

“DWELLING PLACES (AND SPACES) OF THE USELESS-WINGED CORMORANT”: ISSUES OF SPACE, PLACE AND GENDER IN IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION IN JAMAICA KINCAID’S “BLACKNESS” AND OLIVE SENIOR’S “DO ANGELS WEAR BRASSIERES?”

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RESUMO: Nos estudos literários pós-coloniais, é constante a representação de sujeitos fragmentados devido a aspectos sociais e culturais. Para entender a importância dos lugares sociais, geográficos e culturais, discussões sobre diferença e poder manifestar-se-ão. O objetivo desse artigo é dar voz às questões que conectam as noções de espaço, lugar e gênero na construção identitária representadas em dois contos que ilustram a tessitura da complexa rede de imagens e conceitos relativos a geografias coloniais e pós-coloniais, sendo eles “Blackness” de Jamaica Kincaid e “Do angels wear Brassieres?” de Olive Senior. À luz de teóricas como Doreen Massey (*Space, Place and Gender*), Allison Blunt em parceria com Gillian Rose (*Writing Women and Space*) e Stuart Hall (*The Question of Cultural Identity*), analisar-se-á o lugar da diferença (étnica e de gênero) em um momento de forte influência do período colonial na cultura. Essa herança cultural e social dialoga com as construções sociais e o comportamento esperado nas relações de gênero. As representações de sujeitos femininos ficcionais de diversas partes do mundo é um grande fator a considerar na formação da identidade e em relação a fatores externos como a globalização. A questão a responder é como esses sujeitos deslocados são representados na literatura e que lugar(es) eles ocupam em sociedade.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura pós-colonial. Construção identitária. Relações de gênero. Literatura Caribenha.

Regarding postcolonial studies, one may find many issues - especially the ones inscribed in the Western way of living, including the consequences of globalization - that revolve around fragmented subjects because of the different social and cultural aspects and geographical spaces in which these relations take place. In order to understand the importance of the social, geographical and cultural places and spaces, discussions on difference and power are bound to arise. The aim of this paper is to analyze and give voice to the issues intertwining the notions of space, place and gender in identity constitution in two short stories that illustrate the weaving of this complex web of images and concepts regarding colonial and postcolonial geographies. The short stories are Jamaica Kincaid’s “Blackness” and Olive Senior’s “Do angels wear brassieres?” We are keeping in mind that the authors have undergone similar colonization processes since they come from Caribbean countries that were former

British colonies. This article will focus on some theoretical aspects regarding colonial and postcolonial geographies including the discussion on how place and spaces of difference (ethnicity and gender, in this case) aid the construction of the characters' identities.

Even though the concepts of place and space do not always appear in correlation to the ideas of gender, Doreen Massey (1994) highlights the "intricacy and profundity of the connection of space and place with gender and the construction of gender relations" (1994, p. 2). These ideas and others can be represented through literature. The literary emphasis of this paper is on the two short stories mentioned before, the first being by an author from Antigua and published in 1983 and the second by a Jamaican one and published in 1986. Placing the writers in a space/time correlation aids the creation of a better understanding of the purpose and relation the pieces of fiction have with the social reality of the time. Also, the representations of the feminine subjects in the short stories allow the readers to understand

the importance of the existence of this variable construction of gender relations in different local-cultural space/places, and the importance of documenting and analyzing it [...] is that such a finding underlines even more sharply the necessity for a thoroughgoing theoretical anti-essentialism at this level [...] and that that in turn undermines those arguments which rely on attributions of characteristics as 'natural' to men and women. The demonstration of geographical variation adds yet another element to the range of arguments that these things are in fact socially constructed (MASSEY, 1994, p. 178).

These short stories originate from the hands of Caribbean authors who create characters that represent spaces of difference and power in their speech and way of thinking relating to colonial heritage and postcolonial influence. In order to further understand these authors and the context of their writing, it is paramount to dwell on the idea of how the colonization process occurred in their countries, understanding some of the background and history of their birthplaces. Chosen to compose the body of literature of this article, the authors of such texts share the place of the postcolonial writer whose lands suffered from British colonization, they share the place of the dominated people, of women who illustrate in their writing the spaces of patriarchy and difference their characters have to face.

Antigua¹, Jamaica Kincaid's birthplace, was inhabited by different indigenous peoples, however, the first well-documented people were the Arawaks who introduced agriculture to the island. The Caribs, another native people from the area ejected them. When Columbus discovered the island in 1493, it was named by Columbus after the Santa Maria de la Antigua church in Seville and soon most of the natives were suffering from European diseases and were submitted to slavery. Disputed unsuccessfully by the French and Spaniards, only the British Empire was able to colonize it in 1632 and it officially became a British colony in 1667. With large profits coming from tobacco and sugar plantations, there was a noteworthy increase on the importation of African slaves. In 1834 slavery was abolished for all colonies of the British Empire, but most of the former slaves suffered from poor labour and living conditions until the 20th century when the introduction of universal education and better financial conditions improved their lives. Only in 1951 an election with the universal adult suffrage occurred. In current times, according to the 2013 census, 91% of the population of Antigua and Barbuda is black and approximately 4% is mulatto. Taking into consideration the main ethnic group is composed by self-declared black, or Afro-Antiguan/Afro-Barbudan, people and women across classes in this English-speaking Caribbean country remain subjected to patriarchy. The place of writing Kincaid makes use and presents in her short story is essential to bring to the surface the spaces a black woman writer – and her characters - may find herself inserted and the struggles she may have to overcome.

Jamaica², Olive Senior's birthplace has a similar historical background. The Arawaks, also known as Tainos, dominated the region before the arrival of Columbus in 1494. The native population struggled with diseases and slavery as well and was almost extinguished in its entirety by the 1600s. The Spaniards were able to colonize the region at first by almost annihilating the Arawaks near the bay area. In 1655, the Spaniards surrendered to England, but before doing so, freed the slaves who ended up, along with their generations, being called Maroons. Agriculture was focused on export to England

¹ Historical information: "British Colonization". Jamaica, the colonial legacy. Available at: <http://jamaicathecoloniallegacy.weebly.com/british-colonization.html> Date of access: 03/16/2016.

² "Antigua and Barbuda : History". The Commonwealth. Available at: <http://thecommonwealth.org/our-member-countries/antigua-and-barbuda/history>. Date of access: 03/15/2016 and "Antigua's History and Culture". Antigua and Barbuda. Available at: <http://jis.gov.jm/information/jamaican-history/>. Date of access: 03/15/2016.

and, at the time, crops of tobacco and cocoa gave way to sugarcane with the labor force being constituted mainly of enslaved Africans. Dissatisfied with their situation, many slaves were successful when escaping plantations and joining the Maroons. Since the rebellions were frequent and humanitarian groups such as the Quakers worked hard on their behalf, the Abolition Bill was passed in 1808, emancipation and apprenticeship in 1834 and full freedom in 1838. The period that followed was difficult for the lower classes and the will of the mass was given no voice. Given the situation, another mass rebellion took place and health and economic situation improved; nonetheless, the first elections under universal adult suffrage only happened in 1944. Moreover, because of such history, Jamaica is a place where Christianity – whether Protestantism or Roman Catholicism –, to this day, represents the majority of the country and the situation of women is dictated by patriarchal behavior repeated in speech and social relations of both men and women.

As mentioned before, the issues of space, place and gender are prominent in postcolonial literature. Thus, it is of great relevance to determine that, as Massey said, it may be “employed to picture the n-dimensional space of identity” (1994, p. 1), contributing to the formation of dislocated postcolonial subjects who face a set of double displacements, as Stuart Hall calls it, for they are “de-centering individuals both from their place in the social and cultural world, and from themselves” (1996, p. 597). These subjects constitute part of the scope of this research due to the fact that they are illustrated by the variety of different characters in the stories under scrutiny. Indirectly, theories on place, space and geographies have been debated for a while in both literature and academic research. Nevertheless, with more research on globalization and postcolonialism, deeper research has been produced and pieces of writing have been investigated from this new perspective.

Even though it has been believed that place and space are concepts that are immobile while time is fluid, in the past decades, research has articulated the concepts of space and place with social relations. There are many aspects to investigate and in this article the main focus will be on the association of space and place with gender relations. Massey quotes Ernesto Laclau by saying “existence is necessarily dislocated” (1994, p. 3) and, consequently, space is fractured. Although thinking about space(s) connected with dynamism may seem a novelty, Massey explains objectively in the following excerpt how the social phenomena is associated with it and, thus, it requires this energetic view of the concept:

Central to that paper is the argument that space must be conceptualized integrally with time; indeed that the aim should be to think always in terms of space-time. That argument emerged out of an earlier insistence on thinking of space, not as some absolute independent dimension, but as constructed out of social relations: that what is at issue is not social phenomena in space but both social phenomena and space as constituted out of social relations, that the spatial is social relations 'stretched out'. The fact is, however, that social relations are never still; they are inherently dynamic. Thus even to understand space as a simultaneity is, in these terms, not to evacuate it of all inherent dynamism (MASSEY, 1994, p. 2).

Since social relations are at the foundation of time, space and place as dynamic concepts, it is possible to link these ideas with Hall's notions about the post-modern subject and issues of identity(ies). In *The Question of Cultural Identity* (1996), Hall states that modern societies in the late twentieth century suffered a structural change bringing fragmentation to cultural landscapes of class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, race and nationality, aspects which previously added a firm location to individuals. Adding the intensity of processes of postcolonialism and globalization, the concept of belonging also gains a new, more delicate perception and the space of experience for this subject does not rely only on material space anymore.

There are constructed spaces from other practices such as colonialism that constrict subjects into a small place understanding the existence of only one static place with no change for their lives. This article is dealing with symbolic images in stories that are very significant and relate to the space of patriarchy, a space that oppresses one large group of society, women. Patriarchy is a process that limits actions of women and adds specific rules to women and men. In *Writing Women and Space* (1994), Alison Blunt and Gillian Rose call attention to a common process that involves a segregation between the private and public space because the house, and specifically the kitchen, is a place where women may have their social relationships, for they are mothers and daughters, but the public sphere is concerned with "the economic, cultural and political system as a whole" (BLUNT & ROSE, 1994, p. 3) and, as a result, men are the authority in patriarchal societies. Current research appears to validate that with postcolonial thinking, narratives of the past have been assisting the comprehension of the present and spaces and places are becoming more fluid.

“Blackness” is a beautiful piece of writing, filled with with lyricism, by the prominent Antiguan American author Jamaica Kincaid. The story is written in first person and the names of characters are omitted. There are many different images and situations in the story worth analyzing that correlate with the theoretical aspects mentioned before. The story is told in a poetic prose form and depicts the inner feelings of a character who understands her place as woman and mother. Blackness is a term that presents conflicting ideas, since it is associated with annihilation, cruelty and erasure at first, but the term changes throughout the text just to represent what might be the unknown, depicting “an image of renewal or rebirth.” (EDWARDS, 2006, p. 33). It is thought as well that “blackness confounds oppositional thinking by breaking down binaries and bringing opposites together. Blackness is the night that transforms day into darkness, but it is also the color of a racial identity, a color that ‘flows through... veins’” (idem, p.33). This nameless character does not inform the reader the country in which she resides and describes. She, however, presents a background that conforms, silences and distorts her. Spaces of gender and patriarchy constrain her. Her daughter, unlike the mother, lives in a state of conflict and transgression, even though she is just a child. Her skin is “without color” (KINCAID, 1983, p. 473) and the jaws that were once too weak, her mother had to chew food for her, are now strong enough to interact with nature and manmade objects. Despite having created life as such, the narrator still lives in a place of silence, lack of light and isolation, understanding herself as erased.

The main character seems to understand her place as a static, unchangeable situation in which she is silenced and erased in blackness because of her societal position. Customarily, in history, blackness is associated to racial terms and black bodies consigned to margins. However, in her text, blackness is not only bound to silence and erasure; “it also provides a deeply complex vision of selfhood and identity formation. She thus develops a paradox in which the loss of the self comes to define the self” (idem, p. 34). Jana Braziel argues that Kincaid’s short story “Blackness” contests the negative Western connotations of blackness (BORGSTRÖM, p. 2). From the beginning of the short story, in the first part, it is possible to identify passages that highlight the narrator’s understanding that different spaces and places she occupies are destroyed for the one and first notion of her social self. Passages such as “the blackness enters my many-tiered spaces and soon the significant word and event recede and eventually vanish” (KINCAID, p. 471) and “the blackness cannot be separated from me

but often I can stand outside it” (idem, p. 471) are examples of the narrator’s awareness of her condition.

In the first part also, the narrator finds herself silenced in that position - “in the blackness, my voice is silent” (idem, p. 471). Then, the second part follows to illustrate this external silencing and blackness, in addition to illustrating spaces of power and patriarchy, for the narrator describes a dream of bands of men who walk aimlessly, robbing the day of its light and transforming it into night, robbing the smell of the trefoils. They marched in silence but with their silence, violence marched along, destroying the physical and metaphorical marble columns that strengthened the foundations of the house (idem, p. 472). It is a wise choice the one of adding a dream because dreams represent the most inner desires and fears of a person. Only people with power over the other may invade private property and the unconscious of another. This passivity also shows a construction of identity unaware of the domination of societal and cultural hierarchies, thus, generating docility towards oppression and loss of self. It is worth remembering that there is a distinction between the public and the private and, as Blunt and Rose describe it, usually, women are associated with the private. In this dream of the narrator, the bands of men destroy not only the surroundings but also the foundations of her house, the private, even the space that is commonly associated with women.

The next section represents a mother’s love towards her daughter. That child is described as an unmarred individual but pitiless to a hunchback boy. A sense of resistance through violence shows strength in the girl. She is a divided individual, always in a state of conflict but in a beautiful and harmonious way. One who understands that place is a static concept, either sees him/herself as belonging or erased. The representative of this second generation, the daughter, is part of a much more complex scenario: she is a hybrid being, able to love both “the thing untouched by lore, [...] not cultivated, and yet, she loves the thing built up, bit carefully placed upon bit” (KINCAID, 1983, p. 473). By observing the child and its ability to deal with a fragmented identity and to walk on the tightrope amongst different spaces, for instance, the narrator remarks: “One foot in the dark, the other in the light.” And she continues “Though I have summoned her into a fleeting existence, one that is perilous and subject to the violence of change, she embraces time as it passes in numbing sameness, bearing in its wake a multitude of great sadness”. (KINCAID, 1983, p. 473).

The mother thus faces her own reality and for the next section shrugs off her mantle of hatred and the one of despair, embracing the silence and blackness and moving towards the silent voice and because of the silent voice, “even in memory blackness is erased” (idem, p. 473), which is of supreme importance because before blackness was erasing her. Silence becomes now a symbol of empowerment, of an attempt to a chance of development, for it is without boundaries, and the pastures the bands of men before touched and destroyed in her dreams now are unfenced, with beasts leading a guarded existence and, finally, that woman, in the silent voice, is erased, and this erasure meaning only she is “no longer ‘I’” (idem, p. 474), she is reconstructing her identity. She is at peace. This reordering of meaning to the ideas of silence, erasure and blackness defies the foregoing notions as relating to a positionality of inferiority and marginalized identities and add spaces of consciousness to the aforementioned colonially determined gender roles.

Olive Senior’s “Do angels wear brassieres?” is a dynamic piece of writing narrated from a third person perspective. The narrator seems to be from the same region, though, because of the way words are written, it sets the accent of the region, complementing the piece with a sense of creole identity. This is a choice that helps mark the geographical, social and class relations; the only person who speaks formal English is the white male Archdeacon. The space of patriarchy and social class division often lead to a clear-cut bisection when it comes to the female and male roles in society. This is very clear in Jamaica when we read the following passage from the research of Thame and Thakur in “The Patriarchal State and the Development of Gender Policy in Jamaica”,

[...] middle class Jamaican women may be making progress, they do not displace middle class men in power. Women across classes are still subject to patriarchal power. When considering indicators which are perceived as men failing to live up to expectations of manhood, we should seek to deconstruct the cultural norms and structural dynamics which produce them. In that vein, we can also arrive at deeper understandings of why, for instance, men opt out of education and the formal economy. These are feminized spaces precisely because men are not necessarily able to play patriarchal roles within them, given the low wages in these sectors and the declining faith in the dream of social mobility through education (THAME & THAKUR, 2006, p. 14).

This short story describes the social surrounding of a Jamaican girl named Beccka whose father's abandonment forced Beccka and her mother to move into the house of her religious and conservative Auntie Mary. Beccka, similarly to the daughter of the main character in "Blackness", is the representation of transgression in a repressive environment. On the other hand, Cherry, her mother, is a very passive individual who abides by the rules of the household imposed by her sister.

The narrative is constructed through dialogues and some comments from the narrator. It opens with a dialogue between Beccka and her mother about praying and in this first part, already, the narrator declares that the girl reads the *Imitations of Christ*, a devotional book for Protestants and Catholics. However, whereas devoted believers read it for instructions on how to proceed with faith, the child does so "not from any conviction [...] but because everybody round her always quoting that book and Beccka want to try and find flaw and question she can best them with" (SENIOR, 1986, p. 484). In this precise geographical place and household, existing expectations from children (especially girls) are clear, but Beccka, a strong and intelligent child, does not allow her environment to castrate her from her thinking and, even skepticism. She creates questions about taboo subjects such as animals' reproduction and science, transgressing the space for women's knowledge, for women or children ought not to ask or wonder about such subjects. Despite Beccka's transgressions, her auntie thinks, as she describes her niece to a friend, she is "not all bad you know. Sometime at night when she ready to sing and dance and make up play and perform for us we laugh so till! And those times when I watch her I say to myself, this is a really gifted child" (idem, p. 486). And she "is not all bad" because during those moments, she is entertaining and that is one of the main traits women should know how to cultivate. In the second part, Beccka is at her auntie's bedroom, a forbidden space, and to achieve further transgression, she is wearing Auntie Mary's high heel shoes, shawl and hat, the ones Auntie only wears to weddings. Beccka is so aware of what women are allowed to do or not that she has a list of the wickedest things a woman can do which are, from her perspective, dancing all night, being in the arms of a handsome man and taking a drink. This part allows the reader an overview from the mind of this role-infringer child. The next section is a very decisive one for understanding the characters' personalities. Auntie Mary is excited due to the visit of an English Archdeacon to churches in the area and her front gate is a sure stop but she would like him to come inside for tea and Jamaican delicacies. Her one concern is Beccka because she perceives the peculiarity of the child. When he passes

through their house, he decides to enter because he is quite taken with the child who is behaving perfectly – and here the certainty that Becca is fully aware of her ground rules as a child and woman presents itself. When alone with the male white religious figure, she impersonates a shy “good little girl” until she is given a chance of asking questions to the Archdeacon. Despite the amusing tone, the daring questions enlighten the man that before him is not a conventional little girl. He recovers his senses and adds that she is a “very clever very entertaining little girl” (idem, p. 489), as if she still had to be embedded in the patriarchal space women are allowed to inhabit. Her final irreverent question, one the religious man wanted not to have to answer, was if angels wore brassieres – a very peculiar question, for brassieres are the symbol of women oppression, dialoguing with issues of gender and the space of patriarchy. The story ends with Becca’s attempt to escape and Mr. O’Connor answering the question the Archdeacon did not, “as far as I know only lady angels need to” (idem, p. 491). This short story presents a young female character whose behavior defies the spaces patriarchy has reserved for women. She trespasses spaces predefined for her in all aspects with the bravado only a child can present and with the intelligent thinking of a grown woman. Furthermore, it illustrates also a very peculiar character alive in all places, the dominated subject who absorbed generous amounts of the hegemonic speech and winds up reproducing it. In the case of the story, Auntie Mary is the most significant example of it, a woman reproducing the ground rules for the repressive role of women, obliging her niece to pertain to a space and place where she does not belong. Debate is possible to be fostered on the conclusion of the story, for it may be seen as a story of assimilation or transgression until the end.

Altogether, all women characters in the stories live lives engraved by the social, historical and geographical place and space to which they belong or, at least, participate in, summing to their non-static identity formation. Massey emphasizes this notion when stating that “the spatial organization of society, in other words, is integral to the production of the social, and not merely its result” (MASSEY, 1994: 4). Based on these authors, a connection can be made between the short stories because the colonial place the main characters were expected to fill were similar, even though one was a woman and the other a child or one was already fulfilling it and the other only knew how to defy it. Regarding areas such as history, postcolonial movements present the tendency to bestow new perspectives to old traditional thought, “as Mathurin Mair wrote in 1974, historians were obliged to revisit the ‘conventional sources’ in order to open up ‘new

emphases and new interpretations relating to' the black Jamaican woman, and to decode the real world of enslaved and free women so as, eventually, 'to shift the parameters of traditional historiography' (BRERETON, 2013, p. 3).

In conclusion, in both short stories, "geography matters to the construction of gender" (MASSEY, 1994, p. 2). The construction of gender and gender relations are important concerns in the contexts of the stories for the social constructions and expected behavior is really strong when being a man or a woman in that specific space and society, especially for women. These representations of fictional female subjects from different parts of the globe may help demonstrate that the geographical factor, as said before, is another important element to consider in gender formation and the issues regarding globalization and time/space relations. It is of supreme importance that pieces of postcolonial literature as the selected ones be the focus of study and analysis because thanks to the heritage the past social and cultural relations bring, one can hardly recognize the imprisoning and excluding elements less-privileged groups (such as women, gays, non-white people, amongst others) have to face. In a global dimension, these focus groups are no longer "useless-winged cormorants" with only one dwelling place; these subjects portray dislocated and fragmented identities and occupy different places and spaces in society.

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