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THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE AND ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

por

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or another, did believe.

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ABSTRACT

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Supervising Professor: Ph.D. Dilvo Ilvo Ristoff

This study aims at analyzing the construction of identity undergone by Celie, the leading character in the book The Color Purple (1982) by Alice Walker, and Janie, the leading character in the book Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) by Zora Neale Hurston. The approach used favors the investigation of the aspects: journey, sensuality/sexuality, and community in the construction of the characters' identities. The comparison between the two novels revealed that both characters experienced a similar process and used a similar strategy, namely storytelling, in order to expose their personal growth as active subjects.

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THE CONSTRUCTION OF IDENTITY IN ALICE WALKER'S THE COLOR PURPLE AND ZORA NEALE HURSTON'S THEIR EYES WERE WATCHING GOD

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Este estudo tem por objetivo analisar a construção da identidade sofrida por Celie, a personagem principal no livro The Color Purple (1982) de Alice Walker, e Janie, a personagem principal no livro Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) de Zora Neale Hurston. A abordagem empregada favorece a investigação dos aspectos: jornada, sensualidade/sexualidade, e comunidade na construção das identidades dessas personagens. A comparação entre os romances revelou que as personagens passam por um processo semelhante e usam uma estratégia semelhante, a de contar suas próprias histórias, para expor seu crescimento com sujeitos atuantes.

Número de páginas: 82.

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Introduction

According to Stimpson, "[t]he combination of being intellectually talented but institutionally marginal is one characteristic of the history of women, education, and literature studies" (254). This statement can be applied to both Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston, although some critics may affirm that they have the mainstream's recognition. They do have, but this recognition came to Hurston, for instance, just long after her death, and to Walker in the wake of Feminist and African American militancy in the United States.

The scholarship so far has mentioned that it is due to Alice Walker that Zora Neale Hurston's work is known nowadays, since the former did a hard research to locate the latter's tombstone and recuperate her work. Besides, it is also claimed that Hurston's work has influenced Alice Walker's, a theory that can be shown in, at least, two ways. First, it can be asserted that both writers make use of orality in their works. In addition, they denounce the prejudice faced not only by black women but also by black men in the American society.

This study aims at showing these aspects, namely orality and the prejudice faced by black people in the American society, by comparing Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982) and Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937) and showing how these aspects interfere and promote the construction of identity of Celie and Janie, my principal sources of investigation. My contribution in this area will be in terms of expanding the possibilities of analysis made so far of both novels. The hypothesis is that aspects such as the characters' temporal and spatial journey, the sense of belonging to a community, and the awakening of sensuality/sexuality contribute to this process and are portrayed through the familiar tradition of storytelling.

Although the structure of the novels is different, since Hurston's novel is the history of Janie's life told by her to her friend Pheoby and Walker's is an epistolary novel

compound mainly by the letters its main character, Celie, writes to God and to her sister, the similarities are more numerous than the differences. Along with the aspects already mentioned of journey, community and sensuality/sexuality, storytelling is one of the similarities found when comparing both novels and it is also responsible for making possible the change of status, from passive object into active subject, of both Celie and Janie in the novels.

Both novelists also elaborate on the topic of male dominance as well as white dominance in their novels and some examples regarding both will be provided in the analysis. Moreover, in order to give a more accurate reading, Feminist Criticism, along with Afro-American Criticism and New Historicism will be used and are intended to provide a clearer idea on how the power relations take place in the books.

The thesis is divided in four chapters, having the first one presenting a summarized version of the main ideas that orient the theories used to read the novels. The second chapter, by its turn, will present an analysis of Walker' The Color Purple by focusing on its main character, Celie, and the process of construction of identity undergone by her. The third chapter will present the reading of Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God and similarly to the reading of Walker's novel, will focus on the construction of identity undergone by Janie, its main character. The fourth chapter will be a comparison of the two novels discussing the similarities and differences, and it will be an attempt to show the implications of the findings to the reading of the novels.

Chapter One

The study of literature: theories that may help understand two works of fiction that portray reality

> " I would rather think of the text as my accomplice than my patient or my analysand. Unspoken stuff does come out, but if it comes out, it comes out against the grain of my reading. When it begins to clamor for my attention, it catches my eye." (Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 1989.)

A great number of reviews and analyses were written in the last few decades about Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston. Most of the ones which analyzed Alice Walker's The Color Purple (1982) spotted the roles of its main character, Celie, qualifying it as a manifest for the feminists. Some other analyses were also written about Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God (1937), mainly after Alice Walker digged information about the forgotten novelist and anthropologist. Most studies, however, were done by feminists and addressing their interests.

This thesis aims at making another reading of the two novels by studying their contributions to the discussion of black identity in the United States. The discussion will take into consideration some of the main characters in both novels, posing them as representatives of the African Americans settled in the United States. Feminist critics as well as New Historicist critics will be used in order to understand the construction of identity undergone by African Americans.

One of the aspects approached in this thesis is related to the formation of black communities in the United States as a way of enhancing black identity. The formation of these communities proves its value if we consider that "the black condition [of slavery and paraly-

sis] was blamed on family frailty, rather than on poverty and prejudice. Blacks without families, helpless, lacking kinship, would have no will to resist" (Zinn 173).

George Rawick (qtd. in Zinn 173) gives another explanation for the creation of black communities. According to him,

> [t]he slave community acted like a generalized extended kinship system in which all adults looked after all children and there was little division between "my children for whom I'm responsible" and "your children for whom you're responsible."... A kind of family relationship in which older children have great responsibility for caring for younger siblings is obviously more functionally integrative and useful for slaves than the pattern of sibling rivalry and often dislike that frequently comes out of contemporary middle-class nuclear families composed of highly individuated persons. ... Indeed, the activity of the slaves in creating patterns of family life that were functionally integrative did more than merely prevent the destruction of personality. ... It was part and parcel, as we shall see, of the social process out of which came black pride, black identity, black culture, the black community, and black rebellion in America.

Both novels present this idea of forming communities as a means of keeping the alike together and supportive. And this idea will be discussed in the following chapters.

1. Why were the two novels chosen?

Zora Neale Hurston represents a so-called minority in American Literature and, therefore, suffered a lot of prejudice. Alice Walker suffered the same twofold prejudice Hurston did of being both black and woman. In her Their Eyes Were Watching God, Hurston

portrays the richness of the orality of the African American speech, a peculiarity also explored by Alice Walker in her The Color Purple. However, both Hurston and Walker were criticized by other African American writers precisely for portraying this illiterate speech of the African Americans. It was believed that such portrait did not help to erase the idea of inferiority planted by white people in the African Americans' minds.

Both novels by Hurston and Walker present a set of similarities regarding the way each author views and presents the suffering faced by African Americans, both men and women, in the 1930's society in the United States. Another similarity is related to the way they organize the stories, as if they were tales of many voices, justifying the fact that history is not written by one individual only, but by many. The writers also make use of certain strategies in order to construct the black identity of their main characters. These similarities are related to the strategies used in promoting the construction of identity as individuals and can be delimited in terms of attributing temporal and spatial mobility to the characters, a sense of belonging to a community, and the awakening of sensuality/sexuality (the act of discovering oneself as a human being and, in the case of both novels, as a woman). These strategies were explored by a few critics, but restricted to the Feminist Criticism scope. Moreover, no extensive comparison between The Color Purple and Their Eyes Were Watching God was done so far.

Both novels portray some important events in the development of the United States, such as the post-slavery period and the Civil Rights Movement, and in the development and awareness of the African American people inserted in that society, and, therefore, are not limited to portraying the role of African Americans only. Since New Historicism helps reading a text as the basis for the reconstruction of an ideology, this theory will be applied to the reading of both novels hoping to elicit a few aspects and helping to understand the wider coverage of both novels.

2. *African American Criticism: what has been said so far about it and its connection with Feminist Criticism:*

According to Chafe and Sitkoff,

> [n]o domestic development has been more important to postwar American society than the struggle for racial equality. During the three quarters of a century after the end of Reconstruction, little occurred to improve the status of Afro-Americans. The vast majority lived in the South, were denied the right to vote, suffered the overt and covert consequences of segregation, experienced dire poverty, and were subject – at virtually every moment – to the threat of physical intimidation and violence. Through most of that time, black Americans strove to build the best schools, churches, and homes they could for their children and themselves. Yet in an environment shaped and defined by white supremacy, the possibilities of substantial change were minimal (147).

Although minimal, the possibilities of change appeared and were taken by the African Americans and from the terrain of social life they entered the academy. The external and impersonal promises of modification gave way to the collective demand and activism. The African American fight had started long before, but it was from the 1950's to the 1980's that it really provoked some revolution.

Between the 1950's and the early 1980's, African American writing and criticism moved throughout three generations. The first one, called *Integrationist*, went from the 1950's up to the early 1960's, and had the black writers believing that being included into the mainstream of American culture was both desirable and possible. The fight had started long

before this period, yet that was the time in which all the cards needed to be shown, i.e. their intentions needed to be disclosed.

According to Valerie Smith,

> [t]he conditions of oppression provide the subtext of all Afro-Americanist literary criticism and theory. Whether a critic/theorist explores representations of the experience of oppression or strategies by which that experience is transformed, he/she assumes the existence of an "other" against whom/which blacks struggle (57).

And this whom/which blacks started to struggle against was the economic, social and political articulations of racial oppression represented by the white male canonical construction. Moreover, oppression was also identified in the person of the critic/theorist who restrained the participation of black writers in the writing of history task and repressed black writers both individually and institutionally as representatives of another race.

The next generation, closely associated with the Black Power cultural movement, "Black is beautiful", was swayed by a *Black Aesthetic*. It lasted through the 1960's and 1970's, and is characterized by the celebration of black manhood coming from the need to reclaim racial pride especially from manifestations clearly linked to the African culture, but marginalizing feminist politics. It gave way to *Reconstructionism*, which went into the 1980's. Reconstructionist critics were influenced by European poststructuralist ideas and were cautious of any notion of essential identity and of totalizing definitions (Morris 175-176). According to Valerie Smith, the Reconstructionists were "scholars who sought to employ insights and analytical methods acquired from contemporary literary-theoretical discourse in the pedagogy and study of Afro-American literature" (67). They started to appreciate the idea of America and, therefore, the entity African American culture.

From the Reconstructionist movement on, it is argued that more attention started to be paid to the literariness of the black text. In Gates, Jr.'s words,

> [w]hereas black literature had generally been taught and analyzed through an interdisciplinary methodology, in which sociology and history had virtually blocked out the literariness of the black text, these scholars, after 1975, began to argue for the explication of the formal properties of writing. If the "blackness" of a text was to be found anywhere, they argued, it would be in the practical uses of language (305).

For some time, African American studies were stuck in a defensive posture before moving to a generally accepted field of study within the academy. One may wonder what has happened within not only the profession of literature, but also within the field of literary studies in the academy to elevate the status of African American and other minority texts. Gates, Jr. may have an explanation for this. According to him, "one factor would seem to be the women's movement within African American literature" (303). Since 1970, black women writers have produced a remarkable number of novels and books of poetry and some produced before this period were recovered, which happened, to mention only one case, to Zora Neale Hurston's works.

> The works by black women novelists, especially Walker and Morrison, have sold in record numbers, in part because of an expanded market that includes white and black feminists as well as the general black studies readership. What has happened, clearly, is that the feminist movement, in the form of women's studies on campus and the abandonment of quotas for the admission of women to heretofore elite male institutions, has had a direct impact on what we might think of as black women's studies. Indeed, black studies and women's studies have met on the common terrain of

> black women's studies, ensuring a larger audience for black women authors than ever before (Gates, Jr. 303-304).

Nevertheless, the way up to this larger audience was not lacking difficulties. Before the advent of Feminist Criticism, African American Criticism dealt with issues of gender in one of the following ways: in a biographical framework permeated by sexual stereotypes of women, in assertions of male authority within the Black Power movement, and in a visibly gender-blind literary history that did not give equal value to women's text (Smith 58). Within the field of literary studies, black women authors faced a lot of prejudice in terms of racism and sexism and these are transparent in their works.

Since both a reform was already made and gave black women's writer some space in the canon, and critics are more concerned with studying the literariness of a text rather than the sociology or ideology of it, it is not necessary to go backwards and repeat the fight for acknowledgement. Nevertheless, the ideology[1] is still there for those who want to open the wounds. And there is one more problem that can be added to the list: significant progress only occurs when we have external and objective forces working along with individual and collective activism, a relationship that is still not going well nowadays.

According to Stimpson,

> [i]n the 1960s, the struggle by and for the thinking woman reemerged. A number of reasons account for its appearance: a push for general educational reform; a demand for social justice and racial equality that generated a renewed commitment to gender equality; some worry about the dissipation of the talents of educated women; the entrance of all races and classes into the public labor force, which provoked fresh questions about their

[1] Traditionally, ideology has referred to the system of ideas, values, and beliefs common to any social group. In recent years, this visual but indispensable term has come to be associated with the process by which social subjects are formed, re-formed, and enabled to perform in an apparently meaningful world (Gates, Jr. 396).

education; and new technologies of reproduction, such as birth control, which helped to redefine women's sexuality (256).

All these aspects may account for the appearance of an organized movement that revolutionized society, the so-called feminism that would:

1. improve child-rearing and socialization practices so that young children would not be forced to conform to stereotypes;
2. organize small consciousness-raising groups in which women would learn from each other about themselves in order to change their lives if they chose to do so;
3. attack cultural studios that produce the often trumped-up representations of women;
4. create and rediscover cultural alternatives, different systems of representation and expression, another art, literature and literary criticism, film, music, journalism, religion. It would even produce its own languages and dictionaries, and bridge the gap between the world as people found it and the world as people want it to be;
5. transform, or at least alter, the sites of formal education from child care to research centers (Stimpson 256).

As observed by the aspects mentioned, it was a daring movement. However, it did not account to provide solutions to all the minorities within the minority group of women in the literary field and one of these was the black female minority. This is why the black feminist voice emerged in the late seventies with increasing strength, after being both marginalized within the African American literary discourse and ignored in similar ways in Anglo-American feminist writing, a field ruled by the white middle-class female writers. However, it

did not appear smoothly, since the denounces made by African American women writers reached many targets. Moreover, it was considered bad enough when black male writers based narratives on the experience of the atrocities of racism; black women only worsened the problem by introducing sexism to the long list of abuses.

Some African American women writers faced other prejudices due to their sexual option. Morris claims that,

> Afro-American women writers and critics have been trapped in the double oppressions of racism and sexism – to be lesbian as well adds a third circle of intense prejudice to contend against. Afro-American male culture, especially during the Black Aesthetic period in the 1960's and 1970's, represented black manhood in terms of power and sexuality as a means of rejecting the disempowerment experienced by black men within a violently racist society. Black women who expressed any criticism of this male literary chauvinism or who were reluctant to perform a secondary and nurturing role to writing men were vulnerable to accusations of betrayal of black values and solidarity (176).

These accusations have followed both Alice Walker and Zora Neale Hurston, since they were brave enough to denounce prosecution and portray society according to what they witnessed, along with the fact that the former is a lesbian. Alice Walker herself recognizes the damaging criticism against black women writers and harshly criticizes it.

> There are two reasons why the black woman writer is not taken as seriously as the black male writer. One is that she's a woman. Critics seem unusually ill-equipped to intelligently discuss and analyze the work of black women. Generally, they do not even make the attempt; they prefer, rather, to talk

> about the lives of black women writers, not about what they write (qtd. in Smith 8).

The question of gender, however, is not the main interest in this thesis. Since it aims at studying how the construction of identity process undergone by the main female characters takes place in two black women writers' works, its main concern is race. Yet, since the question of gender affects the one of race, contributions written by feminist critics will not be ignored.

Smith illustrates well the issue of gender affecting race when saying that,

> (...) Afro-Americanists, mostly male, have assumed that one may theorize about the experience of blacks in a racist culture on the basis of the lives of black men alone. As the increasingly visible presence of black feminists in the academy has introduced the issue of race into feminist theory, so has it raised the subject interrogated and explored the ways in which the experience of race affects the experience of gender, even as they examine ways in which the culturally constructed experience of gender, specifically of womanhood, affects the experience of race (57).

These prejudices against black women began long before, when the abolitionists' movement had started to take shape. In this period, black women faced the triple hurdle – of being abolitionists in a slave society, of being black among most white reformers and worst of all, of being women in a reform movement dominated by men (Zinn 180).

3. *New Historicism: a historical approach to the study of literature:*

After the Reconstructionist movement that influenced African American literature in the eighties, a new movement in Anglo-American literary scholarship claiming for a

return to historical scholarship in the academic study of literature emerged. This movement may have not affected African American literature so deeply, but surely caused a certain uneasiness in the field of literary study, since it appeared with the intention to move beyond the narrowly formalistic or text-centered approach to literature that had been in vogue for long. This movement is called New Historicism.

In order to find a definition for New Historicism and to know what the enabling presuppositions behind its method are, several critics' words were analyzed and certain inquietude was identified when the authors had to define this uncanny criticism. Myers, however, enlightened the topic. According to him,

> [t]he New Historicism, as by general agreement the movement has come to be called, is unified by its disdain for literary formalism. Specifically, leaders of the movement describe themselves as unhappy with the exclusion of social and political circumstances (commonly known as the "context") from the interpretation of literary works. (...) It has been a response not to literature but to literary studies (1).

When talking about social and political circumstances, one may immediately remember feminism, since "it appeared to hold out the hope of transforming literary criticism into an agent for social change." (Myers 1). However, feminism had no distinctive method of its own, making difficult the work of the feminist critic who knew what she wanted to say about a text, but had to adopt other interpretive strategies in order to make the themes appear. Deconstructionism and Poststructuralism were used to meet the needs of those critics, but did not prove sufficient to attend all the requirements, thus, New Historicism "appeared to offer a distinctive approach, a rigorous method, along with the opportunity to salvage one's political commitments. Indeed, at times, the New Historicism seemed almost designed to methodize

the political interpretation of literature" (Myers 1). In addition, it has also set off an enthusiasm for historical research.

But what are the enabling assumptions behind the aforesaid New Historicism method? According to Myers (2-3), the movement establishes itself upon four main contentions:

1. Literature is historical, which means that a literary work is not primarily the record of one's mind's attempt to solve certain formal problems and the need to find something to say; it is a social and cultural construct shaped by more than one consciousness. The proper way to understand it, therefore, is through the culture and society that produced it. It may be inferred also that literature is not an individual representation but a collective one, like a tale of many voices.
2. Literature is not a distinct category of human activity. It must be assimilated to a particular vision of history.
3. Man himself is a social construct, an intertwined composition of social and political forces, like any works of literature and this is justified by the fact that there is a series of ruptures between ages and men.
4. The historian/critic is trapped in his own "historicity". No one can rise above his own social formation, his own ideological upbringing, in order to understand the past on its terms. A modern reader can never experience a text as its contemporaries did. Thus, the best a modern historicist approach to literature can hope to accomplish is to use the text as a basis for the reconstruction of an ideology.

A certain clutter may arise when referring to both historical and fictional events, since both novelists do not differentiate between them. Hayden White offers a helpful distinc-

tion between these when he states that while historians are concerned with events which can be assigned to specific time-space locations, events which are (or were) in principle observable or perceivable, fictional writers are concerned with both historical and imagined or hypothetical events. Nevertheless, both historians and writers of fiction share the same form of discourses and the aims in writing, due to the fact that both wish to provide a verbal image of reality.

In the early nineteenth century, it became conventional among historians to associate truth with fact and to regard fiction as the opposite of truth. However, "history is no less a form of fiction than the novel is a form of historical representation", since facts do not speak for themselves but are spoken through historians (White 122). Therefore, this definition proves itself limited.

Both novels will be analyzed as forms of historical representation and this analysis aims at showing that the formation of separated communities in the United States was a way of promoting the construction of a racial identity by the African Americans, an idea supported earlier by the historian Howard Zinn. In addition, since New Historicism deals with issues related to historical facts, and the formation of those separated communities in the United States is one of them, along with the interpretation and the different readings that are possible to be made of them, some theoretical account of New Historicism will be useful in the reading of both novels.

According to Veeser,

> (...) the New Historicism has given scholars new opportunities to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics. It has struck down the doctrine of noninterference that forbade humanists to intrude on questions of politics, power, indeed on all matters that deeply affect people's practical lives – matters best left, prevailing

> wisdom went, to experts who could be trusted to preserve order and stability in "our" global and intellectual domains (ix).

Due to its heterogeneity, New Historicism seems to offer a wider coverage of aspects usually explored in books, and since it appeared to question the linearity already established of exploring each theme at its time, the feeling of uneasiness it caused among the scholars seems justified.

As a contemporary theory, New Historicism is still evolving, and, thus, seems difficult to be defined. According to Murfin (150), one of its main concerns is related to the conviction that historical consciousness may be restored to literary studies.

> The new historicist critics are less fact-and event-oriented than historical critics used to be, perhaps because they have come to wonder whether the truth about what really happened can ever be purely and objectively known. They are less likely to see history as linear and progressive, as something developing toward the present (Murfin 151-152).

New historicists have reminded us that it is difficult to reconstruct the past as it really was, and, therefore, to prove that some events nowadays had their causes in events that took place earlier in history and slavery can be explored as an example of this issue. However, no one can ever have a complete idea of the damages or improvements of an event, since most facts presented in history books are based on individual reports proving, therefore, that the historians cannot claim themselves displaced or disarmed of any opinion, as well as no one can deny the help offered by those individual oral stories to the writing of history.

When talking about individual testimonies of history, one may not forget that they may be oriented by an ideology, an issue vastly analyzed in most black writings. And once more, New Historicism proves worthy. "A traditional formalistic approach, treating the text as self-contained, can never locate these ideological operations, also known as "represen-

tations." Only a historicist approach, treating the text as one element in the ideology of an age, can hope to lay them bare", according to Myers (3). In this sense, individual testimonies through storytelling and written documents like the ones used in the two novels that will be analyzed in the following chapters are proved to be worth considering.

The recovery of the original meaning of a literary text is the whole aim of critical interpretation, though this recovery is impossible and New Historicism acknowledges this premise. Therefore, a recovery of the original ideology which gave birth to the text and which the text in turn helped to disseminate throughout a culture seems much easier to be searched than attained.

In this process of understanding ideologies, it is better to get along with Spivak when she claims that unspoken stuff can come out of text [ideology, for instance] and sometimes it comes out against the grain of our reading. Thus, it seems better to think about a text as our accomplice trying not to force it to justify our own beliefs, since it was probably there long before us.

Chapter Two

Construction of identity: a journey through Alice Walker's The Color Purple

> Fiction is rooted in an act of faith: a presumption of an inherent significance in human activity that makes daily life worth dramatizing and particularizing. There is even a shadowy cosmic presumption that the universe - the totality of what is, which includes our subjectivity impressions as well as objective data – composes a narrative and contains a poem, which our own stories and poems echo (John Updike; 1999).

This chapter aims at analyzing the process of construction of identity that Celie, Alice Walker's The Color Purple's main character, undergoes throughout the narrative. Three aspects are significant in this process: journey (both temporal and spatial), community (and the sense it brings of belonging to a group), and sensuality/sexuality (the act, in this case, of discovering herself as a woman). All these aspects concur in making the construction of identity possible, although the aspect of community performs a more expressive role. Other characters will be analyzed along with Celie. However, since she is the novel's main character, a greater space will be spared to her.

The Color Purple was first published in 1982 and transformed into a movie directed by Steven Spielberg three years later. The novel won the 1983 Pulitzer Prize for fiction and an American Book Award. The historical period portrayed in it is the one before the 1920s and after the end of slavery in the United States, which happened officially in 1865 when the Thirteenth Amendment abolishing slavery was ratified (Miller & Faux 100).

Alice Walker's novel caused a lot of controversy among the African Americans in the United States, and due to this she has suffered harassment from her own people who

accused her of hating men, black men in particular, of writing an injurious work to black male and female relationships and of defending harmful, even destructive ideas of equality and tolerance to the black community (Walker 22). In order to understand better why her novel caused so much uneasiness, it is necessary to give some theoretical information about Feminist and African American Criticism, since they both influenced her writing, before moving on to the reading of her controversial The Color Purple.

1. The theories that influenced Alice Walker's works

One of the theories that clearly influenced Walker's works is the Feminist Criticism. This criticism can be divided into three important strains categorized as French, American, and British. Historically speaking, however, they examined similar problems from different perspectives. According to Murfin,

> French feminists have tended to focus their attention on language, analyzing the ways in which meaning is produced. They have concluded that language as we commonly think of it is a decidedly male realm (178-179).

American feminist critics have shared with the French ones both an interest in and a wary doubt of the concept of feminine writing, but while the former are more concerned with individuality, the latter are more interested in language. British feminist critics, in turn, emphasize an engagement with historical process in order to promote social change and, therefore, are regarded as more political than the American ones.

According to Stimpson, Feminist Criticism in the United States has created and re-created critical maps in five ways:

1. by charting the course of women as writers, who they are, how and why they write, their reception and reputations – a study that Elaine Showalter has named gynocriticism[2];
2. by charting the cultural representations of gender, patterns of masculinity and femininity;
3. by showing the complex relations among these representations and patterns of male dominance and then asking for the erasure of such patterns;
4. by establishing the unreliability of other maps because they overlook or misconstrue women and the issue of gender;
5. by so doing, stimulating vigilance about the processes of map making themselves (251).

When reading The Color Purple by Alice Walker, some critics have already explored the aforementioned aspects. This thesis, however, will focus on how Walker attempts to resolve the tensions between sexes by first showing the relations between the male dominance and the female submission, and how they influence the construction of identity of its main character.

2. *The Color Purple – power relations and the struggle to construct a self*

From the time Alice Walker emerged on the literary scene in 1968 with the publication of her first volume of poetry, *Once*, to the present, she appears to have been imbued with an insistent, almost dour and sacrificial determination to tell the truth, a truth that has insistently and consistently evoked contradictory feelings in her readers (Dieke 1). Many

[2] Gynocriticism, the feminist study of women's writing, assumes that all writing by women is marked by gender. According to Schowalter, the introduction of gender into the field of literary studies marks a new phase in feminist criticism. Moreover, the issue of gender is a reminder of the other categories of difference, such as race and class, that structure people's lives and texts.

readers became impressed by the crudeness presented along with the poetry in her writings but acknowledged her great value as an author. Others, like Crouch (qtd. in Smith 65) stated that "[w]riters like Alice Walker revealed little more than their own inclination to melodrama, militant self-pity, guilt-mongering, and pretensions to mystic wisdom."

Many readers' hostility towards Alice Walker rest largely on her third and most polemical book The Color Purple, an epistolary novel compound of 90 letters that Celie, its main character, writes to God and to her sister Nettie and the ones she receives from Nettie; and on its film adaptation by Hollywood filmmaking guru, Steven Spielberg. They claim that these two works distort black history, demean black men, and leave in its "savage" wake a most deleterious impression of blacks (Dieke 1). Against these injustices, Walker claims that she is committed to exploring the insanities, the oppressions, the loyalties, and the triumphs of black women. She also acknowledges that the path to inscribing this womanism is like a dire strait fraught with danger and cultural demons, although being committed to antiracism and antisexim, she dares having written it. In this context, however, it is difficult to criticize without being accused of, and sometimes even feeling a lack of identification with national values and traditions and this situation is even worse when referring to any third-world woman. Even the position 'feminist' is a difficult one for third-world women, although this is not exactly Alice Walker's case, since it is so closely associated with American and European women, something that African American writers, for instance, are not (Morris 178). However, as an African American descendant, this necessity of articulating criticism and solidarity simultaneously is one of the reasons why Alice Walker and a few other women writers are considered the founding mothers of womanism, which happens to be the attempt to get rid of the double oppression of the race and gender trap, along with the effort to show woman's writing according to its cultural specificity as representation of a totalizing ethnic or national identity.

In defense of her novel, it is worth recalling Walker's words,

> The Color Purple is not a story against black men, it is a story about black women. The fact that the men in the story are not all good guys needs no justification, for it is not the obligation of any work of fiction to present every possible angle of every possible situation (Jones 226).

Probably most critics' anger remains in the fact that Walker attributes more value to her female characters than to the male ones. Since men and women are not equals but can be complements, and since the African American women are supposed to remain men's helpmate to build a black nation, wherein the African American women are one-half and the African American men are the other half but Walker prefers to present a homosexual relationship in her controversial novel, there is no doubt that many readers, mainly those more directly connected to her novel due to their skin color, would feel threatened. Nevertheless, since both men and women are wounded by racism, they may try to get healed and this task may be lighter if done together.

The book is the story of the love between two black and poor sisters, Celie and Nettie, that lingers throughout their forced separation of many years, entwined to the story of how during this period of time, the shy, ugly and almost illiterate sister, Celie, finds out her interior power, thanks to the support of a friend/lover, Shug Avery. However, Celie's interior power appears just after she undergoes many challenges and grievances in her life.

The first injustices Celie faces are in the hands of the man she believed to be her father, named Alphonso. After having been raped by him several times, and having given birth to two children, a boy and a girl, she is separated from them, as they are given to a black couple of missionaries in town. Later on, Celie is forced to marry an older man, whom she calls Mr.____; a man that only accepts her as a wife because he would receive a cow (11), a kind of dowry, along with her. Here, Celie is treated as a commodity, which would be exchanged between her so-believed father and another man, but even her value as a commodity

is denied, since her future husband seems to accept her only if really receiving the cow along. Celie's objectification is perceived by her and shown in the following passage:

> Buy Celie some clothes. She say to Mr._____.
>
> She need clothes? he ast.
>
> Well look at her.
>
> He look at me. *It like he looking at the earth. It need something*? His eyes say (20). (my italics).

Her first husband's name is Albert, but she only finds it out when one of his lovers, Shug Avery, comes to stay at their house. Albert is a man whom Celie despises, since in his hands her suffering continues unmitigated. She gets rid of her father's power just to be dominated by another man who happens to separate her from her beloved sister Nettie, after an attack of jealousy and anger (17).

The Color Purple is a critical narrative that comments on issues of feminism as well as African American identity, while presenting the hardships of a young woman, Celie, within the patriarchal North-American system in her struggling to become an individual. The novel is a critique of the patriarchal society system, the denial of the commodity value of women, an insistence on female self-sufficiency in terms of sexual and moral independence from male domination, the preference of sexual deviation, and even the construction of an alternative language for the novel's characters, a language incoherent and limited but serving their users perfectly (Abend-David 15), as the language Celie uses to write her letters, since she cannot utter her ideas, proves to be.

According to Brantlinger, "in imperialist discourse the voices of the dominated are represented almost entirely by their silence, their absence" (186). We have one example of this in Celie since she has her speech denied both in her father's and in her husband's house, through verbal and physical menaces and attacks. Her father had warned her not to tell any-

one, but God, who the father of her children was, and this is the reason why she starts writing to God: it was the only way for her to talk and express her feelings and observations about life. Furthermore, she acknowledges to her sister that her life made her feel so ashamed that she could not even talk about it to God, she had to write it, bad as she thought her writing was (125). The Color Purple is therefore Celie's written, although never uttered, voice to God.

Celie is not the only one who suffers. Other characters do suffer from lack of power and one of them is Harpo. Albert's son, Harpo, falls in love with a strong-minded woman called Sofia (22). After trying to control her wills, Harpo asks his father's advice and receives the following one: "Well how you spect to make her mind? Wives is like children. You have to let 'em know who got the upper hand. Nothing can do that better than a good sound beating" (34), showing that some 'traditions' are transmitted from father to son.

The physical suffering inflicted by their husbands, although Sofia always beats and slaps back while Celie resigns, unites the two women. However, this is not the only link between the two women: they are also united by the work on a quilt (58), a traditional black female activity (181).

3. *Journey, sensuality/sexuality and community: constructing identity*

A familiar motif of Walker is that of the questing self. At the root of most of her writing is the penultimate sense that human life is a journey, a continuing process of growth and discovery. "Quite often the journey takes place on a hard Walker road, the kind of journey on the hard, rocky road of life" (Dieke 4).

> Walking into peril is exactly what most of Walker's characters and personae are doing as they each seek to navigate their own path of fulfillment, a crooked path gravid with dangers, possibilities, changes, personal adven-

> tures, triumphs – big and small – and, of course, occasional setbacks (Dieke 4).

Some of Walker's characters, like Celie, show remarkable courage in the face of adversity and abuse. Of course, there is no clear agreement in what happenings Celie does show courage, since for some people it is when she resigns and accepts her forced marriage with Albert, while for others it is when she finally speaks up and verbalizes her ideas (letter # 74).

Another character that shows fearlessness in the face of adversity is Nettie. Celie's sister, Nettie, runs away from home, after their father tries to abuse her sexually and comes to the house Celie shared with Albert, a mean-spirited, often brutal man who, having been denied Nettie by her father, married Celie so that she would look after his children, since his first wife had been murdered by a lover. Because Nettie spurns his attention, he turns her out of his house and she goes to live, without knowing it, with the couple of missionaries called Corrine and Samuel, that had adopted Celie's children, Olivia and Adam. They go to Africa, in an imperialistic mission disguised in missionary duty to help the lost peoples found there and bring to civilization handicrafts that were not known by civilized people. Nettie remains in Africa writing letters to but never hearing from Celie since Albert manages to hide all the letters that arrived. Nettie's journey out of abuses and into Africa helps in the construction of her identity as an individual. Later on, something similar would happen to Celie when she leaves Albert's house in order to find her own space. Considering one of the New Historicism assumptions, it can be claimed that both Celie and Nettie, along with the other characters, help to construct history in a collective representation, a tale of many voices.

3.1. Temporal and spatial journey: beyond the limits of inflicted power

Celie and Nettie were raised by their mother, who happened to be facing mental problems after her first husband's tragic death, and her mother's husband, whom they took for granted was their father. After their mother's death (2), Celie and Nettie stay with their stepfather until Celie is sent to marry Albert. It is Celie's first spatial journey and one that continues her previous slavery. Nothing changes for good in her life; she only receives more duties.

Something different happens to her sister when she leaves her father's house. After not finding a place for herself in Celie's and Albert's house, Nettie goes to the city and finds help from a couple of missionaries that take her to Africa. Nettie starts her journey after African roots. While Celie stays in a restricted space of action, her sister has an entire new world to meet.

Celie's place of action, opposed to her sister's, is a mere domestic one and her ignorance is measured by the spatial limits given to her. This fact is shown by her attitude after Shug Avery recovers her sister's letters since after observing the letters Celie struggles to puzzle out the markings on them:

> Saturday morning Shug put Nettie letter in my lap. Little fat queen of England stamps on it, plus stamps that got peanuts, coconuts, rubber trees and say Africa. I don't know where England at. Don't know where Africa at either. So I still don't know where Nettie at (116).

To elaborate on this passage, it is worth quoting Selzer's words,

> [r]evealing Celie's ignorance of even the most rudimentary outlines of the larger world, this passage clearly defines the "domestic" site she occupies as the novel's main narrator. In particular, the difficulty Celie has interpreting this envelope underscores her tendency to understand events in terms of

> personal consequences rather than political categories. What matters about not knowing "where Africa at" – according to Celie – is not knowing "where Nettie at"(1).

Celie's difficulty interpreting the envelope sent by Nettie at first only seems to support the claim that her domestic perspective erases race and class issues from the narrative. However, the short passage extracted from the book not only delineates Celie's particular angle of vision, but also introduces other features that lead the readers to resituate her narration within a broader discourse of race and class (Selzer 2).

> For where Celie sees only a "fat little queen of England", readers who recognize Queen Victoria immediately historicize the passage. And if the juxtaposition of the two stamps on the envelope – England's showcasing royalty, Africa's complete with rubber trees – suggests to Celie nothing but her own ignorance, to other readers the two images serve as a clear reminder of imperialism. Thus Africa, mentioned by name for the first time in this passage, enters the novel already situated within the context of colonialism.

These imperialistic/colonialist relations are shown throughout the novel involving different characters, such as Sophia. And to show how clear these relations are, it is possible to use Nettie's observations to support this statement. She acknowledges, although indirectly, that the missionary work she was about to join is tied to the national interest of the English people:

> ...the English have been sending missionaries to Africa and India and China and God knows where all, for over a hundred years. *And the things they have brought back*! We spent a morning in one of their museums and it was packed with jewels, furniture, fur, carpets, swords, clothing, even

> tombs from all the countries they have been. From Africa they have thousands of vases, jars, masks, bowls, baskets, statues – *and they are all so beautiful it is hard to imagine that the people who made them don't still exist. And yet the English assure us they do not* (134). (my italics).

Although the English were not the only explorers, this passage undoubtedly shows the exploitation relation established between English and African peoples, since it presents a catalogue of the material culture appropriated by missionaries from "all the countries they have been" and even from people who no longer exist. Probably these people no longer exist due to the fact that millions and millions of Africans were captured and sold into slavery by Europeans, mainly English people, and many more died either while being chased by their captors or during the journey to slavery. To be more precise, "by the year 1800, 10 to 15 million black had been transported as slaves to the Americas representing perhaps one-third of those originally seized in Africa" (Zinn 29).

According to Miller & Faux the probable first African Americans entered the English colonies of America in 1619 (38). They were in the number of 20 and were not called slaves but servants. However, this naming is not accurate, since the former state, the one of being a slave, is a forced one, while the latter is pretty much free and this last state was definitely not the case of the 'servants' brought from Africa. Back in Africa there was also slavery, although a very different one. In Africa, a slave could marry, own property, himself own a slave, swear an oath, be a competent witness and ultimately become heir to his master (Zinn 27).

> Most slaves were seized in the interior of Africa by European and African traders and then marched to the West African coast, where they were sold to ships bound for the colonies. Some were kidnapped by slavers, some captured during local wars, and some sold into slavery for transgressing

> tribal laws. Among the West African peoples enslaved were the Ashantis, Bakongs, Fantis, Hausas, Ibos, Mandingos, Sekes, Wolofs, and Yorubas. The majority of the enslaved were between the ages of 15 and 30, with men outnumbering women about two to one (Miller & Faux 38).

Another passage that shows this imperialistic relation and that could be understood as a testimony on how to exterminate a people is related to the road that was being built by the English throughout the Olinka's village in which Nettie, the couple of missionaries and their children were sent to offer help. This road, welcomed at first as all different things are by naïve people, gutted the village and transformed the Olinka people from landlords into people who had to pay rent for staying in the Queen's property and a water tax in order to use the water. Some people call this situation progress, but for the Olinka it only brought fragmentation, since many villagers ran away, and sicknesses followed by deaths. The Olinka villagers older than eight years old also had to work in the fields in order to pay for the barracks, the taxes on the land and to buy water, wood and food that they had no more since they were forced onto an arid reservation (239).

In Britain the Emancipation Act of 1833 legally freed the Africans, although in the British mind they were still morally, mentally and physically slaves. This attitude of setting slaves free was a merely politic-economical attitude. According to Brantlinger;

> Britain had lost much of its slave-owning territory as a result of the American Revolution; as the leading industrial power in the world, Britain found in abolition a way to work against the interests of its rivals who were still heavily involved in colonial slavery and a plantation economy. (...) By mid-century, the success of antislavery movement, the impact of the great Victorian explorers, and the merger of racist and evolutionary doctrines in the social sciences had combined to give the British public a widely shared

> view of Africa that demanded imperialization on moral, religious, and scientific grounds (186-187).

This imperialistic attitude still continuing could be envisaged in two attitudes: one of them being the fact that now the blame of slavery could be displaced onto others – the Americans, for instance, since the British showed a more civilized and Christian concern towards the black human beings by setting them free. The other one is the justified presence of missionaries that were sent to Africa as representatives of the potential saviors of Africa: the British people. The missionaries embodied the task of trying to teach the Africans to be both religious and industrious, something that could lead to rebellion against the Americans that were still trading slaves and consequently affecting the British economy.

Along with the missionaries, some great explorers went to Africa. While the former had the task of converting the cannibals and teaching them some principles of Christianity, the latter had established, amongst others, the goal of trying to discover the Nile's sources. Their portraits of the Africans are also quite different, probably due to the fact that in their paths they encountered representatives of different tribes. While the explorers usually portray the Africans as amusing or dangerous, obstacles or as object of curiosity, the missionaries usually portray them as weak, pitiable, inferior mortals who need to be shown the light and saved from their own darkness (Brantlinger 196-197). Of course, the missionaries were tempted to exaggerate the Africans' savagery in order to justify their presence in Africa, as well as to explain the frustrations they were experiencing in making converts, and to win support from mission societies at home, something Nettie and Samuel tried to do after the Olinka village was destroyed by the British railroad (225).

Although welcome at first, Nettie faces prejudice while working as a missionary since she was not an Olinka and, besides, she was a woman. In her words:

> [t]he Olinka do not believe girls should be educated. When I asked a mother why she thought this, she said:
>
> A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something.
>
> What can she become? I asked.
>
> Why, she said, the mother of his children (150).

Since Nettie was not married and had no children, she was "not much, just the missionary's drudge" (153). Besides getting upset with this comment, Nettie is bothered by other attitudes she witnesses. One of them is related to the fact that no one in the Olinka village wants to talk about slavery, since they acknowledge no responsibility whatsoever, which means, they deny their part of complicity in the fact that many brothers and sisters were sold to slavers. Another fact that annoys her is related to the young Olinka girl, Tashi, who tries to please her father until his death in all means possible, never realizing that, as a girl, she never could. In addition to these, some other customs adopted by the Olinka women puzzle Nettie even more,

> ...many of the women rarely spend time with their husbands. Some of them were promised to old or middle-aged men at birth. Their lives always center around work and their children and other women (since a woman cannot really have a man for a friend without the worst kind of ostracism and gossip). They indulge their husbands, if anything. You should just see how they make admiration over them. Praise their smallest accomplishments. Stuff them with palm wine and sweets. No wonder the men are often childish. And a grown child is a dangerous thing, especially since, among the Olinka, the husband has life and death power over the wife. If he accuses one of his wives of witchcraft or infidelity, she can be killed (163).

As observed in the quotation above, power for the Olinka is male and women are seen as a target on which men can practice their power. In respect to power being male, it is worth recalling Wesley's words, since according to him,

> (...) the Black Power ideology of that time has remained sacrosanct and is in no need of revision. Part of that ideology requires black men and women to pull together. However, the unity of black men and women can only exist if the man leads. Therefore, the woman must "submit": remain silent on sensitive issues. You do not "disrespect" your man in public, that is, criticize him in public, or speak too loudly about things that matter to you, or interrupt him when he is conversing with friends or colleagues on "serious" issues. A woman must always defer to her man and subjugate her will to his. (90) (qtd. in Thielmann 71).

The behavior expected by the Black Power ideologists is exactly the opposite from the one performed by Walker. Alice Walker is reminding throughout her novel both men and women of their failures. Besides, she is saying that Black is Beautiful, but not necessarily always right.

Throughout the novel, Nettie plays the role of a very good historian. When describing her visit to New York, she points out the fact that hey had to ride in the sit-down section of the train. She gives examples of segregation inside the train when she mentions, "only white people can ride in the beds and use the restaurants. And they have different toilets from colored." (129-130). All these passages reinforce that we are probably before the year 1946, the year when the "Court rules that segregation on interstate buses is unconstitutional" in the United States (Miller & Faux 120), a law that might have been applied to trains as well.

Although this happened only some decades after the end of slavery in the United States, black people had conquered a whole section of the New York City, called Harlem.

Also in Africa there was a place, mentioned by Nettie, called Monrovia, which "was founded by ex-slaves from America who came back to Africa to live" (135). Her testimonies are full of examples suggesting the formation of hegemonic communities. In the United States, mainly in the west, other ex-slaves settlements were founded after the end of slavery. According to Miller and Faux,

> [i]n 1877 Reconstruction ended and conservative whites returned to power throughout the South. African Americans, fearing that their new freedoms might be in jeopardy, turned to the West as a haven from mounting social and political repression. Already in the years immediately after 1865 a few black colonies had been established in Kansas. Life, though hard, was an improvement over what the former slaves had known. Railroad promoters and land speculators were ready to lure even more migrants. In 1879 alone more than 20,000 African Americans left the South for Kansas. These migrants, known as the Exodusters, created the first, but hardly the last, significant migration of the black population (70).

When in Europe, Nettie observed that segregation was not as clear or strong as it was back in the United States. In one gathering that she had been to before leaving to Africa, she noticed that white and black people even "used the same cups and plates" (133). However, even though slavery had been abolished, racism assumed vastly more subtle ways and prejudice was everywhere, many times disguised.

The connection between Celie's life and Nettie's observations in Africa is clearly identified when we take into consideration the former's servitude posture and the latter's remarks about Africa. For instance, the way women are treated in Africa and the way some of them are treated in America remain the same. In Nettie's words:

> [t]here is a way that men speak to women that remind me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don't even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads towards the ground. The women also do not "look in a man's face" as they say. To "look in a man's face" is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? Again, it is our own behavior around Pa (158-159).

Something Nettie does not distrust is that Celie continues acting in the same subservient way towards her husband. Nettie, on the contrary, does not change an inch her behavior to please other people's wills and she is not subservient, since even prohibited to teach girls in the Olinka village, she continues doing so (157-158). Nettie's main 'follower' is the native girl called Tashi that learns everything that is taught to her, even the Olinka costumes that she knows she will never follow. While Nettie and Samuel are away in Europe trying to gather money to help the Olinka, Tashi undergoes both the facial scarification ceremony and the rite of female initiation, two costumes in her community. The scarification ceremony was believed by the older villagers to be the identification as a people carved in the children's faces, although the children often thought of scarification as backward and frequently resisted to it (239).

The way men in the Olinka tribe treated women and the way black women were treated by men in the United States are astonishingly similar. In Nettie's words, "the Olinka do not believe girls should be educated. (...) A girl is nothing to herself; only to her husband can she become something" (150). This idea of not educating girls shows that patriarchy crosses the boundaries of the continents, since it appears in the beginning of The Color Purple when Celie's father takes her out of school, the first thing she loved in her life (09).

Another character that is deprived from what she loved most, her freedom, was Sophia, Harpo's wife. She is an example not only of prejudice from men towards women but also and mainly from white people against black ones. Because she answers "hell no" (82) to Miss Millie's, the mayor's wife, request that she come to work for her as a maid, Sophia is brutally spanked by the mayor and six policemen, and imprisoned. Forced to do the jail's laundry "all day long from five to eight" (85) makes her react to any order the way the passive Celie would probably do since she says "every time they ast me to do something, Miss Celie, I act like I'm you. I jump right up and do just what they say" (85). This is the complete denial of her inner strength.

Sophia finally becomes Miss Millie's maid in order to stay out of prison and begins serving her and her daughter Eleanor Jane. What surprises most is the name given to Sophia's "slavery"; in this case: contract labor!

> (...) The mayor and his wife and a lot of other white people get labor free from the jailhouse by pretending a colored person jumped on them or cussed them out and so they had to have them locked up. After they're locked up these same white people come up to the jail and get them out and make them work for them for nothing. It's just like slavery, except they sign a paper with the sheriff. They call it contract labor (193).

Sophia and Miss Millie's daughter, Eleanor Jane, appear to have some genuine family feelings for one another since Sophia practically raises her. After many years of service at the mayor's house and after putting Miss Millie's interest above her own family[3], Sophia leaves the mayor's household. However, Miss Eleanor Jane is always around intruding into her family life. Sophia justifies her benevolence towards the girl because she's "on pa-

[3] Sophia is supposed to teach the mayor's wife how to drive and this is done. One Christmas, after five years that Sophia had not seen her children, Miss Millie decides to give her a 'gift': she would drive Sophia home. However, since the mayor's wife had not learnt how to back the car, Sophia, after spending about fifteen minutes with her children, has to drive Miss Millie back home, since no one else *strange colored* could be seen riding with her (97-103).

role... Got to act nice" (199). But later on, Sophia admits that she does feel something for Eleanor Jane, and acknowledges this to her because "out of all the people in your daddy's house you showed me some human kindness" (264).

In order to understand these two women's relationship and the historical implications of it, it is worth recalling Selzer's words,

> [w]hatever affection exists between the two women, however, has been shaped by the perverted "kinship" relation within which it grew – a relationship the narrative uses to expose plantation definitions of kinship in general and to explode the myth of the black mammy in particular. Separated from her own family and forced to join the mayor's household against her will, living in a room under the house and assigned the housekeeping and childraising duties, Sophia carries out a role in the mayor's household which clearly recalls that of the stereotypical mammy of the Southern plantation. However, as someone who prefers to build a roof on the house while her husband tends the children, Sophia seems particularly unsuited for that role. And that is precisely the narrative's point: Sophia is entirely unsuited for the role of mammy, but whites – including and perhaps especially Miss Eleanor Jane – continually expect her to behave according to their cultural representations of the black mother. It is, in fact, these expectations that get Sophia into trouble in the first place, for when Miss Millie happens upon Sophia's family and sees her children so "clean" (76), she assumes that Sophia would make a perfect maid and that Sophia would like to come and work in her household. Similarly, Miss Eleanor Jane assumes that Sophia must return her family feelings in kind, without considering Sophia's true position in her household. The young white

> woman's stereotypical projections become clear when she can't understand why Sophia doesn't "just love" her new son, since, in her words, "all other colored women I know love children" (224-25). (6).

In fact, to Sophia, Miss Eleanor Jane's son, called Reynolds Stanley, is both the living embodiment of and literal heir to the system that oppresses her and manages to change her attitudes, since from the "big, strong, healthy girl" (31) who fights like a man as she had to fight all her life against her daddy, her brothers, her cousins and uncles, due to the fact that " a girl child ain't safe in a family of men"(38), Sophia becomes a woman who stays quiet most of the times. After all, she knows that for a white person not to be mean to a colored an army is sometimes necessary (265). Sophia follows her ancestors' behavior because she does not fight against her enslavement and this attitude makes enslavement even easier, similar to what happened to the slaves brought from Africa. The blacks had been torn from their land and culture, forced into a situation where the legacy of language, custom, family relations, was bit by bit erased for the remmants that blacks could hold on to by sheer, extraordinary persistence (Zinn 26), and this is precisely what happens to her.

4. Celie's awakening

Throughout the novel, Celie's construction of identity process obeys the following sequence: first the discovery of her sexuality/sensuality in her homosexual relationship with her mentor Shug Avery, then her journey out of her husband's slavery (when she decides to accept Shug's invitation to go to Memphis, Tennessee) and, finally, her sense of belonging to a community, a group (Shug and Albert being the most important elements of it). She is beaten down by her life of slavery and abuse with Albert (since having sex with him was something she considered dirty, as if he was "going to the toilet on" her (76)), and just wakes

up to life when he brings Shug Avery, a blues singer and old lover of him, ill, for Celie to nurse. Celie falls in love with Shug, since up to that moment she had not known the meaning of true love between man and woman, and learns her husband's name, although she continues calling him in the old way. The Color Purple, therefore, celebrates the love of women for women as an empowering force within a disabling nexus of poverty, racism and misogyny. Some critics argue that Celie is mirrored in Alice Walker's own sexual preferences and therefore stands as a catharsis for her own suffering.

It is also pleaded by other critics that

> Celie's homosexuality is clearly portrayed not as congenital but as a predilection or pathology that results from being the victim of not merely male but also father figure abusiveness: She is too afraid of her [step]father to look at boys; she expresses a desire for only one person; and she seems unaware of the sexuality of other women. (369) (Royster qtd in Thielmann 70).

The notion of heterosexuality presented by this critic may seem interesting but since up to the present days no one was able to explain clearly why a person is homosexual, it is disposable. Furthermore, Celie's "desire for only one person" is perfectly justifiable if applied to any normal person who looks for *a* soul mate.

After finding Nettie's letters that Albert had intercepted and stashed away in a trunk, and acknowledging being poor, black and ugly and not knowing how to cook (205), she leaves her husband and goes with Shug Avery to Memphis. There, Shug makes her living by singing and Celie begins an independent life designing and sewing pants. The discovery of her sensuality/sexuality with Shug, in addition to her temporal and spatial journey out of slavery helps to start the construction of her identity as a human being and as a woman. This process is eventually completed after knowing that the man she and Nettie used to call their

Pa, was not really their father (172). After this, Celie's shame diminishes a bit, although she does not profess this.

When Nettie is told by Samuel how Celie's and Alphonso's kids got in his and Corrine's house, she hears a story that in fact happened to many African Americans in the United States: a story of lynching and hanging. After the end of slavery, which happened in 1863 with the Emancipation Proclamation issued by President Lincoln, many black people started forming communities and trying to live their lives in peace. However, a social club founded in Pulaski, Tennessee, called the Ku Klux Klan, spreads quickly and begins intimidating and terrorizing southern blacks with their organized raids, lynchings, beatings and burnings. According to Miller & Faux, "between 1882 and 1900 there were at least 100 lynchings a year. By 1968 more than 3,500 African Americans would be lynched, mostly in the South. The record year was 1892, when 161 African Americans were lynched" (101). Fanon presents hatred as the reason for lynchings. According to him,

> [h]ate is not inborn; it has to be constantly cultivated, to be brought into being, (...) [it] demands existence, and he who hates has to show his hate in appropriate actions and behavior; in a sense, he has to become hate. That is why the Americans have substituted discrimination for lynching (53).

Most lynchings were not, as firstly claimed, the outcome of rape or attempted rape. "Instead the victims were lynched for outspokenness, and lynching was a device used to frighten and intimidate African Americans both politically and socially" (Miller & Faux 101). This is the case of Celie's and Nettie's real father: he had been hanged because, according to Samuel, "everything he turned his hand to prospered", and from farming he went to selling. He opened a dry goods store that competed with the white's ones and took their clients. In the middle of one night, he and the two brothers he had working with him were dragged out of their homes and hanged (170).

After her foster father's death, Celie inherits a dry good store that was hers and Nettie's by right since their real father had left it for them and their stepfather had possessed it. By this example in which two different generations owned stores, Walker exemplifies the African American ability of trying to achieve economic integration into the American mainstream. Celie's real father, in the tradition of the American success story, works hard, buys his own store and hires two of his brothers to work for him. However, some white merchants refused to tolerate free competition from a black-owned and black-operated business and decide to put an end to it. According to Selzer, " [t]he tragic history of Celie's real Pa thus compels readers to reinterpret Celie's family history in terms of the historical lack of access of African Americans to the "American Dream" (9).

When Celie gets the store back and decides to hire Sophia, she is signaling an improvement in race relations, not only because it represents Sophia's final escape from her position as mammy but also because shops are used throughout Walker's novel as a symbol of the status of economic and social integration between black and whites. In addition, by doing so in a 1930's white dominated society in the interior of the United States both Celie and Sophia show how daring and decided they are in conquering their own space.

Female circumstance, especially black female circumstance, with its "contrary instinct/contrariness of will" is the Alice Walker turf, a turf distilled in a number of familiar thematic motifs. One such motif is the regenerate self, the belief by Walker that it is possible for human beings to transform themselves. It is a belief rooted in the triune mythic drama of birth, death, and rebirth. Walker's writing is graced with characters that undergo inner development and maturation, and in the process abandon their old attitudes and assumptions. Celie and Sophia are examples of such characters (Dieke 3-4).

Celie starts selling pants to the community she now belongs to. Concerning this, Toni Morrison argues that identity is grounded in a sense of community, not individualism.

For her, the individual life is like the lives of the tribe (Morris 177). In this sense, now Celie is a complete self, and she is not ugly anymore, since "her ugliness was a matter of her physical environment condition, and a state of mind that matched it" (Walker 51). Moreover, she teaches Albert how to sew and everything she had learnt through Nettie's letters about Africa, and they start talking friendly for the first time (259), mainly because they both love Shug, who comes to live with them. Characters such as Albert and Celie leave behind what seems an outmoded existence or established patterns of orientation and behavior to embrace a new philosophy of life (Dieke 4).

Eventually Nettie returns home, in the middle of World War II, and they finally know each other's 'people.'

In Selzer's words,

> The Color Purple closes with a celebration of kinship, its concluding action composed of a series of family reunions: Sophia patches things up with Harpo; Shug visits her estranged children (for the first time in thirty years); and the novel's two narrators, Celie and Nettie, are joyfully and tearfully reunited. Even Albert and Celie are reconciled, his change of heart signaled by his earning the right to have his first name written. Coming after Celie has achieved both economic independence and emotional security, the reunions at the end of The Color Purple testify to the importance of kinship to the happiness of every individual. Appropriately, then, when the two sisters fall into one another's arms at the end, each identities her kin: Nettie introduces her husband and the children, and Celie's first act is to "point up at [her] peoples... Shug and Albert." (243)" (08).

Celie's is self-sufficient, in the terms of her acquired skills as a seamstress or in those of her inheritance of her father's house, both of which stand as legitimate symbols of

practical female independence. She becomes her own master, totally self-dependent. Besides, she has also found love.

5. *Why does the path have to be so full of obstacles?*

Some questions still remain after reading The Color Purple. One of them is:

> Why does Walker place her novel in a time prior to the Civil Rights movement, the Feminist movement, or, in fact, any organizations, laws, or ideologies that can support Celie in her strife? Indeed, the radical feminist realizations of Celie seem anachronistic when they are placed within a 1920s environment, which, for most African American women, yielded more incentive for plain economic struggle than for the search of personal freedom and erotic happiness. But perhaps Walker's choice is precisely that of a time that lacks pre-established feminist ideologies that claim worldwide remedies for women. (...) Celie's triumph is a personal one which, if it is to be a symbol for others, can only be followed in terms of one's personal search for identity, an identity that is not necessarily purple, or rooted in the needlework business, or even lesbian (Abend-David 18-19).

In terms of ideological achievement, it can be said that The Color Purple does not reside only in the denouncing a male dominated society field, but describes the possibilities in the absence of such domination. The final image in the novel, having a reformed Albert who starts to see Celie as a human being rather than his personal property, and a mature Celie overcoming their differences and exchanging some hours of nice talking at the porch, suggests that the individual realizes her full potential within the supporting bonds of a strong

group: a community, no matter how unconventional that group might be. This conclusion also suggests that feelings of kinship can transcend gender differences, even when these differences include injustices as great as Albert's abuse of Celie.

To sum up, the novel tries to resolve tensions between the sexes – but not between the races and, therefore, all those critics who accused Alice Walker's The Color Purple of being unfair to black males are proved to be misconceived. However, Walker fails in her attempt to solve the tensions, since the ending she gives to her novel does not approach reality: she puts a chauvinist man knitting next to the woman he had taken as wife/property who is by her turn set next to her real love: a woman. By doing this, Alice Walker suggests that a balanced and non-biased society is only possible if men learn the so considered women tasks and if women have homosexual relationships. This reading is only broken when considering another important character in the novel: Nettie, and her family.

And why does the historical contextualization exercise such a great importance in the reading of the novel? This question may be answered by Abend-David:

> [i]ndeed, white feminist theory is one of the great achievements of twentieth-century scholarship, the loss of historical context is its occupational hazard, one that results from our condescending image of the prior, nontheoretical discourse of women. Awareness of such hazard may be helpful not only in avoiding a repetition of voices from the past, but also in discovering the innovations in contemporary texts (20).

The scholarship so far has mentioned that it is due to Alice Walker that another black writer called Zora Neale Hurston is known nowadays, since the former made a careful research in order to recuperate the latter's work and even to locate her tombstone. It is also claimed that Zora Neale Hurston's work influenced Alice Walker, something that can be shown in many ways. At first, it can be claimed that both writers make use of orality in their

works. In addition, they also denounce the prejudice faced not only by black women but also by black men in the American society, and offer subjective impressions as well as objective data in their writings.

Chapter Three

Honoring the dead: slavery, storytelling and the construction of identity in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God

"Scribitur ad narrandum, non ad probandum". [Writing is for telling, not proving.] (Tito Livio).

1. Zora Neale Hurston: a misunderstood artist

Zora Neale Hurston was born in Eatonville, Florida, around 1901. Eatonville was one of the few all-black towns in the United States, which had been incorporated in 1886, and her early childhood was probably free of the racism experienced by most children growing up in mixed black and white communities. Her father was a carpenter and Baptist preacher, a man of consequence in the community, since he had the gift of speech. But it was her mother who most influenced her life, considering that she had been a schoolteacher before her marriage, and encouraged Zora to reach out in life. And this is exactly what Zora tried to do. However, since there is no clear consensus whether she was "black as coal, light yellow, or light brown" (Washington 7) it is no wonder that critics' opinions about her work do not converge.

Many critics, such as Darwin Turner, quoted by Smith, have described Zora Neale Hurston as indifferent to her own and other black people's dignity, obsequious to whites, opportunistic, and politically retrograde (59) both as a woman and a writer. According to him,

> [t]he Zora Neale Hurston who takes shape from her autobiography and from the accounts of those who knew her is an imaginative, somewhat shallow, quick-tempered woman, desperate for recognition and reassurance

> to assuage her feelings of inferiority; a blind follower of that social code which approves arrogance toward one's assumed peers and inferiors but requires total psychological commitment to a subservient posture before one's supposed superiors. It is in reference to this image that one must examine her novels, her folklore, and her view of the Southern scene. (98) (Turner qtd in Smith, 59).

The problem with this kind of criticism lies in the fact that it is tendentious and partial. In addition, Turner himself provides a possible explanation for Hurston's obscurity: she got sandwiched in between the exotic primitivism of the Harlem Renaissance[4], to which many critics claim she belonged, and the protest mood of the forties (Washington 11). This lack of clear connection to a literary movement has probably affected Hurston's confidence. However, if Hurston was not so confident about the value of her work and needed constant reassurance, what can we say about other famous artists, not only writers, but also painters like Van Gohg and Leonardo da Vinci? Were they always sure about the importance of their work? Probably not.

Zora Neale Hurston was identified with the Harlem Renaissance, mainly the younger group since it was more interested in moving away from middle-class perspective and of turning to the folk for the material on which a viable black literature could be founded, she gained the older group's disapproving look, since they alleged that black writers had the moral responsibility to uplift the race by portraying educated, middle-class African Americans (Schmidt 55). However, more arguments were used against Hurston: she was brave enough to dream about an equal society in which everybody would have a chance to say something at a time in which the Black Movement of the 1960's had not yet been foreseen.

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[4] Around the 20's, Harlem was considered the largest Negro community in the world, not to mention the U.S.A., and the center of the cultural turmoil which wanted to affirm the black voice as an authentic and participating presence in the stream of American culture and to erase the image of an inferior race (Schmidt 54-55). The Harlem Renaissance is the representation of this commotion in literature.

Some critics saw the problem related to prejudice going beyond control, since uneasiness had already been provoked by black male writers who based their narratives on the experience of the atrocities of racism. This situation only got worse when black women, like Zora Neale Hurston accused of presenting a "whitewashed" picture of African Americans, introduced sexism to the long series of abuse, and unveiled the fact that not only did white people abuse black women but black men did as well.

On the other hand, other critics saw Hurston's position as an outsider of the mainstream literary canon and "as a commentator on the dynamics of any encounter between an inside and an outside, any attempt to make a statement about difference" (Johnson 318). These critics

> read Hurston not only for the kinship inherent in such relations but because she used black vernacular speech and rituals, in ways subtle and various, so glaringly absent in other black fiction (Gates, Jr. 186-187).

Hurston was able to portray the differences among unlike ethnic groups, such as Blacks, Indians, and Whites, by stating why folklore was so important and, therefore, permeated her writing and how the African Americans managed to survive despite the Whites' tortures,

> Folk-lore[sic]is not as easy as it sounds. The best source is where there are the least outside influences and these people, being usually underprivileged, are the shyest. They are most reluctant at times to reveal that which the soul lives by. And the Negro, in spite of his open-faced laughter, his seeming acquiescence, is particularly evasive. You see we are a polite people and we do not say to our questioner, "Get out of here!" We smile and tell him or her something that satisfies the white person because,

> knowing so little about us, he doesn't know what he is missing. The Indian resists curiosity by a stony silence. The Negro offers a feather-bed resistance. That is, we let the probe enter, but it never comes out. It gets smothered under a lot of laughter and pleasantries.
>
> The theory behind our tactics: "The white man is always trying to know into somebody else's business. All right, I'll set something outside the door of my mind for him to play with and handle. He can read my writing but he sho' can't read my mind. I'll put this play toy in his hand, and he will seize it and go away. Then I'll say my say and sing my song." (*MM*, pp. 4-5) (qtd. in Johnson 325).

2. *Telling a people's story*

In black women writing, one may find three basic subjects approached: community, journey and sensuality/sexuality, mainly following the perspective of their experiences in America. These three aspects are present in Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God. Since she was the precursor of journey in black women narratives giving more structure and pattern to slave narratives, this aspect is going to be analyzed in this paper. Moreover, there is the fact that the various types of journey in the novel exemplify the ones faced by African Americans.

Zora Neale Hurston's works were studied as a kind of holdover from the Harlem Renaissance, the period that witnessed the first concerted outpourings of formal artistic expression among African Americans (Williams, v). According to Williams, in the foreword she wrote to the 1978 edition of Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, the Harlem Renaissance had an important role in history.

> The most important stylistic developments of the period were the attempt to use Afro-American folk culture as a basis for creating distinctive black contributions to serious or "high" culture, and the attempt to repudiate the false and degrading stereotypes promulgated in Anglo-American popular (and high) culture by exploring the individual hidden behind the enveloping Sambo mask. *Their Eyes Were Watching God* was published in 1937, almost ten years after the stock market crash of 1929, the date most often given as the end of the Harlem Renaissance. The book's rural southern settings, the use of dialect and folkloric materials, even its romantic theme represent much that was distinctive and significant about this period (v-vi).

Hurston portrays the richness of African American oral culture and the complex individuality of its illiterate "uncultured" folk creators. In doing so, she is probably trying to restore the live communication situation in a medium that is necessarily marked by detachment, solitude, privacy and lack of context as the reading of a formally written novel may be. The author does not use historical data in her fiction; however, one may notice that the events take place during the post-slavery period in the United States, due to social-political incidents portrayed in the novel, the most important one being the formation of the first completely black community in the United States: Eatonville.

It is also important to say that the novel deals with the experience of being both black and a woman in southern white America in the post-slavery period since it presents a woman's self-discovery. This woman is Janie Mae Crawford, an ex-slave granddaughter, who did not suffer what her grandmother did: hard physical labor, poor rations, whippings, the threat of being separated from children and mate, coerced sexual relations with the master, and vindictive treatment at the hands of the mistress.

Their Eyes Were Watching God recalls literary and racial memories, in the speech of a mulatto woman in her struggles to attain selfhood. The fiction portrays a female protagonist (Janie) that tells her own story in a way that one may think it is the story of all black women in the south of the United States. However, different from the other possible women, Janie Crawford achieves a powerful and somehow independent cultural voice as a result of her different experiences, while telling her friend Pheoby her own story. Through her experiences, she perceives herself as an individual: she undergoes a process of self-construction as a person. Slowly, she notices that her existence as a human being does not depend only upon the others, but mainly on herself.

In the absence of her mother, who was raped and died after giving birth to her, Janie has to submit to her grandmother's will. Their relationship can be understood with the help of Theriot's words since, according to her,

> [i]mperial motherhood, with its emphasis on suffering and self-abnegation, was the major feminine script the maternal generation passed on to daughters. Not only were young women exposed to their mothers' feminine ideology in popular literature and in general cultural norms, but they also encountered it from early childhood through adolescence in the mother-daughter relationship itself. Middle-class [and in the novel also the low class] daughters' gender-learning included living with a mother who advocated domesticity while admitting dissatisfaction with it and who modeled self-effacing womanhood by providing her daughter with a carefree adolescent lifestyle. The daughters' generation came to maturity with imperial motherhood as its core feminine ideal (77).

Since the only family member Janie had was her grandmother, she obeyed her in all ways and got married to an old man, Logan Killicks with his so often-mentioned sixty

acres of land, who makes a slave of her. Her grandmother, Nanny, had obliged Janie to marry Logan Killicks to preserve her honor intact, since the girl had already kissed the shiftless Johnny Taylor "across the gatepost" (23), and to see the mulatto girl having a better life.

All the fight her people had to face to get free seems unworthy to her, since Logan Killicks defined his masculinity in relation to the extent to which he could take care of her. Temporarily, Janie accepts this submission, since her husband "kills" her desire, as his surname 'Killicks' alludes to, of having her own "text". He temporarily licks Janie into passivity and submission. But her rebellion against a life dreamed by her grandmother makes her leave her husband and go away with Joe Starks, "a citified, stylish dressed man with his hat set at an angle that didn't belong in these parts" (470). They go to a city that was being built just for black people: Eatonville (it was around the turn of the twentieth century)[1]. At this point, we have real life invading fiction, since Eatonville is Hurston's hometown and was the first totally black community in the U.S.A.

However, her submission as black and as woman has continuity in her second marriage, since her second husband's "stark" chauvinism classifies her in "uh woman and her place is in de home" (69). Even her speech is denied, since "Joe spoke out without giving her a chance to say anything one way or another" (70) inside their house and at the store where other members of the community used to gather to exchange ideas.

According to Miller,

> [i]n Eatonville, the store porch is the cultural center of the community, the place where all of the relevant cultural rituals occur. In a community whose ethos is expressed in the richness of the spoken word, Joe's attempt to

[1] Before the end of slavery in the United States, many slaves who had been recently brought from Africa still holding on to the heritage of their communal society would run away in groups and try to establish villages of runaways out in the wilderness, on the frontier. The ones born in America, on the other hand, were more likely to run off alone and, with the skills they had learned on the plantations, try to pass as free men (Zinn 33). After the end of slavery, the necessity of building black communities was probably due to the need of keeping their identity.

> browbeat Janie into silence block [sic] her from meaningful participation in Afro-American cultural traditions. The price Janie must pay for her "front porch" existence is the dissociation of her sensibility and isolation from the values of the community (64).

Her spatial mobility was delimited by the space inside the store Joe had. He limits her physically by establishing that she could not stay on the porch listening to the common folk's talk-tales. Moreover, similarly to Logan Killicks, Joe Starks also defines his masculinity in relation to the extent to which he could take care of Janie, although his reasons were quite different. According to Starks, "[s]omebody got to think for women and chillun and cows" (110). And he was this 'somebody'. Moreover, Joe states his superiority over Janie by affirming that [w]hen Ah see one thing Ah understand ten. You see ten things and don't understand one" (111).

She feels segregation forced on her: women do not mingle with men. The man who loved saying "I god" along with his name, showing that he stood as the God-figure of his community, had drawn a clear chalk line that Janie could not cross. Nevertheless, for some people her job at the store can be understood as a remarkable achievement, since before that time women did not dare to occupy a space related to business economy. According to Theriot,

> [n]ot only were the physical boundaries of womanly activity expanded in the late-century period, but the premarriage options were also numerous for the young woman than they had been for her mother. Women's employment grew by 50 percent from 1880 to 1900, with the most striking increase among middle-class women. Technological and economic changes produced jobs, and some daughters occupied their late adolescence and early adulthood as salesgirls, stenographers, or typists (79).

In this sense, Janie could be considered a lucky girl, since her grandmother, a former slave, had worked until her death as a maid, and her mother did not even have the chance of working. Furthermore, the changes reported by Theriot were white women's achievements, and Janie was a mulatto achieving similar ones.

Theriot continues by saying that,

> [a]lthough they were sex-segregated for the most part, the late-century jobs differed from the ones available for an earlier generation of women in that they were the creations of the new business economy. While some of their mothers had followed woman's work out of the home and into the weaving mills, schools, or hospitals, the daughter's premarriage jobs were world-oriented; instead of being asked to take their home work [sic] into the world, late-century women were invited to do the world's work. (...) The beginning availability of such jobs altered the social conditions of middle-class womanhood (79).

Not only did women conquer a new territory, they also proved capable of staying there. However, as Janie's grandmother had told her "us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways" (31). In addition, in Janie's grandmother's words,

> de white man is the ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean [Africa] where the black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is de mule uh de world so fur as Ah can see (29).

Janie's grandmother had suffered a lot and knew that being black and a woman meant suffering in the U.S.A. Therefore, Janie should be happy with her new condition as a salesgirl, considering that African American people before them did not have such a privilege. However, she was not satisfied with it, since anything she did around the store, was reason enough for mockery by Joe.

Janie had run away with Joe Starks hoping to fulfill her dream, expressed in the blooming flower metaphor in the very beginning of the novel. However, Joe proved not to be the embodiment of her tree in leaf.

> It was a spring afternoon in West Florida. Janie had spent most of the day under a blossoming pear tree in the back-yard. She had been spending every minute that she could steal from her chores under that tree for the last three days. That was to say, ever since the first tiny bloom had opened. It had called her to come and gaze on a mystery. (...) 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! (23-24).

When the scene described above took place, Janie was around sixteen and all she wanted was to be a pear tree in bloom, ready to receive the visit of kissing bees singing. But, later on, she asked herself where "were the singing bees for her?" (25), since the "vision of Logan Killicks was desecrating the pear tree" (28). Janie waited her bloom time, her green time and her orange time, but the only thing she acknowledged later on was "that marriage did not make love" (44), thus, her first dream was dead and she became a woman. In fact, she did not give up her dream since, when Joe Starks appeared in her life, she finally saw a way to

have her dream come true. With him, she would at last have "a bee for her bloom". The way he acted towards her, however, "took the bloom off of things" (70).

According to Awkward, "Starks has chosen for Janie a psychologically and physically limited role – that of a "wife" – which does not include public speaking (25). With this attitude, Joe disclosed two inhabited and dominated separate spheres. According to him, women could not talk in public. Only after some years, did she realize that she was not "petal-open anymore with him" (111). "She had no more blossomy openings dusting pollen over her man, neither any glistening young fruit where the petals used to be" (112). Janie decided then to save up her feeling for a man she had never seen.

Janie feels segregation, not only verbally, but also racially. She was a woman who had realized she was black when she was six: "Ah was wid dem white chillun so much till Ah didn't know Ah wuzn't white till Ah was round six year old." A man took a picture of her and her friends and just while looking at the picture she saw a "real dark girl with long hair...Dat's where Ah wuz s'posed to be!" (21). Moreover, since an early age, she had been either envied by women or coveted by men. The description provided by Hurston in her book is overflowed by sensuality:

> [t]he men noticed her firm buttocks like she had grape fruits in her hip pockets; the great rope of black hair swinging to her waist and unraveling in the wind like a plume; then her pugnacious breasts trying to bore holes in her shirt. They, the men, were saving with the mind what they lost with the eye. The women took the faded shirt and muddy overalls and laid them away for remembrance. It was a weapon against her strength and if it turned out of no significance, still it was a hope that she might fall to their level some day (11).

The reason for all this jealously and desire might be her skin color, and this can be the reason why Joe Starks wanted her so badly. Janie was not a white woman but a mulatto; even so, she could fulfill the lust for revenge that not only Joe but also all African Americans had: which revenge could be better than going to bed with the enemy's/master's white woman?

Being a mulatto makes of Janie a person who does not belong to just one world. A schoolteacher had raped her mother when she was seventeen and studying to be a teacher, and Janie was the result of the rape. Due to this double source, she feels in many occasions that she does not belong to the black community in which she was living.[2] Besides, a question might have crossed her mind: when one parent is white and the other is black, is the child both, or neither?

Janie is conscious of black people's condition and agrees with a man called Coker who affirms that "[u]s talks about de white man keepin' us down! Shucks! He don't have tuh. Us keeps our selves down" (63). Even so, Janie is decided to become a somebody. However, many difficulties were faced in this construction of selfhood. Even to be accepted in Eatonville, she has to submit herself to the conditions Joe had established to the community, since "he was more literate than the rest" (75), and imposed respect and fear on the others. In Gates, Jr.'s words, "[t]he figure of Jody's big voice comes to stand as a synecdoche of oppression, in opposition to the speech community of which Janie longs to become an integral part" (200). Moreover, the landlord, storekeeper, post-master and mayor of the community Joe Starks had given to the people from Eatonville something that could be found only in

[2] Janie was the tragic mulatto inserted in an African American community. Tragic because by being a mulatto she was the daughter of a black woman and a white man's relation, and, therefore, divided between her loyalty either to her mother or to her father's world. For being a mulatto, and sometimes one with a very light complexion, she could pass as a white, and the tragedy occurs when such event is found out. As a mulatto, she is a constant remembrance of the violence inflicted by white men on black women. Another important point to be highlighted refers to the kind of service mulatto people had to do: they were usually in charge of house chores, while the black people had to work in the fields. This motif is explored in some Brazilian novels like A Escrava Isaura by Bernardo Guimarães. Eventually, if the white was master and the black was slave, what was the mulatto?

white towns: light, the best example of progress at that time and a good reason for pride and respect.

Joe Starks constructs a wall between him and Janie. After his death from a kidney failure, Tea Cake comes into her life. An almost 40-year-old Janie goes away with the guitar-player, gambler, itinerant laborer that embodied all the qualities Nanny, Logan Killicks and Joe Starks would look down upon. Nevertheless, for Janie he is the fulfillment of her vision of the pear blossom. She is not commanded by him but asked to work with him (195). Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods demands nothing from her, only that she be herself. Moreover, he not only embodies Janie's (blossoming) tree, he is the wood himself. While working on the fields she feels, for the first time, the happiness of being treated as an equal and by a person she loves, since Tea Cake does not see her as a woman only but as a partner in everything as well. They do so many things together that Janie does not believe it can be possible.

Janie's journey along time – her childhood, her adolescence, her adulthood – and space – from Georgia to Florida – promotes the character's growth. The author, by providing mobility, both temporal and spatial, gives Janie the opportunity of becoming an acting subject. Moreover, by giving Janie two chances of getting rid of slavery puts her as an example of the resistance to slavery her ancestors had performed. In this respect, Zinn claims that during slavery times, the slaves "included stealing property, sabotage and slowness, killing overseers and masters, burning down plantation buildings, running away" (170-171) as examples of resistance. If a reader sets apart from the novel the author's tendency of protecting her heroin, he/she can affirm that Janie did some of the examples of resistance mentioned. Sabotage and slowness, for instance, may refer to her work in Joe's store, since he accused her of them. Killing may be another example, since we cannot forget the Eatonville people had accused Janie of witchcraft and of poisoning Joe, although a doctor had attested he had had a kidney failure.

There are many types of journey described in black women writings, such as: journey into slavery, journey into freedom and journey back into history. Each of these journeys, no matter how arduous, has generated growth in consciousness, and has provided a means for defining the self. Using Janie as a model, one may say that she passed through all of them. Either when she obeys her grandmother Nanny and marries Logan Killicks or after when she runs away with Joe Starks, she faces a journey into slavery.

Then she goes away with Tea Cake. This is her journey into freedom. Inside this never tried freedom, Janie writes her life like a poem, with rhymes, some uncertainties, but she is not down on her knees anymore. Her happiness just becomes bigger every day.

With Logan Killicks and Joe Starks the only thing she had experienced was an unchained slavery. Slavery makes a person weak and when Janie realizes she had spent half of her life as a slave to Joe, she feels fightless (119). Also, slavery makes one think of death, and Janie starts to do so. However, she knows that "been standing there before there was a where or a when or a then " (129). This makes her recuperate the will of fighting for freedom, and she does so by first showing her wisdom and, second, by unmasking Joe's worn out maleness in front of other men.

The first time she dares becoming a speaking subject takes place inside Joe's store, the place in which she had her speech denied. Some villagers were talking about how much they knew women and how women should be treated, to which Janie retorted:

> [s]ometimes 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' tuh 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 nothin' tuh strain against but women and chickens (117).

From an inarticulate object, Janie becomes an active subject. Yet this daring step is received with coldness, it made her try a second one later on. Janie was already around thirty-five when she noticed that Joe was not as intimidating looking as he used to be. He looked old, and indeed was. She only paid closer attention to it because he was all the time talking about her age, as if he did not want to grow old alone. In one incident inside the store, Joe embarrassed her in front of some clients and she dared again to defend herself. She said,

> [s]top mixin' up mah doings wid mah looks, Jody. When you git through tellin' me how tuh cut uh plug uh tobacco, then you kin tell me whether mah behind is on straight or not" (122).

Joe did not welcome her saying, and an argument had its start with Janie robbing him of his illusion of irresistible maleness in front of other men when saying,

> [n]aw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n *you* kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't 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 (122-123).

Joe had been embarrassed in front of other men and they would not forget this happening so soon. Anyway, what Janie could not understand was why he could "be so mad with her for making him look small when he did it to her all the time". She was expecting equality in rights, what her partners in sex and race are still trying to get some almost one hundred years after this portrait took place. Even without getting equality, Janie had managed to get rid of Joe's dominance. After some time and a few speculators' suggestions, Joe dies. Although silent at first, her resistance serves as an example of what Awkward claims about African Americans.

> By escaping psychologically, if not physically, from Starks' influence and denial of her humanity, Janie follows in the tradition of tens of millions of Afro-Americans who, though powerless to end their servitude, nonetheless exhibited undeniable courage by employing a type of silent revolution (28).

Vergible "Tea Cake" Woods enters Janie's life and after some hanging around and getting to know each other they decide to stay together. Janie is really free with Tea Cake and can finally have her dream realized since

> [s]he couldn't make him look just like any other man to her. He looked like the love thoughts of women. He could be a bee to a blossom – a pear tree blossom in the spring (161).

They did everything together and could be seen by any villager. They went hunting together, since Tea Cake had taught her how to shoot, as well as fishing. They also went to the movies in Orlando, a city nearby, and went dancing. Tea Cake also taught her how to dance, play checkers and coon-can and gave her some driving lessons (166). Then they decided to move from Eatonville to Jacksonville to work side by side in a beans field. Only with him and in front of the other villagers she could now "listen and laugh and even talk some herself if she wanted to" (200). Their love is disturbed by jealousy only a few times: when a girl called Nunkie starts trying to flirt with Tea Cake and when a woman called Mrs. Turner tries to pull Janie towards her brother, since she admired Janie's color. This woman was indirectly responsible for the first and only time Tea Cake slapped Janie, since he became jealous of her beauty, and with the threat of having another man coveting his wife it was his way to show her who the boss was. For Schmidt, this is "a reason good enough for Hurston to eliminate him as a character since he becomes a hindrance to the narrative's design" (64), therefore, this may be why Tea Cake was bitten by a dog, contracted rabies, attacked Janie, was shot and died.

Janie bred envy everywhere due to her "coffee-and-cream complexion and her luxurious hair" (208). Pigment definitely decides her destiny, for there is no doubt that pigmentation implies social relations and expectations that directly affect the individuals involved, and due to her skin complexion, the Eatonville community did not think she deserved Tea Cake. The opposite is also true, since another mulatto, Mrs. Turner, admired her complexion and defended that Janie deserved someone better than Tea Cake. It belongs to Mrs. Turner one extraordinary example of an unreachable dream: the one of having Caucasian characteristics. For Mrs. Turner, paradise was a "heaven of straight haired, thin-lipped, high-nose boned white seraphs" (216). This dream would make any defender of the 70's "Black is Beautiful" movement shiver with anger.

The Eatonville community stands for the United States community of that time (and perhaps of nowadays) as not being the ideal place for love between individuals of different races. Interracial unions were (are?) not easily accepted, and after some time only barely tolerated. Moreover, people are always anxious to categorize someone as belonging to just one group and Janie was someone beyond a clear label. By being neither black nor white, Janie belonged to a third color group, a neutral color that contains them both.

The last journey, the historical one, Janie makes throughout Their Eyes Were Watching God. In all events there is a bit of history: history of black slavery, history of struggle, history of war, history of sufferings and even history of death. This last one is mainly showed after Janie sees some Indians running away since, as they told anybody they met on their way, a hurricane was coming. Janie and the community where she lives have to face this physical journey also. In the beginning, "it is easy to be hopeful in the day time when you can see the things you wish on"(...) "but it was night, it stayed night" (234) and the hurricane came making them run and destroying everything. [3] New Historicism may be recalled here,

[3] In the beginning, everything was feast and despreocupation, but later, everything was destruction. This scene described in the novel makes one remember two other scenes through history. One of them is described in the

since it states that a literary work is a social and cultural construct shaped by more than one consciousness, a tale of many voices, like this event which is described by the Indians', the villagers', Janie's and Hurston's help.

The event is described in full detail by the author in her attempt to attribute verisimilitude to it: "[t]hrough the screaming wind they heard things crashing and things hurtling and dashing with unbelievable velocity" (235). This scene might even make a reader recall the deluge in the Bible.

During the escape, Tea Cake is beaten by a mad dog and contracts rabies. After some time, moved by the rabies, he attacks Janie. To defend herself, she kills him with a rifle shot. And "in the same day of Janie's great sorrow she was in jail" (274). People were jealous and they loved Tea Cake more than Janie, perhaps because she was a mulatto inserted in a black community, and he was a right representative of their color. The Eatonville community was not color-blind as the United States Constitution is. She could see and feel their anger,

> [t]hen she saw all of the colored people standing up in the back of the courtroom. Packed tight like a case of celery, only much darker than that. They were all against her, she could see. So many were there against her that a light slap from each one of them would have beat [sic] her to death. She felt them pelting her with dirty thoughts. They were there with their tongues cocked and loaded, the only real weapon left to weak folks. The only killing tool they are allowed to use in the presence of white people (275).

Besides noticing the fact that she was not accepted by the black community, to which she thought she belonged, Janie found also very peculiar the fact that a jury made of

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Bible when all men were enjoying themselves, and nobody had thoughts of Sodoma and Gomorra. The other one was when the Negroes were made slaves by the colonists and sold all around the world and that is why they could be found in North America, where this novel took place.

twelve strange white men who knew nothing about her and Tea Cake would decide her fate. In her defense she had the fact that she could not be blamed for protecting herself. Moreover, there was the truth that she loved her husband above anything. And "of course he wasn't dead. He could never be dead until she herself had finished feeling and thinking" (286).

3. *Preserving black identity through storytelling*

> Gates, Jr. classifies Their Eyes Were Watching God as a speakerly text, that is a text whose rhetorical strategy is designed to represent an oral literary tradition, designed to "emulate the phonetic, grammatical, and lexical patterns of actual speech and produce the 'illusion of oral narration'". The speakerly text is that text in which all other structural elements seem to be devalued, as important as they remain to the telling of the tale, because the narrative strategy signals attention to its own importance, an importance which would seem to be the privileging of oral speech and its inherent linguistic features (181).

A speakerly text, in this sense, would seem primarily to be oriented toward imitating one of the numerous forms of oral narration to be found in classical African American vernacular literature. One of these forms is precisely what the main character, Janie, follows: storytelling. Storytelling has its justification through Gates, Jr.'s words, since according to him, "for Hurston, the search for a telling form of language, indeed the search for a black literary language itself, defines the search for the self" (183). The self, in this case, can emerge through the will in an attempt to write itself into being within a first-person narrative structure (Gates, Jr. 183-184).

Janie had her own way of preserving her black identity, mainly by telling Pheoby her story. She observes an oral culture, which can preserve a people's laws, history, agreements, customs and skills (Kuyk 44). However, she is not the only oral culture representative. As Kuyk, Jr. has pointed out, in Eatonville

> people converse, gossip, court, argue, insult, compliment, orate, pray, sing, recount their own experiences, "woof" (talk playfully), and "lie" (tell tall tales). When the mayor [Joe Starks] sets up Eatonville's first streetlight, Brother David chants " a traditional prayer-poem with his own variations" (46).

By chanting a "traditional prayer-poem with his own variations", one may understand that Brother David has done his personal reading of the prayer-poem, as anybody else could have done. It means that the theory might be a common ground sometimes, like history, but the readings of it may vary from person to person. It also reminds a reader that Janie is not the only storyteller in the book. Storytelling starts in a chronological order when Nanny, Janie's grandmother, recounts her own life to Janie (29-37), and then goes to Tea Cake when he tells Janie how he had spent the two hundred dollars she had kept hidden for an "emergency" and how he had been knifed after a card game (181-192). Despite portraying Janie's story as the bulk in the book, Their Eyes Were Watching God can be considered a tale of many voices, as New Historicism claims history is, since other characters help knitting the story as one.

Janie's act of remembering the past, both bad and good experiences, and also the act of telling them aloud to Pheoby is a positive characteristic related to constant change. This act may also prevent her from repeating the same mistakes. Storytelling has a lot to do with family gatherings and rural atmosphere since, as soon as stories are printed, they usually become urban and industrial. According to Brooks, "[n] arrating is never innocent, and the

narrative that frames another allows the writer to dramatize the results of the telling [so]" (77). Traditional storytelling is linked to the traveler, who returns from his/her wanderings with something to tell, but also with the preserver of local traditions, rooted in his/her native place (Brooks 81). This tradition reminds one of the stories told by slaves to their children while working in the fields or staying at the slaves' barn in order to keep remembrances alive and recall the roots. Apart from this, we have Janie's act of telling her story to Pheoby serving to a purpose closely related to storytelling: it served to warn her listener against potential dangers and to encourage her to pursue the path of wisdom (Kuyk 56). As potential dangers, one may cite gossiping as being the main source of harm, followed by the act of doing whatever other people want us to, instead of following our own desires. The learning is acknowledged in an enthusiastic way: "Lawd!" Pheoby breathed out heavily, "Ah done growed ten feet higher from jus' listenin' tuh you, Janie" (284). Therefore, we have Pheoby, the ideal listener and a ficelle in the novel[6], speaking as the true pupil to her true pedagogue Janie, embodying the self-consciousness and the knowledge that are the basis for change.

Storytelling reinforces the ties among people, since it implies sharing and exchanging. What may surprise a reader, however, is that Janie returned to the community that had treated her so badly in order to tell her story. After her trial, Janie went back to Eatonville, whose community had gossiped about her, and even accused her of witchcraft when Joe fell ill. Despite all these events, Eatonville was the place where Janie had spent most of her life and it was the environment she was more familiar with: a black, rural and southern community. It was in this place that Janie felt that her task as a storyteller could be more precious. Its importance in Their Eyes Were Watching God could be explained through Brook's words once more. According to him,

[6] This term refers to those secondary characters used in literature to illuminate the main character as a contrast.

> [a]nthropologists and linguists have taught us that in oral cultures, meaning depends in large measure on the context of any speech act. Writing, on the other hand, by its very nature abolishes context, to create an "autonomous discourse", a discourse that one cannot directly question or respond to because it is detached from its author and belongs, strictly speaking, to no one (85).

The linguist Kaplan identifies another importance of storytelling and also its limitation. According to him, the invention of writing [and let us not forget of printing] made possible a change in the relation between information and human beings.

> In orate societies – those that depend exclusively upon spoken language – information is of necessity stored in language. That fact has two important implications: First, there must be a group of individuals who specialize in becoming information carriers, and second, the nature of information is very flexible. Individuals who are repositories of information necessarily achieve special status in a society; they are important to the survival of culture (9-10).

Certainly, Janie's objective in telling her story to Pheoby was to become important, but not only this: Janie tells her story to Pheoby and, through Pheoby, to the entire Eatonville community. Hurston's talent in sharing the narrator's stage with Janie is praised by Gates, Jr.

> The representation of her sources of language seems to be her principal concern, as she constantly shifts back and forth between her 'literate" narrator's voice and a highly idiomatic black voice found in wonderful passages of free indirect discourse [when the novel shifts from third to a blend of first and third person]. Hurston moves in and out of these distinct voices

> effortlessly, seamlessly, just as she does in *Their eyes* to chart Janie's coming to consciousness, it is this usage of a *divided* voice, a double voice unreconciled, that strikes me as her great achievement, a verbal analogue of her double experience as a woman in a male-dominated world and as a black person in a nonblack world (193).

Janie thrives from a nameless child, known only as "Alphabet" (21), a figure for all names and none, who cannot even recognize her own likeness as a "colored" person in a photograph, to the implied narrator of her own tale of self-consciousness. However, in order to acquire this consciousness, she overcomes the obstacles that frustrate her desire to grow as a black active subject and while this happens, she learns how not to mix the inside and the outside she realizes she has (112-113).

Another reason why storytelling is so important in the novel is that it helps showing how blacks were torn from their land and even so could preserve their identity. Their history reminds a reader of the Jew's history. According to Zinn, the African Americans were "forced into a situation where the heritage of language, dress, custom, family relations, was bit by bit obliterated except for the remnants that blacks could hold on to by sheer, extraordinary persistence" (26). One example of such persistence is storytelling, since telling aloud the suffering that were inflicted to you makes your listener more cautious towards life.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is a circular novel, one that begins at the end and ends at the beginning, with an omniscient narrator. In a certain sense, one of the major themes of the novel is Janie's memory and the lyrical form she gives to her experience as she sits on the porch with her confident and auditor Pheoby, while she becomes a speaking subject. Yet without Tea Cake, her everything (as the name alludes), Janie is secure since she had constructed her own identity. She is a romanticized example of some of the struggles her peo-

ple had to face in order to build self-respect and stand up to fight for their rights in the land of freedom and opportunity.

According to Gates, Jr., Hurston's contribution to literature reside in the fact that she blended in her narrative two extremes – narrative commentary in the diction of standard English and black diction. In his words,

> [t]he mode of narration of Their Eyes [sic] consists, at either extreme, of narrative commentary (rendered in third-person omniscient and third-person restricted voices) and of character's discourse which manifests itself as a direct speech rendered in what Hurston called dialect). Hurston's innovation is to be found in the middle spaces between these two extremes of narration and discourse, in what we might think of as represented discourse, which as I am defining it includes both indirect discourse and free indirect discourse. It was Hurston who introduced free indirect discourse into Afro-American narration. It is this innovation, (...), which enables her to represent various traditional modes of Afro-American rhetorical play while simultaneously representing her protagonist's growth in self-consciousness through free indirect discourse (191).

By reading Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God, one may notice the similarities between this novel and Alice Walker's The Color Purple, mainly in relation to the use of aspects such as community, journey and sensuality/sexuality to promote the characters' growth as individuals. The next chapter will compare the two novels by stating similarities and differences between them.

Chapter Four

From A (Alice Walker) to Z (Zora Neale Hurston): a comparison

> It is argued that, since all reading is misreading, no one reading is better than any other, and hence all readings, potentially infinite in number, are in the final analysis equally misinterpretations. (Edward Said).

With regard to the process of identity construction, the novels analyzed in this thesis present more similarities than differences, since aspects such as journey, community, sensuality/sexuality and storytelling were explored in both and helped in this process. However, before presenting these, it is important to present the likeness between the authors.

Concerning Hurston and Walker's upbringing, it is worth quoting Schmidt's words, although she refers only to Hurston. According to her, Zora "experienced what it was to grow up female in a self-contained male-oriented community", and "developed a penetrating insight into the identity and role of women held in a state of tutelage under male rule" (57). It is also important to mention that Hurston was writing about woman's oppression at a time when this issue was generally ignored and when the primary concern of the Renaissance was the reconstruction and proclamation of black manhood.

The likeness between Hurston and Walker resides in the fact that while the former was calling people's attention with her denouncement of black male dominance over black women, the latter came up with the idea that the feminist movement could not clearly and completely represent all women, and this is basically why a movement called womanism has appeared. They both also portrayed power relations in their novels. Moreover, by presenting different faces of the same prism, namely racism, they proved to be innovative and daring for their time. According to Fox-Genovese, "[t]he point is not that texts defend specific political positions, although they may, but that they derive from political relations from which they

cannot be entirely abstracted" (221) something related to New Historicism and that can be applied to Hurston's and Walker's novels.

Both novelists, as mentioned earlier, elaborate on black women through whom men fulfill their expectations regarding their masculinity. Schmidt offers a possible explanation for this behavior. She claims that,

> (...) victimized by both caste and class, the black man could not challenge the white man to assert his power and control in a society where these were valued and considered to be the parameters of male identity. This uncertainty about role and, consequently, his fears of emasculation made him turn to the only element he could beat on: the black woman. Thus, male oppression within the black family reveals a simple yet horrifying truth: power and control over the black woman often became the only means by which the black man could prove himself to himself and to others and in this way attain some kind of leverage with the white man, even if only in sexual terms (59-60).

In order to react against male power, both novels present the two poles of female reaction: dissent and conformity, mainly in marriage. However, while Janie is coveted by men and treated like an ornament by her first husband, Celie is a commodity, something her husband gets along with a cow. Similarly to Celie, who is forced to get married to Albert, Janie is also forced to marry Logan and the two women are kept imprisoned, having their words and moves controlled by their *masters*. Janie escapes from this prison just to enter in another one where she is even more brutalized: her marriage to Joe Starks. Celie only finds the fulfillment of her idea of true love in a homosexual relationship with Shug Avery, while Janie meets the love of her life, the bee for her blossoming flower in Tea Cake, but only to

lose him some time later. If at first both Celie and Janie seem to conform to the abuses, later on they react against them.

A strong example of female dissent is found in The Color Purple 's character Sophia, even though she is an example of nonconformity not only towards accepting her husband's brutalities, but also towards white people's demonstrations of racism. She had acknowledged her value as a human being; therefore, she did not feel inferior to white people and did not aspire to win admittance into the white world. In addition, she did not suffer from any psychological minus-value or feeling of insignificance as Celie did.

Despite the similarities, however, we cannot affirm that in both novels we have "stable kin networks, steadfast marriages, unusual fidelity and resistance to forced marriages" (Zinn 174) like we had during the slavery period in the United States. On the contrary, we have a Celie separated from her children right after they were born and obliged to a forced marriage. We also have a Janie forced to marry an older man against her will. Moreover, we can also identify several examples of physical aggression in both novels, since Celie first suffers in her foster father's hands and later on in Albert's hands (usually only for the reason of existing), while Janie is physically punished by Starks because the meal she had prepared was not good, and later on by her beloved Tea Cake, because he wanted to show to his fellows who the boss was.

To complete the idea of marriage and love, we may recall the one of sensuality/sexuality, which is also elaborated on in the novels. And it is closely connected to flowers. While for Janie the idea of finding love is related to the metaphor of the bee visiting the blossoming flower, Celie finds her sensuality through Shug Avery's teaching. It is Shug who motivates Celie to know her own body, to find her "rose" (vagina) (76-77). And it is the search for someone who could take good care of them (not to say of their flowers) that makes Celie

declare independence from Albert to go along with Shug Avery to Memphis, and that makes Janie accept Tea Cake's offering to go along with him to work in some beans fields.

This aspect of physical, as well as spatial, mobility makes possible the construction of their identities not only as women but also as human beings. Along with the discovery of their sensuality/sexuality, Celie and Janie's both temporal and spatial journey concur in making the process of construction of identity possible. However, community, or the sense of belonging to a group, proves to be as meaningful as journey.

Janie returns to the community of Eatonville, after Tea Cake's death and her trial, in order to start telling her story, while Celie gets united with her people: Albert, Shug and Nettie and the latter's family. However, it is precisely in these two events that some critics find the theme for their criticism. In Alice Walker's it is the closing scene where a homosexual relationship is seen as necessary for love fulfillment and the need for men to learn the so called women stuff to understand and be accepted by them, as mentioned in Chapter Two. In Hurston's novel it is related to Janie's storytelling. Schmidt presents a reading for the latter:

> Janie's account shows she has imbibed the narrative rituals of folk community. Yet, her cultural assimilation shows a certain obliqueness. She sits not on the front porch where males assemble to tell stories but on the back porch, as if a woman's story, with herself as subject and object, cannot yet be considered a proper subject for traditional porch activities (63).

This scene of having Janie tell her story on the back porch can be understood as an example of the so called inferiority complex, which Frantz Fanon has classified as being caused by both economic inferiority and internalization (epidermalization) of this inferiority. We would have a non easily solved paradox, therefore, because if Janie has become an active subject and, thus, mastered her space, why does she not tell her story on the front porch like

men used to do? Is she agreeing that women's place is at the back of men, or was Hurston afraid of provoking African American men even more? Moreover, where is the dissent against male power claimed earlier? The answers do not seem easy to be found.

There are other similarities between the novels regarding religion. The figure of God is explored in both and faced as a male entity who knows everything and who can provide Janie with a husband. In Hurston's novel, religion is mentioned when referring to the deluge described in the Bible, while in Walker's novel we have references to Adam and Eve when portraying the Olinka's tales. Besides, for Celie, God is the figure to which she writes her letters. However, in letter # 73, we have Celie's last fight and this one against God

> What God do for me? I ast.
>
> She say, Celie! Like she shock. He gave you life, good health, and a good woman that love you to death.
>
> Yeah, I say, and he give me a lynched daddy, a crazy mama, a lowdown dog of a step pa and a sister I probably won't ever see again. Anyhow, I say, the God I been praying and writing to is a man. And act just like all the other mens I know. Trifling, forgetful and lowdown (187).

In order to attenuate Celie's anger against God, Shug provides the solution: the reconceptualization of the almighty entity into an itness (190). This is done also possibly to keep the tradition of believing in a powerful omniscient force, and not to relate it to an old white man that would remind them of the sufferings provoked by men in general. However, there is something both women agree with: it is that the Bible (the way they know it) represents only what white people think (letter #73).

Both novels deal with the African American resistance in the United States and this can be described in various ways, mainly in daily life and culture. Their music, magic, art, religion were all ways to hold on their humanity. One of the aspects that shows this is related

to the first-person discourse used in many narratives. We gain some understanding of this through Gates, Jr.' words. According to him:

> [a]s theme, as revised trope, as a double-voiced narrative strategy, the representation of characters and texts finding a voice has functioned as a sign both of the formal unity of the Afro-American literature tradition and of the integrity of the black subjects depicted in this literature (239).

Although Janie speaks herself into being, while Celie writes herself into being, they both struggle to find their own voices throughout the narratives. They do it by using the black dialect that reinforces their identity. Moreover, in both novels we have the storytelling, albeit in different ways, taking place, and the use of free indirect discourse, possibly in order not to stop the flow of ideas. And in this storytelling we, the readers, play an important role since when reading the letters of The Color Purple, we do it as if it were over Celie's shoulder, just as we overhear Janie telling her story to Pheoby in Their Eyes Were Watching God (Gates, Jr.). While telling, and sharing the stage with the authors, it is Celie and Janie's turn to master the language and show the power they struggled to conquer.

Concerning narration, it is worth talking about the mediators in both novels, which is another difference regarding them. In Their Eyes Were Watching God, we have Pheoby who mediates between the individual (Janie) and the group (Eatonville community), whereas in The Color Purple the reader gets the information through Celie and Nettie's letters. Regarding the narrative structure, we have the shifts from third to first-person point of view and vice-versa only in Hurston's novels, while in Walker's novels everything is first person.

To sum up, it is worth saying once more that the aspects used by Hurston in her novel in order to promote the leading character's growth as a subject, namely: journey, community, and sensuality/sexuality, were also explored by Walker in her The Color Purple. Moreover, both authors use storytelling as a tool for allowing the construction of the charac-

ter's identity and explore power relations in the American society of the 30's. Therefore, although 50 years separate the publication of both novels, it is undeniable that Hurston's style influenced Walker's.

Conclusion

The comparative analysis of the two novels showed that the leading characters in them undergone a similar process of construction of identity, which incorporated the following aspects: journey (both temporal and spatial), sensuality/sexuality (and the discovery of oneself as a woman having her dream of love fulfilled), and community (and the sense it brings of belonging to a group). Both novels have another aspect in common: the one of story-telling, which the leading characters make use of in order to change their status of passive object into active subject.

A few differences were pointed out concerning both novels, along with the similarities. Moreover, some parts of the stories portrayed which cause extreme uneasiness among African American critics were also explored, although superficially.

In order to understand the novels, three different criticisms were used and they showed to be complementary if not supportive: Feminist Criticism, New Historicism, and African American Criticism. Although the first intention of this study was to read the novels under the scope of New Historicism preponderantly, this task proved to be limited, as all readings following just one trend tend to be, and confusing, because even among the critics who defended it, this theory has not yet been clarified since it shows to be the mingle of different theories and ideas, some of which it intended to criticize. These three theories were presented in the first chapter.

The second chapter presented some ideas that influenced Alice Walker's work and examined her most controversial novel among African Americans: The Color Purple. Power relations, not only from male over female characters but also from whites over blacks, were explored in the analysis of the novel. Moreover, it also showed that the main character

undergoes a process of construction of identity throughout the novel, due to aspects such as journey, community and sensuality/sexuality.

The third chapter analyzed Zora Neale Hurston's Their Eyes Were Watching God as the finest example of a misunderstood artist's work. In addition to all the aspects mentioned before that help in the construction of a character's identity, such as journey, sensuality/sexuality and community, another aspect was explored, namely storytelling as a means for preserving a group's identity, since the whole novel is based on it. Racism was also explored in this novel, although not fully, since like in The Color Purple the worst examples of it are kept in people's remembrances.

The fourth chapter compared the two novels, and stated their similarities and differences, although these had already been done but separately. The conclusion was that Zora Neale Hurston's novel clearly influenced Alice Walker's, since the set of similarities between both works was wider than the one of differences. The similarities regarding the aspects explored to promote the construction of identity undergone by the novels' main characters, along with the tradition of storytelling by using a group's own language and the power relations found in the structure of a group, proved to be the most important ones.

Concluding, there are a few suggestions for further research, mainly regarding Walker's novel, and one of them refers to Nettie, Celie's sister. One might study her portrait of Africa and apply a Post-Colonial theory to the reading of it. Furthermore, since we have the adaptation to the movie screen of Walker's book, a detailed study comparing both could be done, especially because Steven Spielberg and Quincy Jones did not accept the adaptation suggested by Alice Walker.

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