

## Entre a Escrita Negra e a Escrita Feminina de Resistência à Escravidão

From Black Writing to the Writing of Black Women's Resistance to Slavery

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**Resumo:** O artigo discute as relações entre escrita negra e escrita de mulher negra na literatura Afroamericana. Nele, duas narrativas são cotejadas com a finalidade de estabelecer aproximações dialógicas da mulher escravizada Linda Brent, protagonista da narrativa de escravo *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, de Harriet Jacobs (1861) com a mulher escravizada Sethe Suggs, personagem central da neo-narrativa de escravos *Beloved*, de Toni Morrison (1987). O elemento que marca o conteúdo dialógico entre as duas narrativas e as duas mulheres é a noção de *conversão política*, definida por West (1994) como um movimento individual e coletivo do *niilismo* devastador, patrocinado pela escravidão e seus agentes, para o *autoamor* libertador. Em relação a Linda Brent e a Sethe Suggs, o *autoamor* libertador individual e coletivo garante-lhes a fuga da escravidão para a liberdade através da ação política de pessoas negras e brancas.

**Palavras-Chave:** Narrativa de Escravo; Niilismo; Conversão Política.

**Abstract:** The article discusses the relationship between black writing and black women's writing in Afro-American literature. In it, two narratives are collated to establish a dialogic approximation of the enslaved woman Linda Brent, the protagonist of the slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*, by Harriet Jacobs (1861) to the equally enslaved woman Sethe Suggs, the major character of the neo-slave narrative *Beloved*, by Toni Morrison (1987). The aspect that marks the dialogic content connecting the two narratives and the two women is the notion of *political conversion*, defined by West (1994) as an individual and collective movement from devastating *nihilism*, sponsored by slavery and its agents, to liberating *self-love*. In relation to Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs, individual and collective liberating *self-love* guarantees them escape from slavery to freedom through the political agency of black and white people.

**Keywords:** Slave Narrative; Nihilism; Political Conversion.

What is at once characteristic and suggestive about black women's writing is its interlocutory, or dialogic, character, reflecting not only a relationship with the

“other(s),” but an internal dialogue with the plural aspects of self that constitute the matrix of black female subjectivity (HENDERSEN 2000, p. 349).

### Opening Comments

Henderson’s (2000) words identify, in the writing of black women, a wish to reject self-isolation by relating itself with something else, thus dialoguing externally and internally. By pointing out the “interlocutory, or dialogic, character” (HENDERSON 2000, p. 349) of black women’s writing, Henderson alludes, on the one hand, to its external “relationship with the ‘other(s)’” (HENDERSON 2000, p. 349), represented by both the white and black male traditions. On the other hand, Henderson calls attention to an inside dialogue, suggesting that, internally, black women’s writing is attuned to their common experiences, which speak of “the plural aspects of self that constitute the nature of black female subjectivity.” (HENDERSON 2000, p. 349) Marked by a dialogic hybridity, black women’s writing characterizes itself as a self-reflexive mode of writing. In a general perspective, self-reflexiveness goes beyond the realm of black women’s writing and becomes a major aspect in African American literature. Self-reflexiveness mirrors mutual links among black texts.

From the self-reflexive perspective, this article deals with the idea of a certain movement from the literary to the political. The literary indicates a textual progression from autobiography to novel. The political is a content-based aspect, implying a movement inside politics. The political manifests itself in the individual and group progression from nihilism to love. The central idea here is the progression involving the literary and the political, in which the shift from nihilism to love does not always occur. In some cases, there exists a hybridization of nihilism and love because the first intermingles with the second. In short, self-reflexiveness is understood as the interdependence that accounts for the process through which the autobiography reappears in the novel and is present in political conversion, as nihilism is also visible in love and self-love.

Self-reflexiveness fuels African American literature through the presence of autobiography. According to Andrews (1993), “autobiography holds a position of priority” (ANDREWS 1993, p. 01) over other forms of black narratives. Autobiography starts African American literary tradition and equips it with a process of self-reflexiveness. In African American literary expression, autobiographical self-reflexiveness influences form and content both externally and internally. External self-reflexiveness concerns interdependent relationships between African American and European-American

autobiography. Internal self-reflexiveness suggests that similar interdependence occur within the African American literary tradition, between autobiography and the novel. African Americanists and literary historians acknowledge external and internal self-reflexiveness and critically analyze the intertextual ties interweaving both black and white American autobiography. Gates (1993) recognizes the mutually influential aspects of these two traditions, remarking that the black autobiographer makes “the [white] written text ‘speak’ with a [black] voice.” (GATES 1993, p. 12) The act of merging a black voice – an experience in slavery – inside a white form – written autobiography – is a revolutionary literary attitude. Black autobiography, thus, revolutionizes white autobiography through the way it imitates and revises the previous text.

Black American autobiography enables literary whiteness and blackness to co-exist, integrate, and harmonize differences. In its hybridity, black autobiography has become a major form of black American literary expression since the second half of the eighteenth century and has attracted the attention of slaves and former slaves who wished to express selfhood by writing about their personal experiences. Constructing black selfhood is intrinsically tied to the earliest African American narrator’s search for knowledge (literacy) and freedom. Gates (1993) notes that the slaves’ search for freedom and literacy “became the trope that revises that of the text that speaks in the literature of the slave.” (GATES 1993, p. 09). Andrews (1993) sees in the black narrator’s struggle to possess literacy and freedom the authentication of selfhood. For Andrews, in working as the authentication of black selfhood, autobiography testifies “to the ceaseless commitment of people of color to realize the promise of their achievements as individuals and persons of African descent.” (ANDREWS 1993, p. 01). The conquest of literacy and freedom introduce the secular aspect. The secular conquest is what he calls the freedom from “the sin of slavery” (1). Freedom from slavery not only highlights the complexities of the black autobiographer’s selfhood but also indicate the subtleties of autobiography in its form of slave narratives.

As a form of African American autobiography, the narrative of slavery depicts primarily the secular achievements of the slave narrators. For Gates (1987) these achievements reflect the slaves’ overcoming of “the severe conditions of their bondage.” (GATES 1987, p. ix). Slave narratives suggest that the overcoming of bondage results in the slave’s possession of civil rights and guarantees possession body and humanity. As political empowerment occurs, the slave narrator becomes able to praise freedom from slavery. In concrete terms, internal self-reflexiveness as it is highlighted by Andrews

and Gates links Harriet Jacobs (1861) *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* to Morrison's (1987) novel *Beloved*. Through their characters – both Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs – they challenge the values of traditional womanhood to guarantee escape from their slaveholders' sexual and physical abuse use and concentrate on their quest for freedom from slavery.

### Political Conversion

The first achievement of African American literature resides in the writer's inclination to favor an internal vitality, fusing the elements of prior texts into new works. In its formal and thematic features, internal self-reflexiveness, understood as a process of intertextual relationships and novelization, interweaves slave autobiography with the novel and becomes a major characteristic of African American narrative. As self-reflexive genres, both slave narrative and black novel converse and interweave shared experiences. The second achievement is an essentially content-centered perspective dealing with conversion. As a theme, black woman's conversion also mirrors an instance of the novelization – imitation and revision – that is present in black American literary tradition, from the eighteenth-century autobiography to the twentieth-century novel. Being the theme of novelization – or self-reflexiveness – conversion seems to cover a long period in black American narrative tradition. One concrete instance is visualized in the way conversion, on the one hand, unites different black women writers like Jacobs and Morrison. On the other, it relates a slave's autobiography and the narrative of a slave's life by a third persons.

In its movement from one narrator to another, or from one genre to another, conversion moves around a secular arena of political activism. In other words, the reader may uncover even implicit political aspects of conversion that the writer does not explicitly emphasize. That is, in its political commitment to *freedom from slavery*, Jacobs's (1861) *Incidents* antedates the political implications that will become more overt in Morrison's (1987) *Beloved*. The strong politics substantiates the black woman's political conversion. That is, the fusion of the individual and the group is a political experience among black women. Within black women's enterprise leading to freedom from slavery, its double outcome is her experience of nihilism and love. Here again black American literary self-reflexiveness plays a relevant role as it informs the intertextual conversation of the autobiography and the novel. In her reclamation of political freedom and civil rights for her humanity, the female slave narrator develops a double commitment, to herself and other slaves. Linda Brent epitomizes in her slave narrative, the ideal achievements of all female slave narrators' political conversion. But she is not the only black woman to

pursue political emancipation for her and other slaves. As full citizenship is not automatically granted but results from permanent struggle against social constraints and limitations, Sethe Suggs repeats Linda Brent's fight by reclaiming social emancipation through political conversion. As an incontestable instance of black women's struggle for complete citizenship, Sethe Suggs herself activates a double search – for herself and for others – which reveals a secular conversion profoundly political, as it continues expanding the desire to possess full citizenship.

Aware of political conversion as women's empowerment in action in black America, West (1994) refers to the phenomenon as a politics of conversion. In *Race Matters*, he highlights the vitality and usefulness that black political conversion possess to reverse the psychological damage that is still devastating today's black Americans. He believes that “the politics of conversion openly confronts the self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people.” (WEST 1994, p. 30) He suggests that, within the constraints of social confrontation and limitation, the politics of conversion activates self-love through which black people reverse or destroy the nihilistic “destructive and inhumane actions” they eventually perpetrate against themselves. For him, black American's self-destruction – physical or psychological – derives from a feeling of worthlessness that inundates black life. Being “a disease of the soul” (WEST 1994, p. 29), worthlessness sickens the black soul. As a disease of the black soul, West adds, “nihilism is to be understood here not as a philosophic doctrine that there are no rational grounds for legitimate standards or authority; it is, far more, the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness, and (most important) lovelessness.” (WEST 1994, p. 23) Political conversion is, thus, a black struggle for the kind of racial empowerment that is strong enough to defeat a black existence without meaning, hope and love. Because of the magnitude of the disease, the task of curing and healing the black existence cannot be a solitary enterprise but demands the participation of the whole community. At last, success depends on the conjunction between the individual's self-love and the love of others.

West (1994) traces his discussion of black American's politics of conversion back to bondage as he judges slavery to be the initial social setting for the confrontation of black nihilism and love. In being responsible for the psychological, social, political, and economic context of black American's nihilism, slavery also provides her or him with the counter-practice of love and self-love. He explains that

Nihilism is not new in black America. The first African encounter with the New World was an encounter with a distinctive form of the Absurd. The initial black struggle against degradation and devaluation in the enslaved circumstances of the New World was, in part, a struggle against nihilism. In fact, the major enemy of black survival in

America has been and is neither oppression nor exploitation but rather the nihilistic threat – that is, loss of hope and absence of meaning. (WEST 1994, p. 23)

Denouncing slavery in America as the nihilistic setting that positions itself against their humanity and integrity, enslaved black Americans counterattack their “loss of hope and absence of meaning” (WEST 1994, p. 23) with the strength of the black soul, which finds support in mutual and reciprocal love, and self-love.

West’s (1994) hybridization of the black American’s initial experiences of nihilism and love and their contextualization in slavery fit Andrews’s (1997) dichotomy of slaveholder’s inhumanity and the slave’s humanity. In opposing white inhumanity to black humanity, Andrews argues that in slavery the two are incompatible because slavery opposes “the inhumanity of the slave system” (667) to “the incontestable evidence of the humanity of the African-American.” (ANDREWS 1997, p. 667) As a result, “the inhumanity of the slave system” glues on the slave body an animal status and works as the generator of black American’s nihilistic experiences. The slave counteracts by appealing to mutual black love, together with the reclamation and affirmation of her or his humanity and soul, as the spiritual female narrator does in her spiritual text. Both Andrews and West seem to address similar concerns. In slavery, Andrews notes, white inhumanity and black humanity are incompatible. So are nihilism and love, West argues.

As Andrews (1997) points out that the slave’s humanity struggles to defeat slavery’s inhumanity, West (1994) argues that black love and self-love fight to beat black nihilistic experiences, both in slavery and contemporary black America. In today’s America, a politics of conversion is vital so that the black soul can confront two nihilistic and damaging forces that have adversely affected their life: “too much poverty and too little self-love.” (WEST 1994, p. 23) West believes that black existence is disenfranchised, in countless situations, by “the self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people” (WEST 1994, p. 30) attacking their own physical and emotional integrity. Though he argues that the presence of poverty and the absence of self-love are responsible for the conditions in black communities, he does not believe that the politics of conversion can be used to beat poverty. He admits that the politics of conversion is rather addressed to attack the lack of self-love or nihilism. The presence of a strong nihilistic feeling inundating black America, the nihilism whose source lies in several negative feelings and terrifying experiences has been threatening black people for years with despair, fear, meaninglessness,

and personal devaluation. West sees hope as the controller of despair, arguing that nihilism can be defeated by personal and collective love and self-love, the major ingredients of a politics of conversion.

West's (1994) analysis of black nihilism not only deals with contemporary issues concerning black America but also calls for solutions. He observes that the debate of African American problems has been conducted for years from two major perspectives: the structural and the behavioral ones. Structuralists and behaviorists identify different causes and solutions for black American's nihilistic experiences. For instance, structuralists position the historical and sociological source of black people's problems in their long and devastating exposure to slavery, segregation, job and housing discrimination, unfair unemployment rates, inadequate medical coverage, and poor education. Behaviorists emphasize that the obstacles which tend to prevent black people from ascending mobility are due especially to the weakening of the Protestant ethics, work, delayed rewards, frugality, and personal responsibility. Considering both structural and behavioral views, West also discusses the structuralist and behaviorist tools for the eradication of black nihilism. Initially, he mentions that structuralists agree that the extirpation of nihilism will depend on a few measures, such as programs for full employment, medical insurance, child education and assistance, and an end to job and housing discrimination. However, he also emphasizes that behaviorists believe that the problem will disappear if they promote programs encouraging personal initiatives, the expansion of black enterprises, affirmative action, and free market strategies. In short, the behaviorists defend strengthening the Protestant ethic in black America.

Although West (1994) recognizes the relevance of both proposals, he does not seem totally satisfied with either structuralist or behaviorist solutions because, for him, "structures and behaviors are inseparable, and institutions and values go hand in hand." (WEST 1994, p. 18) He states that "how people act and live are shaped – though in no way dictated or determined – by the larger circumstances in which they find themselves. These circumstances can be changed, their limits attenuated, by positive actions to elevate living conditions." (WEST 1994, p. 19) As a matter of fact, West asserts that the analysis of black nihilism cannot be reduced to, but rather goes beyond, the economic and political structural or cultural behaviors encountered in black America. For him, black nihilism lies in something subtler and deeper than what structuralists and behaviorists are willing to confront to. This has to do with the Negro's loss of hope, with the fear of street violence, the collapse of meaningful lives, and the tremendous carelessness toward black people, and their property. Nihilism is not recent, and the fight against it has started with a struggle against the degradation and devaluation of the slave's life.

However important, money, jobs, health care and decent housing cannot by themselves defeat nihilism. Its defeat requires something spiritual. Black literature exemplifies this struggle. For instance, Linda Brent recovers from despair with her quest for virtue just as Sethe Suggs keeps nihilism at bay by fighting for her children's safety. These women fight with black cultural values rather than with structuralist or behaviorist social programs. The fuel for such a fight, West (1994) notes, has always come from black culture, which has developed over centuries “ways of life and struggle that embodied values of service and sacrifice, love and care, discipline and excellence.” (WEST 1994, p. 24) However necessary, these black cultural forces have not been enough to maintain people's fighting spirit against their social and personal degradation so, today, market forces and consumerism have made black nihilism worse. For West, the expansion and intensification of pleasure caused by the market of comfort, commodification of sexism, femininity, violence, and sexuality have seduced black America and, thus, have eliminated traditional black values.

Despite the immense difficulties of black experiences in America, West (1994) does not lose hope. On the contrary, he argues that nihilism can be defeated by a newer and more energetic form of black people's empowerment through a politics of conversion. He attests that black Americans' politics of conversion seems to be “the strategy for holding the nihilistic threat at bay” as it “is a direct attack in the sense of worthlessness and self-loathing.” (WEST 1994, p. 27) He also asserts that a politics of conversion requires love and care because, as nihilism is a “disease of the soul,” (29) it cannot be destroyed by arguments or analyses. “Any disease of the soul must be conquered by a turning of one's soul. This turning is done through one's own affirmation of one's worth – an affirmation fueled by the concern of others. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion” (WEST 1994, p. 29), West says. And he suggests that a love ethic “is a last attempt at generating a sense of agency among downtrodden people.” (WEST 1994, p. 29) The politics of conversion demands the merging of “the self-within” with “the world-outside”, that is, the individual's inner force and the group's outer cooperation.

Finally, West (1994) does not entirely dissociate his politics of conversion from both liberal structuralist and conservative behaviorist agendas. On the contrary, he admits that structuralists, behaviorists, and defenders of a politics of conversion share common ground, though limited ones. He explains:



Like liberal structuralists, the advocates of a politics of conversion never lose sight of the structural conditions that shape the sufferings and lives of people. Yet, unlike liberal structuralism, the politics of conversion meets the nihilistic threat head-on. Like conservative behaviorism, the politics of conversion openly confronts the self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people. Unlike conservative behaviorism, the politics of conversion situates these actions within inhumane circumstances (but does not thereby exonerate them). (WEST 1994, p. 30-31)

In fact, one point becomes clear. According to West (1994), the turning of one's soul or the defeat of nihilism cannot be an individual's isolated experience but requires both individual and collective action. Though uniting the individual black convert with the converted black community, West's political conversion converges to, and converses with, a political convert like Sethe Suggs who establishes racial communion between both the female black activist and the activism of the black women group through political acts of resistance.

### **Black Novel**

Being the privileged mark of African American slave narratives, internal self-reflexiveness also interconnects black American autobiography to African American novel. Internal self-reflexiveness makes slave narratives construct a mutual conversation with the black novel. Many Afro-Americanists have acknowledged that, in its spiritual or secular version, autobiography has influenced the novel. Among them, for instance, Bontemps (1966) recognizes the literary ties connecting black narrative autobiography and black novel writing, arguing that “from the narrative came the spirit and vitality and the angle of vision responsible for the most effective prose writing by black American writers from William Wells Brown to Charles W. Chesnutt, from W.E.B. Dubois to Richard Wright, Ralph Ellison and James Baldwin.” (Bontemps, in GATES 1987, p. X) In contemporary black American literature, along with Wright, Ellison, and Baldwin, other novelists can be included in Bontemps's list of those who solidify “the spirit and vitality and the angle of vision responsible for the most effective writing by black American writers”. Certainly, among them is Morrison who continues “this process of imitation and repetition” (GATES 1987, p. X), to use Gates's (1987) phrase, a phenomenon that makes African American literary tradition so genuine. Like Bontemps and Gates, Smith (1987) not only acknowledges but also articulates “the influence of the slave narratives on later black writing.” (SMITH 1987, p. 2) She addresses her explanation of the phenomenon of self-reflexiveness to black literacy and notes that the acquisition of reading and writing is crucial for the African American narrators' affirmation of autonomy and selfhood. She calls attention to “the variety or ways in which the idea of literacy is used within the

tradition of African American letters.” (SMITH 1987, p. 2) She also observes that “slave narrators and protagonist-narrators of certain twentieth-century novels by African American writers affirm and legitimize their psychological autonomy by telling the stories of their own lives.” (SMITH 1987, p. 2)

Andrews (1992) similarly contributes to the understanding of the process of repetition and revision that ties earlier and recent black American narrative. His discussion of Bakhtin’s (1981) notion of “novelization,” though brief, is useful here. Resorting to the concept, Andrews argues that “all narrative forms since the rise of the novel have been undergoing repeated revolutions, or ‘novelization.’” (ANDREWS 1992, p. 85) It is this capacity to “novelize”, Andrews observes, that allows the novel to revolutionize “the form and content of other narrative types [...] closely allied to it” (ANDREWS 1992, p. 85). He observes that “under the influence of ‘novelization’, traditions and generic standards of narrative form undergo constant revision.” (ANDREWS 1992, p. 85) Andrews (1993), later, expands his acknowledgement of Gates’s notion of *Signifying* – literary repetition and revision among African American texts – in practical rather than theoretical terms. He establishes the connections between black autobiography and novel, noting that the first African American novel – Brown’s (1853) *Clotel: A Narrative of Slave Life in the United States* – pays tribute to autobiography in its title, specifically to one of its subgenres, the slave narrative. Andrews remarks that autobiography, or the slaves’ “first-person accounts of their lives”, antedates and influences Brown’s novel, as the author himself was “a fugitive slave autobiographer” before becoming a novelist. “Ever since”, Andrews writes, “the history of African-American narrative has been informed by a call-and-response relationship between autobiography and its successor, the novel.” (ANDREWS 1993, p. 1)

### **Linda Brent Fights Slavery at Dr. Flint's Plantation**

Slavery is the antagonizing setting in Jacobs's (1861) *Incidents* because it encapsulates the cruelty and, thus, threatens the slaves’ hope and ability to preserve meaning in their lives. Linda Brent knows well the dangers of slavery and denounces them: “slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.” (JACOBS 1861, p. 77) She recognizes the damaging oppression of slaves, and like West (1994), believes that “as long as hope remains, and meaning is preserved the possibility of overcoming oppression stays alive.” (WEST 1994, p. 23) Linda Brent’s personal story is the evidence of two major aspects in the life of African Americans today: nihilism and love. While she denounces the nihilistic threat of slavery, she, likewise, highlights her self-love and her love for the other slaves. Thus, the telling of her own struggle against nihilism is evidence of that preservation of hope and meaning that West speaks

of and is the condition for her, Yellin (1987) notes, “to assert her womanhood” (YELLIN 1987, p. XIV), a womanhood that is under constant disenfranchisement in the slave system. Aware of the disenfranchising forces of slavery against the slave, like Linda Brent herself, Andrews (1997) condemns bondage “as the condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual deprivation, a kind of hell on earth.” (ANDREWS 1997: p. 668) This “hell on earth” has the potential to cause “the self-destructive and inhumane actions of black people” (WEST 1994, p. 30) which, according to West (1994), only a politics of conversion is capable to confront openly and reverse. The slaves' open confrontation of slavery, West advises, is only possible “as long as hope remains, and meaning is preserved” (WEST 1994, p. 23) by both the individual slave and the slave community.

In *Incidents*, slavery's disenfranchisement addresses itself particularly toward women because it attacks the enslaved mother's hope and meaning and, therefore, builds an antagonizing setting that is often marked by a haunting death wish. Linda Brent tells of the slave mother's desire for her own death and that of her children: “she sits on her cold cabin floor, watching the children who may all be torn from her the next morning; and often does she wish that she and they might die before the day dawns” (JACOBS 1861, p. 16). Linda Brent recounts that her mother “had been weaned at three months old, so that the babe of the mistress might obtain sufficient food” (JACOBS 1861, p. 07), and that her grandmother “was a little girl when she was captured and sold to the keeper of a large hotel.” (JACOBS 1861, p. 05). In generating death and separation inside the family, slavery limits the space for maternity. Levander (1999) acknowledges this limitation and notes that “Linda learns that her condition as a slave woman precedes and so preempts maternal authority.” (LAVENDER 1999, p. 31) She argues that, within such a limiting situation, Linda Brent “represents the dehumanizing impact of slavery on female identity by carefully delineating” the slave system which, “on the one hand, demands that slave women reproduce, but, on the other hand, denies them maternal rights.” (LAVENDER 1999, p. 31) Because of such social constraints, women's value, if any, resides in their reproductive capacity “to increase their owner's stock” (JACOBS 1861, p. 49), Linda Brent remarks.

These constraints on motherhood, on one hand, attempt to neutralize Linda Brent's self-valuation and, on the other, wishes to weaken the black community's “love ethic.” Slavery activates its damaging forces against women and submits them to the patriarchal authority of the master who, in Andrews's (1988) words, “presided necessarily and benevolently over three interlocking domesticities: the blood family, the slave families, and the larger family of the entire plantation community.”

(ANDREWS 1988, p. 243) As for the slave family, the master's power is fueled by the physical exploitation and body depredation that he causes to the slave in general and the slave woman in particular. It attacks both motherhood and sexuality, adding to slavery the status of "a haven, indeed, a harem of interracial libidinousness." (ANDREWS 1988, p. 243) For Andrews, "the 'absolute power' of the unholy patriarch [is] combined with the male's supposedly innate 'lust of dominion to produce the lurid image of the 'Erotic South'.'" (ANDREWS 1988, p. 243)

Slavery exerts control over the female slave and wishes to control Linda Brent's womanhood as well. In its struggle against Linda Brent's self-valuation and the community's love ethic, slavery attacks the narrator, her family, and other slaves. The slave system utilizes Linda Brent and the other women slaves as wealth and property and, thus, denies their humanity by reducing them to commodified and disposable items, sexually exploited, often in the name of religion and Christianity. In so doing, slavery denies Linda Brent any access to the restoration of black soul and humanity. In her discussion of slave women's roles, Scott (1995) laments that "under slavery they were obliged both to take on the role of 'surrogate men' and to become 'breeders'. Exploited to produce children who were themselves commodity items, the women found their traditional roles of mothers, daughters and wives/lovers were perverted." (SCOTT 1995, p. 814) Hooks (1981) adds to this commodification of the slave woman the fact that "as the market values of the black female slave increased, larger numbers were stolen or purchased by white slave traders." (HOOKS 1981, p.16)

The slave system in operation at Dr. Flint's plantation debases the slave woman's roles to generate wealth by trading slaves. Thus, being transformed into commodity items, Linda Brent and her family are expected to make Dr. Flint even richer, wealthier, and more prosperous. Linda Brent seems to be very conscious of her own and her parents' material and economic value since her childhood. "And though we were all slaves, I was so fondly shielded that I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise, trusted to them for safe keeping, and liable to be demanded of them at any moment" (JACOBS 1861, p. 05), she reports. Not only is motherhood commodified, but commodification also reaches the children. Smith (1990) explains Linda Brent's children's destiny as commodified items, writing that "indeed the system of slavery, conflating as it does the categories of property and sexuality, ensures that her posterity will become his [Dr. Flint's] material possessions." (SMITH 1990, p. 220)

Being marked as "a piece of merchandise" or as "material possessions," the slave family is never safe, but lives in constant danger because the system has given itself and its agents the right to

commodify the slave family by separating its members to make them even more dependent and profitable. Here, Scott (1995) subscribes to Smith's words, stating that "irresponsibility on the part of the plantation master could overnight, wrench loved ones from each other. Thus, slave families' security depended always on the master's whims." (SCOTT 1995, p. 814) As a result of the material and economic value attached to the slaves, children were frequently separated from their parents, and husbands were apart from their wives. Linda Brent describes an instance in which a black family is separated, and all the members are sold: "on one of these sale days, I saw a mother lead seven children to the auction-block. She knew that some of them would be taken from her; but they took all. The children were sold to a slave-trader, and their mother was bought by a man in her own town." (JACOBS 1861, p. 16). Linda Brent personally experienced family disruption when her grandmother Aunt Marthy was sold at auction and bought by a white woman, a friend who, later, gives Aunty Marthy freedom.

Though essential, wealth is not the only value that harms or destroys the slave's humanity and wish to develop individual self-valuation and collective love ethic. Property, another value, denies the slave's humanity and soul, transforming her or him the possession that the slaveholder manages for personal interests and economic reasons. The slave system uses adult and young slaves, men and women, Linda Brent writes, "as property, as marketable pigs on the plantation." (JACOBS 1861, p. 36). Scott (1995) remarks that "slave women were, in fact, commercial items, the 'inventory' which, along with horses, cows, chickens, and pigs constituted the slave holder's net worth." (SCOT 1995, p. 814). However, Linda Brent's grandmother challenges the Southern law, according to which, "a slave, being property, can hold no property." (JACOBS 1861, p. 06) However, Aunt Marthy has a house, some money, and an expertise of her own: she bakes and sells cookies.

Dr. Flint, the major representative of the slave system in Linda Brent's autobiography, clearly and explicitly considers Linda Brent his property. His continuing sexual abuse indicates he sees her status as property. He repeatedly warns her of both her economic value and her owing him total obedience; "Do you know that I have the right to do as I like with you – that I can kill you, if I please?" (JACOBS 1861, p. 39) Later, willing both to punish her disobedience and prevent her from marrying a free black man, Dr. Flint sends her to his plantation, advising her: "I'll teach you a lesson about marriage and free niggers." (JACOBS 1861, p. 40) Dr. Flint's denial of her marriage reflects his personal wish to control her sexuality. His attitude seems to be evidencing the aspect that, in slavery, economic power and sexual terror go together. Andrews (1988) acknowledges slavery's sexual terror transforming the South into

an “Erotic South” due to the slaveholders' libidinousness and sexual violence against slave women. Scott (1995) weighs sexual violence against black women, stating that “young adolescent and teenage girls were routinely abused by their masters and by other white men who had access to them.” (SCOTT 1995, p. 814)

Along with wealth and property, religion is another value cherished by the slave system. Linda Brent condemns its Christianity. In the name of slavery's religious beliefs, the slaveholders guiltlessly inflict the most devastating cruelty against their slaves and, as Linda Brent suggests that “they seem to satisfy their consciences with the doctrine that God created the Africans to be slaves.” (JACOBS 1861, p. 44) Linda Brent's viewpoint of Christianity in slavery is that it is the source of oppression. Therefore, Linda Brent must challenge the slaveholders' dehumanizing religious thought to reclaim her soul and humanity. She reclaims her religious faith and believes that God is the only father of all human beings, both masters and slaves. Thus, she denounces what Andrews (1997) characterizes as “the spiritual emptiness and the hypocrisy of institutionalized religion.” (ANDREWS 1997, p. 627) As Johnson (1998) explains, Linda Brent “carefully distinguishes between what she believes to be ‘true’ Christianity and the religion practiced by the slaveholders.” (JOHNSON 1998, p. 34)

Linda Brent's faith in the slave's soul and humanity exemplifies, according to Andrews (1997), black religious experiences. He observes that “Christian African American literary characters also judge their own standards of appropriate behavior as ‘true’ children of God who know that God is good, requires absolute obedience, rewards the faithful who do good and punishes evil doers.” (ANDREWS 1997, p. 627) By denying the slave's humanity, the slaveholders' religion allows its ministers to teach the slaves prayers that both order them to behave obediently to their masters and warn them that their offense to the master is an offense to God. Linda Brent attacks this hypocritical religious behavior by criticizing the teaching of a prayer that reads “obey your old master and your young master – your old mistress and your young mistress. If you disobey your earthly master, you offend your heavenly Master.” (JACOBS 1861, p. 69)

This interconnection between religion and slave commodification becomes even clearer in Linda Brent's description of a Methodist meeting she attends. She portrays the leader, indeed the town constable, who associates religion with trade and abuse, as “a man who bought and sold slaves, who whipped his brethren and sisters of the church at the public whipping post, in jail or out of jail. He was ready to perform that Christian office any where (sic) for fifty cents.” (JACOBS 1861, p. 70) Against

slavery and its values aimed against the humanity of slaves, Linda Brent explodes a strong and negative comment: “O, the serpent of Slavery has many and poisonous fangs.” (JACOBS 1861, p. 62) One of its “poisonous fangs” being Dr. Flint's lustful advances against her, her sexuality and chastity.

### **Sethe Suggs Combats Slavery at *Sweet Home***

Sweet Home plays the role of the *antagonizing setting* in Morrison's (1987) novel *Beloved*. Like Dr. Flint's house and plantation do in Jacobs's (1861) *Incidents*, Sweet Home encapsulates slavery and its values. The approximation of these two black texts through the depiction of slavery and its environment somehow positions Morrison's fictional work as a response to the call that it receives from Jacobs's autobiographical narrative. In this *call-and-response* process in which these black texts are tied together and, from which, they obtain especial meaning, Morrison's novel, or neo-slave narrative, signifies upon Jacobs's slave narrative and, thus, *Beloved* repeats and revises the slave system in operation in *Incidents*. As the levels of inter-signification, repetition, and revision generate conversational links between the two black works, they exemplify self-reflexiveness among black writing and black rewriting, which emphasizes the idea that Linda Brent's devastating experiences in slavery are reflected in Sethe Suggs's struggle against servitude. In other words, as it does to Linda Brent's life, slavery activates its devastating forces both to neutralize Sethe Sugg's self-valuation and to weaken the black communal love ethic that supports her. In the two slave experiences, slavery dehumanizes, brutalizes, and victimizes these women by using them as wealth and property. Being the locus of the slave system in *Beloved*, *Sweet Home* signifies upon Dr. Flint's plantation. Andrews (1997) remarks that these two plantations function as “a kind of hell on earth.” (ANDREWS 1997, p. 668) Being Morrison's condemnation of the “hell on earth,” *Sweet Home* causes its slaves a double pain. It provokes what Bouson (2000) describes, on the one hand, as “the humiliations and traumas the slaves were forced to endure at the hands of their white oppressors” (BOUSON 2000, p. 131) and, on the other, “the insidious effects of internalized racism – that is, socially produced feelings of self-contempt and self-hatred.” (BOUSON 2000, p. 131) The slaves' humiliation and trauma or self-hatred not only result from cruel oppression expressed through physical depredation, but they also derive from subtler behaviors sponsored by the slaveholders.

In *Incidents*, the female narrator states that “slavery is terrible for men; but it is far more terrible for women.” (JACOBS 1861, p. 77) Like Linda Brent, Kubitschek (1998) is aware of “slavery's horrifying destruction” (KUBITSCHEK 1998, p. 126) of slave people and culture, remarking that *Beloved* denounces “the effects of slavery on individual men and women, on black families, and on the

black community.” (KUBITSCHKEK 1998, p. 126) At *Sweet Home*, slavery’s dehumanization also derives from subtler behavior by the slaveholders, such as the desinfranchisement that occurs with naming the slaves. Lawrence (2000) notes that “on Sweet Home, where Garner believes that he allows his slaves to be men, the power of naming remains with the white master.” (LAWRENCE 2000, p. 234) Having their manhood defined by Garner, Morrison writes, “and so they were; Paul D. Garner, Paul F. Garner, Paul A. Garner, Halle Suggs and Sixo, the wild man.” (MORRISON 1987, p. 11) In fact, even this given manhood is under constant threat. Paul D. questions and denounces being named, asking “is that where the manhood lay? In the naming done by a white man who was supposed to know?” (MORRISON 1987, p. 125) Even worse, Sixo loses his manhood because of his cleverness. Accused of having stolen the meat he had cooked and eaten, he denies the theft, adroitly arguing: “improving your property, sir (...) Sixo take and feed Sixo give you more work.” (MORRISON 1987, p. 190) Morrison denounces the consequences of Sixo’s attitude: “clever, but Schoolteacher beat him anyway to show him that definitions belonged to the definers – not the defined.” (MORRISON 1987, p. 190) Lawrence (2000) emphasizes the uselessness of the defined Sixo’s argumentation in the environment dominated by the white definer, clarifying that “Sixo’s rhetorical artistry – stealing and eating the shoat is ‘improving property’ since such apparently transgressive behavior actually will increase his productive capacity – is futile.” (LAWRENCE 2000, p. 234) The slave’s intellectual sophistication does not seem to touch the sensibilities of the slave system and, therefore, does not prevent the slave from being treated cruelly. Therefore, *Sweet Home* is not only “the condition of extreme physical, intellectual, emotional and spiritual deprivation.” (ANDREWS 1997, p. 668), for Sixo and the other men, as Andrews (1997) says. It also emphatically symbolizes the hell where Sethe Suggs suffers the sexual and economic exploitation from which she desires to escape. As a result, besides being the ambient of black suffering, Dr. Flint’s plantation and Schoolteacher’s *Sweet Home* are also the *loci* of Linda Brent’s and Sethe Suggs’s resistance and empowerment.

*Sweet Home* is, certainly, “a kind of hell on earth” to Sethe Suggs and is introduced to the reader through her recollections. Linda Brent’s memories of slavery and sexual assaults help her become critical of the treatment dispensed to black women in both the South and the North. While Linda Brent is fighting off sexual advances in the South, her daughter Ellen is the target of similar abuses in the North. When Sethe Suggs recalls the atrocities perpetrated against her at *Sweet Home*, Morrison explains in an interview with Darling (1994) the validity of her heroine’s rememory: “there is a necessity for remembering the horror, but of course there’s a necessity for remembering it in a manner in which it



can be digested, in a manner in which the memory is not destructive.” (DARLING 1994, p. 247-248) Sethe Suggs explains her own recollections: “some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it’s not. Places, places are still there.” (MORRISON 1987, p. 35-36) Recollection, Bouson (2000) notes, is “uncontrolled remembering and reliving of emotionally painful experiences.” (BOUSON 2000, p. 135) And the place, *Sweet Home*, “is a picture floating around out there outside my head” (MORRISON 1987, p. 36), Sethe Suggs remarks. In her recollections, her feelings toward the farm are ambiguous, mixing beauty and shame. The ambiguous feelings derive from the impossibility of her exerting some control over past experiences. The narrator shows Sethe Suggs's ambiguity and highlights that “suddenly there was Sweet Home rolling, rolling, rolling out before her eyes, and though there was not a leaf on that farm that did not make her want to scream, it rolled itself out before her in shameless beauty.” (MORRISON 1987, p. 06). Sethe Suggs’s ambiguity toward *Sweet Home* seems plausible because of the peculiarity of its slavery. In *Incidents*, Dr. Flint’s plantation seems to be a constant and regular presence in its cruelty under the master’s control. However, *Sweet Home* is ironically named, associating slavery with sweetness and a place of good living. Consequently, both Sethe Suggs’s and Paul D’s memories of *Sweet Home* are different. With the Gamers – its former owners – *Sweet Home* seems a bearable place to live in and work in with some dignity and humanity. Kubitscheck (1998) subscribes to this description though adding that “a beautiful Kentucky plantation. Sweet Home originally houses a white couple, Mr. and Mrs. Garner, and nine slaves (...). Garner allows them [slaves] many male privileges. Garner also permits Halle to buy his mother’s – Baby Suggs – freedom.” (KUBITSCHEK 1998, p. 116). A conversation between Mr. Garner and Baby Suggs, Jenny for the Garners, clarifies the Bodwins’ doubts about the Garners’ view of slavery and intensifies the ambiguity of *Sweet Home* and its form of enslavement:

“tell em, Jenny. You live any better on any place before mine?” “No, sir,” she said. “No place.

“How long was you at Sweet Home?”

“Ten year, I believe”

“Ever go hungry?”

“No, sir”

"Did I let Halle buy you or not?"

"Yes, sir, you did." (MORRISON 1987, p. 145-146)

Paul D's impressions of *Sweet Home* conflict with both Baby Suggs's experiences and Sethe Suggs's recollections. He diverges from his lover, and her mother-in-law, breaking the ambiguity of shame and beauty attached to *Sweet Home* in the two women's mixed feelings toward the place. Affirming that "it wasn't sweet and it sure wasn't home" (MORRISON 1987, p. 14), Paul D's evaluation makes of it a humiliating and damaging repetition of the cruelty established on Dr. Flint's plantation, which prepares the reader for Schoolteacher's devastating management of the plantation *Sweet Home*.

In *Incidents*, Linda Brent condemns slavery, observing that it is worse for women than for men. She states "it is far more terrible for women. Superadded to the burden common to all, they have wrongs, and sufferings and mortifications peculiarly their own." (JACOBS 1861, p. 77) Both herself and Sethe Suggs have become vivid examples of this statement, especially in their womanhood and sexuality. In Morrison's (1987) *Beloved*, after Mr. Garner's death and Schoolteacher's arrival, Sethe Suggs feels on her own flesh how terrible slavery can be. The former irony and ambiguity of Sweet Home cease to function then. *Sweet Home* under Schoolteacher's supervision becomes a world of pain, Bouson (2000) observes, through "Sethe's paralyzing and dirtying memories of the physical and psychic assaults on her humanity." (BOUSON 2000, p. 136) Her recollection unveils the condemnation of the sexual exploitation that the slave woman must endure. Like Linda Brent's abuse by Dr. Flint, Sethe Suggs's sexual exploitation relates to the economic commodification of the slave woman. We are informed that Sethe Suggs's sexual exploitation parallels the two plantations in cruelty. She is taken as the breeder whose breeds are commodified. She is seen, Morrison writes, as "property that reproduced itself without any cost." (MORRISON 1987, p. 228) Thus, *Sweet Home* repeats and revises Dr. Flint's plantation, itself becoming the locus of cruelty and abomination, which steal the slaves' humanity by lowering them to the level of chattel and discardable wealth and property. Being utilitarian items brutalized in various ways, slave families are destroyed, parents are separated from their children, women are sexually abused, men's spirits are crushed, and many other slaves are killed or disappear. *Sweet Home*, then, exemplifies, in cruelty, any other kind of plantation. For instance, Sethe Suggs remembers how she was separated from her mother, how her mother's ribs were branded with a circle and a cross and, later, how her mother was hanged and mutilated: "Hung. By the time they cut her down nobody could tell whether she had a circle and a cross or not." (MORRISON 1987, p. 61)

The cruelty and abomination plotted against her mother are repeated many years later, in her own flesh, by the slave system Schoolteacher implements at *Sweet Home*. Furman (1996) argues that Sethe

Suggs's escape from *Sweet Home* is her “emphatic rejection of slavery’s power to circumscribe her motherhood” (FURMAN 1996, p. 770), as it had done to her mother. Physical violence and brutalization are the expedients to control Sethe Suggs’s female sexuality. Kubitschek (1998) clarifies *Sweet Home*’s sexual brutalization of Sethe Suggs, explaining that “Schoolteacher’s nephews brutally abuse Sethe sexually, sucking her milk from her breasts and whipping her back bloody.” (KUBITSCHEK 1998, p. 116) In her remembering of the damaging events, it is self-awareness that makes Sethe Suggs to denounce the exploitation of slave women by controlling their motherhood and to associate her milk with her mother’s milk that goes to the white babies before she can have it. She still suffers from this damaging memory: “the little white babies got it first and I got what was left. Or none.” (MORRISON 1987, p. 200) Omolade (2000) remarks that the stolen milk represents slavery’s most devastating sacrilege against the humanity of the slave woman. The analyst adds that slavery invades the very place that is inviolable and sacred to both African and European societies, that is, “the sanctity of the woman’s body and motherhood within the institution of marriage.” (OMOLADE, 2000, p. 125) In so doing, slavery adds other unbearable pains to the bodily depredation of slave women like Sethe Suggs.

Like her mother, Sethe Suggs herself has her flesh marked but, unlike the mother, the marks on her back from floggings resemble a tree, as Amy, Sethe Suggs’s white friend who helps her escape, describes in plain words:

It's a tree, Lu. A chokecherry tree. See, here's the trunk – its red and split wide open, full of sap, and this here's the parting for the branches. You got a mighty lot of branches. Leaves, too, look like and dern if these ain't blossoms. Tiny little cherry blossoms, just as white. Your back got a whole tree on it. In bloom. What God have in mind; I wonder. I had some whippings, but I don't remember nothing like this. (MORRISON 1987, p. 79)

Besides Sethe Suggs’s marked flesh, other forms of brutalization are added to the miserable fate of black women at *Sweet Home*. Sethe Suggs’s stolen milk and sexual abuse during pregnancy position her motherhood and sexuality as the targets of the cruel and brutal slave system at *Sweet Home*. Once again, the dehumanization of slavery assaults the slave woman’s dignity.

In Morrison’s (1987) *Beloved*, the slave woman’s brutalization is not limited to *Sweet Home* but is extended to house 124 on *Bluestone Road*. In this house, the horror of slavery results in Sethe Suggs injuring her children, even murdering one of her daughters. Sethe Suggs’s infanticide is associated with despair and revolt against slavery and its brutality. She cannot bear the possibility of seeing repeated in

her children everything she had gone through at *Sweet Home* and decides to do something to protect her children from slavery. Furman (1996) explains her action:

When Schoolteacher, his nephews and the sheriff enter Baby Suggs's yard to reclaim Sethe, and worse, to take her children back to slavery, she revolts. In an instant she is transported back to the brutal beating she endured in the hours before escape and to her deepest violation (...) Sethe resolves that "nobody will ever get my milk no more except my children". (FURMAN 1996, p. 71)

What Sethe next does has to do with her "thick love," a profound act of maternal feeling justified by her need to protect her children. "They ain't at Sweet Home. Schoolteacher ain't got em" (MORRISON 1987, p. 165) is how she reacts.

In this mingling of nihilism and love that Sethe Suggs goes through and embodies, "thick love" is her possible reaction to stop the continuing brutalization of herself and her family. Likewise, in Jacobs's (1861) *Incidents*, Linda Brent's feelings of infanticide are an act of affirmation of will and emancipation of the slave woman. In both cases, infanticide suggests that death is preferable to slavery. Infanticide is only an imagined option to Linda Brent, but to Sethe Suggs it is a concrete fact. Levander (1999) notes that, through its libertarian aspects, "infanticide is the one way for slave mother to express their desire to exert maternal control over their children." (LEVANDER 1999, p. 34) In addition, Peach (1995) observes that the murder of her daughter "subverts the white myth of Southern paternalism in which the slave owners were envisaged as presiding over an extended and subservient family of both blacks and whites." (PEACH 1995, p. 97) With her act, Sethe Suggs challenges Schoolteacher's authority over herself and her family. With her death, Sethe Suggs's *Beloved* becomes the testimony of those sixty million or more slaves who perished in slavery. In fact, as the locus of enslavement and cruelty, *Sweet Home* echoes and rearticulates Dr. Flint's plantation. The two plantations victimize, brutalize, and dehumanize the slave, but while Dr. Flint's assaults against Linda Brent are constant, Sethe Suggs's experience with slavery shows two different moments when the Garners' more humanitarian management of the place is replaced by the devastating rule of Schoolteacher. Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs denounce the cruelties of slavery in their political narratives.

### Concluding Comments

[A politics of conversion] stays on the ground among the toiling everyday people, ushering forth humble freedom fighters – both followers and leaders – who have the audacity to take the nihilistic threat by the neck and turn back its deadly assaults. WEST

West's (1994) words reinforce the work done by "the toiling everyday people" like Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs, and others. In his words, these women were the "humble freedom fighters" who dared to look nihilism in the eye and managed – or failed – to mitigate or control its devastating effects. These "followers and leaders" like Linda Brent and Sethe Suggs courageously took "the nihilistic threat by the neck," temporarily succumbed but, finally, domesticated "its deadly assaults" (31). Throughout this article, groups of black women and their supporters, during different periods of the African American literary tradition, fought for freedom and won it when they joined their individual selves to their community's leading spirit. Some of them won directly, others indirectly, through the contribution of supporters. Some profited from the achievement, others did not profit but left a legacy for the benefit of others to come. These two black women, with intensity, or bigger or smaller presence, made the conversion from slavery to freedom, from nihilism to love. The idea of movement, progress, and achievement, present throughout the article, embodied the practice of black self-reflexiveness on the literary and political levels. On the literary level, self-reflexiveness indicates that African American literary tradition is informed by a process of interdependence between two literary genres, the slave narrative, and the novel. On the political level, self-reflexiveness reveals that the development of the novel out of the autobiography is followed by two other moves: one contemplating black women's dislocation from the literary to the political; another depicting their passage from nihilism to love.

Literary self-reflexiveness positioned the African American literary tradition in its historical perspective by privileging the "call-and-response relationship" that made the autobiography and the novel two interdependent genres. The autobiography, the novel, and the mutual interconnections between them were the concern of African-Americanists. As Andrews (1993) points out, from the publication of Brown's (1853) *Clotel. A Narrative of a Slave Life in the United States*, the first black novel, "the history of African American narrative has been marked by a call-and-response relationship between autobiography and its successor, the novel." (ANDREWS 1993, p. 01) Gates (1987) expressed a similar idea saying, that "when the ex-slave author decided to write his or her story, he or she did so only after reading, and rereading, the telling stories of other slave authors who preceded them." (GATES 1987, p. X) The political conversion concentrated on the black woman's move from nihilism to love through their personal quest for political empowerment. Slave narrative and novel were the interests of this analysis and, through the discussion of nihilism and love, established the politics of conversion among

black women. In Jacobs's (1861) slave narrative *Incidents*, and Morrison's (1987) novel *Beloved*, the battle of nihilism and love reflected the women characters' access to freedom and empowerment or represented failure.

Initially, the political conversion developed its involvement with individuality and community through Linda Brent's slave narrative. The fusion of the black selfness with the groupness informed the politics of conversion. West (1994) argued that the politics of conversion became the strategy that black people employed to hold "the nihilistic threat at bay", functioning as "a direct attack in the sense of worthlessness and self-loathing" (WEST 1994, p. 27) that devastated the individual and the community as well. Being the agency leading to emotional and cultural empowerment, the politics of conversion also became "a turning of one's soul" aiming at defeating "any disease of the soul" by means of the individual and the group's contribution. Thus, the analyst observed that "this turning is done through one's own affirmation of one's worth – an affirmation fueled by the concern of others. A love ethic must be at the center of a politics of conversion." (WEST 1994, p. 29)

The political convert's attention addressed itself to the scrutiny of the various relationships kept between her "self-within" and "the world outside." That is, "one's own affirmation of one's worth" was monitored "by the concern of others," or it was informed by their lack of concern. In the two examples of black women's politics of conversion analyzed here – Linda Brent's and Sethe Suggs's – the group's participation was crucial, contributing to the individual self-assurance or denying help to remain consistent with its values. Likewise, the individual woman's self-affirmation did not always position itself in agreement with the group, temporarily or always. The disagreement generally occurred when the nihilistic threat was too big to be positively managed by the individual and the group, and as a result, love did not occur, causing the failure of the individual woman and her separation from the group. In those situations, love could only be restored through the intervention of other individuals and, only then, was the integration of the individual and the group possible. This situation reminds us of Sethe Suggs's experience. In general terms, these two instantiations of politics of conversion revealed, with certain variations, the movement from nihilism to love, for example, in *Incidents*, communal womanism and sisterhood ensured Linda Brent's quest for freedom from Dr. Flint's sexual harassment and eventual escape to the North. Similarly, in *Beloved*, the communal work of black women guaranteed Sethe Suggs's final harmony with the *Bluestone Road* neighborhood.

The argument developed throughout the study was that the movement from nihilism to love

would occur. Indeed, the outcome of each instance of the politics of conversion, in each text, pointed to the group's achievement. The community of slaves guaranteed Linda Brent's eventual freedom and the *Bluestone Road* neighborhood celebrated Sethe Suggs's reintegration with the group. In the analysis, various instances of a politics of conversion functioned as the background upon which the play between nihilism and love, virtue and vice, good intentions and wickedness were measured. Bearing the idea of play in mind, the black women's experiences could neither be solely reduced to nihilism, nor could they be concentrated on love, but resulted from the linkage that could not clearly distinguish one from the other. Therefore, what made the black women's experiences in Morrison's *Beloved* significant was neither nihilism nor self-love or love, but both nihilism and love. Similarly, what made the politics of conversion meaningful was the concern it addressed to these two elements. Indeed, the move from nihilism to love expected seems to be less a reality than a dream of a move from whiteness to blackness, considering that whiteness was supposed to generate nihilism and blackness was desired to develop love. In general terms, this was certainly true in both *Incidents* and *Beloved*, in which, the nihilistic whiteness derived from slavery. In specific terms, however, both whiteness and blackness were hybrid generators of nihilism as well as love.

From the polarity or hybridity of nihilism and love two major sets of conclusions were drawn: one related to the individual and her self-valuation; the other associated with the group and its love ethic. As for the individual, we may say that the indeterminacy between nihilism and love was present in the lives of many black women like Linda Brent, Sethe Suggs. As they were the catalysts, they attracted the group's interest and convinced the group to behave as it did. Linda Brent's experiences in Jacobs's (1861) *Incidents* dealt with the ambiguity of nihilism and love in two ways: one suggested that she explored self-valuation by fighting against Dr. Flint's sexual harassment so that she could keep her virtue and chastity, while at the same time giving her virtue and chastity to Mr. Sands. She explained her situation: "the crisis of my fate now came so far near that I was desperate (...) and seeing no other way of escaping the doom I so much dreaded, I made a headlong plunge." (JACOBS 1861, p. 55) Two, as a result, the solution she took had to do with love and self-love. Her own words were self-explaining: "it seems less degrading to give one's self, than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment." (JACOBS 1861, p. 55) Virtue and flaw, nihilism, and self-love, determined her actions, but she left uncertain the borders between one and the other as she decided to protect her human integrity

by giving her chastity, not to an oppressor, but to “a lover who has no control over you, except that which he gains by kindness and attachment.” (JACOBS 1861, p. 55) In *Beloved*, Sethe Suggs's existence also mixed nihilism and love, as well. In her life, the indeterminacy between these two elements derived from her murder of her daughter so that the daughter was not made a slave by Schoolteacher. By naming the murder of her own daughter “thick love” she blurred the borders between good intentions and wickedness and equated death with liberation. Her own words were clear: “I stopped him (...) I took and put my babies where they would be saved” (MORRISON 1987, p. 164), suggesting that death was preferable to slavery.

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