

EXEMPLARY EXCEPTIONS: THE SINGULARITY OF SOJOURNER TRUTH AND JARENA LEE AND THE NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN SOCIETY

EXCEÇÕES EXEMPLARES: A SINGULARIDADE DE SOJOURNER TRUTH E JARENA LEE E A SOCIEDADE ESTADUNIDENSE DO SÉCULO DEZENOVE



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Organizadores:

Prof. Dr. Cláudio R. V. Braga



Profa. Dra. Gláucia R. Gonçalves



Profa. Dra. Fernanda Guida



Profa. Dra. Elena Brugioni



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Hanna Karolyne Souza Simões

hannasimoes@hotmail.com

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Marcel de Lima Santos

seasky68@yahoo.com

Ph.D. em Estudos Literários pela University of Nottingham, na Inglaterra (2003). Atualmente é Professor Associado de Literaturas de Língua Inglesa da Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais.

Resumo/Abstract

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Este texto visa compreender o paradoxal rótulo de excepcionalidade de Sojourner Truth e Jarena Lee, a partir do que foi registrado em suas (auto)biografias e como foram retratadas e referidas nos jornais oitocentistas. A partir disso, investigamos a construção da raça e dos estereótipos pelos poderes hegemônicos brancos e expomos como essas mulheres desmantelaram a excepcionalidade enquanto forma de comparação de superioridade e inferioridade.

Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, Excepcionalidade, Estereótipos

This text aims at understanding Sojourner Truth and Jarena Lee's paradoxical label of exceptionality as registered in their (auto)biographies and as portrayed and referred in nineteenth-century newspapers. From this we investigate the construction of race and stereotypes by white hegemonic powers and discuss how these women dismantled exceptionality as a necessary superior/inferior comparative form.

Sojourner Truth, Jarena Lee, Exceptionality, Stereotypes

Introduction

The concept of exceptionality is entangled in waves of meaning. How people are situated within this spectrum of signification is dependent upon the classification made by others and by themselves. With this in mind, this text aims at understanding Sojourner Truth and Jarena Lee's place as registered in their (auto) biographies and also portrayed and referred to in newspapers of the period. Such an analysis will provide arguments to evaluate these women's attitudes as well as the social context in which they lived.

The assessment of the way these women were characterized and represented will develop through a previous presentation of biographical elements of Truth's and Lee's lives. After a discussion of the concept of exceptionality associated with racial stereotypes, we will approach how such stereotypes are constructed and biased by white subjects' fictionalization of race as a defense mechanism, along with its impacts on the literary production of black subjects. Lee's and Truth's portrayals and representations drawn from their narratives and mentions in newspapers will grant arguments to state the effects of exceptionality as well as their position and singularity. Their narratives, *Narrative of Sojourner Truth*, published in 1850, and *Religious Experience and Journal of Mrs. Jarena Lee, giving an account of her call to preach the gospel*, published in 1849, and clippings about Truth from the newspaper *Anti-Slavery Bugle* will provide illustrative depictions of how these women were outlined. These extracts will corroborate the hypothesis that not only were they targets of other people's prejudices and stereotypical notions but also that their responses to discriminatory stances were exceptionally met through their singularity expressed through words (written or spoken) and attitudes.

Sojourner Truth and Jarena Lee

The characterization of Sojourner Truth and Jarena Lee as women of antebellum

America have differences and correlations. On the one hand, the similarities between them are the period and geographical location they lived in; they were born in the last part of the eighteenth century in the northern states of the United States: Lee was born on February 11th, 1783, on Cape May, state of New Jersey, and Truth, whose name was originally Isabella, was born in Ulster County, New York in the year 1797 according to scholarly comments (ANDREWS; FOSTER; HARRIS, 2001, p. 401), for in her narrative it is mentioned that she was born "between the years 1797 and 1800" (GILBERT, OLIVE; TRUTH, 1998, p. 9). Apart from this, they were both religious women whose path to sanctification has been agitated: Jarena Lee describes some episodes of suicidal attempts before converting to Christianity, and Truth states that her religious teachings from her mother and father would have come out of the desolation of having their children sold and sent away. The strongest connection between them, however, is that their journeys throughout the nineteenth century have been shaped mostly by their religious dedication and their decision to become itinerant preachers.

On the other hand, some of their differences have defined how these women are remembered today. Jarena Lee, as a free woman since birth, faced other challenges in life, most of them based on racial prejudice, but also gender-based, especially by her religious peers, even though the audiences she addressed were generally black, as were her religious affiliation. Lee was not mentioned in newspapers except from the only time her name appeared in a paper in 1834 (but it is not proven it was really her). Notwithstanding that both women had prominent acquaintances, this did not reflect on Lee's influential aspect in society, and at some minor level, not even Truth's. Sojourner Truth, who was constantly mentioned in newspapers, was acquainted with influential white men, but their connection is not highlighted in biographies made of men like William Lloyd Garrison, Truth's Northampton associate. The same can be said of Lee, whose closeness to Bishop Richard Allen, founder of the African Methodist Episcopal Church (AME)

in 1816, is not mentioned in his own narrative and her doings have not been written or described by anyone but herself, despite being the first recognized female preacher in the AME church. According to Frederick Knight (2017), she attended conventions to which Truth also went, but there is no mention of it or any other preaching events in the press. Also, the only visual image we have of Lee is the one she inserted in her narrative. Her call to preach the gospel was depicted by her and only her, highlighting the importance and the power of the word. Her whereabouts after the second publication of her narrative remain unknown, and Knight has had difficulty locating her after the publishing of *Religious Experience* because her name was probably misspelled in census.

Sojourner Truth, on the other hand, was frequently mentioned in newspapers at that period, especially after her famous 1851 speech “Ain’t I a Woman?”. In it she addressed stereotypes related to race and gender, that conceive women only as a fragile and delicate being, displacing black women in general due to their status as property. This speech, notwithstanding its shades and fictions, has made way into the debates regarding intersectional lenses in feminist and post-colonial studies. At that period, her speeches and narrative reached audiences from the United States and England. Her speeches are famously depicted as making powerful associations and directly addressing audiences concerning women’s rights along with abolition rights. Concerning Truth’s physical image, her figure is present in many *cartes-de-visites*, but it is also described in many ways, regarding her clothing, her voice, her posture, and her physical appearance. Another element frequently evoked is her previous enslaved situation, which was often used to address some experiences in her speeches, as part of the construction of her subjectivity. As a formerly

enslaved person, this “condition” was generally mentioned in newspapers and became a background to how articles would refer to her. This adds up to her illiteracy, which unfavorably depicted her as ignorant and unlearned. Hence, she embodied some elements that portrayed her within a stereotyped version of what a black emancipated woman was, or better, how she had to be regarded.

Exceptionality, stereotypes, and literary productions

Examining the place of women in anthologies of seventeenth and eighteenth-centuries literatures, it is not perceived upfront that only white women are being referred to¹, rendering invisibility to non-white women. Thus, inquiring where black women were in these periods and when they started getting access to literature as readers or authors reverberates many inequalities, but most of all it exposes how the black subject was and still is rendered inside the exceptional label. Therefore, it is possible to observe how the exceptionality of the few black voices of the period is met with its classification as deviant. The dehumanizing effect constructed by slavery reinforces this label, as it disregards the capacity of black people to produce literary works according to a level standardized by white men in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. At the same time, this effect does not make the few works produced by non-white people influential, for even though those who had exposed their experiences or creativity stood out (despite the general assumption that people from non-European descent were not capable of writing influential texts), they were hardly given the authority on the topics addressed (even if the literary matter was the person’s own life). Despite these labels and effects, this period fomented the rise of subjectivity that attempted at including hitherto social outcasts,

¹ The two anthologies used in this research have only portrayed white female writers in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries: Gilbert and Gubar’s *Norton Anthology of Literature by Women* (2007) and *The Cambridge companion to early modern women’s writing* (2009) organized by Laura Knoppers.

leading to the United States Declaration of Independence (1776) and the French Declaration of the Rights of Man and of the Citizen (1789) with its “unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness”. However, these movements have culminated in the designation of citizenship only to white men.

Such exclusive designation, when associated with race, led to the suppression of singularities and cultural traits, and forced black people into the position of the psychoanalytical Other. The Portuguese writer Grada Kilomba explores how black subjects came to be “the personification of the repressed aspects of the white ‘self’²: Otherness. She describes whiteness “as a dependent identity that exists through the exploitation of the ‘Other,’ a relational identity constructed by whites defining themselves as unlike racial ‘Others.’” (2010, p. 19). Consequently, the surging of the exceptional label regarding black people meets two of white people’s needs: (1) to state the difference, meaning that the Other is not like the Self; (2) to keep this difference in a merging way, meaning that each person would be seen as representatives of the Other group. However, as we will soon observe, there are exceptions, such as in cases when one individual stands out of her group and is either removed from this group or labeled as an exemplary exception. Therefore, with the focus on skin color, white people led black people into a merging that determined the color as a differential and unifying characteristic at the same time. On the one hand, when approached with the negative aspects, such as sloth, violence, and malice, according to what Kilomba named as the screen of projection (2010, p. 18), it can be said that one black person represents all black people. On the other hand, when one black person succeeds

and stands out, this person’s “achievement” (reaching the white Subject’s expectations and producing something that is valued and highly regarded by white people) is not entirely laureated for it emerges from among a people whose achievements are disregarded, meaning that the individual who produced such a thing is only one detached from an ocean of nameless and faceless Others. This way, the white subject maintains the status as the ‘self’ and the “white fantasies of what Blackness should be like” (2010, p. 19).

The exceptional label arouses stereotypes that are forms of expression of what is seen and constructed as the norm. Stereotypes derive from “simplifications” of complexities, as something “reduced to a few essentials, fixed in Nature by a few, simplified characteristics” (HALL, 1997, p. 249), but also act as a narrative power. When facing a stereotype we should question “how it came into being and whose ends, and to what purpose did it serve” (WINKS, 1990, p. 113). Exceptionality, thus, appears through a comparative difference. In the Oxford dictionary the word ‘exception’ is defined as “a person or thing that is excepted or that does not follow a rule”(SOANES; STEVENSON, 2008, p. 496). Hence, another possible aspect that results from “the exceptional” is, besides the isolation, the tie with those who “follow a rule”. From a racial perspective, we might say that, after being detached, this subject becomes the sole reference on a specific topic and perhaps excessively pointed out as the exception, generating stereotypes such as that of Mammy and Uncle Tom³, which operate with the integration and exclusion of these women and men from their environment. Therefore, these subjects are exhorted to act as mascots or a charade and are asked to fulfill a role forged to make the white subjects feel good about themselves. These stereotypes have

² Italics in the original.

³ Uncle Tom, derived from Harriet Beecher Stowe's pro-abolitionist novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and Mammy are stereotypical representations of the “good” Christian black slave. They are generally portrayed as an “ever-faithful and devoted domestic slave” (HALL, 1997, p. 245).

contributed to the perpetuation of racism and sexism, and they have an impact on people's identities, for they establish an expectation of a person's behavior. When someone is considered exceptional among others of their kingship, it means also that the expectations made/designed for this group originate in these stereotyped and negative constructions of identity made by hegemonic powers. Accordingly, even "good" stereotypes do not erase stereotypes of badness, but on the contrary: "when juxtaposed, the 'good' may, instead, in a most cynical way, work to reinforce the 'bad'" (ZARKOV, 2020, p. 2). Such act makes the questioning of one's skills, as writers or preachers, one of the most common racist and sexist acts. And for black subjects, the restraints to writing instruction fomented the imaginary that non-white subjects had smaller brains or were not capable of learning abstract knowledge. Hence, the efforts made by enslaved to "imitate the manners and customs of so-called 'civilized' white folks" was taken with disproportionate amusement by whites (HALL, 1997, p. 244).

The effects it has on literary production are considerable. By classifying black works as exceptional there is little to be expected from them, seeing that they were considered inferior regarding education and capacity. Their authority is questioned and the way they are portrayed demonstrates how different they were/are. Such questioning is exemplified by the presence of Certificates of Character in many ex-slave narratives. In Truth's case, among those who have certified her character and the veracity of the events told in the *Narrative*, were her former enslaver Mr. John Dumont, Isaac Van Wagenen, who helped her gain her liberty (and whose name she and her children incorporated to themselves before she renamed herself), and William Lloyd Garrison, a distinguished abolitionist and journalist (he was also the editor of the newspaper *The Liberator*). Then they are detached by others (white others) and begin to have their identity and singularity questioned/erased. It enhances the standard normalization of whiteness and what they regard as the norm. The stereotyped vision portrays a single and one-dimensional

manifestation of blackness, and to be "exceptional" means to be worthy of the definition in a way that one becomes displaced. The concept of displacement addresses black (auto)biographies as belonging to a different category. Seen that the labeling of exceptional does not have the same effect on white people, black people's literary production will generally be inserted in an adjusted category, one that is frequently accompanied by the prefix "afro" or "African-American". However, it is important to state that these elements have helped create an identity agenda and they have also exposed the relevance of raising consciousness to minorities' identities in literary works.

Exemplary exceptions: analysis of descriptions and events

The analysis that follows will be presented in two sections. The first considers only clippings concerning Sojourner Truth from *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* in three different years: 1850, 1851, and 1860; and the second encompasses excerpts from Truth and Lee's narratives. Through the analysis of the extracts selected from two sources, (auto)biographies and newspapers, we obtain access to the exceptionality agenda.

In newspapers what is written is given a status of truthfulness according to its reputation and reading public, and, at the same time, it possesses an influential capacity that differs from (auto)biographies in that they are endorsed by an arbiter, who, acting as a mediator, will filter and "objectively" address events. Therefore, in newspaper articles and reports, Truth had little or no influence on her characterization. Yet, as a source of information, it stresses a social vision, for they (newspapers) are a broader means of communication and have a considerate level of effectiveness and repercussion when it comes to shaping public opinion. Hence, the selection of adjectives heightens this social vision.

Additionally, (auto)biographies such as Truth's and Lee's aimed at providing truthful accounts of their life trajectory. They belonged to a group that through the writing of spiritual (auto)biographies "had to lay the necessary

intellectual groundwork by proving that black people were as much chosen by God for eternal Salvation as whites” (ANDREWS, 1988, p. 7). Yet, their influential capacity was dependent upon the reading of the entire work, presenting less impressive numbers in comparison to a paper. Regardless of this element, an (auto) biography provides more details and most times uphold a message extracted from the selected passages and defined sequence of event. That is generally true for African-American (auto)biographies, which have formed a literary movement in the decades previous to slavery emancipation. For instance, Jarena Lee is considered one of the first women to publish her live narrative. As the authority of the text, the (auto) biographers (up to a certain point and in all its complexities) hold the narrative power, and because of this, we have access not only to the event but also to their experiences. Meaning that we have contact with their expression of feelings but most importantly, with their reaction to the events. More than in the “objective” description, in their response we meet their principles and beliefs (not disregarding the possibility of inaccuracy or exaggeration). Their singularity is expressed in the way they approach the event and their attitude toward it. Therefore, the decision to include in this analysis clippings from newspapers and (auto)biographies is due to their differences and yet their active role in providing material for an investigation of exceptionality: the former as a third party observer who articulates and reproduces general characterizations along with a social conception of exceptionality, whereas the latter provides a first-hand account that includes stereotypes enforced by the offenders and the author’s answers to such matters, exposing their own vision of exceptionality and singularity.

Newspapers clippings

The editor of *The Anti-Slavery Bugle* was most likely Marius Robinson, who was familiar with Truth and is the writer of the academically accepted version⁴ of the speech “Ain’t I a Woman?” which was also published in this paper (PAINTER, 1996, p. 125). This newspaper began publication on June 20, 1845, and went through until 1863, when its main objective – the emancipation of those who had been enslaved – was accomplished. As a radical abolitionist paper, its motto was “No Union with Slaveholders” and this approach made it necessary to move to a city that would welcome that agenda. Salem in Ohio fits this prerequisite and was also an active station to the Underground Railroad. The paper found a great number of readers beyond Ohio’s borders in states such as Iowa, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Indiana, and had a solid circulation during its eighteen-year run.

In the first extract we become aware of Mr. Garrison’s connection with Truth, who is introduced to the convention by him. The adjectives used are significant to highlight the type of exceptionality impelled upon her. Here she is first presented as formerly being a slave, which induces the reader to a prearranged set of inferior stereotypes, to afterward having her speaking talent exalted as manifesting “an extraordinary natural shrewdness and wit”. The use of “extraordinary” here is overly explicit and demonstrates how her capacities derive from racist ideas of black people’s performance.

Extract 1 - Anti-slavery Bugle - Salem, Ohio - June 15th, 1850 – page 2

Mr. Garrison asked leave to introduce to the Convention a woman, who had **formerly been a slave**, but was now residing in Northampton, in this State. Her former name was Isabel, but she had taken the name of Sojourner Truth. She spoke about half an hour with great earnestness, evincing an **extraordinary natural**

⁴ The different versions of Sojourner Truth’s speech are thoroughly discussed in Nell Irvin Painter’s book *Sojourner Truth, a life, a symbol* (1996).

shrewdness and wit. - The Convention was deeply interested by her remarks. She has recently published a little work, giving the narrative of her life. (JACKSON, 1850)

Though unable to read one word, she exhibited a power of rude, but keen analysis, such as most professional critics must covet in vain. - the remainder of the afternoon, was occupied in a most deeply interesting discussion, growing out of the scene through which we had just passed. (PILLSBURY, 1851)

In the following passage, one year after the previous, the descriptive words sustain similar ideas concerning Truth. By being defined as “the poor old slave woman”, she is associated to her economic condition (“poor”), her age (“old”), and her previous exploration situation (“slave”) as a subject who would normally lack ability due to absence of education and opportunities. She, however, possessed a “power of discrimination, I never in my life saw exceeded if equaled”, which again illustrates the exceptional capacities she presented, “withdrawing” her from racist conceptions and stereotypes of performance and comparing her skills to the normative ones, for her power of discrimination could not even be equaled. Additional references to her focus on her illiteracy, and from this we observe a pattern that has developed throughout the selected excerpts: first Truth is qualified as inferior, afterward she is characterized as remarkable. Such a sequence focus on the separation of the previous stereotypical place designed for black women like herself, to later specify her differential qualities in a comparative analysis. This part indicates this pattern in that the writer first calls attention to her incapacity to read but states her keen analysis as a skill aspired by most professional critics. However, such desired “keen analysis” is labeled as rude. Therefore, the praises she receives arise from a negative and diminishing viewpoint. The descriptions made reinforce a discursive position that, through exceptionality, extract her from the group she belonged and isolate her as an exemplary exception.

Extract 2 - Anti-slavery Bugle - Salem, Ohio - October 25, 1851 – page 2

Sojourner Truth, the poor old slave woman, review the four known sermon, with the power of discrimination, I never in my life saw exceeded if equaled. In the terrible Crucible of her criticism, she melted it down and down until it was shown to be nothing to the purpose at all.

The last newspaper excerpt is dated ten years after the first one and is dedicated to Sojourner Truth, having her name as its title. The description directed to the editor of the Bugle focuses on Truth’s lecturing circuit and her ability to “scatter” “seeds of truth” with her speeches. The writer then highlights Truth’s success in convincing people, white people, through the effect of Truth’s orality: she becomes an exception among her racial peers and is not included in the general rule imposed upon black subjects. Here once more her exemplary exceptionality is addressed negatively when regarded in a widened angle. To praise her, the writer diminished an entire group. Yet, she is again described as “poor”, following the previous “poor old slave woman”, now she is a “poor child of nature”. Such callings bring forth the patronizing attitude derived from white subjects who make use of those adjectives with forged modesty which constructs exceptionality through inferiority. This way, being called a “child” in opposition to “old” discriminates the incapacity to defend oneself as if she was helpless and vulnerable. The reference to nature in the latter example makes a further connection, one that binds natural elements to aspects of race and gender, for they would not indicate the enlightened and logical thinking with which men are associated. As a “poor child of nature”, Truth was diminished to an unfortunate being, whose “warm heart” derived from the hardships endured and not from her singular exceptionality. When in the last part she is called “noble woman”, it is done so to detach her from her peers. In the sarcastic tone imbued in the sentence, the writer states that not even someone as “great or good” as Truth would be set free by the “equable laws” of the “enlightened country”. Hence, her exceptionality did not exclude her from being a

slave, thus she was an exception only for certain social aspects. The writer attempts to compliment Truth and criticize the slavery system, meaning that the country was not enlightened and its laws were irregular, but ends up offending all those subjects who were not exceptional or “too great or good to be reduced to a chattel”.

Extract 3 - Anti-slavery Bugle - Salem, Ohio - Jan 21st, 1860 – page 2

Sojourner Truth.

Editor Bugle: Sojourner Truth has been lecturing in this vicinity this fall. She was well received, and the seeds of truth she scattered; I think, will take root in many hearts.

I think, at least, she has succeeded in convincing the people to whom she has spoken, that **if the blacks as a race are inferior to the whites, she is an exception to the general rule.** Few women of cultivation possess as **vigorous and intellect**, or as warm a heart as this **poor child of nature.**

Yet, **noble woman** that she is, **she was not too great or good to be reduced to a chattel by the equable laws of our free (?) and enlightened country!**

That the time may soon come when such abominations may cease forever in the earnest prayer of [...]

Yours, truly.

C. L. M.

Sylvester, Green Co., Wisconsin. (M., 1860)

In this sense, this analysis draws upon the contradictory exceptional role Sojourner Truth occupies, considering her exclusion and, at the same time, inclusion in society, whilst her singular exceptionality was not addressed as the key element that distinguished her as a woman of their time.

(Auto)biographies clippings

The following excerpts contain description of events that are meaningful to Truth and Lee's lives. In both incidents, they are personally confronted and, as a response, they take a discursive position that assumes their singular exceptionality. One event has been selected for Truth and two for Lee.

The first is from Sojourner Truth and contains the part where she addresses the

selling of her son to a Southern state, which was illegal at the time. According to Suzanne Fitch and Roseann Mandziuk “[a]fter 1807, it was illegal to take slaves out of New York if the person taking them out of the state had not owned the slaves for ten years” (1997, p. 13). Such was the case of Peter who was encaptivated by Solomon Gedney, who “disposed of him to his sister’s husband, a wealthy planter, by the name Fowler” (GILBERT, OLIVE; TRUTH, 1998, p. 30). When Truth questions the illegal selling of her boy, she has an authoritative attitude, as it becomes explicit with the use of words such as “dare” and her awareness of the possibility of bringing this person to “account for the deed”.

[...] When Isabel heard that her son had been sold South, she immediately started on foot and alone, to find the man who had thus **dared**, in the face of all law, human and divine, **to sell her child** out of the State; and if possible, to **bring him to account for the deed.**

As she arrives at her former enslaver’s house, Truth, after complaining to Mrs. Dumont and hearing offensive comments from her about Peter, Truth’s son, and her affliction to his wellbeing, asserts with determination that she would have her son again. Not even the contempt and discredit addressed to her made her question her capacity of having her son back in New York. Her certainty, as she exposed, derived from her faith in God who would make her “tall within” and even make her feel “the power of a nation” with her. Her consciousness of the power of God acting through her exemplifies her confidence and self-awareness in defiance of the wrongdoers who illegally sold her son.

Arriving at New Paltz, she went directly to her former mistress, Dumont, complaining bitterly of the removal of her son. Her mistress heard her through, and then replied—*‘Ugh! a fine fuss to make about a little nigger!* Why, haven’t you as many of ‘em left as you can see to, and take care of? A pity ‘tis, the niggers are not all in Guinea!! Making such a halloo-balloo about the neighborhood; and all for a paltry

nigger!!!' Isabella heard her through, and after a moment's hesitation, answered, in tones of deep determination—'*I'll have my child again.*' 'Have *your child* again!' repeated her mistress—her tones big with contempt, and scorning the absurd idea of her getting him. 'How can you get him? And what have you to support him with, if you could? Have you any money?' 'No,' answered Bell, 'I have no money, but God has enough, or what's better! And I'll have my child again.' These words were pronounced in the most slow, solemn, and determined measure and manner. And in speaking of it, she says, '*Oh my God! I know'd I'd have him agin. I was sure God would help me to get him. Why, I felt so tall within—I felt as if the power of a nation was with me!*' (GILBERT, OLIVE; TRUTH, 1998, p. 30) (italics in the original)

The following paragraph is a comment made by Olive Gilbert regarding the difficulties to transmit into paper elements from the performative composition of Truth's orality. Gilbert's remarks address a closer picture of Truth in its impossibility to capture, in its singularity. Despite the description of "quaint but fit expressions", Gilbert approaches Truth in a singularity that does not stereotype her, but instead observes and respects her oral, body, and clothing expressions. Such aspects are part of her as a singular subject, not as a "greater" person in an inadequate comparison.

The impressions made by Isabella on her auditors, when moved by lofty or deep feeling, **can never be transmitted to paper**, (to use the words of another,) till by some Daguerrian⁵ act, we are enabled to transfer the look, the gesture, the tones of voice, in connection with the quaint, yet fit expressions used, and the spirit-stirring animation that, at such a time, pervades all she says. (GILBERT, OLIVE; TRUTH, 1998, p. 30–31)

Similarly to Truth, Jarena Lee writes about her journey as a preacher in her narrative. Throughout it she faced many

confrontations, the most important one is when she had her request to preach denied by Richard Allen, who was a Reverend at that moment. The basis of his argumentation was that "as to women preaching, he said that our Discipline knew nothing at all about it - that it did not call for women preachers" (LEE, 1988, p. 11). Nine years after the first request she carved her place among the preachers of the AME church. Yet, she constantly handled prejudice situations during her exhortations and preaching. Towards the end of her text she relates that "[i]t was altogether a **strange thing to hear a woman preach** there, so it made quite an excitement, which made my labor very heavy, as the people were all eyes and prayed none" (LEE, 1988, p. 87). The strangeness derives from biased notions of the place and role of women in society. Hence, for the first passage, we will analyze her first call to preach, when she expounds a conversation that portrays the social constraints towards women preaching and her inner desire.

The dialogue occurred between Lee and an inner voice that was for a long time awaited by her. The message was transmitted exclusively to her and imperatively called her to preach the gospel. Lee's immediate answer was imbued with social awareness since women were not preachers and therefore no one would believe her. But at this moment the singular exceptionality takes place for her inner voice asserts her the power to preach and face her challenges, for she would be assisted in her journey. This quote, then, depicts Lee's means of conforming her singular exceptionality to the social one, because, through the interference of God in her ability, she would act through self-effacement. This strategy was also present in medieval female-authored writing, who had to attribute their competency to a heavenly source to have their books accepted. The same approach can be perceived in Lee's attitude; accordingly, her singular exceptionality would generally be presented through the confrontation of her abilities and capacities to

5 Reference to Louis Jacques Mandé Daguerre (1787–1851), inventor of the daguerreotype process of photography and considered one of the fathers of photography.

perform her duties as a preacher, which represent gendered stereotypes.

Between four and five years after my sanctification, on a certain time, an impressive silence fell upon me, and I stood as if some one was about to speak to me, yet I had no such thought in my heart.-- But to my utter surprise there seemed to sound a voice which I thought I distinctly heard, and most certainly understand, which **said to me**, "Go preach the Gospel!" I immediately replied aloud, "No one will believe me," Again I listened, and again the same voice seemed to say-- "Preach the Gospel; I will put words in your mouth, and will turn your enemies to become your friends" (LEE, 1988, p. 10).

The last excerpt provides an example of prejudice with gender and racial origins. Here we observe a defiant yet subtle provocation to those who dared question her capacities. Her acute understanding of racist and sexist discrimination is marked by her questioning regarding a sister in Church, meaning a white sister, and the exceptional discursive position she occupied when she wrote "He has not answered me yet". The use of "yet" promotes defiance of this white man's will to inhibit her business as an authorized woman preacher. In response to his bigotry, she challenges his faith and chooses not to go to the Old Methodist Church, in which she had addressed the pride and prejudice she had undertaken. On this account, the responsiveness of Lee to her enemies was based on a discursive position that, through provocations to the person's stereotypes and prejudices, exposed her singularity and refusal to be complicit in the place these people sought to locate her.

I was invited by one of the Trustees of the Old Methodist Church to pay them a visit on the ensuing Sabbath morning. I made the appointment for said day, I left Georgetown on the morning early, half past ten o'clock we arrived in Milford; Church bell was ringing. We were conducted into the Church; a local preacher was in the pulpit and had prayed, but was asked to come down by another who invited me there. I spoke for them and afterwards they gave out for another

appointment at night, but it caused a controversy among themselves, and they threw it on him to come and see if I would fill it. Previous to this the coloured preachers told me **there was controversy about woman preaching**. But he came and asked me **how long I had been preaching the Gospel**. I answered, rising, 5 or 6 years. He said it was something new. I told him it seemed to be supposed so. I referred him to Mrs. Fletcher, of England, an able preacher and wife of Mr. Fletcher, a great and worthy minister of the Parish. He asked why I did not go to the Quakers. I told him I was sent to the Methodists. I asked if he had a sister in the Church, and she witnessed a Christian life, and was called and qualified to preach, do you think you would be justified before God, to stop her? He has not answered me yet, I found it was prejudice in his mind. He talked as if he had not known what the operation of the Spirit of God was. We may say, with propriety, he had not tarried at Jerusalem long enough. When about to part, he asked me if I would come, but I could not then promise. At night, the people came in their carriages from the country, but **were disappointed, for I spoke in a colored Church**. The doors and windows were opened on account of the heat, but were crowded with people; **pride and prejudice were buried**. We had a powerful time. I was quite taken out of myself—the meeting held till day-break; but I returned to my home. (LEE, 1988, p. 38)

By analyzing the extracts, we observed the movements from both sides, from how they were depicted and seen and how both women wanted to be seen according to their actions and responses to events. But these prejudiced and stereotypical depictions derive not from who Truth and Lee are, but from the way women like them could act and the positions they could occupy. Through the examination of their description and response to harmful events, we access their self-awareness and understanding of the modes of operation of racism and sexism. We, then, aspire to detach from a comparative view of exceptionality and intent at dissecting the "naïve" juxtaposition of "goodness and badness" stereotypes as seen in the newspaper's characterizations. In this way, we aim not at replacing the concept of exceptionality, but at unpacking its layers of

symbolical violence. Furthermore, the notion of exceptionality takes on a completely different role when it is assumed by Truth and Lee. By narrating themselves as exceptional women, they are empowered to dare occupy social places that had been denied to them, giving voice to their singular expressions, handling opposition, and persevering within what they believed in, having God as a guide. Therefore, when we regard and focus only on them, as women and as humans, we address exceptionality through a constructive angle, whereas when we contemplate these women considering what was expected from them in the hegemonic viewpoint, then we are looking through stereotypical lenses, which serve to a racist and violent purpose: to continually state where non-white subjects should/could not be. But despite all this, Truth and Lee's acts, stories, and singularity persisted.

Final considerations or How can we regard exceptionality?

The word is a central source of power and creation. Considering Truth and Lee as doers of the word⁶, their position in society has been one central yet peripheral when it comes to the authority and power addressed unto them. Thus, their classification as exceptional widens the scope through which we may perceive their conduct in private and public spheres. The focus, however, lies in their performance as preachers. The relevance of their religious involvement becomes extraordinary when they decide to publicly demonstrate their skills, be it through speaking at camps, speaking up at church, fighting for causes in legal courts, or publishing their life narratives.

Through the printing of their life stories and *cartes-de-visites*, both Truth and Lee have exceptionally withdrawn themselves from the depiction created to them as black women but have outstandingly created for themselves a place to express their singularities, in which their sense of exceptionality flourished and

bore fruits. Their narratives provide materials from self-perceptions as well as comments on others' reactions to them. In their (auto) biographies, they described themselves and recounted events and situations when they felt disrespected. As would be expected, such contempt would be performed largely by white men (in the case of Lee) and women (as for Mrs. Dumont and Mrs. Gedney in their mockery of Truth's search for her son). These works concede access to both public and private spheres, thus, we have contact with how they chose to depict the doing along with their comments and actions towards it.

Whereas in newspapers, the stereotyped notions Truth confronted derived from gendered and racial basis, Truth had herself stereotyped visions thrustured unto her even after her public accomplishments. The manner of praising Truth insulted not only her but also black people and therefore served to the same discriminatory purpose. The adjectives used strengthened stereotypes and prejudices that diverged the description of her and focused on a negative comparison that disguised her singularity and made it irrelevant. Other extracts from different papers contain, along with a physical description, oral elements (such as stereotyped accent) create depictions made of Truth, leading to more constructed visions of her according to racist stereotypes serving white purposes. Contradictorily, direct quotes from Truth's speeches are often saturated with a southern stereotyped way of speaking while alternative newspaper articles address her ability to speak and commend her for it.

Thus, the questions "What did it mean for a Black woman to be an artist in our grandmothers' time? And in our great-grandmothers' day? It is a question with an answer cruel enough to stop the blood" (WALKER, 2004, p. 233) when adapted to the singular exceptionality of black women, not only evoke the inequalities of the paradoxical exceptional label but, most of all, the violence and opposition these women have

⁶ This term was extracted from James 1:22–25. In this passage it is emphasized that those who do will be blessed, in opposition to those who only hear (COOGAN *et al.*, 2018, p. 1769).

experienced through generations. Their versions and exposure of wrongdoings coupled with Truth and Lee's defiance of the general rule are met with difficulty due to the white Subjects' denial in recognizing their part in creating and promoting racism and sexism (even in newspapers intended to repudiate slavery and the racist system that supports it). Thus, when in the nineteenth-century black men and women started expressing themselves through the writing of life narratives, the white and constricting label of exceptionality given to these subjects and their literary works as a lesser mark (attesting to their "incapacity"), reinforced the whites blindfoldedness towards non-white artistic expressions.

In this manner, when Alice Walker addresses grandmothers and great grandmothers in her question, she is referring to those women who were not considered exceptional by others, yet her argument is that it was exactly those women who have "more often than not anonymously, handed on the creative spark, the seed of the flower they themselves never hoped to see, or like a sealed letter they could not plainly read" (2004, p. 240). Therefore, even if women like Truth and Lee have exposed their lives and lived a public life, it does not exclude those who have not, for they are also guardians of the exceptional spark that is passed from generations. Accordingly, from this period black men and women have started following the example of women like Belinda Sutton, Phillis Wheatley, Harriet Jacobs, Sojourner Truth, and Jarena Lee, but also of their grandmothers and great grandmothers, meaning that the singular exceptionality does not aim at labeling those that "follow the rule" as inferior, but at highlighting the existence of remarkable "seeds of truth" and "seeds of flowers" that are scattered whenever stereotypical and discriminatory visions are subverted, above all, by art. This exceptional black feminist movement is, in opposition to the previous notion of exceptionality, collective. Declarations such as Julia Cooper's "only the black woman can say when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my

womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me" (1988, p. 31) illustrates this movement as it highlights the subversion contained in the disruption of hegemonic concepts and ideas.

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