

Reading Orality in Isabel Allende: A Study of Three Novels

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ABSTRACT

This article undertakes a comparative study of orality in selected works by Chilean author, Isabel Allende. According to this study, Allende's outlook on orality operates as a means of communal as well as personal survival. Within underlying discussions of *mestizaje* and *latinidad*, orality is here viewed as a transformative narrative practice. Allende's orality is presented as paradoxical because, though unwritten, it has the ability to preserve and to authenticate. The article presents orality as a continuing narrative process that attests to the cultural value of an 'authentic' Latin American identity, while also drawing attention to the predominantly female oral storytellers in these novels. Finally, it helps to explore the tension between silence and voice, folklore and sanctioned history, authentic experience and that constructed for a patriarchal ideology. An important medium of survival, Allende's particular brand of orality ultimately constructs alternative narratives and realities. To this end, *Eva Luna* (1987), *The Stories of Eva Luna* (1989) and *Paula* (1994) will be discussed.

Key Words: Allende, Feminism, Latin American Literature, *Latinidad*, *Mestizaje*, Orality

INTRODUCTION

'I come from a family of storytellers, an oral tradition, and that helps a lot', says Isabel Allende (Iftekharrudin 1994, 361). To a great extent, Allende's storytelling success lies in her incorporation of the oral side of Latin American culture, local folktales, unorthodox stories as well as

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‘otherworldly’ stories in her works. It is this aspect of her writing which the paper seeks to examine. Traditional and contemporary processes of storytelling, which enhance the *mestizaje* quality of Allende’s orality, will therefore be explored through *Eva Luna* (1987), *The Stories of Eva Luna* (1989)¹ and *Paula* (1994).

This paper presents a study of orality in terms of a culturally oriented hub around which vibrant cultural discourses orbit and which clearly validate *el otro lado* (Christie and Gonzalez 2005, 307), the ‘other side’. Since orality, in Allende’s novels, involves the sharing of stories which are historical, folkloric or personal, it becomes continuous with the articulation of both personal identity and a wider communal identity. In other words, orality operates as a goal and as a process of survival for the community and the individual, and implies the transformation of relationships of domination and loss into those of love and reconciliation.

The paper recognizes that the notion of orality is broad and elastic and includes ‘everything from allegory, folktale, spirit possession, fantasy and myth to ancestor veneration, ritual, legends, proverbs, fables and jokes’ (Vambe 2004, 235). Various discussed as ‘compelling dilemma’ (Nauss Millay 2005), as sourced through ‘a variety of repertoires, diffusing tales from different oral traditions to stories by ancient and modern authors’ (Riascos 2007, 253) or as ‘means by which to conceptualize the formal, political and aesthetic properties of indigenous language’ (Acosta 2013, 203), orality exerts power, communicates values and can serve multiple and sometimes apparently contradictory purposes. In this context, therefore, the paper presents Allende’s orality as a ‘remapping’ of her native Latin America and as fully integrated within bonds both personal and communal. Focusing on survival, her *cuentos*, *Eva Luna* and *The Stories of Eva Luna*, for example, enhance wider concerns such as nation and place while *Paula* is motivated by personal ones like a mother’s coping with loss.

Often drawing from the past and addressing a future that compels listeners and storytellers alike to confront a wide array of situations, Allende’s use of orality does not reflect an ultimatum to give in to tradition or to break completely away. By blurring the borders between the written and the spoken, the *cuentos* in question highlight orality as an act of self-affirmation and solidarity. Accordingly, Leticia A. Guardiola-Sáenz maintains that ‘it is only by listening to the voice of the other in the text, the one who has suffered the unjust invasion and oppression, that one can construct a liberating story, by reading between the lines and

1 Due to similarity of titles, quotations from *Eva Luna* and *The Stories of Eva Luna* will be accompanied by the abbreviations *EL* and *SEL* respectively.

listening to her own construction of identity' (2002, 94).

Integrated within domestic culture, Allende's female protagonists are especially portrayed as the core medium through which oral values are transmitted. Daisy L. Machado, for example, suggests the 'undocumented woman' and the 'unnamed woman' (2002, 161-170) as crucial to Latin American storytelling. The presence of female protagonists, who often possess a fluid identity, allows for the creation of multivocal stories that speak to the reader on many levels, and these various tales encompass issues of gender, race, abuse of power, shame, cultural values and social roles. Although tropes of oral storytelling certainly empower these female subjects, this paper will also address the fact that orality is not only an evocation of female empowerment.

While indicating how Latin American orality does not operate above or against the community, but rather draws from the roots, this paper bases its framework on *mestizaje*. Widely conceptualized by Anzaldúa, *mestizaje* is presented as the creation of a new mythos – that is a change in the way we perceive reality, the way we see ourselves and the ways we behave (1987, 81). Several other critics have also attempted to make use of the term *mestizaje* in varying contexts. Wade's discussion of the 'lived experience', which is one of the concerns shared by the three novels, shows how *mestizaje* is reflected in family relationships and friendship networks for instance (2005).

Mestizaje, in terms of racial and cultural mixture, further connects with the analysis proposed. Locating racial hybridity as an inevitable phenomenon following the conquest of the New World, Suzanne Bost recognizes that 'the term is itself a bridge, revealing the intimacy of unlike components' and works as a paradigm for 'internal contradictions' within identity (2000, 188). Alternatively, Gloria Inés Loya's suggestion of a '*mestizaje* which welcomes men and women as equal' (2002, 237) highlights the novels' celebrative attitude towards all human beings, and enhances ways in which the connection of the listener to the cultural or personal memory of the storyteller's experience remains an ongoing oral process. Reinstating *mestizaje* as a trope for survival, this study also demonstrates orality in terms of a decentred cultural experience.

In other words, Allende's protagonists in *Eva Luna*, *The Stories of Eva Luna* and *Paula* define various facets of *mestizaje*, implying 'cultural markers such as language' and, at other times, 'ethnic and racial characteristics such skin colour and ancestry' (Telles 2014, 37). This defines the protagonists' ability to share and retell stories, childhood memories or folktales in order to discover the history of their native land and thus themselves. In their

differing engagements with orality, these women construct hybrid new identities each, consciously deciding which aspects they will claim and which ones they will discard. For this reason, *mestizaje* is an integral part of Allende's narrative process. The protagonists' exquisite storytelling power lies in the potent mixture of their oral narrative skills and an awareness of the symbolical 'borderlands' upon which their *mestizaje* lies. Clearly then, *Eva Luna*, *The Stories of Eva Luna* and *Paula* are explorations and especially, the sharing of events that exhibit the hallmarks of Allende's powerful storytelling aesthetic.

Depicted as a cultural response, Allende's orality enhances how the *mestiza's* experience of liminality, while confusing and even painful at times, is a necessary part of the process of '*mestiza* consciousness'. Vicente L. Rafael (2001), who situates the *mestiza* as object and symbol defined by what she is not, considers the fact that '*mestizaje*' has multiple meanings which often supersede significations understood by those who embody its markings. It is therefore 'the capacity, among other things, to speak in different registers, as if one's identity were overlaid and occupied by other possible ones' (Rafael 2001, 167). Anzaldúa, on the other hand, reconfigures the *mestiza* as agent and subject, a '*mestiza* consciousness' which enables her to create a new way of being and seeing that transcends the oppositional forces/narratives that would divide her:

The new mestiza copes by developing a tolerance for contradictions, a tolerance for ambiguity. [...] She learns to juggle cultures. She has a plural personality, she operates in a pluralistic mode. [...] Not only does she sustain contradictions, she turns the ambivalence into something else (79).

Isabel Allende's novels show how *mestizaje* problematizes conventions of race, nation and gender, drawing attention to fluidity within identity rather than singularity. This provokes an urge for cultural authenticity in her narratives which, in turn, informs the recurrent use of orality.

Philip Swanson maintains that Allende's novels are often criticized for 'sentimentality, social and political naïveté, stylistic conservatism and the perpetuation of bourgeois norms' (2006, 265). Nothing can be further from the truth since Allende, although a popular, mainstream writer, certainly writes for a wide international audience. The effectiveness of her work can be viewed in terms of its relationship to a non-academic and non-intellectual global readership. From this perspective, Allende's mobilization of popular and oral storytelling formats can be seen to generate a form of magical realism that communicates key values to a mass public in the way that more complex and experimental examples of Latin American

fiction cannot hope to do. Her fiction, in many ways, can also be seen to develop a popular form of postcolonial discourse (Swanson 2006, 265).

In this connection, Edmundo Paz Soldán (Arias 2005, 139-149) discusses *latinidad* as a response to the exoticization of Latin America through the immense popularity of magical realism. Allende's particular negotiation with *latinidad* and magical realism converges towards oral discourses because it appears to do away with the tendency in Latin American literature towards the complex and the obscure and, instead, channels magical realism into a more communicative direction. Defined as 'cultural identity' (Rodríguez 2002, 115), the notion of a vibrant *latinidad* in the narrative world of Isabel Allende is recuperated through the essentially indigenous medium of orality.

Since the storytelling format offered by the novels of Isabel Allende also reflects a postcolonial society, the heavy inclination towards orality indicates the connection to an ancient and still active cultural *mestizaje*. It is important to mention that the Latin American *cuento* does not overlook this detail for the sake of a nostalgic originary past and a lost identity. The task of oral storytelling, in fact, is to attempt to resolve the impasse of how the other might be articulated as 'other' in all its difference, as a *mestizaje* medium of cultural transmission and how it represents itself. This is one way in which oral transmission can be said to reflect a preoccupation with *el otro lado*.

ORALITY AS COMMUNAL SURVIVAL: EVA LUNA AND THE STORIES OF EVA LUNA

This section proposes a simultaneous reading of Allende's *Eva Luna* and its sequel, *The Stories of Eva Luna* to show how modes of orality display a commitment to communal survival. Because racial models are used to describe cultural multiplicity (Bost 2000; Telles 2014), the issues of identity and *mestizaje* which emerge therein have particular resonance from a Latin American perspective. Racial *mestizaje* is significantly projected from the standpoint of a mixed-race Chilean narrator, Eva Luna, the 'bastard with blood of every colour' (*EL*, 237) in her genes. Caught between her lowly social status and her *mestiza* racial identity, Eva Luna must negotiate the double-edged sword of her mixed origins and its significance within Latin American racial formations. Because orality connotes transmission and survival, it becomes the *mestiza's* most potent weapon.

As an oral storyteller, aware of her mixed racial belonging, Eva Luna exists outside linear, patriarchal historiography and globally represents the homes and communities of those 'left behind'. So, her stories represent experiences neither contained within nor circumscribed by such scripts. Orality, in this case, provides a means to challenge monolithic stories and narrative styles, and to evaluate standards and scripts that dictate which experience is worthy of record or not and how that experience is to be articulated. If Eva Luna challenges memory, the record of her own lineage reflects the blurring of space and time typical to *mestizaje* consciousness:

My name is Eva [...] I came into the world with a breath of the jungle in my memory. My father, an Indian with yellow eyes, came from the place where the hundred rivers meet [...] Consuelo, my mother, spent her childhood in an enchanted region where for centuries adventurers have searched for the city of pure gold (*EL*, 3).

Though largely committed towards communal survival in this *cuento*, orality recognizes Eva's reconstituted home as the space that best eludes the destruction of oral storytelling practices. Rescued, healed and 'adopted' by the equally *mestiza* *madrina* and the *abuela*, Eva Luna redefines her liminal *mestiza* identity within the more celebrative space of oral storytelling. Healer of 'old wounds' (*SEL*, 367), adept at 'supplant[ing] with poetic flourishes what she lacked in information' (*EL*, 7), she resurrects forgotten memories of indigenous lifelines and cultures. Eva Luna's evolution amongst matriarchal, though improvised, *madrina* and *abuela* figures is also one way of confronting all the attendant anxiety about gender, culture and identity.

So it is in this particularly empowered *mestizaje* home 'with pictures of Catholic saints and African gods' (*EL*, 95) that diverse coffin-stories and tales of virginity are orally transmitted and retold countless times by the *abuela* and the *madrina*. From that point onwards, Eva Luna's interest in sharing stories with members of her community becomes a mode of resistance, since her role shifts from that of submissive *gritona* or potential victim to the more assertive role of *macha* or resister (Perez 2002, 68). Her original stories are all sites of cultural renewal, given the obvious allegiance to indigenous methods:

I sat down with my legs folded like an Indian, closed my eyes, and let my mind wander through the dunes of a white desert, as I always do when I invent a story (*EL*, 227).

Orality, therefore, is presented as a medium of survival for the wider community of undocumented, anonymous figures, especially women. Since it also emerges as a crucial zone where narrative power is investigated, the storytelling world of the wandering female *mestiza*, Eva Luna, relies on the structure and emotive power of her orally-transmitted stories. According a complex vocabulary of empowerment and sensuality, of space and resistance to the marginalized woman, orality permits the creation of women's stories that challenge the scripts of their larger cultures. Consuelo, herself of unknown parentage, protects the identity of her daughter Eva through orality:

She manufactured the substance of her own dreams, and from those materials constructed a world for me. Words are free, she used to say, and she appropriated them; they were all hers (*EL*, 21).

In the same way, Eva Luna's *el mundo zurdo*, the 'left-handed world' (Anzaldúa 1981) –replete with prostitutes, murderers, bastards and adulterers – represents a means of articulation which values communal experience. By focusing on survival, Eva Luna's stories collectively formulate a narrative plan to transform oppressive situations into happy endings for everyone. The destinies of Rolf Carlé's mistreated mother and sister, for example, are transformed into miraculously positive ones. Even the queer space of Mimi the transvestite is acknowledged, because he is given the authority to transform the sad fate of Zulema, the dead frustrated-in-love wife of Riad Halabi, into a much happier one. Donning Zulema's jewellery and enhancing his carnivalesque glory, Mimi learns the skills of storytelling from Eva and proclaims a mythical story of fulfilling love. The destruction of sad or conventional stories demonstrates how the equation of race, gender and sexuality is confronted through the transmission of stories. Eva's *el mundo zurdo* also provides her with a distinct vocabulary with which to articulate the marginal's yearning to be in relation:

Mimi says I have a special voice for storytelling, a voice that, although mine seems to belong to someone else, as if it issued from the earth to rise through my body (*EL*, 227).

Those who choose to reside in or travel to *el mundo zurdo* tend to be those who are already or always in the travelling mode, as a matter of necessity and survival (Anzaldúa 1981). As inextricable part of this, the wandering Eva Luna can escape the otherwise oppressive environment which surrounds her. The storyteller's act of travelling is also an act

of transmitting memory to the community and literally creates a new language for the repressed. Basically, it is home culture and not assimilation into dominant culture that provides the source of an alternative social and storytelling system. Only when Eva Luna extends her ‘defensive and consoling’ (Gregory 2003, 88) brand of storytelling into the community does she begin to create her *el mundo zurdo* where other marginals might be safe.

According to Negron, ‘*latinidad* is best understood by taking into account everyday, situated social practices’ (2014, 89) and the negotiations of collective identities that take place in daily oral interactions gradually infiltrates itself into all areas of community life. To a greater extent than *Eva Luna*, *The Stories of Eva Luna* foregrounds *latinidad* as social heterogeneity. Rolf Carlé’s request for an original story in the Prologue of *The Stories of Eva Luna*, ‘Tell me a story you have never told anyone before. Make it up for me’ (*SEL*, 5) already reinstates the communicative function of *latinidad*. It is important to note that even Eva Luna propagates her daily doses of orality in society because she is given no other resources from which to build a positive identity for herself. ‘I would curl up beside Elvira and offer to tell her a story if she would let me stay’ (*EL*, 54) and ‘I made myself comfortable and offered him a story in payment for being so nice to me’ (*EL*, 57) are clear indications of Eva Luna’s own desire to communicate and to propagate love and reconciliation within the community. The storyteller’s call for reconciliation and acceptance via her tales is in fact an ongoing process of *latinidad*, without finality or resolution. Her own story as well as the stories she tells will never be finished.

Recuperating a host of storytellers, racially diverse but with a similar commitment to orality, *The Stories of Eva Luna* is a clear attempt to revitalize the economy and culture of an authentic *latinidad*. Each one’s story is an act of memory and literally creates a new language for the repressed. Therefore, the recurring stories and narrative figures that hop from *Eva Luna* to *The Stories of Eva Luna* demonstrate complex cultural reinscriptions which are in fact the real subject of both texts. The very use of the fantastic, the comic and the magically real promote largely indigenous beliefs. Eva Luna’s storytelling is not simply a belief that the indigenous is relevant to Latin American narratives, but also a confirmation of the way those beliefs are deployed and in the way they are constructed around the liberating praxis of marginalized figures.

Rafael Pérez-Torres maintains that ‘the dynamic qualities of [...] spiritual *mestizaje* are manifest in a newfound hope for spiritual transformation

and, if extremely tenuously, social renewal' (2006, xviii). Recognizing the mestiza body as a site of knowledge and social promise, 'Two Words', the very first *cuenta* in *The Stories of Eva Luna*, is motivated by another traditional wandering storyteller, Belisa Crepusculario. Like Eva, she too fulfils the basic universal functions of oral literature:

She made her living selling words [...] Some people waited for her from one year to the next, and when she appeared in the village with her bundle beneath her arm, they would form a line in front of her stall. Her prices were fair. For five centavos she delivered verses from memory; for seven she improved the quality of dreams; for nine she wrote love letters; for twelve she invented insults for irreconcilable enemies. She also sold stories, not fantasies but long, true stories she recited at one telling, never skipping a word (*SEL*, 10).

Significantly located within a traditional tent 'in the middle of a plaza, surrounded by the uproar of market day' (*SEL*, 12), the storyteller is transformed into an agent of *latinidad*. Belisa Crepusculario's political deal with the Colonel for instance displays a subtle discursive move which determines their mutual social 'understanding'. So this subversive *mestiza* storyteller opens 'a world of possibilities in terms of forging new relational identities' (Pérez-Torres 2006, 3):

The Colonel stood up, and turned straight toward her. She saw dark skin and the eyes of a ferocious puma, and she knew immediately that she was standing before the loneliest man in the world (*SEL*, 14).

As a mutable narrative means, orality enables an evolving language of experience. In this way, such records allow more readily for the new experiences of the teller not only to be included in the sophisticated narrative unit offered in *The Stories of Eva Luna* but also for extant stories to be sustained. Oral transmission, therefore, is the means to claim cultural and literary language. With the understanding that *mestizaje* is an 'inclusive' process linked to embodied identities and kinship relations (Wade 2005), the story 'Walimai' aligns orality with ancestral beliefs and myth and more importantly, recourse to memory:

The name given me by my father is Walimai, which in the tongue of our brothers in the north means "wind". I can tell it to you, since now you are like my own daughter and you have my permission to call my name, although only when we are among family (*SEL*, 141).

Given the indigenous tribal origin of the storyteller, the implications of racial *mestizaje* are now extended. In producing a narrative that demands oral transmission ‘I have taught my sons and daughters’, (*SEL*, 141) and communal sharing ‘This is how we blood kinsmen greet each other’ (*SEL*, 141), Walimai attributes the continuing value of stories to cultural memory. Performing narrative feats in ways that are culturally specific and embedded in the language of miracles and mysticism, Walimai’s repertoire of ghost stories takes on particular meaning. Significantly, such authority—where ancestry and the supernatural are incorporated into cultural beliefs—proves a genuine complement to oral forms of transmission:

My father and mother told me stories; they sang songs to me, and taught me what a man must know to survive alone, with nothing but his bow and arrows. I was free (*SEL*, 143).

In the intricate narrative unit that constitutes *The Stories of Eva Luna*, *latinidad* is highlighted within an accessible oral repertoire. Blurred storytelling *débuts* such as ‘Clarisa was born before the city had electricity’ (*SEL*, 41), ‘She went by the name of Belisa Crepusculario’ (*SEL*, 9) and ‘On the radiant day that Dulce Rose Orellano was crowned with the jasmine of the Queen of Carnival’ (*SEL*, 301) abound with interpretive oral communities, in terms of the self-conscious subversion of traditional narrative openings. In the same way as *Eva Luna* blurs the real facts of people’s personal histories, linearity and space are deliberately blurred in *The Stories of Eva Luna*. It is now the storyteller’s responsibility to make up for that loss of history and ‘restore’ it in a new oral form.

By locating the dominant metaphor of *mestizaje* within the racially composed body, *The Stories of Eva Luna* collapses the oral and the written in ways that replicate the survival of traditional storytelling in a system of relentless patriarchal domination. The approach to making stories survive is one that strives to maintain genuine communal relationships based on love and respect rather than fear and power. In both *Eva Luna* and its sequel, storytelling shows the capacity for reconciliatory relationships and provides evidence of their existence. For this reason, *Eva Luna*’s stories also give voice to the experiences of those who are victimized by the absence of such relationships.

Quite a lot of criticism on Allende’s treatment of orality focuses on latent similarities with the *Arabian Nights*. Stephen Gregory (2003) argues that Allende’s orality implies ‘seductive entrapment’, indicating sexual manipulation. On the other hand, Silvia Nagy-Zekmi (2003) uses the

allegory of Scheherazade to different ends, maintaining that Allende's storyteller appears in the context of women telling stories to save lives. While this paper does not focus on Allende's narrative engagement with the *Arabian Nights*, it nevertheless reinstates orality as a paradigm for certain dilemmas within communal Latin American identity. Highlighting some of the negotiations and frictions that define *latinidad*, *Eva Luna* and *The Stories of Eva Luna* project *mestizaje* as part of a wider communal quest for story and memory.

ORALITY AS PERSONAL SURVIVAL: PAULA

Unlike the *Eva Luna cuentos*, *Paula* is based on Allende's authentic 'conversations' with her dying daughter. Suggestive of personal survival, *Paula* provides an alternative purpose of orality. *Convivencia diaria*, that is, personal 'daily coexistence' (Ricourt and Danta 2003), translates the oral mosaic which underlies this mother-daughter relationship and helps identify a meaning and salience of *latinidad* different from that articulated in the *Eva Luna cuentos*. By choosing parameters which are more personal than communal, communicated in terms of 'the legend of our family' (3), 'the other members of this family we both belong to' (8), *Paula* aligns *latinidad* with the shared oral memories of a specific lineage. Committed to restructuring a personal past, *latinidad* minimizes gaps and lacks within the storyteller's memory, who maintains, 'My life is created as I narrate' (8).

Mestizaje memory, though evoked on a briefer note than the *Eva Luna cuentos*, is also understood to be part of *latinidad* in *Paula*. The narrator, who confesses her 'three-quarters Spanish-Basque blood, one-quarter French, and a tot of Araucan or Mapuche Indian, like everyone else in [her] land' (14) is involved in the act of sharing her personal story of racial *mestizaje* with her daughter. Recollections of her childhood in Chile and Bolivia, followed by her adult years in Venezuela are the means through which *latinidad* is defined as a panethnic ideal that emerges through an individual narrative process of self-reflection and reinvention. This is informed in part by the narrator's personal mediation with oral forms of storytelling and which she transmits to her direct lineage, the daughter:

When you wake up we will have months, maybe years, to piece together the broken fragments of your past; better yet, we can invent memories that fit your fantasies (8).

As an oral entrepreneur who hustles creatively to make memories meet, the narrator's early experiences in Latin American territories other than Chile affirms claims to a wider *latinidad* and the diversity of her current family network. Her mobility and the importance she attributes to communication skills contribute to her desire to survive the most personal of odds, the death of her daughter.

Paula's different approach to invoking *latinidad* exemplifies how orality transforms from a mere narrative resource into a much more consolidated strategy for survival and a means to affiliate and connect with rather than to disintegrate memory altogether. Paula the daughter may die, but remains connected to the mother through personal, filial storytelling bonds. Lourdes Torres (1991) asserts that Latin American writers question and subvert conventional notions of autobiographical writing through the 'blending of the imagined and the real's o that 'myths and fantasies coexist with historical realities' (273), allowing authors to present and explore both personal and communal histories as well as bicultural or multiple identities. According to this paper, though, *Paula's* traditional overtones of the mother-as-storyteller enables a personal repository of Latin American storytelling. The narrator, for example, discusses her personal repertoire of memories in terms of 'places, dates, and names I don' t remember', 'errors' and 'twisted' facts (8).

The narrator's quest to attain personal survival is thus congruent with having a shared family heritage with her daughter. For this reason, her desire to connect through shared *latinidad* is mutually reinforcing. In her maternal interaction with and a personal 'crafting of emotion' (Carvalho 2003) for the dying Paula, the narrator consistently pursues her goal of promoting a specific family history. Announcing the various stories of Tata and Meme, the narrator's childhood and multiple tales of love as part of a personal family commitment, *Paula* reinstates its oral attributes to transmit the experiences of an individual subject. The stories that comprise this memoir are therefore explorations of selfhood that closely involve the narrator's relationships with her memories, as well as her creative rewriting and shaping of them. These narrative messages are then transmitted to the dying daughter, resulting in a highly experimental and original text that both challenges and redraws the boundaries of traditional storytelling.

Latinidad makes certain claims to shared cultural heritage, colonial and postcolonial histories, and language, and also to racializing and discriminatory experiences common to all peoples of Latin America. In the context of *Paula* where the mother promises 'different stories' (50) to the daughter,

we see how personal memory encapsulates the redesigning of stories through shared experiences of geographic alienation, psychological isolation, harsh economic and political realities and survival. By personalizing her various dilemmas through oral storytelling, the mother urges her daughter to resolve her own dilemma through death. For Maer (2003), Allende's rethinking of her own story as mother bespeaks deep-seated grief as well as the acceptance that her daughter finds peace in death, very much like a therapeutic process. This paper suggests that the imagination through oral storytelling creates a personal space where the mother forges the acceptance for her daughter to die at last. What the storyteller underscores in her various narratives is finally a woman's means of survival and acceptance.

Since it does not release its grip on the sharing of personal stories, *Paula* encounters *latinidad* as a discursive and performative space. Despite the approaching death and comatic state of the daughter, the mother continues to share stories that reflect faith and action, comparing her political relationship with Chile to the personal story of her daughter's tragedy:

When I look back over the long trajectory of my life, I believe that the military coup in Chile was one of the dramatic turning points. A few years from now, I will perhaps remember yesterday as the second tragedy to put its stamp on my existence (207).

The oral exchange complicates and extends the notion of *latinidad* beyond that of identity, focusing on meditations of shared narratives as performative practices. So, orality takes on aestheticized dimensions in the novel, displaying *latinidad* as an alternative mode of cultural production, imbued with an ambivalence that interrogates the limits of this Latin American mother's identity. Latin American storytelling here is anchored in the belief that the function of the storyteller is not only to transform and interpret universal questions of existence and death but also to assist in the transformation of lived reality into private tales of loss and grief:

Now that I know Paula is going, my efforts are absurd. She is worn out; that's what she tells me in dreams at night and when I wake at dawn and when I am walking in the forest and the breeze carries her words to me (319).

Though routine, activities such as storytelling serve to reinforce people's sense of the substance of *latinidad*, that is, the tangible ways in which

it can meet instrumental, relational, and symbolic needs. For this reason, the axiom of mother-daughter exchange in *Paula* is personal survival. The narrator's indication that 'I keep Paula's letter in the same tin box that contains Meme's relics' (321) establishes more than just a basis for continued cooperation and collaboration. As an instance of *latinidad*, *convivencia diaria* mobilizes emotional bonding while its significant images of love and loss indicate how personal memories can help an individual cope with life and death.

Nancy Raquel Mirabel argues that *latinidad* 'relocate[s] intimacy, relationships, emotion and the self within an analysis that so often leaves the personal and the collective on the margins' (2007, 17). While bouncing back and forth within the main exchanges with Paula, the mother's additional stories display 'belonging' to a specific culture which is ideologically, socially and politically constructed. The mother's experience of faith, mediated through personal memory, is reflected as the desire to share a different story every time. While being neither particularly original nor particularly unexpected, the sharing of stories in *Paula* nevertheless plays a primary role from which oral *latinidad* is discerned. Propelling alternative experiences of grief, *latinidad* invokes the fluidity of magical realism and pursues the mother through the journey of her convictions, experiences and eventual loss:

Paula pointed to the stream; I saw fresh roses lying along its banks and a white powder of calcined bones on the bottom, and I heard the music of thousands of voices whispering among the trees (330).

Indicative of a grief memoir (Fowler 2007), oral storytelling in *Paula* also evokes 'a sense of an ethical centre [...] often associated with a lost or missing member of the family' (Pérez-Torres 2006, xviii). It is this very sense of loss and absence which is complemented by personal shared stories drawn from memory, popular folklore and the creative imagination. Read in this light, *Paula* is transformed into a powerful act of remembering and living to 'tell the tale'. Through the narrator's storytelling art, we see an attempt to redefine and reinvent *latinidad*. Paula's demise is ultimately a productive loss, since it addresses the role that orality has played in even the most personal contexts. There emerges a dynamic interaction between the representations of grief and within the wider cultural objective of orality. By reflecting upon shared family bonds and recasting orality as an aesthetic code, *Paula* finally evokes a sense of place and personal connection:

I call upon my sturdy grandfather and my clairvoyant grandmother to help you cross the threshold and be born on the other side; I especially summon Granny, your grandmother with the transparent eyes, the one who died of sorrow when she had to be separated from you. I call her to come with her golden scissors to cut the strong thread that keeps you tied to your body (321).

CONCLUSION

Although written, Allende's work resonates with an oral quality due to the repetition of characteristics and phrases and the narrative techniques of foreshadowing and flashbacks. An allegedly oral form, a traditional oral content or a combination of both is visible in Allende's texts. Often in parallel with magical realism, the use of orality reproduces a reality that a formally realistic narrative economy cannot contain; yet it is distinctly linked with the marginal. Consequently, distinct oral storytelling positions must be recognized as central components in the development of *mestizaje* narrative. The oral storyteller is thus culturally consistent and exists as a counter current to patriarchal control, investing women and other marginalized figures with individual authority and opportunities to articulate alternative experience.

Synonymous with storytelling in Allende's novels, orality emerges as a powerful narrative discourse. The efficient power of orality resides in the deeply rooted communal, or personal understanding of Allende's storyteller, who happens to be both Latin American and female. An anchoring theme, orality therefore plays a pervasive and potent role in shaping certain aspects of Latin American identity. The significance of orality, especially in *Eva Luna*, *The Stories of Eva Luna* and *Paula*, lies in its symbolic cultural character, in other words, in its ability to bear an abundance of cultural sharing and emotional bonding. Therefore, in the context of Allende's novels, which are already driven toward an emancipatory self-understanding of Latin American culture and identity, orality is reinstated as a vital narrative quotient.

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