

**Narratives of the lives of buried hearts:
writing as (re)historicising**

*Narrativas de vidas de corações enterrados:
a escrita como (re)historicização*

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Abstract: The specific context for this literary analysis encompasses the lives and experiences of American natives and of the slaves who were brought to the U.S.A. as elaborated in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, by Frederick (Douglass (1845), and *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, by Dee Brown (1970). These books are perhaps some of the most evoked manifestations of historical revision; the former addressing American History through the perspective of a slave, and the latter doing likewise through the perspective of the indigenous population. I endeavour to get to such reflections through scrutinising the historical echoes of literature, as my specific goal is to analyse if and how Douglass and Brown's books revise American history by saying what has been kept silent so far. The reflections articulated in both narratives prove to be harsh evidence that historical documents are far from being all encompassing – and are, for such reason, amenable to revision.

Keywords: Frederick Douglass; Dee Brown; historical revision.

Resumo: O contexto específico levado em conta nesta análise literária diz respeito às vidas e experiências dos nativos americanos e dos escravos trazidos para os EUA, como elaborado em *Narrative of the Life of Frederik Douglass*, de Frederick Douglass (1845), e *Bury my Hear at Wounded Knee*, de Dee Brown (1970). Talvez estes livros

sejam duas das manifestações de revisionismo histórico mais evocadas, sendo a primeira uma narrativa contada pela perspectiva de um escravo e a segunda, pela perspectiva da população indígena. Busco chegar a essas reflexões através do escrutínio dos ecos históricos da literatura, sendo meu objetivo específico analisar se e de que forma os livros de Douglass e Brown revisam a história americana dizendo aquilo que até então havia sido mantido em silêncio. As reflexões articuladas em ambas narrativas evidenciam de forma concreta que documentos históricos não são capazes de abraçar todas as discussões necessárias – e são, por esse motivo, passíveis de revisão.

Palavras-chave: Frederick Douglass; Dee Brown; revisionismo histórico.

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Why am I compelled to write? Because the world I create in the writing compensates for what the real world does not give me [...]. I write because I'm scared of writing, but I'm more scared of not writing.¹

Introduction: The Text and its Fractures

Alongside the development of literary criticism, a discussion concerning how literature and history are related, objective and subjectively, has emerged and actually marked a considerable amount of such criticism. After much reflection, one could say today that there is no need to address both of these stances – history and literature – in isolation, nor to set them up in a hierarchical fashion; they have always depended on one another, in a relationship of complete reciprocity. Now we all know, or are supposed to do so, that “far from there being a tension between literary form and historical context, the fractures in the text reveal its relationship to history”.² Every text presents fractures, and such fractures is perhaps

¹ ANZALDÚA. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, p. 310.

² WOLF. *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Twentieth-Century Historical, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, p. 97.

what makes both literature and history singular; by the same token, the silences, omissions, and slipups that emerge during the concoction of both is precisely what evinces their interdependence. This discussion is pertinent to my article in particular because, hereinafter, I shall advocate for the advent of literature as a process of historical revision – the literary text summoned up as to unveil the epistemological fractures of standard ontologies. Conscious that marginalised subjects have been successively (mis)represented by official discourses and accredited historiography, regardless of how pertinent their positions might be, I rely on the literary analysis of two specific texts where peripheral historicising surfaces as to walk us through a rather distinct direction. Such peripheral historicising theretofore consists in the overall context for my analysis: the groundbreaking critical perspectives set forth by subaltern subjects concerning the postcolonial condition – “ex-slaves” or “ex-natives” – who seem to put into question the purportedly universal and innocuous assumptions of hegemony.

If “writing is re-naming”,³ rewriting history also means titling and describing historical events that have been overtly disregarded by the master narratives of hegemonic historicising. In this sense, and given the problematic status of such hegemonic historicising, the specific context for my literary analysis encompasses the lives and experiences of American natives and of the slaves who were brought thereto as articulated in *Narrative of the Life of Frederik Douglass*, by Frederick Douglass, and *Bury my Hear at Wounded Knee*, by Dee Brown. These books are perhaps some of the most evoked manifestations of historical revision, the former addressing American history through the perspective of a slave, and the latter doing likewise through the perspective of an Amerindian. One might wrongly assume that, since the enslavement of blacks and extermination of natives in America has already happened in the past, there would be no need to talk of such issues in the present. There would be, if you will, nothing to gain from describing once again how this or that has occurred, as if the idea of historical revision were simply to rediscover the roots of subaltern identities. According to Foucault, however, “the purpose of history is not to discover the roots of our identity, but to commit itself to its transformation”.⁴ Therefore,

³ RICH. *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, p. 25.

⁴ FOUCAULT. *The Order of Discourse*, p. 162.

one might say that the naivety of such line of reasoning is bulky: it is precisely because such events occurred in the past that we must talk of them in the present – after all, the future depends on it. Apropos, it is rather unlikely that someone involved in black and/or Amerindian agendas would come to this questionable conclusion – the representatives of hegemonic reasoning are the only ones who take advantage on that.

It is also true nonetheless that “re-vision – the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for the margin more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival”.⁵ This act of looking back is, for some of us, perhaps an option; but, for many, it consists in the only means for surviving. Bearing that in mind, the overall goal of my following analysis is to problematise hegemonic methods of objective and subjective conquest, usually taken for granted, concerning the rather ideology based religious, geographical, social, financial, and profit-oriented pillars of Western obsession with personal control and social development – in capitalist terms. More specifically, I endeavour to get to such reflections through scrutinising the historical echoes of literature, as my specific goal is to analyse if and – if so – how Douglass and Brown’s books revise American history by saying what has been kept silent – making out why it had never been said prior to them. In my reading of *Narrative of the Life of Frederik Douglass* and *Bury my Hear at Wounded Knee* it is worth mentioning that I countersign Said when he poses that “history is made by men and women, just as it can also be unmade and rewritten. Always with various silence and elisions, always with shapes imposed and disfigurements tolerated”.⁶ Tackling literature as a channel to unmake and rewrite the master narratives of official history, I scheme then two hypotheses to be tested during the analysis of my research objects – concerning both the flaws and silences veiled within such knotty official history.

The first hypothesis is that postcolonial perspectives on literature of resistance and re-representation provides readers with the pages left unwritten in the history books, filling the blanks resulting from an obtuse positioning of hegemonic representatives towards American history – since its conception and until contemporaneity. My second hypothesis, which emerges in cahoots with the first, is that Douglass and Brown’s

⁵ RICH. *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, p. 23

⁶ SAID. *Orientalism*, p. 203.

historical revisions are symbolic of subaltern resistance as they demystify the interests hidden behind the supposedly innocuous attempt of hegemony to assimilate and institutionalise the “other” through historical, economic, and – especially – religious rather questionable maxims. For testing such hypotheses, the theoretical framework of this research envelops the analytical tools set forward by concepts that manifest the need for accepting and/or boosting peripheral discourses. “Against strategic essentialisms, the possibility of historiography as strategy forces a wedge into the narrowly philosophical edifice”.⁷ It is precisely for the questioning of this philosophical edifice of hegemonic ontology that strategic essentialisms must be discredited – through the dawn of less predictable epistemes. Hence my deploying of Hall’s postcolonial and transcultural movements⁸ and of Anzaldúa’s notion of the borderlands as a space for identity (re)conceptualisation.⁹ Moreover, Rich’s view on the possibility of historical revisionism,¹⁰ Bhabha’s reflection upon the self and the other as constitutive and indissoluble,¹¹ and Spivak’s critique concerning the issue of subalternity¹² and its voice shall also be brought to my analysis – as to contribute to the revision articulated in both my objects of analysis.

Discussion: Historiography as “a Curse rather than a Blessing”

The reason why, to history, what one says and what one is forbidden to say both matter is precisely because the latter and the former only exist because of one another. When a master narrative is developed, many other narratives get undermined during the process – an official discourse walks on the corpses of peripheral discourses successively silenced. “What one cannot say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is carried out, in a sort of journey to silence; because subaltern historiographies might raise many questions, the subaltern cannot speak”.¹³ That the subaltern cannot speak is well known to most

⁷ SPIVAK. *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, p. 34.

⁸ Cf. HALL. *When Was the Postcolonial? Thinking at the Limit*.

⁹ Cf. ANZALDÚA. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*

¹⁰ Cf. RICH. *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*.

¹¹ Cf. BHABHA. *The Location of Culture*.

¹² Cf. SPIVAK. *Can the Subaltern Speak?*

¹³ SPIVAK. *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, p. 59.

of us who remember history books describing slaves and natives – but never giving them room to speak up their minds themselves. In *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee* this is not the case any longer as the author shares with readers an approach to the historical events of America through the perspective of the natives who were living therein before (and during) the arrival of colonisers. “They made us many promises, more than I can remember, but they never kept but one; they promised to take our land, and they took it”.¹⁴ In a nutshell, mesmerised by the behaviour of colonisers, the Amerindians who so often speak in Brown’s book describe, throughout a series of historical events, how they have been cruelly deceived by the dishonest agreements with the whites. The ambitions that make colonisers so corrupt and unfair in his narrative are the same ambitions that are shared by the whites who enslave Douglass and try to prevent him from learning to read and write. Demystifying the romanticisation of nature and the logic that the city is always worse than the countryside, his experience displays the problem of essentialisms – inasmuch as, if freed from the urban setting, there would actually be no other (more idealistic) place for ex-slaves to move to.

Narrative of the Life of Frederik Douglass is filled in with problematisations of the sort: “A city slave is almost a freeman, compared with a slave on the plantation. He is much better fed and clothed, and enjoys privileges altogether unknown to the slave on the plantation. There is a vestige of decency”.¹⁵ The critique articulated herein goes in the opposite direction of a pastoral idealisation of nature (and its necessary contrary image, the villanisation of the urban setting). One could say, therefore, that Douglass’ perspective regarding the relation urban versus rural is an antipastoral one. Nevertheless, before addressing the issue of antipastoralism we must first shed a light on the pastoral tradition. The term “pastoralism” is brought henceforward as problematised by Leo Marx, in the book *The Machine in The Garden: Technology and The Pastoral Ideal in America*. In his view pastoralism as related to the idea of a supposedly virgin continent – as if the natives who were here before the arrival of the Europeans were just a picayune detail mixed with the fauna and flora enveloped by the mysticism of their exotic milieu – deserves to

¹⁴ BROWN. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, p. 161.

¹⁵ DOUGLASS. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. The Anti-Slavery Office, p. 30.

be reconsidered. Within such tradition, the idealisation of nature and its oppositional and detached condition in what regards urban life are crucial elements. Likewise, what does “an antipastoral perspective” means? Here one must take a careful look at Raymond Williams’s book *The Country and the City*. Thereby, readers learn how antipastoral approaches are the ones that take into account that both country and city have been institutionalised by hegemony and are now interconnected through complex but effective means responsible for reinforcing meanings rather than allowing them to deviate from one another.

As Douglass’ experience demonstrates, the same unfairness and difficulties faced in the city, regarded “as a place of noise, worldliness and ambition”,¹⁶ could be found in the countryside as well. This is why it is so important for us to challenge epistemologically the foundations that framework this traditional idea of a “natural” environment that might be defined, as Williams suggests, simply as surrounded by “peace, innocence, and simple virtue”¹⁷ and paradoxically seen, at the same time, “as a place of backwardness, ignorance, limitation”.¹⁸ It is significant, still according to Williams, that the common image of the country “is now an image of the past, and the common image of the city an image of the future; that leaves, if we isolate them, an undefined present”.¹⁹ This dichotomist view on the rural versus urban logic is detrimental therefore because it entails a linearity that is not necessarily operational, as Douglass shows readers in his accounts regarding both settings. In *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee* the master narrative regarding a countryside of peace, innocence, and simple virtue is also put into question: “Only Pocahontas was remembered. Musical names remained forever fixed on the American land, but their bones were forgotten in a thousand burned villages or lost in forests fast disappearing before the axes of twenty million invaders”.²⁰ If the experience of the native and of the slave is often exoticised, such experience is also assimilated by hegemonic tradition – as the other becomes the cornerstone element of the self. Romanticising the environment does not necessarily implicate that

¹⁶ WILLIAMS. *The Country and the City*, p. 30.

¹⁷ WILLIAMS. *The Country and the City*, p. 210.

¹⁸ WILLIAMS. *The Country and the City*, p. 323.

¹⁹ WILLIAMS. *The Country and the City*, p. 297.

²⁰ BROWN. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, p. 382.

such environment shall be respected – as we have seen, hegemony has transformed both nature and the Amerindian (whose romantic invented semblance embodies the environment, giving it a human form) in a part of a nostalgic past that (supposedly) cannot be retrieved any longer.

The assimilation of peripheral discourses, like the ones that put into question the hypocrisy behind the choice for words of indigenous origin to name this or that place (whereas indigenous bones are forgotten in the burned villages and/or lost forests of the continent), has put the margin to sleep. Notwithstanding such process, a clear consequence of literary historical revisionism, as carried out both in *Narrative of the Life of Frederik Douglass* and *Bury my Hear at Wounded Knee*, is that the subaltern has finally been given a chance to stand up for a new discursive position. In the words of “the sleepwalkers are coming awake, and for the first time this awakening has a collective reality; it is no longer such a lonely thing to open one’s eyes”.²¹ Collective realities nonetheless require experiences to be shared; this is why what happens to the subaltern only becomes ontologically meaningful when it is put in the spotlight. If “no speech is speech if it is not heard”,²² peripheral discourses must find a way to be channelled around the four corners of the globe – a process that, hazardous to the political and social agenda of normativity, is generally hidden by the official discourses in vogue. Reading and writing are two of the most effective forms for allowing speech to be heard; hence the importance of literature. As Anzaldúa and Moraga suggest “to write is to confront one’s demons, look them in the face and live to write about them”.²³ If writing is confronting one’s demons, it shall never be taken as a comfortable experience for the subaltern – when it is comfortable it is probably because something is rather wrong. Of course, demons appear since the beginning of one’s learning; before writing about the situation of those living (or surviving) in the margin, first of all such situation needs to be understood.

This is precisely why, at the beginning of his text, Douglass alleges that learning to read and write had actually “been a curse rather than a blessing. It had given me a view of my wretched condition, without

²¹ RICH. *When We Dead Awaken: Writing as Re-Vision*, p. 19.

²² SPIVAK. *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, p. 23.

²³ ANZALDÚA; MORAGA. *This Bridge Called My Back: Writings by Radical Women of Colour*, p. 171.

the remedy. It opened my eyes to the horrible pit, but to no ladder upon which to get out. I envied my fellow-slaves for their stupidity”.²⁴ It is not seldom that stupidity is envied; an excessive awareness regarding the condition of those living outside central borders amplifies the horrible pit that Douglass is talking about herein. Even though in most occasions no ladders are provided, opening one’s eyes to the marginalisation of the subaltern is crucial for other possibilities to be envisaged – no matter how painful such process might ultimately be. Perception is the key also in Brown’s narrative: “You might as well expect the rivers to run backward as that any man who was born a free man should be contented when penned up and denied liberty to go where he pleases while he sees white men going where they please”.²⁵ Why should Amerindians stay where they are told if the whites can simply go wherever they please? To the indigenous population, the logic of reservation, of having a delineated plot of land with limits and frontiers marking where natives belong, is not and shall never be acceptable. The very idea of ownership, of having your freedom to go where you please restrained, does not make any sense for those whose tradition has never really cared about such approach towards the occupied space. That can be noticed in the following excerpt of a conversation between Charles Eastman, the Amerindian that guides the development of the narrative, and a white representative of British colonial interests: “‘Did you know that there is no word in the Sioux language for that, sir?’ Charles asked, ‘For what?’ ‘Own the earth’, said Charles Eastman. ‘Not in any native language’. ‘Well, then perhaps you should invent one’”.²⁶

Language also betrays us; and having their cultural and linguistic features assimilated by colonial conquest, the indigenous values are transformed into something else – their very epistemes do not fit in the new continent that British interests are constructing. In an attempt at domesticating the Amerindians, the colonial enterprise also entail the erection of reservations that are created with indigenous names (remember the issue of romanticisation) and, likewise, reduced plots of land are distributed to the indigenous population, as to shut up the

²⁴ DOUGLASS. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. The Anti-Slavery Office, p. 36.

²⁵ BROWN. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, p. 21.

²⁶ BROWN. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, p. 201.

natives by integrating them to the hegemonic narrative. One should have in mind nonetheless that “wild tongues can’t be tamed; they can only be cut out”.²⁷ That is to say, assimilation shall only take place if the subaltern is silenced – and s/he is silenced through a detrimental process of punishment and chastisement. That can be seen not only in the experience of Amerindians as narrated by Brown, but also when Douglass discloses his own subjugation as a slave: “I was somewhat unmanageable, but a few months of this discipline tamed me. Mr. Covey succeeded in breaking me. I was broken in body, soul, and spirit”.²⁸ As one can see clearly here, the humiliation of slavery deprives the subaltern from humanity; the shame and degradation of being treated as no animal deserves to be treated is very effective in breaking up any motivation one might have to dodge the condition whereto one has been taken – simply due to the colour of his/her skin. For such situation to be grasped as it should, Du Bois highlights the importance of preventing the master narratives of hegemony from describing the black experience²⁹ – as for such experience per se to speak for itself, as it happens in Douglass’ narrative. “It is important not simply to fit African American writers into existing critical paradigms like modernism but to challenge their Universalist assumptions through close analysis of black texts”.³⁰

This close analysis of black texts is required for challenging universalist assumptions because, in many occasions, what these texts say might go in the opposite direction of what is generally assumed due to other more official (and thus reminded) discourses. Insomuch as “a critique of essentialism is about restoring individuals to history”,³¹ allowing such restoration to occur through the historical revision of subaltern individuals and their particular historicisations is the very first step we all need to take. If the story of the margin is always unpredictable, it is by getting closer to such stories that the literary realm might ultimately confuse preconceived epistemes. One of the moments when

²⁷ ANZALDÚA. *Borderlands / La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, p. 21.

²⁸ DOUGLASS. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. The Anti-Slavery Office, p. 55.

²⁹ Cf. DU BOIS. *The Souls of Black Folk*, p. 45.

³⁰ WOLF. *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Twentieth-Century Historical, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, p. 256.

³¹ WILLIAMS. *Culture and Materialism*, p. 32.

readers experience something like that in *Narrative of the Life of Frederik Douglass* occurs in the excerpt where the author seems to be against the holidays that are given to slaves. Wait now, this does not mean that he does not agree that blacks also deserve to rest, that they are all justifiably in earnest for a break from the hard work. The problem, in Douglass view, is that these holidays are “part and parcel of the gross fraud, wrong, and inhumanity of slavery. They do not give the slaves this time because they would not like to have their work during its continuance, but because they know it would be unsafe to deprive them of it”.³² This critical gaze upon a simple holiday is enthralling: a necessary insight. Divested from those few moments for resting, slaves could become potentially dangerous; taming them also entail the provision of some level of liberty – or at least a reminder of it. This approach on the issue of holidays also relates to the pastoral romanticisation of the space of the other and of the other him/herself; domestication is an intricate project, and deception plays a significant role therein.

The pastoral project is, apropos, in consonance with its religious origins and attributes – which, on its turn, configure another target for Douglass antipastoral critique. “Of all slaveholders with whom I have ever met, religious slaveholders are the worst. I have ever found them the meanest and basest, the most cruel and cowardly, of all others”.³³ Perhaps some readers could erroneously assume that, because they are Christian, a few of the slaveholders would be less cruel to the slaves; but that is far from being the truth. In the end, during both colonial and neo-colonial processes, the bible has served not to stop subjugation, but to justify it; the lord of the black person is his/her white owner. In a tradition whence “difference has been used to confirm, rather than destabilize, the centrality of received cultural norms”,³⁴ discursive positions such as the ones presented in *Narrative of the Life of Frederik Douglass* and *Bury my Hear at Wounded Knee* has still much to do. The status of difference must be altered, as it must serve not to confirm, but to destabilise the centrality of official discourses regarding the historicising of self and other. Senator

³² DOUGLASS. *Narrative of the life of Frederik Douglass, an American slave, written by himself*. The anti-slavery office, p. 66.

³³ DOUGLASS. *Narrative of the Life of Frederik Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. The Anti-Slavery Office, p. 67.

³⁴ ÁVILA. *Diversity and/or Difference*, p. 14.

John Logan translates, rather well, how the white community understands the difference of the indigenous person when he speaks to the renowned American native Sitting Bull in Brown's narrative. "You are not a great chief of this country; you have no following, no power, no control. You are on an Indian reservation merely at the sufferance of the government. All you have and are today is because of the government".³⁵ Any resemblance between the humiliation that Douglass goes through and that of Sitting Bull is not mere coincidence; the normative discourses of hegemonic official historiography operates by discrediting, demeaning and deriding the authority of other subjects. The great indigenous leader becomes nothing to the white coloniser.

Hegemonic ontology assimilates and alienates, through disciplining and reprimanding, both subalternity representatives: the American slave and the American native. Alienation and assimilation, by the way, "are two common words used to describe contemporary Indian people. I've come to despise those two words because what leads to alienation and assimilation should not be so concisely defined".³⁶ The problem, it seems, is to simplify the experience of the subaltern who is assimilated and alienated through colonial institutionalisation; integration, as I believe my objects of research effectively convey, is not a guileless process. Such integration might occur, we all know subjective and objectively – i.e. through physical harassment and/or ideological convincing, aided by a vast array of institutions, being the church perhaps the most operational of them. In this sense, it is not despite of Christian interference that slavery occurs, but because of such interference. "We have men-stealers for ministers, women-whippers for missionaries, and cradle-plunderers for church members".³⁷ This is precisely the reason why, filled with unutterable loathing, Douglass criticism has been called by Michael Bennett as antipastoralism, for, as the latter affirms, the resulting cultural outgrowths of the dramatic developments of the ex-slave story "shaped anti-pastoral qualities".³⁸ The anti-pastoral qualities of Douglass' critique concern his ability to identify the fallacious nature

³⁵ BROWN. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, p. 320.

³⁶ CAMERON. *Gee, You Don't Seem Like an Indian from the Reservation*, p. 48.

³⁷ DOUGLASS. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. The Anti-Slavery Office, p. 102.

³⁸ BENNETT. *Anti-Pastoralism, Frederick Douglass, and the Nature of Slavery*, p. 206.

of Western discourse, also bringing about the paradoxical character of Western taken-for-granted institutions. As a matter of fact, in many occasions of both my research objects, the authors mock the hypocritical discourse of Western religiosity; demonstrating how, hidden in between the purported selflessness and generosity of Christianity, anyone can spot a severely rotten primary nucleus. “You teach our children the words of your God, ‘Be fruitful and multiply’. It seems however that these words are not meant for the Indian. For what kind of man would take a wife and have children he cannot feed? No Indian man”.³⁹

This insight deserves attention; for the words of God, that God who is being presented to the indigenous population, does not seem to encompass every subject – but only a small group of privileged people who are indeed given a chance to be fruitful and multiply. What seems to be made clear in both narratives is that Western morality is hypocritical; and that, when it goes to the capitalist interests of colonial and neo-colonial processes, everything is feasible. The black or Amerindian subject who chooses to stay in the way shall be effaced not to jeopardise the process. I finish my analysis with one of the last reflections brought up in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, when the author exposes the controversial nature of hegemonic two-facedness. Thereby, he observes that the man who has robbed him of his earnings at the end of each week has also met him as a class-leader on Sunday mornings – whence he showed slaves and ex-slaves the supposed way of life, and the path of salvation. Likewise, the man who sells black women for purposes of prostitution (being Douglass’ sister one of the chosen) also stands forth as a pious advocate of purity and morality. By the same token, the man who proclaims it a religious duty to read the Bible paradoxically denies Douglass and his mates the right of learning to read. “We see the thief preaching against theft, and the adulterer against adultery – religion and robbery as allies of each other: devils dressed in angels’ robes, and hell presenting the semblance of paradise”.⁴⁰ I would like to finish my analysis with this specific excerpt because it also tells us much about contemporaneity. There are still images of these subjects who are purported to embody the higher moral, educated, and civilised

³⁹ BROWN. *Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee*, p. 342.

⁴⁰ DOUGLASS. *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave, Written by Himself*. The Anti-Slavery Office, p. 103.

values – who are actually rather different from what their social status grants them with. Natives are still presently being Christianised; they are still being given the Bible, even though they do not, need not, and should not be saved by any insatiable Christian god who has seemingly never really cared about them.

Final Remarks: Replacing the Binary Divide

The reflections articulated in *Narrative of the Life of Frederik Douglass* and *Bury my Heart at Wounded Knee* are a harsh evidence that historical documents are far from being all-encompassing. In this sense, therefore, if the master narrative of history becomes a foundational tool for proposing, developing and reinforcing hegemonic positions, “literature becomes the very instrument for the possible constitution of non-hegemonic positions. By putting in circulation different alternative discourses, it helps construct likewise alternative and resistant subject positions.⁴¹ Both narratives analysed hitherto elaborate upon the matter of historical revisionism; and both provide us with complex and multifaceted alternative discourses. Resistant subject positions are nonetheless configured not simply through the emergence of a panoply of discourses – the central strategy in this movement is for such discourses to inhibit and/or transform the master narratives so far in vogue. This is why Morrison alerts us to the fact that “arguing against the prevailing ideology of cultural pluralism in a supplementary relationship to mainstream literature”.⁴² The notion of cultural pluralism, insofar as it is configured as a mere rhetorical idea, does not bring any contribution for the subaltern whatsoever. If mainstream literature does not get affected, historical revisionism does not work – and literature fails to impinge upon reality as it can, and as it should. I finish my article therefore bringing us back to the discussion that begins in my introduction: that of the supposed antagonism represented by the history versus literature logic. Both narratives analysed and discussed in my research are inserted within history (as, of course, any other narrative); as we have seen, both depend on history and, through revision, they allow the transformation of history

⁴¹ FUNCK. *The Impact of Gender on Genre: Feminist Literary Utopias in the 1970s*, p. 25.

⁴² MORRISON. *Beloved*, p. 34.

to be envisaged. Literature is always social, political, and historical: when one writes a book one is also rewriting history. “Literature is part of a society’s ideology – an element in the complex structure of social perception; to understand literature, then, means understanding the total social process of which it is part”.⁴³

Texts and contexts exist in a relation of reciprocity, failing to understand one means failing to understand the other. There is, indeed, many insightful articulations brought forward both by Douglass and Brown; but no reader would be wise to isolate them from history – actually, and if only that were possible, I doubt there would be any way to apprehend the meaning of such insights if such was done. Derrida argues that, in literary analysis, “attention to history, context, and genre is necessitated, and not contradicted”.⁴⁴ If a literary narrative is situated within the realm of historical documents, if its epistemes impinge upon and/or put into question such documents, it would be a mistake to separate text from context – to advocate for a close reading that does not include the space and time where and when such literary pieces are located. If Derrida is also right when he poses that “literature is an institution which consists in transgressing and transforming”,⁴⁵ for transgression and transformation to become possible the institution of literature must be understood in relation to the other institutions. Opening up one’s eyes to the context of a text helps us, in the end, to envisage other contextual possibilities – i.e. understanding past narratives gives us an opportunity to delineating future ones. “The structure of a text both puts down roots in the unity of a context and immediately opens this non-saturable context onto a recontextualization”.⁴⁶ Recontextualising the past events taking place in the formative events of American history, as do both *Narrative of the Life of Frederik Douglass* and *Bury my Hear at Wounded Knee*, is also an endeavour to reclaim what has been lost – to give presence and voice to those who have been erased and silenced from history. In a world haunted by colonial and neo-colonial processes only the lenses of postcolonialism might help us change how the self and the other are seemingly doomed to deal with one another.

⁴³ EAGLETON. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 5.

⁴⁴ DERRIDA. *Acts of Literature*, p. 67.

⁴⁵ DERRIDA. *Acts of Literature*, p. 72.

⁴⁶ DERRIDA. *Acts of Literature*, p. 63.

There is an Imperial tradition, but such tradition is not compulsory – there is still time for transforming colonial epistemes, regardless of how fixed they have become to hegemonic historiography. It is also the responsibility of literature to enter and affect the configuration of such historiography, and it daily does so, regardless of our will. One might, apropos, criticise my mingling of political discourse and literature – but, if you do so, you are simply wasting your time. After all, and as Eagleton suggests, “there is, in fact, no need to drag politics into literary theory: it has been there from the beginning”.⁴⁷ It is high time such interdependence were taken seriously – both by academia and by the literary market; as one should be guiding efforts to shape a postcolonial historical tradition. Thinking postcolonially, however, is not analogous to thinking about “after colonialism” – such would be a fake linearity, the chronology of the colonial is less straightforward than that. The postcolonial, after all, is no different from the other “posts” of contemporary thinking (e.g. post-method, poststructuralism, post-humanism, etc.). “Postcolonialism is not ‘after’ but ‘going beyond’ the colonial”.⁴⁸ This is so inasmuch as what came “before” does not disappear – present and past interact and can change one another; the manner I understand the history of the other interferes in the manner I shall historicise my own. Dichotomist reasoning no longer apply. The binary divide between colonial and postcolonial, margin and centre, colonisers and colonised, black and white, is an oversimplified view on different regimes of reason, as usually all binarisms are. Literature and dichotomy, after all, do not get on well; the literary world is never here or there – it is always between both. Is this a comfortable idea of literature? Not at all. It is one that increases its responsibilities and makes literature accountable for the context wherein it fits. In the words of Bhabha, the task of literature is not to be comfortable, since it consists in “an uncomfortable, disturbing practice of survival and supplementarity – between art and politics, past and present, the public and the private”.⁴⁹

⁴⁷ EAGLETON. *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, p. 169.

⁴⁸ HALL. *When Was the Postcolonial? Thinking at the Limit*, p. 253.

⁴⁹ BHABHA. *The Location of Culture*, p. 175.

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