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Heirs of Atlantic paths: Afro Dialogues in Spanish and the Building of the Modern World

Literature is a means to illustrate the historical destiny of the society it intends to characterize, whether on a more restricted level, like the social group, or on a more global one. On this level we can locate the Spanish speaking Atlantic world built due to the colonization, with 1492 as a symbolic date. Undoubtedly, the current world order reflects the heritage of the building of the modern colonial system.

The aim of this text is to analyze the means by which the world order is conceived on literary works in Spanish language that reflect the crossroads of such constructions on the American and on the African side of the Atlantic. Combining the literary, the cultural, the social and the symbolic, this proposal will lean on the content analysis of the novels *Los Nietos de Felicidad Dolores* (1991), by the Afro-Panamanian writer Carlos Guillermo Wilson, alias Cubena, and *Arde el Monte de Noche* (2009), by the Equatoguinean writer Juan Tomás Ávila Laurel. Both writers have a prolific production (poetry, essay, novel, short story) and they are committed to a critical view of the nowadays coloniality¹.

The first is a historical novel that recounts the racial discrimination and the injustices of the non-recognition on the public sphere of the historical contributions of African slaves and their descendants in the region we now know as America (or Latin America). Cubena is himself a Panamanian descendant of Caribbean African descendents. *Arde el Monte de Noche* is an autobiographical novel about the author's childhood in the Annobon Island. Among the themes of the novels, we can find the construction of racial and ethnic relations, the expressions of identity conflicts or the significance of the concept of power in a heterarchical system, linked to contexts of taking off and abandonment of lives that appear on historical and memorial discourses.

Through these discourses we can read the creation of an Afro-Hispanic culture accomplished by the rescue of localized patrimonies. So these two novels, in their dialogue, offer us an opportunity to reflect on the building of the modern colonial world and its subjects and on the expression of collected memories, as well as on the means of deconstruction and relativization of the western enunciations of universality and of the maintenance of hierarchical structures.

¹ To Walter D. Mignolo (2007: 17), the coloniality is the other side of modernity and is marked by the absences. However, we must not forget that this is a modernity centered in the Atlantic, involving the invention of America (as in Mignolo's title *The Idea of Latin America*) and of Africa (like on Valentin Mudimbe's *The Invention of Africa*).

The *creation* of the colonial America and Africa and the *invention* of these continents are the result of a crossroads of trajectories, histories and narratives that express the explorations of the land and the exploitations of the people. Hierarchies were established on such a system. Race, class or gender, among others, were interconnected to build this world and are mirrored on current discursive expressions.

The themes of the invisibility and of the exposal of the colonial networks of power on this *Island of the Atlante sea* and on Panama point the construction, by the literary discourse, of geographies and grammars of the coloniality structure, based on, at least, three axes: power, being and knowledge². Both novels develop a geosituated grammar of the heterarquic network of what is still the world of a domination centered in the Atlantic. And both show us is the places of the existing and of the expression of a subjugation experience. So these are places from where emerges the building of a particular, turned collective, geopolitical and social differential knowledge on the modern Atlantic world.

Both novels offer the expression of an idiosyncratic speech focused on several types of exclusion. They aim to overthrow the dichotomous and structural perspective of the colonial³ history, mainly focused on the dialectics periphery/metropolis or colonizer/colonized. They share the history of the struggle lead by the African people and the African descendent people on the Atlantic world. They are all the grandchildren of Africa and Felicidad Dolores. The private histories became public and turn into a category the *black people*, on a system where race is a central feature. For example, the narrator of *Arde el Monte de Noche* emphasizes that its inhabitants of the Annobon Island are blacks.

But on both narratives, the coloniality of the being (and, indeed, of the mind) is more than just based on what we regard as this symbolic category of race. I consider, with Nelson Maldonado-Torres (2007: 151), that the principle of the idea of the coloniality of the being lays on the historical projects that highlight the separation of the subjects by color. But we can go further. The difference and the subjection are marked on more complex guidelines. In Juan Tomás Ávila's book, on a political system of ethnocracy on which the considerations on the belonging are at the disposal of the most obscure side of the oil globality, of the fishing businesses, on the militarization and on the international system. In Cubena's work, this difference lays on the discrimination of the *chombos*, the Caribbean Afrodescendent people and his descendants on Panamanian society. The origins mark the racial assertion and demonstrations of a black consciousness in Latin America. Cubena also tells us

² Santiago Castro-Gómez (2007: 79-80) presents a triangular structure of the coloniality, whose vertices are the being, the knowledge and the power. More than a structure, I prefer to consider the coloniality as a system, though using Castro-Gómez triple building of this domination network.

³ This adjective doesn't have properly a temporal meaning.

how the Afrodescendants and Afrodescendants Latin-Americans turn into an ethnic group on the other side of the Atlantic and how they excluded from *nuestra America* and from the *USA-America*.

Lying on an Afrocentric approach, by the statement of the African heritage in Latin America, Cubena rises up against the misrecognition of the Afrodescendants' contribution to the culture and history of this continent and the desafrikanization of the public history. By doing so, we read on his work an "acute sense of history and pan-Caribbean cultural identity" (Kutzinsky, 1996: 182)

These places, peoples and memories are inscribed on the colonial wound. With Walter Mignolo (2007: 97), we consider that the colonial wound derives from the racial discourse and the correspondent racial hierarchization of the world. It's through the colonial wound that the inhabitants of these places inscribe themselves on the *Black Atlantic* and on its modern constitution, following the des-Eurocentered view of Paul Gilroy in *The Black Atlantic. Modernity and Double Consciousness* (2002).

They are the colonial wound's descendants and beings, linked to slavery and the colonial economical system of exploitation. Even nowadays, and taking an example from Juan Tomás Ávilas' novel, the Annobon Island doesn't belong to the autochthonous, but to the tentacles that put in action what we must consider as the world of coloniality concerning the fishing system (*Arde el Monte de Noche*: 50-51). Or related to the building of a new airport and of fancy houses for the county's political elite. The negotiation between the locals and the foreigners is explicit: the ships are there to steal and those who go to the ships are "exercising as beggars" (*Arde el Monte de Noche*: 68). The costliness is sometimes impossible to bear. So is the death by cholera, an important episode on the narrative. As if the Ambô is a population mentioned to live without anything (*Arde el Monte de Noche*: 207).

Among other exclusion method, implying a Eurocentric frame, we find, for instance, the logocentric system as a tradition of domination. In order to make possible other perspectives, readings and constructions, Juan Tomás Ávila subdivides and deconstructs the logocentrism into categories such as the preservation of African oral traditions in charge of foreign agents and, most important of all, the language.

The leading figures of the logocentrism in the island are the teacher and the priest and, on such a context, we must highlight the language, the fá d'ambô. The song appreciated as the "más bonita del mundo intero" (*Arde el Monte de Noche*: 11) is constant in the novel and on its maritime context. Through this song, the narrator is not only observer, but an active member of his community: it is through the language that the individual narrator inscribes himself on the island total social fact and on the community code sharing. The particular universe of the *Rey de Agua*

Salada is the expression of a singular semiotic corpus⁴. On a kind of expression of differential consciousness (concept of Sandoval, 2000: 35-36), the women sign on the church on “nuestra lengua”, the property of the island and of nobody else. And, on the novel, we consider the Spanish as a mechanism to read the autochthonous language, because, at the level of the colonial subject conscience, the tool to express the resistance to the linchpins of subjugation is the fá d’ambô.

By the examples of the ecclesiastic and the military contexts, we can conclude that the language is more than the expression of freedom: it’s the space of freedom. The “lengua de la gente de mi isla” (*Arde el Monte de Noche*: 49) doesn’t belong to the groups and spaces of subjugation, the church, the school and the soldiers. “¿Pero cómo ellos podían ejercer bien de soldado en un lugar, en nuestra isla, donde no tenían a nadie, sin hablar nuestra lengua, sin saber nadar ni poder llevar un cayuco? (...) Los de nuestra isla tampoco aprendimos su lengua” (*Arde el Monte de Noche*: 74). This last attitude is, in my opinion, to highlight: the refusal to learn the language that characterizes the Equatoguinean ethnocracy, the Fang.

The contexts of privation, isolation, rapine or belittlement we read in the novels lead us to the Fanonian concept of the *wretched of the earth*, the strong idea of the texts, in my opinion. I choose the classical work of Fanon, instead of the expressions *subaltern* (Spivak) or *people without history* (Eric Wolf), because these novels show us the need to claim the history and to overcome the grids of the subalternity. They challenge the logics of the coloniality, which remarks the absences on the modernity paradigm.

The *wretched of the earth* belong to the large group of the “non being”, on a racial demarcation of the world. We witness the insistence on the impossibility of heterogeneous trajectories on the global sphere⁵. But this globality is also made of realities as singular as the ones presented on this paper. And the voices of Juan Tomás Ávila or of Cubena teach us that the impossibility must be relativized. As Gloria Anzaldúa stands for, appealing to a new and necessary consciousnesses, “the possibilities are numerous once we decide to act and not react” (2007: 101).

⁴ As we can see on the following quote: “Bueno, en la isla de mar de Atlante de la que hablo al rey del mar se le conocía como Rey de Agua Salada, así, y cuando oía a otros del rey de agua salada, sabía que se refería al nuestro, no al de otro sitio. En la lengua de nuestra isla existen dos nombres para el mar: mar, en dicha lengua, y agua salada” (*Arde el Monte de Noche*: 171).

⁵ We can see it on the following example: “in order to argue that one potentially significant contribution of global South discourse is to render the impossibility of its own trajectories across heterogeneous global spaces. In other words, global South discourse stands to recognize, *as an effect of the neoliberal globalization in which it seeks to intervene*, the irreducible limits on thinking the South from within the institutions of the North and the discursive practices they sustain” (Cherniavsky, 2007: 77).

The action is made possible in the construction of the *wretched of the earth* or of the *colonial subjects*⁶ (on colonial and postcolonial contexts) on the narratives of the people who belong to that universe. It is not the victimization, but the negotiation of the life experience and of the heritage of a great part of the humanity. They aren't deprived of History. They are subjects that build the History at the level of their existences and languages.

The significance of the local enunciation of these individual speeches must be highlighted on such a context, since they convey the deconstruction of the predominant Eurocentric structure of History's discourse. By reversing the angle, the novels create History and the following words by Juan Tomás Ávila initiate us on the relevance and the need of History: "En realidad vivir en la oscuridad es hacerlo de espaldas a la historia. Y es que no creo que nadie pueda contar lo que hace en la oscuridad, pues no conocería todos los detalles de lo que ocurre en ella" (*Arde el Monte de Noche*: 158).

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⁶ People became colonial subjects by their inscription on the colonial difference. This means the institutionalization of the differences based on the subalternization (cf. Maldonado-Torres, 2007: 132-133).

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