

COMBAT

ARTE, ARTIVISMO E CIDADANIA. UTOPIAS E FUTUROS IMAGINADOS

ART, ARTIVISM AND CITIZENSHIP: UTOPIAS AND IMAGINED FUTURES

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Art, activism and citizenship. Utopias and imagined futures



Mulheres Negras na Resistência: um estudo de duas escritoras do Harlem Renaissance

**Black Women in Resistance: a study of
two writers of the Harlem Renaissance**



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Resumo:

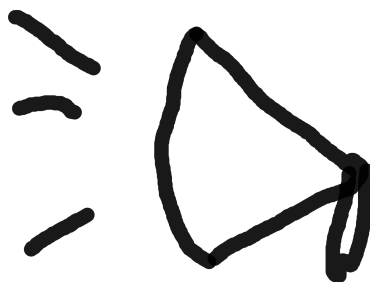
Arte e literatura são frequentemente descritas como armas na luta pelos Direitos Civis, bem como a igualdade social. Num contexto de discriminação racial e de género, os artistas afro-americanos combinaram a criatividade com o ativismo e lutaram para que o seu talento e humanidade fossem reconhecidos. Como resultado, um grande número de romances, poemas ou autobiografias visavam representar a história dos Negros de África dispersos por todo o Novo Mundo. A criação de uma autêntica voz negra e o estabelecimento de uma literatura apropriada representam um enorme passo na história afro-americana. De facto, com o aumento da produção artística afro-americana, nasceu uma nova tradição literária que ilustrou o caminho para a saída da escravatura: A tradição literária negra. Embora a literatura negra existisse desde o século XVIII, o início do século XX foi o mais frutuoso em termos de produção de arte negra.

Palavras-chave: Harlem Renaissance, literatura afro-americana, raça, género.

Abstract:

Art and literature are often described as weapons in the fight for Civil Rights as well as social equality. In a context of racial and gender discrimination, African-American artists have combined creativity with activism and fought for their talent and humanity to be recognized. As a result, a great number of novels, poems or autobiographies aimed to represent the history of the dispersed Blacks of Africa all over the New World. The creation of an authentic black voice and the establishment of a proper literature represent a huge step in African-American history. Indeed, with the increase in African-American art production, a new literary tradition that illustrated the way out of slavery was born: The Black literary tradition. Although Black literature had existed since the 18 th century, the beginning of the 20 th century was the most fruitful in terms of black art production.

Keywords: Harlem Renaissance, African-American literature, race, gender.



Introduction

In 1920 in New York, the Harlem Renaissance came as a turning point in black cultural history. Also called "The New Negro Movement", this rebirth of Black-American culture aims to subvert the derogatory image suffered by African-Americans and reconstruct a new racial identity. The 1920s was also a period of passing from conventional white standards to a more sophisticated black life, culture and vernacular that stimulated racial pride and confidence.

Resisting and subverting white essentialism was not only the aim of male writers but also of women writers like Nella Larsen, Jessie Redmon Fauset, Zora Neale Hurston, Georgia Douglass Johnson, Dorothy West and many others. In the case of African-American women writers, however, the issue of identity formation and voice was of course further complicated by gender. Black women writers indeed struggled to gain a voice that seemed to be appropriated by men, blacks and whites, in a male-dominated society. Indeed, while major male writers of the Harlem Renaissance have received a significant amount of academic consideration, women writers were left on the margins.

Some critics like Ann Allen Shockley even claim that the Harlem Renaissance was a male movement:

The difference in interest, subject matter, and writing styles between males and females add to [the patronizing attitudes of black male writers and critics toward black women writers which retarded their careers and consequential recognition]. While black males like Claude McKay, Wallace Thurman, and Langston Hughes were writing in a realistic style of race...the [accepted] themes of the [Harlem Renaissance], women writers tended to cling to [what were considered] outdated Victorian themes and conventional style. (Shockley, 1988, p. 405)

Despite the intense gender hierarchy in art domains, African American women writers struggled in order to be recognized. Thus, African-American women's literary works in the 1920s portray a fundamental struggle against racism, sexism and class issues.

In this paper, I will focus on the works of two women writers: Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral* (1929), and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937). I will put forward the twin themes of subversion and resistance which seem common to these two writers, and which allow one to establish a dialogue between the texts, thus delineating a sort of literary sisterhood. I will try to analyze the means of resistance used by these writers as they subvert the dominant hierarchies of the time in order to gain freedom and achieve a sense of self. Throughout their itinerary, the protagonists resist the forces that affect their conception of selfhood and impact their consciousness in an attempt to grasp and transcend their cultural limitations.

Although the protagonists of these novels share the same struggle and the same experience of black womanhood, the authors address the issues differently. While Jessie Fauset resists the negative stereotypes associated with blackness by promoting the bourgeois and educated protagonist who passes for white, Hurston on the contrary chooses to subvert whiteness as a whole by promoting Black folklore.

1. Racial Resistance: Deconstructing White Essentialism in Fauset's *Plum Bun*:

Jessie Fauset was concerned with both racial and gender issues. She was fully aware of the obstacles faced by women of any race and particularly the double discrimination faced by African-American women, and sought to emphasize the power of black women in her works. Fau-

set's desire to tell the truth about the black community stems from her childhood memories about discrimination. In an interview published in May 1932 in *The Southern Workman*, she recalls:

When I was a child I used to puzzle my head ruefully over the fact that in school we studied the lives of only great white people. I took it that there simply have been no great Negroes, and I was amazed when, as I grew older, I found that there were. It is a pity that Negro children should be permitted to suffer from that delusion at all. There should be a sort of 'Plutarch's Lives' of the Negro race. Some day, perhaps, I shall get around to writing it. (Starkey, 1932, p. 220)

Moreover, when editing for *Crisis*, Fauset reviewed *Birthright* a novel written by white author T. S. Stribling in 1922 in which he used such racial misconceptions about African-Americans: "the peculiar, penetrating odor of dark, sweating skins", "negro blood" (Stribling, 1994, p. 334) etc., and in which he described mulattoes as lazy, claiming that if they ever succeeded in their education or their job, it was certainly due to their white blood. Because she was aware that literature lacked positive portrayal of African-Americans, she aimed, through her perspectives as a middle-class cultured person, to portray African-Americans as favorably as possible.

Indeed, in her novels and short stories, Jessie Fauset deconstructs the stereotypical portrayal of African-Americans as lower-class citizens. She depicts Blacks as middle and upper-class people and even as elitists. Her narratives represent bourgeois blacks who, in their attempt to integrate white American society, decide to embrace the ideals, the values and the lifestyle of the white community.

In *Opportunity* published in June 1924, Gregory Montgomery^{54.)} praises Fauset for "interpreting the better elements of our life to those who know us only as domestic servants, 'uncles,' or criminals." (Montgomery, 1924, p. 181) Similar statements were also made by George Schuyler^{55.)} who was also pleased to read about successful African-Americans, he rejoices that "here for the first time we are presented with a novel built around our own 'best' people who, after all is said, are the inspiration of the rising generation." (Schulyer, 1924, in Johnson, 1960)

Jessie fauset's second novel *Plum Bun: A Novel Without a Moral*, is generally considered as her best as it deals with the complex themes of racism, capitalism, and sexism. Also, as I am treating the subject of resistance, my choice of *Plum Bun* is thus related to the fact that the novel is considered as Fauset's 'pièce de résistance'. The novel offers an innovative portrayal of the African-American female struggle to resist both white and male derogatory representations of women. Published in 1929, the novel is a 'Künstlerroman' that depicts the journey of Angela a young Black painter in her quest of identity, happiness and freedom from her hometown Philadelphia to New York and then to Paris. Her light skin facilitates her passing for white, the color which was then perceived as the golden key to power, status and money. Confined to her liminal space between two races, she experiences a hybrid life of blackness and whiteness, oppression and freedom, middle-class and upper-class, American and European. The protagonist puts on whiteness and moves from her home in Philadelphia to New York.

^{54.)} Gregory Montgomery (August 31, 1887 – November 21, 1971) was a Professor at Howard University and a leading figure in the National Negro Theatre Movement.

^{55.)} George Samuel Schuyler (February 25, 1895 – August 31, 1977) was an American writer and journalist.

Although it looks like a conventional book of passing, *Plum bun* transcends the limitations of the passing genre and challenges the depiction of the classic tragic mulatto, and the classic stereotypes in general. In the novel, Fauset deconstructs these clichéd characteristics of white hegemony, and starts by resisting the portrayal of the traditional mulatto tragedy.

Confronted with racial and gender restrictions, mulattoes were estranged from their socio-cultural environment of which they tended to either resist or to transgress prejudices by creating new alternatives of existence. Fauset's deconstructing and resisting conventions and prejudices consists in portraying a different model for the mulatto, one that is not tragic. By setting a whole section entitled 'home' in the novel, Fauset aims to deconstruct the traditional mulatto narratives since mulattoes are said not to belong anywhere and not to have any fixed identity or place. In other words, while most of the time mulattoes are conventionally 'orphans', Angela has a family and a house.

The author uses the figure of the mulatto in order to deconstruct racial essentialism and emphasize the inadequacy of the one-drop rule. As Deborah McDowell observes, Fauset "challenged the irrationalities of the American attempt to classify races biologically... [as] the figure of the mulatto who could pass for white exposed the basis of that irrationality in prejudice." (McDowell, 1990, p. xxiii) Her physical appearance does not present any sign of racial belonging, as indeed "melanin, it seems, is not the manifest truth of race, although it has played a crucial part in the construction of racial thinking in the United States" (Rottenberg, 2003, p. 439). In Philadelphia, Angela is believed to be white. Her art teacher Henry, a racial essentialist, is stupefied when he becomes aware of Angela's true origins:

But I can't think she's really coloured, Mabel. Why, she looks and acts just like a white girl. She dresses in better taste than anybody in the room...Well, she just can't be. Do you suppose I don't know a coloured woman when I see one? I can tell'em a mile off. (Fauset, 1929, p. 72)

Fauset refuses the idea that race may be detectable. She acknowledges that the theory of "blood tells" is a construct of white essentialists who believe that "racial segregation merely reflected the natural order of the universe: to preserve the distinction and separation of the races was to preserve order." (Kawach, 1997, p. 94) Fauset proves that this one-drop rule is inefficient when Angela's friend Mary Hastings fails to recognize her friend's blackness, not only because she does not present any physical sign of blackness, but also because her being black does not affect her personality and her intellect. Angela does not understand why Mary blames her for not mentioning that she is a black girl:

And then her own voice in tragic but proud bewilderment. 'Tell you that I was coloured! Why of course I never told you that I was coloured. Why should I?...I'm just the same as I was before you knew I was coloured and just the same afterwards. Why should it ever have made any difference at all?' (Fauset, 1929, p. 38)

In many passages in the novel, Fauset ironically denounces white people's blind attachment to racial essentialism. For instance, the attendants of the theatre who do not sell tickets for colored people, accept light-skinned Angela and refuses her dark-skinned friend Matthew, though both are blacks. Also, Angela's racist lover Roger fails to detect that Angela is also black as he proudly insults black people in the restaurant:

Well I put a spoke in the wheel of those 'coons'! They forget themselves so quickly, coming in here spoiling white people's appetites. I told the manager if they brought one of their damned suits I'd be responsible. I wasn't going to have them here with you, Angéle. I could tell

that night at Martha Burden's by the way you looked at that girl that you had no times for darkies. I'll bet you'd never been that near to one before in your life, had you? Wonder where Martha picked that one up (Fauset, 1929, p. 133).

The absurdity of racial essentialism reaches a climax when both Angela and her lover Anthony, both of whom are passing for white, fail to detect each other's blackness. When he reveals his origins to Angela, unaware that she is also black, Anthony exclaims:

Yes, that's right, you damned American! I'm not fit for you to touch now, am I? It was all right as long as you thought I was a murderer, a card sharp, a criminal, but the black blood in me is a bit too much, isn't it?...What are you going to do, alarm the neighbourhood?...You are a white American. I know there is nothing too dastardly for them to attempt when colour is involved. (Fauset, 1929, p. 285)

Through these examples, Fauset aims to prove that passing deconstructs racial essentialism. In this "farical scene," according to McLendon, "the larger purpose of the parody, of inverting the racial sign system, is to call attention to Angela's and Anthony's positions of indeterminacy, thereby subverting the body's potential as signifier of socially constructed representations of race and stressing the complex interplay of issues of identity" (McLendon, 1995, p. 48) Anthony's comment also denounces the way white essentialist treat black people as "a murderer, a card sharp, a criminal," and asserts that the act of passing becomes almost a necessity: "You in your foolishness, I in my carelessness, 'passing, passing' and life sitting back laughing, splitting her sides at the joke of it." (Fauset, 1929, p. 298)

Racial essentialism provides a justification for the oppressive exploitation of black people. The purpose of generating such a fictive knowledge, is to provide whites the power over blacks. In this respect, Michel Foucault suggests that "The exercise of power perpetually creates knowledge and, conversely, knowledge constantly induces effects of power...It is not possible for power to be exercised without knowledge, it is impossible for knowledge not to engender power". (Foucault, 1980, p. 52)

Angela is fully aware of the perversity of white hegemony:

All the good things were theirs. Not, some coldly reasoning instinct within was saying, because they were white. But because for the present they had power and the badge of that power was whiteness, very like the colours on the escutcheon of a powerful house...a lot of things which are in the world for everybody really but which only white people, as far as I can see, get their hands on (Fauset, 1929, p. 73).

This fake racial discourse provides whites with power and allows them to believe that blacks are innately bound to serve them. Madame Sylvio hires Mattie to serve her on the basis of her colour:

She knew that in spite of Mattie's white skin there was black blood in her veins; in fact she would not have taken the girl on had she not been coloured; all servants must be negro...she felt dimly that all coloured people are thickly streaked with immorality. They were naturally loose, she reasoned, when she thought about it at all (Fauset, 1929, p. 29).

Fauset ironically details and debunks most of the stereotypes ascribed to black people. Roger for instance states, "I've never seen a nigger with any [brains] yet" (Fauset, 1929, p. 216). The nurse at the hospital in Broad street "did not believe that black people were exactly human" (Fauset, 1929, p. 59). In her point of view, "there was no place for them in the scheme of life so far as she could see" and "the niggers [should be] burned" (Fauset, 1929, p.59). Later in the novel, the teachers' committee who withdraws Miss Powell's award when they found out that she is black, feel that they are

"acting in accordance with a natural law" (Fauset, 1929, p. 346). One of the reporters even considers mixed blood as a curse whose "insidiously concealed influence constantly threatens the wells of national race purity. Such incidents as these make one halt before he condemns the efforts of the Ku Klux Klan and its unceasing fight for 100 percent. Americanism" (Fauset, 1929, p. 352).

As McDowell points out, Fauset "comprehends the extent to which social hierarchies are color-coded...a coding that interacts America's basic attitudes toward racial intermixture" (McDowell, 1990, p. xxii). Angela fully understands that in America "colour or the lack of it meant the difference between freedom and fetters;" (Fauset, 1929, p. 137) and she sees passing as the only means to subvert white hegemony: "I'm sick, sick, sick of seeing what I want dangled right before my eyes and then of having it snatched away from me and all of it through no fault of my own" (Fauset, 1929, p. 77).

Angela's successful passing not only ridicules the one-drop rule of white essentialism, but also subverts white hegemony's power over her:

While the mulatto challenges the myth of racial purity, the figure of the passing body goes a step further, challenging the stability of racial knowledge and therefore implicitly the stability of the order that has been constructed on that knowledge. (Kawach, 1997, p. 131)

Besides, Fauset denounces the description of mulattos as promiscuous and immoral. She thus deconstructs this attribution by reversing the stereotype of the black woman as a Jezebel, she does not only transfer promiscuity and immorality on whites but also tends to represent her black characters as quite respectable. The absence of the sex and nudity is a temptation to subvert the racial prejudices that depict the black female body as promiscuous. I would argue that despite the absence of sexual scenes in the text, *Plum Bun* is nevertheless deeply concerned with love and sex, though they are represented in an indirect way. While blues singers convey a primitive and prejudiced image of the sexually active black female who is always urging for sex, Fauset tends to deconstruct these exotic and erotic images by presenting black women as bourgeois, middle-class, and puritanical.

Fauset also subverts the stereotypical idea that the positive character attributions of mulattoes are only due to their white heritage. She depicts the two artists in the novel, Miss Powel and Miss Henderson, not as mulattos but as fully Black characters in order to insist that their artistic greatness cannot be the result of white genealogical background, but only of their Black blood. The author subverts the notion of black inferiority and affirms that Black is beautiful. By portraying the character of Miss Powel, Angela's colored art colleague, as fully black and very beautiful artist, Fauset reverses the clichéd idea that mulattos are beautiful and talented only because they are half white.

Besides, Fauset resists the prevalent images of Harlem as a city of exoticism as depicted in many works such as Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven*. Indeed, she challenges the fictive stereotypes, and aims at restoring the truth about Harlem. In this respect, in the novel, Angela is amazed by Harlem when she realizes that it is not populated by only low-class blacks and criminals, "not all these people...were servants or underlings or end men" (Fauset, 1929, p. 96) Angela is surprised about Harlem because she has embodied the white essentialists' attitude towards blacks and Harlem that Fauset tends to deconstruct.

In *Plum Bun*, Fauset portrays the twentieth-century American culture by analyzing its racial and gender dimensions. She draws a character that suffers the limits of race and gender, but at the same time resists them. only when she gave up passing for white and yearning for bourgeois materialism that she comes to terms with herself.

Eventually, Jessie Fauset has dealt with the complex duality of being both black and female, as well as of being only a female to show that despite the racial reality, class and gender remain two major obstacles for American and African-American women artists in the 20th century. By not sacrificing her protagonist at the end of the novel, Fauset tends to deconstruct the image of the tragic mulatto as it is narrowly portrayed by 20th century literary works. Indeed, Fauset's mulatto is not a tragic person who is punished by death for her deserting of the race, but rather succeeds in coming to terms with herself and her environment.

2. Gender Resistance: The "Mise à Mort » of the Black Man

A folklorist, anthropologist and novelist during the Harlem Renaissance, Zora Neale Hurston was one of the major figures of twentieth century African-American literature. Her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is a revolutionary literary work that records a young woman's quest to find her voice and redefine herself. The novel has long been considered a central black feminist text and was praised as powerful for its unique ability to transcend race. Hurston creates a protagonist who is shaped by African-American culture, history and struggles and who challenges gender roles and black love through her relationships with herself, her family, her community and her husbands.

Their Eyes Were Watching God is now considered a classic text in American literature as well as in African-American literature; it has been hailed as a heroic quest narrative, a black woman's *Bildungsroman*, and even a slave narrative depicting the development and quest for freedom of the main character, Janie, who moves from a state of innocence, uncorrupted by prejudices, be it racism or sexism to one of maturity as a result of suffering and surviving various adventures. Her coming of age implies coming to terms with social realities and gender inequalities.

In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, Hurston portrays the characteristics of Southern Black history. Indeed, she explores many themes which are commonly attributed to the Deep South, such as racism, class and gender, and demonstrates how these issues accentuate one's discontent making rebellion an only solution.

Hurston's novel nevertheless suffered as a result of endless debates concerning how blacks should be portrayed in literature. Aware of the necessity to improve white people's view of Afro-Americans, some black intellectuals such as Alain Locke and W.E.B DuBois, who believed that literature represented the most valuable means to dismiss racist prejudices, claimed that Afro-American writers ought to represent Afro-Americans in the most favorable way. Hurston's characters, however, refuse what Hughes called the "urge within the black race toward whiteness, the desire to pour racial individuality into the mold of American standardization, and to be as little Negro and as much American as possible." (Hughes, 1926, as cited in Awkward, 1990)

Richard Wright, who believes that literature that does not inspire protest is useless, argues that Hurston's novel fails to hold a "basic idea or theme that lends itself to significant interpretation... [Hurston's] dialogue manages to catch the psychological movements of the Negro folk-mind in their pure simplicity, but that's as far as it goes... the sensory sweep of her novel carries no theme, no message, no thought." (Wright, 1993, p. 17)

Wright's failure to identify the themes of the novel was due to his inability to understand the feminist aspects of Hurston's novel. He believed that this novel was addressed to a white audience rather than to a Black one. Yet, Hurston was determined to ignore the double audience issue and feel free to say whatever she wanted. In her novel *The Golden Bench of God* which the publisher refused to print, she wrote:

Punches have been pulled to 'keep things from the white folks' or angled politically...well to show our sufferings, rather than to tell a story as is. I have decided that the time has come to write truthfully from the inside. Imagine that no white audience is present to hear what is said. (Hurstons, as cited in Hemenway, 1980)

In other words, the novel is an optimistic representation of Black life in the rural South, a life devoid of White oppression and struggle, contrary to what we usually see in the Jim Crow South. The affirmation of Black life and values as well as the ignorance of interracial issues is in fact a protest in itself. Boyd disagrees with Wright and asserts that Hurston's narratives are protest literature because:

It protest white oppression by stripping it of its potency, by denying its all-powerfulness in black people's lives. Hurston's literary method was not confrontation but affirmation. (Boyd, 2003, p. 305)

Hurston's marginality is a consequence of her refusal to present what most people expected from her works. She shocked those who were interested in black folk culture, yet did not expect to read about female behavior in a world where women were viewed as men's possessions. Zora Neale Hurston is an afro-centric who sees women, Africa and the institution of marriage with an eye well in advance of her time. She was known for her challenge against gender roles expectations and was strong-willed and at odds with authority. Hurston partly attributes her own characteristics to her heroine who passes from silence to voice as the novel develops.

Hurston challenges the authority by presenting anti-conformism and rebellion against society as positive choice and reaction; and this is by attributing to rebellion the quality of courage and bravery. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the protagonist Janie struggles to bring a positive change and improve her conditions and finally succeeds. Indeed, through analyzing the events of her life and telling them to her friend Phoeby, Janie releases herself from oppression and thus recreates herself through storytelling.

The most considerable marker in Janie's coming to selfhood and ability to use her voice is the whole structure of the novel itself. Narrated in a flashback, the novel is a retelling of Janie's experiences to her friend. She eventually finds her words, is comfortable with them, and is sure they are hers, that she can now use them to tell her story.

Janie discovers her own power when she rhetorically murders her husband Jody. Jody has always felt threatened by Janie's oratory talent, a reason why he frequently offends her publicly in order to assert his own superiority and masculinity. One day in the store, Jody insults her:

I god almighty! A woman stay round uh store till she get old as Methusalem and still can't cut a little thing like a plug of tobacco! Don't stand dererollin' yo' pop eyes at me widyo' rump hangin' nearly to yo' knees...You ain't no young girl to be getting' all insulted 'bout yo' looks. You ain't no young courtin' gal. You'se uh ole woman, nearly forty...Nobody in heahain'tlookin' for no wife outa yuh. Old as you is. (Hurstons, 1937, p. 106)

For once however, after twenty years of submission and oppression, Janie signifies back:

Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon Ah looks mah age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big-bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain'tnothin' to it but yo' big voice. Humph! Talkin'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life. (Hurstons, 1937, p. 106)

Janie's description of Jody as sexually impotent destroys the image Jody had built up of himself as an attractive and happily married man, "the revelation of the truth kills him. Janie, in effect, has rewritten Joe's text of himself and liberated herself in the process" (Gates, 1990, p. 162) as Henry Louis Gates observes. When the townspeople see and hear that the mayor and his wife have quarreled, Jody is "robbed... of his illusion of irresistible maleness that all men cherish, which was terrible" (Hurston, 1937, p. 107). Jody perceives Janie's verbal abuse as a sort of symbolic castration and murder, not only physically but also socially. Since he relates his sexual ability to his reputation, Jody is devastated by his wife's comments. Consequently, not only does he refuse to sleep with Janie any longer, but he also withdraws from social life to avoid being a subject of mockery by the townspeople. Soon after this incident, Jody "got too weak to look after things and took to his bed... But Jody was never to get on his feet again..." (Hurston, 1937, p. 111).

Many crucial scenes in the novel such as Janie 's insulting her husband back, take place on the porch of Eatonville as the porch has always been a place of social life. In *Swinging in Place: Porch Life in Southern Culture*, Jocelyn Hazelwood Donlon argues:

Socially, politically, and psychologically significant, the porch is charged a transitional space between public and private spheres. Facilitating yet limiting access to others, the porch inextricably links community members to each other, while setting boundaries—be they boundaries of class, of gender, or of generation. Indeed, what fascinates me most about the porch is how it helps to set the terms of a community, how it fosters the policing of boundaries--boundaries that separate 'private' from 'public', 'self' from 'other', and 'home' from 'community'. In essence, the porch creates a 'liminal' space. (Donlon, 2001, p. 13)

The porch indeed encloses various kinds of interactive potential as echoed by Michel Foucault's notion of heterotopia. In *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, the porch is not only perceived as a place of interactions and performance but also as a space of resistance. The male porch-sitters in Eatonville use the porch to perform African-American oral tradition as well as to subvert the constructs of white supremacy.

The protagonist indeed uses the porch as a space of resistance and subversion. She challenges this established male space and tries to use the porch in order to subvert gender roles but, she is denied the right to participate in this space: "Janie did what she had never done before, that is, thrust herself into the conversation." (Hurston, 1937, p. 112) Jody prevents her from speaking because he knows that her participation would dismantle the power system which he has been building for years, and which allows him to be in perpetual control of his marriage and his town.

For Janie, the porch acts as an emancipating force. When she returns to Eatonville, Janie chooses to narrate her story on the back-porch which acts as a liberating space from the constraints of race and gender. It is important to note that the intimate back-porch space that Janie creates is mostly linked to her female subject rather than to her African-American heritage, and may be seen as an attempt to create an exclusively female space.

Instead of seeking the front-porch space as the traditional hush harbor^{56.)} and a productive space of exchange, the male porch-sitters appropriate the space as masculine and exclude women from

^{56.)}The hush harbor was a place where slaves secretly gathered in order to practice religious traditions during antebellum America.

their exchanges. A fact that may be understood as the unconscious reaction of black males towards racial discrimination. Indeed, racially oppressed, they tend to dismiss their frustration and reinforce their manhood through disregarding their female counterparts.

Eventually, Zora Neale Hurston is considered as a literary fore-mother for the flourishing of black women's literature in the twentieth century. Hurston's work is characterized by her woman-centered narratives, particularly *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, which links the African American women's literary work in the second half of the twentieth century and after, to the African American women literature in the nineteenth century. In other words, the works of Hurston influenced all those women writers who came after such as: Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker and many others. "No survey or introductory level course on black women writers of the twentieth century would be complete without attention to her work". (King, 2008, p. 12) Zora Neale Hurston also explores the complex lives of her characters. In her book *Black Love and the Harlem Renaissance*, Patricia Boulware Ranson argues that Hurston's novels "were love letters to black people and a manifestation of her unconditional acceptance of them." (Boulware Ranson, 2005, p. 153) Hurston's novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* is more a celebration of blackness rather than a rebellion against whiteness, though this very ignorance of whites may also be read as a means of resistance.

Conclusion

Jessie Redmon Fauset and Zora Neale Hurston are two prominent writers of the Harlem Renaissance who share this desire of racial uplift and who created a space in which women are given a voice. Each in their own way, they intended to express themselves and were not discouraged by the challenges they faced. As literary feminists, they explored the themes of race, class and gender by emphasizing the role of black women as regards sexuality, family and marriage. They also showed how the relation between men and women affected the female self. Indeed, in their narratives, Larsen, Fauset and Hurston highlight the way racism marks man/woman relationship, and demonstrate to what extent it impacts the way women view themselves and society.

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