

THE NATION AND ITS OTHER*

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Worldliness is therefore the restoration to such works and interpretations of their place in the global setting, a restoration that can only be accomplished by an appreciation not of some tiny, defensively constituted corner of the world, but of the large, many-windowed house of human culture as a whole.

- Edward Said, "The Politics of Knowledge"

Abstract

Partiendo de la conceptualización romántica de la nación como espacio de estrategias político-discursivas de constitución de la noción de sujeto universal y homogéneo presupuesto de la identidad del estado-nación, examino algunas de las implicaciones entre narratividad, determinantes ideológicos y exclusiones en la fijación de guiones de género y de raza que operan en base al impulso fundacional presente en novelas de canon brasileño del siglo XIX. Establezo la diferencia del marge en la consideración de una novela no canónica que califico como contrafundacional en la medida que interviene en la producción de subjetividades compatibles con los intereses del estado y de la cultura nacionalista del período.

Palabras-clave: nación, siglo XIX, novela, canon, diferencia

Resumo

Partindo da conceptualização romântica da nação como espaço de estratégias político-discursivas de constituição da noção de sujeito universal e homogêneo pressuposto da identidade do estado-nação, examino algumas das implicações entre narratividade, determinantes ideológicos e exclusões na fixação de scripts de gênero e de raça que operam na base do impulso fundacional presente em romances canônicos brasileiros do século XIX. Estabeleço a diferença da margem na consideração de um romance não canônico que qualifico como contra-fundacional na medida em que intervém na produção de subjetividades compatíveis com os interesses do estado e da cultura nacionalista do período.

Palavras-chave: nação, século XIX, romance, cânon, diferença

I – Rethinking national identity

On pointing out the strangeness of the relocation of familiar notions such as home and the world resulting from the historical conditions of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations that characterize our present time, Homi Bhabha in his Introduction to **The location of culture** states that “we find ourselves in the moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity, past and present, inside and outside, inclusion and exclusion”.¹ Thus, on redefining the collective construction of nation-ness in the light of these figures, Bhabha formulates the groundwork of his thesis of the nation as a disjunctive space of representation by displacing what he calls the pedagogical temporality that has dominated its horizontal construction (the tradition of the people as one and “in-itself” to pose the force of the performative, discursive strategies that engender a temporality of the ‘in-between’, and which intervenes in the homogeneity of the people signified as a Self, distinct from the Other of the Outside. And he states:

The problem is not simply the ‘selfhood’ of the nation as opposed to the otherness of other nations. We are confronted with the nation split within itself, articulating the heterogeneity of its population. The barred Nation It/Self, alienated from its eternal self-generation, becomes a liminal signifying space that is internally marked by the discourses of minorities, the heterogeneous histories of contending people, antagonistic authorities and tense locations of cultural difference².

Today, the national has become, from the point of view of cultural comparativism, a privileged topic of inquiry. While current global reorganizations, the hegemony of marketplace doctrines, transnational capitalism and mediated mass culture consumption seem to have weakened substantially the discourses on our “imagined communities”³ with profound effects on national cultures, these effects have not signaled the end of nationalism and/or the interest in the national in the academic/cultural arena.⁴ While the ever-growing interaction of local factors with non local ones is indeed producing socio-cultural identities that weaken national identifications and therefore, national bonds, the resurgence of the national, as an issue and as a category of analysis in the production of critical perspectives on culture and identity has brought a renewed scholarly interest and a wealth of theorization of the political, social and cultural relationships subsumed and fostered by the technologies of nationalism, past and present. It is worth pointing out that such an interest has gathered momentum at a time when questions such as colonization, migration, exile and diaspora have emerged at the level of theory. So, even though concepts of nationhood are themselves becoming problematic in specific ways, particularly with today’s understanding that nations

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¹ London: Routledge, 1994, p.1.

² Op. Cit., p.148.

³ Phrase coined by Benedict Anderson in **Imagined communities: reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism**. London: Verso, 1983.

⁴ Some of the historians, social scientists and critics that have dwelt on this subject include Homi Bhabha, Paul Gillis, Garcia Canclini, Ernest Gellner, Benedict Anderson, Arjun Appadurai, Doris Sommer, Mary Louise Pratt Eric Hobsbawm refers to the “new supranational restructuring of the globe” in his **Nations and nationalisms since 1780: programme, myth, reality**. (England: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

are not so clearly separated and distinguished by geopolitical boundaries, that cultural boundaries do not necessarily coincide with national ones and that within these national borders cultural diversity is the rule rather than the exception, the focus on the national has advanced new ways of perceiving and thinking about collective constructions of nationness, relevant to present inquiries about how its past, actualized in the memories and forgetfulness embedded in its histories, evoke processes of power and authority, domination and subalternity.

The understanding that modern national cultures have historically developed not as single, unified entities that expand to include and incorporate differences but as sites of negotiations and contestations, exchange and conflict across intranational boundaries, has altered our consciousness about the relationships between national culture, memory, identity and belongingness. This is to say that strategies of representation among different social segments, with different histories in relation to empowerment and affected differently by the historical circumstances engendered by relations of power show that meanings and values may not always be affiliative or collaborative but profoundly dissonant and even conflictual. It is in this context that the opposition insider/outsider that have always bolstered the historical processes by which the territorial paradigm of the modern nation came to forge the nexus of belongingness and on which national narratives depended for its relevance and coherence has now been appropriated for discussions of intranational differences. Such discussions expose the nation's otherness, the fictive universality predicated on the claim of a totalizing, essentialist, all-encompassing national identity.

It comes as no surprise then that the tropes of myth and typology that grounded the understanding of modern nationalities - the universals of European modernity at the genesis of the liberal nation-state such as progress, civilizing mission and citizenship - have been superseded by newer categories such as margins, borders, hybridity, in-between space. From this perspective, the question of the nation, in today's critical agenda, has become a question of how the signs of a national culture were articulated in the past and brought to the present, what cultural discontinuities and ambivalences they make visible, how meanings and values are thus, according to Edward Said, positioned as "zones of control or of abandonment, or recollection and of forgetting, of force or of dependence, of exclusiveness or of sharing".⁵ This is one of the reasons why the revision of historical discourses that gave origin to the nation-state, the rereading of the ideological apparatuses that sustained its power and authority to produce structures of symbolical meaning underlying the cultural politics through which national imaginaries were constructed and histories were written and told, has been a movement associated to the necessity of rediscovering other agencies, other narrations, other memories which the national project did not and could not grant validation. Thus, narratives of the past have gained a functional and intellectual value in that their analysis allow a fresh look into the conditions and traditions that have (mis)shaped national identities. Besides, such an investigation makes possible charting the significant absences made visible as effects of the processes of national social formation that have produced the people in specific cultural terms. One may add that, from this perspective, the emergence of alterity has developed a sense of urgency

⁵ In: "Representing the colonized", **Critical Inquiry**, vol.15.no.2 (winter 1989), 225

about the meanings and status of differences in the context of the temporal continuities that have engendered national subjectivities compatible with the interest of the modern nation-state.

II – Relocating the past

In Latin America countries, with a legacy of slavery and with historical experiences of colonization, migration, domination and subordination, the construction of collective self-identity did not occur without contradictions and violence, real and symbolical. The romantic period represents the historical moment *par excellence* of the birth of the new modern nations emerging from the movements for Independence from Spanish and Portuguese rules. Apart from geo-cultural variables, in all countries of the region there was an appropriation of nationalist discourses, couched on the ideals of European romanticism, particularly on the idea of the people “as one”, to advance the image of a universal national body, an unproblematic unity and particularity of identity and culture that defined consensus in order to promote and establish horizontal identifications as the nexus of national belonging⁶. If, on the one hand, the frame for the development of national identity was set by the conditions imposed by the historical experience of colonial states and their slave mode of production, on the other, it was largely determined by the hegemonic constellation of forces defined by a boundary of class-belonging that promoted the bourgeois ideals of progress and civilization which, in practice, sustained a rigidly structured social organization along class, racial and gender lines.

Functioning at the service of a white elite ruling a patriarchal and colonial state, romantic nationalism operated within its hegemonic institutions and representations by a set of inclusionary and exclusionary interpellations whereby individuals were to be constituted as national subjects.⁷ However, the fictitious nature of its universalist claim becomes quite evident when one considers the gaps between its discursive construct and the realities of political structures and social organizations that regulated the identity politics of the national body and which were deeply bound up with the exercise of power on producing racial hierarchies, class divisions and gender asymmetries.⁸ In reality, the unmarked national subject of nationalism bore the stamp of white male ethnicity as the limit and condition of normalized national belonging, in relation to which, all forms of differences were interpreted.

⁶ According to the Argentinian historian Jorge Myers in his “Literatura romantica y proyecto nacional” In: **América Latina: palabra, literatura e cultura**, vol. 2. Ana Pizzaro, ed. São Paulo: Editora UNICAMP, 1994.

⁷ This contradiction is aporetic in the sense that nationalism gives difference *qua* difference an essential (and marginalized) status while advancing a universalization of difference to produce a homogeneous identity.

⁸ As David Lloyd points out in his “Nationalisms against the state”, “it is a paradox of nationalism that though it may often summon into being a ‘people’ that is to form and subtend the nation-state, it is always confronted with that people as a potentially disruptive excess over the nation and its state – if nationalism calls forth a people for the nation-state, its mode of subjectification still cannot exhaust the identifications made available to the individuals thus summoned”. (In: **The politics of culture**. Lisa Lowe and David Lloyd, eds. Durham, N.C., 1997, 175).

Historically, such a homogenizing foundational thrust started with the imposition of a national language that “forgot” and “erased” all linguistic and cultural manifestations that did not fit the project that intellectuals and men of letters took upon themselves to promote and impose through the writing of power and the power of writing. In the XX century, important critical works approached the problematic of national identity in Latin America by examining the material forces that presided its formation processes and the role of the intellectual class. For example, in 1936, Sérgio Buarque de Holanda in the classical work **Raízes do Brasil**, makes a critique of the formation period of the Brazilian nationality by pointing out the establishment of an intellectual elite, men of books and words, who could not cope with the horrors of our day-to-day colonial underdevelopment and, therefore, fabricated an imaginary world out of touch with the reality that surrounded them. He forwards his value judgement incisively: “Todo o nosso pensamento dessa época revela a mesma fragilidade, a mesma inconsistência, a mesma indiferença, no fundo, ao conjunto social”.⁹ Two years later, in 1938, Nelson Werneck Sodré in his **História da Literatura Brasileira – sua base econômica**, joined in the critique of the alienation of the intellectual class which sought by all means to maintain distance from the people by asserting its affiliation with the metropolitan center and by imitating its models, institutional, juridical and literary ones. The views of both Brazilian scholars find echoes in the work of the Uruguayan critic Angel Rama. In his classical work **A cidade das letras**, Rama points out the efforts of the Latin American intellectual elite to advance the European model of the city of letters, a world of learning and refined taste in a massively illiterate society while engaged with instances of institutional political power, remaining quite aloof from the great mass of the population, dispossessed and left to their own luck. More recently, on assessing the processes that attended the institutionalization of culture in the XIX century Latin American contexts, another critic from Uruguay, Hugo Achugar, drawing from Rama’s central ideas, states that, as a rule, intellectuals “construyeron una nacion ideal que no respondia a la realidad étnica, social y cultural de los países en que vivían”.¹⁰ How was literature to fit in this landscape?

Literature, in the western world, has played a central role in the articulation between culture and politics, particularly in the formation of modern nation-states. In his work **Imagined communities**, Benedict Anderson elaborates on the rise of the modern European nation states in the late 18th and early 19th centuries and affirms that the processes that attended their formation cannot be dissociated from the forms and contents of romantic imaginative literature. In effect, romanticism introduced the idea of nationhood and the theme of nationality as interpretative filters through which cultural production could fulfill the historical demands posed by new political realities. In the case of Latin American countries, one can understand how, to a great extent, the cultural transplantation of the ideals of romantic nationalism clashed with the civilizing mission of the colonization process and its logic of conquest and ritual destruction, the result of which lay bare, at the level of literary representation, the ambivalences and contradictions between the desired image of ideal nationhood and a commitment to the interest of a nation-state that served the conqueror and a privileged elite. The alliance between discourse and power in the strategies

⁹ São Paulo, Companhia das Letras, 6^a.edição, 1998, 162.

¹⁰ In: “La escritura de la historia ou a propósito de las fundaciones de la nación”. **Cadernos do Centro de Pesquisas Literárias da PUC/RS**. Porto Alegre, vol.16, no.1, August 2000. p. 11.

of representation that advanced the figuration of nationality as a cultural preserve in contiguity with empire building¹¹ accounts for the violence that characterized the constitution of the public sphere of formal culture in Latin American countries.

In Brazil, from the period of the Independence aftermath to the consolidation of the Republican ideal in the 1880's, literature was at the center of the debates around which a national project could be envisioned for it was regarded as a matrix for nationality¹² in terms of providing the *locus* of enunciation for the ideologemes of nationhood, those that could forge a historical memory so as to configure the uniqueness of the Brazilian experience and constitute a national subject by integrating values, habits, perceptions with a distinctive sense of place, the so called "local color". The Brazilian romantic movement, deeply bound up with the organicist notion of an autonomous nation-state, fostered the literary nationalism that became the genesis of the aesthetic and political ideology of racial democracy, a powerful myth that, since the 19th century, has kept inter-racial tensions and conflicts outside the political domain.¹³ On affirming nationhood, romantic nationalism produced 'the people', first and foremost as a fictive totalizing category, functioning within an hegemonic institution, a colonial slave state capable of "transcending (domestic) differences, social antagonisms and divisions"¹⁴ in its formulation of a normalized condition of national belonging. The romantic nationalist impulse enabled the convergence of two domains that generally keep some distance and tension between themselves, that of literary culture and of national culture. This convergence takes place when the psychological meaning of nationhood takes precedence over the political meaning so the psychologizing of the political relativizes internal differences to reinforce the principle of differentiation, as Balibar and Wallerstein have taught us in **Race, Nation, Class**: "it is the symbolic difference between 'ourselves' and 'foreigners' which wins out and which is lived as irreducible"¹⁵.

The national narratives, that is, fictional works that have gained the status of foundational texts for embodying the national ethos and have been, as a result, legitimized and canonized as master narratives of identity illustrate to what extent the literary

¹¹ Raymundo Faoro, a pioneer among Brazilian sociologists, stated that contrary to the British who founded in America a motherland, the Portuguese founded in Brazil an extension of the Portuguese state. See his **Os donos do poder: formação do patronato político brasileiro**. Porto Alegre, Editora Globo, 1957.

¹² One instance of this debate is the famous polemic between the writers Joaquim Nabuco and José de Alencar over different views on the definition of a national literature, carried on the pages of the newspaper "O Globo", from September to November 1875.

¹³ According to Carlos Hasenbalg, an authority on race relations in Brazil, there is no other Latin American country where the myth of racial democracy has been so persistently elaborated than in Brazil. See his article "Notas sobre Relações de Raça no Brasil e na América Latina". In: **Y Nosotras Latinoamericanas? Estudos sobre Gênero e Raça**. Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda, ed. (São Paulo: Memorial da América Latina, 1992, 52-58).

¹⁴ As Nikhil Pal Singh states in a most enlightening discussion of the concept of universalism and its alignment with the idea of nationalism in the article "Culture/Wars: Recoding Empire in an Age of Democracy", **American Quarterly**, no. 3, vol. 50, Sep 1998.. In this very article, Singh goes on to state: "The modern nation-state and its structures of citizenship, in this sense, are the exemplary forms that Balibar calls 'fictitious universalism,' or the universalism appropriate to those domains encompassing "effective processes of institutions and representations...[that] liberate individual subjectivity from narrow communitarian bonds, and at the same time impose normal, that is, normative and normalized patterns of individual behavior" (508).

¹⁵ **Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities**. (Transl. by Chris Turner. London, Verso, 1991, 94).

institution participated in the allocation of social empowerment and resources and became, in the process, a privileged site for the enactment of the ideological presuppositions of a political ethic or teleology underwritten by an essentialist nativism that envisions a totality that is not there. Looking backwards to the past in search of origins that could validate a national identity was the task some Brazilian writers known as “indianistas” set to themselves. José de Alencar, the most important of them, has been acknowledged by the critical establishment as a writer who produced our foundational fictions of nationality.¹⁶ His achievement in bringing mythic material such as of the legend of Ceará to the status of historical argument in one of his major novels, **Iracema**, published in 1865, has been widely celebrated and criticized from a variety of critical perspectives. Recent readings point out the limitation/imperfections of his project by examining the implications of narrativity and textual politics underpinning the love story between a native woman and a white warrior against the background of wars waged by the Portuguese and allied tribes against resistant tribes, during the period of the Portuguese conquest and colonial expansion.

The structuring of the plot follows a narrative economy that reaches its logical closure with the death of Iracema, right after childbirth, and with the victory of the Portuguese hero Martin, over enemy tribes, followed by his foundation of the Christian “mairi”, the settlement where he is going to raise his son Moacir, the emblematic icon of the encounter of the two races and genesis of the Brazilian nationality. In theory, Moacir can be a referent to racial amalgamation, the first Brazilian born potential hero.¹⁷ But miscigenation meant, as a rule, assimilation and acculturation to white values, so even though Moacir is half native, half Portuguese, his status is of white: he is his father’s son, in line to carry on the civilizing/christianizing mission, the violence, deracination and denaturalization of which are complicit with the subject of eurocentric colonial protagonism.

In the romantic myth-making of national origins, giving birth to a son is a woman’s duty, making a nation is a white hero’s task, seconded, of course, by the native friend and other acculturated native males, what makes of it a homosocial affair. Women, who were never invited to imagine themselves as part of this horizontal brotherhood had their value

¹⁶ Among such critical works, see the important essay “Alencar, o discurso fundador e os pactos da nacionalidade” by Lucia Helena. In **Fronteiras do literário: estudos e pesquisas**. Livia Reis, ed. Niterói, EDUFFF, 1997. In another essay entitled “A visão tropical e os pares à deriva: reflexões em torno de Alencar” (**Luso_Brazilian Review** vol.41, no. 1) the scholar examines Alencar’s novels in the light of some comparisons with Rousseau’s imaginary and the question of language and interiority, to point out his achievement of terms of thematizing the question of solitude as *locus* of the origin of nationality. One has to consider here that solitude (in case this formulation is accepted for the word used by Alencar is ‘saudades’, for which solitude is not a synonym) has different meanings for Iracema and for Martin because of their situational difference: solitude is inherent to Martin’s condition as a hero conqueror, exiled from his native land and missing the love of the bride he left behind, whereas for Iracema, solitude emerges when Martin’s passion for her begins to wane and fail to meet the demands of her heart’s desire.

¹⁷ It is necessary to point out that the possibility of a black hero was never considered as a sign of brazilianness because of racial genealogy, both genetic and historical. Miscegenation as assimilation was the dogma of a liberal white elite whose project was to give coherence to a cultural identity that would project the image of an integrative homogeneity. In this regard, see the article by Clara Alvim “Os discursos sobre o negro no século XIX: desvios da enunciação machadiana”. In: **Papéis avulsos** 19, CIEC, Rio de Janeiro, 1989. Also in this regard, see **O Negro e o romantismo brasileiro** by Heloisa Toller Gomes. São Paulo, Editora Atual, 1988.

limited to their reproductive capacity¹⁸. Alencar's representation of Iracema bears the weight of the patriarchal cultural value attached to the feminine. As a topos, a figure that inscribes the space of the natural realm through which the hero moves to fulfill his destiny, Iracema makes possible the social fiction of heterosexual (re)production required for nation-building and, in this sense, she remains a function of a narrative model where the sequence fathering a son/fathering a nation is premised on paternity as movement, agency, freedom, experience, culture, processes from which women are excluded. So, Iracema's destiny is to remain a precarious other to the nation, a "natural" difference that strategically serves to distinguish valid, enabling and potent male cultural and racial identity from an identity defined by nature, female and native, disabling and subversive of the firmness of national purpose. Iracema is guilty for having betrayed the Jurema's secret and given away her virginity for love to a white man but she is to die, not because of child labor but because of Martin's waning love and abandonment as he leaves for the battlefield when she needed him most. As the narrator observes, to Martin's existence full of great desires and noble ambitions (p.70), a friend and a wife are not enough. Thus, what a woman desires becomes an obstacle to what man wills and, in this sense, Alencar could not stand except for man's will since his narrative project depended on the representation of a social order and its corresponding law of meaning in which there was no subjectivity opened to 'natural' womanhood.

So, in **Iracema** the discourse of national foundation is run over by a narrative resolution that is ideologically determined by the pressures of a historical necessity to make the nation emerge as a modern narration. It is ironic that in its search for alterity, Alencar's narrative underwrites a contiguity of cultures that affirms primordial attachments to European values and ratifies the conquest by the Portuguese, whose presence is legitimated and constitutes a representative of the contiguity of cultures.¹⁹ It is relevant to note, however, that for Alencar the autochthonous element was regarded as the idealized image of ethnic purity that could operate as a universal sign of brasility, yet the work and effect of narrativity in **Iracema** discloses the investment of a subject in patriarchal and ethnocentric positionalities of meaning and desire that afford violence against the woman and the native. In this context, it is relevant to remind of the critical position of Antonio Candido who, on assessing the literary production of the period, points out how it effectively engaged processes of imposition and transference of the colonizer's culture to the point where literature became, from a political point of view, a very efficient instrument of the colonizing process²⁰

Today, the question of national identity predicated on the assumption of nationhood as the unproblematic horizon of a shared culture and on the literary canon and national fictions as the ultimate sign of cultural identity is under siege. The relation between nationhood and canonical formation lies on the dominant order of a narrative which,

¹⁸ This is the point of view advanced by Mary Louise Pratt in the article "Mulher, Literatura e Irmandade Nacional" published in the collection **Tendências e Impasses**, edited by Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda.

¹⁹ See José Luis Jobim's comments on Alencar's ethnocentrism in his article "O indianismo literário na cultura do romantismo". In: **Produção literária e identidades culturais**. Zilá Bernd and Francis Utéza, eds.. Porto Alegre, Sagra Luzzatto, 1997.

²⁰ In the essay "Literatura de dois gumes". In: **A educação pela noite e outros ensaios**. São Paulo: Ática, 1987.

internally, contain its constituent elements – agents, story, deeds, space, time – all ordered in a natural, self-justifying framework, played out from one perspective only. So the canon, as an important aspect of the literary institution, has been regarded as the authorized narrative of the nation's historical becoming as much as the literary canonical operates as a system of cultural signification that inscribes the values in which one national body is embedded and by which it is identified.

In the last two decades or so, there has been much theory and critical production that probe into the issues involving essentialist definitions given to canons for it is understood that national canonical formations which emerged under the romantic influx of the people as one are, to a great degree, effects of the historical on-going functioning of institutions deeply entwined with the ideological apparatus of nation-building and invested with power to control and regulate the dissemination of discourses, authorize certain representations that fulfill a certain will of truth and set the system of signification and standards of value by which production is validated as representative of the national body politic of texts. The fact that canons are the result, among and above other things, of the prestige and power of the critical discourse through which a segment of the people exercise control over the processes by which symbolic representations are made legitimate to circulate and become representative of the whole people, make canons institutional forms of containment linked to structures of exclusion that operate to the advantage of a culture inflected in the singular form. The questions that resonate with potential meaning for the destabilization of canons have been who speaks in the names of values, whose values are these that are being affirmed and for whom they are addressed.

These questions mean that an examination of the way national literary canons have been established raises necessarily the question of cultural hegemony, particularly in the historical contexts of transplanted cultures. If we consider, for example, that the racialized and genderized construction of cultural hegemony of which the XIX Brazilian canon is the most legitimate expression rendered woman silenced and the black subject invisible – no voice, no identity and no self-representation – in the making of the national identity, the recuperation of narratives silenced by the formal culture means to bring hegemonic historiography to crisis. By crisis I mean not only the exposure of the fissure in the national body but also the opening of a space for intervention on the signification-function of the national sign-system in terms of supplementing a lack on the part of what is signified.²¹

III – Center and margin: the difference of view

On examining two 19th century novels that engage racial fictions, the purpose is to highlight the contrast between the different value-codings inscribed in their politics of representation in order to render visible certain positionalities of meaning and desire operated by the texts in relation to the question of identity. The question of authorship is central in this case, because one novel was written by a white man, Bernardo Guimarães, acknowledged as a major writer of the period while the other one was written by a slave

²¹ I'm referring here to Gayatri Spivak's notions about historiography and subalternity presented in the essay "Subaltern studies: deconstructing historiography". In: **In other worlds: essays in cultural politics**. New York, Routledge, 1988.

woman, Maria Firmina dos Reis²² who remains largely unknown among scholars and specialists in Brazilian literature. The recognition of the authorship of **Úrsula** and its validation as part of the literary system was effected neither at the time the novel was published, that is in 1859, in the northern state of Maranhão, or in the decades that followed. Had it been otherwise, the ideological apparatus that kept the slavery system working until 1888 when the Abolition Law was passed would have perhaps met with a more effective oppositional stand in the world of letters. The recovery of this long forgotten narrative in a facsimile edition in 1975²³ by the scholars Antônio de Oliveira and Nascimento Morais Filho brought to light the first novel authored by a black woman in Brazil²⁴. Maria Firmina dos Reis inscribes a black voice in the construction of national subjectivities engendering what Homi Bhabha defines as a counter narrative of the nation that “continually evoke and erase its totalizing boundaries –both actual and conceptual – disturb those ideological maneuvers through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities”²⁵.

Published in 1875, **A escrava Isaura**, written by Bernardo Guimarães, is hailed as an abolitionist novel and has been consecrated by critical assessments such as “a courageous and virile pamphlet” in Antonio Candido’s words²⁶, in that it exposed to the popular imagination the unbearable situations of captivity. Up to the 1870’s Guimarães was considered, along with the names of Joaquim Manuel de Macedo and José de Alencar, the master of the Brazilian novel²⁷ and of all his works, **A Escrava Isaura** was the most popular. In the critical evaluation of another critic Alfredo Bosi, the novel came to be seen as the national **Uncle Tom’s Cabin**, which was translated into Portuguese in a first edition published in Paris and in a second edition in Lisbon in 1856, soon to reach Brazil where it was widely read. For Bosi, Brazilian literature started depicting cruel masters and virtuous slaves only after the appearance of **Uncle Tom’s Cabin**.²⁸ The novel indeed focuses on the

²² For more information on the writer see **Escritoras brasileiras do século XIX**. Zahidé L. Muzart, ed. Florianópolis/Santa Cruz do Sul, Editora Mulheres/ Editora EDUNISC, 1999.

²³ In 1988, there was a third edition of the novel by the Ministry of Culture through the National Book Institute and Presença Edições in celebration of the 100th anniversary of the Abolition Law. This edition was organized by Luiza Lobo with and Introduction by Charles Martin.

²⁴ There is still a polemic about the first woman writer, but the criteria of gender has not been used taking into account the difference of race. Some scholars consider Teresa Margarida da Silva e Orta who was born in São Paulo but while still a child left to Portugal and never returned to Brazil. There she published **As Aventuras de Diófanes** in 1752. Some critics, using the criteria for establishing the first female authorship the place of publication and the themes, believe that Maria Firmina dos Reis is the first Brazilian woman novelist. Such is the case of the writer Josué Montello in his article “La Primera Novelista Brasileña” in **Revista de Cultura Brasileña**, no. 41, jun. 1976. This magazine was edited by the Brazilian Embassy in Spain. Luiza Lobo in her essay “Auto-Retrato de Uma Pioneira Abolicionista”(In: **Crítica sem juízo**. Rio de Janeiro: Francisco Alves, 1993, 222-238) affirms that the first novelist is Ana Eurídice Eufrosina de Barandas whose work **O ramallete ou Flores escolhidas no Jardim da Imaginação** dates from 1845. Yet, she acknowledges the precedence of Maria Firmina dos Reis in advancing the abolitionist theme.

²⁵ In: **The Location of Culture**, op. cit.,149.

²⁶ In: **Formação da literatura brasileira**, vol. 2, 8^a. Edição. Rio de Janeiro: Itatiaia, 1997, 218.

²⁷ In the critical assessment of Lucia Miguel-Pereira. **Prosa de ficção (1870-1920)**. (Rio de Janeiro, José Olympio, 1959, 27).

²⁸ In: **História concisa da literatura brasileira** (São Paulo: Cultrix, 1998, 143-144). In a note, Bosi suggests that Isaura’s famous escape from Minas to Recife might well have been inspired by Elisa’s escape through the floating ice of the Ohio River to the North and then to Canada.

ordeals faced by a slave girl who suffers sexual harassment from a lecherous master, falls in love with a kind white gentleman who wants to marry her, is wickedly persecuted to the point of running away, is recaptured and, finally, after many obstacles, finds happiness with her deliverer, the white gentleman. At the time of its publication Brazil was the only western nation with a slave-holding system. The Law that forbade slave traffic had been proclaimed in 1850 but it would take 28 years more for the Abolition Law. In this period, anti-slavery campaigns were under way throughout the country and the novel became popular as a libel against the evils of a system that reduced human beings into chattels. The plot that relies on the romantic trials of an impossible love story, provides accounts of situations of peril in scenes that recall Stowe's novel. What is less acknowledged in relation to **A escrava Isaura** are the positionings of the authorial voice and the politics encoded in the narrative representation that ends up by flaunting its anti-slavery stand.

From the start, the narrative inscribes the conventions of literary gentility associated to the sentimental genre which articulated and produced the cult of white womanhood. Isaura is depicted as a young woman, perfect in mind and body, a true lady of good manners and refined taste. The long descriptive opening scene focuses on her physical attributes in terms of traditional western images associated to female purity and enchantment: the angel and the siren. Sílvio Romero, one of the critics of the so called 19th century 'holy trinity'²⁹, referred to Isaura as a beautiful young lady, intelligent, charming, gifted and white, as a sample of the good Arian race.³⁰ In other words, the slave whose plight moved so much the readers at the time was a white slave, a woman who did not exist and this is the touch of in verissimilitude that runs throughout the narrative. As the initial scene reiterates the whiteness of her body, there is an effacement of the black slave body marked with a history of property status. Isaura becomes a representative of chastity and of pure sensibility cultivated within the benevolent walls of white domesticity. Even if the text's expressed intention was to take a stand on the injustices of slavery and even if Guimarães tried to compensate the character's social inferiority by whitening her, his characterization weakens or invalidates altogether that stand for if such a woman could be engendered in such a context, slavery was not that bad as abolitionists wanted people to believe. What follows in the scene deserves a closer look for it discloses the perverse logic underlying the need to silence history. The scene depicts an exchange between the mistress who suddenly enters the room while Isaura is playing the piano and singing a song:

- *Ah! É a senhora? - respondeu Isaura voltando-se sobressaltada. – Não sabia que estava aí me escutando.*
- *Pois que tem isso?... continua a cantar (...) mas eu antes quisera que cantasses outra coisa; por que é que você gosta tanto dessa cantiga tão triste, que você aprendeu não sei onde?...*
- *Gosto dela, porque acho-a bonita e porque... ah! Não devo falar...*
- *Fala, Isaura. Já não te disse, que nada me deves esconder e nada recear de mim?...*

²⁹ The other two were José Veríssimo and Araripe Junior.

³⁰ In **História da literatura brasileira**. (Rio de Janeiro, José Olympio, Tomo 3º. 3ª. Edição, 1943, 309). Sílvio Romero was very critical of the Brazilian literary romanticism. Influenced by positivist ideals and by the scientific theories of 19th century Europe, he conceived his **História** as a way to say the truth about our 'brasilidade'. The reductive schemes evinced in his attempt to define the national character are seen as the result of his alignment with definitions of race which led him to defend the superiority of the white ethnicity in its major contribution for the betterment of the race and the improvement of the national culture.

- *Porque me faz lembrar de minha mãe, que eu não conheci, coitada!... Mas se a senhora não gosta dessa cantiga, não a cantarei mais.*
- *Não gosto que a cantes, não, Isaura. Não de pensar que és maltratada, que és uma escrava infeliz, vítima de senhores bárbaros e cruéis. Entretanto passas aqui uma vida que fria inveja a muita gente livre. Gozas de estima de teus senhores. Deram-te uma educação, como não tiveram muitas ricas e ilustres damas, que eu conheço. És formosa, e tens uma cor linda que ninguém dirá que gira em tuas veias uma só gota de sangue africano. (...). Oh! Não cabe em tua boca essa cantiga lastimosa, que tanto gostas de cantar. – Não quero, - continuou em tom de branda repreensão, - não quero que a cantes mais, ouviste, Isaura?... se não, fecho-te o meu piano³¹*

The prohibition to sing a song that calls to her memory the presence of a mother she had not known in lyrics that evoke the homeland and make references to the dispossession of a slave's life and soul is clearly based on the assumption that a slave has no mother. It is not difficult to understand how this assumption integrates the ideological apparatus on which the justification of slavery is grounded and befits, therefore, the mistress position. What is disturbing is that this assumption is underwritten by an authorial position that refrains from establishing any difference between the mistress' and the narrator's perspective. The narrator's construction of reality is rather set in the void of the historical discourse on slave parent-child relationship, what makes him an accomplice to a silence of 400 years over the black individual as a humanized subject.

The fictional necessity that bears on Guimarães' narrative script is intimately correlated with the social code of the text to produce a meaningful structure that translates the cultural and historical demands of his time. In this context, the logics of whitening and the ordered silence about origins is coherent with the role assigned to a heroine who must be assimilated if she is to marry a white hero, endowed with the prerogatives of his race, gender and class as a true representative of the national ideal of manhood. The gap engendered by difference in the narrative had to be somehow bridged and neutralized, if the reading public, a white dominant class which has always abhorred and tried to conceal miscegenation, were to accept a marriage as the happy *denouement* of the story. On effacing the historical body of the slave so that it could be appropriated to and integrated into the national body politic of the nation in the form of its narration, Guimarães' condemnation of slavery becomes contaminated by a narrativity that engenders its own

³¹ **A Escrava Isaura.** São Paulo: Editora Ática, 18th edition, 1992, 12-13. Trans. (Oh! Is it you, mistress? – Isaura answered turning around disturbed. – I did not know you were there listening to me.

- What is the matter? ... go on singing (...) I wish you sang another song; why do you like this sad song so much? I do not even imagine where you have learnt it from...
- I like it because I think it is beautiful... Oh! I should not speak...
- Speak to me, Isaura. Haven't I told you that you must not hide nor fear anything from me...
- Because it reminds me of my mother, whom I did not get to know, poor thing!... So, if you do not like this song I will not sing it anymore!
- I do not like you to sing it, in deed, Isaura. People will think you are ill-treated, an unhappy slave, a victim of barbarian and cruel masters. However, the life you enjoy here would make a lot of free people to envy you. We have given you education, as lots of distinguished and rich ladies, whom I know, do not have. You are beautiful, and have a pretty complexion, nobody would say that a single drop of African blood runs in your veins. (...) Oh! This regretful song which you like singing so much does not fit you, – I do not want it – she continued in a brand tone of reprehension, I do not want you to sing it, did you hear me, Isaura?... Otherwise, I will forbid you to play on my piano.

brand of racial perversity. The paradigm of white ethnicity becomes an incontrovertible value for communal recognition and national self-definition.

In *Úrsula*, the narrative uncovers another story. The first references to the novel appeared in the classical reference source for the 19th century literature that is the **Dicionário Bibliográfico Brasileiro** by Sacramento Blake, published in 1899. Maria Firmina dos Reis was a black woman slave who had had access to education and became a school teacher. In addition to *Ursula*, she published, **Gupeva**, an indianist novel published in her home state magazine **Ecos da Juventude** in 1861, a short story entitled “A escrava,” in 1887 and a volume of collected poems, **Cantos à beira-mar** in 1871. *Úrsula* is considered the first literary work to advance the abolitionist cause. Yet, the novel has been completely ignored and silenced in literary historiographies and criticism. The problem of the validation of female authorship in the 19th century and of validation of the novel’s cultural black text can explain its absence from the institutions of literature, what is a clear indication that the complex problems of otherness are regulated by a class, gender and race system of literary production, consumption and reception.

The plot centers on a lovers’ plight, a white couple in peril, and its entanglements highlight the battle between chastity and seduction, virtue and crime, persecution and captivity, love and hatred, violence and resistance. There is no happy ending for the white couple but madness and death, as there are violent deaths inflicted to the mother slave and her surrogate son who tried to help the white lovers. In spite of some romantic excesses, compatible with the sentimental genre popular at the time and the genteel taste of an audience to which Maria Firmina dos Reis addresses, gender and racial violence are realistically and dramatically rendered from a point of view that was no doubt informed by Reis’s experience of being a gendered and racial outsider in the patriarchal white Brazilian society. The narrative is structured around a sequence of misfortunes, betrayals and crimes presented in embedded narratives, a technique associated with medieval narratives and which here functions as a sign of black orality. This means that besides the omniscient narrator, there are other narrators-protagonists who take up the word to tell their stories and, by doing so, they bring insight into character and advance event.

The first chapters illustrate the extent to which Reis’ narrative distances itself from Guimarães’. They focus on the story of a white gentleman named Tancredo who suffers an accident from horseback while riding in a remote farmland region. Tancredo’s life is saved by a slave named Túlio who happens to be passing by and who takes the wounded man to be treated by Ursula, the white girl with whom the white gentleman falls in love. As a reward, Túlio is freed from bondage and becomes the free servant of his new master and friend. Túlio is the character focused in the first scenes and his representation deviates from the western cultural doxa of representing the racial other in terms of demonization, eroticization and infantilization. Contrary to Isaura’s meekness and submission to her mistress, Túlio is described as a proud man whose African blood boils in his veins, blood that he had inherited from his parents that neither the climate or bondage could assuage³². He is very much aware of his condition and he voices his rebelliousness in the first exchange with the Tancredo, emphasizing his sense of homelessness, of strangement for

³² *Úrsula*. Rio de Janeiro, Instituto Nacional do Livro/Edições Presença, 1988,25.

being a slave in a land which is not his. Contrary to Guimarães's narrator whose positioning sides with the white character in disavowing the slave's origins, here there is an investment on the part of the authorial voice to disclose the content of a black subjectivity that bespeaks of longing for homeland and family, and of anger in relation to the defilement of the enslaved body. From the material visible site and sign of his subhuman condition – the slave body - Túlio retrieves a sense of self and of humanity that he re-creates in speech performances. According to his words, the body may creep and moan in pain and servitude but the mind is free and can't ever be enslaved by anyone's will.

Maria Firmina dos Reis's intervention in the writing of the racial fiction of Brazilian nationhood becomes vigorously evident in the emergence of its repressed history, in the accounts of both Túlio and Mother Susana, an old African slave who is Tulio's surrogate mother. Mother Susana also takes up the word to tell of her memories of her African girlhood, of her happy family life, of her captivity, of the physical and psychological torments inflicted on board of the slave-trading ship and of the daily tortures in a foreign land, under the implacable rule of the Brazilian white master. Unlike the communicative disability of Isaura, Túlio's speeches and Mother Susana's compelling narration are acts of resistance against the white's silencing of the black voice. Here, slave memory, singular and communal, claims its historical and cultural specificities in the construction of subject positions that stand in a disruptive relation to the national subject.

In *A Escrava Isaura*, the whitening of Isaura is a necessary step for the collective forgetfulness necessary to bring together romance and nation-building. The narrative demand for the establishing of conjugal unions in 19th century fictions that engage in projects of national identity construction, as it has been pointed out in the thesis advanced by Doris Sommer³³, show how these fictions come to figure historical national unification and stability. Therein the foundational quality of Guimarães's novel. In *Úrsula*, the romantic outcome is an impossibility not because of plot constraint but because the very possibility of romance is denied, from the start, by the social and psychic arrangements of the patriarchal white family which far from being a benign entity, is the site of violence, lust, betrayal, and murder. And at the center of it lies the powerful white father/rich landowner/slave master, Tancredo's father, who is violent with the wife to the point of causing her death, deceives the son and marries his promised bride and ends up killing the son to take away his newly-married wife – Ursula - with whom he had fallen in love, bringing upon the latter madness and death. There is no kinship, no love or peace in the white family but hatred and crime. And it is at this point that the novel unveils its reading of the Brazilian historical text. The ravaged white home becomes a symptom of the nation's malaise as the image functions as a metaphor and a metonym of the nation under the historical crisis of the First Empire, a time where internal revolutions and regional insurrections³⁴ against the central government embodied in the imperial rule of Don Pedro I, made national unification and pacification a dream far off. As a narrative from the

³³ See her **Foundational fictions**. Berkley, University of California Press, 1991. Also the essay, "Amor e pátria na América Latina: uma especulação alegórica sobre sexualidade e patriotismo" In: **Tendências e impasses**. Heloisa Buarque de Hollanda, ed.

³⁴ The most famous uprisings are: Cabanada (Pernambuco) 1832-1840, Cabanagem (Pará) 1835-1840, Balaiada (Maranhão) 1838-1841, Revolução Farroupilha (Rio Grande do Sul) 1835-1845, Revolução Liberal (São Paulo) 1842, Revolução Liberal (Minas Gerais) 1842, Revolução Praieira (Pernambuco) 1848-1850.

margins of the nation, **Úrsula** turns the association romance/nation-building upside down, exposing the fallacy of its universal cultural and historical claim for in a patriarchal slave society, family and state wither under the evil engendered by its power structure. The denial and suppression of the other makes romance and nation-building a definitely doomed enterprise. It is in this sense that the intervention of Reis's novel in the white fictions of national narratives can be considered a particular instance of narrative performance. On recovering a history from below, from the point of view of a black enunciation, Reis engages a critique that liberates those spaces foreclosed within nationalism – its racializing exercise of power and violence - to enable a subjectivity and agency in touch with its own historically constituted interiority. This makes of **Úrsula** a counter- foundational text that disrupts the totality envisioned by nationalist ideology.

IV - Final remarks

As the history of Brazilian thought and culture is run throughout with the ever-present fascination with the question of the national, posed either as a challenge, as an obsession, as an impasse or as an incident³⁵, Brazilian scholars of different extractions have insistently pointed out the abstractionism and artificiality that lie at the grass-root level of the national culture. I evoke what Roberto Schwarz, echoing other voices, has diagnosed as the enduring problem in Brazilian civilization, that is, the embarrassing feeling we experience in relation to the lack of authenticity in our cultural life.³⁶ Appropriating this argument to the context of the present discussion, I would argue that this feeling is the recurring symptom of a trauma deeply associated with our historical incapacity of grappling with our material realities, of reconceptualizing the terms on which our identity has been conceived, of acknowledging our resistances to question the processes by which we have produced our difference in relation to the internal other. In other words, it is the effect of our difficulties in turning the critical focus from the binaries us/them, here/there, inside/outside to the margins of our imagined community, that is, the difference within, as the exegetical horizon of our own identity. As Benedict Anderson has remarked with admirable acuity, communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. We know well what seems to have been our style, at least, for the last three centuries: a style “without a concept”³⁷ that has celebrated, in a seductive and self-indulging mode, mythic images of nation-ness - the myth of non-violence, of racial democracy, of benevolence, conciliation and cordiality³⁸ - which have become crystallized in the literary, social and political imaginary in default of historical

³⁵ As observed by the sociologist Otávio Ianni in his **A idéia do Brasil moderno** (São Paulo: Brasiliense, 1992).

³⁶ I am referring here to his theory of the “misplaced ideas” (as idéias fora do lugar) presented in his **Ao vencedor as batatas**. São Paulo, Duas Cidades, Ed 34, 5a. edição, 2000.

³⁷ This is the hypothesis developed by Octavio Ianni in his “Tipos e mitos do pensamento brasileiro”. In: **Histórias da literatura: teorias, temas e autores**. Maria Eunice Moreira, ed. Porto Alegre, Mercado Aberto, 2003.

³⁸ Marilena Chauí in her article “Política cultural, cultura política” discusses in some length some of these myths. In **Brasil/Brazil – revista de literatura brasileira**, no.13, ano 8, 1995. Also José Murilo de Carvalho in the essay “Brasil: nações imaginadas” from his book **Pontos e bordados: escritos de história e política** (Belo Horizonte, Editora UFMG, 1998) discusses the three images of nationhood constructed by the Brazilian political and intellectual elite since the colonization period: the first is characterized by the absence of the people, the second by a negative view of the people and the third by a paternalist view of the people.

processes whereby looms the presence of a state, as qualified by Octavio Ianni, as “strong, demiurgic, oligarchic, authoritarian and tyrannical” and “an arrogant and oppressive political culture produced in the course of centuries of slavery”.³⁹ To interrogate canonical formations and their representational and representative character as well as to submit consecrated literary works to readings that produce new insights as to their textual politics from a point of view that exposes the workings of authoritative and complex structures of oppression and exclusion means to produce knowledge that challenge the cultural determinations of traditional codes of interpretation and value inscribed in the literary (and academic) culture. This means, ultimately, a step towards reconstructing the national on epistemological, symbolical, social and political grounds. So, the stakes are high: the nation and its other...the resignification of our imagined communities should enable us to move beyond the politics of power and identity inscribed in its fictitious construct. .

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³⁹ Octavio Ianni. Op. Cit, 259.

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