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**(DE)CONSTRUCTING IMAGES OF AFRICA IN LANGSTON HUGHES'S *THE
BIG SEA* AND ALICE WALKER'S *THE COLOR PURPLE*:
A Postmodern Approach on the African-American Collective Identity**

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“...I learnt that the only way to get a thing done is to start to do it, then keep on doing it, and finally you'll finish it, even if in the beginning you think you can't do it at all. ”

— Langston Hughes, *The Big Sea*

“The more I wonder, the more I love.”

— Alice Walker, *The Color Purple*

Resumo

Este trabalho analisa como as representações da África em *The Big Sea* de Langston Hughes (1940) e *The Color Purple* (1982) de Alice Walker enriquecem as discussões sobre a formação da identidade afro-americana. Ao retratar uma África que não atendia à pátria ideal para os negros americanos, esses livros questionavam a retórica do século XX que favorecia a África como o lugar onde os negros americanos seriam representados e poderiam exercer plenamente suas identidades.

A Teoria dos Estudos Culturais serve de base para a análise das práticas culturais que operam por meio desses sujeitos negros na África e na América. Para analisar os elementos complexos que compõem a subjetividade afro-americana, é usada principalmente a abordagem de Ron Eyerman à memória coletiva e a noção de Stuart Hall de identidades como um "significante flutuante".

Em suma, esta dissertação defende que o retrato não convencional da África nas obras literárias citadas problematiza as discussões sobre a subjetividade afro-americana. Contrariando as narrativas do "retorno", os dois autores chamam a atenção para o elemento americano que não pode ser negligenciado nas questões da dualidade de ser africano e americano ao mesmo tempo.

Palavras-chave: Langston Hughes, Alice Walker; pós-modernismo; teoria sociocultural; identidade; subjetividade.

Abstract

This work analyzes how the representations of Africa in Langston Hughes's *The Big Sea* (1940) and Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982) enrich discussions around issues of African-American identity formation. By depicting an Africa that did not meet the ideal homeland for black Americans, these books questioned the 20th-century rhetoric that favored Africa as the place where black Americans would be represented and could fully perform their identities.

Theory from Cultural Studies will serve as the basis for the analysis of the cultural practices that operate through these Black subjects in Africa and in America. To analyze the complex elements that make up African-American subjectivity, I rely mostly on Ron Eyerman's approach to Collective Memory and Stuart Hall's notion of identities as a "floating signifier."

In short, this dissertation argues that the unconventional portrayal of Africa in the aforementioned literary works problematizes the discussions about African-American subjectivity. By going against the narratives of "return," both authors call attention to the American element that cannot be neglected in the issues regarding the two-ness of being African and American at once.

Keywords: Langston Hughes, Alice Walker; postmodernism; sociocultural theory; identity; subjectivity.

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Introduction

It is a consensus that the improvement of the black population in America was the main concern of intellectuals at the beginning of the 20th century. While Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois led the discussion about the uplift of African Americans through education in the 19th century¹, it was in the first decades of the following century that culture became a central point in the debate involving the uplift of Blacks in the United States. Langston Hughes made the African American experience the subject of his writings, which vividly depicted the racial strife of blacks living in the U.S. The conflict of American blacks to conciliate their black identity with their American identity has been part of the discussions about the identity formation of African Americans by many theorists, authors, and black writers like Langston Hughes and Alice Walker.

They tried to reconstruct the history of their African American heritage through their works. For example, a recurrent “theme in a number of Hughes’s poems is collective memory – memory of Africa, the slave trade, the plantation, day-to-day oppression” (Jordan 860). Many poems, prose texts addressing the continent, and the account of Hughes’s visit to some African countries provide invaluable insight into his vision of the ties between black Americans and Africa, as well as how this bond helps the discussions over the process of identity formation of blacks living in the US.

Additionally, in searching for a cure to the collective trauma of people of African descent, black writers and citizens alike turned their attention once again to Africa, which became a source of inspiration for those who saw the continent as their ideal homeland. A case point is Ethiopia and Liberia, two free black African nations, which inspired African Americans who saw similarities between these countries’ fights “for independence and their own struggles for civil rights” (Ruetten 2). Thus, an image of Africa as motherland spread around people of African descent in America. Returning to the continent their ancestors once belonged was seen as a way of reclaiming their

¹ Although Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois saw education as essential to the uplift of African Americans, their philosophies sharply clashed. While the first advocated hard work, industrial and farming skills, the latter took on political actions, civil rights, and the development of college-educated blacks known as the *Talented Tenth*.

freedom and identity.

However, carrying two competing identities while living in a white-centric country has an additional level of complexity. To understand the specificities of what it meant to be African-American, it was necessary to break away from the traditional portrayal of Africa. The literary works of Langston Hughes and Alice Walker – two of the most praised authors of the twentieth century – helped in demythologizing the images of Africa and the African peoples. By placing black subjectivity at the center of their literary agenda, Hughes and Walker help to give voice to African Americans and their works have tremendously contributed to bringing African American issues to the forefront. Their literary works are rich in social insights, which illuminate assessments of African Americans' subjectivity regarding race, identity, and memory.

Among the several topics about which these authors were concerned, the struggle of American Blacks in search of identity seems to be the most prominent one. In a place where, as Toni Morrison points out in *The Guardian*, “American means white,” it seems plausible to Blacks in America to pose the following questions: Where do we belong to? Are we Africans or Americans? Are we neither one nor the other? Thus, driven by the desire to find out their “location” in American society, in the 1920s many African Americans, as stated before, tried to move back to the land of their ancestors – the place they believed they belonged to: Africa. In a scenario where African-Americans were considered less human than whites, some ideologies from eastward movements, like Marcus Garvey's, take place.

This Black Nationalist and his followers urged African-Americans to be proud of their race/heritage, and return to the motherland of black people: Africa. Even though this idea seemed to be appealing at the time, the eastward movement to the land of their ancestors ultimately failed. At the time, while many black leaders embraced and supported Garvey's visionary ideas, others called into question the view that going back to an Africa they had never seen but only imagined would be the best choice for African-Americans. Among some of the problems in Garvey's propositions, the misrepresentation of Africa in the African American imaginary seems to be the most prominent one.

Writers, such as Langston Hughes, pointed to the problems of romanticizing Africa in the process of constructing an African American identity. Decades later, Alice Walker, likewise, would also problematize the construction of an African American subjectivity concerning the African continent. Therefore, it is worth exploring the unconventional portrayal of Africa in Langston Hughes's and Alice Walker's literary works, *The Big Sea* (1940) and *The Color Purple* (1982) respectively. By showing an un-romanticized view of Africa, both Hughes and Walker raise relevant questions about African American issues, such as identity, race, and memory.

First of all, it is important to go back in past to understand that hierarchical systems based upon elements of differentiation have always existed in human history. From the transatlantic slave trade, the idea of race and racism spread throughout the United States. In the 17th and 18th centuries, more than 10 million Africans were unwillingly shipped to the Americas. Slavery² was a system of enforced labor that relied upon intimidation, brutality, and dehumanization. It was not just a cultural system, but a legal one until 1865, which brought about damaging consequences to African Americans – consequences that still resonate over the centuries. Since then, Africans and their descendants have struggled to define their place in North America.

Furthermore, the legacy of slavery still haunts African Americans, who continue to struggle with racism, invisibility, and the feeling of not belonging or living somewhere in between. As W.E.B. Du Bois puts it in "Of Our Spiritual Strivings," "the history of the American Negro is the history of this strife" (3). When it comes to African Americans' difficulty to reconcile their subjectivity as being both African and American at once, in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1897), Du Bois makes the following statement:

It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his two-ness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two

² According to Ron Eyeran slavery is the cultural trauma that forges African Americans' collective identity. See more in *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*.

thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife- this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. In this merging he wishes neither of the older selves to be lost. He does not wish to Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He wouldn't bleach his Negro blood in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of opportunity closed roughly in his face. (2-3)

Du Bois's statements bring to the fore the following question: as a black subject in America, how does one reconcile these two strivings, namely, the identity as being a black person and an American citizen?

In order to understand the processes through which Blacks in America dealt with their identity, an overview of what was happening in America during the time span covered in this dissertation is due. First, the Pre-Civil Rights period (1865 -1964) marks turbulent years for African Americans in the United States, mainly in the South. Violence against blacks increased substantially after World War I and brought about the Great Migration. Fleeing racial discrimination and segregation, African Americans left the South – ruled by Jim Crow Laws based on the theory of white supremacy that legalized segregation of the black population – and moved to northern cities. As American society changed with the roaring 20s, elements of African American culture gradually entered the mainstream. Set against a background of slavery and prejudice, African Americans saw themselves represented in the mainstream by black music and art, whose epitome was Harlem Renaissance. This movement is considered one of the greatest cultural periods in American history, taking place in America between World War I and the mid-1930s. It was a period where African American musicians, artists, writers, and black culture altogether flourished and became part of the (African) American identity. Harlem Renaissance was also called the “New Negro Renaissance,”

because this term “includes all African Americans, regardless of their location, who participated in this Cultural Revolution” (Nash 153).³

The Great Migration drew to Harlem some of the greatest minds and brightest talents of the day, an impressive array of African American artists and academics, who were responsible for producing one of the most significant eras of cultural expression in the nation's history. The Renaissance is located at a crucial point in black history, articulating cultural and political references ranging from pioneers of the blackness and denouncers of oppression, like Langston Hughes and Marcus Garvey, whose thoughts, theories, and literary works this study draws from.

The Harlem Renaissance was a cultural, social, and intellectual explosion in America. The movement brought notoriety to the great works of African American art and influenced future generations of African American artists and intellectuals. The issues of African-American identity and theories that emerged from Harlem have led the discussions over the topic and lasted beyond the century. The movement was seen as a necessary corrective to all those decades of minstrelsy and blackface that had occurred in America until then. At the time, the most urgent task was to improve the image of Blacks in the country. Many of his fellow writers heard Hughes’s appeal to this new way of picturing the image of African Americans. Briefly, authors from the movement “sought to refute previous literary stereotypes and create a new, positive self-concept for African-Americans” (Ahlin 160). Consequently, to talk about a “New Negro” was to assert a particular identity that had not fit within the American context at the time. Amongst many acclaimed poets of the movement, Langston Hughes stood out. He was described as a noisy author of the movement for incorporating black music into his work (Chasar 57).

It is also worth mentioning that, by this time, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) becomes even more important. Led by W. E. B. Du Bois, this

³ Historically, many words have been used to ascribe racial labels in the US. For African-Americans, the term "negro" gained acceptance replacing the term "colored" driven by some black leaders like Booker T. Washington and W.E.B. Du Bois in the mid-to-late 19th century. See Smith 496-487.

organization sought equality and fought for the improvement of black people. Garvey, as another important figure of the Civil Rights Movement, founded the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), which, among several purposes, aimed at the formation of an independent black nation in Africa.⁴ By calling African Americans to return to their ancestral homeland, Garvey encouraged black Americans to be proud of their race. He stated that the search for social equality by Blacks in America was a delusion. In other words, African Americans would always be a non-assimilated minority and would not improve their condition while living in the United States. Garvey's "Back to Africa" proposal gained many followers due to his persuasion coupled with the African American identity crisis – it was popular especially among blacks of the Great Migration, who found that moving North would not have them away from white racism.

Second, the Post-Civil Rights period also played an important role in African-American history. The Black Power Movement, which aimed at achieving black empowerment, had its origin during the Civil Rights Movement and somehow grew “out of the same soil, confronted the same predicaments, and reflected the same quest for African American freedom. In fact, virtually all of the elements that we associate with ‘Black Power’ were already present in the small towns and rural communities of the South where ‘the civil rights movement’ was born” (Tyson 541). This movement triggered a series of discussions about black improvement, self-pride, and redemption. To be more precise, during the heyday of the Black Power movement, when African Americans were trying to gain racial equality, called for self-determination and racial dignity, the sense of belonging (or not) came up with the following question: Am I American?

To sum up, since the nineteenth century African Americans have faced a time of radical transformation in the political and legal status of African Americans. Blacks were freed from slavery and began to enjoy greater rights as citizens. Despite the acquisition of these rights, they kept

⁴ The main Back-to-Africa movement referred to in this work is that of Marcus Garvey. There had been other movements that aimed at the Black emigration to Africa, like American Colonization Society (ACS) see Bacon and Werner's *Back to Africa: Benjamin Coates and the Colonization Movement in America, 1848-1880*.

fighting for equality as well as searching for their origins. Hence, some critics agree that the African American past has strongly reflected upon the dynamics of African American identity. One of the views relies on the shifting importance of Africa for blacks in the U.S. The continent was represented as the root of their identity and the source of strength during tough times. As Brian W. Thomas states, “throughout the course of this debate over identity ... the United States have variously ignored ... or embraced Africa as a central element of identity for African Americans” (143).

This fact contributed to the belief that the origin of American Blacks was only in Africa. Consequently, many Blacks in America began to reject the American element of their subjectivity that came along with a white background. In the context of reclaiming African identity, many African Americans started to seek their ancestral state prior to forced assimilation. As a result, African Americans had also to look back to their past to find their heritage. Nevertheless, although the importance of Africa for Blacks living in America is undeniable, for many experts, authors, and intellectuals, African Americans needed to partially break away from Africa to build their own identity. Thus, one of the aims that guide this master’s dissertation is to analyze the strategies used by Hughes and Walker to shift the thinking from Africa to America as the home of African Americans. In so doing, in which ways does this rupture help to discuss the components of African-American identity construction after all? By having in mind issues concerning the African American subjectivity, this dissertation seeks to investigate how the portrayal of Africa in *The Big Sea* and *The Color Purple* questions some of the narratives that fostered a utopian image of Africa.

In fact, Langston Hughes’s autobiography and Alice Walker’s novel greatly illustrate the problematic aspects of electing Africa as the desired place. In order to reclaim black identity, it seemed to be necessary to question the romanticized portrayal of Africa depicted by many authors during the Harlem Renaissance period and beyond. Years later, Alice Walker seems to continue this line of thought, which shows that the rhetoric on Africa as the motherland has lasted in African-Americans’ imagination.

To begin with, being a black man who attended Columbia and Lincoln universities allowed

Langston Hughes to experience life on both sides of “the veil.”⁵ As the most important writer of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes mainly wrote about his experiences as a black man and, unlike his contemporary writers, linked his personal experiences to the common experience of black America. In other words, Hughes highlighted the uniqueness of African American experience in contrast to white Americans. By having a robust sense of racial pride, Langston Hughes’s literary works nurtured equality and denounced racism. Hughes wrote several works of prose and eleven plays: *The Weary Blues* (1926), *Not Without Laughter* (1930), *The Ways of White Folks* (1934), and *Montage of a Dream Deferred* (1951); edited the anthologies *The Poetry of the Negro, 1746-1949: an Anthology* (1949), and *The Book of Negro Folklore* (1983); and Hughes also co-wrote the play *Mule Bone: A Comedy of Negro Life* (1931)⁶ with Zora Neale Hurston, which, in Hughes's words, he had “plotted out and typed the play based on her story, while she [Hurston] authenticated and flavored the dialogue and added highly humorous details” (*The Big Sea* 321).

An important point to mention about Langston Hughes's literary works is the fact that, different from other authors from the Harlem Renaissance, he made a trip to Africa. This fact changes the way he deals with the continent, his roots, and his identity. *The Big Sea* is an autobiography that shows the author's life, experiencing challenges like those brought upon black citizens in America in the 20th century. This book portrays a reality he found in Africa, which conflicted with prior images he had built about the continent – an image that the Harlem Renaissance embraced as a myth and imagination. When he reaches Africa, Hughes sees that he is not even welcome there. In this book, he states: “There was one thing that hurt me a lot when I talked with the people. The Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro. You see, unfortunately, I am not black” (11). This shocking moment is just one of many unexpected events that not only deconstruct the image of Africa, but also unfold other discussions on black subjectivity.

⁵ Du Bois's theory of double-consciousness allows seeing the Veil as a psychological manifestation of the color line, which exists in the world, preventing white people from seeing Blacks as Americans. See more in *The Souls of Black Folk* by W.E.B. DU Bois

⁶ The process of writing the play led Hughes and Hurston to end their friendship. The authors’ disagreements over the play's copyrights made the play be published only after both of their deaths, in 1991.

Some authors have written about the long relationship between Hughes and Africa. In “Black-White Symbiosis: Another Look at the Literary History of the 1920s,” Amritjit Singh examines the poet’s break with the ‘primitive’ and the traditional view of Africa that were present in his first writings, which makes the author “one of the few exceptions to the bandwagon influence of the white stereotype” (30). In a similar vein, especially in *The Big Sea*, it is possible to see Hughes’s portrayal of many issues in black history, such as racial discrimination and his embrace of the principle of “blackness”, in which he seeks “to immortalize the culture and perceptions of a nation or race [of Black Americans]” (Miller 39). Although his autobiography has not received as much attention among scholars, *The Big Sea* allows a deep analysis of the process in which Hughes writes his poems, how he explores the boundaries of racial identification, and how he formed a conception of Africa as the ancestral homeland of African Americans. Some other authors have written about the dialectics of homeland and identity that comes out of Hughes’s depiction of the continent. These images start as idealistic, pre-colonial (Gohar 46), transcendent and romantic meditation on racial heritage (McLaren 4; Dworkin 633); show a conflictual Africa centered and African-American ideals (Westover 1207); and end up with his re-connection with and a return to Africa in a more revolutionary and anti-colonial tone (Kim 432).

As a matter of fact, Hughes's ties with Africa go a long way and his representation of it as the place where his roots lay appears in several poems: In “Danse Africaine” (1922) and “Dream Variations” (1926), Hughes evidences his racial pride and love of Africa, and many of the images of the African continent “are taken from escape poetry” (Allen 23). Furthermore, in his first flirtation with Africa, there is "a primitive background with its hot sunshine, tropical trees, gay colored birds, and shapely dark maidens" (Allen 10). He connects past and present, new, and old worlds to show how these relationships shape his identity. In “The Negro” (1922) – another poem published by *The Crisis* – Hughes once again evidences his connections with the continent and says: “I am a Negro:/ Black as the night is black, Black like the depths of my Africa” (Selected Poems 7).

As Vera M. Kutzinski suggests in *The Worlds of Langston Hughes: Modernism and*

Translation in the Americas, *The Big Sea* should be read with more depth due to its complexities.

The aspects of identity in the autobiography encode Hughes's "personal and cultural anxieties about belonging in scenes of misrecognition in which prior assumptions about familial, cultural, or political identities and ties are rendered unstable and often severely ruptured" (31). Furthermore, from a Pan-Africanist perspective, *The Big Sea* shows that although Hughes somehow focused "on what connects people of color ... Hughes ... did not support Garvey ... And unlike Garvey, Hughes had been to Africa" (54).

Finally, Hughes's literary works contribute to the discussions of the African-American identity that is marked by the intertextual connection of literature produced by a black author with narratives of African origin. In this dialogue, present and past are reinterpreted. In his enchanting verses and prose, Hughes manages to bridge past and present, New and Old worlds, showing his belief in the existence of a particular link between the history of those places and people as well. This phenomenon is evident in the (re)creation of a mythical and historical memory based on the experience of Diasporic poets, as in the writings of Hughes and other black authors.

Coupled with Hughes's relevance in literature, there is another writer who can be considered one of the most admired African-American writers working today: Alice Malsenior Walker. This talented woman has written novels, stories, essays, and poems that became acclaimed works of fiction, including the short story collection *In Love & Trouble* (1973), in which the short story "Everyday Use" was first published. In addition to reflecting upon the suffering and pleasure of African American women, Walker's literary works touch on issues of black identity and feminism, which show her literary gifts and political convictions. Moreover, they are rooted in economic hardship, exclusion based on race, and African-American culture. Alice Walker continues writing and developing her work as a feminist, humanist, and environmental activist for economic causes and social justice.

Alice Walker does not oppose the theories that paved the way for black Americans and leaders at the beginning of the twentieth century. She pays homage to her predecessors and somehow

keeps their memory alive. For example, in *Langston Hughes: American Poet* (1974), Alice Walker introduces the work of Hughes to a new public, who could have access to the work and the importance of this poet. In “Looking for Zora” (1975), Walker became responsible for revitalizing interest in the work of the most widely published black woman author of the Harlem Renaissance: Zora Neale Hurston. Furthermore, Walker’s literary works bring a new perspective on the black agenda in themes like the importance of ancestry, search for identity, and the racial oppression of black women in the United States. Although Blacks in the US had improved their political and legal status in America, yet they still found themselves trapped in the perennial struggle of being black in a racist society in the last decades of the twentieth century.

Walker introduced the themes of gender and racial inequality that she would continue to explore throughout her career with her first novel, *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970). Her writings portray issues and stories of many cultures, including her own African-American heritage. Likewise, it is undeniable that her works may reflect the internal conflicts that black people, mainly women, go through. It is worth mentioning that, when it comes to portraying Africa and its rituals, besides *The Color Purple*, Walker released *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992), which is set in a fictional African country where female genital mutilation is practiced, but the analysis of this novel will be open to further studies.

Amongst several worldwide acclaimed works, the novel *The Color Purple* stands out. The novel was written in a moment of the growing importance of the feminist, Black Power, and Civil Rights movements. Furthermore, from the mid-twentieth century onward, black leaders, nationalists, and African Americans drew their attention once again to their connection with Africa and expressed their political interest in the continent’s uplift during Africa’s decolonization. Fast-forward to the second half of the 20th century, Garveyism was still around proving that the “back to Africa” idea remained an authentic part of the black diaspora discourse. Walker calls into question the illusion of racial equality in a continent Black Americans had never been to but imagined as the home of their

ancestors. Much of the theories that nurtured these movements were shaped from the thoughts shared by black intellectuals in the first half of the twentieth century.

Correspondingly, the movement towards the Motherland depicted in the novel has to do with the so-called Ethiopianism, which was at the center of a huge debate throughout the 20th century. More precisely, Walker uses Ethiopianism as the basis for questioning the narratives that shaped the African-American mentality regarding Africa and their self-image as well. This political-religious movement gained popularity among African Americans through some slave narratives, as well as “in the exhortations of conspiratorial slave preachers, and in the songs and folklore of the slaves of the Old and the peasants of the New South” (Moses 411). Guided by the biblical verse from the Old Testament saying, "Ethiopia shall soon stretch out her hands unto God," this movement was credited to be responsible for encouraging the African American interest in Africa. However, like *The Color Purple* shows, in Europe, the idea of Africa as the “Dark Continent” shaped the views of missionaries, who also saw Africans as uncivilized, incapable, lost, and in need of evangelism.

The story takes place in Georgia, Walker's homeland, during the racial segregation period. It is narrated by Celie who, through a series of letters to God and her sister Nettie, writes about incest, physical abuse, and loneliness. Nevertheless, her hopes are realized through a female community formed by her husband's mistress and her sister. Gradually, Celie awakens sexually and learns to see herself as desirable and a valuable part of the universe. Although being criticized for the negative portrayal of black men, *The Color Purple* also portrays the strength of family, community, and spirituality as part of life.

One of the most important parts of the novel, the section this dissertation focuses on, is based on Nettie's letters, Celie's sister to whom the letters are addressed. The specificities of this character transport us to different places. It focuses on Africa and addresses important issues such as cultural relativism⁷ and black identity, which was divided between an America that discriminates against the

⁷ Some cultural relativists argue that cultures differ fundamentally from one another, and so do the moral frameworks that

black population coming from Africa and an Africa that no longer recognizes Black Americans as part of their culture. Nettie's life also leads us to reflect upon the efficiency and limitations of religious organizations.

By the same token, the portrayal of the Olinka people facing the arrival of the Europeans to their land, is another important point in the novel, as it shows the violent cultural domination of one ethnic group over the other. It also emphasizes the double pain of the black woman, who suffers from oppression and physical violation. In fact, this might be seen as a critique of how Africa was colonized, divided, disrespected, and exploited. In addition, the depiction of the missionaries Corrine and Olivia shows the struggle of the black people in the United States for fitting in and finally belonging somewhere. The missionaries do not feel American, and they cannot belong to Africa, which, in theory, would be their origins. At this point, Nettie deals with an inner conflict. After knowing the African peoples and recognizing their origins, she ends up being divided because she notices that she is bringing the education of the white man to the land of black Africans. Consequently, Nettie is not recognized as part of the Olinka people.

The Color Purple has been canonized regardless of some criticism on either the negative portrayal of male characters or sexual and violent stereotypes about black people (Harris 4), Western canonical “prevalent stereotypical images of Africa in Western popular culture” (Kieti 158); and painting a reproachful, primitivist, and condescending African-American view of Africa (M’Baye 159), which points to a mythic reconstruction of Africa’s history distorted by white myths (Trinya 3). Concerning her unconventional portrayal of Africa, what stands out is Walker’s depiction of African customs through female genital mutilation and ritual scarification. Various critics have signaled these rituals as another strategy used by Walker to approach patriarchal oppression (Byerman 62; Winchell 94) and the patriarchy maintenance of the power by forcibly denying the women's ability to shape their identity (Wall 88). Additionally, the starting point of Walker’s portrayal of Africa is the

structure relations within different societies. See more in *Race, Language and Culture* by Franz Boas.

religious involvement of Christian Blacks in African countries that coincided with European imperial expansion (Killingray 16) and the use of black Americans as the media for perpetuating colonizers' values in Africa (Jørgensen 66).

In “Race, Gender, and Nation in *The Color Purple*,” the literary scholar and cultural theorist Lauren Berlant analyzes the representation of national identity through the main character, Celie, and says that by addressing an Afro-American nation, Walker’s novel problematizes tradition-bound origin myths and political discourse, which is a way of problematizing nationalism itself, in both “its Anglo- and Afro-American incarnations” (835). She also states that these letters from Africa might provide an indigenous alternative history for black consciousness that “reverses its traditional invisibility or debasement in the racist American context” (846).

Thus, to examine the relations between these two distinct nations, societies, and subjects, some theoretical analysis will be used. Nettie's account of formal systems of colonial oppression acting upon black bodies in Africa is one of many ways used by Walker to de-romanticize Africa. Hence, Frantz Fanon's thoughts of the binary opposition of colonizer and colonized must be used.⁸ It can be seen in some letters that Nettie, sometimes, perpetuates some concepts and values from her Western and limited point of view. Conversely, to understand the conflictual relationship with the continent of origin, as well as the changes in the main characters' identities, Paul Gilroy's concepts of transnational identities will be used.

The sociological dilemma of race is also addressed in this chapter and theorists on Race like bell hooks and W.E.B Du Bois, whose famous quote states that “the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line,” is the basis upon which this chapter will be set. As Walker shows in *The Color Purple*, the social dynamics of race in late-twentieth-century America acquires different issues to the black agenda, such as the feminist discourse that had been overlooked throughout the

⁸ Peggy Ochoa explains, in “The Historical Moments of Postcolonial Writing: Beyond Colonialism's Binary,” that the colonial discourse incorporates and perpetuates this oppositional thinking, which promotes binary stereotypes and validates the values of the colonizers over the subalterns (224).

century. To discuss the misleading ideas that left the cultural feature out of the debate over the sameness between Africans and African-Americans, theorists from the Cultural Memory Studies like Ron Eyerman and Astrid Erll will enrich the analysis of the novel for they provided a significant challenge to dominant understandings of race, and of race relations within the diasporic context.

As highlighted before, the African American journey, from slavery to freedom, has been a journey of struggle. It is in this context of racism, persecution, and displacement that blacks began to envision an idealized Africa as the only way to reclaim black identity. From the Harlem Renaissance forward, some authors helped to build this romanticized portrayal of Africa. However, some writers found it necessary to break up with this romantic view of Africa as a motherland to start discussing issues of black subjectivity and identity within the context of the United States. This dissertation, therefore, aims at investigating the way Langston Hughes and Alice Walker question images of Africa in the African American imaginary.

Despite the decades separating both literary works under analysis, there is a similar approach concerning Africa by means of identity, race, and complexities involving the African-American subjectivity. It is true that images and concepts about Africa have been part of African American collective identity, maintaining a special status in African American collective memory. Hughes and Walker question narratives and rhetoric of movements that encouraged an idealistic return. As Rongjing Meng explains, these eastward movements passed on the idea of a place where "African Americans find a home for their spirit. On that land, they connect to their ancestors and to their unchanged African root which is an indispensable part in their identities" (1236). However, both literary works show that after living in a different cultural environment for a while, African Americans have lost the cultural sense of belonging. Back in Africa, black Americans do not find their culture whatsoever: Hughes is not recognized as "Black" by Africans, so are Nettie and other African American missionaries.

After the failure of the mission by seeking out their roots in Africa, Hughes and Nettie seem not to swing in that wind anymore. It evinces the long-lasting African-American struggle with their

relationship with their roots and the insistence to locate the Black identity in the African past. Thus, *The Big Sea* and *The Color Purple* use the African setting to problematize black Americans' perpetual search for an African American identity elsewhere. Both authors further and converge along the lines suggested by Du Bois. The authors expose the co-existence of inner conflict as being both Americans and Africans through Hughes's and Nettie's experiences in African countries. The portrayal of these two subjects as two different beings problematizes, even more, the double consciousness for it sets the stage for establishing the foreign cultural place of Africa in African American collective memory.

In the next two chapters, this work will bring the following themes and approaches: In Chapter One, “(Re)Thinking Africa in *The Big Sea*: A Cultural Perspective about the Impact on African American Identity,” brings an introduction to Langston Hughes’s first autobiography, *The Big Sea*, and highlights the author’s ever-changing ties with Africa. From a cultural perspective, there is also an overview of the main facts about the African American experience in the first decades of the twentieth century. The analysis of how a romantic and erratic image of Africa took place in the African-Americans’ intelligentsia at the time. Comparatively, Hughes’s lines dedicated to Africa will be located within the cultural practices of which *The Big Sea* is part. The changes in his feelings toward Africa vary from his first poems to the autobiography, revealing a break from past portrayals of the continent. Additionally, the chapter exposes how narratives from periodicals, books, poems, and anthologies were crucial to shaping a stereotypical image of Africa in African-Americans’ imagination at the time. Although being considered as one of the greatest talents of The Harlem Renaissance, in *The Big Sea* Hughes denounces various concepts and ideas of Africa spread in the movement, like the white patronage that influenced his and other Harlemites’ depiction of the primitive.”⁹

⁹ Through western eyes, the idea behind Africa as the Dark Continent is typical of early colonial travel narratives. It represents Europeans' image of Africa as the backward and perverse opposite of Europe's. A fact that allegedly justified colonialism, legitimized the enslavement of Black people, and exploitation of Africa's resources. For more information, see Macheso 47-48.

In *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes's journey points to an Africa that does not meet his "Africa, Motherland of the Negro peoples" (10). Then, the author highlights many issues that come out of his contact with Africans. This transatlantic experience unfolds some aspects of the author's subjectivity, like race relations and skin color – which are questioned and re-signified on African soil. In the chapter, to analyze the conflicting forces that are in play between American Blacks and African Blacks, a sociocultural approach is carried out. Mainly, Stuart Hall's theorization of race as a "floating signifier" illuminates the discussions involving issues regarding the shifting meanings of race in both contexts: African and American. Thus, chapter one attempted to analyze how the portrayal of Africa in *The Big Sea* contributes to discussions about the construction of African-American identity.

In Chapter Two, "Demystifying Africa and the African Myth in *The Color Purple*," there will be an analysis of Alice Walker's novel by means of how the novel contributes to the discussions of race and memory in the construction of the African-American identity. Nettie's experience in Africa presents a scenario in which Black Americans and Africans are put in two different directions. My main objective is to verify the applicability of discussion on identity in *The Color Purple* in light of postmodern and postcolonial theories.

A postmodern¹⁰ reading of *The Color Purple* will be applied to examine the ways in which American Blacks and African Blacks are affected by different cultures, religions, and belief systems. The religious involvement of Christian Blacks in African countries is the main eastward movement questioned in the novel. The idea behind this religious-political movement brings to the surface elements of postcolonial identities, which are based on cultural interactions between these two different subjects. Fanon's and Gilroy's concepts will be used to understand the dichotomy that characterizes the colonial context which impacts not only the portrayal of Africa in the book, but also the lives of Africans in the plot.

¹⁰ Postmodernism serves as an umbrella term for other literary movements. It allows for postcolonial reading and relies heavily on the method of deconstruction to analyze social-cultural situations.

Moreover, considering Cultural Memory Studies, Chapter Two will also investigate cultural, national, and ethnic aspects present in Walker's depiction of African-Americans and African Blacks and the collision of their subjectivities. Hence, the chapter highlighted Walker's criticism on discourses and narratives based on mutuality, which either over-emphasized commonalities between Africans and the Diaspora or conveyed misunderstandings regarding the black races. From Pan-Africanism to religious texts, there will be an analysis of how these narratives have contributed to shaping the African American collective memory of Africa. In so doing, Walker suggests a different look at Africa, which is far from romantic, suggesting that the African roots that African-Americans have searched for so long are already embedded within the breadth of American culture.

In short, Langston Hughes's and Alice Walker's literary works tremendously contributed to the discussions on black subjectivity. These authors' views paved the way for further authors and African Americans to discuss their own subjectivity. Furthermore, their particular portrayal of Africa helped usher in new layers of complexity in what it means to be a hyphenate African-American. To sum up, this master's dissertation seeks to investigate how the unconventional portrayal of Africa in *The Big Sea* and *The Color Purple* contributes to the debates over the construction of African-American identities.

CHAPTER ONE

(Re)Thinking Africa in *The Big Sea*: A Cultural Perspective about the Impact on African American Identity

I've known rivers:

I've known rivers ancient as the world and older than the flow of human blood in human veins.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

I bathed in the Euphrates when dawns were young.

I built my hut near the Congo and it lulled me to sleep.

I looked upon the Nile and raised the pyramids above it.

I heard the singing of the Mississippi when Abe Lincoln went down to New Orleans, and I've seen its

muddy bosom turn all golden in the sunset.

I've known rivers:

Ancient, dusky rivers.

My soul has grown deep like the rivers.

“The Negro Speaks of Rivers” (*The Big Sea* 55)

In the poem quoted above, Langston Hughes hints at the long-lasting tie with Africa that would be part of his works. “The Negro Speaks of Rivers” is one of the most anthologized poems of Hughes and traces the life of diasporic subjects, the link between the past and the present, and their connection with their roots. The aforementioned rivers, from which one’s soul has grown deep, are directly linked to the history of Africa and serve as a living memory of Africans and African Americans alike. Connecting past and present, the speaker reflects upon the history of the African

diaspora, slavery, and the beginnings of African American history and culture.¹¹ Just as the poem shows, Langston Hughes expresses his ties to Africa and this connection will vary in different ways throughout his career. This bond goes from a portrayal of an idealized Africa during the 20s – a place he had never been until then – to a recognition of its imperfections and differences that made the African-American subject readdress both sides of their identities.

In *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes's journey points to an Africa that does not meet the land of his dreams. He questions the image of the continent that had been embedded in his memory and on the life of African-Americans too. It is exactly from this unconventional portrayal that he raises important discussions about African-American subjectivity through their relationship with Africa. On African soil, Hughes visited over 30 ports along the West Coast, like Congo, Lagos, Niger, Dakar, Senegal, and the Ivory Coast. In each country, he learns more about Africa(s), its beauties, and problems as well.

Additionally, in the book, Langston Hughes reflects on the emergence of a cultural movement that addressed, above all, the keen interest in Africa shown by many Black leaders, Nationalists, and Black Americans. Artists from the Harlem Renaissance sought to "reverse some of the negative connotations attached to Africa" (Delgado-Tall 288) and busted some of the stereotypes that had long been associated with blacks and helped create a new image of them. In their fight against racist stereotypes, Harlemites ended up "invoking Africa as a source of history as well as a source of pride." Thus, Africa gradually became "the universally acknowledged motherland to all African Americans" and writers, intellectuals, and artists of the movement "in their evocations of Africa, whether those evocations were positive or ambivalent, made Africa a central space on the cultural landscape of African American people" (Harris). Consequently, many misconceptions and misunderstandings influenced the way in which Africa was constructed in the African-Americans'

¹¹The seventeen-year-old Langston Hughes wrote this poem while he was on a train heading to Mexico City. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes explains: "Crossing the Mississippi ... I looked out the window... and I began to think what that river ... had meant to Negroes in the past... Then I remembered reading how Abraham Lincoln had made a trip down the Mississippi ... and had decided within himself that it [slavery] should be removed from American life. Then I began to think about other rivers in our past—the Congo, and the Niger, and the Nile in Africa" (54).

collective memory. By questioning the Harlemitic romantic image of Africa and emphasizing the American component of black subjectivity, Langston Hughes proposes a shift on the complex discussions regarding the two-ness of being African-American in the United States at the time.

To analyze black subjectivity in the autobiography, W.E.B Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk* helps to understand the wide-ranging representations of the diversity of the black experience. By stating that "the problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line" (3) and by problematizing double consciousness, namely, the struggle of being identified as Americans and black people at the same time, Du Bois's theory illuminates the analysis of *The Big Sea*, in especial how Hughes discussed the "double-consciousness" aspect of the African American experience. This social approach to African American identity is highly emphasized by Hughes throughout his works, as he claims in "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain" to be "a proponent of the African side of Harlem Renaissance Debate" (Shaduri 98).

Furthermore, to discuss the role of the representation of Africa in the formation of African American identity in *The Big Sea*, this chapter also takes into account the theory of cultural identity, which encompasses a wide range of socially constructed categories that influenced how African-Americans know and experience their world socially. As a social construct, cultural identity deals with important questions about conceptions, understandings, and lived experiences regarding the self in relation to others across time, space, and context. Thus, concepts of cultural identity help to understand questions related to Afro-Americans and their (non)identification with Africa in the 20th century.

In short, *The Big Sea* shows the puzzling and ever-growing interest in Africa by African Americans. While some black nationalists praised Africa as the only possible place for the African diaspora to live, other black leaders questioned the very notion of this idea regarding the construction of African-American subjectivity. Thus, it is worth questioning what images were in play when talking about the Motherland. How many Africas are there in Hughes' works before and after his time there? Should African-Americans review their desire to go back to a place foreign to them after

all? At the end of his journey in Africa, in *The Big Sea* Hughes states, “I was only an American Negro—who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not Africa” (325). Hence, Hughes’s time on the coast of West Africa contributed to the understanding of his Africaness.

The relatively big section dedicated to Hughes's time in Africa and the different images of the continent presented in his work makes it legitimate to evaluate the importance of this place to the construction of the Afro-American identities. From Hughes’s accounts of his life as a young black man to his rising career as a poet, the autobiography provides good insights into the issues concerning what it meant to be African American at the time. Henceforth, this chapter will analyze many aspects of the unconventional portrayal of Africa in *The Big Sea*. Distancing from the ideal homeland dreamed by many American blacks, his depiction of Africa and Africans problematizes, even more, the theories of African-American subjectivity that result from possessing two competing identities at once.

1.1 THE HARLEM RENAISSANCE AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF AFRICA IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN IMAGINATION

“The period when the Negro was in vogue”

Langston Hughes (*The Big Sea* 228)

Questioning images and stereotypes, like sambo and black face, was one of the main concerns in the first half of the twentieth century. At the time, black artists had the duty to represent "Black Americans [who] sought to re-present their public selves in order to reconstruct their public, reproducible images" (Gates 129). It was in Harlem where people of African descent from the South and the Caribbean diaspora began to give expression and value to their art. Through a shared memory of their past, these diasporic subjects partook in common experiences of slavery, emancipation, and a determination to forge a new African American identity. However, as Langston Hughes and his contemporaries had never been to Africa until then, how could they describe it so vividly? Which elements besides literature helped create a collective and sometimes stereotyped

image of Africa?

Firstly, either having a nationalist or stereotypical depiction, black artists took African culture as a key element of pride and inspiration during the period. Many "images" credited to be Africa, became popular at the time, thereby shaping the collective memory of African Americans. In his 1996 essay, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora," the theorist Stuart Hall argued that some cultural practices, like visual arts and photographic works, are examples of "the continuing creative power of this conception of identity within the emerging practices of representation" (224). Notably, images of African art mediated by anthologies and magazines helped to create the idea of Africa in the African-American imagination. These images were essential in the making of African-American collective identity in the first half of the twentieth century.

In the context of the Harlem Renaissance, African-American artists advocated the embrace of black identity and heritage through artistic expression, which brought along new creative energy for African-American literature. For *The Nation*, Hughes wrote the article "The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain," which served as a manifesto of the movement defending an authentically black art in its theme and aesthetics. This article also attempted to describe the group of writers who came together during the time:

We younger Negro artists who create now intend to express our individual dark-skinned selves without fear or shame. If white people are pleased, we are glad. If they are not, it doesn't matter. We know we are beautiful. And ugly too. The tom-tom cries and the tom-tom laughs. If colored people are pleased we are. If they are not, their displeasure doesn't matter either. We build our temples for tomorrow, strong as we know how, and we stand on top of the mountain, free within ourselves. (95)

Langston Hughes's words urging his contemporaries to fearlessly express their blackness marks a new time for African American art. The racial consciousness he is concerned about comes out as a project based on the refusal of the aesthetic and epistemic parameters established by Western values.

Coupled with Hughes, Alain Locke is another Harlemiter, whose works shaped the movement and showed “the transformations of the inner and outer life of the Negro in America” (*The New Negro: an Interpretation* xxv). As proposed by Locke in the essay “The New Negro,” there is an antithetical relationship between the “New Negro” and the “Old” one. The latter “had long become more of a myth than a man,” portrayed and seen by white society as “more of a formula than a human being” (Locke 1). From this contribution, it is possible to see a new proposal of artistic representation of black culture, whose main idea took Africa as the center of the African American cultural landscape. The black continent was the main source of inspiration and an essential element of the Black Aesthetic in the movement. As Alain Locke, others' postwar “literatures saw fit to graft ... the mythological and primitivistic defense of the racial self that was the basis of the literary movement which we call the New Negro, or Harlem, Renaissance” (Gates 136).

Locke supported the idea that African art was an inspiration that would lead African Americans to emphasize the proud and beautiful roots of their race. In “The Legacy of the Ancestral Arts” (1925), he highlighted the bond between Africa and black Americans and suggested that “the sensitive artistic mind” of the African-Americans should take “a cultural pride and interest” in their African heritage, receiving “from African art a profound and galvanizing influence.” Moreover, he claims “a more highly stylized art does not exist than the African” (256). Along with Douglas's and Winold Reiss's illustrations drawn from African art and culture, Locke intentionally permeates the book with a collection of photographs of African sculptures and masks, like Baoulé and Bushongo, showing the movement's appreciation for the African art form and their African heritage altogether.



Figure a YABOUBA



Figure b BUSHONGO

Like Hughes and Locke, Countee Cullen is another example of a Harlemiter whose writings helped to craft the African imaginary on Americans' minds. He explored the connection of Black Americans with Africa as a way of showing the pride of his heritage. In his classical poem "Heritage" there is a speaker, who repeatedly questions the meaning of Africa, whether it is "Jungle star or jungle track,/ Strong bronzed men, or regal black/ Women from whose loins I sprang/ When the birds of Eden sang?/ ... What is Africa to me?" (269). Although the poem brings some primitive elements creating a picturesque scenery of Africa, it also exposes the speaker's unfamiliarity with the continent. These images are a result of "the proliferation of negative images of Africa in the literary tradition that, for the Harlem Renaissance [thinkers], was a pressing problem" (Nardi 260).

Secondly, from a Harlemiter perspective, there was "a feeling of solidarity or even identity with Africa [that] could be generated only if the Afro-Americans were taught to be proud of their African ancestors and of their color" (Berghahn 43). Consequently, a powerful tool in fostering racial pride in Black Americans was the periodical *The Crisis*, whose issues were filled with poetry, texts, and visual images that presented new narratives concerning the black races. *The Crisis* can be considered a crucial element for constructing scenarios of Africa on the collective mind of African-Americans. Under the editorship of W.E.B. Du Bois¹² covers, texts, illustrations, and political commentary echoed the African past and became an important source for building a collective image of Africa in the African American imagination. Hence, studying the literary and visual images of Africa in the periodical sheds light on the analysis of the construction of the African-American identity.

Throughout its pages dedicated to literature, *The Crisis* gave voice to talented writers like Langston Hughes, whose verses could first be seen there. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes

¹² The magazine was founded in 1910 and was edited by W.E.B. Du Bois in its first 24 years.

describes the importance of this medium for his career as a writer:

So I sent her [Jessie Fauset] my poem written on the train, ‘The Negro Speaks of Rivers.’ And in June 1921, it appeared in the *Crisis*, the first of my poems to be published outside Central High School.

My father reacted to my published work with two questions: “How long did it take you to write that?” And next: “Did they pay you anything?”

Neither the *Crisis* nor the *Brownie’s Book* paid anything, but I was delighted to be published. For the next few years my poems appeared often (and solely) in the *Crisis*. And to that magazine, certainly, I owe my literary beginnings—insofar as publication is concerned. (72)

THE CRISIS	
A RECORD OF THE DARKER RACES	
PUBLISHED MONTHLY AND COPYRIGHTED BY THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF COLORED PEOPLE, AT 70 FIFTH AVENUE, NEW YORK CITY. CON- DUCTED BY W. E. BURGHARDT DU BOIS; JESSIE REDMON FAUSET, LITERARY EDITOR; AUGUSTUS GRANVILLE DILL, BUSINESS MANAGER.	
Vol. 22—No. 2	JUNE, 1921
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The July CRISIS is our annual education number. We want news and photographs of graduates.	
FIFTEEN CENTS A COPY; ONE DOLLAR AND A HALF A YEAR	
FOREIGN SUBSCRIPTIONS TWENTY-FIVE CENTS EXTRA	
RENEWALS: The date of expiration of each subscription is printed on the wrapper. When the subscription is due, a blue renewal blank is enclosed.	
CHANGE OF ADDRESS: The address of a subscriber can be changed as often as desired. In ordering a change of address, both the old and the new address must be given. Two weeks' notice is required.	
MANUSCRIPTS and drawings relating to colored people are desired. They must be accom- panied by return postage. If found unavailable they will be returned.	
Entered as second class matter November 2, 1910, at the post office at New York, New York, under the Act of March 3, 1879.	

Figure c The first poem of Langston Hughes published. Reprinted from *The Crisis*, June 1921.

The use of imagery ended up shaping the collective memory of Africa in the African-American imagination. Consequently, it carved out concepts of Africa and African culture, which contributed to constructing a collective memory among its black audience. In short, these visual symbols of Africa in *The Crisis* provided “insight into African culture and help[ed] create a collective identity for American people of African descent” (Kirschke 75).

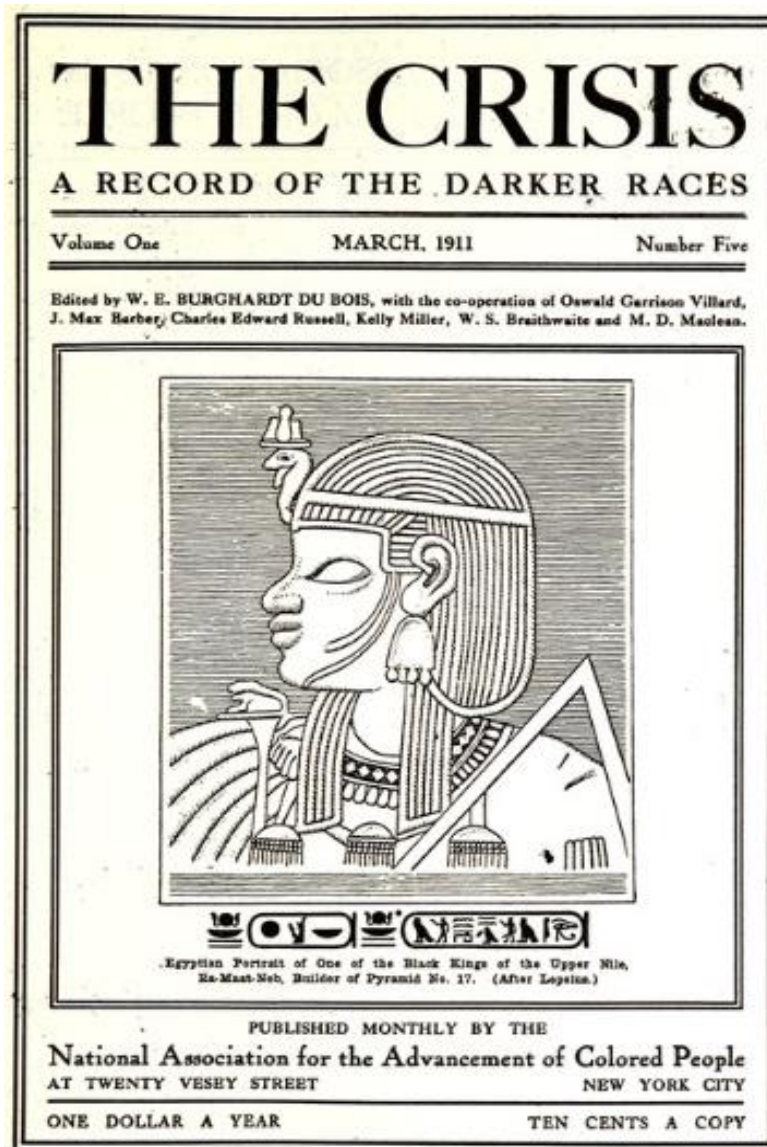


Figure d "Egyptian Portrait of One of the Black Kings of the Upper Nile, Ra-Maat-Neb." Reprinted from *The Crisis*, March 1911, cover.

Like the cover above, several other issues of the magazine featured Ethiopian art, photographs of African royalty, poetry, and African folk tales. Hence, through several media and forms of representation, African American writers reconstituted Africa as the primal scene for representing black identity. In this regard, Africa became a point of origin in a common past, which grounded the formation of the collective identity of the black community in America.

According to Amy Helene Kirschke, all those images used by Du Bois during his editorship are full of symbolism. In *Art in Crisis: W.E.B. Du Bois and the Struggle for*

African American Identity and Memory, Kirschke studies these symbols and highlights that on the pages of *The Crisis* “visual symbols of Africa could provide insight into African culture and help create a collective identity for American people of African descent” (134-135). In doing so, Du Bois used both ancient and contemporary examples of Africa to connect the American readers to their magnificent past.

Furthermore, during the century, the feeling of being unwelcome in America tightened the bond between black Americans and Africa. To escape racism, African-Americans saw overseas as the perfect place to heal their traumatic slavery past. The collective trauma of enslavement and discrimination, as well as the shared symbol of Africa as the motherland point to the discussions of the African-American identity throughout the century. Besides that, the politics of remembering the past helped African-Americans in the process of identity formation. Halbwachs, in *On Collective Memory: The Heritage of Sociology* (1992), states that “no memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve the recollections.” Moreover, we “preserve memories of each epoch in our lives, and these are continually reproduced; through them, as by continual relationship, a sense of our identity is perpetuated” (47). It is assumed, from this perspective, that memory is a collective process. In short, people of African descent share a mix of familial memories that are passed down from one generation to another.

Thus, it can be seen that the image of Africa as the 'homeland' lived on the memory of the black population in America during the first decades of the twentieth century. Cullen’s wondering about the meaning of Africa, Locke’s support to African culture, and Du Bois’s praise for Africa in the pages of *The Crisis* evidence the Harlem Renaissance as a landmark in how African Americans built on their images of Africa. Hughes was no exception and, in *The Big Sea*, he shows how he incorporated in his work many elements from both his experience in Harlem and his trip as a seaman throughout the west coast of Africa. In his writings, a

scenario that started out as an extension of what had been produced so far in African American literature, ended up as a break from the old and romantic portrayal of Africa.

Still from a sociological approach, which sees memory as “collective in that it is supra-individual, and individual memory is conceived in relation to a group” (Eyerman 6), it is possible to see from his own words how the collective memory played an important role in Hughes’s life – and the lives of African Americans extensively. Before traveling overseas, Hughes reproduced in his poems an idea of Africa that was collectively constructed on his memory. In *The Big Sea*, as he recounts that memorable six-month trip that took him from Harlem to Africa, he describes his eagerness to know the place he has always dreamed about. Hughes says:

But all those days I was waiting anxiously to see Africa. And finally, when I saw the dust-green hills in the sunlight, something took hold of me inside. My Africa, Motherland of the Negro peoples! And me a Negro! Africa! The real thing, to be touched and seen, not merely read about in a book. (10)

This statement gives a hint of how Africa was seen by many African Americans at the time. The “Motherland” of peoples of African descent was, indeed, part of the African American imaginary. From the outside, Africa met Hughes’s expectations. When he finally reaches Africa, its beautiful landscape stands out to him. In the chapter “African,” he describes it as “a long, sandy coast-line, gleaming in the sun. Palm trees sky-tall. Rivers darkening the sea’s edge with the loam of their deltas. People, black and beautiful as the night” (101-102).

However, as he experiences the African life, he notices that many images of the continent relied deeply on the “paradox of the African heritage in the 19th century,” which was “a conglomerate of contradictory forces and ideas about Africa” that “increased the gap between reality and the imaginary” (Delgado-Tall 303). Consequently, this awareness unfolds

some concepts of race and identity to be discussed below.

1.2 INVESTIGATING HUGHES'S IMAGES OF AFRICA AND QUESTIONING THE PERFORMANCE OF AFRICAN AMERICAN IDENTITY ELSEWHERE

The aforementioned historical and cultural contexts showed that Langston Hughes, just as other Harlemites poets, emphasized the awareness of their great racial pride and racial heritage. Africa, then, played an integral role in how Black Americans saw themselves in relation to their ancestral home. In examining this relationship, one must not ignore the role of western perceptions of the continent that influenced the way Blacks in the US saw themselves in popular culture. At the time, conflicting images of Africa as both a backward place and a source of identity took place in the African-American imagination. Then, Africa became a place to keep at a distance and a place to embrace as an ancestral homeland. Much of this portrayal was present in the Harlem Renaissance and, as Hughes shows in *The Big Sea*, influenced his literary productions for a time. Thus, his first break with the movement is influenced by the change in how he perceived Africa, as well as how he posits himself as not being African at all. To analyze the several meanings of Africa and African-American consciousness, a social-cultural perspective must be taken into account.

The cultural theorist Stuart Hall points out that the term "Africa" by itself designs "a modern construction, referring to a variety of peoples, tribes, cultures, religions, and languages whose principal common point of origin lays in the confluence of slave trade" ("Diasporas, or the logic of cultural translation" 50). As already mentioned, the narratives about Africa, African culture, and African art mainly came from periodicals, poems, and anthologies. Hughes, as the main artist of the movement, was no exception and was influenced by this interest in Africa as well.

In his first works, Hughes's romantic way of depicting Africa shows not only his admiration toward the continent but also African-Americans' perceptions at the time. Africa

for Hughes had a straightforward meaning of rootedness that he made clear in his first writings. The ideal place, whose discourse suggested that Africa was the Promised Land to where all people of African descent would go, was part of the collective mind at the time. Considering cultural identity as "a sort of collective 'one true self'... which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common" (Hall 223), through his poems, Hughes turned his audience's attention to the land of their ancestors and cultivated a special cultural identity.

As this study claims, even though Langston Hughes later questions this portrayal of Africa in his autobiography, it is undeniable that, at first, he also looked to Africa as an inspiration for his works. As pointed out before, his first poem, "The Negro Speaks of Rivers," published in the magazine in 1921 in *The Crisis*, reflects his interest in the continent that will appear in many of his works throughout his career. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes describes the composition of this poem. According to him, the inspiration for the poem came while he was crossing the Mississippi on a visit to his father, whose "strange dislike of his own people" baffled and disturbed him. As being an object of this dislike, Hughes puts into a global context the racial stresses of people of African descent in the United States. He states:

Now it was just sunset and we crossed the Mississippi, slowly, over a long bridge. I looked out the window of the Pullman at the great muddy river flowing down toward the heart of the South, and I began to think about what that river, the old Mississippi, had meant to Negroes in the past – how to be sold down the river was the worst fate that could overtake a slave in times of bondage . . . Then I began to think about other rivers in our past – the Congo, and the Niger, and the Nile in Africa – and the thought came to me: 'I've known rivers,' and I put it down on the back of an envelope I had in my pocket, and within the space of ten or fifteen minutes, as the train gathered speed in the dusk, I had written this poem, which I called "The Negro Speaks of Rivers" (55)

The poem is full of symbolism and presents the voice and memory of people from the

African diaspora. Hughes establishes a link between past and present and provides images of his heritage along with memories that are directly attached to ancient African rivers: the Euphrates, Congo, and Nile. And it is through "his naming of Africa's major rivers," that he "establishes a link with the American black man's romantic motherland" (Barksdale 17).

From a transnational and intercultural perspective, what can be seen from Hughes's first flirtation with Africa would rather be the quest for identification. In "Who Needs 'Identity'," Hall reflects upon identification as "a recognition of some common origin or shared characteristics with another person or group, or with an ideal, and with the natural closure of solidarity and allegiance established on this foundation" (2). Hence, Africa and the peoples of Africa are the main sources of identification not only for African Americans but also for diasporic people of African descent.

However, although being recognized as one of the most talents of The Harlem Renaissance, in *The Big Sea* Hughes criticizes some concepts and ideas spread in the movement that could be seen in some of his works too. Hughes denounces its elitism, as well as some Harlemites' naivety, who were led to believe that "the race problem had at last been solved through Art [and] ... were sure the New Negro would lead a new life from then on ..." (228). Consequently, this identification with the land of his ancestors makes Hughes take a different path from his contemporaries and break with an idealized image of Africa at the time.

As a matter of fact, Hughes exposes the paradox contained in the books published at the time by black writers: To make books and publications possible, there was an essential involvement of white patronage in the movement. From one of these supporters, Charlotte Mason, the idea of picturing a primitive Africa comes to the surface.¹³ Hughes, in *The Big Sea*, describes her controlling patronage in detail and shows how it somehow affected his

¹³ Besides Hughes, Charlotte Mason funded other writers like Zora Neale Hurston, whose works had to express the "primitivism she believed to be linked to the African race" (Booth 50).

works. Hughes says:

Great wealth had given to a woman who meant to be kind the means to power, and a technique of power, of so mighty a strength that I do not believe she herself knew what that force might become. She possessed the power to control people's lives—pick them up and put them down when and where she wished. She wanted me to be primitive and know and feel the intuitions of the primitive. But, unfortunately, I did not feel the rhythms of the primitive surging through me, and so I could not live and write as though I did. I was only an American Negro—who had loved the surface of Africa and the rhythms of Africa—but I was not Africa. (325)

From this account, Hughes at once criticizes the aesthetics of the movement regarding images of Africa and shows his understanding of its real meaning regarding his identity. In other words, besides Hughes's break with Mason, this passage shows the direction of his work and his life as a black American since then. According to Hughes, although "he 'had' loved the surface of Africa," he could no longer pretend he felt "the rhythms of the primitive" and express what they wanted him to. This awareness is extensive to Hughes's being. He makes sure that the life and culture of African Americans differ drastically from the stereotypical view of African Blacks. He realizes he "was not Africa," and concludes that he was an American Black instead. Hughes is at the same time proclaiming "the political integrity and historical specificity of his own position as "an American Negro" precisely by denying any immediate connection with Africa" (Scanlon 516).

The dualism present in loving Africa and not being Africa adds extra layers of complexity to Du Bois's theory of Double Consciousness. Hughes is, indeed, experiencing the inner conflict of the black body in America living as a Black American and an American carrying two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, and two warring ideals. However, from the moment the "African" component of this subject meets its "origins,"

many issues arise. More precisely, the "Black" part of his identity is questioned upon his non-identification with Africa. Thus, from the controversies of the Harlem Renaissance, Hughes indicates that Du Bois's theory should, under different circumstances, also take into account cultural aspects (Shaduri 91).

In addition, by denouncing stereotypes related to Africa in some literary productions of the time, the above quote points to Hughes's first step to finding out what Africa "really" was and, consequently, understanding the role of his ancestry in the construction of his identity. Against the original purposes of the movement, it can be seen stereotypical Africa being performed in The Harlem Renaissance too. This western concept of Africa had been part of the African-American imagination and Hughes suggests a break with this portrayal in his further works. From this proposition, black people "must not collude with the West which, precisely, normalizes and appropriates Africa by freezing it into some timeless zone of the primitive, unchanging past." Instead, Africa must be reckoned with by people from the Diaspora "but it cannot in any simple sense be merely recovered" (Hall 231).

Actually, it is because of his actual experience in African countries that Hughes becomes more aware of his identity. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes experiences Africa in several ways and casts doubts on the idea of Africa as a literary dreamland highly addressed by the Renaissance poets. Chiefly, coupled with other several symbolic meanings that Africa had at the time for the black Diaspora, it was the idea of a return to Africa that Hughes questioned.

In *The Big Sea*, while Hughes narrates his journey to West Africa aboard the S.S. Malone, he describes the many steps it takes to destroy one's dreams. From the moment he climbs on board to the time he sets foot on Africa, Hughes expresses his mixed feelings about discovering what Africa was really like. From the very first moment Hughes's bound for Africa begins, he takes a decision that sets the scene for further discussions involving what has shaped his own identity, as well as his openness to the new world he is about to face

overseas. The first thing he does onboard the ship is to get rid of his old books. He says:

I took them all out on deck and threw them overboard. It was like throwing a million bricks out of my heart—for it wasn't only the books that I wanted to throw away but everything unpleasant and miserable out of my past: the memory of my father, the poverty and uncertainties of my mother's life, the stupidities of color prejudice, black in a white world, the fear of not finding a job, the bewilderment of no one to talk to about things that trouble you, the feeling of always being controlled by others—by parents, by employers, by some outer necessity not your own. All those things I wanted to throw away. To be free of. To escape from. I wanted to be a man on my own, control my own life, and go my own way. So I threw the books in the sea. (98)

Whether this event actually happened or not, what is worth noting is the symbolism in this scene. By throwing his books overboard while he heads to Africa, Hughes leaves his old self behind and is open to the new one that he is about to find abroad. This behavior can be perceived as a way of escapism. Hughes's words represent the proposals and principles to leave America and return to Africa, which are seen by some scholars as either "escapist" or "associated with essentialist, romantic ideas about black cultural unity;" Furthermore, this desire to leave "this place and find a new home misses what these movements might tell us about how black people have imagined real freedom... and search for a new land tells us ... about what people dream about, what they want, how they might want to reconstruct their lives" (Kelley 16).

Consequently, the desire of going "back" to the place where black people were taken from gained popularity among some Blacks in the US as "an alternative to a life of misery in the United States" (Berghahn 161). In opposition to America, Africa represented the perfect place where blacks would be accepted and have more opportunities as human beings. It is in this scenario that some of Marcus Garvey's ideologies take place. There is in the

autobiography a subtle critic of Garvey's ideas, whose ideologies were based on a Western view on the African civilization.

There were about six passengers aboard on S.S Malone along with the crew in a mission in Africa. They were all white missionaries but one. This African American man is described as "a colored tailor" and "a Garveyite who had long worshipped Africa from afar, and who had a theory of civilization all his own" (8). After highlighting the very basis of Garvey's plans of building a black nation in Africa, Hughes denounces some of the notions that nurtured this idea:

He thought that if he could just teach the Africans to wear proper clothes, coats and pants, they would be brought forward a long way toward the standards of our world. To that end, he carried with him on his journey numberless bolts of cloth, shears, and tailoring tools, and a trunk full of smart patterns. The missionaries carried Bibles and hymnbooks. The Captain carried invoices and papers having to do with trade. We sailors carried nothing but ourselves. (8)

Additionally, among some of the problems in Garvey's propositions, the misrepresentation of Africa in the African American imaginary seems to be the most prominent one. In *The Big Sea*, Langston Hughes criticizes this notion and brings a different perspective to Garvey's theory. As Hughes lands in Africa, he states that "at that time, 1923, the name of Marcus Garvey was known the length and breadth of the west coast of Africa. And the Africans did not laugh at Marcus Garvey, as so many people laughed in New York" (102). Hughes calls attention to the fact that Garvey did not have unanimous support for his proposals. Although being respected and known by many Africans, Garvey was not as admired in America.

After being in Africa for a while, Hughes implies that some Africans there "hoped what they had heard about him [Garvey] was true—that he really would unify the black

world, and free and exalt Africa.” However, “they did not understand the terrific complications of the Colonial Problem. They only knew the white man was there in Africa, heavy and oppressive on their backs. And they wanted him to go away.” Finally, Hughes tells the Africans, “Our problems in America are very much like yours ... especially in the South. I am a Negro, too” (102).

This excerpt about Hughes’s experience in Africa shows his discordance with Garveyism and his astonishment for not being recognized as one of them, Africans. It also points to a mutual misunderstanding based on hope, dreams, and stories of a reality that grew much out of fantasy rather than experience. Garvey’s promotion of the “Back to Africa” movement leads to what Stuart Hall called the long-deferred dream of an Africa that signified an origin to Black Diaspora. However, Hall argues that Africa, “whether it is ... an origin of our identities, unchanged by four hundred years of displacement, dismemberment, transportation, to which we could in any final or literal sense return, is more open to doubt.” Furthermore, the “original 'Africa' is no longer there. It too has been transformed” (231) – as Hughes figures out in the autobiography.

Then, it is clear that Hughes does not buy into the concept of this original and unchangeable Africa that was part of the rhetoric at the time. Instead, by literally experiencing what Africa was really like, Hughes raises debates over the process of constructing an African American identity. This de-romanticization of Africa found in *The Big Sea* provokes discussions of some issues regarding the African-American subjectivity, like race and hybridity that will be explored from now on.

1.3 DISMANTLING THE AFRICAN DREAM AND “READING” THE *FLOATING*

SIGNIFIERS OF RACE

“You see, unfortunately, I am not black”

(*The Big Sea* 11)

In *The Big Sea*, Hughes presents examples of many images of Africa that were part of the African-American collective memory. From the very first publication of his poem to his return to America, it can be seen a change in his approach to Africa. Later, a more “realistic” image of Africa takes place in *The Big Sea* affects his further writings. For being the only Harlemit who has been to Africa at the time, Langston Hughes brings about another side of Africa, African culture, and Africans that took the discussion of African-American subjectivity to another level. From his depiction of the continent, relevant topics of identity emerge.

In the book, Hughes chooses to emphasize the African-American dream of knowing Africa. His trip symbolizes how African-Americans articulated their longing to return to the place from which their ancestors had been taken. Hughes’s first glance at the land of Africa echoes some of those romantic and idealized portrayals that were common in the Harlem Renaissance. Hughes recalls:

That first morning when we sighted the [African] coast, I kept leaving my work to lean over the rail and look at Africa, dim and far away, off on the horizon in a haze of light, then gradually nearer and nearer, until you could see the color of the foliage on the trees.

We put in at the port of Dakar. There were lots of Frenchmen, and tall black Senegalese soldiers in red fezzes, and Mohammedans in robes, so that at first you couldn’t tell if the Mohammedans were men or women.

The next day we moved on. And farther down the coast it was more like the Africa I had dreamed about—wild and lovely, the people dark and beautiful, the palm

trees tall, the sun bright, and the rivers deep. The great Africa of my dreams! (11)

From his first look at the continent, it is possible to see that its inhabitants and cultural miscellany mesmerize him. From a distance – literally or metaphorically – Africa met the one from Hughes's dream. He even realizes that there are some similarities between the west coast of Africa and America, like the weather that "was no hotter than a Chicago summer" and, in fact, "not so hot" (105).

However, as he lands on the continent, the African dream slowly dies before his eyes. Immediately as the ship arrives at the African coast, one of the first acts in Africa was to pick up some supplementary African crew to do all the hard work aboard. Hughes says the "African crew did almost all the work aboard, and I had an African boy to wash my dishes, set the tables, and make up the rooms for me" (105). Later in the book, Hughes adds more information about this moment and criticizes the American system of oppression that works in America also works in Africa as soon as they land in the continent. He says:

When we got to Africa we took on a full African crew to supplement the regular crew who weren't supposed to be able to stand the sun. Then I had an African boy to do my washing, my cleaning, and almost all my work—as did everybody on board. The Africans stood both work and sun without difficulty, it seems. (7)

This passage reveals the paradox of American power. Whereas Hughes, himself, has no shame of having an African boy to do the hard work for him, he perpetuates to some degree of what African Americans had long fought against: the African hard labor in American soil based on prejudicial racial beliefs and stereotypes that justified slavery in the plantation era. In other words, this act, naturally described by Hughes, ties neatly with the ideals espoused by whites in the so-called New World¹⁴. Europeans "saw" Africans as the

¹⁴ According to Michelle Alexander, the enslavement of Africans in the Americas and European imperialism bring about the classification of people along racial lines in the New World. Especially in America, the idea of race "emerged as a means of reconciling chattel slavery with the ideals of freedom preached by whites in the new colonies" (23-24).

"ideal slaves" because, among other things, they could withstand the rays of the sun better, which characterized "the systematic enslavement of Africans" (Alexander 24).

Another instance of the dismantlement of the images of Africa was the portrayal of the lives of some African girls. In the chapter "Sailor's Holiday," Hughes gives special attention to how prostitution works in some African ports. He describes:

The African girls were usually very young, small, with bushy hair, and often henna'd nails. Little boys, their couriers, would take you to them and wait for you outside their doors, or if you stayed all night, they would sleep on a mat beside you on the floor.

The small black boys always said the girls were their sisters, but perhaps that was because they knew no other English word to describe them. (107)

Moreover, Hughes describes a scene that shows how foreigners exploit these African girls. He says that although "no women were permitted on the boat," two little African girls got around to climbing aboard the ship "hoping to make some money" (108). However, as the crew had no money, these girls ended up being raped by them. Hughes describes,

Thirty men crowded around, mostly in their underwear, sat up on bunks to watch, smoked, yelled, and joked, and waited for their turn. Each time a man would rise, the little African girl on the floor would say: "Mon-nee! Mon-nee!" But nobody had a cent, yet they wouldn't let her get up. Finally, I couldn't bear to hear her crying: "Mon-nee!" any more, so I went to bed. But the festival went on all night. (108)

By narrating these events, Hughes suggests that there is a side of Africa that must be shown and talked about. On top of that, he also shows that the way Americans deal with Africa and its people(s) is far from respectful. Just as the African laborers were explored as soon as they reached the African coast, Hughes realizes that American men from the ship would not miss the opportunity to take advantage of Africans in as many ways as possible, both financially and sexually.

In the same fashion, the most striking feature of the relationship between Hughes and the Africans happens when he meets them face to face. Already in the first chapter of *The Big Sea*, Hughes states: “but there was one thing that hurt me a lot when I talked with the people. The Africans looked at me and would not believe I was a Negro” (11). Thus, although his first impressions of Africa met his dreams and expectations, what shook him inside was the fact that the Africans did not recognize him as a black man. This passage shows Hughes’s exclusion “from the one community he had assumed to represent unquestioned belonging” (Kutzinski 40). These last words also give rise to critical questions of race and its essentialisms.

For black Africans, Hughes is no longer a “black” man. It is worth remarking how some concepts about race shift from America to Africa. Stuart Hall’s theories on race as a floating signifier provide the theoretical grounding for the articulation of race as a social construct. In “Race: The Floating Signifier,” Hall argues against the attachment of racial identification to any other human characteristic. Hall shows how the meaning of the signifiers of racial identity changes according to the time and place in which these signifiers are being interpreted. Hall explains:

The argument that I want to make to you is that race works like a language. And signifiers refer to the systems and concepts of the classification of a culture, to its practices for making meaning. And those things gain their meaning, not because of what they contain in their essence, but in the shifting relations of difference, which they establish with other concepts and ideas in a signifying field. (362)

In fact, it can be seen that systems and concepts of African culture signify “race” differently from the American categorization. As Hughes describes, to his surprise in Africa he is not labeled as black. Some passages in the autobiography show a different perspective on Hughes's race. While talking to some Africans about the color-line problem in America,

Hughes's words were received disdainfully by the Africans. He states: "they only laughed at me and shook their heads and said: 'You, white man! You, white man!'" (103). These words struck Hughes from within. He contends: "It was the only place in the world where I've ever been called a white man. They looked at my copper-brown skin and straight black hair ... and they said: 'You—white man'" (103).

From Hall's concept of race as a floating signifier, it can be said that although the signifiers of race are very often found on the body by its physical characteristics, what determines what "is" or what "is not" are other factors, like one's culture. It happens because their meaning is relational rather than essential. They cannot be fixed and are "subject to the constant process of redefinition and appropriation: to the losing of old meanings, and appropriation and collection and contracting of new ones, to the endless process of being constantly re-signified." Furthermore, these signifiers are "made to mean something different in different cultures, in different historical formations at different moments of time" (Hall 362).

Hence, even though Langston Hughes is categorized as Black in America, the same does not happen in Africa. As an African boy explains to him, the Africans see him as such because of all those missionaries who come to Africa "to teach us something, since they think we know nothing" (104). Hughes insists: "But I am not white," and right away the African boy replies: "You are not black either" (104).

In Nigeria, Hughes depicts the cultural aspect that plays a key role in the arena in which black Americans and black Africans are seen differently. There, Hughes is not seen as equal by his African brothers. His eagerness to get to know a traditional African ritual dance, Ju-ju, is rejected because, according to an African man, "White man never go see Ju-ju ... White man never go!" Hughes unsuccessfully argues: "But I'm not a white man," but once again he is told: "You no black man, neither" (120). These shocking moments for Hughes

problematize the western notion of race indicating that its categorization varies according to place, country, and culture. To put it in Hall's words, whether race works as a language, its signifiers vary according to the systems and concepts of a given culture.

Thus, Langston Hughes's race has a different categorization while in Africa. In another section of *The Big Sea* Hughes takes the discussion to another level. In "Negro," he addresses the readers with the statement: "You see, unfortunately I am not black" (11). This banishment from the Africa of his dreams "provides Hughes with an opening for meditating on racial identity and misrecognition back home" (Kutzinski 40). From this passage, Hughes finds out different conceptions between Africans and Americans on the subject of race.

Since the 1970s, the social constructionist view of race has been the most dominant one, and this outlook must be taken into consideration when discussing black subjectivity and the complexities of African American identity. Many critics in Critical Race Theory agree on the "reality" of race in social and political existence, rather than in a logical one (Barnshaw 1902). From this perspective, the reality of race is socially constructed. Charles W. Mills argues that "whiteness is a system of domination and exclusion brought into existence by mutual (in-group) agreement." Thus, "the political character of race is made theoretically central: race is politically created and is a form of political domination" (451). In other words, the demarcation of races is artificially drawn by human beings in response to particular political agendas.

Additionally, Mills, in the "What Are You Really?' The Metaphysics of Race," points out the metaphysical status of racial assignments and how the notion of race varies from one context to another. According to him, opposed to essentialists and realists, race "has not been an arbitrary social category ... or an innocent designation ... but has functioned as a real marker ... of privilege and subordination in a vertical system" (50). Thus, in problematizing the idealized view of Africa evoked by the black intelligentsia of his time,

Hughes favors a sociological approach to race that also takes into account cultural aspects in the construction of African American identity. Especially in American society, Du Bois wonders about its meanings and impacts on American blacks. In "The Conservation of Races" (1897), Du Bois shows that although groups of black people might share similar physical features, it is not enough to categorize them from the same race. According to him, beliefs, culture, and ideologies are elements that single out the African American experience from the African one, for instance. Du Bois says:

Here, then, is the dilemma, and it is a puzzling one, I admit. No Negro who has given earnest thought to the situation of his people in America has failed, at some time in life, to find himself at these cross-roads; has failed to ask himself at some time: What, after all, am I? Am I an American or am I a Negro? Can I be both? Or is it my duty to cease to be a Negro as soon as possible and be an American? If I strive as a Negro, am I not perpetuating the very cleft that threatens and separates Black and White America? Is not my only possible practical aim the subduction of all that is Negro in me to the American? Does my black blood place upon me any more obligation to assert my nationality than German, or Irish or Italian blood would?. (4)

Hence, the American classification of race highly based on skin color seems to be insufficient. Being African American encompasses, thus, more than the color of their skin. As a matter of fact, it is from the moment Hughes meets Africans that the aforementioned theories are exposed. The shifting of racial assignments and notions of one's race sharply vary. In other words, by addressing the readers saying "You see, unfortunately I am not black," Hughes exposes how the system assigns and re-assigns one's race according to the context in which the group is inserted. Thus, this fact is crucial to make a black person in America not be considered as such overseas.

Towards the end of the chapter, Hughes also problematizes the social and legal

principle of racial classification, the one-drop rule, which gained popularity at the turn of the 20th century in America. He concludes that “here in the United States, the word “Negro” is used to mean anyone who has any Negro blood at all in his veins.” While “in Africa, the word is more pure. It means all Negro, therefore black” (11). Nevertheless, Hughes wonders about the very notion of blackness in America from his own lineage. He explains, “there are lots of different kinds of blood in our family ... I am brown. My father was a darker brown. My mother an olive-yellow. On my father’s side, the white blood in his family came from a Jewish slave trader in Kentucky, Silas Cushenberry, of Clark County, who was his mother’s father” (11).

Hughes's biographer, Arnold Rampersad, argues that by this statement, Hughes wanted to emphasize "the extraordinary nature of his devotion to the African race, given the variety of blood in his veins." Furthermore, he conveys "the lesson that for a Negro in America racial pride cannot be a cloistered virtue but must be constantly tested and intensified by sacrifice and effort" (*The Big Sea* xxi).

Correspondingly, in America, along with slavery, colonialists brought about racial terms to differentiate themselves from the others. Historically, mestizos “have been seen as superior to "unmixed" blacks, if not as good as whites, and as such have been privileged in various ways in mainstream white society” (Mills 65). Nevertheless, it seems that in Africa this equation goes on the other way around. In the book, Hughes tells the story of a mixed-blood African boy, Edward – of whom Hughes wrote the short story “African Morning,” which he claims to be “one of [his] best stories” (104). However, what stands out about this story is how Africans mistreat Edward and his mother in a small English colony. Hughes becomes friends with Edward and knows that the reason why they were treated so badly was that Edward’s “mother had lived for years with a white man” (104) and Edward would never be accepted and seen as a black person, therefore, African.

To sum up, as Hughes lands in the dark continent of his dreams, instead of being welcomed by his African "brothers," he has a much cooler reception than expected. Through a system of difference, the depiction of Africa in *The Big Sea* marks not only a shift in Hughes's approach on the continent, but also provides relevant insights to discussions of race. The gradual dismantlement of the continent exposes the enduring complexity of black subjectivity, which is constructed by its non-essential and relational aspects. Thus, examples of the exploitation of Africans and African girls, culture clash, and non-recognition by his African "brothers" reveal an Africa that Hughes had not read in the books.

CONCLUSION: ACTUAL(IZING) AFRICA AND CONTRIBUTING TO AN AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY

Although the portrayal of the continent in the autobiography is far from romantic, it contributes to maximizing the significance of Africa in the memory, literature, and culture of Black Americans. Langston Hughes goes beyond his contemporaries, whose works tended to represent the relations between African-Americans and Africa mainly in terms of similarities and homogeneity. In *The Big Sea*, there is an attempt to represent these relationships in terms of the ambivalence of African-American subjects toward Africa, the deconstruction of the motherland of black people, and the diversity that constitutes the cultures of the African Diaspora. Complementing Hall's and Gilroy's take on the representation of Black cultures as being hybrid and complex, the book favors the idea of heterogeneity in African-American subjectivity.

From his vivid wish to get to know the land of his ancestors, Hughes's journey brings about issues of the relationship between Africa and its Diaspora. In *The Big Sea*, Hughes makes clear that he had been "waiting anxiously to see Africa." The dreamland comes true before his eyes as soon as he lands there: "When I saw the dust-green hills in the sunlight, something took hold of me inside. My Africa, Motherland of the Negro peoples! And me a

Negro! Africa! The real thing, to be touched and seen, not merely read about in a book” (10). However, after experiencing life in West African countries, Hughes presents an Africa that did not meet not only his expectations but also most of what relied on the African American collective imaginary. From that moment on, Hughes starts to question crucial issues regarding the construction of the African American identities through its connection with a place they had known from books.

From Langston Hughes's personal account of his journey, it can be said that much of his approach on black subjectivity has changed while working as a crewmember aboard the S.S. Malone in 1923. From his relationship to the sea, going back and forth between the two worlds, Hughes acquires an even more awareness of his hybrid identity, which turns out to be neither African nor American but African-American, a merged identity. As Paul Gilroy theorizes in *The Black Atlantic*, it is exactly this "moving to and fro between nations, crossing borders in modern machines that were themselves micro-systems of linguistic and political hybridity" (12). Later in his life, Hughes would make many other trips to Africa and become a praised figure in countries like Senegal, Ghana, and Nigeria. He would also be responsible for bringing the work of his African peers to the Western mainstream in the 1960s – Hughes collected and edited the anthology *An African Treasury* (1960), which brings a collection of essays, poems, articles, and stories from black Africans. Indeed, Hughes's contribution to literature and the black population lies in the powerful narrative with which he gave expression to the conflicts and pains of Afro-Americans, resulting from a confrontation with past concepts of Africa and the African-American identity.

As a matter of fact, it is possible to see in his autobiography the impact of his trip after he came back to America. While in Africa, in a port in the Congo, Hughes acquired a monkey, whom he had named Jocko. The whole story of Jocko seems to be more symbolic than an actual event. It serves to show how changed Hughes was after his discoveries in the

Dark Continent. Hughes brings the monkey as a gift to his younger brother, which shows his eagerness to share his African bonds with his kin. However, from the moment he lands in America until his departure to other adventures around the world, the fate of this red wild monkey in the New World culminates in a story of misfit, rejection, and repulse. In short, Jocko ends up being sold "to a Pittsburgh pet shop" (137). Symbolically, Jocko's tale reflects upon the discourse on belonging that has always been part of the African American experience. The relationship between Africa and America for a black American is far from simple, so is the African American identity.

In conclusion, Whether Africa had long stood for "an artistic symbol and a political refuge for blacks" (Barksdale 27), the relationship of black Americans with their roots gained special attention in regards to the motherland during the Harlem Renaissance. The "Harlem" and "Africa" sections in *The Big Sea* show which elements of the African American experience were at a stake during the first decades of the 20th century. Despite Marcus Garvey's mantra calling out black people to raise a nation in Africa, Hughes's depiction of the continent indicates his concerns on the African-American longs for this idealized Africa.

Indeed, Hughes's identification with Africa was not simplistic and many of his works expressed mixed feelings towards the place that some black nationalists elected to be their 'home'. Langston Hughes celebrates his African soul in a good deal of his poems. From "I've Known Rivers" to *The Big Sea*, this relationship with the land of his ancestors goes from contemplative to a more realistic tone. The unusual portrayal of the continent enriches discussions of race and identity of African-Americans. As Dennis Chester argues in "Modernism, African American Autobiography, and Langston Hughes's *The Big Sea*," there is a repositioning and redefinition of race proposed by Hughes in the book. Chester asserts that the representation of the African continent in the book is "overlaid with questions of racial identity ... [and] provides an intriguing and productive counterpoint to depictions of

Africa provided by other modern writers and artists” (43). Thus, in problematizing the idealized view of Africa evoked by the black intelligentsia of his time, Hughes favors the sociological approach to race that also takes into account cultural aspects in the construction of African American identity. In the end, although being conscious of his African heritage, Hughes draws special attention to the 'American' element of the hyphenated subject who lives in America.

Finally, Langston Hughes's works have contributed to the discussions of what it meant to be Black in America. Denouncing racism, describing his life as a traveler, and questioning elements of the African-American subjectivity, Hughes's thoughts influenced many authors throughout the century. Amongst these writers, Alice Walker years later takes on his concepts and adds new perspectives according to the needs of the second half of the twentieth century. In *The Color Purple*, another unconventional portrayal of Africa, African life, and culture also enriches the debate over race and identity in the African-American context. Walker's equally abundant contribution is worth analyzing and will be explored in the next chapter of this master's dissertation.

CHAPTER TWO

Demystifying Africa and the African Myth in *The Color Purple*

“An African daisy and an English daisy are both flowers, but totally different kinds”

Alice Walker – *The Color Purple* –

Alice Walker’s novel, *The Color Purple*, is one of many literary productions of the 20th century that gave special attention to African Americans’ search for their ancestral roots in Africa – a pursuit that has long been part of the lives of Blacks in the United States. The lasting, difficult, and problematic relationship between African-Americans and the United States is credited to be the determinant fact that has bound them in many ways to Africa. As Langston Hughes did in the first half of the 20th century, Alice Walker, some years later, also challenges Pan-Africanism in the novel. Instead of solely emphasizing the Pan-Africanist discourse that praised Africa as the ideal homeland of their ancestors, the novelist chooses to highlight the various aspects of African culture, such as rituals, customs, traditions, and the enduring effect of colonialism on its people. In so doing, Walker suggests that the African roots American blacks have searched for so long are already embedded within the breadth of American culture – a fact that cannot be ignored when discussing the two-ness of many African Americans regarding their identity.

From the main characters' transnational experience, this chapter analyzes the various and distinct scenarios of Africa that the novel portrays, which conflict with those previous set images that might have created a romantic view of the continent. This depiction points to Walker's view on Black subjectivity standing out against the proposition made by some black leaders at the time, who supported emigration as a way of fleeing racial discrimination in America. On the contrary, Walker favors the belief that African-Americans should remain in

the United States to fight against racism and for full legal rights as American citizens who were still facing inequalities in the last decades of the century.

The Color Purple expresses the effort to portray the particularities of what it meant to be an African-American woman in the face of derogatory images attributed to them in America. Alice Walker sets her novel at the time when there was an "increase in African American missionary activity in Africa," which ironically "coincided with European imperial expansion across the Continent" (Killingray 16). The starting point of Walker's unconventional portrayal of Africa is the religious involvement of Christian Blacks in African countries. Nettie, Samuel, and Corrine stand for those Christian missionaries in Africa during the century, whose mission in the Motherland affected the lives of Blacks on both sides of the Atlantic.

The African presence in *The Color Purple* brings a different outlook on how African-Americans saw themselves in relation to Africa. The letters exchanged between Celie and Nettie play an important role in the book by approaching themes that go beyond religion, sisterhood, and female bond. It can be seen in Walker's novel elements of the social dynamics of race in late-twentieth-century America, which acquired other issues of the black agenda, such as the black feminist discourse that had been overlooked throughout the century.¹⁵ From the letters coming from Africa, Celie broadens her horizons and develops herself into a more conscious character. The collective trauma that grounds the basis of the African American experience is part of Nettie's subjectivity and follows her wherever place she is, either in America or Africa.

To de-romanticize Africa, Walker gives special attention to relations between these two distinct nations, societies, and subjects. The depiction of some elements of the African

¹⁵ Issues of the interplay between racism and sexism were addressed by Black feminists like bell hooks and Alice Walker, whose "womanist" social theory highlighted the everyday experiences of black women.

culture, as well as the criticism on some western values inherent in many black Americans show Walker's attempt to question the dominant thought that shaped the African American imaginary in the century, which derived from a misleading idea of Africa. The novel problematizes the meaning of Africa for some black nationalists, like Garvey, who had no actual experience outside America and took the continent only through narratives that emphasized the Africaness of their identity. Walker brings to the foreground a distinct relationship that African-Americans have had with mainly West African traditions and proposes a great review of the misrepresentation of Blacks in some narratives, whose depiction of American blacks exposed them to derogatory and stereotypical images of themselves.

Then, after setting up a series of misconceptions present on Nettie's and Celie's minds of what Africa was really like, the novel takes a different path from some African American authors, whose literary productions expanded out from Ethiopianist views on Africa. Alice Walker's unconventional portrayal of Africa goes against the back to Africa notion popular at the time. She proposes that America cannot be overlooked when discussing the issues over the construction of the African American identity, because it is the principal place out of which the construction of the black subjectivity stems.

At last, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss how Walker's novel challenges naïve perceptions of Africa as a paradise of social, gender, and racial equality that had been part of African-Americans' imagination. She does so by showing the impact of colonialism in West Africa, challenging the emphasis on mutuality in the Pan-African discourse, reviewing some religious narratives – either written or oral – that had misrepresented Africa and African peoples over time. Walker's novel functions thus as a counter-discourse that challenges Pan-Africanism as well as provides a meditation on the role of memory, history, and narratives in the construction of African-American identity.

2.1 BRIDGING HARLEM AND AFRICA: REVIEWING “MUTUALITY” IN THE PAN-AFRICAN DISCOURSE

Walker uses the historical context of her novel as a foundation to discuss many issues regarding Africa as a symbol of hope, pride, and freedom that had influenced the way black Americans dealt with concepts of identity. Although *The Color Purple* lacks dates and never directly refers to any actual events, Walker grounds the novel within a historical framework. Different from *The Big Sea*, the period between 1910 and 1940 in *The Color Purple* focuses on primarily the rural South, which brings about new nuances of struggles that affected the southern Blacks in different ways¹⁶.

Along with the cultural explosion from the northern cities of the United States, namely the Harlem Renaissance, there were also political advancements, whose discourses addressed mainly those who were still suffering from segregation in the south. The Harlem Renaissance’s impact on American South can be seen as twice important as it challenges racism and stereotypes of the Jim Crow South.

Langston Hughes, in *The Big Sea*, addresses Harlem as a key element when discussing black pride, race, and identity. So does Alice Walker. Before developing Nettie's journey in Africa, Alice Walker made sure to address Harlem, which works in the novel as a bridge to connect these two peoples. Nettie's journey as a young African American going to Africa starts at this place, where some Pan-Africanist set of ideals emerged. Her mission starts in the north where she has the first hint of the relationship of black Americans with Africa within the context of diasporic consciousness.

¹⁶ Segregation and lynching were still prevalent in the South up to the 1930s.

In the novel, she highlights the importance of this northern city and depicts it as a landmark for the uplift of blacks in America. On her way to Africa, Nettie walked past Harlem and witnessed that blacks there “love Africa. They defend it at the drop of a hat” (135). Nettie's experience in the Harlem neighborhood of New York represents the first step of a long journey of self-discovering, enlightenment, and issues concerning the African American dream and love for Africa.

The novel narrates this historical event that helped to shape how later generations of black Americans related themselves regarding their ancestral homeland. Nettie amazingly describes:

When we got to New York we were tired and dirty. But so excited! Listen, Celie, New York is a beautiful city. And colored own a whole section of it, called Harlem. There are colored people in more fancy motor cars than I thought existed, and living in houses that are finer than any white person's house down home. There are more than a hundred churches! And we went to every one of them ... They live in such beauty and dignity, Celie. And they give and give and then reach down and give some more, when the name "Africa" is mentioned. (135)

From this letter, it is possible to see Walker's acknowledgment of Harlem for increasing black Americans' awareness of Africa, as well as strengthening ties between the motherland and the African Diaspora in America. There, Nettie becomes more aware of the symbolic meanings of the continent across the Atlantic, which influenced the way blacks in the United States – especially in the North – took on some concepts of culture, identity, and race.

Additionally, Nettie's time in the New York neighborhood of Harlem explicit the African-American thought at the time. It gives hints of Pan-Africanism and its philosophies,

which are reviewed in the novel. Along with Black Nationalism, a Pan-Africanist set of ideals influenced the lives of the black population in the US in the way they dealt with their identities and their ties with Africa. Some of the philosophies of the movement, especially those of radical nationalist persuasion, created the myth of Africa or the "Return Myth" that fostered the idea that "Blacks can find happiness only in Africa" and convinced others that "Africa is the place for the African" (Asante 163).

In *The Color Purple*, before going to Africa and experiencing what the continent is like, some of Nettie's words echo those of Garvey's. While in New York, Nettie witnesses that the African-American people were very willing to help Africans in the continent, and learns that working to better the Blacks in Africa is part of the Pan-Africanist thought of uplifting Black people everywhere. As Nettie says, "we and the Africans will be working for a common goal: the uplift of black people everywhere" (137). Nettie's experience in Harlem must have solidified her view on the continent across the Atlantic.

Nevertheless, the setting of the novel shifts to the African continent as soon as Celie discovers the letters that her sister, Nettie, has written to her about her life as a missionary in West Africa. The next step of the journey of Nettie's self-discovery happens on the other side of the Atlantic. The African section of *The Color Purple* paints a scenario that accentuates the issues that emerge from the search of common identities, roots, and culture between African Americans and black Africans during the 20th century. The will to experience life in Africa can be seen in Nettie's words in the following excerpt:

Did I mention my first sight of the African coast? Something struck in me, in my soul, Celie, like a large bell, and I just vibrated. Corrine and Samuel felt the same. And we kneeled down right on deck and gave thanks to God for letting us see the land for which our mothers and fathers cried – and lived and died – to see again. (143)

Similar to Hughes's first sight of the African coast, the above quote shows Nettie's amusement for reaching the Promised Land and points to the African dream highly praised by African Americans in the twentieth century. The moving emotion that Nettie felt on seeing the African coast for the first time exemplifies the Afro-American "idealistic view of Africa as an image, a beautiful artifact to be used by Afro-Americans in their pursuit of racial pride" (Christian 125). However, the African journey is filled with many conflicts between the mythical continent and the actual one, which unfolds some thoughts on the Pan-African discourse that extended throughout the twentieth century.

Walker chooses to highlight the European threat in the Pan-African set of ideas. Whether it is race relations in the US, or politics in Africa, the novel brings a scenario that shows how these groups of black people are moved by and to, and the actions taken by them to raise against the system of oppression coming from European colonialism. Hence, the common goal between both black Americans and black Africans is the system of oppression acting upon these populations on both sides of the ocean.

In other words, the novel emphasizes that more than the color of the skin and ancestry, what these two "peoples" share is the fact that both suffer from racism and are impacted by Eurocentrism. As Tunde Adeleke argues:

[The] lack of unit among black Americans and Africans [is] due, in large part, ... to the lack of sufficient awareness and appreciation of shared historical experiences, cultural values, and interests. Most critically, [the] failure of black Americans and Africans to acknowledge the commonality of their problems and challenges. Not only do Africans and Black Americans share historical ties, common interests and identity, but also, according to the cultural-nationalists, they confront common problems emanating largely from a common foe--Euro-Americans. (505)

This Eurocentric threat, as Adeleke argues, acts upon both black American and African lives and is responsible for creating a world order of white supremacy. Hence, Pan-Africanism ideals emerge as the tool for dealing with this European threat. In this view, *The Color Purple* portrayal of many forms of oppression in Africa suggests that African-Americans would not get away from issues found in America.

The portrayal of the villagers' sufferings and their stories of oppression echoes some of the abuses that African Americans are facing on the other side of the Atlantic. In other words, some sort of the same system of oppression act upon both people. While in America the central issue of the century was the problem of the color line, as Du Bois declared, in Africa black people, especially women, would face similar kinds of harshness. As depicted in the novel, much of this oppression originates in a social construction based on patriarchy.

In "Understanding Patriarchy," bell hooks defines patriarchy as "a political-social system that insists that males are inherently dominating, superior to everything and everyone deemed weak, especially females, and endowed with the right to dominate and rule over the weak and to maintain that dominance through various forms of psychological terrorism and violence" (18). It is possible to see this system of power that gives men privileges acting on the lives of black women in the plot. The novel suggests that as blacks had their own struggles in America, so did black Africans in their land. Nettie finds out a similar oppressive system acting upon African women in the village through their marital unions. Nettie says:

But many of the women rarely spend time with their husbands. Some of them were promised to old or middleaged men at birth. Their lives always center around work and their children and other women (since a woman cannot really have a man for a friend without the worst kind of ostracism and gossip). They indulge their husbands, if anything. You should just see how they make admiration over them. Praise their

smallest accomplishments. Stuff them with palm wine and sweets. No wonder the men are often childish. And a grown child is a dangerous thing, especially since, among the Olinka, the husband has life and death power over the wife. If he accuses one of his wives of witchcraft or infidelity, she can be killed. (166)

Noticeably, the racism and sexism Nettie experiences are also present in Africa. Nettie sees that “the Olinka don’t believe in educating girls,” and concludes, “they’re like white people at home who don’t want colored people to learn” (156). This revelation is just the first of many associations that Walker makes that elucidate the inequalities existing in both places.

Furthermore, in the novel, Nettie highlights the similarities in patriarchal practice between the Olinka and African American men of the American South:

There is a way that the men speak to women that reminds me too much of Pa. They listen just long enough to issue instructions. They don’t even look at women when women are speaking. They look at the ground and bend their heads toward the ground. The women also do not “look in a man’s face” as they say. To “look in a man’s face” is a brazen thing to do. They look instead at his feet or his knees. And what can I say to this? Again, it is our own behavior around Pa. (162)

From these quotations above, African women are seen as a target on which men can practice power. From Nettie’s observation, it is possible to “generalize that the way women are treated in Africa and the way some of them are treated in America were the same” (Nodari 13). While African women are subjugated by their gender, African American women are as twice discriminated against by racial and gender oppression. That is to say that women’s suffering in Africa somehow reflects what Nettie, Celie, and many African American women experienced in the US.

In this view, Alice Walker considers the impact that this transnational experience must have on the political and cultural history of black Americans, which leads to a reevaluation of the political discourse that guided the ideals of some black leaders of the century. Alice Walker questions the idea that going back to the place Blacks once belonged would make them flee racism and oppression. In *The Color Purple*, Walker shows that going back to Africa and building a new nation there is not a simple matter. As the novel shows, many issues regarding the oppression of colored people were also happening abroad and Africa was not what they expected it to be.

Similar to Hughes, by meditating on the issues of returning to an African ancestral home praised by nationalists, Walker raises questions concerning the romantic portrayal of Africa. As Nettie's trip advances, the journey moves toward a disturbing scenario that deconstructs, even more, this romantic view, which brings Nettie and her sister a different notion of their sense of self. In claiming African identity in Afro-American subjectivity, the Pan-African discourse based on mutuality fails to acknowledge the differences among these subjects. The insistence upon defining Black Americans as Africans unfolds what Adeleke calls the "identity paradigm." The scholar argues that "regardless of the degree of African cultural retentions, regardless of how far Black Americans went in changing their names and wearing African clothes, they remain in large part, products of the American historical experience." Furthermore, it is this experience that "shaped their identity [and] has left its mark indelibly on black American culture and identity" (526).

From *The Color Purple*'s plot, it is possible to state that Walker advocates the Du Boisian perspective, which took into account the American experience of much significance in the construction of their complex identities. The more the African-Americans experience life in Africa the more they distance themselves to Africans. In the next sections of this chapter, there will be a deeper analysis of not only the narratives that constructed the ideas of

Africa, but also other atypical portrayals of Africa that Walker criticizes, like the role of Christianity in political and psychological colonization in African countries. This depiction covers many issues of the relationship between African-Americans and Africans and unfolds some aspects of the construction of the African-American identities that cannot be neglected.

2.2 RE-SIGNIFYING AFRICA THROUGH PRE-EXISTING NARRATIVES

“It is the pictures in the bible that fool you. The pictures that illustrate the words”

Alice Walker – *The Color Purple* –

This chapter is showing that the atypical portrayal of Africa in *The Color Purple* sheds further light on the discussions of the formation of the African American identity because it raises some issues concerning the black subjectivity – such as the existence of an ideal homeland existing away from America. Thus, the idea of Africa as this mythical place, where people of African descent would go back to, lives on and takes shape in the minds of the African diaspora through narratives that depicted it as such. It is through some narratives – religious, literary, or storytelling – that Alice Walker develops the stages of her characters' self-growth, which are also experienced in the collective history of black Americans and Africans as a whole. By challenging the long-existing media representations about Africa, Africans, and the African American past, Walker proposes a different look at the land of origin of African Americans and invites readers to see how some narratives have been constructed by leaving the greatness of black people out. In so doing, Walker contributes to the analysis of the role that certain narratives play on issues of race and identity development of African Americans.

The field of Cultural Memory Studies analyzes the importance of narratives in reshaping the past and the meaning-making process that comes out of it. According to some scholars, it is from these accounts that "nations, ethnic and religious groups create narratives

(‘myths’) which tell the story of their origins and distinctiveness" (Erl1 147). Throughout time, narratives about black people have had the power to influence how certain groups see themselves by means of the construction of their collective identity. From this perspective, these narratives are meaning-making agents and cannot be left out of the discussions of race and identity of African Americans. According to some critics, societies construct the social world they live in “through a series of tacit agreements mediated by images, pictures, tales, and scripts. Much of what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel, but not perceived to be so at the time. Attacking embedded preconceptions that marginalize others or conceal their humanity is a legitimate function of all fiction” (Delgado 42).

In this sense, black writers feel the need to compose counter-stories to cast doubt on the validity of accepted premises or myths, especially ones held by the majority. Ron Eyerman talks about the importance of narratives from minority groups in shaping the collective identity of African Americans. In "The Past in the Present: Culture and the Transmission of Memory," he argues that these “narratives can provide means for a ‘counter-story’ for a minority or an oppressed group, in which some of the central concepts of a dominating discourse can be appropriated and given new meaning. An example is the concept of ‘race’, which was appropriated and revalued by American blacks in their struggle to redefine their standing in society" (162). Hence, it is worth examining Alice Walker’s counter-story, which exposes and challenges some highly entrenched destructive narratives about black people over time.

Firstly, Alice Walker in the novel calls attention to the lack of representation of Africa for American Blacks from the south. From her memory, Nettie recalls the images she had internalized from childhood that were passed down from her teacher. Nettie mentions the underrepresentation of the continent, that made her “never even thought about it as a real place,” and the little information she had was a stereotypical representation of Africa as “a

place overrun with savages who didn't wear clothes" (131). Nettie's first approach on the subject points to a stereotypical Dark Africa. Instead of relating to the greatness of her ancestry, Nettie distances herself from the place overrun with savages.

Surprisingly, it can be found some examples of this portrayal in the African world created by Walker in the novel. Heading to the Olinka village, Nettie describes the African scenario as follows:

We left right away for Olinka, some four days march through the bush. Jungle, to you. Or maybe not. Do you know what a jungle is? Well. Trees and trees and then more trees on top of that. And big. They are so big they look like they were built. And vines. And ferns. And little animals. Frogs. Snakes too, according to Joseph. But thank God we did not see any of these, only humpbacked lizards as big as your arm which the people here catch and eat. (150)

Nettie's description of Africa reinforces those same inaccurate impressions that started earlier as a child. Walker's depiction of Olinka turns out to be as stereotypical as those found in books, which highlighted a side of Africa as a land full of wild animals. Although being as stereotypical, this scenario is the first step taken towards de-romanticizing Africa throughout the novel.

Later on, Walker criticizes some other narratives – like those found in the Bible – that had shaped the historical and cultural imagination of blacks in America during the century. In *The Color Purple*, Walker proposes a different look at these narratives, which exemplifies that – like her own novel – they are important tools that frame the African Americans' way of seeing the world, themselves, and their race. Notably, back to the previous moment when Nettie witnesses black Harlemites' worship for Africa instead of America, and the black church that has a black representation of God, she is impacted in a way that she has never

been before. The scenario in the North is foreign to Celie too, which makes Nettie, through her next letters, draw her sister's attention to another version of the stories of Africa and Africans they had been told so far.

In the novel, Alice Walker retells biblical illustrations that have long been part of the African American imaginary. In some of Nettie's letters, there is an attempt to reconstruct the perception of black people and their importance to humanity. Through the narrative, Nettie over emphasizes the black color of some biblical characters that were told to them so long ago. Nettie asks her sister:

Did you know there were great cities in Africa, greater than Milledgeville or even Atlanta, thousands of years ago? That the Egyptians who built the pyramids and enslaved the Israelites were colored? That Egypt is in Africa? That the Ethiopia we read about in the Bible meant all of Africa? (132)

These sentences re-signify the Christian religious narratives that have always been part of the collective black American imagination. Nettie's re-visitation of these texts impacts herself and her sister right away. The power of these words, pictures, and stories give Celie, in America, a new perspective on her features, race, and pride of her origins.

Conversely, Walker chooses to highlight the struggle of black Christians across the diaspora, who had learned to worship God in a face that does not resemble their own. These narratives play a role in the reforming of history and as a tool for defining collective identity and the sense of the African American self. That is to say, individuals construct their identities through narrative practices, and they are to reshape the past to fit certain ideological purposes.

In *Memory in Culture*, Astrid Erll casts light on how media work in the construction of cultural memory. She tells about the connection between culture and memory within

sociocultural contexts. From this perspective, some cultural formations are based on "collective memory, on symbols, media, institutions, and social practice which convey versions of a shared past." Moreover, "the social institutionalization of memory media finds its strongest manifestation in the framework of national, ideological, ethnic or religious memory." Therefore, these various forms of media have the power to "construct versions of a past reality" (125).

From this perspective, literary texts can be considered as media of cultural memory, because their symbolic forms "play a role in the making of cultural memory – such as chronicles, historiography, legal texts, religious writings, and mythic tales" (Erl1 149). Thus, *The Color Purple* touches on the issue of the misrepresentations of Blacks, and Africans, not only in biblical texts but also in the Literature of the West. The novel uses some passages from the Christian Bible to give a new look at those images that many African Americans grew up with mainly in the religious South.

For instance, there is a clear critique of how blacks in America construct the image of God from some biblical readings. The above-mentioned letters Celie receives about Africa coupled with the biblical images of black people influence her notions of God, as well as how she pictures him. Through its narratives, the social construction of what God looks like is questioned in the novel. At first, from Christian narratives she has been raised with, Celie describes God as "big and old and tall and graybearded and white. He wear white robes and go barefooted" (193). Right after, Celie is confronted by another female character, Shug, who says that this view is basically taken from "the one that's in the white folks' white bible" (193). In the end, these two characters conclude that "Ain't no way to read the bible and not think God White" (193).

Additionally, because of her mission, Nettie reads about Africa, and realizes, for the very first time that the Bible is full of black people, and Ethiopians in the Bible were black — just like her. Nettie says:

Think what it means that Ethiopia is Africa! All the Ethiopians in the bible were colored. It had never occurred to me, though when you read the bible it is perfectly plain if you pay attention only to the words. It is the pictures in the bible that fool you. The pictures that illustrate the words. All of the people are white and so you just think all the people from the bible were white too. But really white people lived somewhere else during those times. That's why the bible says that Jesus Christ had hair like lamb's wool. Lamb's wool is not straight, Celie. It isn't even curly. (120)

With this revelation, Nettie becomes even more aware of the power of representation and how it affects the process of identity construction of African Americans. Here, Nettie figures out "the representations that surround and limit her" and "explains that Biblical illustrations are misleading [because] they depict bodies that are images of the power structure rather than drawing them to correspond to historical evidence" (Wall 88). The Western depiction of the biblical narratives told in the church is now looked upon in a different way. Nettie finds out that the skin of the Ethiopians is "whitened" in the English Bible, and as she recollects the same stories and gives them a different look, Nettie re-signifies her and her sister's view of Africa, Africans, and God as well.

Consequently, Nettie's new approach to the biblical stories impacts her sister, and herself, making them both learn and re-interpret the history of African peoples, which ends up accentuating the pride of their own features, heritage, and race. Nettie figures out that in the Bible, "Ethiopia" stands for Africa and the biblical description of some features – like his hair being like lamb's wool – makes Nettie and Celie paint a different picture of Jesus, whose

features might not look white-skinned as they once believed. The non-white representation of Jesus reflects on the way Nettie and her sister see their race. They value the fact of being non-white and begin to see worth in themselves.

In short, these stories in *The Color Purple* exemplify how African Americans construct images through narratives to which they have access. Mediated by black nationalists, sacred books, and novels, they have the power to affect the lives of black Americans, shape the way they perceive themselves, and play an important role in constructing the collective identity of African-Americans. In the novel, Walker shows that either literary texts or sacred books have been an essential part of the way Blacks in America deal with their subjectivities regarding representations of Africa and Africans alike.

2.3 STRESSING DIFFERENCES AND QUESTIONING THE AFRICAN MYTH IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN IMAGINATION

“The Africans never asked us to come, you know. There’s no use blaming them if we feel unwelcome.”

Alice Walker – *The Color Purple* –

As stated in the previous chapter, the role of collective memory in shaping the collective identity of African Americans was crucial to understand the various steps involved in the complex analysis of the two-ness of being African-American. Moreover, in the second half of the twentieth century, the pride of being black had a direct link to how African-Americans dealt with their ancestry and shaped their sense of identity through a natural association with Africa as the motherland. Nevertheless, Nettie starts very quickly to see that life in Africa is far from utopic. The more this character comes to know different parts of Africa, the more she acquaintances instances of discrimination and political injustice are just as likely in Africa as in the Southern United States.

This chapter argues that Alice Walker is one of a few black voices "that persistently opposed emigration to Africa or an untoward African American focus on the continent" (Killingray 13). In *The Color Purple*, Walker calls into question the ideal homeland that was part of the African American imaginary and chooses to depict a scenario that many blacks should be aware of. By doing so, she shows that black leaders, writers, and scholars should be careful not to homogenize the experiences of the diverse peoples within the diaspora. In other words, even though there are many commonalities between black Americans and black Africans, there are crucial differences that stem out of the political, cultural, and societal contexts.

In the novel, Africa gradually becomes strange to Nettie and uncovers disturbing elements that make her feel dislocated several times in her mission. Nettie's disappointment starts as she learns about the involvement of Africans with Europeans in the Atlantic slave trade. She finds out that some of her ancestors had sold their own people to white slave traders. Nettie says: "I read and I read until I thought my eyes would fall out. I read where the Africans sold us because they loved money more than their own sisters and brothers. How we came to America in ships. How we were made to work" (132). Then, she questions, "Why did they sell us? How could they have done it? And why do we still love them?" (139). Finally, in Africa Nettie notices, "no one else in this village wants to hear about slavery, however. They acknowledge no responsibility whatsoever. This is one thing about them [Africans] that I definitely do not like" (165).

The above quotes are examples of Walker's attempt to question the notion that Africans in the continent would share the same views and thoughts with their brothers and sisters from the diaspora across the ocean. Africans' refusal to recognize African traders' involvement in the trans-Atlantic trade disappoints Nettie, whose previous thoughts did not expect to see such a reaction from the Africans. Actually, in this section Walker sketches a

denied relationship in Africa, which emphasizes Africans' "unwilling to claim any kinship with African Americans ... and refuse to take responsibility for selling their own kin"

(Daniels 112).

This assumption is just the beginning of many to come cultural clashes that will give Africa a different view. Walker demystifies Africa and many concepts of Back-to-Africa migratory programs by casting doubts on the concept of reciprocity between Black Americans and Africans.

Nettie's first disappointment comes along with a hint of the African political arrangement. In Monrovia, the capital of Liberia, Nettie meets the President of the country and notices his cabinet is mainly made of white people. There she comes to understand its norms along with racial hierarchy. Nettie is surprised for she "had not expected to see any white people in Africa, but they are here in droves. And not all are missionaries." Moreover, she notices that "there are bunches of them [white people] in Monrovia, too. And the president, whose last name is Tubman, has some in his cabinet. He also has a lot of white-looking colored men in his cabinet." And after having tea with the president, Nettie concludes that, in Africa, the presidential palace "looks very much like the American white house" (142).

It is worth mentioning that in Monrovia, before getting into the description of African culture and environment, there is a mentioning of the first attempt to send black Americans back to Africa: The American Colonization Society (ACS). The movement took place in Liberian cities allegedly with the purpose to improve the conditions of impoverished free Blacks by assisting them in West Africa. However, black leaders figured out that what politicians in America really wanted was "to 'drain' the free black populations from the

United States as there seemed ... no other way to resolve growing racial tensions between North American free blacks and whites” (Wheelock 68).

The novel questions this recurrent endeavor to relocate free black American populations to Africa that for some reason goes a long way in America. Walker undoubtedly turns against the return to Africa idea when she puts these words into Nettie's mouth:

Monrovia was the last place we were among people we were somewhat used to, since it is an African country that was ‘founded’ by ex-slaves from America who came back to Africa to live. Had any of their parents or grandparents been sold from Monrovia, I wondered, and what was their feeling, once sold as slaves, now coming back, with close ties to the country that bought them, to rule. (140)

What calls Nettie’s attention in the first place is how these black Americans would feel coming “back” to a place that had once sold them to be enslaved across the Americas. In fact, this effort to relocate the black population to Africa makes highlights the African-American struggle for belonging. Not being desired in America and not getting used to life in unknown Africa nurtures the discussion of the black subjectivity in the novel.

Once again, Walker shows a scenario that did not meet the expectations of those diasporic people who dreamed about Africa as the perfect place for the uplift of Black people. In the novel, black Africans in power have been impacted by Western culture, which influences their relation to the black race.

In Liberia, Nettie faces how much Western white culture and values rule over there. The president's concern with "trying to develop the country" and the way he refers to African blacks as "natives" upset Nettie a great deal, because as she says "it was the first time I'd heard a black man use that word. I knew that to white people all colored people are natives. But he cleared his throat and said he only meant “native” to Liberia. I did not see any of these

“natives” in his cabinet” (142). Hence, gradually Nettie finds out that Africa is nothing but a land distressed by many of the same problems as in America.

At the end of her first experience in African soil, Nettie concludes: “I did not really like the Senegalese I met in the market. They were concerned only with their sale of produce. If we did not buy, they looked through us as quickly as they looked through the white French people who live there” (141). Nettie’s letters signal that Blacks in Africa are also oppressed and dominated. These images coming from Africa open Celie’s eyes to the outside world across the Atlantic and link the personal oppression she has suffered from with broader themes of domination and exploitation in both Africa and rural Georgia.

In sum, the idea of Africa as the Motherland for African-Americans is not fulfilled in the novel. As discussed before, the African Americans’ sentiment towards Africa as the Motherland can be credited to an inevitable link to West Africa as a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In "The Concept of the African Diaspora and the Notion of Difference," Avtar Brah analyzes the main characteristics and the complex interplay between black individuals and groups across national and cultural borders. According to her, especially the concept of "home" for diasporic subjects is "also the physical and psychological experience of a particular place at a particular moment, a place in the diaspora where identities are negotiated and transformed" (53). Indeed, after this transnational experience, Africa does not seem to be “home” before Nettie’s eyes.

By the same token, in another step in the process to re-signify the African-Americans’ collective memory of Africa, Walker starts to portray nuances of African culture and rituals that go against Western practices. First, Walker paints a disturbing look at how some African tribes, through their culture, perpetuate a chain of discrimination very much based on the control over women's bodies.

Walker calls attention to how damaging some African rituals can be, especially to women. Walker addresses the issue of female genital cutting (FGC), a ritual to which African girls submit themselves at the beginning of their adulthood. Nettie mentions about "the one ritual they do have to celebrate womanhood is so bloody and painful, I forbid Olivia to even think about it" (188). Although the cultural exchanges between these two groups grow stronger as time passes by, Nettie forbids her actual niece to think about the possibility of such a practice, which delimitates and emphasizes the differences between these cultures.

Later on, Walker approaches the second aspect of the female initiation, which involves face scarification. The act of inflicting wounds shows submission to the traditions of the dominant power within the culture and physically and mentally marks the lives of Africans. Nettie gives a vivid description of how the ritual goes. Nettie notices that Tashi, an Olinka village girl, "was planning to scar her face." And as the African mission proposed, Nettie confesses that "one of the things we [missionaries] thought we'd helped stop was the scarring or cutting of tribal marks on the faces of young women" (239). Later, it is explained that the ritual "is a way the Olinka can show they still have their own ways ... even though the white man has taken everything else. Tashi didn't want to do it, but to make her people feel better, she's resigned;" furthermore, "she's going to have the female initiation ceremony too, she said" (239).

Disappointed, Nettie finds out that besides their efforts to stop this kind of ritual, American missionaries were powerless in the tribe. Nettie tells that while they "were away she'd undergone both the facial scarification ceremony and the rite of female initiation" (241). The consequences of such an act are also felt through Tashi's behavior. As Nettie contends, "her face was still swollen from half a dozen small, neat incisions high on each cheek" (242). Furthermore, Nettie notices:

They [scars] must be painful too because they look irritated and red. But this is what the villagers are doing to the young women and even the men. Carving their identification as a people into their children's faces. But the children think of scarification as backward, something from their grandparents' generation, and often resist. So the carving is done by force, under the most appalling conditions. We provide antiseptics and cotton and a place for the children to cry and nurse their wounds. (242)

And from Nettie's point of view, "Tashi is ... ashamed of these scars on her face," as she begins to "appreciate the magnitude of her mistake" (242). Tashi realizes that the scars on her face will be seen as a mark of "savage" through the lenses of her African American friends. Her behavior provides evidence that villagers know how the West views their culture. It is conveyed that by choosing her people's culture, Tashi is excluding herself from another.

Nettie's reading of Tashi's regret is emblematic because it brings back nuances of her Western savior complex. To this end, by showing Nettie's dismay with some African traditions, Alice Walker is displaying a complete familiarity with the cultural legacy of western civilization as an inherent part of the African American subjectivity.

Once again in the novel, black Americans and Africans are seen as two opposing beings. This portrayal, in part, reflects Frantz Fanon's observation, in *The Wretched of the Earth*, that the problem Black Americans "were faced with was not basically any different from that of the Africans. The whites in America had not behaved any differently to them than the white colonizers had to the Africans." However, "gradually the black Americans realized that their existential problems differed from those faced by the Africans." And the only thing they would have in common "was that they all defined themselves in relation to the whites. But once the initial comparisons had been made and subjective feelings had

settled down, the black Americans realized that the objective problems were fundamentally different” (153).

As a way to emphasize how troublesome the idea of African Americans going back to Africa was, Walker opts to finish the black mission in Africa in a bad way. The last scenes in Africa highlight the conflicting relationship that permeated black Americans and Africans during all the years they co-existed in Africa. As shown in the final conversation about the non-fulfillment of their goals, Nettie and her now-husband, Samuel, discuss their disappointment with Africans on their way back to their "actual" home. Although showing her sadness for the failure of their mission in Africa, Nettie realizes that Africans have never asked them to be there. She tells, "the Africans never asked us to come, you know. There's no use blaming them if we feel unwelcome." Samuel reiterates this statement and concludes:

It's worse than unwelcome, ... The Africans don't even see us. They don't even recognize us as the brothers and sisters they sold. That's the heart of it, don't you see. We love them. We try every way we can to show that love. But they reject us. They never even listen to how we've suffered. And if they listen they say stupid things. Why don't you speak our language? they ask. Why can't you remember the old ways? Why aren't you happy in America, if everyone there drives motorcars? (243)

Hence, Nettie and Samuel perceive that the love for Africa they found in North America conflicts with the treatment they received by Africans, who despise them for belonging to Western culture.

Finally, the African setting in *The Color Purple* put forward touchy issues concerning the relationship between African-Americans and their ancestors. Walker raises questions about the logic that plays in the conflicting arena when opposing subjects are put together. Furthermore, from neglecting the collective trauma attached to the African American memory

to some forms of oppression found in Africa, the continent starts to tumble down into Nettie's eyes.

Some years after she arrives in Africa, Nettie and her Christian comrades conclude that not even Christ can save the Olinka from the damaging consequences of colonialism. In depicting this scenario, Walker shows that the effect of colonization on African soil is one aspect of Black conscious thought that cannot be neglected whatsoever.

Thus, Walker's unconventional depiction of the continent in *The Color Purple* – more precisely the conflictual relationship between African Americans and Africans – favors the complex identity construction of black Americans, which is built from the collective trauma that is so particular and determinant “force in the shaping of the black American experience and identity” (Adeleke 526). Moreover, Walker's option to stress the major differences between black Africans and African Americans is a way to recognize that the singularity of their historical experiences makes them different subjects, which emphasizes Walker's contrary view that the ideal “promised land was not to be found in Africa but to be struggled for in North America” (Killingray 7-8).

2.4 THE COLONIAL PROBLEM: CRITICIZING THE BLACK ATLANTIC MISSION AND ADDRESSING RACE IN AFRICA

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker's portrayal of Africa focuses on a side of the continent that goes against the romantic notion praised by black writers at the time. Once again, Walker casts doubt on the paradoxes of the messianic event that metaphorically elected Ethiopia as the place for the redemption of Black people. The back-to-Africa movement depicted in *The Color Purple* is more based on the notion nurtured by black Protestants in America in the 20th century, whose biblical focus directed their gaze towards Africa as a mission field. From this movement, Walker highlights some misleading ideologies spread

around the diaspora that for a long time emphasized the commonness between Afro-Americans and Africans. Either politically or religiously, black Americans and Africans are contrasted against each other, which shows off, even more, the complexities of African-American subjectivities. By putting black Americans and Africans in two opposite sides, Walker allows for discussions of race in the African-American context.

Firstly, in “The Black Atlantic Missionary Movement and Africa,” David Killingray points out that, at the time, the whole idea spread around Christian blacks was based on the fact that “the Bible spoke powerfully of exodus from slavery, and for some blacks this was interpreted as a need to return to Africa” (4). As the novel shows, Nettie believes that going to Africa was, at first, a way of helping African “people who need Christ and good medical advice” (118). This quote leads to the assertion that, in the novel, Walker uses black Americans as the media for perpetuating colonizers' values in Africa. The story of Nettie stands for the black victim of the white settlers, who “having internalized the European culture of enlightenment and Protestant Christianity, go out to take on their part of the burden and bring the goodness of civilization to their brothers and sister in the jungle” (Jorgensen 66). Hence, another strategy to question the image of Africa as the ideal homeland, Alice Walker uses some of the ideologies that prompted the political-religious involvement in Africa, like the so-called Ethiopianism.

The power of narratives in shaping one's view is already addressed in the previous section. It is from these texts that Ethiopianism takes place. Driven by some biblical verses, the movement encouraged even more black Americans' interest in Africa. *The Color Purple* highlights this transatlantic experience of American Blacks and criticizes the basis of this idea, which started from civilization thoughts towards the African continent. The infliction of these ideologies promoted a loss of understanding, which revolved around the fact that missionaries advanced the interests of the brutal colonizers in newly free African nations.

Correspondingly, from a postcolonial perspective, religion is considered one of the forces through which the colonizer creates colonized subjects and maintains power over them. This form of control acts in a way in which "the colonialist bourgeoisie is aided and abetted in the pacification of the colonized by the inescapable powers of religion" (Fanon 28). In the novel, the missionaries are described as an example of how Christianity was used as a way in which colonialism exerted its power over some African colonies. It is known that the British in Africa used western religion, more precisely Christianity, as an instrument of colonization. Christian missionaries were sent to Third World nations to civilize and bring God to the people they perceived as savages, which leads to automatically seeing the others, who do not share their beliefs, as innately evil and uncivilized.

John Cullen Gruesser has pointed out this portrayal of Africanist writing by African-American authors, whose depiction of the motherland in the twentieth century stressed a myopic view of Africa. At that time, much of this view came from Ethiopianism. In *Black on Black: Twentieth-Century African American Writing About Africa*, Gruesser explains the concept of Ethiopianism as "the teleological and uniquely African-American view of history" (6) taken from the Psalms verse, in the Bible, saying that "Princes shall come out of Egypt, Ethiopia shall soon stretch forth her hands unto God" (68:31).

In fact, Alice Walker's novel is set within this context as Nettie expresses on her way to Africa that "everyone has such high hopes for what can be done in Africa. Over the pulpit there is a saying: Ethiopia Shall Stretch Forth Her Hands to God" (Walker 134). According to Gruesser, this political-religious movement towards the East triggered the African Americans' belief that they would play a significant role in the regeneration of Africa and lead people of the diaspora, and Africans themselves, to a brighter future. From this utopian mission, a series of misunderstandings between black Americans and Africans unfold in the novel.

The letters addressing Celie from England and Africa focus on the overt presence of European colonialism in the continent, which shows Walker's concern for depicting a different scenario for those African Americans who want to live there might find. Before reaching Africa, Nettie and other missionaries stayed for a while in England. In her first letters to her sister, Nettie explicitly criticizes the very idea of colonialism and wonders about its impact on the lives of African blacks. From these critical words on colonialism, Nettie expands her sister's horizons and makes it possible to reflect upon the position that African Americans take in the United States caused by the dreadful actions of the white settlers coming from Europe. Nettie says:

Although Africans once had a better civilization than the European ... for several centuries they have fallen on hard times. 'Hard times' is a phrase the English love to use, when speaking of Africa. And it is easy to forget that Africa's 'hard times' were made harder by them. Millions and millions of Africans were captured and sold into slavery – you and me, Celie! And whole cities were destroyed by slave catching wars. Today the people of Africa – having murdered or sold into slavery their strongest folks – are riddled by disease and sunk in spiritual and physical confusion. They believe in the devil and worship the dead. Nor can they read or write. (139)

Nettie's high hopes of converting Africans to Christianity are grounded in her view of God and religion. The last sentences from the above quote show Nettie's "reproachful, primitivist, and condescending African-American view of Africa, recalling the distrust of religion and tradition" of Africans (M'Baye 159). This condemnatory tone can be seen as Walker's critique of a traditional white religion brought to New England and imposed on black slaves. In bringing a black American criticizing African religious beliefs, Walker subverts the twentieth-century conventional portrayal of the continent, which situates the novel a clear opposition to "the romanticization of Africa as the land of Glory" (M'Baye

159). Quite the opposite, the novel chooses to emphasize the continent's perennial suffering from the effects of colonization and cultural imperialism.

This depiction of Africa resembles Fanon's work, *The Wretched of the Earth*, pointing out the colonial problems with characterizing colonialism as a binary opposition of colonizer and colonized. According to Fanon, the dichotomy – white and black, good and evil – characterizes the colonial context. Nettie's focus on the lack of formal education of Africans and their need to be Christianized reflects that of European casting of African culture as inferior. The people of Africa were described as "riddled by disease and sunk in spiritual and physical confusion" and their belief "in the devil and worship the dead" also emphasizes the western notion of redemption of the African people.

More than problematizing the view of the European parameter as the only parameter of civilization, the above quote shows how colonizers do not respect the beliefs of the colonized subject. Nettie sees Africans as white colonizers do, which passes on the idea of how colonizers perceived the colonized in terms of a superior-inferior polarity. From these words, Nettie serves as the medium applying to describe Africa from a western point of view in which Black Africa, the Third World, "is looked upon as a wild, savage, uncivilized, and lifeless region" (Fanon 108).

Still from a postcolonial perspective, *The Color Purple* continues to depict an African scenario that reinforces the idea of Eurocentric superiority through the whole mission in Africa. As a critic of the exclusionary concepts of western religions, Walker emphasizes African myths through their cultural traditions. She questions the concepts these African Americans bring with them in their journey to the land of their ancestors. In the following excerpt, Nettie, from her Christian perspective, describes the African faith in a way that differentiates it from Christianity. Nettie informs her sister "the most horrible thing to happen

had to do with the roofleaf, which, as I must have written you, the people worship as a God and which they use to cover their huts” (233).

The roof leaf, which is the Olinka's most important crop, is another symbol used by Walker to highlight the damaging consequences of the colonial power in Africa – it ends up being destroyed to make room for the rubber trees of the English rubber company. Moreover, the roof leaf is used in a way to stress the antithesis of African Americans' and Africans' culture, as much as the hybrid subject that emerges out of these transnational characters. It starts as a "part of the welcoming ceremony" (152) to the missionaries. As Nettie becomes more aware of the importance of the roof leaf to the Olinka people, she reviews her concept of God back home. It goes from a shocking statement of this object that "the people worship as a God" (233) to a condescending behavior that differs them, black missionaries, from the white ones.

Joseph, the spokesman for the Olinka, tells Nettie, "the white missionary before you would not let us have this ceremony." And Nettie, later, explains: "We know a roofleaf is not Jesus Christ, but in its own humble way, is it not God?" (154). It is inferred from this passage that Joseph has already understood the main Christian tenet for making the distinction between the Christian representation of God and his people's faith. Moreover, this passage is another criticism of the exploration of Christianity in Africa, which spread its beliefs around Africans. Samuel embraces the new education proposed by African-American Christians, whose teachings represented the developed western civilization and were solely based on "English, reading, writing, history, geography, arithmetic and the stories of the bible" (144).

Secondly, as pointed out, the way Nettie racialized the biblical verses calling Ethiopians "colored" points to the American racial discourse noteworthy. Race was a dominating theme in this period and black missionary activity and experiences were hedged

about by questions of color and race. Although relatively small in number and influence, “African American missionaries were unique in the United States in being the one ethnic group that had a primary focus on evangelizing peoples who were racially similar” (Killingray 6). On this topic, Alice Walker criticizes the very notion of this idea, which derived from white sending agencies’ belief “that African American missionaries had greater resistance to tropical diseases than white people,” coupled with “plenty of voices in the Americas claiming climatic advantage for blacks over whites in the tropics” (Killingray 9).

Despite the Pan-African discourse tone present in the novel, *The Color Purple* does not endorse the idea of Marcus Garvey, but "offers a modified and somewhat critical perspective on the complex dynamics of the racial and continental relationships between America and Africa" (Trinya 6). Indeed, the novel overturns this misleading thought that black skin would be enough to get black missionaries away with some diseases due to the climate of Africa.

A man in the village warns Nettie about their possible faith after the rainy season in Africa. He is sure that, just like Europeans, black missionaries would fit into their culture and perish:

He spat on the ground. What are you? Three grownups and two children. In the rainy season, some of you will probably die. You people do not last long in our climate. If you do not die, you will be weakened by illness. Oh, yes. We have seen it all before. You Christians come here, try hard to change us, get sick and go back to England, or wherever you come from. (161)

This character's disgust and foreshadowing end up coming true as Nettie accounts "after two months, during which I or the children or Corrine has been sick" (164);

furthermore, Nettie says that “Corrine has been very ill with African fever. Many missionaries in the past have died from it” (170).

Thus, the novel highlights how Africans negotiate and forge relationships among themselves and with the members of the foreign society. As seen in the above quote, this relationship is far from harmonious – as Nettie had expected – for the common feature that would give her an advantage among the Africans: the color of her skin. Nettie says, “there is one big advantage we have. We are not white. We are not Europeans. We are black like the Africans themselves” (137). Nettie’s words voiced a sentiment shared by many of those black Christians, who believed that “black America and Africa were intimately connected, largely because of the color of their skin. African Americans saw their plight as inextricably linked with that of Africans and their struggle for liberation” (Blyden 66). However, although Nettie’s physical description and behavior point to her categorization as being a black woman, it was not enough to make her being recognized as such by her African comrades. On the contrary, what Alice Walker writes is that Nettie’s Pan-African perspective does not offer any advantage in African soil. In the Olinka village, what she actually experiences is that, even though they are black like Africans, they were seen by them in the same light as Europeans, as outsiders, and vice versa.

After a long time in Africa, there are many examples in the novel that show Nettie’s distrust towards Africans comparing them to white people in America. Nettie sees that, just like in Georgia, African men are “like white people at home who don’t want colored people to learn” (156), concluding that “Africans are very much like white people back home, in that they think they are the center of the universe and that everything that is done is done for them. The Olinka definitely hold this view” (168).

As an African American writer, Alice Walker has a sensitive perception of racial issues regarding black Americans and how they deal with their identity in relation to the other. The very definition of the concept of Otherness¹⁷, which relies on its imposed state of difference, helps to understand how societies form their identities. Comparing Africans' cultural behavior, patriarchy, and self-centeredness to white people in America, Nettie is, to some extent, building her own sense of identity in respect to the Other, where the “sign of cultural/historical/racial difference” is brought to play (Bhabha 293). Being either racially or geographically other, it can be seen in the novel that the Pan-African rhetoric is overlapped with the "white presence" in Africa, distancing black Africans and Americans once more.

In like manner, in *Invisible Sojourners: African immigrant Diaspora in the United States*, the social theorist John Arthur provides a deep analysis of the conflicting relationship between people of Africa and the Diaspora despite the historical ties that bind them together. Arthur explains that “the cultural barriers and the social and economic differences separating the Africans and the African-Americans is sometimes the cause of a simmering hostility and misunderstanding between them.” Furthermore, just "sharing the common physical characteristics of skin color has not ensured cultural and economic unity between African immigrants and American-born blacks” (77-78).

The skin color is an allegory used by Walker to emphasize the misleading assumption that, due to their skin color, African-Americans would be more accepted in Africa by their brothers and sisters. The way Walker uses skin color as a trope for race relations in the novel shows the differences between Africans and African-Americans' understanding of their race. Walker draws attention to the fact that African-Americans bring with them the view on race from America that is credited to be a racialized space. The history of blacks in America is

¹⁷ In literary theory, the concept of "othering" is a key concept in postcolonialism and refers to the depiction or categorization of another person as distinctly different. Coined by Edward Said in *Orientalism* (1978), some theorists often capitalize the term as "Othering," "the Other," and "Otherness."

troubled by a past and present grounded in a widely white racist society. Thus, it seems reasonable to see Nettie's limited take on the visible marker of Africans through skin color.

As a matter of fact, the natives do not welcome the African American missionaries as expected. Actually, this feature only triggers the curiosity of the natives and as Nettie and the other black missionaries arrive at the tribe, the Olinka villagers surround them and are shocked by the fact that for the very first time they see a black person as a missionary. Nettie accounts:

You never saw such curious faces as the village folks surrounded us with. At first they just looked. Then one or two of the women touched my and Corrine's dresses ... So then they moved up a little bit—nobody saying a word yet—and touched our hair. Then looked down at our shoes. We looked at Joseph. Then he told us they were acting this way because the missionaries before us were white people, and vice versa. (151)

Because the missionaries had come mostly from the white European world, the Olinka people had never seen black-skinned foreigners in such a position. Although the physical mark of the color of their skin is perceived, it is only enough to cause strangeness for its unusualness. Walker uses this failure of mission between the African American missionaries and the natives to show how these two subjects, although having intersections, are different matters and should, then, deal with their identities in different ways. While the novel corroborates with the very basis of the Pan-Africanist ideals that emphasized the unity of all African peoples and shared goals and interests; at the same time, it highlights the differences between these two distinct populations showing that regardless of their shared common ancestry they are "totally different kinds" (Walker 122).

The way the Olinka villagers react to African Americans is one of many depictions used by Walker to demonstrate the complex ways in which African-Americans situated themselves in the African diaspora. The mission in Africa contains tensions, which are described along Nettie's journey around West Africa, suggesting that many of prior concepts on this matter might not be fulfilled in Africa. This portrayal illustrates a shifting perspective on the pan-Africanist set of ideals, from its foundational discourses toward its social practices.

Still from the debate of race relations in the United States, Killingray points out that "the issues of race and colour had always been central to the African American missionary venture in Africa" (17). Unlike their white European counterparts, black foreign missionaries saw Africa's problems through the lens of the African American population in the United States. In the novel, the way Nettie describes African helps to elucidate this view. What stands out is that her Western categorization of race is still very much based on skin color. Compared to what she had seen in the South of the United States, the racial category, African-American, is essentially based on visual features. From this perspective, Nettie's description of Africans does not go far from that perception. Nettie writes:

It was the funniest thing to stop over in Monrovia after my first glimpse of Africa, which was Senegal. The capital of Senegal is Dakar and the people speak their own language, Senegalese I guess they would call it, and French. They are the blackest people I have ever seen, Celie. They are black like the people we are talking about when we say, 'So and so is blacker than black, he's blueblack.' They are so black, Celie, they shine. Which is something else folks down home like to say about real black folks. But Celie, try to imagine a city full of these shining, blueblack people wearing brilliant blue robes with designs like fancy quilt patterns. Tall, thin, with long necks and straight backs. Can you picture it at all, Celie? Because I felt like I was

seeing black for the first time. And Celie, there is something magical about it. Because the black is so black the eye is simply dazzled, and then there is the shining that seems to come, really, from moonlight, it is so luminous, but their skin glows even in the sun. (141)

Nettie's account of her arrival in Dakar is foremost emphasized by her amazement at seeing "some of the blackest people" she has ever seen. The skin-color-based description made by Nettie makes her admire anew her black skin and her black race. Her depiction of Senegalese people has something to do with a kind of racial categorization where scales of blackness are commonly taken into account when dealing with the essentialization of what it means to be black in America.

As Thomas and Turner point out in "Race, Class and Color: The African American Discourse on Identity," in America, "the issue of color, as a social value, emerged as a cultural symbol that has complicated race designation." From the Antebellum period, "color configuration served as criteria and qualification for formation of caste in social organization," bringing about even intra-color conflicts that "have created the most disruptive problems in the racial history of people of African descent" (12). In short, the color of the skin of Africans calls attention to a Southern black American, who inevitably associates this feature with the American way of perceiving their blackness. As Nettie says, the pride of being black and dark-skinned has something to do with what "folks down home like to say about real black folks" (141).

In summary, the "Ethiopianist" motto and some elements of the Pan-Africanist discourse are criticized in the novel. The author's criticism of some religious practices is a "path of Walker's larger project of rethinking Christianity and spirituality in her works" (Harris 458). More precisely, by using American blacks as the media for performing some

colonizer's values in Africa, Walker subverts how African American writers have written about Africa. Furthermore, Walker condemns the black American missionary involvement at the time, whose thoughts, faith, and practices collided with their so-called Africans' brothers and sisters. By showing African-American missionaries from a foreign perspective, Alice Walker contributes to the debate over the issues of race relations in America. In *The Color Purple*, Nettie and other American Black missionaries see Africans through the lens of the African-American way of seeing things – a Western categorization of race highly based on skin color.

In short, Walker's criticism of the idea of African-Americans going back to Africa is expressed through her critique of Ethiopianism. In the novel, African American Christians end up neither returning to nor Christianizing Africa. These facts are examples of Walker's strategy for questioning what elements are determinant to the construction of African-American identities. Her criticism advocates Africa as not being the national homeland of African-Americans whatsoever. The (religious) eastward trip that should unite these two black populations ends up setting them apart from each other. In other words, what starts as a dream of uplifting black people in Africa, turns out to be a disastrous involvement between black Americans and black Africans. Consequently, even though African blood is a crucial component of their identities, black Americans must be considered "Americans because they are historically and physically rooted in America" (Kay 123).

CONCLUSION: CONCERNING AFRICANESS AND/OR AMERICANESS IN THE AFRICAN-AMERICAN IDENTITY

Driven by the growing feeling of belonging, during the 20th century African Americans emphasized their link and tie to Africa, showing the similarities that united them both historically and psychologically. However, despite their common ancestry, Africans and African Americans remained separated by myths, misperceptions, and negative stereotypes.

In *The Color Purple*, Alice Walker paints a disturbing picture of Africa and re-signifies the meaning of the continent in the African American imaginary. In so doing, Walker contributes to the discussion of the issues regarding the construction of the African American identities in the United States.

The novel shows an African American missionary who, along with her will to go to the land of her ancestors, takes to Africa political, social, cultural, and legal conventions that, as the novel suggests, are a crucial part of the African American experience. Nettie, as a black American, embodies the expected common bond held together by notions of the black diaspora, which is expected to encounter many similarities between them and Africans. But Walker chooses to emphasize competing images that nullified traces of cultural likeness.

From Nettie's letters, Cellie and Nettie grow their understanding of their roots and their importance in the lives of African Americans, who were still striving for their American identity in a racist society. Nettie is used in the book as the perfect example of many African-Americans, who in the twentieth century looked to Africa as a way to reclaim their identity once stripped away from them. However, some misleading ideas, beliefs, and dreams about Africa are slowly broken down.

In Africa, instead of the land of opportunities that inspired black nationalists to promote black emigration to the continent, Walker chooses to portray African countries and their flaws concerning the enduring impact of colonialism, issues of bringing Western culture and beliefs to the continent, and peculiar rites and customs that totally oppose to those practiced in the US. This is to say that Alice Walker focuses on the differences rather than the commonalities between these two populations regarding their "cultural specificities as representations of a totalizing ethnic or national identity" (Nodari 5).

Nevertheless, *The Color Purple* mentions the Pan-African solidarity used as a way to combat oppression on both sides of the hemisphere. It also shows that although black Americans and black Africans have the same origin and share similar issues regarding the color line, they are different subjects that should be seen as such. In other words, homogenizing the experience of people of African descent does not help when discussing relevant topics of the African American agenda, like the attempt to get rid of the double oppression of the race in America, and the construction of the African American identity in the US.

It must be acknowledged that Walker's novel has been criticized for its portrayal of Africa and African culture as naive constructions because it reproduces the same Western canonical "prevalent stereotypical images of Africa in Western popular culture" (Kieti 158). Some commentators have argued that this portrayal of Africa and African culture in the novel perpetuates the idea of the enlightened Western savior, who brings light to the poor and primitive, which represents not only the African American imagination as a whole but also the author's, herself, limited point of view on these matters. Indeed, Alice Walker walks a thin line between what is a critical tone and what is another stereotypical description of Africa, which may be interpreted for some as a reinforcement of the previous stereotypical portrayal of Western writers.

On the other hand, what Alice Walker does is recognize that the derogatory stereotypes that construed Africa as either the Dark Continent or the Motherland come from the narratives that have long been part of African American life. These narratives are redressed in the novel making such images have a different meaning. In *The Color Purple*, the narratives coming from Africa provide Nettie and Celie a fairly different image of the continent, impacting their lives in many ways back in America. From not knowing "where Africa at" (119) to the statement that "God is different to us now" (227), Africa is shown as a

determinant factor that contributed to the development of these two characters' identities, culture, and how they see their race.

In *The Color Purple*, the differences and disturbing views of African culture that put black Americans and Africans in opposite directions also point to Walker's critique of those black leaders, who sought cultural identity in their African origins. This specific portrayal of Africa seemed essential for the writer's necessity to question the basis of the idea of what going back to Africa would be. Unlike Marcus Garvey, Walker seems to oppose the return to the Motherland as a way to express the African American identity.

In stressing many differences between American Blacks and African Blacks in the African setting, Alice Walker de-mystify the romantic depiction of Africa as the homeland of people of the African diaspora. In so doing, in *The Color Purple*, Walker posits herself against the misleading belief that praised Africa as the home for black Americans, contributing to the discussion of the double complexity that acts upon the African-American subject, whose hyphenated identity cannot leave behind either side of its nomenclature. Rather than solely singling out the Afrocentric aspect of their identity, black Americans should, thus, acknowledge and embrace the significance of their American experience in the shaping of their identity.

In describing this continuous alternation between Africaness and Americanness, cultural and national identity, Walker furthers W. E. B. Du Bois's remark on the black Americans' double-consciousness, for she locates this division between a subject looking for her roots elsewhere rather than America. In the end, the missionary experience in Africa turns out to be the symbolic bridge linking these two subjects that, although sharing roots, are contrasting to each other. Going back to Africa, and going back to America, only emphasizes how hard it is for Blacks the construct their identity finding their place in the world. The

black American mission in Africa exposes even more how complex the construction of the African American identity is. While in America there is slavery, discrimination, and oppression, across the ocean, they face some of the same discriminatory practices in the African world.

Finally, after the failure of the mission in Africa Nettie and her comrades feel like they were not welcomed to either of these two places. Thus, the concept behind going back to Africa does not seem to be a good idea after all. This portrayal shows off the complex construction of the African Americans identity, which is illustrated by means of the double struggle of the black population living in America, who have neither been free from nor close to their African roots. As Africa is not being the Promised Land praised by the narratives at the time, the identity construction of this hyphenated subject has to be shaped and forged in the same place to where they were induced to escape from: America.

Final Remarks

I took them [books] all out on deck and threw them overboard. It was like throwing a million bricks out of my heart—for it wasn't only the books that I wanted to throw away but everything unpleasant and miserable out of my past: the memory of my father, the poverty and uncertainties of my mother's life, the stupidities of color prejudice, black in a white world, the fear of not finding a job, the bewilderment of no one to talk to about things that trouble you, the feeling of always being controlled by others... All those things I wanted to throw away. To be free of. To escape from. I wanted to be a man on my own, control my own life, and go my own way. So I threw the books in the sea. (Hughes 98)

I wrote a letter to you almost every day on the ship coming to Africa. But by the time we docked I was so down, I tore them into little pieces and dropped them into the water... That's the way I felt when I tore them up and sent them to you on the waves. But now I feel different. (Walker 130)

Both quotes, from the targeted literary works, somehow summarize the aim of this master's dissertation: the analysis of how the collective identity and memory work on the African-American subjectivity. The eastward movements represented in the books show how Blacks in America negotiate their subjectivity by means of their connection with Africa. Metaphorically, by throwing old books, letters, and writings into the sea, these characters are at the same time leaving their old self behind and opening themselves to the new ones to be discovered in Africa. It is as if they were about to write new narratives about Africa, their

heritage, America, and themselves too.

The debate over the bond between African Americans and Africa has lasted for centuries. Especially in the twentieth century, this debate came to the surface of the black agenda in the US characterizing the sociopolitical position of American blacks in the United States. The chapters of this dissertation showed the writers' depiction of African Americans' varied relationships with Africa through the 20th century. While Langston Hughes, in *The Big Sea*, provides a cultural approach through the identification of black Americans with Africa, Alice Walker, in *The Color Purple*, addresses the socio-political aspect of it. Both works depict an Africa that does not correspond to the long-lived Motherland in the African-American imagination. In the books, both authors show the recognition of a foreign Africa by black Americans, which unfolds nuances of the transatlantic identity that comes out of this experience.

In this dissertation, the path taken to analyze *The Big Sea* and *The Color Purple* has been constructed as follows: Firstly, I provided the theoretical background and an overview of the main events of the time in which the books were written. The 20th century was a time of radical transformation in the political and legal status of Blacks in America. At that time, some of the most important theories took place and were critically important to comprehending the African American experience. Black leaders, scholars, and intellectuals like Booker T. Washington, Marcus Garvey, and W.E.B Du Bois theorized about the complexity of what it meant to be black in America. From Back-to-Africa to Black Power, movements throughout the century provided a basis upon which Langston Hughes and Alice Walker based their writings.

Throughout the chapters of this dissertation, Langston Hughes's first autobiography, *The Big Sea*, as well as Alice Walker's famous novel, *The Color Purple* were analyzed

introduced by the authors' ever-changing connection with Africa. Chapter One attempted to analyze how the portrayal of Africa in *The Big Sea* contributes to discussions about the construction of African-American subjectivity. Chapter Two focused on Alice Walker's examining the author's approximation with postmodern theory and its unfolding through Nettie's experience in Africa and its scenarios, which Black Americans and Africans are put in two different directions.

Hence, the chapters presented in this dissertation highlighted Hughes's and Walker's criticism on discourses and narratives that were part of the African American agenda throughout the twentieth century. By depicting an African scenario that sharply differed from the romantic portrayal so far in America, both authors suggest not only a different look at Africa, but also the way African Americans deal with their subjectivity. Thus, the analysis of these works end up suggesting that the African roots African-Americans have searched for so long are already embedded within the breadth of American culture – a fact that cannot be neglected whatsoever.

In conclusion, it is undeniable Langston Hughes's and Alice Walker's importance to literature. The latter was influenced by Hughes and the quotes at the beginning of this section prove so. As a matter of fact, in "Turning into Love: Some Thoughts on Surviving and Meeting Langston Hughes," Alice Walker expresses the impact of Hughes on her life as a black woman and writer. She says "as much as I liked some of his poems and short stories, I liked even more his autobiography... Particularly in the sections where he wrote about his struggle with his parents... I recognized one of my grandfathers." Furthermore, Walker concludes "It was the first realistic portrayal of a certain kind of puzzling black man I'd read" (664).

Similarly, the unconventional portrayal of Africa in *The Big Sea* and *The Color Purple* contributes to the debates over the construction of African American identities. By

stressing many differences between American Blacks and African Blacks, Hughes and Walker posit themselves against the misleading belief that praised Africa as the home for black Americans. If Hughes makes clear in *The Big Sea* his opposition to Garvey's ideas, Walker in *The Color Purple* is not Garveyist either. The novel "does not advocate the back-to-Africa sentiments of the sixties and seventies... [and] even during the very 'return' to Africa, an epistolary link, even if thin, is maintained with America" (Trinya 3). These authors propose, after all, that rather than solely singling out the Afrocentric aspect of their identity, black Americans should acknowledge and embrace the significance of their American experience in the shaping of their identity.

In short, Africa not being portrayed as the Promised Land shows that the authors favor the African-American subjectivity being shaped and forged in America. Thus, the literary works analyzed in this dissertation add extra elements of complexity in the identity construction of the hyphenated subject in America. At last, much has been written and talked about Hughes's and Walker's representation of the puzzling African-American experience in Africa. Nevertheless, in the context of contemporary migratory movements, the commonalities and differences between both subjects, Black Americans and Black Africans, in America might remain for further research.

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