for instance illustrates that a griot telling the story of Soundiata may start by asking the audience if it really wants to know the story of Soundiata. Then he would proceed to explain the meaning of the name. In the course of the story, the griot would anticipate on the audiences' reactions and address the listeners to shape their perceptions through comments and personal opinions. (Qtd in Bestman (1981), P. 171).

This is exactly the case of *Some People, Some Other Place* where the narrator constantly intrudes in the story to contextualize events, to sometimes help the reader decipher events, and to present her own views and interpretations through the use of communication signals, orientation signals and *consciousness of projection phrases*. In the opening chapters of the novel, the narrator provides all the information related to the contexts in which the events occur. It is the narrative voice that places the story of Eula in context. It shows that the story happened in the Reconstruction period when millions of African-Americans roamed around America or migrated towards the larger cities in quest of better jobs. Similarly, all the factual elements necessary to putting Eula Too's experience in the context of World War I and the Great Depression are communicated

via the narrative voice. Likewise, the narrator presents the socioeconomic and political situation in the world and the US as the story goes on to help the reader understand why poverty was a common denominator during the 1930s.

The voice of the narrator also buds in the story to build meaning instead of letting the reader draw his own conclusion. When she recounts the conversation between Marion and Lona, after the latter attempted to poison her mother-in-law to have the house for herself, the narrator is the one who reveals Lona's slip of tongue and self-accusation. Commenting on Lona's statement that she did not poison Marion's mother, the narrator observes that "Marion hadn't mentioned poison" (325). These comments operate like orientation signals in the text.

The narrator does not merely recount events or describe the characters' lives in a neutral way, but she also comments on them and many times draws conclusions and lessons grounded in religion. For instance, the tale of her mother's experience is juxtaposed with comments expressing her love and compassion. While recounting the brutal rape that Eula was victim of, she cannot help sharing her feelings of compassion and thankfulness that God sent her a helping hand through Madame Elizabeth's intervention:

"I was in pain for the little, pitiful woman who would be my mother. I thanked God that someone with a kind heart had come along to help her. God did not send the helper, but it was love for Him that had led her heart to help. How blessed we were" (Cooper, 2004, P. 66).

Several other examples of linguistic markers of an oral text can be given, but the description of Lona's life is more illustrative. Lona, as the narrator explains, is a young girl who had been abandoned by her mother,



and grew up in foster homes where she was sexually molested by her foster father and got pregnant from a boy in the house; she lost the baby and somewhat managed to build a future, working as a maid in white people's houses. Lona met Robert Green and they fell in love and married. However, their relationship turned sour when Robert discovered who Lona really was: Robert found out that he had married a person who did not know love, a deceitful person who stole things wherever she went because she did not have self-worth. It is through the non-narrative comments or the consciousness projection of the narrator that the reader discovers Lona's psychology and her real problems. On page 227, the narrator first hints that Lona stole because she is blinded by the glitters of the world and does not have God. As she says, repeating a passage of the Bible, "He who loves the world, the Love of Me is not in them" (P.227). It is also through the non-narrative comments that the reader understands the reasons why Lona cannot build bridges with others and cannot believe that she could be loved for what she is. She never succeeds in healing from the trauma of the past. The passage below in which the narrator draws her psychology is quite eloquent:

Being an orphan had almost nothing to do with the way Lona was. The problem was never being loved by anyone, never being touched except for selfish touching and never being taught there was such a thing as "Love." Animals and birds can die without any signs of love. She had never seen love. When she did see it, she did not recognize it, therefore she did not believe it. Robert loved Lona for herself; Lona loved Robert for what he was to herself. She knew to call on God, but she didn't know God nor the Bible that tells humans about Love (P. 240).

The last sentence of the above quotation, as well as numerous previous and subsequent references to God, shows the

religious overtones of the narrator's comments. From the outset of her story, we notice a highly religious tone and a profusion of signifiers referring to religion, God and the Bible.

5. Ideological Dimensions in *Some People, Some Other Place*

The oral-like narrative can be said to resonate echoes of a preacher's sermon. Broadly speaking and regardless of religious creed, the sermon is a form of moral or religious discourse preached before audience during a service. Its main role consists in keeping the congregation on the right path, and bringing back the lost sheep to the herd. Most sermons also warn against Satan's power and unreligious behaviors. They advise the audience to follow God's teachings to reach wholeness on earth and go to heaven when they die. The non-narrative comments, particularly the opening chapter of the novel or epinarrative in which the unusual narrator perched in a window looking down to the Earth introduces herself suggest the tone of a sermon. The narrator's rhetoric sounds like a moral and religious lesson delivered by a priest, and her language is replete with references to the Bible and God's teachings. Indeed, she reveals how much she is disgusted and horrified by the world of humans, a world in which greed, thirst for Power, and violence prevail, a world in which the poor and the weak are oppressed, and a world in which the Ministers of God are hypocrite. In sum, a world in which God's Truth is ignored and "Satan is pervasive" (PP: 2-3). Then, she deplores how human behavior has turned the world into a burning hell, contrary to God's plan. For her, "God did not create this Earth to be destroyed, God created it to be inhabited by the meek, the teachable, nonviolent, peaceful, loving meek" (3). She also infers that the only



reason why man cannot enjoy a blissful life in a world of Eden is because he chose to believe a lie. As soon as man comes to Earth, he forgets all the Love and Wisdom that used to surround him in the world beyond, and he falls victim to Satan's temptations like Adam and Eve. The narrator also suggests that people have the capacity to resist the workings of Satan because God endowed them with a free will. In sum, the narrator warns against Satan's power and clearly shows that people should follow the teachings of the scriptures as the only way to salvation. For her, "people who choose God over Satan's temptations" and give themselves to God are happy because He is Love (P. 4).

Mieke Bal(2009), in *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*, conjectures that the ideological dimension of a novel mainly shows through non-narrative comments. However, in Cooper's novel, the religious ideology is disseminated at two levels: the narrative voice and the characters' speech. Indeed, the messages delivered in the epinarrative's sermon are supported by illustrative evidences from the various women's stories and the speeches of characters such as Miss Hart, Eula, Earle, and Marion. All these characters reinforce in their conversations that if you do not study God's word, you are likely to fail in your life because the Bible contains all the truths of God who created Earth. They also all share the view that the world's problems derive from absence of Love and ignorance of the Biblical truths. The narrator's sermons are almost replicated by Marion, particularly in her conversations with Lona, Mme Elisabeth, Eula, and Iris. Marion, as Eula notices, is the one that talks about God and His purposes. Echoing the words of Miss Hart and Earle, Marion professes that learning the words of God allows the individual to have direction and purpose in life. For Marion, life is

important and fragile and constantly threatened by Satan's work. Therefore, "you have to guard one's happiness. Build a fence around your home and a mental fence of wisdom around your mind" (358). She also preaches that "There is no life without some wisdom, some sense. No life without God. God gives you true hope in a world where seldom one gives anybody anything" (324). Marion also taught Mme Lafont that love and hope are the most important things in life.

J California Cooper perpetuates an aesthetic tradition woven around the functional paradigm of the Black sermonic tradition or black preaching in *Some People, Some Other Place*. It has already been pointed out how the formal and linguistic features of the narrative parallel that of a sermon, but it is helpful to grasp the function of the Black sermon or Black Preaching to demonstrate how the story is built on this paradigm. The Black sermonic tradition can be traced back to the times of slavery when the preacher used to gather secretly the enslaved in the woods and talk to them. Using the symbolism of the Bible, he would give them strength to survive the horrors of enslavement and help them project a future of hope. The sermon continued to be an instrument for "cathartic release" for the black community during the days of Jim Crowism: its aim has been to preach messages that appeal to both the intellect and the emotive dimensions of humanity and to liberate oppressed souls from dominant societal structures; it illustrates that individuals can transform through a relationship with God. As Dolan (1994) puts it so well,

The preacher through his ritual form of expression—the sermon—structures the meaning of blackness as he tells the story of a fallen man or woman risen. He regenerates the spirits of his downtrodden community with his



mental meditation on freedom—freedom from sin and freedom to articulate self. (P.383).

In *Some People, Some Other Place*, the narrator can be said to address a female audience; the narrative is a collection of stories of women from different geographic and racial origins all engaged in a quest of a place or a search for self and wholeness. Eula is African-American and a descendant of former enslaved people, Madame Elizabeth is from the dominant culture, Ha is Chinese and came to America to build a better life, Maureen Iris is a Jew whose parents met on a ship heading for America; in brief, the women in the novel constitute a sample of American society and the world as well. Although their ancestors hail from different parts of the world, and they belong to different races and cultures, these women share the same problems and challenges: they are all women of humble origins living in a male dominated society trying to build a future. These women are marginalized, lack education, struggle to earn a living, and they have either suffered from teenage pregnancy or from sexual violence.

Throughout their stories and the stories of other women living around them, the narrative paints the greatest challenges they face and points at directions. Some of the recurrent issues in the lives of the women are the following ones: marginalization, lack of education, sexuality, teenage pregnancy, prostitution, and disorientation resulting from lack of faith and guidance. Eula Lee, Mme Elizabeth, Lona, Eula Too are all victims of teenage pregnancy and it has destroyed their dreams. Pregnancy is harder, especially when as it is the case of Eula, one has been raped. The narrative does not fail to deal with issues related to childbearing such as abortion.

Interwoven within the tales of these women's lives are the gender issue; women are marginalized and relegated to a secondary

position in society. They are uneducated, do not enjoy civic rights such as voting right, and are considered inferior to men. Teachers such as Miss Hart have to abandon their jobs when they get married and "let it go to a man who was considered a more deserving person of the job because married or single, he needed the money" (25). Marginalization and exclusion seem to be worst in China "where girls were mouths to feed who would marry and go off to another family to help their husbands" (278). For this reason, Ha's father who was living in dire straits gave most of the food to the sons who worked in the fields, leaving his only daughter famished. He will later on sell Ha for a bag of beans. From the women's tales, we gather that girls are even trafficked in India. The poor mother of Maheema Do is sold to a whorehouse in China. The narrative clearly condemns certain types of behaviors and points at avenues for successful quest of wholeness through the successes and failures of the various women in the story who end up living together on Dream Street in Placeland. The names are emblematic of the characters' search for wholeness and self. The women who succeed in achieving stability in their lives are the ones who are resilient, who possess education and faith in God, who have benefited from the help of the Deity and "ancestors" and have gained consciousness of the importance of female bonding; Eula Too, Marion, Miss Hart, and Mme Elizabeth can be given as examples, but Eula Too is the one through whom all the above-mentioned values are celebrated.

The narrative presents Eula Too, the main protagonist of the novel, as a symbol of success and a model given the values she is endowed with and her particular function in the achievement of the other characters' dreams at the end of the narrative. Eula Too is a fallen creature who rises to high summits



thanks to instrumental role of “ancestors” in her life, the power of dream, endurance, faith and love. Ancestors, Toni Morrison (1994) defines in “Rootedness,” “are not just parents, they are a sort of timeless people whose relationships to the characters are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain wisdom” (P.201). Eula is the first daughter of Eula Lee, a young girl who belongs to a poor family of African-Americans farmers migrating towards Northern cities in the Reconstruction period in quest of better living conditions. Eula Lee lived in extremely poor conditions and got pregnant looking for soothing love. As the narrator explains, “The way these things happen when you are tired, disgusted, poor and in need of a little warm bit of love, even a little excitement. Imitation of love, at fifteen years of age, looks like what you think real love is (and may be) and is welcomed into arms that are empty of everything else” (18). After the birth of Eula, she got married and children came in quick succession and the family cannot make it out of the vicious circle of poverty. Eula bravely helped her overwhelmed mother care for the large family and gained awareness that a large family constitutes a shackle to a woman’s fulfillment. Despite the negative environment in which she grows up, Eula nourishes dreams of education and achievement of her American dream of success. Thanks to Miss Hart, a retired Negro teacher, who will serve as an “ancestor” or a guiding presence in her life, she gains literacy, Love, wisdom, and spirituality. Miss Hart taught her that the Bible is “the only book in this world I know of that tells you to love everybody and that has a good thing because it is the lack of love that causes all the world’s problems” (28). Miss Hart gave her love of the Bible’s wisdom and a copy of the holy book that she will keep all her life.

Eula Too struggles her way out of ignorance and poverty, and she is aware of the fact that she cannot build a future in her environment; for this reason, she decides to move to Chicago with the help of an older man who owned a vehicle. Eula used to let the man innocently obtain pleasure by rubbing himself against her private parts in exchange for some dollars bills she saved. Eula never reaches Chicago because she was brutally raped and left on the side of the road. Luckily, Eula Too is found by Mme Elizabeth, a wealthy Madame who runs a luxurious whorehouse who will serve as a second ancestor for her; she takes Eula under her protection, teaches her etiquette, and hires someone to improve her education. Mme Elizabeth supports Eula and forces her to keep the baby when she discovers with stupefaction that she had been impregnated during the rape. Under her protective wing, Eula will blossom into an educated, wise, and resilient woman. She manages Mme Elizabeth’s business and regularly sends money to her destitute mother and Miss Hart. Eula stays very close to the Deity even if she lives in a whorehouse. Unlike Lona who cannot forget the pain of the past, Eula Too successfully conjures the demons of her rape. She also extirpates Earle from the negative environment of her home to enable her to get an education and project a future. Although Eula is really thankful to Mme Elizabeth, she never becomes a subordinate, but rather becomes her friend and family. Eula never forgets her parents and ancestors. She regularly sends money and visits her family and Miss Hart. When her mother dies, and she makes up her mind to settle in Placeland, she builds a house for the lonely and old Miss Hart and takes her brother with her so that he could build a better life.



Eula's positive role and function in many women's lives is particularly enhanced at the end of the narrative, when she moves to Dream Street in Placeland. Her actions prove how much love she has for everybody. Eula is described as a model of generosity, someone who lacks selfishness, and can anticipate people's needs. Although she had found love and was going to be happily married to Lamont and move to her own new place, she cannot stand seeing so much sadness in Placeland and she takes the appropriate measures to spread her happiness around. She places Rita, a former prostitute who had no place to go, under the motherly protection of Maureen Iris who was living alone in her big house on Dream Street. Iris and Rita become like mother and daughter. They decide to keep Rita's babies, and they will eventually form a loving family and support each other. Eula is also aware that she will not be able to spend time enough with Mme Elizabeth because she is moving to her own house with her husband, and she creates a safety network for her ancestor; she uses part of the two hundred thousand dollars Mme Elizabeth obtained from the sale of her property to help the other women achieve their dreams thus empowering them for the future. Five thousand dollars are given to Lona to help her put a down payment on a house and learn a useful trade. Eula gives ten thousand dollars to Ha to help her go to summer school and learn English, send her daughters to college and still have two thousand dollars to go home to China and see her mother. Ha had been saving a dollar a day to send her daughters to school. Eula also gives Rita a ten-thousand dollar check to help face the expenses of taking care of the baby, eventually go to school, take typing short hand classes, or even start a nursing or starts a business making hats. Eula makes them

believe that Mme Elizabeth Fontzil gave them the money and asks them to keep an eye on her and company.

Through her character, the narrator delivers a sermon on how women can reach wholeness through resilience, faith and love above all. Her characterization reinforces what can be considered as one of the most important messages conveyed throughout the narrative, a message delivered by the preacher-like narrator in the epinarrative and Marion's recommendations. She has God in her, she is not blinded by the glitters of the world, she gives education an important place, struggles for herself and she loves. Eula can even be said to embody Love in the novel, for what is Love? Does not Corinthians 13:4-7 tell us that "Love is patient and kind; love does not envy or boast; it is not arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice at wrongdoing, but rejoices with the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things." Eula Too possesses all these attributes. Paraphrasing Sandra L. Barnes in "An Analysis of Black Church Liberation and Womanist Theologies" and taking into account the advocacy and uplift dimensions of the novel, one can say Cooper performs the task of educating, equipping, and empowering women through a sermon representing the various experiences of diverse women, showing how they intersect, and pointing at avenues of successful negotiations.

6. Conclusion

The beauty of J California Cooper's works can only be grasped if one understands that she writes within the paradigm of a tradition that heals through the pen and exploits cultural heritage as an index for crafting literature. Like practitioners of the



Black Art, Cooper combines in her work functionality and art that enhances cultural markings in several respects. Cooper's work has a filial relationship with literary ancestors such as Toni Morrison's *Love* (2003). The novel enters in the continuum of an art that has "the ability to be both print and oral literature: to combine those two aspects so that the stories could be read in silence, of course, but one should be able to hear them as well" (Morrison, 1994, P. 200). It is a type of novel that can replace the stories that parents would tell their children around a fire at night. Cooper's work, also perpetuates the aesthetic tradition of a functional, culturally grounded, and interactive Black Art. She surely follows the prescriptions of Morrison who suggests, in reference to Black art, that:

It should try deliberately to make you stand up and make you feel something profoundly in the same way that a black preacher requires a congregation to speak, to join him in the sermon, to behave in a certain way, that a musician's music is enhanced when there is a response from the audience (Rootedness, 1994, P. 200).

Indeed in her work, Cooper recreates the effects of the Black sermonic tradition through the use of an intrusive omniscient heterodiegetic narrator perched from a window aloft the world of the story who has the power to retrace events from the past and the present. The self-consciousness of her attempts to make the novel sound oral shows through the typographical use of italics to indicate the traces of the narrator's voice in the story. The orality of her novel is also illustrated by the presence of an implied audience that the narrator engages throughout the story, thus constructing the book with it as in a call-response game. The other characteristic of an oral text that can be traced in the novel is the use of voice to dramatize the story. Like in an oral performance, voice helps engage the

audience, arrange the story and move smoothly through time and space; it also helps to put the stress on key events, comment on them, and draw moral lessons from the characters' lives. The narrator's voice is also full of linguistic features of orality such as communicative signals, orientation signals, and consciousness of projection passages.

Cooper's work also belongs to an African-American tradition that dates back from the Harlem Renaissance, especially in terms of aesthetics. The cultural markings of the sermonic tradition which has constituted an index for African American creative writers as Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, Jean Toomer, Zora Neale Hurston, Richard Wright, Ishmael Reed, Leon Forrest, Alice Walker, Ernest Gaines, Toni Morrison, Gloria Naylor, Julius Lester and C. Eric Lincoln (Hubbard 383) can be identified in the novel. The language of the narrator is replete with religious references and replicates the didactic functions of the sermon. Like a preacher would in a sermon, the narrator first laments over the greed, violence, and ungodliness that prevail over the world and posits that all these plagues result from the ignorance of Biblical teachings and absence of love. This sermon delivered by Huala Too is amplified in the story through the words of Marion, Eula Too, Earle and Miss Hart. The narrative illustrates that characters that ignore God's words and do not know Love fail in their quests of self and wholeness. On the contrary, a character such as Eula Too, who embodies the truths of Love, succeeds in forging a viable life. Eula Too's behavior and actions are offered as a story of empowerment of women.

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