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IDENTITIES IN CONTEXT:

GENDER AND RACE IN WILLIAM FAULKNER'S *LIGHT IN
AUGUST* AND IN ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S *THEIR EYES
WERE WATCHING GOD*

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And I remind myself all the time now that if I were to have been born mute, or had maintained an oath of silence my whole life long for safety, I would still have suffered, and I would still die.

Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*

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ABSTRACT

This research is dedicated to the analysis of two fictional works, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston and *Light in August* (1932) by William Faulkner. The starting point of the analysis is the idea that identities are constructed according to specific discursive injunctions, which vary from context to context. The study is focused on the main characters of both novels, Janie Crawford, a black woman, and Joe Christmas, a man whose racial identity is unknown. The comparison between the two characters is based on how their identities are constructed in the novels in relation to their access to language and their possibility of articulating within it, and the context in which they are inserted.

Key words: Literature – William Faulkner – Zora Neale Hurston – Identities.

RESUMO

Este trabalho é dedicado à análise de duas obras ficcionais, “Their Eyes Were Watching God”, de Zora Neale Hurston, e “Light in August”, de William Faulkner. O ponto de partida da análise é a ideia que identidades são construídas de acordo com injunções discursivas específicas, que variam de contexto para contexto. Para tanto, foram analisados os dois personagens principais dos textos, Janie Crawford, uma mulher negra, e Joe Christmas, um homem cuja identidade racial é desconhecida. A comparação entre os dois se baseou na forma como ambas as identidades são construídas nos romances, em relação ao seu acesso à língua e a possibilidade de articulação dentro dela, e ao contexto no qual estão inseridos.

Palavras-chave: Literatura – William Faulkner – Zora Neale Hurston – Identidades.

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INTRODUCTION

It is hard to tell with certainty where our interests begin. Why and how I chose to study literature that was produced in the beginning of the twentieth century in the South of the United States is no longer clear to me. But the things we desire to understand possibly define us in ways more definite than the things that we do understand. Coming from an undergraduate course in Journalism, I was used to the idea that there is not only one reality which all people share, but that there are plenty of realities. However, it was only when I began studying literary theory and came across poststructuralism, gender theories, race studies, and queer studies that I began to appreciate the ways in which I was incapable of understanding the worlds of other people. It seems that everybody knows that everybody else sees the world differently. But worried about the problems we have to solve, worried about our careers, security, social and our sexual lives, we become separated and lose our ability – or our willingness – to comprehend other people's experiences. We begin to think that what is normal to us must be normal to others and we forget how culture, race, gender and social class form a web of meanings and discourses that superimpose one another and define our experiences and the language we use to express ourselves. This does not only happen with individuals, but also with collectives. Groups and communities are built like this. And so are nations.

Injustices begin to appear when the perceptions of a hegemonic group are imposed over the perceptions of other minority groups. Things become even worse for marginal identities when the law, which is taken to be an instrument of justice, becomes an injunction that regulates identities, according to categories that serve the purposes of a dominant social order. This was (and to some extent still is) the case with the experience of blacks in the United States, particularly in the South. For too long, black identity was taken to be a sign of absence and invisibility, and because the identity of the black woman is a site where gender and race intersect, it was regarded as a double absence. Against this scenario, writers like William Faulkner and Zora Neale Hurston represent efforts to revise and rewrite the oppressive injunctions of identity formation. Way before the rise of post-structuralism, both Faulkner and

Hurston perceived that realities were constructions guided by language in particular contexts and their books are a living proof of this. The purpose of this study is to analyze the novels *Light in August* (1932) by Faulkner and *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937) by Hurston from a perspective of identities as constructions, which are both enabled and informed by language.

In *Light in August*, Faulkner narrates the trajectory of Joe Christmas, a man who does not know his racial background. Christmas' racial uncertainty represents a threat to the community of Jefferson, where the story is set, to the extent that he signifies a dangerous suspension of categories, which brings to the fore the fallacy of racially determined identities. Inserted in the context of a puritan Southern community, Christmas is unable to assert a sense of self, as he cannot access language. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is the narrative account of a black woman's quest for a self-defined voice. The novel presents Janie Crawford's story as she herself tells it to her friend Pheoby, thus rendering the richness of the black oral tradition in the form of a written narrative. Janie engages in a series of relationships with different men, all of them oppressive in different ways. As she understands more about her context and becomes involved in the community, Janie is able to develop her own voice and to refute the feminine role as defined by the male figures of her life.

The first chapter, **Identities in Context**, is concerned with the exploration of the meaning of identity, through the discussion of subject formation in general and racial identity in particular. The first portion of the chapter develops the analysis of the production of locality and the imaginary around the idea of nation. Here, I weave a connection between the South and the identities to which it both serves as context to and against which it becomes. The work of Judith Butler about the construction of subjective identities and the articulation of resistance is central to the understanding of how identities are formed and how they acquire agency. The work of Henry Louis Gates Jr. on the history of the black literary tradition and its relation to the formation of a black identity plays an important role in the research, as it stands as a revisionary effort to understand the history of the racial category "negro". The experience of the black woman and the double burden of the intersection between race and gender is also explored in the first chapter, through the works of bell hooks and Hortense Spillers.

The second chapter, **The Black Experience in America: Context**, is a revision of the history of Southern literature. I present a summary of the main themes in Southern literature since the colonization period and investigate how they form an imaginary South. A portion of the chapter is also concerned with the study of the Afro-American literary tradition, from its beginnings to the Harlem Renaissance. I use the work of Donald Petesch to present the characteristics of the black literature and to clarify how the literary tradition is closely connected with the oppressive experiences of racism and slavery. The Harlem Renaissance is also studied in this chapter, in order to introduce the literary movement which defined a great part of Hurston's career. Here I use the work of Alain Locke to provide an example of how one of the most influential black intellectuals of the time thought about black art and how he understood the role of the New Negro writer.

The third chapter, **William Faulkner: Deconstructing the South**, examines Faulkner's work from the perspective that his career as a writer is an instance of criticism against the social order that prevailed in the South. The works of Peter Swiggart, Claus-Peter Neumann and Olga Vickery provide the grounds for this study. With the analysis of *Light in August* I hope to show how Faulkner is able to explore the contradictions of the racially defined identity as a site of subversion. My objective is to propose that, by suspending the possibility to "read" Christmas' body, Faulkner seeks to expose the fiction created by Southern racist claims. Judith Butler's work serves as theoretical frame that accounts for the impossibility of Christmas' identity. The works of Vickery and Swiggart are also the basis for the examination of this novel.

The fourth chapter, **Zora Neale Hurston: Writing the Black Woman's Voice**, presents the work of Zora Neale Hurston and an analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. First, I introduce Hurston's life, in order to elucidate how her childhood in an all-black town influenced her relationship with literature. Using the work of Robert E. Hemenway, Hurston's biographer, and Michael Awkward, I provide a brief explanation of Hurston's unique connection with black folk culture and how deeply it informed her narrative strategies. Henry Louis Gates Jr.'s theory of the *speakerly text* and Judith Butler's account of the formation of the subject are the grounds for the analysis of *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. I seek to demonstrate how Janie's assertion of a self-defined voice is connected with the possibility of

expression within the community, which provides her the means to articulate her agency and, thus, her resistance.

Finally, I will compare the narrative rendering of both characters, Janie and Christmas and it is my objective to show that they are connected by their constructions of marginal identities as dependent on language. I also seek to demonstrate that, despite the similarities, Christmas' life ends tragically, whereas Janie can assert a sense of self that is intrinsically connected with her insertion in the communal life, which enables her to access the black oral tradition, an important instrument of black resistance.

1. IDENTITIES IN CONTEXT

1.1. The Production of Locality

Studying the Afro-American literary tradition, several times one comes across the notion of two Americas. Underlying this notion is the idea that there are differences in the perceptions of what America represents to distinct groups. Whereas the hegemonic American culture holds the imaginary land of freedom and possibility as the “true” America, minority groups in the United States have a particularly bitter reading of what America entails. That the unity of America can be shattered by the specificities of the categories that inhabit it is also stated in the schism that divided the country in North and South. The “South” is an imagined nation within a nation. Formed by particular historical experiences which are intrinsically connected with the Civil War, this unstable mark of geographical space is carried with symbolic meaning. “The South” is defined against “the North” and stands as a singular place.

This particular South was assumed to be sexualized, tropical, and horribly violent; it was the low-slung id to the North’s preening superego. It was, most of all, a melodramatic confusion of the antebellum slaveholding South and the South of Jim Crow, featuring Bull Connor’s wild dogs and water hoses, and bloodied young black men and women, all battling for their lives in a location whose borders were presumed to be unchanged from the days of the old Confederate States of America (GUTERL, 2007: p. 231).

According to Arjun Appadurai (2008), the production of locality is dependent on the production of “local subjects” (APPADURAI, 2008, p. 179). There is a historical and dialectic relationship between the production of local subjects and the “neighborhoods in which such subjects can be produced, named, and empowered to act socially” (APPADURAI, 2008, p: 181). Local knowledge and rituals are forms that produce reliably local subjects, and, at the same time, also produce the neighborhoods in which those local subjects are inserted and where they occupy specific categories. In other words, like actors performing roles, the local subjects must act according to established rules that guarantee the stability of the community that stands as their context. Appadurai argues that “space and time are themselves socialized and localized through complex and deliberate practices of performance,

representation, and action” (2007: p. 180). However, those contexts exist only in relation to other contexts, with which they have to negotiate.

“The production of neighborhoods is always historically grounded and thus contextual. That is, neighborhoods are inherently what they are because they are opposed to something else and derive from other, already produced neighborhoods¹”. The contextual relationship between neighborhoods sets what Stuart Hall (1996: p. 3) calls “symbolic boundaries” or frontiers, which demarcate the inside through the exclusion of difference, which defines a “constitutive outside”. It can be said that neighborhoods and the identities that constitute it are forever in construction: the fictions of common origin, essential traits and shared ancestry, and the ideal of stability are processes never completed, that demand a constant effort in order to be maintained.

According to Etienne Balibar, the nation can be viewed as a hegemonic institution. Such an institution is capable of imposing a singular “superior community” in which members recognize themselves as belonging to different collectivities. Thus, the nation is hegemonic “in the sense that it does not suppress the multiplicity of “belongings”, but succeeds for a longer or shorter time and within certain limits in hierarchizing and pacifying this multiplicity” (BALIBAR, 1995: p. 180). Balibar analyses the relation between national and cultural identities and suggests, as a starting point, that culture is “the essential nation”, or what distinguishes the national state from that other “nation” of an intrinsic community. To understand “cultural identity” one has to accept a minimal condition of clarification: (1) that there is identity only by and for subjects – where subject is “a name for the possibility of assigning a referent to the persons distinguished by the language, thus of saying “I”, “we” and “they” in context” (BALIBAR, 1995: p. 183); and (2) there is culture only by and for institutions – where institution is “generally a name signifying that any human practice involves a certain distribution of statuses (or obligations) and functions (utility, efficiency, communication), susceptible of being expressed and legitimated in discourses” (BALIBAR, 1995: p. 183).

One of the ways in which particular experiences were organized under the concept of the nation was by creating of a conception of time that prized simultaneity and rendered possible the imagining of a nation. The idea of different people existing

¹ By “neighborhood,” it can be understood “situated communities characterized by their actuality, whether spatial or virtual, and their potential for social reproduction” (APPADURAI, 2007: p. 179).

simultaneously under the same community was made possible by devices such as newspapers and novels. The classic novel, where the point of view of the narrator enables him not to be limited by what an individual person (or particular character) might know, creates what Anderson (1983) calls an “omniscient reader” within a geographically bounded space. The formal encompassing of different voices inside the novel (Bakhtin’s plurivocality) emulates and helps to fabricate the national community, with its assemblage of languages and styles, which is larger than any singular individual can know. In this sense, the role of the novel in constructing the nation acts on two levels: on the one side, there are the characters performing actions simultaneously (sometimes) unaware of one another; on the other side, there are readers, imagining that there are several other readers performing the same act as he or she, at the same time.

1.2. Identities: Race and Gender

Talking about the South of the United States entails talking about identities and, most of all, about difference, both internal and in relation to the rest of the country. At the heart of this difference lies an ever-recurring racial tension and the memory of slavery, which brings to the fore a social relationship that blacks, up to this day, have never been fully able to escape. This relationship is based on white power and oppression and reached its most salient forms within American history in the geographical space of the South. But the effects of racism are still very present throughout the country and can be seen in the marginal positions held by black people within American society. Amidst poststructuralist theoretical discussions on what it is that identity conveys, the reality of racism comes as less abstract in the lives of black people who are not free from the definitions of others, be it in an eighteenth-century report on how racial characteristics determine black mental capacities as inferior², or in contemporary racial profiling practices, that target black young man in particular.

A recent controversial case of racial profiling happened in August 2014, in Ferguson, Missouri, when a white policeman shot to death an 18-year-old black boy named Michael Brown. Brown was interpellated while walking in the street with a friend and, after a series of events that are not yet fully explained, received several

² See David Hume, *Of National Characters* (1948).

gunshots, even though he was unarmed and had surrendered. Brown's death is not a rare event and only got such media attention after protesters went out to the streets of Ferguson claiming for justice. In the aftermath, Darren Wilson, the white cop that shot Brown, was not indicted by the Grand Jury as responsible for Brown's death and is now free of charges. In another incident, this time in Staten Island, Eric Garner died after a police officer submitted him to a chokehold for 15 seconds. Garner was accused of selling loose cigarettes on a sidewalk, and when he complained about being harassed by the police officers, they tried to arrest him. When Garner escaped, officer Daniel Pantaleo grabbed him back and put his arm around Garner's neck. When Pantaleo finally loosened his arm, Garner said only "I can't breathe" and died some time later.

That the integrity of black bodies can be violated without raising the same concern that is shown in regard to white bodies is an evidence of a social disorder that regards the black individual as invisible. Racial profiling is just another manifestation of a racism that seems to change its forms over time, but never seems to cease existing. From lynching and segregation during Jim Crow laws to racial profiling, since the abolition of slavery blacks have been restrained from leading normal lives with the rest of the "society" through myths imposed through institutionalized discursive practices that contribute to the cycle of violence in the formation of the subject. Even the fact that violence suffered by a black young man is advertised by the media as racially motivated, whilst the violence suffered by black women is barely advertised at all, or is simply not regarded as a racial problem, is an example of how these discursive practices continually constitute subjects in marginality, maintaining a hierarchy of property that regards bodies as merchandises, where black women are regarded as the least valuable assets. Black identity emerges then as a response against a complex context of power structures, in which the black person is simplistically and arbitrarily associated with a series of characteristics and values (generally derogatory) that are not always in accordance with reality and that serve purposes of social control. But this process that forms black identity happens within the same terms of the discursive practices to which the response is directed.

But what does language (and literature) have to do with identity formation in general, and with black identity – and black women's identity – in particular? Language is the means through which subjects seek representation. Representation, however, has a controversial functioning, since it can be both "the operative term

within a political process that seeks to extend visibility and legitimacy” to certain categories, and “the normative function of a language which is said either to reveal or to distort what is assumed to be true” about those certain categories (BUTLER, 2007: p. 2). So, first of all, it is through representation in language that marginal categories seek political visibility. But how do those marginalities operate as categories? Contemporary theory suggests that the idea of a subject, of an “I” prior to representation does not exist, since political and linguistic “representation” sets the terms for the subjects they will later come to represent. Butler argues, in a revision of Foucault’s positionings on the subject, that becoming a subject is paradoxically also being subjected to a power, but this process does not act unilaterally:

The customary model for understanding this process goes as follows: power imposes itself on us, and, weakened by its force, we come to internalize or accept its terms. What such an account fails to note, however, is that the “we” who accept such terms are fundamentally dependent on those terms for “our” existence. Are there not discursive conditions for the articulation of any “we”? Subjection consists precisely in this fundamental dependency on a discourse we never chose but that, paradoxically, initiates and sustains our agency (BUTLER, 1997: p. 2).

For the black experience, in particular, the relationship between discursive practices and subjectivity is problematical: whereas Africans’ inability to write was a proof of their lower place in the “Great Chain of Being” and the justification for their enslavement, writing was the commodity they had to exchange in order to be considered humans. Following the humanist faith in the ability of language to represent the truth of the subject, slaves found in the autobiographical report the instrument that would free them and that would make the “white world” see blacks in their essence, because language’s capacity to record subjectivities is what enables agency. But poststructuralism draws attention to how language not only enables the subject to express oneself, but also structures the existence of the subject, after all, there is a grammar that makes the “I” possible.

If the status of the black identity has been a difficult issue since blacks were taken from West Africa to become slaves in America, the status of the black woman is doubly problematic, because the search for political representation within both black and feminist movements excludes the existence of black women. Discussing gender specifically, the idea that the aim of feminism is to pursue political representation for the category of women led to exclusionary practices, for what does ‘women’ stand for? The logic that there is a stable subject prior to representation has been called into question since it was proposed that juridical systems of power not

only represent subjects but also *produce* subjects. The subject of feminism thus becomes discursively constituted *in accordance* with the structures of power that are supposed to emancipate it.

The domains of political and linguistic ‘representation’ set out in advance the criterion by which subjects themselves are formed, with the result that representation is extended only to what can be acknowledged as a subject. In other words, the qualifications for being a subject must first be met before representation can be extended. (BUTLER, 2007: p. 2)

The problem of the subject is that it is politically produced according to exclusionary practices that become naturalized and concealed by the juridical structure. So it becomes the imperative of feminism not only to seek representation for women, but also to understand how the category of “women” (the subject of feminism) is formed by the juridical system through which emancipation is sought. The “subject before the law” falls to the ground when it is raised the possibility that there is not a temporal “before” where the subject might be found on its ontological integrity and so the “performative invocation of a nonhistorical ‘before’ becomes the foundational premise that guarantees a presocial ontology of persons who freely consent to be governed and, thereby, constitute the legitimacy of the social contract” (BUTLER, 2007: p. 4).

But even more crucial to the present analysis is the political problem of the common identity presumed by the term “women”. The notion of “women” as a stable signifier excludes the differences of historical contexts and the possibility of intersections between race, class, ethnicity, etc. To assume that there is a universal basis for feminism means to assume that there is also a universal structure of patriarchy, by which women are oppressed. This view, according to Butler, enables the understanding of gender oppression within marginal cultures as a consequence of an essential *non-Western barbarism*. Butler questions if there is something common among “women” that is prior to their oppression or if “women” is an identity bounded by its subordination to the masculine. To this, she states:

The masculine/feminine binary constitutes not only the exclusive framework in which that specificity can be recognized, but in every other way the “specificity” of the feminine is once again fully decontextualized and separated off analytically and politically from the constitution of class, race, ethnicity, and other axes of power relations that both constitute “identity” and make the singular notion of identity as a misnomer (BUTLER, 2007: p. 6).

Considering the articulation of a stable subject as a requirement of representational politics, it can be understood that this insistence on a unity of the category of women

that ignores the multiplicity of intersections by which concrete “women” are constructed, is itself a form of construction of those “women” that do not respond to the requirements of the category as marginal.

The problem of the subjectivity granted to women is only granted to women who engage in Western humanistic discourse, or women that seek to be regarded within the academic framework. In this context, “Other” women only become the objects of the discourse of Western feminism. However, how is this objectivation of the marginalized women to be avoided, when the search for authenticity in marginalized groups reaches the same objectivation, once the voice of a self is taken to represent a whole group – and it does so the language that is available to it? It is naïve for marginalized groups to believe that writing can convey the whole of their experience, as rich as it is in reality, without yielding anything, without losing something in the process, since language is not a transparent medium. This “bind of self-expression” is defined by Butler in the preface of *Gender Trouble*, as she questions her own endeavor:

I do not believe that poststructuralism entails the death of autobiographical writing, but it does draw attention to the difficulty of the ‘I’ to express itself through the language that is available to it. For this ‘I’ that you read is in part a consequence of the grammar that governs the availability of persons in language. I am not outside the language that structures me, but neither am I determined by the language that makes this ‘I’ possible. This is the bind of self-expression, as I understand it. What it means is that you never receive me apart from the grammar that establishes my availability to you. If I treat that grammar as pellucid, then I fail to call attention precisely to that sphere of language that establishes and disestablishes intelligibility, and that would be precisely to thwart my own project as I have described it to you here. I am not trying to be difficult, but only to draw attention to a difficulty without which no ‘I’ can appear (BUTLER, 2007, p. xxv-xxvi).

In *The Literary in Theory* (2007), Jonathan Culler points to a tendency of contemporary theory to relate (the distinctiveness of) the literary not to the specificity of its language but “to the staging of agency on the one hand, and to engagements with otherness on the other” (p. 29). The role of literature in making one self-conscious relies, then, on its ability to render the complexity of different situations, enabling the advent of conflicts of value and principle. This agency is associated with the concept of the *concrete universal*:

To understand myself as agent is to see myself both in a concrete situation determined by my particular past and yet able to consider alternative courses of action by debating what is appropriate for *someone* in my situation to do and thus to consider choices open to a certain type of agent – a type which I am only one possible example (CULLER, 2007: p. 30).

The agency Culler stresses is connected to our ability to see characters as individuals and, furthermore, to the structure of exemplarity in literature. Even though it is not clear what particular literary works are exemplary *of*, this question underlines the whole matter of representation and culminates in what we call the “universality” of literature. To the structure of exemplarity, Culler (2007: p. 34) associates the relationship between literature and the “problem of identity”, because literature proposes diverse models of how identity is formed, by constantly questioning if “the self [is] something given or something made, and [if it] should be conceived in individual or in social terms”. Culler (2007: p. 35) points to a tension between theoretical thinking and literary work (we arrive at “a crux of the literary in theory”), on the basis that, while literature represents individuals, and “struggles about identity are struggles within the individual and between individual and group”, theoretical discussions on social identity tend to focus on group identities. The question of exemplarity turns, then, to readers (or theorists), for they are the ones who “decide” what the characters stand for. In this sense, the literary can also function as a source of agency in theory, where the locus of the critic will determine how works are interpreted and read.

The question of what identity means, as suggested above, is central to contemporary theory. This “problem” derives from poststructuralist thinking, which proposes that the transcendental Subject (with a capital “S”), as well as all essential binarisms that derive from it, is socially constructed. The death of the Subject makes it possible for other subjects to appear, up to a point where we reach the “death of the death of the subject” (LACLAU, 1995: p. 94) and identities become deconstructed so as to lose their essential character, something that eventually leads to the end of fixed identities and to an utmost confusion of what is the actual meaning of the term “identity” as well as its plural, “identities”. For instance: if marginal groups seek representation in order to escape marginality and since representational politics require the articulation of a stable subject (which is *produced* by that same juridical structure that is said to represent it), the search for representation can turn out to be an exclusionary practice, if the identity of a certain group can only exist to the extent that it excludes certain intersections of identities.

First of all, it is necessary to question the historical forms in which the relation between particularity and universality appears. In classical ancient philosophy, it is impossible to unify the particular (related to irrationality) and the universal (related to

rationality), because they are self-excluding. For one to happen, the other has to cease. Another way of looking at this relation is through Christianity. The universal in this case is God's view and we, as humans, cannot access it, unless through revelation. The dividing line is no longer one that differentiates irrationality from rationality, but one that distinguishes finite events, with a contingent succession, from those of an eschatological series, according to Laclau (1995). This type of relation is called *incarnation* and "its distinctive feature [is] that between the universal and the body incarnating it there is no rational connection whatsoever" (LACLAU, 1995: p. 96). From here arose the *privileged agent of History*, whose body is incarnated by a transcending universality.

In modernity, the logic of incarnation is substituted by rationality: God is replaced by Reason. The incarnated body had to be explained by human reason and so it took place the hegemonic logic of Eurocentric rationalism, and the dividing line was placed between a foolish past and a rational future. Eventually, in a last phase of this stage, the body of the proletariat ceased to be particular and passed on to being universal, cancelling, therefore, the distinction between both, and making the logic of incarnation no longer necessary. But at this point "social reality refused to abandon its resistance to universalistic rationalism" (LACLAU, 1995, p. 97) and it began to appear that the relation of the particular body of European culture that stood for universal human essence was a problematic one. At the same time that the logic of incarnation was cancelled by the construction of European universalism, this would mean the cancelling of the universalization of a particularism, or, the cancelling of itself. But how to conceive this, when imperialistic motives drove Europe to come into conflict with other cultures, which were considered particular against European Universalism? Thus, the logic of incarnation was reintroduced, with Europe standing for universal human interests (as the "establishment of a universally freed society of planetary dimensions" (LACLAU, 1995: p. 98)). The only difference between the Christian logic of incarnation and the Eurocentric logic of incarnation is that there was no longer a supernatural power regulating the advent of the universal, so it became necessary to establish "an *essential* inequality between the objective positions of the social agents" (LACLAU, 1995: p. 98).

It can be concluded, then, that the universal is only a particular that became dominant: the two sides will always be "unbridgeable". Even if we were to consider that all particularisms can coexist with each other in a coherent whole, one

differentiated from the other, there would still be the need for a total, against which difference is developed, and that will be an absolute object. This opens the way for thinking of identity as dependent on relations of power: a subject can only be a subject in relation to an Other. “I cannot assert a differential identity without distinguishing it from a context, and, in the process of making the distinction, I am asserting the context at the same time” (LACLAU, 1995: p. 100). Here we come across the problematic of the constitutive roles of the parts, as, for instance, when the identity of the marginalities is defined by the center, as well as it helps defining it.

1.3. Subjects in Repetition: Resistance and Resignification

Subjection is the process of the making of a subject and implies regulations that will discursively constitute the identity of that subject. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault argues that this regulatory process does not take place as an exterior relation of power but, as the name suggests, the individual is made into a subject, formed into a subject, through an operation that is centered in the body. In the process of becoming a subject, who is made to approximate an ideal, a norm of behavior, the subject loses his individuality and becomes totalized in its identity. This normative ideal is, in Butler’s terms, a kind of “psychic identity”, the prison of the body, which Foucault will name as soul and which stands for the workings of totalizing identities. Butler compares Foucault’s soul with the psyche in the psychoanalytical sense, where “the ideal of the subject might be understood as the ego-ideal which the superego is said, as it were, to consult in order to measure the ego” (1995, p. 231), or, in Lacan’s descriptions, the ideal functions as the symbolic norm which fixes the subject within language.

However, if for Foucault the soul represents the prison of the body, for psychoanalysis the psyche is what resists the normative demands by which the subject is constituted, because that which remains unconscious is what escapes the prison of the coherent and totalizing identity. On these terms of comparison, Butler argues that the Foucauldian reduction of the psyche to an externally framing ideal leaves the interiority of the body as a malleable surface upon which only the unilateral effects of the Lacanian symbolic (or regulatory power) will act. Butler defends her (partly) psychoanalytical criticism of Foucault by arguing that one cannot claim that an individual is the “principle of his own subjection”, as argued by Foucault, without

recurring to a psychoanalytical account of the formative effects of restriction. Such an exposition of Foucault through the lenses of psychoanalytical theory is of great importance to this study because of the weight that generative effects of prohibition had on the formation of Negro identity. But the opposite is also true in Butler's analysis, since the idea of the unconscious as the single locus of resistance is revised under the Foucauldian light.

What comes under scrutiny is accounting for resistance to subject-formation in both Foucault and psychoanalysis in order to rethink the problematic of subjection and resistance to it. Butler raises two questions: if Foucault understands the psyche in service of normativeness, then how does he account for the resistance to normalization lodged in the unconscious? And is the resistance to normalization which psychoanalysis attributes to the unconscious, not socially and discursively produced? If we consider that the psychic resistance to subject formation is attributed to the impossibility of keeping unconscious what Freud argued as ideas that represent instincts, we come to a problem of biological determination, for instincts are fixed in what Butler (2007, p. 11) calls the "biology-is-destiny formulation", something that cannot be grasped and it is thus attributed to uncontrollable biological forces. This formulation does not account for a resistance that has the power to rewrite the discursive and regulatory demands of normalization.

In *History of Sexuality* Foucault argues that power acts on the body and in the body, pervading the interiority of the subject. But this notion implies that there is interiority prior to the invasion and, giving that the Foucauldian soul is exterior to the body, Butler raises the question of what is interiority for Foucault and argues that even though Foucault suggests that the body can only be produced through power-relations, sometimes his explanations entail a materiality of the body as a site of investment that does not depend on power-relations. In *Discipline and Punish*, however, Foucault's explanations for the relation between materiality and investment are distinct from the ones he sustains in *History of Sexuality*. In the former, the soul is a normative ideal, under which the body is materialized in direct relation to the investment of power, thus, there is no body outside of (or prior to) power. Here, it is "at the expense of the body that the subject appears, an appearance which is conditioned in an inverse relation to the disappearance of the body, an appearance of a subject which not only effectively takes the place of the body, but acts as the very soul which frames and forms the body in captivity" (BUTLER, 1995, p. 236). Butler

raises the question whether the emergence of the dissociated self at the expense of the sublimation of the body does not leave behind some bodily remainder which, she argues, survives as a “kind of constitutive lost”, being the formation of the subject the mode in which the destruction of the body is preserved in normalization. It is not, however, (only) in the return of the body to a non-normalized state that Foucault points as a possibility of subversion, but resistance appears as the effect of power itself, as its “self-subversion”. As the subject produced through subjection is repeatedly constituted, repetition represents the possibility of the effects that undermine normative investments, through a reversal of signification that happens in time, where the initial term mutates into different signifying possibilities. But from where does the resistance emerge? Butler resorts to the Althusserian notion of interpellation, where the subject is constituted by the performative act of naming, like in Lacan’s call of the symbolic constitution. In this attempt of symbolic constitution of the identity, the domain of the imaginary is the possibility of misrecognition or it is what derails the performative process of the discursive constitution of the identity. While in *Discipline and Punish* Foucault assumes the efficacy of the symbolic constitution of identity, in *History of Sexuality* he refuses the existence of a single locus of resistance (like, for instance, the psyche, the unconscious or the imaginary) and asserts that resistance occurs in multiple forms enabled by power itself. Psychic resistance, according to Butler, is doomed to perpetual failure, because even though it thwarts the effects of the law it opposes, it is unable to rewrite that same law. Foucault’s formulation of resistance, on the other hand, takes in account the duality of being “constituted” by the law and being “an effect of resistance” to the law, with the Lacanian symbolic becoming relations of power and resistance being an effect to those relations of power. Power for Foucault not only addresses the interpellating demands that act on the subject but it is formative and productive, thus, discursive investments do not unilaterally constitute a subject, or, if they do, they constitute “simultaneously the condition for the subject’s de-constitution” (BUTLER, 1995, p. 241). The subject only remains a subject through the reinstitution of itself as a subject and the progressive usage creates the conditions for a “subversive reterritorialization”.

1.4. "Race"

"Race" is not a thing. Contemporary biology poses that the concept of "race" is misleading for describing differences among human groups. So, when we speak of "race" we are talking about a construct based on natural features, which gained its status as a biological criterion in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, when it was expected from biology a universal sanction for these constructs as essential. But "race", according to Gates is not a report on reality, it is rather an arbitrary construct, a trope applied to describe and *inscribe* differences between groups, cultures, religions and languages and between "natural" attributes, such as athletic ability, gene pool, fidelity, etc. This *racialism*, according to Todorov, existed more as a cultural category than as a physical one, because nineteenth-century racist thinkers (with some exceptions, like Gobineau) had already realized that there was no such thing as purity of blood. "The word 'race' thus became virtually synonymous with what we ourselves call 'culture,' and nineteenth century racialism subsists today in the idea of cultural difference" (TODOROV, 1986: p. 373).

Discourse played an important role in inscribing differences as fixed categories and language became, more than a medium, a sign of this construction: language reifies the differences between cultures and the relations of power between them. Gates sustains that these usages of language developed as Western culture and traditions (Judeo-Christian and Greco-Roman) established their domination over other cultures of "color". Writing was used as a tool in service of maintaining Western control over other cultures. In particular, the formal production of literature was the definite proof of the capacity (or incapacity) of others in relation to the European. Gates (1986: p. 3) traces back to Hippolyte-Adolphe Taine the usage of "race" as "positivistic criteria" in the analysis of literature. What Taine understood by "race" was the essence of man, "the source of all structures of feeling and thought". This process of allying "race" and writing began because, since René Descartes, *reason* was the single most important human characteristic. Writing was a visible sign of reason and the lack of the ability to write (or to master the "arts and sciences") meant the absence of humanity. In other terms, since the "discovering" of other "races" during the Renaissance, Europeans chose art (especially in the written form) to be the element of comparison between them and those different "races". "Race" became, then, a fixed category that established the mental capacity, the physical appearance,

the behavior and, by extension, that which determined the relegation of black people to a lower place in the great chain of being, a construct that, following the rule of systematization that characterizes the Enlightenment, organized all creations in a vertical scale, from plants to animals to man and up to God. Because writing, for blacks, meant the right to go up a few steps in the chain of being, it did not represent an act of creativity, but a commodity they would exchange for their humanity.

Gates claims that in most European texts about Africans, *writing* was the primary category for measuring their humanity, their place in the chain of being. To this, it can be argued that the act of imposing writing to other cultures as the pathway to achieving reason is in itself an act of violence. “No, blacks could not achieve any true presence by speaking, since their “African”-informed English seems to have only underscored their status as *sui generis*, as distinct in spoken language use as in their peculiarly “black” color” (GATES, 1989. p. 6). Thus, writing became an instrument in favor of maintaining a political order created by Europeans. Ironically, at the same time that the Africans’ “incapacity” to write was a proof of their lower evolutionary status, legal impediments were created to keep them from writing.

By mid-eighteenth century, Hume (1748) wrote about the “characteristics” of the world’s division in “species of men”:

I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general all the other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be naturally inferior to the whites. There never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation. No ingenious manufacturers amongst them, no arts, no sciences... Such a uniform and constant difference could not happen, in so many countries and ages, if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men. Not to mention our colonies, there are Negroe slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity... (HUME, 2012, loc: 2230).

Echoing Hume, Kant relates color and intelligence in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) and asserts the connection between blacks and stupidity as a fact. Following the same track, Hegel claims that the absence of systems of writing in the African culture indicated they had no history. According to Gates the point Hegel makes about there being no African written history suggests an important role played by *memory*: “without writing, no *repeatable* sign of the workings of reason, of mind, could exist. Without memory or mind, no history could exist. Without history, no humanity, as defined consistently from Vico to Hegel, could exist” (GATES, 1986: p. 11).

The Africans' discursive "silence" was, for Western critical thought, a proof of their absence of humanity. Thus, Africans took upon themselves the challenge to respond to these allegations of there being no African history and therefore no African humanity by writing books, poetry, autobiographies and creating, through the recording of the black voice, both the "I" of the individual black author and the "I" of the collective experience of race. Black's individual histories would sum up to a great collective history of both African and Anglo-African blacks. This was a movement toward minimizing race distinctions. The first slave narratives - the first chain of black signifiers, published in England between 1760 and 1789 - signified upon the chain of being by the simple act of writing because, by creating literature, they criticized the chain of being and their place in it and inaugurated the "Other's chain". But how could writing in the terms imposed by the Western tradition represent black freedom, when it was what secured black enslavement in the first place? Or, to put it another way: "how can a black subject posit a full and sufficient self in a language in which blackness is a sign of absence?" (GATES, 1986: p. 5).

The function and nature of black literature has been a complex subject for black critical discourse, because, from the first slave narratives, writing carried the burden of functionality and served as an evidence of blacks' "humanity": they had to write themselves into the human community. The critical Western discourse set the terms of this equation by claiming that literacy led to freedom from slavery and to equality between Europeans and blacks. The black literary tradition entered this dialectic with the Western critical discourse and embraced the terms of the equation not only by accepting the arbitrary idea that the formal production of literature had to be used in service of the progress of the "race", as a political and social instrument, but by stating that literature had to think "of itself as essentially just one more front of the race's war against racism" (GATES, 1989: p. xvii), a theory of the function of art that, by the New Negro Renaissance, had become prescriptive.

The beginnings of the black literary tradition are, to say the least, ironic: the claim of African's absence led to a literature that stated their presence but did not free them from having to engage in a dialogue with the critical discourse that asserted their absence in the first place. In *The Uncompleted Argument*, Appiah analyzes W.E.B. Du Bois writings and claims that even though Du Bois proposed to move away from the biological conception of race toward a sociohistorical one, he did not succeed in "escaping from race" (APPIAH, 1986: p. 35), but rather, he reevaluated black race in

relation to the sciences of racial inferiority. Du Bois asserted difference by proposing that a collective work in developing the black race as a group was necessary for blacks to make their contribution to humanity. Appiah deconstructs the ties that, Du Bois argues, would unite this “vast family of human beings, generally of common blood and language, always of common history, traditions and impulses [...]” (DU BOIS, 1970: p. 76) and arrives at the biological conception from which Du Bois tried to separate himself from, and concludes that Du Bois assigns to the black race a metaphysical role.

From its origins black literature was a form of accusation of social and political institutions, so content (or the theme of the “black experience”) became privileged over form.

Structure, by now, was atomized. Form was merely a surface for a reflection of the world, the world here being an attitude toward race; form was a repository for the disposal of ideas; message was not only meaning but value; poetic discourse was taken to be literal, or once removed; language lost its capacity to be metaphorical in the eyes of the critic; the poem approached the essay, with referents immediately perceivable; literalness precluded the view of life as allegorical; and black critics forgot that writers approached things through words, not the other way around. The functional and didactic aspects of formal discourse assumed primacy in normative analysis. The confusion of realms was complete: the critic became the social reformer, and literature became an instrument for the social and ethical betterment of the black person (GATES, 1989: p. 30).

Gates claims that a pervasive sense of urgency and unity has doomed the Afro-American tradition from its start, because language was used as a means for personal and social mobility, conferring a secondary place to judgments of literary nature. Much of what is said (even by the black critic discourse) to be characteristic of black literature is based on received ideas consisting of simplistic generalizations. The prevalence of the theme of black experience took into consideration only the socio-cultural context, external to the literary work, as if form was something that simply had to be filled by a politically accepted content. The connection between literacy and political rights is fundamental to understanding the received ideas that both compelled the Negro Arts and constituted the context of white critical discourse (that was, among other things, used to justify the institution of slavery) with which black literature would engage in a dialectical relation. On the claim that black culture has a collective ethos, Gates argues that black history (literary and extraliterary) is characterized by a tension between the perceptions of an individual who seeks representation and the white public perceptions of that individual.

The claim that black culture is characterized by a collective ethos most definitely demands some qualification, since our history, literary and extra-literary, often turns on a tension, a dialectic, between the private perceptions of an individual and the white public perceptions of an individual and the white public perceptions of that same individual (GATES, 1989: p. 37).

Considering what Gates calls an “ironic circular thread of interpretation” (1989: p. 28), where physical blackness becomes metaphysical blackness, in a process of recording of the black voice that preserved a difference that was first asserted by white critical discourse and that originated the tradition of black difference, the role of black criticism has always been tied with (even though, in some instances, it seeks to repudiate) Western theory. One of the consequences of this movement has been the Afro-American tradition’s tendency to expect black literature to present an “essence” of blackness, as if it were an objective category in the analysis of literature. By doing this, Gates suggests, black literary tradition yields too much and becomes reductionist. For Gates, if there is a “relationship between social and literary ‘facts’” (1989: p. 41) it must be found through the analysis of the work’s structures of meanings, through close textual reading, and not by the measure of correspondence between a writer and his or her world.

1.5. Intersectionality: the Double Burden of the Black Woman

The experience of the black woman is largely marked by being excluded from the groups that “define” her in language – blacks and women, as a consequence of racial and sexual specificity, respectively. Freedom for black male slaves meant the possibility of being active citizens within the American culture, since the representation they sought was intended to grant them access to a political system that had so far deemed them marginal.

While many black activists sympathized with the cause of women’s rights advocates, they were not willing to lose their own chance to gain the vote. Black women were placed in a double bind; to support women’s suffrage would imply that they were allying themselves with white women activists who had publicly revealed their racism, but to support only black male suffrage was to endorse a patriarchal social order that would grant them no political voice” (HOOKS, 1981, p. 3).

Gaining the right to vote represented the ultimate recognition of blacks as a participant group on the decisions of the country – and of their lives – and white male support for the vote of black males and not of women (black and white) marked a schism in the solidarity between women, since white women felt impelled to draw

analogies between “women” and “blacks”, as if there was not a link between them, as if the black women did not exist or matter.

According to Hooks (1981), in its earliest stages, the slave trade focused on African men, since they were more valuable as merchandise than African females. Until the establishment of anti-amalgamation laws³, in colonial times, white females were encouraged or coerced to engage in sexual relations with black men, given the shortage of workers and low numbers of black women in America. When a new law established that the offspring of white women and black men would be free, planters then began to perceive the economic advantages of breeding black female slaves, because their offspring, regardless of the race of the father, was legally considered property of the master. According to Hooks, observers of nineteenth century African culture reported that African women were not only subdued to African men, but they were also responsible for working in services that demanded great physical effort. Planters realized that, besides from breeding and performing domestic tasks, female slaves could also be put to work in the fields.

The oppressive experience of slavery, however, did not begin at the plantations. While still in Africa, families and tribes were separated and their members were imprisoned and sent to America in slave ships. It was in these ships that African men and women were “initiated” in what Bell Hooks (1981, p. 19) calls an “indoctrination process”, whose ultimate aim was to repress the African’s awareness of themselves as free people, and that would culminate in the imposition to “break” the slave identity onto captive Africans. The traumatic experience of terror and fear aboard the ships was crucial to the process of preparation of slaves for the market. The absolute suspension of their prior identities played an important role on this process, through “the destruction of human dignity, the removal of names and status, the dispersement of groups so that there would exist no common language, and the removal of any overt sign of an African heritage” (Hooks, 1981, p. 19). Hortense Spillers (1987) relates the displacement of Africans through the loss of land, name, kin and language, to a suspension of gender difference.

Those African persons in “Middle Passage” were literally suspended in the “oceanic,” if we think of the latter in its Freudian orientation as an analogy for undifferentiated identity: removed from the indigenous land and culture, and not-yet “American” either, these captive persons, without

³ According to Hooks (1981), the first anti-amalgamation law was passed in Maryland, in 1664.

names that their captors would recognize, were in movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all. (SPILLERS, 1981, p. 72)

According to Spillers, as human cargo aboard the slave ships, Africans represent a possibility, undifferentiated until it reaches the land. Gender is lost and both black females and males convert into *quantities*.

In the ships, methods of torture were used by slave traders to impose fear and control over the slaves. Such methods included, according to reports by slaves who had gone through the middle passage, branding with hot iron, beatings, brutalizing, among other forms of terror. The process of becoming a slave, Spillers argues, is centered on the body, because only when the captive body becomes less than human, becomes a *thing*, the subject position is lost. The distinction between flesh and body marks, for Spillers, the distinction between captive and liberated subject positions. The “hieroglyphs of the flesh” trace the markings of tortures, of beatings, by ruptures, divisions of human tissue, wounds made through the action of whips, irons, knives. These hieroglyphs stand for the frontiers of the body marked by ethnicity in the culture, or the distance between what Spillers names “cultural *vestibularity*” and “*culture*”.

hooks argues that, while African male slaves were regarded as possible threats and were chained to one another, slave traders did not thought that African female slaves represented any possibility of resistance, thus slavers could exercise total and absolute power over black female slaves and their bodies. To Spillers, however, granting that the African female was responsible for tasks of physical labor, conceding such “docility” to the female slave seems questionable, although there are no evidences that link the female slave to insurrectionary activity. There is, on the other hand, counter-evidence: the fact that the sexual vulnerability of black female slaves was commonly explored through torture methods such as rape and other forms of sexual assault and the fact that it was not uncommon for African females to land in America already pregnant of their captivators. “However, we might guess that the ‘reproduction of mothering’ in this historic instance carries few of the benefits of a *patriarchalized* female gender, which, from one point of view, is the *only* female gender there is” (SPILLERS, 1987: p. 73).

hooks sustains that the black female had to endure a peculiar condition, since her most salient “characteristics”, being black and female, made her more liable to being explored. More than just a case of satisfaction of masculine sexual lust – a

stance that normalizes this kind of behavior –, the rape of black women was an institutionalized form of terrorism perpetrated by white men as a means to obtain control and obedience to a white imperialistic order. By imposing a system where the female slave could exchange her body for food, for safety (her own and her children's), or for attenuated punishments, the body of the black woman was turned into a commodity and set as a sexual object to be explored at the will of white men. A number of myths were created to demoralize black women and to legitimize a racist and misogynist social order that prevailed in colonial America. Even though the brutal treatment white men imposed to black women is mentioned in white abolitionist literature, the reports frequently meet a limit set by Victorian social decorum that prevents the full horror of the black female experience to be graphically exposed.

According to hooks, during the first centuries of colonization, laws that instituted sexual repression were enacted as a result of the fear provoked by the sexual liberty enabled by the wilderness of the colonies. Because Christian teachings related sexual desires to sin, following the logic that opposes body and mind, and because men thought themselves the personal agents of God, women were appointed as the causes for moral downfall and as the personification of sin. Through the projection onto women of the repressed masculine desire, women began to be viewed as sexual objects and to be oppressed through institutionalized sexist practices. In the nineteenth century, however, the status of white women changed: as long as they abnegated their sexuality, they could be idealized as glorified creatures, whose virtues inspired men and elevated their sentiments.

This change in the masculine perception of white women came at the same time that black women were being massively exploited in the plantations. In opposition to the image of the white virtuous woman, the black woman now stood as the “sexual savage”, in accordance with an identity that was largely imposed on Africans since they arrived at colonial America. Even though there was agreement as to the moral responsibility of white men who sexually assaulted enslaved black women, those black women were also seen as partly responsible for the abuses that happened to them, because they supposedly embodied lust and sin. Following what hooks calls the “trap” (1981: p. 33) of the language of the Victorian ethos, the situation of sexual exploitation that black women slaves were forced to endure was described as “prostitution” in abolitionist literature and even in autobiographical writings of former slaves. This lightening of the tone of the enslaved black woman's

traumatic experience by labeling it “prostitution” not only made white men less accountable for the oppressive acts they performed, but also reinforced and helped perpetuating the myth of the black woman as sexually permissive, as a “sexual savage”. In a sneaky move, discourse again is formative: rape exists only when the victim is a white woman, since savages or non-humans cannot be raped.

Sexism, however, was not limited to white men. The development of a black slave sub-culture based on the patriarchal model of white America saw the repetition of the same sex roles that instated the higher status of black men over black women. As black women assimilated the female role as defined by patriarchy, slavery became even more demoralizing to them, since they could not fulfill the ideal of “true womanhood” while performing masculine tasks, such as working in the fields.

The fact that enslaved black women were forced to labor as ‘men’ and to exist independently of male protection and provision did not lead to the development of a feminist consciousness. They did not advocate social equality between the sexes. Instead they bitterly resented that they were not considered ‘women’ by the dominant culture and therefore were not the recipients of the considerations and privileges given white women. Modesty, sexual purity, innocence, and a submissive manner were the qualities associated with womanhood and femininity that enslaved black women endeavored to attain even though the conditions under which they lived continually undermined their efforts. When freedom came, black women resolved to cease their labor in the fields (hooks, 1981: pp. 48-9).

The myths about black women that were perpetrated during slavery did not cease as black slaves were freed. To restrict the consequences of sexual exploitation to the context of slavery is to consciously ignore the impacts that such socially sanctioned forms of oppression had on black women. The continued devaluation of black womanhood had formative effects not only in the social status of black women, but also in the American psyche. When slavery ended, the relationship between women of race and untraditional behavior was a given. Even though most black women slaves conformed to the sexual morality of white American culture and believed that virginity was their ideal physical state, they could not be protected against sexual exploitation and, according to the terms imposed by patriarchy, “they were seen as having lost value and worth as a result of the humiliation they endured” (Hooks, 1981, p. 53). During Reconstruction, black women tried to copy the mannerisms of white women in order to change negative images of black womanhood but faced enduring oppressive practices that aimed at maintaining social control over black people. The social advances made by blacks after the end of slavery were evidence that the idea of a hierarchy based on racial inferiority was absurd, and that

the coexistence between blacks and whites in America was possible. To this, whites reacted with new exclusionary practices, from laws, such as Jim Crow's, to social taboos, all of which intended to restore the old social order and to suppress racial miscegenation. Two myths were especially damaging for the black identity: the myth of the "bad" black woman and the myth of the black rapist.

2. THE BLACK EXPERIENCE IN AMERICA: CONTEXT

2.1. Southern Literature:

If we assert that there is a Southern literature, which differentiates itself from the general category of North American literature, it is implied that we also believe in the existence of a “South”. Not only in the sense of a geographical boundary, but as a place whose regional identity is definable as a set of something or other, which can be distinguished and traced as local, or as exclusive of this place. But if we can hardly put our finger on what it is that makes Southern identity Southern, how can we distinguish its literature from the literature written in the rest of the country? This is a two way street: Southern identity exists, among other things, because it has a regional culture – and a regional literature –, at the same time, Southern literature can only be grouped under the same category because there is a Southern identity to start with. Our starting point will be the founding of the Virginia colony as the foundation of a discourse that will prevail and later will become Southern literature.

Literature from Artur Barlow’s expedition (1584), the first to be sent to Virginia by Sir Walter Raleigh, portrayed America as a paradise, comparing it to the Garden of Eden, as when sailors explored the land and were astonished to discover an abundance “as in the first creation, without toil or labor” (in LEMAY, 1985: p. 13). Even though the first attempts to colonize the Virginia wilderness ended up being failures (or perhaps because of it), it can be seen from Barlow’s account that the South, before it even properly existed, “began to assume the literary image of a transaction between pastoral dream and historical reality” (SIMPSON, 1985: p. 9). This is due partly to the way Englishmen imagined America: a wild, barbarian land, inhabited by unrefined and uncultivated people. For the colonizing process to play out successfully, America had to be sold as the land of opportunity. In fact, until 1618, when the Virginia Company implemented the Headright system, which granted fifty acres of land to the immigrants, the realization of the English colonization was not secured. In this context, promotion literature played an important role, not only in guaranteeing that America would be colonized, but also in shaping the imaginary around the meaning of the nation.

It is in antebellum literature, which emerged in the South in the seventeenth century, that we can first perceive an opposition between the Southern version of the great American transaction between dream and reality and the Northern (New England) one. At the heart of the difference between the views on the transaction supported by each region are distinct ideas on what the American nation should be:

For the North the truth embraced the indivisibility of the Union and, with increasing intensity in the decade before the Civil War, the abolition of slavery as the condition of a free and equal society. For the South the truth enfolded the idea of the sovereignty of state and section over the national power and, ultimately, the concept of a great slave society as the rational basis of freedom and equality (SIMPSON, 1985: p. 10).

The beginning of the negotiation between North and South that would culminate in the Civil War can be traced to the colonization period. Southern colonization, however, lacked the religious character of most European colonies of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries – a character that can, however, be found in the founding of New England – because its founders were more aligned with the modern institution that, at the time, was concerned with the critic of men, of God, of nature and of society as a whole. It was not the case that the colonization of the South was free from Christian religious influences, but Southern literature at large always presented traces fundamentally secular. And it is the cumulative effect of this secular inclination that will become the most important trace of antebellum Southern literature.

During the Civil War and the Reconstruction period the South entered a phase of nostalgic gazing upon its recent past. The loss of the Confederacy and the collapse of the social structure of the Old South, which was based upon slavery, represented a schism in Southern history and the literature written at the time fell short in portraying the changes undergoing in the region. Besides from the difficulties in publishing their books, Southern writers were expected to defend the Confederacy. This situation led to a difficult time in Southern literature that lasted from the 1850s to the 1870s. However, it was during this period that the foundation of what would become the Southern Renaissance was set. Although the Civil War had undermined Southern literature, in other ways it also helped its ulterior development. For one, the Southern regional identity was strengthened through the gathering of people under the Confederacy. Also, during the war and right after it ended, the South could count only on its regional literary resources and could no longer look upon the North (New England) or Europe for support. As a consequence of this isolation and of the subsequent reintegration with the North, the South went through a period of self-

reflection. Southerners had to understand and explain themselves. Thus Southern literature turned inward, to its people, its communities, its land and its language.

Southern writers began to write for people who shared the same cultural background and literary language absorbed the regional speech and became simpler than the styles employed in the antebellum period. Local dialects began to be depicted, as well as registers from all social classes. “The new national spirit after 1865, with its accompanying industrial and urban growth, stimulated a growing number of eager readers of emerging magazines both to celebrate sectional peculiarities and to escape from a world of growing complexity” (MUHLENFELD, 1985: p. 183). In the same period, a tension between the nostalgia for the past and the egalitarian ideals of the present began to arise. The social changes that occurred at the end of the war transformed social roles, like that of white women and black women and men. It was a period where social positions were reallocating, a period of search for affirming subjectivities that were so far alienated. Most writers still were the white Southerners, sometimes related to planters, or planters themselves, who saw the collapse of a glorious past and had to learn how to deal with a present where the end of slavery represented a threat to their superior social position. Thus the response to the emergence of a Negro literature, that intended to be a political and social instrument, came as a literature of escapism that idealized a return to the Old South, to the myth of the plantation life depicted in an idyllic form, like a state of purity that had been corrupted. This was a literature that did not mean to critique the Old South, but that somehow mourned the past through sentimental memories. And it was only after the collapse of the agrarian system based in slavery that the myth of the plantation life could be created.

The question of race, in particular, was a very complex subject for the new South. The rise of plantation fiction and the representation of the Old South under the aura of a Lost Eden needed black corroboration to seem more authentic, because blacks were eyewitnesses of the institution of slavery. From there the necessity of white Southern writers to use the resource of the black slave’s voice, which told in a convincing dialect his life in the plantation for “both a North and South ready to see slavery, once abolished, in a light that would facilitate reconciliation and make the Negro once again the Southerner’s problem” (MACKETHAN, 1985: p. 211). The simplicity and innocence addressed to the Negroes, generally described as children

who needed guidance from their masters, personified the spirit lost in the nation with the demise of the agrarian system. According to Mackethan, black characters in writing of white authors writing in the post-Civil War South, such as Joel Chandler Harris, Thomas Nelson Page and Irwin Russell, lacked any critical purpose and were described as victims of fortuity that felt dislocated and incapable of living outside the plantation world. However, black's supposed inability to fit properly in the postbellum world, more than a longing for times passed, is in fact the consequence of an institution that never allowed blacks to live as human beings. Charles Chesnutt picked up on those obvious injustices, imperceptible to white authors and to the white readership of the time. Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus served as a model for Chesnutt, who wrote consciously of what he was aiming at: to "lead people out, imperceptibly, unconsciously, step by step' to a recognition of the black American's human rights" (MACKETHAN, 1985: p. 216). Chesnutt found on the literary model and on the characters of the plantation fiction a way to undermine the effects that that literature was having – that is, to present slavery as a necessity of the Southern social structure and as an institution that was beneficial for both, planters and slaves.

The decades at the turn of the nineteenth century, from 1890 to 1920, are practically forgotten in Southern literature. The attachment to the idealization of the past (and of the future) prevented the possibility of any realistic criticism. Driven by an audience that expected literature to be escapist and idyllic, authors just imitated a style that was now exhausted, as described by the "savage ideal": that ideal "whereunder dissent and variety are completely suppressed and men become, in all their attitudes, professions, and actions, virtual replicas of one another" (HOBSON, 1985: p. 252). Critical temper began to arise as writers and critics that had left the South to study returned and saw it under a new light. Regardless, by the 1920s "the cultural index or plane of living of the South was the lowest in the nation" (1985: p. 262) and the region was the nation's number one economic problem. Ironically, it was precisely by this time that Southern literature relived in the Southern Renaissance, which concentrated in the region, for more than 30 years, most of the nation's relevant literary production. Even though the seed for what would become the Southern Renaissance can be traced back to the Reconstruction period, the reasons that led to this phenomenon are not clear. Allen Tate offers an explanation that takes into account the Southern isolation in relation to the rest of the country, which lasted

until the First World War: “with the war of 1914-1918, the South reentered the world – but gave a backward glance as it slipped over the border: that backward glance gave us the Southern renaissance, a literature conscious of the past in the present” (1968: p. 262). Southern writers now tried to understand the meaning of the past and tried to rediscover their connections to a regional tradition that differed from the rest of the country. The elements of this Southern tradition are summarized by Cleanth Brooks as follows:

[...] a feeling for the concrete and the specific, an awareness of conflict, a sense of community and of religious wholeness, a belief in human imperfection, and a genuine and never wavering disbelief in perfection ever developing as a result of human effort and planning; a deep-seated sense of the tragic, and a conviction that nature is mysterious and contingent (1985: p. 263)

2.2. The Black Literary Tradition

In August 1841, former slave Frederick Douglass narrated his life story for an audience in an antislavery convention in Nantucket, Massachusetts. There already existed periodicals that supported the anti-slavery cause, like the *Philanthropist* (established in 1817) and later the *Freedom's Journal* (the first black newspaper, founded in 1827) and the public was used to reading about the subject. However, the report of a slave delivered by he himself was something new. This came in accordance with the need of early black literature to serve as reportage, in order to satisfy a public curious for understanding the peculiar institution of slavery and its workings. As a response to the growing popularity of the abolitionist movement in the North and to the movement's preoccupation in exposing the reality of slavery, the South hardened its position in supporting slavery in the 1830s and began to consider it (and to represent it, among other forms, in literature) no longer as a “necessary evil”, but as a “positive good”. The emphasis was on the “blessing” that was the slaves' ignorance: they were happier and freer when living in the plantations, under the rule of their masters, where they were not obligated to think for themselves – an ability that so far blacks had to prove being capable of. The happiness of the plantation life was explored not only in literature, but also in lithographs and prints that depicted the slaves joyfully dancing around their cabins, while the elderly black “uncle” played his banjo. The images created and propagated by slave-holders demanded counter images, of which the best source were the highly popular autobiographical narratives

of former slaves, whether in form of publication, or discourses in public platforms. “Every narrative was another report from the front lines, and these were no ‘remembrances recollected in tranquility.’ These were, as Angelina Grimké characterized an escaped slave’s narrative, reports that ‘came burning from his own lips’” (PETESCH, 1989: p. 7).

The idea that Black literature is characterized by a mimetic quality originated in the slave narratives. Blacks struggled to reach their own voice in order to denounce on the institution that kept them quiet in the first place. Certainly the reports of the shocking experiences of people who until recently weren’t considered as human as whites (and that in the American South still weren’t), would be seen with distrust, thus the necessity of corroboration for the stories being told⁴. It was the word of black slaves versus the word of the white planters and in this point in time the word of the slaves weighted less. This explains why, in its conception, Negro literature was related to what we tend to identify with naturalism and realism, while white writings of the same period presented characteristics related to “romanticism”.

Many of the qualities that have characterized black literature have evolved from its early public role – [...] – as well as from its reflection of the very different sociohistorical experience of blacks in America. In its early public role, its purpose has been to report on the conditions of black life to a hypothetically decent, Christian, democratic audience in the expectation that once that audience was made aware of the gap between democratic, Christian ideals and daily, mundane practice, change would occur (PETESCH, 1989: p. 8).

Within black literature (which intended itself a representation of black reality, a portrayal of the black experience in the country) and white readership, to whom black literature was addressed, there was a space, a difference of perception that took shape in the form of the concept of the “two Americas”, two nations under the same country, something that would be publicly noted only in 1969, with the Kerner Commission, but that already existed in black reality since 1619, on the occasion of the first shipment of slaves to disembark in America. “The black consciousness of the two nations is mirrored in the early spiritual, folk seculars, and slave narratives” (PETESCH, 1989: p. 8). According to Petesch, some characteristics derived from both, the early public role of black literature and from its representation of the diverse black experience, until then ignored by the white public. As a report of conditions, “early black prose focused on a mundane play of the material” (PETESCH, 1989: p.

⁴ In some cases, as in the report on the life of Henry Bibb, a correspondence with white Southerners was required so to attest for the veracity of the report – that did prove real in the end.

9). Relationships between whites and blacks were often loaded with tension and the possibility of violence, whether physical or psychological, something that resulted in the recurrence of themes of the struggle for independence and identity. And black literature also employed what Petesch (1989: p. 9) calls masking, “which is essentially a strategy for being absent while present”.

The realism stressed by the reports of former slaves was opposed by both “current theory and practice in literature” (PETESCH, 1989: p. 10). Critics in the first half of the nineteenth-century felt obligated to preserve the social order, in the name of property and propriety. This meant ignoring the voices of the lower social classes and repressing authors whose aims were to disrupt social, economic and political stability. Literature (and the white readership) had even to be prevented from pessimism and skepticism. Critics, instead, praised the “beautiful” and “moral” as qualities that could elevate human nature and that could lead to higher truths. “Where patriarchy and the Victorian family, with their mirroring of the ideal and of the status quo, are elements of the approved domestic model, how to assimilate the experience of the black family, subject to economic, psychological, and sexual violence of whites? (PETESCH, 1989: p. 12).” Blacks were in possession of a content that no literary form other than the slave narrative could accommodate, and that in no context other than the antislavery propaganda was acceptable.

2.3. The Problem of Difference

The black experience in America, both in slavery and in “freedom” resulted in a consciousness, among blacks, of their status of difference. Considering that America is a nation founded upon equality, or the elimination of difference, this constituted a problem. Themes like the “American dream” (even though the term was coined only in 1931, the idea is present since the beginning of America) and different manifestations of it have been stressed in American literature since the beginning of the colonization period. For instance, a promotional report by Capt. John Smith, written in 1616, already manifests what is for him the special uniqueness of America in comparison to Europe, and portrays it as a “land of opportunity” and freedom:

Here are no hard landlords to rack us with high rents or extorted fines to consume us, no tedious pleas in law to consume us with their many years' disputations for justice... here every man may be master and owner of his own labor and land, or the greatest part, in a small time. If he have nothing

but his hands, he may set up this trade and by industry quickly grow rich (1989: p. 13).

Considering the overall promising atmosphere of the early writings about America and the idea of perfection that with time came to be associated with the country, it seems only natural that happiness should be regarded as an important trace in American literature and as something worthy of preservation in a nation that had to create itself in the absence of a historical past. But just because America ignored difference, it doesn't mean that difference did not exist. And it was through this crack in the oppressive discourse of the "American dream", a discourse that disregarded the black experience, that blacks confronted, through a process of subjection, their own difference and grabbed on to it. And it was upon difference that they would later build their identity.

During the Reconstruction period, the need to restore the Union represented a shift in the literary tone. The "battle of the books" (PETESCH, 1989: p. 15), which saw the opposition of images regarding slavery, from the narratives of both former-slaves and of white southerners, was replaced by a celebration of the past. In the name of reestablishing harmony, from the end of the war until the beginning of the twentieth century, the South glanced back with reconciling eyes and found suitable to disregard the difference between whites and blacks, a difference which "dissolved in a celebration of mutuality and sentiment, and the 'old times' became the good times, not to be forgotten" (PETESCH, 1989: p. 15). The selective reading of the American experience (not only regarding blacks, but also regarding Indians and class differences, to cite a few examples) makes obvious the existence of structures of power at play in the discourse. And those structures of power are what informed the way the black condition was perceived in the post-Reconstruction period.

Even though the celebratory and nostalgic sentimentalism of Post War literature was unifying in a national level, the creation of images that would correspond to that level in the day-to-day life of Southerners became necessary in order to justify passed experience and the real present of Negroes, since the practical relations between whites and blacks could not be considered under the same unity as the literary abstraction. Metaphors, such as the black as a child or as an animal, were created to validate that "normal" experience between whites and blacks wasn't possible, because if blacks were considered to be "normal", then how would their enslavement be explained?

Only their difference could have permitted, and justified, enslavement in the first place. If they were children, and the metaphor of the family persisted into the twentieth century, they must be controlled. If they were not children, then they must be uncivil and, therefore, subject to control (PETESCH, 1989: p. 17).

Thus the only signs of Negro presence occurred within white discourse: blacks either existed as defined by power relations, or they didn't exist at all.

The image of the black as a child is understood in the context of family relations, where the master was considered to be a parent or guardian of the slaves, who, by its turn, found guidance and restraint in the paternalist relation with their masters. The image of the slave as a child had as its counterpoint in the image of the slave as a beast. Because slavery was a form of domesticating and "civilizing" blacks, it could be inferred that once the control of the master was withdrawn, blacks would return to their savage nature, or, in the most extreme forms of depiction, they would become monsters. Before the Civil War, black savagery took the form of revolt and whites feared that, once slavery was abolished, blacks would rebel against them aggressively. However, the Civil War ended and when blacks achieved "freedom", no such thing as rebellion and savagery took place. In white conscience, however, savagery was replaced by another kind of threat that would be determinant to the black experience and that would have consequences in literature: the image of the black as rapist. "From the 1880s through the turn of the century, writers and speakers increasingly charge the black man with assaults on white women. It is these assaults that are cited to explain, and often to justify, the increasing violence of lynching" (PETESCH, 1989: p. 19). Blacks saw slavery, which had just been abolished, replaced by another form of control, the fear of lynching. "Freedom" didn't affect significantly the social and economic status of the black people; it also didn't affect their interactions with whites. This explains the endurance of many of the qualities of early Negro literature in later periods.

One of those qualities, already mentioned above, is the tendency in black writing toward a collective perception. In white America the individual experience was of great importance, since Puritan belief established an individual relation between man and God (every man has to work for its own salvation), which on its turn influenced the relation of man and State and replaced church authority for the authority of secular laws. This emphasis on the individual has great influence in the romantic ego common to white literature. At the same time, communal experience in

the villages of West Africa (from where slaves of the New World mainly came from), as well as the black experience of slavery in America established a collective consciousness that is characteristic of black literature. If to the slaves (because of the African heritage, and because of their present in slavery) the individual existed in relation to the social groups and to the web of relationships that provided him with security and a sense of place, to the white American, individuality represented freedom in a nation that supposedly granted equal opportunities to everyone and where being inscribed by social positions meant a form of imprisonment. The divergences in both tendencies only got more and more exacerbated throughout history. Slavery impeded the assertion of a black subjectivity until the middle of the nineteenth century and forced black people to think in terms of their common identity, as the hostile experience of slavery separated them from whites in terms of “we” and “they”. Under such conditions, black literature of the nineteenth century became more focused in representativeness rather than uniqueness: slave narratives were more concerned in portraying what it was like to be a slave (what meant that the author wasn’t speaking only for himself, but for a group) than in digressing about individual concerns of the separate self.

The necessity to render a veritable universe made the descriptive accounts of places, people, objects, rituals and institutions characteristic of black literature from slave narratives on. At first, the descriptive information was intended for a white audience, who should be able to imagine how slavery (or being black in general) was like. But as social conditions increasingly improved for blacks in America, the audience for the Negro author shifted. Now black writers write for a black audience who has economic and social conditions to read them. Thus the twentieth century saw changes in the use of things and places in Negro literature, which began to function as an evocation of a world, as rite, rather than as documentary evidence.

Like Adam naming the animals, the black writer names the things of his world – an act that is magical, political, and historical. But black things, in all their particularity, are located in places that are also specific, so that naming is often bound up with places that have figured historically and psychologically in the black experience. Two places have accumulated memories sentiments, and characterizing “things”: the South (or “down home”) and Harlem (PETESCH, 1989: pp. 41, 42).

The “thingy” world evoked by black writings serves as a place for memory and history apart from the white world. And it’s in this thingy world, which found in the novel its form of expression, that blacks will be able to project an identity. The

naming of objects may be viewed as an attempt to place order in the black experience and to understand it inside a sequential narrative, which will mirror the black self.

White power during slavery was asserted on the belief that blacks were possessions of their masters, just like objects or animals. In this relation of ownership, violence, both physical and psychological, was characteristic. But given the slaves' consciousness and will, white power met with black resistance (even if small) and the simple preservation of self in the daily life was considered by blacks to be a triumph. Slave narratives describe the violent character of the interaction between blacks and whites and show it to violate even the most private territories of the black self. Considered by their masters as possessions, whose limits could be violated at will, blacks could not assume that their view on themselves mattered or that the limits or their selves should be respected by others. But what are the limits of the self? If we think the self in terms of territoriality, the vulnerability of the slave becomes clearer. Territory, according to ethologists like Edward Hall (1989: p. 53), is "the area or space an organism lays claim to and defends" and its importance comes from the security it provides to the functioning of a system, like a frame within which a group can develop. Ethologists study the territorial responses of nonhuman organisms and tend to view it as a category fixed in space. On humans territory operates more or less in the same way, except human responses to territory can be regarded as "psychic space" (PETESCH, 1989), a space which is important for a person's well being. The body functions as the center for the territorial responses and can be itself viewed as territory.

For blacks, violation of space has been recurrent, from the slave cabins to their bodies. Reports of the intrusive presence of whites in the space of the slave's cabin are very common in Negro literature. Slaves weren't granted any privacy and masters and overseers, as well as other figures of white power, had the right to barge in the cabin at any time, thus the sheltering quality of the white's "house" was very distant from the black experience in the cabins. But even more intrusive than the violation of the space of the cabins, was the violation of the black body. Under slavery, the body of the Negro was a white property and from birth to death slaves were treated as objects, as things. Like animals, they didn't have the right to know their birth dates or to be properly buried. The rights we normally associate with human bodies were disregarded for the slave's body: they could be beaten, raped, and submitted to casual

handling. This process of subjection is referred to by Frederick Douglass as “imbrutement” and implies the imposition of slave identity on blacks, an imposition that they will resist (in literature, among other ways) in order to achieve a sense of self they find worthy. Once slavery ended and “freedom” was achieved, blacks realized that actual freedom was more complex than liberation from physical bondage and could only be fully reached when they were set free from the definitions of others – something that, to this day, hasn’t happened in its totality.

Moralism also had an important part in defining America’s position regarding slavery. One of the instances of American moralism, religion, was used as a justification of slavery. Those who supported slavery asserted that God had created blacks to serve whites and that Africa was a wild land of brutes, from where blacks had to be saved. Thus the social control and discipline resulting from slavery was deemed necessary for the maintenance of social order. Religious discourse in the South incorporated the white planters’ view on slavery and, through manipulative and instrumental language, became a practical means of social control. The slave narratives reproduced those religious discourses in order to parody them. The black response to religion differed when the sermons were delivered by blacks and by whites (or in the presence of whites). While blacks had to conform to white preaching (a disciplinary preaching), with black or mulatto preachers they experienced real “straight preachin” from the Bible. Characteristic of the “straight preachin” are certain qualities, which will also be found in Negro literature, such as concreteness and relation to the daily life of the slaves (emphasis on mimesis), valuing of the self in face of difficult conditions and the achievement of freedom (both physical as well as from the definitions of others) and justice. The non-religious forms of expression in black literature are a variation of the religious forms of expression, even though the audience – and the author’s response to that audience – changed through time, the message remained the same. Outside religion, a response to morality in black literature also developed from the growing black consciousness of the existence of a gap between national ideals and the national reality they were submitted to.

Language, in this sense, represents an opportunity for black resistance and resignification, “thus, though not owning things/possessing things, they have possessed the language to talk about the things” (PETESCH, 1989, p. 66). It was through language that blacks found a form of representation for the America they

knew and for experiences that were not accounted for in white literary expression. One of the linguistic responses to the gap between black reality and national ideals is irony: a verbal expression of the “twoness” of W. E. B. Du Bois. Ironic responses in black writings vary from the most public levels to the most private ones and the most recurrent form of irony employed in black literature is the filling of white formal structures with black content, termed by Petesch (1989) as *mythic subversion*.

2.4. The Harlem Renaissance

If by the turn of the twentieth century the majority of the black population in the United States lived in the South, by the end of World War I almost one million blacks had emigrated North. In part, this movement, known as the Great Migration, was motivated by the economical crisis that hit the South after the Civil War and by the labor shortages in industrial centers in the North during wartime. However, those rural black southerners were also escaping from a past of slavery and segregation (and a present of oppression) and pursuing the promise of a “new frontier of racial equality” (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 37), which the North represented. Hemenway sustains that it is probable that this expectation was not met by the reality of a North where the labor unions were segregated and where the racist influence of a growing Ku Klux Klan could also be felt. The migration, however, helped asserting a sense of self among black Americans. A racial community was growing, and with it, the opportunity of sharing a “common consciousness” (LOCKE, 1992: p. 7) and uniting by the rebirth of cultural bonds and history, not just by white oppression.

A great concentration of blacks settled in the Harlem – a neighborhood created in the first two decades of the twentieth century, when black New Yorkers who lived in the tip of the island began to head North, as better housing conditions became available.

Between 1900 and 1910 the Harlem area was overbuilt with new apartments, and in the face of empty rooms, developers discovered the righteousness of open housing. Black realtors purchased the buildings, and by the beginning of World War I, after some bitter real estate battles between black buyers and white owners, Harlem had been occupied. At the end of the war, their ranks swollen by the steady migration of rural southern blacks to northern industrial jobs, over one hundred thousand black people had made Harlem a city within a city, designated it the cultural capital of black America, and endowed it with youthful exuberance and promise (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 29).

This racial metropolis was a symbol of the changing social status of black people in the United States and was home to a great number of black artists, writers and intellectuals. Cultural production played an important role in the “progress” of the race, as civil rights organizations, like the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) and the National Urban League, fostered periodicals that would help consolidate an Afro-American literary tradition. Harlem thus became a fertile ground for black culture: literature, music, theater and other forms of art developed in response to the subordinate role that American society still imposed on Negroes. Harlem offered to black authors what they could not find in the South: “an intellectual and artistic community replete with opportunities for publishing and acquiring an audience” (DAVIS, 1985, p. 291).

Periodicals played an important role in the development of Afro-American literature. *Crisis*, founded by the N.A.A.C.P. and edited by W.E.B. Du Bois, was one of the first publications to publish young black writers who confirmed with their work, the search for a genuine black identity. It was also in *Crisis*, in 1922, that Langston Hughes published “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” and consolidated the birth of the New Negro Movement. Inspired by Hughes, other important writers published texts in the pages of the *Crisis*, like Arna Bontemps, Sterling Brown and Jean Toomer, among others. Another publication that boosted the Harlem Renaissance was the *Opportunity*, founded by the National Urban League and edited by the sociologist Charles S. Johnson. Johnson printed Zora Neale Hurston’s “Drenched in Light”, the author’s first story to be published nationally, in the December, 1924 issue of *Opportunity*. It was also Johnson who encouraged Hurston to join the cultural activities in Harlem. Besides *Crisis* and *Opportunity*, another magazine that was important to the cultural agenda of the Harlem Renaissance was the *Messenger*, founded by the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and edited by A. Philip Randolph. The *Messenger* was founded in 1917 as a socialist organ for union activities and only later published literary works. Besides being a vehicle to the messages of the New Negro Movement, those three periodicals also inspired the birth of smaller magazines and special numbers dedicated to black authors in white magazines.

The Harlem Renaissance reflected a literary uprising that sought to illustrate the genius of black souls, in opposition to racial stereotypes that still explored the idea of black inferiority.⁵

Rejecting both the dialect school of Paul Laurence Dunbar's plantation poetry and the slave-quarters sing-alongs of white writers like Thomas Nelson Page, both nineteenth-century stereotypes growing from the minstrel tradition, the young black writers demanded a place for the creative expression of the New Negro (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 28).

The New Negroes⁶ wanted to expose the absurdity of second-class citizenship by providing evidences of the cultural parity between whites and blacks. They believed that, when compared to the achievements of the European civilization, the black race was moving forward, but still on the early stages of a political, economical and cultural development. In the foreword of *The New Negro*, Alain Locke speaks of a "cultural adolescence, and the approach to maturity" (1992: p. xxvi). He believed that blacks would no longer going to be regarded as savages, as bearers of minds as limited as that of children. "That was yesterday," Locke affirms, since "there has come a development that makes these phases of Negro life only an interesting and significant segment of the general American scene" (1992: p. xxvi). Locke was one of the most influential black intellectuals of the time, along with Du Bois, and both of them, even though defending theoretically different positions in regard to the function and nature of black art, gave aesthetic contour to the New Negro.

For Du Bois, Negro art could not be separated from propaganda. As for Locke, he believed in the potential of "pure art" and repudiated the use of art as an instrument for social struggle. *The New Negro*, under Locke's selective editing, evinced his beliefs in this new-breed of intellectual Negroes, "a few enlightened minds," (1992: p.13) who could speak for themselves. But if the possibility of black art serving the race was rejected in favor of individual achievements, then what was, as Hemenway (1978: p. 50) puts it, "the responsibility of the artist to those brothers

⁵ In the introduction of *The New Negro*, Arnold Rampersad cites some examples of racist works that circulated in the United States in the beginning of the 20th century: *Foundations of the Nineteenth Century* by Houston Stewart (published in a translated version in the United States in 1911); *Essay on the Inequality of Races* by Count Arthur de Gobineau (published in a translated version in the United States in 1912); *Birth of a Nation* by D.W. Griffith (1915); *The Passing of the Great Race* by Madison Grant (1916); *America a Family Matter* by Charles W. Gould (1922); *America's Race Heritage* by Clinton Stoddard Burr (1922); *Race and National Solidarity* by Charles Conant Josey (1923); and *The Revolt Against Civilization: The Menace of the Under Man* by Lothrop Stoddard (1923).

⁶ The term "New Negro" had been used sporadically since the 1890's, but it was chosen as the expression that best described the spirit of the 1920's movement and some time later it was crystalized by Alain Locke's 1925 anthology *The New Negro*.

and sisters without talent or the opportunity to express themselves in print”? Locke found that the answer was in folk heritage, which the young black writers should interpret for the world. Locke sustained that the New Negroes should “consciously strive for a pure rather than a propagandistic art, and should base this conscious creation on the unconscious esthetics manifested by the spirituals, the folk sermons, the folktales – the proletariat’s artistic forms” (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 50). The South then began to be regarded with new eyes, as the repository of a rich culture and history, traced all the way from Africa and surviving through the Middle Passage.

The actual differences between Du Bois and Locke, however, were only superficial. According to Hemenway, both intellectuals expected Harlem Renaissance artists to value the folk-spirit and to adapt it to a rigorous formal production, as a means of improving the future of the race through the creation of high art. It became normative, as the artistic politics of the New Negro movement, that the educated black elite should speak for their illiterate counterparts – the proletariat. According to Locke (1992: p. 10), whereas the “outer life objectives” of Negroes were already formulated – in the sense that they sought to live by the democratic ideals of American institutions –, their “inner objectives” were still being formulated and were revealing a new group psychology that asserted race pride and a sense of community. Along with race pride, there should be a redeeming effort in the work of black intellectuals, aimed at rescuing the folk arts and reclaiming their value to a black community that had been taught to neglect them.

A great part of the writers who represented the Harlem Renaissance were college educated and expected to be assimilated to the American society as first-class American citizens. Despite their recently discovered sense of self, those young blacks still regarded the Western European tradition as a role model for high culture. Both Du Bois and Locke studied in Germany, and of the younger writers, some of them also received education in European countries. Those were people who grew up with the thought that they should “reflect honor on the race, exhibit moral behavior that could not be distorted into racist stereotypes” (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 49). Folk heritage should be explored, but with the intention of transforming it into an acceptable form of art, within European standards. Locke defends this new role of blacks in America, contributing to the betterment of race relationships: “He now becomes a conscious contributor and lays aside the status of a beneficiary and ward

for that of a collaborator and participant in American civilization.” (LOCKE, 1992: p. 15).

3. WILLIAM FAULKNER: DECONSTRUCTING THE SOUTH

The “legend” of the Old South was explored in no other way more richly than in the work of William Faulkner. In shaping the history of the fictive Yoknapatawpha County, the place where most of his novels are located, Faulkner traces the Southern changing social context during a period of time that stretches for two centuries, from 1745 to 1945. This mythical county, situated in Northern Mississippi, occupying an area of 2,400 square miles and with a population of 15,611 inhabitants (according to a map drawn by Faulkner himself), stands for a social allegory of the Deep South – and, some critics argue, of the whole nation. But far from idealizing the Antebellum South in his novels, Faulkner puts the region and its people under scrutiny and not only portrays the moral and social decay of the Southern aristocracy following the Civil War but reviews the Southern past tradition as a means of understanding the decadence of the present. With the creation of a unified imaginary world that permeates a number of short stories and novels through repetition of characters, events and places, Faulkner successfully combines the abstract themes of social commentary with the actual history of the South.

Faulkner’s central characters are archetypal of the Southern guilt-ridden puritanism and are “dominated by obsessive desires to impose rational categories upon the rebellious facts of human experience” (SWIGGART, 1962: p. 8). These characters are representatives of “a white supremacist patriarchy, backed or at least sanctioned by a Calvinist variant of Christian faith: Presbyterianism” (NEUMANN, 1999: p. 54). They are founders of a social order that was intended to last, with their tradition and their land being passed on from father to son. However, a fundamental flaw in the design of the social order brought upon the burden of the South: slavery. The moral paradox of a society that defended democratic ideals and that, at the same time, was based on the plantation system is, in Faulkner’s novels, at the heart of the problem.

The Deep South was settled partly by aristocrats like the Sartoris clan and partly by new men like Colonel Sutpen. Both types of planters were determined to establish a lasting social order on the land they had seized from the Indians (that is, to leave sons behind them). They had the virtue of living single-mindedly by a fix code; but there was also an inherent guilt in their “design,” their way of life; it was slavery that put a curse on the land and brought about the Civil War. After the War was lost, partly as a

result of their own mad heroism (...) they tried to restore “the design” by other methods. But they no longer had the strength to achieve more than a partial success, even after they had freed their land from the carpetbaggers who followed the Northern armies. As time passed, moreover, the men of the old order found that they had Southern enemies too: they had to fight against a new exploiting class descended from the landless whites of slavery days. In this struggle between the clan of Sartoris and the unscrupulous tribe of Snopes, the Sartorises were defeated in advance by a traditional code that kept them from using the weapons of the enemy. As a price of victory, however, the Snopeses had to serve the mechanized civilization of the North, which was morally impotent in itself, but which, with the aid of its Southern retainers, ended by corrupting the Southern nation.” (COWLEY, 1946: p. 103)

The analysis made by Cowley in the introduction of *The Portable Faulkner* stresses the importance of locality and history and summarizes the legend of the South as founded upon an aristocratic class of planters, like the Sutpens and the Sartorises. This aristocratic class was “accursed” by slavery, which brought upon the Civil War, and had to face social and moral decay, as the poor whites rose to power and corrupted community values by serving an industrialized North.

Cowley made an important remark recognizing that to Faulkner slavery was the curse of the Old Order. Reviewing *The Portable Faulkner*, Robert Penn Warren points to the limits of Cowley’s examination and stresses that the legend should not be taken as an issue of South versus North, but as an issue that concerns the moral confusion of the modern world, which suffers from “a lack of discipline, of sanctions, of community of values, of a sense of a mission” (1946: p. 112). Both critics had an important role in pointing out that Faulkner’s work was worth serious analysis and that it stood for more than just a “cult of cruelty”, as earlier criticism had stated. However, they still read Faulkner as a moralist. For Cowley and Warren, even though Faulkner was disapproving of the Old Order’s contempt for the lives of Negroes, he nevertheless held in high appraisal the “traditional man”, with its set of “codes, concepts of virtue, obligations” (WARREN, 1946: p. 113) and with its notion of truth. What these critics failed to see, maybe for not acknowledging the importance of *how* Faulkner was saying what he said, was that Faulkner was trying to say that this very set of codes, concepts of virtue and obligations were at the root of the curse.

Analyzing Faulkner almost ten years after Cowley and Warren, Ursulla Brumm attributed to “rapacity” the root of civilization and the cause of the burden of guilt that Faulkner’s civilized man has to carry. Brumm claims that the pre-historical time of America’s wilderness was a genuinely American experience, which Europeans could not share, and which was being transformed into a myth by the time

Faulkner wrote his books. According to Brumm, civilization meant the destruction of the virgin land and all its possibilities of fertile creation. At the same time, “only as doomed and vanquished could [the wilderness] be lamented and loved so much by writers who necessarily, just by picking pen and paper, have to confess themselves as part of the civilization they accuse” (BRUMM, 1955: p. 130). In acknowledging the paradoxes of civilization and art, Brumm seems to read more clearly than previous critics what Faulkner was trying to convey in his stories. Brumm also points that, if Faulkner intended to criticize the empire builders, what we arrive at is, finally, a questioning of property, especially, the property of the land. If we consider that one of the tenets of Judeo-Christian religions, of which Presbyterianism is a part, is that man should take control over the earth and exploit its resources, it is possible to say, then, that Faulkner’s questioning is directed at the Puritan man and his rationalization of the world.

Neumann (1995) argues that, because of racist and sexist implications, control over the earth was taken to mean control over women and non-whites, because, while they represented an extension of nature, the white male was considered a supreme being, detached from earthly connections. In his analysis of *Light in August*, Neumann states that knowledge is a strategy of control much explored by Faulkner in this novel. Knowledge equals power, according to Neumann, because if one knows something as being *real*, one knows how to react to it. Consequently, lack of knowledge entails lack of control. Language, as a form of categorization of knowledge, is also an essential strategy of power since it makes it possible to categorize a phenomenon and, thus, to place this phenomenon in a common logical scheme, without which communication cannot exist.

This common scheme requires an experiential foundation, since words are representative instances of objects and depend on experience for content. In this sense, language is not only a means of communication, but it is also a formative instance, since, “by learning to talk, a human being involuntarily imbibes the classifications inherent in language, which, to a considerable extent, determines what s/he sees of reality, shapes this reality of him/her” (NEUMANN, 1995: p. 59). Categorization, then, distances people from reality, or from a more holistic approach on experience, and places a hierarchical ordering of things. At the same time, the experience of the subjects also shapes language, because “words derive their meaning

both from the object or event to which they refer and from the subjective reaction of the speaker or listener to that object or event” (VICKERY, 1964: p. 266).

The power language has to form and rule social activity is something Faulkner’s books not only explore but also illuminate. Faulkner seems very conscious of how words can become prescriptive and even more conscious of how personal and communal experience can shape the meanings of words, since, as Vickery (1964: p. 267) puts it, “a single word conveys different things to different people as it reflects not reality but their own particular angle of vision”. Thus, the importance Faulkner grants not only to the historical context of the South, but foremost to particular locus of enunciation, which are translated into his use of diverse point of views to suggest specific “realities”. In the following chapter, we will focus on the study of *Light in August* as a novel that illustrates Faulkner’s ability to use language as both a technical device and an “index to human behavior” (VICKERY, 1964: p. 266), by examining how Faulkner weaves the identities of race and gender in the narrative, specially the identity of Joe Christmas, the central character, in relation to the background of the community of Jefferson, where the story takes place.

3.1. Light in August

Light in August takes place in the community of Jefferson, Mississippi, “a tightly knit social organization with something like an ‘organic’ character, whose stability is guaranteed by unanimous acceptance of inherited values and unquestioning compliance with established cultural codes” (BLEIKASTEN, 1987: p. 81). Those established cultural codes follow the “cultural logics of heteronormativity, white supremacy and misogyny” (MUÑOZ, 1999: p. 6) and determine the rules by which intelligible identities will be governed. Identities that do not conform to such rules become elided and are punished for failing to act accordingly to their roles. In this sense, Jefferson represents a ruling social doctrine that constructs and naturalizes identities, at the same time that the discursive apparatus hides the construction of those identities, as the actors agree to “perform, produce, and sustain” (BUTLER, 2007: p. 190) the cultural fictions that their identities depend upon. Language is part of the discursive apparatus, to the extent that the ritual social dramas render it “almost invulnerable by establishing it as an autonomous authority in private and personal as

well as social experience” (VICKERY, 1964: p. 269). It is against this background of a “tightly knit social organization,” which stands as a metaphor for the Southern society at the beginning of the twentieth century, that Faulkner sets the drama of Joe Christmas.

Christmas is a man who does not know his “true” racial identity – he is only described in the text as being “parchment colored” – since he does not know his ascendancy. Even when, later in the novel, we find out that his mother is white, the question of his father’s race, whether he is Mexican or negro, still remains unsolved. In a context where the uniformity of the subjects is expected and their behavioral conformity is required, Christmas symbolizes the site of an incongruity. His own existence as the possible offspring of a miscegenation marks him as subversive. Butler claims that the body, with its differentiation between inside and outside, establishes the boundaries of stable identities and can be regarded as a social metaphor. “If the body is synecdochal for the social system *per se* or a site in which open systems converge, then any kind of unregulated permeability constitutes a site of pollution and endangerment” (BUTLER, 2007: p. 180). Christmas, as the possible bearer of both white and black bloods, is a site of pollution. A pollution that can only be regarded as a danger when the lines of the social structure are clearly defined, which is the case with the community of Jefferson. Christmas, thus, inhabits the in-betweenness that puts the racialized identity into question.

The issue of Christmas’ identity is the central theme of *Light in August*, because it signifies a suspension of categories that sheds light on the problematic perception that identities are somehow essential, a perception that was shared by the fictional inhabitants of Jefferson – and by the real inhabitants of a racially segregated South. Christmas, in fact, does not have an identity, since he does not have access to a language where he can assert a sense of self. As Butler suggests, “learning the rules that govern intelligible speech is an inculcation into normalized language, where the price of not conforming is the loss of intelligibility itself” (BUTLER, 2007: p. xix). That Joe Christmas cannot conform to the rules of intelligibility of either black nor white identities is in accordance with Butler’s proposition that “what is signified as an identity is not signified at a given point in time after which it is simply there as an inert piece of entitative language” (BUTLER, 2007: p. 197). If it were so, if identities were in fact essential or singularly signified in one interpellating event, then

Christmas would not have difficulties accessing an identity. He, nevertheless, does. Because Christmas cannot be designated by a linguistic category, he cannot be established in language, and therefore, he cannot articulate agency so as to resist the naturalizing instances of the hegemonic culture.

Christmas spent his childhood in an orphanage, where he was, to some extent, regarded as black. The children of the orphanage called him “nigger”. We later find out, however, that the children were possibly influenced by Doc Hines (Eupheus), Christmas’ racist and fanatical grandfather, who takes Christmas to the orphanage and starts working as a janitor in the same place, just so he can be close to Christmas and “watch” him. Doc Hines is motivated by the belief that God put a mark on Christmas and had a “plan” for him. “So old Doc Hines he watched and he waited. From God’s own boiler room he watched them children, and the devil’s unbeknownst among them, polluting the earth with the working of that word on him” (FAULKNER, LA, p. 682)⁷. The idea that the taboo of miscegenation marks a site of pollution, as it has been explained above, is echoed in Doc Hines’ racist ideas.

When Christmas is eight years old, he is adopted by McEachern, a white farmer who has no knowledge of Christmas’ possible mixed racial background. The relationship between Puritanism and the impetus for categorization, which is connected with patriarchal control, is manifest in McEachern’s character and in his actions. McEachern educates Christmas according to strict Presbyterian values. Christmas becomes imbued with the social rules that permeate Southern puritan identities and becomes the site of a double “call”: he is partly black and partly white. In the Southern economy of stable subjects, however, those two identities are exclusionary. A passage of the text that illustrates how puritan values shape habits of thought is the episode where McEachern questions Christmas on the whereabouts of the calf he was given as a gift:

“She’s my cow,” Joe said. “You gave her to me. I raised her from a calf because you gave her to me to be my own.”

“Yes,” McEachern said. “I gave her to you. To teach you the responsibility of possessing, owning, ownership. The responsibility of the owner to that which he owns under God’s sufferance. To teach you foresight and aggrandizement. Call her” (LA, p. 519).

This passage clarifies the importance of ownership and “aggrandizement” to the Presbyterian doctrine and how it relates property to God. Christmas, who had sold the

⁷ From this moment on, whenever passages of *Light in August* are transcribed, the initials LA and the number of the page will be used as a reference.

calf to buy a suit, lies to McEachern about what he did with the money. McEachern knows that Christmas is lying and accuses his foster child of “sloth, and ingratitude, and irreverence and blasphemy” and still adds “lying and lechery” (LA, p. 520) to the list of sins he has committed. At the same time that this episode shows how puritanism entails social relationships based on hierarchies of knowledge and male authority, it also shows the sort of puritan guilt-ridden perspective of life, which represses behaviors by classifying them as sins. By “internalizing” the Presbyterian doctrine, and at the same time having the knowledge that he is possibly black, Christmas has to assert a sense of self in accordance with the rules of conflicting sites of identification. “Joe learns to hate his own body as well as its physical and emotional needs, and to him hunger and desire seem oppressive forces associated with darkness and evil” (SWIGGART, 1962: p. 136).

But why is it that Christmas’ “black” body and his “white” mind cannot co-exist? Christmas’ subjectivity is rendered by two interpellating moments, but he cannot occupy the identity of the “I”, whose stability is defined in opposition to an “Other”, and occupy the position of the “Other” at the same time. If we consider the binary frame according to which identities are created, the “I” always and only becomes an “I” by the exclusion of an “Other”. According to Butler, culturally hegemonic identities are founded and consolidated by the expulsion and repulsion of the “Other”.

The “abject” designates that which has been expelled from the body, discharged as excrement, literally rendered “Other.” This appears as the expulsion of alien elements, but the alien is effectively established through this expulsion. The construction of the “not-me” as the abject establishes the boundaries of the body which are also the first contours of the subject” (BUTLER, 2007: p. 181)

The episode of the black girl in the shed is related with this need to expel and repulse the “Other”. Joe enters the shed, and because of the darkness, he is unable to distinguish the black girl inside of it. Vulnerable, he is “enclosed by the womanshenegro and the haste, driven, having to wait until she spoke: a guiding sound which was no particular word and completely unaware” (LA. p. 514). The womanshenegro not only brings to the fore a memory of trauma and humiliation, connected to a crucial scene in the orphanage, but she speaks in a language which he cannot understand, embodying, in the unified form of femininity and blackness, the ultimate threat to his existence. This episode also marks the first contact Christmas has with sexual relations. “Instead of doing what is expected, Joe kicks the girl and

fighters with the other boys as they rush in” (SWIGGART, 1962: p. 135). In order to escape his own desire, which, in contradiction with his puritan beliefs, can be directed to even the most “abject” of beings, Christmas resorts to violence.

Another scene which is related to Christmas’ need to define the boundaries of his identity through the “ejection and transvaluation of something originally part of identity into a defiling otherness” (BUTLER, 2007: p. 182), occurs when Christmas enters Freedman Town, the black section of the city, and has the need to instantly escape it. “On all sides, even within him, the bodiless fecundmellow voices of negro women murmured. It was as though he and all other manshaped life about him had been returned to the lightless hot wet primogenitive Female” (LA, p. 483). The passage continues, as Christmas leaves Freedman Town: “Then he became cool. The negro smell, the negro voices, were behind and below him now” (LA, p. 483). Johnson suggests that “the resistance to finding out that the Other is the same springs out of the reluctance to admit that the same is Other” (JOHNSON, 1986: p. 323). In this sense, Christmas’ refusal to embrace the black identity as a part of himself, not only comes from his impossibility to assert himself linguistically like a black subject, but also from the way the white identity excludes the possibility of a black subjectivity.

The episodes described above are all part of chapters that function as flashbacks from Christmas’ childhood and which occupy the central portion of the novel, from chapters VI to XII. Before and after those six chapters, the narrative is rendered in the present and covers the unfolding of the main drama from the point of view of diverse characters. The text from Christmas’ flashback begins as follows: “Memory believes before knowing remembers. Believes longer than recollects, longer than knowing even wonders” (LA, p. 487). This statement can be analyzed as the conscious struggles of an adult to understand and place the events of his childhood into perspective. Muñoz explores this process in terms of how his own adult experiences functioned as a “looking-glass” from which he gazed at the past, particularly to a determined event which he sees as fundamental to the development of his queer “disidentificatory” identity, and concludes: “my memory and subjectivity reformatted that memory, letting it work within my own internal narratives of subject formation” (MUÑOZ, 1999: p. 4). Likewise, the adult Christmas’ childhood memories are remembered in light of his previous experiences.

In this sense, Christmas distinguishes one primary scene of violence, where the negative connection between race and gender possibly started. This particular scene is the traumatic moment in the orphanage, when a five-year-old Christmas, who is hidden in the dietician's closet eating toothpaste, is discovered, after he vomits the toothpaste. The moment Christmas becomes sick with the toothpaste is described as follows: "At once the toothpaste which he had already swallowed lifted inside him, trying to get back the rife, pinkwomansmelling obscurity behind the curtain he squatted, pinkfoamed, listening to his insides, waiting with astonished fatalism for what was about to happen to him" (LA, p. 489). In the adjacent bedroom, the dietician was having sex with the young doctor, something that she should not be doing, so she becomes certain that Christmas, who was absently eating the toothpaste, was spying on her. She drags him out of the closet and scolds him by calling him a "nigger bastard": "'You little rat!' the thin, furious voice hissed; 'you little rat!' Spying on me! You little nigger bastard!'" (LA, p. 489). Suspicious that Joe will tell other people about her improper relationship with the young doctor, the dietician tries to bribe Joe for his silence, while all the while he is expecting to be punished, because he feels guilty about doing something he should not have been doing (eating the toothpaste). "This episode symbolizes the main currents of Joe's adult life. His consciousness of unexpiated guilt becomes involved with the belief that he is part Negro and in need of moral absolution" (SWIGGART, 1962: p. 135). The elements of race and gender and their conflicting existence with Christmas' puritan morals are then set up, making femininity and blackness become associated with the idea of sickness and guilt.

First, Faulkner drastically overturns the classic sentimental image of the pink-and-white feminine sweetness. Women in this text reveal that their brittle exteriors cover an often violent nature. When that violence is exposed, it often takes the form of a racial attack; as far as Joe is concerned, being bad means being a nigger (CLARKE, 1989: p. 410).

Christmas' troubled relationship with black women is related to this traumatic moment, as it becomes clear in the episode of the black girl in the shed. When Christmas enters the shed and finds the black girl in there, the text describes that "There was something in him trying to get out, like when he had used to think of toothpaste" (LA, p. 514). The memory of the toothpaste and the nauseating feeling it causes is associated with both femininity and blackness. It is possible to suggest that the toothpaste episode, which marks a primary violence for Christmas, is connected

with the exclusion and repulsion of the “Other”, which, ultimately, takes the form of the black woman. Christmas’ only assertion of subjectivity, then, is by the denial of the black woman.

The fifteen years between Joe’s escape from McEachern’s house and his arrival in Jefferson are characterized by his attempts to come to terms with his identity. During this period, Christmas develops a strategy to dodge paying the white prostitutes with whom he sleeps, which consists simply in telling them that he is a black. One day, however, when he is no longer in the South, the strategy does not work and he becomes outraged: “He did not know until then that there were white women who would take a man with a black skin” (LA, p. 564). The fact that Christmas himself, who has internalized the Puritan morals, regards miscegenation as a taboo and, at the same time, knows that he is fruit of an interracial sexual intercourse, clarifies the impossibility for him to assert an identity. Always on the wrong, he becomes a rebel. At the same time, this episode introduces a phase where Christmas tries to “become” black. “He was in the north now, in Chicago and then Detroit. He lived with negroes, shunning white people. He ate with them, slept with them, belligerent, unpredictable, uncommunicative” (LA, p. 564). Even though Christmas tries to be black by experiencing a black life, he is still “uncommunicative”, because he lacks the language to speak like a black person, and thus, cannot become part of a black community. He even engages in a relationship with an ebony woman, and tries to “breath into himself the dark odor, the dark and inscrutable thinking and being of negroes, with each suspiration trying to expel from himself the white blood and the white thinking and being” (LA, p. 565). But the “white thinking” cannot accept the black being and “all the while his nostrils at the odor which he was trying to make his own would whiten and tauten, his whole being writhe and strain with physical outrage and spiritual denial” (LA, p. 565).

In *Light in August* the father (or the grandfather) who exercises the linguistic power of naming, plays a crucial, even though absent, role. It is Doc Hines that puts the “mark” of race on Christmas and it is him who impels the children to call Christmas a “nigger”. When McEachern adopts Joe, however, he decides that he is going to be called “McEachern,” because it is sinful for someone to be called “Christmas”.

They were in the matron’s office; he standing motionless, not looking at the stranger’s eyes which he could feel upon him, waiting for the stranger

to say what his eyes were thinking. Then it came: “Christmas. A heathenish name. Sacrilege. I will change that.”

“That will be your legal right,” the matron said. “We are not interested in what they are called, but in how they are treated.”

But the stranger was not listening to anyone anymore than he was talking to anyone. “From now on his name will be McEachern.”

“That will be suitable,” the matron said. “To give him your name.”

“He will eat my bread and he will observe my religion,” the stranger said. “Why should he not bear my name?”

The child was not listening. He was not bothered. He did not especially care, anymore than if the man had said the day was hot when it was not hot. He didn’t even bother to say to himself *My name aint McEachern. My name is Christmas* There was no need to bother about that yet. There was plenty of time” (LA, pp. 505-506).

The scene is very symbolic of the power to name that the father holds under the law: it is his “legal right.” Christmas, however, does not accept his new name, because it represents a repression of the subjectivity he could assert – even though “Christmas” was the name put on him by the dietician when he was still a baby on the day he arrived at the orphanage, it represented the little identity he had so far. That McEachern wants to change Christmas’ name shows his need to exert control and categorize, and points to how Christmas is regarded almost like a property, which is McEachern’s legal right to manipulate, because “He will eat my bread and he will observe my religion”.

We are presented with the significance of naming in *Light in August* the first time Christmas appears in the narrative, at the planing mill, as Byron Bunch reflects on Christmas’ name: “And that was the first time Byron remembered that he had ever thought how a man’s name, which is supposed to be just the sound for who he is, can be somehow an augur of what he will do, if other men can only read the meaning” (LA, p. 422). Reading the meaning of names carried with augur – instead of accepting them to be “just the sound” for what it is they are supposed to represent – is precisely what generates the dramatic actions in *Light in August*. Christmas is haunted by the weight of not knowing whether he is white or black. In a Southern tradition where race and gender define one’s role in society, the lack of a clear identity is unacceptable. In this sense, Butler questions, “to what extent is identity a normative ideal rather than a descriptive feature of experience?” (BUTLER, 2007: p. 23) If we take, for instance, the word “Negro”, as Vickery analyzes it, the pernicious workings of linguistic categories become clearer:

As long as it is remembered that “Negro” and other similar terms merely specify a particular logical, verbal class, the word cannot possibly provoke any emotional response or elicit any action. If, however, they are regarded

as exhaustive accounts of the individual's nature, they become an instrument of division, destroying that communal anonymous brotherhood in which alone man can express his true nature (VICKERY, 1964: p. 270).

When “Negro” ceases to be a category and becomes a concept loaded with cultural values, through secondary meanings that are associated with it, it turns out to be alienated from what it was originally intended to describe. Vickery points out that language can reach yet another stage, as “Negro” turns into “nigger” and the word is then loaded with historical, political, religious implications. “In short, ‘nigger’ is no longer a descriptive or generic term but a compressed myth to which the plantation system, the Civil War, and the Reconstruction have all contributed shades of meaning” (VICKERY, 1964: p. 271). Finally, when the word turns from concept into precept, it becomes rhetorical and it is no longer descriptive. Negro, then, signifies a pattern of behavior or a complex of ideas. The word becomes loaded with ethical significance – good Negroes are the ones that fit into the behavior that is expected of them, while the bad ones are the ones who repudiate the role of the Negro as it is instated by culture. When the word becomes a concept completely displaced from reality and ultimately a controlling term, it then causes actions to become standardized, impersonal. The lynching of Joe, for instance, is the ultimate fulfilling of the opposing concepts of white and black.

In such situations language is no longer a means of communication. Instead it serves as a way of circumventing the recalcitrance of experience by fixing a code or formula which clearly, definitively, and finally orders that experience and hence all reactions to it. The result is a kind of linguistic determinism inflicted on himself by man because of his desire for order (VICKERY, 1964: p. 273).

While Joe Christmas undercuts racial differentiation and raises doubts about the meaning of racial identity as a justification for behavior, Joanna Burden, on the other hand, undercuts gender affirmatives. The Southern-raised heir to a Yankee family, Joanna's past is intertwined with the history of the community and yet, she is like a foreigner to the town. In this sense, both Christmas and Joanna are outsiders, characters who are isolated from contact with the exterior world. Also like Christmas, Joanna requires an amount of freedom which dissociates her from the role attributed to women by the Southern bourgeois society. In Joe's interpretation, Joanna is described as a “masculine woman”. However, it can be questioned whether she is actually masculine, or whether she just does not conform to the traditional feminine identity – an identity which, in the novel, is performed by Lena, the “earth mother”.

While the other female characters in *Light in August* are limited by their dependency to men, Joanna, a spinster in her forties, lives alone in her own house, has financial independence and complete control over her life. By the standards of a patriarchal society, she is bound to be considered “masculine”.

However, Joanna is still capable of maintaining a relationship with Joe, marked particularly by an excessive sexuality. But because of Joe’s preconceptions of how women are supposed to be, he does not comprehend Joanna and sees her as having two dissociated personalities.

It was as though there were two people: the one whom he saw now and then by day and looked at while they spoke to one another with speech that told nothing at all since it didn’t try to and didn’t intend to; the other with whom he lay at night and didn’t even see, speak to, at all (LA, p. 570).

The Joanna that Joe sees during the day is the one he can talk to in a language common to both, because she has a “man trained habit of thinking born of heritage and environment” (LA, p. 572). The Joanna that surfaces at night is the nymphomaniac, the one who surrenders to Joe, like a “horizon of physical security and adultery if not pleasure” (LA, p. 572). Both Christmas and Joanna represent a masculine struggle for authority (related to the white patriarchy) that is undercut by traces of their identities (being a woman and having Negro blood). When the roles prescribed to those identities by the social doctrine that rules both Joe’s and Joanna’s life – as it also rules the community around them – are not met, both characters become stances of challenge, while at the same time, they cannot come to terms with what their real identities are and, accordingly, how they should behave. Clarke even suggests that Joanna’s nonconformity to the social role attributed to women is even more threatening to the community’s security than Joe’s erasure of racial distinction. “Whereas Joe’s death scene symbolically purges his black blood, murdering Joanna does not expel the feminine” (CLARKE, 1989: p. 403). Nevertheless, both their identities and the behavior entailed by it cannot exist in the Southern community of Jefferson.

Faulkner demarcates a distinction between procreation and sexuality by depicting Joanna as a barren spinster. Clarke suggests that Joanna’s masculine features, which distance her from the traditional feminine role may explain why she was dissociated from maternity. “Her creativity, like masculine creativity, is restricted to the figurative realm as she revels in sexual fantasies and particularly, we remember, in obscene words, and thus is left an ‘unfulfilled woman,’ neither wife, nor mother”

(CLARKE, 1989: p. 406). However, we can assume also that Faulkner rendered impossible for Joanna to become a “real” woman because of the patriarchal values of the community, which she herself has embodied. So, even for her, to be a woman would mean being unfit for control. Joanna, then, cannot bridge the gender gap and is the victim of an internal schism, which she cannot resolve – and which Faulkner resolves by killing her. Joanna’s death – her murder, in fact – and its aftermath are a recognition of how patriarchy normalizes identities, through the exorcism of disruptive behavior (like Joanna’s feminine power). Even though Faulkner does not provide a happy ending for either Christmas or Joanna, he does recognize and expose the racism, the sexism and the normative predicates of a white supremacist patriarchy.

While Joanna’s death is the incident that unfolds the dramatic action of *Light in August*, it is nevertheless a cloudy episode in the narrative. Like Christmas’ racial identity, the account of what happened the night Joanna died is deliberately avoided in the text. In the fourth chapter, as Byron reports to Hightower what has happened in the Burden house, he says that Joanna “was lying on the floor. Her head had been cut pretty near off” (TA, p. 465). There is also a flashback scene that narrates the night of her death, and which accounts for Joe having a razor on his hand, “not open yet” (LA, p. 607) and leaving it on the table, while Joanna is sitting in the bed with her arms folded. After that, we are given the following description:

Then he saw her arms unfold and her right hand come forth from beneath the shawl. It held an old style, single action, cap-and-ball revolver almost as long and heavier than a small rifle. But the shadow of it and of her arm and hand on the wall did not waver at all, the shadow of both monstrous, the cocked hammer monstrous, backhooked and viciously poised like the arched head of a snake; it did not waver at all. And her eyes did not waver at all. They were as still as the round black ring of the pistol muzzle. But there was no heat in them, no fury. They were calm and still as all pity and all despair and all conviction. But he was not watching them. He was watching the shadowed pistol on the wall; he was watching when the cocked shadow of the hammer flicked away (LA, p. 607).

The scene ends here, with no more information about what happened. Only later, when Joe gets off the car that gives him a ride, and realizes that he has a gun, do we understand more:

The match burned down and went out, yet he still seemed to see the ancient thing with its two loaded chambers: the one upon which the hammer had already fallen and which had not exploded, and the other upon which no hammer had yet fallen but upon which a hammer had been planned to fall. ‘For her and for me,’ he said (LA, p. 610).

That Joanna's head was "cut pretty near off" points to the fact that she was killed. Nevertheless, it is still impossible to tell for certain whether she was murdered by Christmas or not. So it is crucial to ask: if Faulkner intended readers to know that Christmas indeed killed Joanna, why did he omit the information? Perhaps matters are not so clear-cut as some critics⁸ have taken it to be. While Joanna's death meant that she had to be acknowledged by the community, it also transformed her into an instrument, which served two complementary purposes. The first is inoculating Joanna's power of non-conformity against the patriarchal values of the community, by appropriating her as a violated white woman who needs to be avenged and thus informing her dubious existence into a more acceptable category. The second is reinforcing the racist emblem of the black rapist directed at Christmas – who, according to what Joe Brown informs the community, is black and Joanna's killer.

Thus, two flagrant manifestations of the contradictions and incompleteness of the system, potentially threatening because they might find resonance in people's subconscious remainders of the pre-oedipal phase, are not only eliminated but also successfully reintegrated into the ideological picture imposed on reality. The system remains intact, unscathed (NEUMANN, 1999: p. 62).

Once the community finds out that Christmas, whom they thought was a foreigner, had, in fact, black blood, and that he also maintained a relationship with a white woman, his persecution activates a social apparatus that serves the purpose to re-normalize identities, to punish the subversive identities that do not perform their roles accordingly. Thus, Joanna's death and Christmas' new found racially mixed identity become self-complementary. While Joanna's dead body is appropriated as the site where new social meanings become attributed to her subversive life, it is also the instrument for Christmas re-naturalization into the role of the black rapist. Joanna's identity can only become coherent with the role of a violated white woman, to the extent that Joe's identity is that of a black rapist. That the community of Jefferson promptly reads into the incident what they are willing to accept is an example of how social doctrines produce stable identities through the exclusion of the "Other". According to Swiggart, "Faulkner often describes Southern puritans as if they always wore a stylized mask, expressive of moral certitude, in confronting the complex and shifting facts of human experience. Such a mind will insist upon formalized behavior, ranging from group worship to mob violence" (SWIGGART, 1962: p. 146).

⁸Swiggart (1962), for instance, writes: "Joanna tries to kill Joe with her grandfather's antique pistol, but the pistol misses fire. Joe then kills her with his razor" (p. 138).

Symbolically, when Joe is castrated by Percy Grimm, race is obliterated as Joe's "pent black blood" rushes out his body. "Upon that black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever" (LA, p. 743). Joe then becomes just a "man", thus representing the only transcendent figure of the novel. The castration could also mean Faulkner's attempt at obliterating gender. However, it is only symbolically that the gender and the race gap can be eradicated. While being the only transcendent figure in the narrative, Joe is still submitted to fulfilling a racist necessity. However, it is important to remember that Christmas willingly gives himself up to punishment. The self-sacrificial character of his surrender is reinforced by the fact that he can only find peace and accept his identity as the "white nigger" (LA, p. 654) at the end of his life. After the episode in the Burden house, Christmas lives for some time in the woods. During this period, he embraces his black identity, to the extent that he knows that he will be punished in the near future. In a sense, it is like Christmas is accepting his role, however, the Christian-like manner that he gives himself up can be regarded as a late form of resistance, because the memory of Christmas and what he represented to the community will not be forgotten:

upon the black blast the man seemed to rise soaring into their memories forever and ever. They are not to lose it, in whatever peaceful valleys, beside whatever placid and reassuring streams of old age, in the mirroring faces of whatever children they will contemplate old disasters and newer hopes. It will be there, musing, quiet, steadfast, not fading and not particularly threatful, but of itself alone serene, of itself alone triumphant" (LA, p. 743).

4. ZORA NEALE HURSTON: WRITING THE BLACK WOMAN'S VOICE

Zora Neale Hurston was born and grew up in the all-negro town of Eatonville, Florida. According to Hemenway, Eatonville “existed not as the “black backside” of a white city, but as a self-governing, all-black town, proud and independent, living refutation of white claims that black inability for self-government necessitated the racist institutions of a Jim Crow South” (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 12). Hurston’s own father, John Hurston, had written the town laws. This positive environment marked Hurston’s childhood with the perception that her race did not have to be regarded as a “problem”. Whereas most black artists of her time had difficult experiences regarding racism and segregation politics, and whereas some of them even believed that their blackness was something that had to be erased, or at least minimized, Hurston had had a first-hand example of how capable Afro-American people were of governing themselves, providing her with a lived experience of community, which she would carry for the rest of her life. In the preface to Hurston’s biography, Walker writes that it is in Hurston’s unusual relationship with race that lies her uniqueness: Hurston’s most characteristic quality is “racial health – a sense of black people as complete, complex, undiminished human beings, a sense that is lacking in so much black writing and literature” (1978: p. xiii).

Hurston’s close relationship with the folk tradition resulted from the fact that she grew up listening to the “lying sessions” in Joe Clarke’s porch (which inspired the porch scenes in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*). Eatonville was a rich repository of the black oral tradition, which carried through the black voice a code of communication that protected black people against external racism and oppression during slavery and after. Hurston’s experience in Eatonville informed her writing since the first story she published, named “John Redding Goes to Sea”, in the *Stylus* magazine, in 1921. Some time later, Hurston moved to New York and became a living part of the Harlem Renaissance. One of the concerns of this movement was to explore the folk roots of Afro-American culture and to combine traditional black modes of expression with Western high culture. From all of the New Negro writers, Hurston was the one with the closest connections to the black folk tradition.

her person and her fiction exhibited the knowledge that the black masses had triumphed over the racist environment, not by becoming white and emulating bourgeois values, not by engaging in a sophisticated program of political propaganda, but by turning inward to create the blues, the folktale, the spiritual, the hyperbolic lie, the ironic joke. These forms of expression revealed a uniqueness of race spirit because they were a code of communication – intraracial propaganda – that would protect the race from the psychological encroachments of racism and the physical oppression of society. Hurston knew that black folklore did not arise from a psychologically destroyed people, that in fact it was a proof of psychic health (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 51).

Hurston did not see as an impossibility to be both black and American and she regarded with distrust the bourgeois idea that to avoid racist stereotypes the writer should refrain from depicting the lowest members of the race. Along with Langston Hughes and Wallace Thurman, she created *Fire!!* in 1926 as a response to those bourgeois ideas. The magazine was committed to writing about the workers, about the folk and the rich roots of Afro-American culture, a culture which had been seen as associated by the first generation of emancipated slaves with a shameful and traumatic past, a product of slavery. The paradox of *Fire!!* is that, at the same time that it praised the working class and their forms of cultural expression, it required a bourgeois black readership that could understand the magazine's radical aesthetic propositions. *Fire!!* ended after only one exemplar published. Hurston, however, wanted to continue to write about her cultural heritage and about people who still retained “some individual race qualities and who were not totally white American in every respect save color of skin” (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 45).

Motivated by the opportunity to study folklore as a serious academic discipline, Hurston entered Barnard College, a feminine division of Columbia, to study anthropology. This is when she acquired what she deemed the “spy-glass” of anthropology.

The spy-glass enables Hurston to step back and see her experience from afar, but it also makes her see herself as somebody else. A dual consciousness comes to characterize her intellectual life, and a tension, perhaps latent since her removal from the Eatonville scene, stretched between the subjective folk experience and the abstract knowledge of the meaning of that experience (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 62).

This distinction between the subjective experience of the folk culture and the objective study of it as an academic discipline marks a crucial point in Hurston's efforts to negotiate between differences. Hurston became a “threshold figure,” as Barbara Johnson (1986: p. 318) characterizes her, the middle-woman between the folk tradition and the white world. The fusion of folklore life with formalized fiction was

Hurston's greatest concern as a writer. Folk culture was an inherently oral tradition, where the ability to express imagined worlds through speech, while still holding the audience entertained, was what defined the role of the artist. Hurston recognized this as an oral literary tradition, alongside which her written fiction should be developed. According to Johnson, "the noncoextensiveness of oral signs and written signs is a problem very much at the heart of Hurston's enterprise" (JOHNSON, 1986: p. 327). Hurston's intention then was to find narrative solutions that would allow the richness of tale telling to be transposed into written literature. However, during the Harlem Renaissance years, Hurston found herself more and more disillusioned by the Afro-American literary aspirations to transform folk art into a conscious art form, because she, above all New Negro writers, understood that there was no need for the writer to "speak for the masses, since the masses through their collected folklore could speak for themselves" (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 82).

This is why Hurston resorted to anthropology, so she could be, more than an elitist artist trying to convey an essential blackness through literature, an active "tradition-bearer" (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 82). The study of anthropology showed Hurston that folklore could, indeed, be preserved in all the richness it possessed, without having to be transposed into a higher art form. Around this time, Hurston took two folklore-collecting trips financed by her white patron Mrs. Mason. *Mules and Men*, published in 1935, was the result of one of these trips. *Mules and Men* is a collection of folk tales, which becomes unified by the presence of a transitional voice, a narrator that describes the settings and the characters, and introduces the tales. According to Hemenway, in *Mules and Men* Hurston "represented oral art functioning to affect behavior in the black community; to display this art in its natural setting she created a narrator who would not intrude on the folklore event. A semifictional Zora Neale Hurston is our guide to southern black folklore" (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 164). Hurston's trip begins in Eatonville, her hometown. Analyzing the structures of address of *Mules and Men*, Johnson writes:

[...] when Hurston leaves Eatonville to gather more tales, she is snubbed as an outsider because of her car and expensive dress until she lies and says that she is a bootlegger fleeing from justice. With her loss of difference comes a flood of tales. The strategy to obtain the material becomes indistinguishable from the material obtained (JOHNSON, 1986: p. 326).

Hemenway's observations on that same passage suggests that what Hurston writes about the dress is not, in fact, true, but only a narrator performing for the reader.

When she travels to Polk County she must establish a right to be in the lumber camp before she can retire and listen. She is accepted only after a fugitive status is created, an extensive repertoire of folksongs is demonstrated, and her “\$12.74 dress from Macy’s” put away. The dress is an obvious example of Hurston’s narrative posing for the benefit of her readers. Given her collecting experience, it seems extremely unlikely that Zora Neale would actually be wearing such a dress in a lumber camp. Yet by suggesting a certain distance between herself and her informants – symbolized by her clothes – the narrator manages to ease the reader into the alien environment (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 167).

The comparison shows that, what Johnson claims to be the reality of what occurred when Hurston arrived in Polk County, is, indeed, a strategy Hurston employs to approximate the reader. Since what Hurston wrote about having to discard the dress is probably not true, it becomes just an artifice to illustrate how she was included in the community. The joke, then, is on the reader, who, like the folktales suggests, is tricked once more into believing that Hurston is only reporting the tales as an outsider, as a third eye, when she is in fact, one of them. This is an instance that illustrates how Hurston’s work is “constantly dramatizing and undercutting [...] inside/outside oppositions, transforming the plane geometry of physical space into complex transactions of discursive exchange” (JOHNSON, 1986: p. 318).

This example is only to present Hurston’s skilled narrative experiments and play of voices. According to Gates, voice, in this sense, is not only a matter of point of view “but also the linguistic presence of a literary tradition that exists for us as a written text primarily because of the work of sociolinguists and anthropologists such as Hurston” (GATES, 1988: loc. 4538). It is only ironic that Hurston’s struggle to record the orality of black forms of expression was almost suppressed by the Afro-American literary tradition, only resurfacing due to Alice Walker’s revisionary efforts. Hurston demarcates for the Afro-American tradition a site of indeterminacy. Her life and her career are deeply marked by the necessity to mediate: between the black girl who grew up in an all-Negro town, where she learned the richness of folk culture, as she listened to lying sessions in Joe Clarke’s porch, and the woman writer in the Harlem Renaissance, a literary movement which sought to elevate the folk culture to the status of high art; between the creative artist whose connection to folk was subjective, and the anthropologist who had to analyze the folk as an objective material; between a Negro who believed that the lives of blacks accounted for so much more than white oppression, and the New Negro exponent whose financial

health relied on a white patron that demanded exclusive property of her folklore collections.

According to Awkward, “Hurston’s work is positioned vis-à-vis contemporary Afro-American women’s novels as what Michel Foucault calls an ‘initiator of discursive practices’” (AWKWARD, 1989: p. 12). In other words, Hurston’s novels mark the starting point of an Afro-American woman’s literary tradition, which is based on the revision and refiguration of earlier texts. This black female intertextuality, meaning by intertextuality “a paradigmatic system of explicit or implied repetition of, or allusion to, signs, codes or figures within a cultural form such as the novel” (AWKWARD, 1989: p. 5), differs from the revisionist tendencies found in the black male literary tradition, which are connected with the need to assert new priorities over past theories regarding black life and fiction. Black feminine intertextuality is united by a sense of cooperative textual interactions and by the possibility of legitimizing “rebellious endeavors” (AKWARD, 1989: p. 7). In other words, Hurston literary work serves as a precursor for the feminine revolt against “patriarchal literary authority” (AWKWARD, 1989: p. 7). Perhaps the rebellious intentions of her work explain the neglect that Hurston has suffered as a writer. Even though (or perhaps, because) “she spent a lifetime refusing to accept the roles prescribed for black women intellectuals” (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 5), Hurston died penniless, practically in anonymity, buried in an unmarked grave in Fort Pierce, Florida. The voice that she so actively tried to depict, however, continues very much alive, because Hurston was one of the first black writers who understood that “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house”:

Those of us who stand outside the circle of this society’s definition of acceptable women; those of us who have been forged in the crucibles of difference – those of us who are poor, who are lesbians, who are Black, who are older – know that survival is not an academic skill. It is learning how to stand alone, unpopular and sometimes reviled, and how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths. For the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house (LORDE, 2007: p. 112).

4. 1. Their Eyes Were Watching God

In the essay *Thresholds of Difference* (1986), Barbara Johnson argues that Zora Neale Hurston was “a commentator on the dynamics of any encounter between

an inside and an outside, any attempt to make a statement about difference” (JOHNSON, 1986: p. 318). Indeed, Hurston’s work inhabits the in-betweenness of black and white cultures by exploring the transactions between these two distinct discursive practices through the form and content of her novels. The operation of harmonizing antipodes, in fact, the operation of signifying upon the Western literary tradition by repeating *with a difference* is a distinguishable trace of the black literary tradition, which, according to Gates, is a double-voiced tradition.

Black writers, like critics of black literature, learn to write by reading literature, especially the canonical texts of the Western tradition. Consequently, black texts resemble other Western texts. These black texts employ many of the conventions of literacy form that comprise the Western tradition. Black literature shares much with, far more than it differs from, the Western textual tradition, primarily as registered in English, Spanish, Portuguese, and French. But black formal repetition always repeats with a difference, a black difference that manifests itself in specific language use. And the repository that contains the language that is the source – and the reflection – of black difference is the black English vernacular tradition (GATES, 1988: loc. 300).

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston depicts the search for identity and for a sense of self of a black woman named Janie Crawford. As Janie’s quest for subjectivity is constructed by and against the imposed violence of the signifying practices of a patriarchal community, she becomes marked by a schism that divides her perception of life in inner and outer world. Janie is only able to unify her outside and her inside as she finds a voice and expresses her self-defined black womanhood. At the heart of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* lies the concern with the search for a black female voice. As it has been said above, the debate over how the public black voice should be registered in literature was recurrent since the beginnings of the Afro-American tradition. It was against this background that Hurston engendered rhetorical strategies that would demarcate an end to the debate over black mimetic principles in fiction – as Sterling Brown had made in poetry –, by creating what Gates calls the “speakerly text”: a mediation between “a profoundly lyrical, densely metaphorical, quasi-musical, privileged black oral tradition on the one hand, and a received but not yet fully appropriated standard English literary tradition on the other hand” (GATES, 1988:loc. 4348).

The text’s combination of first-person dialogues in black dialect and third-person narration in standard English formulates a stance of resistance as it transposes to the novel form a speaking black voice, “a voice encoded and audible in secular songs and spirituals that have survived to express Afro-American resistance to the

institution of slavery” (AWKWARD, 1989: p. 18). This combination finds its epitome in Hurston’s use of the free indirect discourse, which stands for the encounter of both voices, creating a hybrid character, “who is neither the novel’s protagonist nor the text’s disembodied narrator, but a blend of both, an emergent and merging moment of consciousness” (GATES, 1988: loc. 374). The free indirect discourse dramatizes Janie’s quest for self-consciousness and subjectivity, since it functions as the rhetorical analogue to the metaphor of the negotiation between inside and outside. By employing such narrative strategies, Hurston suspends reference rather than erases differences, and she does so by “foregrounding the complex dynamism of their interaction” (JOHNSON, 1986: p. 328). In this sense, the construction of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* seems to be Hurston’s suggestion that there is no essential truth to identity, but that identities are *practices* which result from the injunctions of discourse and that depends on the signifying acts of linguistic life.

Abstractly considered, language refers to an open system of signs by which intelligibility is insistently created and contested. As historically specific organizations of language, discourses present themselves in the plural, coexisting within temporal frames, and instituting unpredictable and inadvertent convergences from which specific modalities of discursive possibilities are engendered (BUTLER, 2007: p. 198).

The emphasis on rendering the narrative as if it were an oral speech can be traced to the idea that the black vernacular was a mode of encoding black private and communal rituals and thus, it served as an instance of psychic resistance against the violence suffered by black people, not only during slavery, but also in its aftermath, with segregation laws and the spreading of myths which reinforced racist stereotypes, as for instance the myth of the black man as a rapist and the myth of the black woman as a sexual savage. While some black artists in the beginning of the twentieth century dismissed the folk heritage as a sign of pathology, since it brought forth painful memories and traumas, Hurston believed that the folk culture was an instrument of survival, to which black people resorted in order to escape the violence they suffered daily as slaves. To Hurston, it was through the folk that black people asserted their humanity, by encoding their subjectivity in spirituals and myths and making it inaccessible to whites. This idea is present in a passage in the opening scene of the book, as Janie arrives in the town by sundown, when people are getting home from the work on the fields and beginning to gather on the porches to tell stories.

It was the time for sitting on porches beside the road. It was the time to hear things and talk. These sitters had been tongueless, earless, eyeless conveniences all day long. Mules and other brutes had occupied their

skins. But now, the sun and the bossman were gone, so the skins felt powerful and human. They became lords of sounds and lesser things (HURSTON, TG, p. 1)⁹.

In those “lying sessions” on the porches, however, the black female voice was absent. Janie was inserted in a community that perceived black women’s abilities incorrectly and deemed them inferior to black men. Because of the patriarchal value system that established the rules of intelligibility which govern signification, this idea gained the status of a “preemptive and violent circumscription of reality” (BUTLER, 2007, p. xxiv). Male dominance over the black folk culture depicted in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is what Hurston revolts against by depicting Janie, a black woman, telling her own story of self-assertion to her black female friend, Pheoby, and authorizing her to pass the story on to the other women in the community. When Pheoby remarks that Janie should tell the other women what has happened to her since she went away, since they are already judging her, Janie answers: “Ah don’t mean to bother wid tellin’ ‘emnothin’, Pheoby. ‘Tain’t worth de trouble. You can tell ‘em what Ah say if you wants to. Dat’s just de same as me ‘cause mah tongue is in mah friend’s mouf.” (TG, p. 6). Even though Janie does not feel the will to engage with a critical audience herself, she nevertheless extends the possibility of agency to Pheoby, by sharing her self-defined black womanhood and voice. Hurston is, thus, signifying upon a collective Black women’s consciousness that had so far been kept almost completely suppressed, but which nevertheless existed in the persistent rejection of stereotypes and controlling images that were associated with African-American women. The rhetorical devices that Hurston uses only amplify the scope of her rebellious endeavors: “just as Janie gives Pheoby permission to tell her story to the town’s hostile female community, she allows the text’s omniscient narrator [...] to tell her Afro-American feminist story to a potentially hostile reading public” (AWKWARD, 1989, p. 13).

Butler sustains that the act of speech “is at once performed (and thus theatrical, presented to an audience, subject to interpretation), and linguistic, inducing a set of effects through its implied relation to linguistic conventions” (BUTLER, 2007: p. xxvii). This notion of speech as an instance of power is found in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* in the form of the Afro-American verbal behavior of call-and-

⁹ From this moment on, whenever passages of *Their Eyes Were Watching God* are transcribed, we will use TG and the number of the page as a reference.

response. It is crucial to understand that the role of audience in the Afro-American culture is completely distinct from the role of the audience in the Western culture. Instead of cultivating the Western model of communication that opposes speaker and listener, black expressivity privileges the continuity between them: the speaker performs and the listener performs. The interaction between audience and speaker serves the purpose of creating a unified movement, which breaks with the privileged position of the speaker, since, as Awkward puts it, “not only does the black audience listen to the text – it helps to create it” (p. 49). In this sense, when Janie shares her tale with Pheoby, she is symbolically extending her self-defined voice as a black woman and her acquired knowledge to Pheoby. Pheoby’s reaction, by its turn, is positive, going from “hungry listening” (TG, p. 10), to gaining self-consciousness and a will to act, which is made clear by Pheoby’s response to Janie’s tale. “‘Lawd!’ Pheoby breathed out heavily, ‘Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus’ listenin’ tuh you, Janie. Ah ain’t satisfied widmahself no mo’” (TG, p. 192).

The first time Janie is mentioned in the text is in the following passage: “So the beginning of this was a woman and she had come back from burying the dead” (TG, p. 1). With this sentence it is introduced the artifice of “plot negation” (GATES, 1988: loc. 4615), which is recurrent throughout the text and which serves the purpose of illustrating the external powers of subjection that condition Janie’s identity and to which Janie reacts. In other words, Janie’s subjectivity is constructed by a series of external signifying practices that are governed by rules of cultural intelligibility, which she conforms to and subsequently subverts, as she finds her own voice in consonance with black cultural practices and is able to narrate her story to Pheoby. When Janie returns to the community “after burying the dead” she has asserted an identity as a black woman, but not on the terms deemed acceptable by Eatonville’s patriarchal community. Janie’s untraditional behavior (she does not feel the need to inform the community what she has been doing, she engaged in a relationship with a man younger than her, she dresses inappropriately and does not feel the need to hide her sexuality) does not resonate positively with the other women in the community, thus illustrating that “the rules that govern intelligible identity, i.e., that enable and restrict the intelligible assertion of an ‘I,’ [...] operate through repetition” (BUTLER, 2007: p. 198). Yet, it is precisely because “signification is *not a founding act, but rather a regulated process of repetition*” (BUTLER, 2007, p. 298) that the subversion

of identity can be achieved, since it is the possibility of repeating with variations – *with a difference* – that enables agency.

The representation of Janie’s narrative begins with the first mention to the trope of the tree, which is repeated several times throughout the text. “Janie saw her life like a great tree in leaf with the things suffered, things enjoyed, things done and undone. Dawn and doom was in the branches” (TG, p. 8). Gates sustains that the metaphor of the tree is used by Janie “to define her own desires but also to mark the distance of those with whom she lives from these desires” (GATES, 1988, loc. 4662). It is through the tree imagery that Janie’s sexual awareness is presented. Indeed, Janie’s discovery of her sexuality happens beneath a pear tree and in close connection with her witnessing a natural phenomenon:

She was stretched on her back beneath the pear tree soaking in the alto chant of the visiting bees, the gold of the sun and the panting breath of the breeze when the inaudible voice of it all came to her. She saw a dust-bearing bee sink into the sanctum of a bloom; the thousand sister-calyxes arch to meet the love embrace and the ecstatic shiver of the tree from root to tiniest branch creaming in every blossom and frothing with delight. So this was a marriage! She had been summoned to behold a revelation. Then Janie felt a pain remorseless sweet that left her limp and languid (TG, p. 11).

Right after this scene, Janie shares her first kiss with a “beglamored” Johnny Taylor and is interrupted by her grandmother, Nanny. At this point, the narrator shifts the point of view from Janie to Nanny, as she watches “Johnny Taylor lacerating her Janie with a kiss” (TG, p. 12). It is precisely this moment at the gatepost, when Janie has to leave her “dream” and come inside the house, where Nanny informs her that she is a woman now, that initiates Janie’s conscious life: “She thought awhile and decided that her conscious life had commenced at Nanny’s gate. On a late afternoon Nanny had called her come inside the house because she had spied Janie letting Johnny Taylor kiss her over the gatepost” (TG, p. 10). In both accounts of the kiss quoted above we are given Nanny’s perspective and, in both stances, it is Johnny who is the acting individual; it is his will to kiss Janie and she stands as the violated victim, even though this perception is not in accordance with the previous scene, when we know through Janie’s free indirect discourse that it is she who chooses Johnny, after searching “as much as the world as she could from the front steps” (TG, p. 11).

Janie had just started to tell her narrative to Pheoby, when she passes from a nameless child called “Alphabet”, who is not even aware that she is colored when she

looks for herself in a photograph, to the first instance of her voice, a metaphorical voice, that is represented as Janie names her feelings and projects them onto the outer world. Janie's narrative, however, is then subtly overlapped by Nanny's voice, which assumes control over the narrative to tell her own story and Janie's genealogy. This intruding slave narrative, a tale-within-a-tale, as Gates points out, is rendered as an oral traditional narration and serves as a function of the plot. We thus become familiarized with Nanny's text and her perceptions of black womanhood, derived from her experience with slavery, where her body, her labor and her sexuality were the property of a white male owner and thus liable to being abused and manipulated.

“You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfill my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of the hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from whishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob'em of they will. Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither. It sho wasn't mah will for things to happen lak they did” (TG, p. 16).

The suspension of familial ties and the violent sexual exploitation of black women during slavery formed Nanny's notion that “colored folks is branches without roots”. This is, in Nanny's perspective, particularly true for Janie, considering that Janie's light brown skin comes from two generations of black females being sexually exploited by white males. Janie is the offspring of oppressive relationships, the embodied heir of a denied black humanity. Nanny's rhetoric, in this sense, is also an instance of resistance:

Like many African- American women, she resisted the controlling images of “work-ox” and “brood-sow,” but her status as a slave prevented her fulfilling her “dreams of whut a woman oughta be and do.” She saw the constraints on her own life but managed to keep the will to resist alive. Moreover, she tried to pass on that vision of freedom from controlling images to her granddaughter (COLLINS, 2002: p. 93).

At the same time that Nanny's speech imposes onto Janie the sign of “woman” as an identity restricted by her own “dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do”, it is also an enabling ground for resistance, because signifies upon a “Black women's long-standing rejection of [...] controlling images” (COLLINS, 2002: p. 98). In this sense, if we return to the role of the narrator in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the novel unfolds in yet another level, because Janie's voice and the resistance that it enables does not begin with her, and will not end with her. Instead, it is extended not only to Pheoby, and concomitantly to the women in Eatonville, but also to the readers

and as the ground for the black woman's literary tradition, closely connected to a collective black women's consciousness.

What does it mean, then, for Janie to "choose" the moment she discovers her sexuality and is named a "woman" as the first gesture of her self-consciousness? By consciousness it is understood the "means by which a subject becomes an object for itself, reflecting on itself, establishing itself as reflective and reflexive. The "I" is not simply one who thinks about him – or herself; it is defined by this capacity for reflective self-relation or reflexivity" (BUTLER, 1997, p. 22). In this sense, the moment her grandmother interpellates Janie is the moment when she, as subject and object of her own narrative, chooses to represent herself and this inaugurates her intelligible identity as a woman.

The desire to persist in one's own being requires submitting to a world of others that is fundamentally not one's own (a submission that does not take place at a later date, but which frames and makes possible the desire to be). Only by persisting in alterity does one persist in one's "own" being. Vulnerable to terms that one never made, one persists always, to some degree, through categories, names, terms, and classifications that mark a primary and inaugurative alienation in sociality. If such terms institute a primary subordination or, indeed, a primary violence, then a subject emerges against itself in order, paradoxically, to be for itself (BUTLER, 1997, p. 28).

So Janie's subjectivity, borne out of an external power that pressed her onto subjection, brings about a continuous repetition of acts that will try to approximate the ideal of a ground for identity, but whose groundlessness, on the other hand, is what enables her agency to be articulated. In a sense, if we consider that Janie is narrating her life story, for her to "choose" the moment she becomes conscious – something that is denied for subjects, in order for them to remain in subjectivity – is a powerful claim of self-assertion.

As a consequence of Janie's kiss with Johnny Taylor, Nanny not only "marks" Janie as a woman but also expresses her concern to see Janie married as soon as possible. Nanny's imposition of marriage as a form of erasing Janie's sexuality opposes Janie's perception of what a marriage should be like in the vision of the pear tree. Nanny, whose image resembles that of the "standing roots of some old tree" (TG, p. 12), shares the southern white aristocratic society's value system, where "womanhood is viewed as a docile condition and women themselves are regarded as attractive possessions" (AWKWARD, 1989: p. 22). So, to Nanny, "sittin' on high" is

the opposite of being “the mule uh de world”. Janie sums up “Grandma’s way” of living to Pheoby in the following manner:

She was borned in slavery time when folks, dat is black folks, didn’t sit down anytime dey felt lak it. So sittin’ on porches lak de white madam looked lak uh mighty fine thing tuh her. Dat’swhut she wanted for me – don’t keerwhut it cost. Git up on uh highcahir and sit dere. She didn’t have time tuh think whuttuh do after you got up on de stool uh do nothin’. De object wuztuhgitdere(TG, p. 114).

According to Hemenway, “the vertical metaphor in this speech represents Hurston’s entire system of thought, her social and racial philosophy. People erred because they wanted to be above others, an impulse which eventually led to denying the humanity of those bellow” (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 237). Nevertheless, Janie did accept to live “Grandma’s way” for some time and married Logan Killicks, in the hope that “she would love Logan after they were married” (TG, p. 21). When her expectations don’t meet up to reality, Janie goes to Nanny. Nanny’s reaction is to question whether Killicks has beaten Janie already, implying that in time this is to be expected. So, in Nanny’s perspective, even though marriage equals protection from outside violence, that protection is not extended to the household. When Janie first dream is dead, and she concludes that “marriage did not make love” (TG, p. 25), she becomes a real woman. The deception of not fulfilling the dream of marriage, however, comes along with knowledge: “She knew things that nobody had ever told her. For instance, the words of the trees and the wind” (TG, p. 25).

Despite her disillusionment, Janie still “looked up the road towards way off” (TG, p. 25), until sometime later, Joe Starks comes along. Starks is described as being of “a seal-brown color” but acting “like Mr. Washburn”, meaning that he behaved like a white person to Janie. From the beginning, Starks’ identity seems to be, like Nanny’s, molded by a Southern white aristocratic discourse. Also like Nanny, Starks wants Janie to occupy a high place. When Starks learns that Janie’s husband, Killicks, is out buying a mule for her to plow, Starks’ response is “A pretty doll-baby lak you is made to sit on de front porch and rock and fan yo’self and eat p’tatersdat other folks plant just special for you” (TG, p. 29). In Starks’ speech it is clear that he does not object to the hierarchizing impulses that govern white America. He, in fact, shares the idea that money secures authority and sees the opportunity to become a “big voice” in “dis place dat colored folks was buildin’ theirselves” (TG, p. 28). Janie runs away with him, only to find out, sometime later, that he “desired quite literally to make decisions for her” (AWKWARD, 1989: p. 25). When they arrive in Eatonville, Starks

applies the capitalist economic concepts he has learned with the white businessmen for whom he has worked. Joe, whose favorite expression is “I god”, tears down trees to build a store and a post office and, in the most symbolic of its acts, also brings light to the town. By using his “big voice” of command, Starks subjugates the whole community to his will and behaves as if he was a God-figure. His actions usually entail orders, as he repeatedly tells people what to do. This is especially true for Janie, as we learn that it is Starks’ intention to do all the talking for her.

Starks’ character is symbolic of everything that Hurston believed was wrong with Afro-Americans adopting a white philosophy. Joe’s figure of authority becomes associated with the white man as he not only becomes “Mayor – post-master – landlord – storekeeper” (TG, p. 47), but even builds a “sparkly white” house, around which “the rest of the town looked like servants’ quarters surrounding the ‘big house’” (TG, p. 47) and buys a “little lady-size spitting pot for Janie to spit in” (TG, p. 47), while the rest of the community “wasn’t told no better than to spit in tomato cans” (TG, p. 48). This flagrant difference between Starks and the rest of the community makes them start to feel restless with “a familiar strangeness”: “You keep seeing your sister in the ’gator and the ’gator in your sister, and you’d rather not” (TG, p. 48). According to Hemenway, Hurston believed that “black people became free not by emulating whites, but by building from the cultural institutions of the black community; women discovered an organic relationship with men only when there was consent between equals” (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 238). What Hurston seems to suggest in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is that freedom is to be found in racial pride and not in accepting the terms of a white hegemony by replicating them in black communities. “They bowed down to him [...], because he was all of these things, and then again he was all of these things because the town bowed down” (TG, p. 50). The community’s position in relation to Starks is, indeed, an analogue to the relationship between masters and slaves during slavery, which serves the purpose of pointing how authority and power relations are constructed through cultural practices.

When Tony Taylor gives a speech to welcome “Brother Starks”, it becomes clear that the community’s ruling social doctrines regard women as possessions, since Janie is placed in a list with “all dat you [Starks] have seen fit tuh bring amongst us – yo’ belov-ed wife, yo’ store, yo’ land –” (TG, p. 42). In the same occasion, Starks is made mayor of the town, and Janie, as Mrs. Mayor Starks, is asked to say a few

words. Before Janie has the chance to talk, however, Starks intervenes: “Thank yuhfuhyo’ compliments, but mah wife don’t know nothin’ ‘bout no speech-makin’. Ah never married her for nothin’ lak dat. She’s a woman and her place is in de home” (TG, p. 43). Starks turns out to be Janie’s most oppressive husband, as he keeps her from speaking and denies her the possibility to assert a sense self. According to Gaylee, “women were then as now to be little more than shadow images in the minds of men, the reflections of every man in their lives from father to husbands, creatures with no substance, no being, no identity outside that sanctioned and vouchsafed by men” (GAYLER, 1982, p. 24). This is clearly stated when Janie remarks that she believes that being “Mrs. Mayor Starks” does not amount to much, since she does not do anything, and Starks’ response to her is that she knew from the start that he wanted to be a “big voice” and that she “oughta be glad, ’cause that makes uh big woman” (TG, p. 47).

As Starks’ sexism grows, Janie develops a self-division. But she only becomes aware of this division when Joe hits her for the first time because she could not get the dinner right. She then realizes that “something fell off the shelf inside her. Then she went inside there to see what it was. It was her image of Jody tumbled down and shattered. But looking at it she saw that it was never the flesh and blood figure of her dreams” (TG, p. 72). After this episode, it follows a scene in the store, where Mrs. Robbins is made the target of a series of sexist comments regarding beating women in order to secure their respect. This sequence is connected to the previous scene, in which Starks slaps Janie. Then, when Joe Lindsay disapprovingly comments that Mrs. Robbins’ husband “says beatin’ women is just like steppin’ on baby chickens” (TG, p. 75), the scene resonates the earlier altercation between Janie and Starks about who has the right to tell the other what to do and when Starks states that “somebody got to think for women and chillum and chickens and cows” (TG, p. 71). Janie responds to the sexist remarks from the men on the porch, the first time she asserts herself verbally in the community.

Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised He was ’bout y’all turning out so smart after Him makin’ yuh different; and how surprised y’all is goin’ to be if you ever find out you don’t know half as much ’bout us as you think you do. It’s so easy to make yo’ self out God Almighty when you ain’t got nothing’ tuh strain against but women and chickens (TG, p. 75).

Her statement suggests that women are as equal to men as blacks are to white. Joe’s response to her that she is “gettin’ to moufy” and that she should bring “de checker-

board *and* de checkers” (PG, p. 75), is intended to conform her back into the “psychologically and physically limited role” (AWKWARD, 1989: p. 25) of black woman which he deems appropriate.

Janie’s strategy is resorting to silence and learning to separate her inside from her outside. A passage that perfectly illustrates Janie’s double-consciousness is the following: “one day she sat and watched the shadow of herself going about tending store and prostrating itself before Jody, while all the time she herself sat under a shady tree with the wind blowing through her hair and her clothes” (TG, p. 77). This necessity to separate thoughts from experiences is shared by Afro-American women, to the extent that, according to Collins, “Black women’s lives are a series of negotiations that aim to reconcile the contradictions separating our own internally defined images of self as African-American women with our objectification as the Other”(COLLINS, 2002, p. 99). It is in this inward space that Janie finds a way to cope with the oppressive demands of her husband. “In a way, it was good because it reconciled her to things” (TG, p. 77). Butler argues that “agency is the assumption of a purpose *unintended* by power, one that could not have been derived logically or historically, that operates in a relation of contingency and reversal to the power that makes it possible, to which it nevertheless belongs” (BUTLER, 1997: p. 15). In this sense, by becoming a self-conscious woman Janie is capable of articulating herself in language by which she differentiates herself from the others while conforming to social rituals of the community. The scene of her construction is also the scene of her agency, in terms of signifying practices that let her identity be and open to her the possibility of subversion, by the “reconfiguration and redeployment” (BUTLER, p. 199) of discursive injunctions.

The self-division of inside/outside is what enables Janie’s self-assertion, to the extent that she learns to “name her own division and move the parts simultaneously through contiguous spaces” (GATES, 1988, loc. 5129). That Janie is finally able to respond to Starks’ sexist remarks is an indication of her empowerment. Hurston’s rendering of Janie’s coming into being through her double self-consciousness bears the traces of the black slave code of behavior as slaves showed themselves meek and inarticulate in the presence of their white overseers, while when together with their colored counterparts, they could exchange and express their subjectivities in languages inaccessible to whites. Thus, it is from this site of resistance that Janie tells

Starks to “Stop mixin’ up mah doings widmah looks” (TG, p. 78), implying that her sense of black womanhood is not limited to his (or for that matter, to the community’s) conforming concept of black womanhood. To Joe’s surprise, Janie stands up for herself and finally learns how to “play de dozens” (TG, p. 79), as Sam Watson observes, *when she* responds to his comments about her aging body:

Naw, Ah ain’t no young gal no mo’ but den Ah ain’t no old woman neither. As reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah’m uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat’suh whole lotmore’*you* kin say. You big-bellies round here and put on a lot of brag, but ’tain’*nothin’* to it but yo’ big voice. Humph! Talkin’ ’bout *me* lookin old! When you pull down yo’ britches, you look lak de change uh life (TG, p. 79).

According to Gates, “this scene, this transformation or reversal of status, is truly the first feminist critique of the fiction of the authority of the male voice, and its sexism, in the Afro-American tradition” (GATES, 1988: loc. 5191). When Janie defies Starks by pointing out to him that his body is also aging, she strips him off his mythical God-like position and brings him back to his frail human figure. As the episode takes place in the store porch, it is important to stress that the audience plays an important role in the scene’s demystifying nature. The gesture not only undermines his manly authority but also divests him of his godlike figure, an emulation of the white man to his own community. Janie brings him back to corporeality and signifies upon the fragility of the abstract white male citizen, which Starks is meant to represent, as the *mythical norm* described by Lorde.

Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a *mythical norm*, which each of us within our hearts knows ‘that is not me.’ In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, young, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society (LORDE, 2007: p. 116).

Janie’s self-assertion has devastating consequences to Starks who striped out of his manly identity eventually dies. It is not until Janie meets Tea Cake that she takes “greater steps [...] toward a self-determined identity” (AWKWARD, 1989: p. 35). Tea Cake, unlike Janie’s other relationships, does not relate to the economic terms of a marriage contract as proposed in Nanny’s text. Janie acknowledges this as she explains to Pheoby her relationship with Tea Cake in comparison to her previous marriages: “Dis ain’t no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. Dis is uh love game. Ah done lived Grandma’s way, now Ah means tuh live mine” (TG, p. 114). While Joe Starks represented to Janie the image of the horizon, a trope for desire, Tea Cake is associated with the image of the tree in blossom: “He could be

a bee to a blossom – a pear tree blossom in the spring” (TG, p 106). According to Gates, Vergible “Tea Cake” Woods is Janie’s “ideal lover” (GATES, 1988: loc. 4643), and “not only embodies Janie’s tree, he is the woods themselves, the delectable veritable woods, as his name connotes (‘Vergible’ being a vernacular term for ‘veritable’)” (GATES, 1988: loc.4776). Instead of the godlike figure, as represented by Starks, Tea Cake is described as “a glance from God” (TG, p. 106). It is with Tea Cake that Janie learns how to play: literally play checkers and symbolically, to “play de dozens”, meaning to assert herself verbally in the oral tradition which includes playing the “love game”. It is also with Tea Cake that Janie moves to the swamp, the “muck in the Everglades, ultimately breaking with the “protection” of material possessions and bourgeois conventions that limit her role as a black woman.

Tea Cake represents, in this sense, a great influence – not to say a scene of instruction – on Janie’s acquisition of a woman’s identity. However, as Awkward (1989) points out, it is important not to disregard the text’s suggestion that Janie and Tea Cake are not, after all, equals. At the same time that Janie tells Pheoby “Ah done lived Grandma’s way, now Ah means tuh live mine” (TG, p. 114), she also claims that she and Tea Cake are “goin’ off somewhere and start all over in Tea Cake’s way” (TG, p. 114). Tea Cake himself also makes statements that can only be classified as characteristically sexist. For instance, he refuses to accept Janie’s money, stating that he does not need “assistance” to provide for his wife – even if the assistance comes from his wife herself: “From now on, you gointuh eat whatever mah money can buy yuh and wear de same. When Ah ain’t got nothin’ you don’t gitnothin’” (TG, p. 128). Janie’s response to what seems to his remark is only to say, “Dat’s all right wid me” (TG, p. 128), a submissive attitude that seems unlikely given her earlier growth in self-awareness. According to Awkward, Janie’s assent to Tea Cake’s behavior “would seem to provide cogent evidence against an interpretation of her as a wholly liberated, self-defined, independent woman”(AWKWARD, 1989: p. 37).

The new marriage turns sour when Tea Cake begins to beat Janie because of jealousy, particularly when she is introduced to Mrs. Turner’s brother. “Not because her behavior justified his jealousy, but it relived that awful fear inside him. Being able to whip her reassured him in possession. No brutal beating at all. He just slapped her around a bit to show he was the boss” (TG, p. 147). With all the differences between what Starks and Tea Cake personalities represent, they both share the need for self-

assertion through physical abuse. According to Collins, Tea Cake, like Starks, does not consider Janie a person, but as something that he owns. “Even if a man loves a woman, as is clearly the case of Tea Cake and Janie, the threat of competition from another male is enough to develop an “awful fear” that Janie will choose another man and thus deem him less manly than his competitors” (COLLINS, 2002: p. 160). Janie’s silent response to Tea Cake’s unmotivated violence may recall Janie’s lack of response to Starks, with the exception that then, she verbalized her dissatisfaction and the reader could access her thoughts and could learn what was going on “inside”, behind the mask of resilience. When Tea Cake beats Janie, however, no such response is given. The narrator does not provide any explanation except Janie’s silence. As Awkward states:

Her silence recalls her quiet response to Starks’ psychological and physical abuse, and suggests – voicelessly but powerfully – her disapproval of her third husband’s method of dealing with the threat of an apparently unspectacular rival for whom Hurston does not even bother to provide a name. (AWKWARD, 1989: p. 39)

Gender difference, which had so far been almost non-existent in Janie’s relationship with Tea Cake – he tells to come work *with him* in the muck, instead of *for him*; he teaches her how to play, he takes her out fishing –, becomes evident when Tea Cake uses force in order to reassure his “possession”. “Furthermore, Janie’s transgression was the potential to become unfaithful, the possibility to be sexually promiscuous, to become a whore” (COLLINS, 2002, p: 160). Yet, one could argue that Janie’s silence is her means of protesting, because it shows her growing ability to navigate between her two selves. According to Collins, “silence is not to be interpreted as submission in this collective, self-defined Black women’s consciousness” (COLLINS, 2002: p. 98). In this sense, we can take Janie by the same terms that Johnson uses to define Hurston: that by negotiating between two opposite sides, she suspends references, rather than erases difference.

Tea Cake’s greatest contribution to Janie is initiating her in “an active participation in the traditions and rituals of her culture. He also provides the means for Janie to create a sincere appreciation of her own physical and spiritual beauty” (AWKWARD, 1989: p. 52). Whereas Starks had kept Janie aloft from the community’s oral tradition by limiting her role to the tight enclosures of the bourgeois definition of “woman”, Tea Cake frees Janie from an empty way of living by giving her the opportunity and the freedom to immerse herself in the black folk tradition and

by encouraging her to develop her own identity. It is only by achieving a self-asserted and confident voice that Janie can narrate her own story. But contrary to what might be expected, Janie's self-defined voice, which informs her narrative at the end of the text, does not appear as a first-person direct dialogue, but rather, as a dialect-informed indirect narration that becomes unified with the free indirect discourse, to the point that the difference between them cannot be located.

As the protagonist approaches self-consciousness, [...] not only does the text use free indirect discourse to represent her development, but the diction of the black character's discourse comes to inform the diction of the voice of narrative commentary such that, in several passages, it is extraordinarily difficult to distinguish the narrator's voice from the protagonist's. In other words, through the use of what Hurston called a highly 'adorned' free indirect discourse, which we might think of as a third or mediating term between narrative commentary and direct discourse, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* that implicit tension between standard English and black dialect [...] (GATES, 1988: p. 4794).

The first chapter introduces the narrative commentary in the third-person, only to present the main character, Janie, who we find out is going to narrate her story to her friend Pheoby. Her narrative then appears to be a parenthesis that begins in the second chapter, but instead of a first-person narrator, the tale is told by a third-person narrator, which provides the reader with information that Janie could not possibly know – both in indirect discourse in standard English and free indirect discourse, in a midway between standard English and black dialect. On the other hand, Janie's narrative renders the rich dialect of the characters in first-person direct dialogue. By the end of the novel, the whole of the narrative seems to conform to a form of narrative commentary that has absorbed both the standard English of the third-person narrator and the black dialect of the direct discourse. Because *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is conceived as a play of voices, it also becomes a play of spaces and times that unfold themselves in the mode of a narrative-within-a-narrative.

The dramatic effect of such narrative composition is the result of what Hurston was possibly aiming for: it seems that “the very subject of this text would appear to be not primarily Janie's quest but the emulation of the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical structures of actual speech, an emulation designed to produce the illusion of oral narration” (GATES, 1988: loc. 4911). It is hard, however, to define Hurston's purpose, especially when the text itself appears to move in the opposite direction. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* suggests, in fact, that Janie's

search for a self-defined identity is so closely intertwined with the black oral tradition that is impossible to separate the two instances.

The rhythms and natural imagery which structure the novel refer not only to liberation from sexual roles, but also to the self-fulfillment inherent in this sense of community. Janie's 'blossoming' refers personally to her discovery of self and ultimately to her meaningful participation in black tradition (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 239).

For Hurston, folk culture was the ground for resistance, as opposed to the assimilation of bourgeois notions of material racial advancement. Unlike most writers of her time, Hurston did not have a problem being American and black, as long as she was able to assert her identity in her terms. That meant talking like black people talked, thinking like they thought, and telling stories the way they told, using the same tools as those of oral narration, revising, repeating and signifying upon the elements of Negro life.

Gloria Anzaldúa wrote: "I write to record what others erase when I speak, to rewrite the stories others have miswritten about me, about you. To become more intimate with myself and you. To discover myself, to preserve myself; to make myself, to achieve self-autonomy" (ANZALDÚA, 1983, p. 169). Hurston, in a sense, wrote for the same reasons. She wanted to record the folklore that was alive in the black communities and she knew that that was a challenge, that is was her challenge. She perceived the life and the culture of the black working-class as stances of their endurance, as the receptacle of the black humanity that had to be restored during oppression. Gayler claims that with *Their Eyes Were Watching God* Hurston suggests to portray that black people lived healthy, normal lives, beyond the shadows and the shackles of white America: "that no society was so powerful as to exclude laughter, tears, and most importantly love; that to portray blacks as having no freedom outside the oppressive American society is to argue that either the society will change or blacks will never attain freedom" (GAYLER, 1982: p. 22). It seems that, in the end, what Janie discovers through her process of self-knowledge is precisely this. There can be more to Negro life than trying mimicking white society. If blacks could endure and maintain their dignity through the most humiliating experiences and if the accounts of those experiences are stored in an oral tradition, then she, as a black woman, had only to learn from embracing her culture – and from learning to be a part of it. Identity is a *practice*, rather than a set of fixed concepts and external ideas that inform different people in their limited roles. This is implied when, as she finishes telling her story to Pheoby, she contends:

'Course, talkin' don't amount tuh uh hill uh beans when yuh can't do nothin' else. And listenin' tuh dat kind uh talk is jus' lakopenin' yo' mouth and lettin' de moon shine down yo' throat. It's uh known fact, Pheoby, you got tuh *go* theretuh *know* there. Yo' papa and yo' mama and nobody else can't tell yuh and show yuh. Two things everybody's got tuh do fuhthemselves. They got tuh go tuh God, and they got tuh find out about livin' fuhthemselves (TG, p. 192).

5. FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The objective of this work was to analyze the novels *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, by Zora Neale Hurston, and *Light in August*, by William Faulkner, in order to understand how racial and gendered identities are constructed in both texts. More specifically, in order to understand how the identities of the novels' main characters, one Afro-American woman named Janie Crawford, and one possibly Afro-American man named Joe Christmas, are constructed in relation to their social contexts. Even though the two novels are set in the South, one takes place in a white community, where the dominant social doctrine is a patriarchal white supremacy, and the other in a black community, where the cultural values are largely based on the black folkloric tradition, but which is, nevertheless, also patriarchal. The idea that identities are defined by signifying practices that conceal its own workings so as to naturalize its effects, and the will to understand how this occurs in two distinct contexts (even though closely related) is what grounds the comparison between the two narratives. In other words, both novels are concerned with depicting how minority identities are formed, in relation to an oppressive context, the construction of subjectivity and the strategies of resistance that are enabled by it, which change from context to context and from identity to identity.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a narrative that describes Janie's search for a self-defined voice, within the traditions of a black community. The book renders Janie's life story as a narrative that Janie herself tells to her friend Pheoby. In this sense, Hurston's novel suggests the continuity of an Afro-American oral tradition in the form of the novel, at the same time that it asserts a feminine collective voice that is passed on from Janie to Pheoby as it is also passed on from the text to its potential readers – and to other black female writers. Janie engages in a series of intimate relationships with men and changes from Janie Crawford to Janie Killicks, then Starks, as she carries her husband's names as images of herself that she denies, until she meets Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods, the first man with whom she can enjoy a greater level of freedom (even though not absolute equality). Janie "is thought to be (and is maintained) 'inarticulate' by her first two husbands but is a master of metaphorical narration" (GATES, 1988: loc. 4300). However, she only comes to find

out the possibilities of verbally asserting herself when she meets Tea Cake, her third husband. Tea Cake presents to Janie the rich culture of black folk as he presents to her the chance to engage with the community. So far, Janie had been conformed to the feminine role attributed to women by values of a white bourgeois society. With Tea Cake, however, she is able to speak and discovers the power of her voice as she participates in “lying sessions”.

Light in August narrates the life and death of Joe Christmas, a character who does not know his “true” racial identity. In the context of the South, a geography marked by racial difference, Christmas represents a site of pollution and incongruity. His narrative is rendered as a series of more or less traumatic events, which shape the direction of his life and which he does not seem able to assert any control over, since he is uncommunicative and the only manifestations of his feelings and desires is through violence. Because he inhabits the in-betweenness of miscegenation, Christmas cannot access a language through which he can assert his voice. Christmas represents the “vacillation between categories” (BUTLER, 2007: p. xxiv), and exposes the “reality” of race as a fallacy, since his double identity, as both white and black, points to the fact that what we take to be “real”, or the naturalized knowledge of what race is – of what the Negro race is – is a changeable reality. Christmas eventually arrives in Jefferson, Mississippi, where he engages in a relationship with a white woman named Joanna Burden, descendent from a Yankee family, who does conform to the rules of the traditional feminine identity. Both Christmas and Joanna are considered outsiders by Jefferson’s social doctrine. It is through his relationship with Joanna, more specifically, through her death, that Christmas’ mixed racial background is discovered by the community. Joanna’s death, then, serves as the instrument to inscribe Christmas in the racial categorization: while Joanna stands for the violated white woman, Christmas becomes the black rapist. Thus, his subversive behavior is regulated by the social apparatus, the instance that constructs his black identity according to a racist necessity, and punishes him at the same time.

If, as Butler argues, “construction is not opposed to agency; it is the necessary scene of agency, the very terms in which agency is articulated and becomes culturally intelligible” (BUTLER, 2007: p. 201), why is it that Janie’s constructed identity enables her to assert her own sense of self and react to the sexism that oppresses her, whereas Christmas becomes the instance of a tragic disclosure? In

Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston seems to suggest that, to Afro-Americans, the possibility of asserting subjectivity and, thus, being able to articulate resistance, is intimately connected with the black folk tradition, a repository of myths, spirituals, and other forms of expression inherently black, which served as a survival strategy during slavery. Janie's double consciousness, the schism that divides her in inside and outside, is only resolved by the assertion of a voice within the black community and its indigenous forms of expression.

In a white-dominated America where principles antithetical to those of Black culture are often imposed upon Afro-Americans, the type of resolution suggested by Hurston's novel can be accomplished only by a re-connection of opposites that Western culture has conceptualized as irrevocably dissociated (AWKWARD, 1989: p. 56).

This "re-connection of opposites" that Awkward writes can only happen when there is a sub-culture that grounds the efforts of resistance. Lorde seems to echo Hurston's ideas when she claims: "Without community there is no liberation, only the most vulnerable and temporary armistice between an individual and her oppression. But community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretense that these differences do not exist" (LORDE, 2007: p. 112). The idea that community is necessary for self-assertion also resonates through *Light in August*, but by presenting the other side of the coin, which consists in the difficulties entailed from always being a social outcast. Christmas is unable to access an identity, to the extent that he does not know to which category he belongs. Christmas is the "non-verbal maker, *here and there, this and that*, as the conventions of discourse out of which he arises proffer him no claim to a "present/presence" (SPILLERS, 1991: p. 8). Being essentially "originless" (SPILLERS, 1991: p. 10), Christmas cannot construct social ties, nor is he capable of uniting his "white thinking" and the racist values that are entailed in it, with his black blood. For the black blood is the only thin connection that Christmas has with the Afro-American community. Christmas is founded in a grammar that regards part of his identity – the Afro-American part – as an absence. Unlike Janie, Christmas cannot resort to the folk tradition, the instrument that enables the black individual to construct his identity outside of the white hegemonic culture.

The notion that coherent identities are always formed by the repulsion of an "Other" is rendered in both novels as the denial of the experience of the black woman. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the misogyny directed at Janie takes the form of a repressive external discourse that molds her identity from her early experiences as a

woman. This repressive discourse is in accordance with white cultural values and relates women to property, designating them as inarticulate and less capable than men. Such discourse is expressed by Janie's grandmother, Nanny, and becomes clearly embodied in Joe Starks, Janie's second husband. Starks' flagrant sexism is rendered in several scenes where he expresses his will to control Janie's voice and her life. In *Light in August*, the misogyny is present in Joe Christmas' actions and attitudes and is related with his puritan morals, which define the way he reinterprets a childhood traumatic memory. Christmas' hatred of black women is more clearly expressed in the scene where he brutally beats a black girl with whom he was going to experience his first contact with sexuality. The denial of the feminine identity is a form of self-assertion for black male characters, whose masculinity is denied in the white world.

Both Janie and Christmas can trace the "beginning" of their consciousness to interpellating moments in their childhoods. Janie describes the moment her grandmother sees her kissing Johnny Taylor at the gatepost, calls her inside the house and tells her that she is "uh 'oman, now" (TG, p. 12) as the starting point of her search for her own voice. As for Christmas, the key moment that marks his division of identity is the episode in the orphanage, when he is caught hidden in a closet, after he vomits the toothpaste he is eating, and is dragged by the dietician who scolds him and says that he is a "little nigger bastard" (LA, p. 489). Those interpellating moments are what enable the character's social existence, "initiated into a temporal life of language that exceeds the prior purposes that animate that call" (BUTLER, 1997: p. 2). Both scenes also mark a "primary violence" (BUTLER, 1997: p. 28), in the sense that words and behaviors that were previously unacknowledged by the individual, become regulatory instances. "Vulnerable to terms that one never made, one persists always, to some degree, through categories, names, terms, and classifications that mark a primary and inaugurative alienation in sociality" (BUTLER, 1997: p. 28). However, whereas Janie can articulate herself within the category of woman and achieve agency, Christmas' cannot.

Both Hurston and Faulkner seem concerned with directing a social criticism to the capitalist notions of progress, to the materialism of American life and to the social doctrine that sustains them. The two authors describe the South as it is after the "fall". Faulkner constructs his criticism by weaving a social allegory of the whole South,

represented in the community of Jefferson, through the exploration of the psychological “reality” of his symbolic characters. He investigates the decadence of the South and suggests that its cause can be located in the puritan tenets which rule the social structure according to a rational impetus of categorization. Hurston literature, on the other hand, suggests that there is more to the South than the “reality” accounted for in the white perspective. There is a black South, which exists in all-black communities, and which is independent from the shadow of white society or, at least, which is not completely defined against it. This is not to say that Hurston ignored the racism that, by the time she wrote *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, was still very much alive in segregation laws. She did not. Hurston believed, however, that it was necessary to depict black people who did not “devote their lives to a morose discussion of white injustice” (HEMENWAY, 1978: p. 220) and her novel is the instrument she uses to do that. In fact, “true consummation occurs in *Their Eyes* once Janie eschews the values implied by material possessions (such as middle-class houses, especially those on which sit idle women who rock their lives away), learns to play with Tea Cake, and then moves to the swamp” (GATES, 1988: loc. 4842).

In a sense, both Faulkner and Hurston were already deconstructing the identities of their characters way before critics could understand what that meant. By creating characters that are not defined by their “essential” identities, both authors point to the fact that there is an external discourse that enables their existence, by inserting them in categories, but that can also hamper their attempts in escaping the repressive identity. Janie frees herself from a discourse that limits her role as black woman and discovers, through lived experience, that she has a voice and that she is capable of using it whenever she deems necessary – even to speak against the structure that subjected her into being. Christmas racial uncertainty represents a moment of suspension of categories and indicates the phantasmatic quality of racialized identity. He is also Faulkner’s way of showing that it is only the access to culture and to communal life that enables the strategies of resistance of marginalized groups to emerge. Because, “the fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects. Minoritarian subjects need to interface with different subcultural fields to activate their own senses of self” (MUÑOZ, 1999: p. 5).

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