

MELO JR., Orison Marden Bandeira de. *Literatura e racismo: uma análise intercultural* [Literature and Racism: An Intercultural Analysis]. Recife: Ed. Universitária da UFPE, 2013.111 p. [Coleção Étnico-racial]

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Literatura e racismo: uma análise intercultural [*Literature and Racism: an intercultural analysis*], by Orison Marden Bandeira, is an attractive book which resulted from his Master's research at the Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo [Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo]. The author transits through the most varied sectors of culture: Philosophy, History, Anthropology, and Literature. The author carries out a rigorous analysis of two 19th-Century literary texts: *O Mulato* [*Mulatto*] (1881), by the Brazilian writer Aluísio Azevedo, and *The House Behind the Cedars* (1990), by the American writer Charles Chesnutt. Both of them are set in the 1870s. The author's literary analysis is grounded on the Bakhtinian studies, by means of which he intends to point out the existence of a markedly racist discourse, in particular, in the narrator's speech. Backing his arguments on previous works, Orison confirms the presence in both texts of echoes of a prejudicious discourse in relation to black and mulatto characters. When focused on Brazilian authors, the author shows that in *Memórias de um Sargento de Milícias* [*Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*] (1854), by Manuel Antônio de Almeida, *As Vítimas Algozes – Quadros da Escravidão* [*The Victims Executioners – Frameworks of Slavery*] (1869), by Joaquim Manuel de Macedo, *O Tronco do Ipê* [*The Ipe Stem*] (1871), by José de Alencar, *A Escrava Isaura* [*Slave Isaura*] (1875), by Bernardo Guimarães, and *Iaiá Garcia* (1871), by Machado de Assis, there are many situations in which the discourse used by the narrator slips into prejudice. The same finding is confirmed in the American novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), by Harriet B. Stowe. Published in 2013, by *Editora Universitária da UFPE* [UFPE Publishing House], the book is part of a celebratory collection to the 10th anniversary of Act 10639/2003.¹ It is a project of the Deanship of Extension of the Federal University of Pernambuco.

The book is organized into a short introduction, ten chapters and final remarks, through which the author sets out the highest important questions for literary studies: rooted in Bakhtin, Voloshinov, Fiorin, among others, he sets the basis for his analysis by exploring narratives that potentially point to the existence of a racist discourse. In chapter one, the theoretical foundation is laid. The title, rather meaningful, indicates what it is to be discussed, viz., “An intercultural literary analysis based on the concepts of utterance,

¹ TN. This Federal Act was sanctioned on the 9th of January of 2003, making the study of African and Afro-Brazilian History and Culture mandatory in the National Education System.

enunciation, dialogism, and understanding” (MELO Jr., 2013, p.17).² The method used is clearly Bakhtinian, for it is grounded in the framework of the Dialogic Discourse Analysis. Firstly, he relies on thematic researchers, such as Beth Brait (*Análise e Teoria do Discurso - Discourse Analysis and Theory*), José Luiz Fiorin (*Introdução ao Pensamento de Bakhtin – Introduction to the Bakhtinian Thought*); then, he goes to primary-source works of Voloshinov (*Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*) and Bakhtin (*The Problem of Speech Genres*). All the aforementioned authors share the same vision about the literary text and the concept of utterance: “an ideological sign par excellence, presenting two dimensions - the semiotic (materiality) and the ideological (metalanguage) one” (MELO Jr., 2013, p.18).³

Through Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of language (the utterance and/or the word is trespassed by the dialogue of the other), in chapter 2, Orison introduces theorists of racism that advocate the inferiority of black people, such as the Swiss zoologist Agassiz. In *Voyage au Brésil* (1868), written together with his wife, he reports his meeting with an “inferior population,” composed of black people, mulattos, and Brazilian Indians. Let us take, for example, what the Swiss zoologist writes about black people, when he discusses the education to women in Brazil: “This is the constant association with black servants, and, worse still, with negro children, of whom there are usually a number in every house. Whether the low and vicious habits of the negroes are the result of slavery or not, they cannot be denied” (p.481).⁴

Agassiz’s racial ideas found space in the United States as well as in Brazil. In *História da Literatura Brasileira* [The History of Brazilian Literature], Silvio Romero concurred with the doctrine of the white race superiority, praising the Portuguese for this contribution to Brazilian biotype. According to him, they were the main agent of the Brazilian culture. Romero wrote about the “whitening” of the Brazilian population, a prediction that did not confirm.

In the path of the Brazilian theorist, there are highly important names of the national “*intelligentsia*,” such as the abolitionist Joaquim Nabuco and Nina Rodrigues.

² TN. When there is no published English version of the work, direct quotes will be translated into English, and the text in the original language will be provided as footnotes. Text in the original in Portuguese: “Uma análise literária intercultural a partir dos conceitos de palavra, enunciado, dialogismo e compreensão”.

³ Excerpt in the original in Portuguese: “signo ideológico por excelência, possuindo duas dimensões: a dimensão semiótica (materialidade) e a dimensão ideológica (metalinguagem)”.

⁴ AGASSIZ, L.; AGASSIZ, E. C. *A Journey in Brazil*. Boston: Ticknor and Fields, 1868.

Nabuco's case is interesting. As he was a vehement abolitionist, his position about the white race superiority is odd, as he affirms that black people exerted a negative influence on white people.

In chapter 3, the author discusses these racist theories and the possible echoes of a racial discourse in the Brazilian oeuvres. *Memórias de um Sargento de Milícias* [*Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*], *As Vítimas Algozes – Quadros da Escravidão* [*The Victims Executioners – Frameworks of Slavery*], *O Tronco do Ipê* [*The Ipe Stem*], *A Escrava Isaura* [*Slave Isaura*], and *Iaiá Garcia* were the selected novels for rapid analyses. In all of them, the narrator uses words or sentences that indicate the existence of racial prejudice. In fact, the reader will realize that, even in those oeuvres whose aim is to defend black people, there are references to a racial discourse. In *As Vítimas Algozes* [*The Victims Executioners*], for example, Macedo places, in the narrator's speech, the need for the abolition of slavery because "the slaves are pernicious to live amongst white people, their masters" (MELO Jr., 2013, p.34),⁵ ensuring that "in no part of the world were there ever more human and complacent masters than in Brazil" (MACEDO, 1991, p.62).⁶ In Macedo's work, the slave is described as "immoral," "ignoble," "perverse," "violent." It is important to highlight that the reader will have a summary of what was exposed at the end of the chapter. For example, in *Memórias de um Sargento de Milícias* [*Memoirs of a Militia Sergeant*], we find the stereotypes of the "despicable slave" and of the "immoral slave." However, in *A Escrava Isaura* [*Slave Isaura*] and in *Iaiá Garcia*, the stereotype of the "noble slave" is highlighted.

Chapter 4 brings the reader with an analysis of *O Mulato* [*Mulatto*]. The author offers a short introduction about the reception of the text in São Luiz do Maranhão. In his biography about Aluizio, Raimundo Menezes affirms that its reception was not good, for the dwellers of the city interpreted, in the novel characters, a critique to them. In spite of the fact that the novel presents a strong critique to prejudice, denouncing the abuses suffered by black people and exposing their masters' perversity, there are moments in which, contradictorily, the reader finds, throughout the narrative, "prejudiced descriptions

⁵ Excerpt in the original in Portuguese: "os escravos são perniciosos ao convívio dos brancos, seus senhores".

⁶ MACEDO, J. M. *As Vítimas Algozes: Quadros da Escravidão*. 3.ed. São Paulo: Scipione, 1991. Excerpt in the original in Portuguese: "nunca em parte alguma do mundo houve senhores mais humanos e complacentes que no Brasil".

of secondary black characters” (MELO Jr., 2013, p.45).⁷ As an example, it is possible to cite the narrator’s description of the fugitive slaves: “fugitive slaves with their women and children, forming a big family of evildoers” (AZEVEDO, 1992, p.48),⁸ or this other characterization of the slaves’ lack of cleanliness: “the insufficient clarity of a dirty lantern, the fattening sign of the slaves’ hands” (AZEVEDO, 1992, p.132).⁹

These are evident signs of a racist discourse, and the narrator “left many implied marks of this prejudice in his speech, through words and sentences of a prejudiced nature [...]” (MELO Jr., 2013, p.50).¹⁰ For the author, there is “a stereotyped representation of the black element in the narrative as well as the description of the African-descendant hero with characteristics of a white hero” (MELO Jr., 2013, p.50).¹¹ Another aspect to be highlighted in the chapter is the comparison the narrator makes between Benedito and a monkey: Benedito, a slave child, is “a wicked little deep purple skinny nigger [...] [who] crossed the room as fast as a monkey” (AZEVEDO, 1992, p.63).¹² Citing Bakhtin, as he affirms in *Discourse in the novel* (1981) that “a particular language in a novel is always a particular way of viewing the world, one that strives for social significance” (BAKHTIN, 1981, p.333),¹³ Orison with great propriety reaffirms that “the resemblance of the slave with a monkey cannot pass unnoticed, as this language finds a particular meaning in the scientific world of the 19th Century” (MELO Jr., 2013, p.49).¹⁴ In current days, this relation has become a reality, for acts of prejudice have been committed by a racist minority all over the world.

From chapter 5 to chapter 8, the focus is on the novel by Charles Chesnutt *The House Behind the Cedars*. Differently from what was taking place in Brazil, in the United

⁷ Excerpt in the original in Portuguese: “descrições preconceituosas de personagens negras secundárias”.

⁸ AZEVEDO, A. *O Mulato*. 11. ed. São Paulo: Ática, 1992. (Série Bom Livro). Excerpt in the original in Portuguese: “escravos fugidos com suas mulheres e seus filhos, formando uma grande família de malfeitores”.

⁹ For reference, see footnote 8. Excerpt in the original in Portuguese: “à insuficiente claridade de uma lanterna suja, o sinal gorduroso das mãos dos escravos”.

¹⁰ Excerpt in the original in Portuguese: “deixou várias marcas subjacentes deste preconceito na sua fala, através de palavras e frases de cunho preconceituoso [...]”.

¹¹ Excerpt in the original in Portuguese: “uma representação estereotipada do elemento negro na narrativa e há a descrição do herói afrodescendente com características de heróis brancos”.

¹² For reference, see footnote 8. Excerpt in the original in Portuguese: “um pretinho seco, retinto, muito levado dos diabos...(…) atravessou a sala com uma agilidade de macaco”.

¹³ BAKHTIN, M. *Discourse in the Novel*. In: BAKHTIN, M. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist and translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1981. pp.259-422

¹⁴ Excerpt in the original in Portuguese: “símile do escravo com o macaco não pode passar despercebido, já que essa linguagem encontra uma significação particular no mundo científico do século XIX”.

States, there were laws that defined whether citizens were black or white. If they had 1/8 of “black blood,” they were considered black by the Virginia Slave Act of 1705. And in the 19th Century (between 1830 and 1840), there was a tightening of the law with the creation of the *one-drop* rule. The rule determined that even if people did not “look black,” just a “black drop of blood” prohibited them to marry white people. This is explicit in Chesnutt’s novel, when Judge Straight declares that “one drop of black blood makes the whole man black” (CHESNUTT, 1993, p.113).¹⁵ The author follows the same procedure as with *O Mulato* [*Mulatto*]: before analyzing *The House Behind the Cedars*, he traced for elements of racial prejudice in the novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, by Harriet B. Stowe. Uncle Tom, the protagonist, is described as a man conformed to his fate. He even rejects running away so that he would not leave his master in a bad situation. Even when he changed masters, he remained faithful as a dog. In spite of the great success reached by the novel, which was regarded as anti-slavery, researchers affirm the opposite: the narrative presents a romantic view of the slave, for the protagonist is stereotyped as the “faithful slave,” the one who is humble, resigned, and whose passivity is compared to a workhorse. The discussion about the *color line* is enlightening to understand Chesnutt’s novel. Some segregationist rules were set, and everyone had to obey them. For example, “A black male could not offer his hand (to shake hands) with a white male; Blacks were not allowed to show public affection toward one another in public; blacks were introduced to whites, never whites to blacks” (PILGRIM, 2000).¹⁶

Chapter 8 presents the analysis of the discursive elements in *The House Behind the Cedars*. The social context was of social segregation, and thus the narrator’s speech follows this path. The house behind the cedars was located in a segregated setting, where black people and mulattos lived far from the small town of Patesville in North Carolina. The heroine is Rena, the daughter of Mis’ Molly Waden, “a free African-descendent, the daughter of legally and free married parents” (MELO Jr., 2013, p.52).¹⁷ Rena’s father was a white and wealthy man. Despite her black ancestry, her skin color did not denounce that; thus, she could pass as white as long as she left “the house behind the cedars,” the city, and the state. If she wanted to belong to “the world of the whites,” she had to cross

¹⁵ CHESNUTT, C. W. *The House Behind the Cedars*. New York: Penguin Classics, 1993.

¹⁶ PILGRIM, D. What was Jim Crow? Big Rapids, MI, *Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia*, 2000. Available at: <<http://www.ferris.edu/htmls/news/jimcrow/what.htm>>. Access on: 18 may 2013.

¹⁷ Excerpt in the original in Portuguese: “uma afrodescendente livre, filha de pais livres e legalmente casados”.

the color line. She went to Clarence (South Carolina), along with her brother, and to completely nullify her origin, she even changed her name to Rowena Warwick. Rena fell in love with her brother's friend, George, and both were about to set the wedding date, when something unexpected completely changed Rena's life. As she returned to her hometown due to her mother's illness, accidentally her fiancé found out about her ancestry. George saw her leaving the doctor's office and knew, from the doctor, that she was of a mixed race. Although he kept Rena and her brother's secret of their ancestry, he refused to marry her. Overwhelmed and sad, Rena returned to the house behind the cedars. There she died. Frantz Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1967), affirmed that "there are two such women: the Negress and the mulatto. The first has only one possibility and one concern: to turn white. The second wants not only to turn white but also to avoid slipping back" (p. 38).¹⁸ Rena felt superior to other African-descendants, for she was "whitened," and yet for white people, she was inferior.

Similar to what he did in *O Mulato* [*Mulatto*], the author compiled a table of words and sentences from the narrator's description of characters and compared them to the stereotypes used by Brookshaw: faithful slave (faithfulness, devotion, master, faithful, passive fatalism), noble slave (superior in blood, superior quality, natural authority, gracious movements, discreet elegance). Rena incorporated the "noble slave" stereotype but was also the object of adoration to other black people, as she had a "whitened" skin, and was, thus, considered superior to other African-descendants.

To conclude, in chapters 9 and 10, the reader will find the similarities between the two novels (chapter 9) and the specificities of each one (chapter 10). After a brief glance at comparative literature, the author enumerates the similar elements of the novels: the chosen cities (small, poor, and full of prejudice); historical events (Franco-Prussian War in *O Mulato* [*Mulatto*], and the period just a little after the Civil War in *The House Behind the Cedars*); omniscient narrator; prejudiced words in the speeches of the narrators; whitened protagonists; death (The incapacity of mixed-race people to survive the law of the jungle), and relationship conflict.

According to the author, the specific elements of each novel are: angle of vision and the conscience (or not) of a black ancestry. The first one is highly visible, because in

¹⁸ FANON, F. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Charles Lam Markmann. New York: Grove Press, 1967.

O Mulato [Mulatto], the narrative is about the world of white people, in the contextualizing the African-descendants' situation; in the Chesnutian novel, however, the narrative is about the world of black people, and African-descendants enter the world of whites. The second difference is also visible, for Raimundo was completely unaware of his ancestry up to the moment of the revelation, while Rena was completely conscious of her situation since her childhood. The chapter ends with Orison's statement with which we completely agree: It is possible to come to the conclusion that both novels present two essential elements for the research: the verbal (word) element, based on prejudice, and the discursive element, represented in the speech of their narrators. The choices of "whitened heroes" took place in a moment when the white scientific community of both countries cried out for the "whitening of their race as a solution for the presence of black people, who were considered inferior, in their society" (MELO Jr., 2013, p.97).¹⁹

The narrator's contradiction presented in both novels (fighting against prejudice and yet using prejudiced words and sentences) corroborates the Bakhtinian notion of dialogic discourse. Fiorin highlights that "every discourse is inevitably inhabited, crossed by the discourse of others" (2008, p. 19).²⁰ That was what Orison testifies in his analysis. With this publication, the *Editora Universitária da UFPE* [UFPE Publishing House] shows how concerned scholars from Pernambuco have been about Brazilian ethnic-racial issues. This book is an excellent example of the endeavor to properly discuss and support such discussions, which are highly useful for our reflections. We hope that Orison Marden Bandeira's excellent work continues, for the present edition is a good sample of the author's commitment to issues that affect the Brazilian society.

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¹⁹ Excerpt in the original in Portuguese: "embranquecimento de sua raça como solução para a presença do elemento negro, considerado inferior na sua sociedade." (p. 97)

²⁰ FIORIN, José Luiz. *Introdução ao Pensamento de Bakhtin*. São Paulo: Ática, 2008. Excerpt in the original in Portuguese: "todo discurso é inevitavelmente ocupado, atravessado, pelo discurso alheio".