

AN INTERCULTURAL READING OF CHARLES W. CHESNUTT'S THE
GOOPHERED GRAPEVINE AND OF THOMAS PAGE'S MARSE CHAN:
RACIAL REPRESENTATION IN POSTBELLUM SOUTHERN SHORT STORIES

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses two short stories about the Old South, Thomas Nelson Page's *Marse Chan* and Charles W. Chesnutt's *The Goophered Grapevine*. To enrich this discussion, the literature written on slavery by African Americans shortly before the civil war is reviewed, namely the works of Harriet Ann Jacobs and Frederick Douglass. The point that African American author Chesnutt is better able to depict a more complex narrative about slavery and the old south than Page is then articulated. The relevance of the analysis of these two short stories stems from an intercultural posture that not only understands the importance of reading literature interculturally, but also recognizes that understanding other cultures and literatures helps us better understand ourselves and the cultures we are immersed in.

KEY-WORDS: African American Literature, American Literature, Southern Literature. Interculturality

1. INTRODUCTION

Stemming from an intercultural standpoint and as teachers of English as an Additional Language ourselves, we believe that reading foreign language literatures help us better understand different nations, peoples and their cultures as well as ourselves and the cultural groups to which we belong. In other words, reading foreign literatures entails

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an intercultural encounter between the reader, the literary text and the cultures represented in the literary text. Thus this article is an intercultural reading from within the Brazilian cultural horizon of two American short stories. We make the point that American culture, as well as all other English speaking cultures, should be discussed interculturally, from a perspective that not only promotes the understanding of other cultures, but that also leads to the self-awareness of one's own culture.

Furthermore, the study of American culture becomes even more relevant if we consider the many commonalities that Brazil shares with the United States - both historically as well as culturally. Benedict Anderson (1983), for one, calls the nations established in the Americas (Brazil, the Caribbean, the entirety of Latin America and the Anglo North America) Creole Nations as a way of underscoring the similarities shared by the former European countries and the contributions of all different peoples that compose the American ethnic tapestry. As fellow Creole Nations, he argues, the nations of the Americas were the first to consolidate a nationalism that was efficient enough to do away with Colonialism in the so-called New World and, consequently, were the first nations to craft their own national identities. However, on the flip side of this heroic narrative, the Americas unfortunately share a past of indigenous bloodshed and chattel slavery that, not only tainted the past, but also left deeply engraved scars in the national identities that linger into the present. In this cultural milieu, racism and violence established themselves as major American problems, in the crux of which lie a colonial heritage that seeks to divide the Creole population in the Americas into Whites (the descendants of the colonizers) and People of color (indigenous, black and Asian people), to keep monetary and social power in the hands of whites, and to delegate People of Color a position of subalternity in modern societies (FOUCAULT, 1976, apud MIGNOLO, 2000).

Racism is a major problem with which both Brazil and the United States struggle and examining how racism operates in two short stories of American Literature may contribute to the discussion of racism in Brazilian contexts and in Brazilian literature. Reading American fiction in Brazil, then, is an intercultural activity in its very nature, so much so that as we understand American society, we are led to think about

and question our own. We reiterate that this paper is a Brazilian literary analysis of two short stories, one written by a white American writer Thomas Neil Page and the other by African American author Charles W. Chesnutt.

The analysis of these two short stories will center first on a brief discussion of the social aspects of literature, then we will proceed to a historical discussion of racism in America, and later to a discussion of racial representation in both short stories.

2. A HISTORICAL BACKGROUND ON THE UNITED STATES SOUTH: FROM HARRIET ANN JACOBS AND FREDERICK DOUGLASS TO THOMAS NELSON PAGE AND CHARLES W. CHESNUTT

Despite the fact that Brazil received the highest number of slaves during the slave trade period, the United States also participated in the slave trade system very substantially. Most African slaves in the USA lived in the South and had to work on cotton plantations, although some would also undertake a variety of different jobs, such as taking care of the house, cooking, and raising their master's children. This moment in American history is most often referred to as the *Antebellum Period* in that it preceded the civil war that would eventually abolish slavery. African American Literature of this period mostly encompasses the works of former slaves who had successfully broken free from the shackles of slavery escaping the South and going North. Included in this body of works are the writings of Harriet Ann Jacobs, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and the classic *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* by Frederick Douglass.

Both Harriet Ann Jacobs and Frederick Douglass describe their lives as slaves in their personal narratives in appalling words. Harriet Ann Jacobs, who escaped slavery by hiding in her attic for nearly seven years before running away to Philadelphia by boat, describes her life as a slave child who “had no thought for the morrow” (JACOBS, 1861/1998, p.129) as “the greater bitterness of life” (JACOBS, 1861/1998, p.133). She also describes the sexual advances she would often suffer from her master when she “entered her fifteenth year- a sad epoch in the life of a slave girl” when her master “began to whisper foul words” in her ear (JACOBS, 1861/1998, p.134).

On that same note, Frederick Douglass describes his life as a slave as his “wretched condition”, a “horrible pit” with “no ladder upon which to get out” (DOUGLASS, 1986, p.191). In one of his most moving scenes of his narrative, Douglass says that

I have often been utterly astonished, since I came to the north, to find persons who could speak of the singing, among slaves, as evidence of their contentment and happiness. It is impossible to conceive of a greater mistake. Slaves sing most when they are most unhappy. The songs of the slaves represent the sorrows of his heart; and he is relieved by them, only as an aching heart is relieved by its tears. At least, such is my experience. I have often sung to drown my sorrow, but seldom to express my happiness. Crying for joy, singing for joy, were alike uncommon to me while in the jaws of slavery. The singing of a man cast away upon a desolate island might be as appropriately considered as evidence of contentment and happiness, as the signing of a slave, the songs of the one and of the other are prompted by the same emotion (DOUGLASS, 1986, p.58).

After the civil war, the South was devastated by the war. Many cities had been burned down or destroyed during the war and had to be re-built, many plantation owners were then bankrupt, and many African Americans had been emancipated but had nowhere to go or to work. This period in American history is known as *The Reconstruction Era*. The Reconstruction Era spanned the years 1865 to 1877 in which the South tried to re-emerge culturally and economically from the destruction of the war (ANDREWS; GWIN; HARRIS; HOBSON, 1998, p.245).

During this period of history, Southerners began a cult of the Lost Cause, “that glorification of the Confederacy and of the older South that had preceded it” (ANDREWS; GWIN; HARRIS; HOBSON, 1998, p.245). The cultural production of the Reconstruction Era, very often included monuments, music, paintings, and literary pieces that celebrated the past of the South, representing the South as an idyllic setting of romances and noblemen. The cult of the Lost Cause lasted much longer than the Reconstruction period and has become an American myth, although often criticized. Many notorious books and movies are based on a celebration of the Lost Cause, including the all-time-classic novel by Margaret Mitchell and Victor Fleming’s movie

Gone with the Wind (1936), and Better Davis Oscar-nominated movie *Jezebel* (1938).

It was also during this period that the first Jim Crow laws (1876 to 1965) were established. These laws segregated the South, established different schools and restaurants for blacks and whites, and kept African Americans from voting by establishing different procedures for American citizens to vote based on the color of their skins. The Jim Crow era was also marked in history as a time of rampant violence against African Americans that took place all over the country¹, especially in the Southern states. Public lynchings of African Americans happened regularly, as the South saw the rise of vigilante groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, that sought to further segregate and to keep different races from mixing (ANDREWS; GWIN; HARRIS; HOBSON, 1998, p. 246).

It is, therefore, in this context that the works to be analyzed are placed. Other works by other celebrated Southern writers should be placed in this same historical context, such as the fiction of Samuel Clemens (Mark Twain), Kate Chopin, Zora Neal Hurston and William Faulkner.

3. THE SOCIAL/CULTURAL ASPECT OF LITERATURE AND INTERCULTURALITY

In his seminal book, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, Eagleton (1996) explores several different perspectives on Literature, guiding his readers through a discussion of a variety of literary theories, including, but not restricted to, Russian Formalism, Reception theory, Hermeneutics, Post-structuralism, and Political Criticism. In doing so, he elaborates on how, historically, the scope of the study of literature went from the life of the author to a focus on the literary work itself, then shifted its attention to the reader, and ultimately to how the author, the work and the reader reflect and impact society. For this paper, we will base our studies on this most recent moment in literary criticism as discussed by Eagleton (1996) and will, therefore, center our discussion on the social importance of literature and how literature is a discursive construct that, not only reflects society, but also helps create society.

According to Eagleton (1996), literature and literary theory are quintessentially socially located, produced in the entrails of a given culture/society, both constructing the society in which it was conceived as well as being constructed by it. In fact, Eagleton claims that not only is literature socially located, but that it would be impossible for it to be otherwise, going as far as to say that every attempt of disassociating literature from its social milieu has been credited for reinforcing the dominant *status-quo* and ignoring important social issues discussed in the literary text.

It is not a matter of regretting that this is so — of blaming literary theory for being caught up with such questions, as opposed to some ‘pure’ literary theory which might be absolved from them. Such ‘pure’ literary theory is an academic myth: some of the theories we have examined in this book are nowhere more clearly ideological than in their attempts to ignore history and politics altogether. Literary theories are not to be upbraided for being political, but for being on the whole covertly or unconsciously so — for the blindness with which they offer as a supposedly ‘technical’, ‘self-evident’, ‘scientific’ or ‘universal’ truth doctrines which with a little reflection can be seen to relate to and reinforce the particular interests of particular groups of people at particular times (EAGLETON, 1996, p. 170).

Said (1979), another important theorist, claims that literature - and academic knowledge at large - is epistemologically located at the intersection of society and art. In *Orientalism* (1979), Said challenges the common public assumption that there are two different types of knowledge: the first being some sort of pure academic knowledge, free from all interferences of the world around it and the latter some sort of social knowledge that seeks to understand, explain, and change society. He then argues that every area of study is socially constructed because every researcher or author that ever was or will be is inserted in a social context from which he cannot detach herself/himself.

No one has devised a method for detaching the scholar from the circumstances of life, from the fact of his involvement (conscious or unconscious) with a class, a set of beliefs, a social position, or from the mere activity of being a member in society. These continue to

bear on what he does professionally, even though naturally enough his research and its fruits do attempt to reach a level of relative freedom from the inhibitions and the restrictions of brute, everyday reality. (SAID, p.10, 1979).

In our view, to understand literature as a social construct means to see it as an entity that is both constructed by and constructs the society in which it is produced. In that sense, literature can be taken as a tool that seeks to reaffirm social exclusion and to legitimize hegemonic discourses or as a potential tool for social inclusion-

If literature is a social and cultural product, and if it promotes social change and a moment of reflection on our lives, then it only makes sense to conclude that reading literature is an intercultural activity at its very core (KRAMSCH, 1993; MATOS. 2012). Moreover, considering that reading literature can create intercultural dialog, it then follows that reading and reflecting about racism via American literature can lead us not only to look outwardly and analyze American society, but also to look inwardly and ponder ourselves and racism in our society. Thus, reading American Literature places our Brazilian identities and culture at a cultural and social crossroads from which we can look at the United States and at Brazil at the same time.

4. THE INCLUSION OF AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE IN THE CANON AND AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE NOWADAYS

We will now attempt to connect the previous discussion on the social aspect of Literature and the inclusion of African American Literature in the literary canon. First, we should ask ourselves what is the canon, how does it come to be, who has the authority to decide which texts make it to the canon or which ones do not? More importantly, if literature is a social construct, then how does the composition of the canon reflect certain ideologies? And finally, should literature be a social/cultural construct, then how does the American literary canon reflect the ideologies of a segregated nation? These are questions that should be discussed, not only in stylistic and linguistic terms, but also through a critical lens as these questions can only be fully answered when considering how society, culture and literature relate to each other.

Initially, we should assume that the canon, as well as literature itself, is an abstract concept, one that has been socially constructed and ideologically charged (EAGLETON, 1964). Take for instance the case of how African American Literature in the United States was included in the canon. In the context of racism and violence already discussed, their arts and their literatures were not safeguarded from social exclusion. Many brilliant black writers were not considered relevant enough, or even good enough, to enter the traditional literary canon as the canon remained a collection of books written by “dead white males” fit for academic, “serious”, study (BONNICI, 1998). This had been the scenario in the scholarly world until very recently, more specifically up until critical movements in literature started questioning the supremacy of this white male dominated canon, problematizing its constitution and advocating a view of the canon as a social construct that needs to include the voices of minorities. Fleming (2007, p. 4) quotes Benton (2000) stating that “the challenge to the traditional canon has come from two main directions: from post-colonial, feminist and other theorists who, as part of an agenda for social and cultural change, have questioned the dominance of white, male, bourgeois canonical texts.” This academic push in the 1960s helped not only to include women’s works in the literary canon, but also writers of color, expanding African American Literature and establishing it as an important part of general American Literature as well as an entire studies field in its own right.

This paper argues that, being a social construct, literature can not only promote social equality, but also represent certain social contexts. When certain minority groups do not have their culture and their literatures recognized as canonical, literary criticism is contributing to hegemonic powers, serving, to quote Eagleton (1964, p.170), “particular interests of particular groups of people”. We now proceed to the analysis of these two short stories.

5. MARSE CHAN: SYNOPSIS

The first short story discussed in this article, *Marse Chan*, was written by Thomas Nelson Page, a defender and celebrator of the Old South, that is, the South prior to the Civil War. Born on a plantation

near Richmond to a white family, Page wrote *Marse Chan* in 1881, but only published it in 1884, at a time when Northern publishers wanted to read about the exotic and the backward of Old South. Therefore, albeit written by a southerner, Page's short story was meant to be read countrywide, spreading the so-called "grandeur" of the antebellum South. -

In *Marse Chan*, we are introduced to a man who is travelling through Virginia and meets a former slave who, though a freed man, still lives in the same plantation where his master used to live. Asked by the northern traveler about his old master, the former slave, whose name is later introduced to the reader as Sam, eagerly tells the traveler of his master, and of his life in the plantation prior to the civil war, describing his own time as a slave back then as "dem (...) good ole times" (PAGE, 1881 apud ANDREWS, W.; GWIN, M. C.; HARRIS, T.; HOBSON, F, 1998, p. 314).

The narrator's story begins when his master, Marse Chan, was born and when he was designated to be Marse Chan's personal slave, "now, Sam, from dis time you belong to yo` young Marse Channin`; I wan` you to tek keer on `im ez long ez he lives. You are to be his boy from dis time. An` now, `he sez, `carry `him in de house" (PAGE, 1881 apud ANDREWS, W.; GWIN, M. C.; HARRIS, T.; HOBSON, F, 1998, p. 313). Then he continues his narrative to tell us how he and Marse Chan became friends, how Marse Chan became a bright student, and most importantly, how Marse Chan met the future love of his life, Miss Anne, in her first day at school.

The narrative progresses, and we learn that Miss Anne's father and Marse Chan's father do not see eye to eye in terms of politics, as the first is a Democrat and the latter a Republican. Later in the short story, Marse Chan goes to college only to return home to find out that his father had lost his sight when trying to save his "ker'ige-driver" from a fire in the farm. Upon returning home from college, Marse Chan is described by Sam as "the pures` and nobles` men God ever made" (PAGE, 1881/1998, p. 317).

The civil war breaks out and Marse Chan and Sam have to go fight in the war, as "(...) one night Marse Chan come back from the offis wid a telegram dat say, 'Come at once', so he wuz to start next mawnin`. He uniform wuz all ready, gray wid yaller trimmin`s, an

`mine wuz ready too” (PAGE, 1881/1998, p. 320). Before going to the battlefields, though, Marse Chan pays Miss Anne a visit and

went on talkin` right fars to her; an` he tole her how he had loved her ever sence she wuz a little bit o` baby mos`, an` how he nuver `membered de time when he hedn`t `spected to marry her. He told her it wuz his love for her dat hed made `im stan` furst at school an` collige, an` he kep` `im good an` pure; an` now he wuz gwine `way (PAGE, 1881/1998, p. 321).

Ultimately, Marse Chan dies fighting in the war, not being able to marry the love of his life. The story ends with Sam asking the Northern foreigner “an` will yo` please tell me, marster? Dey tells me dat de Bible say dyar won` be marryin` nor givin` in marriage in heaven, but I don` b`lieve it signifies dat- does you?”, to which the Northerner offers his own interpretation, giving Sam some solace (PAGE, 1881/1998, p. . In other words, the whole story revolves around the star-crossed lovers who wish to be together, but cannot, and who end up irremediably separated because of the Civil War. Though this story does not explicitly talk about racism and slavery, the depictions of whites and blacks in this narrative reinforce a myth of the Old South, thus, idealizing slavery, romanticizing slave owners and vilifying the emancipation of African Americans.

6. THE GOOPHERED GRAPEVINE: SYNOPSIS

The Goophered Grapevine by African American author Charles W. Chesnutt, was originally published in 1887 and later re-published in 1899 in an anthology of short stories called *The Conjure Woman*. His collection of short stories was also written about the Old South, but different from other writers of his time, Chesnutt`s fiction was never written to pay tribute to the “grandeur” of the Old South. In this short story, the reader is introduced to a couple who is moving to the South from Ohio because the wife is sick and needs a “warm more equable climate” (CHESNUTT, 2000, p.337) to recover. Upon arrival, the husband looks for some land to buy where he could start cultivating grapes to start his own business. He finds a former plantation that he

considers fit for this purpose and proceeds to visit the plantation himself in the company of his wife. On this plantation, they meet a former slave, Uncle Julius, who also tells them the story of his old master, his fellow slaves and how the grapevine in that plantation got “goophered”, that is, cursed.

According to the slave, back in the times prior to the Civil War, “a wealthy man by the name of McAdoo” (CHESNUTT, 2000, p.338) owned that plantation, where he used to grow scuppernongs, a type of grape. His scuppernongs were so good that McAdoo’s slaves would always eat from the grapevine while their master was not watching, causing McAdoo to be angry for the loss of his grapes and profit. In Uncle Julius’s words,

Now, ef dey’s an`thing a n***** lub, nex` ter `possum, en chick`n, en watermillyums, it’s scuppernon`s. Dey ain`t nuffin dat kin stan` up side`n de scuppernon` fer sweetness; sugar ain`t a suckumstance ter scuppernon`. W`en de season is nigh `bout ober, en de grapes begin ter swivel up des a little wid de wrickles er ole age- w`en de skin git sof` en brown,- den de scuppernon` make you mack yo` lip en roll yo` eye en wush fer mo`; so I reckon it ain`t very `stonishin` dat n***** lub scuppernon` (CHESNUTT, 2000, pp. 35, 36.).

Then, filled with greed, McAdoo goes to a conjurer and asks her to curse his grapevine so that his slaves would not eat from it anymore. By doing so, he succeeds in keeping his slaves from eating his grapes and is able to make a bigger profit off of his grapes. That is, until Henry, a recently purchased slave, eats from them without knowing of the curse. Upon eating the scuppernongs and hearing of the goopher (the curse), Henry was “terrified dat he turn pale, en look des like he gwine ter die right in his tracks” (CHESNUTT, 2000, p. 341). Scared and willing to save his own life, Henry goes to the same conjurer that first ‘goophered’ the grapevine and makes a deal with her so that he could live, bringing her a piece of ham as a bargain. What happens next, though, is that Henry becomes strangely attached to the grapevines to the extent that his health and well-being starts to depend on the current state of the grapevine. During spring time, for instance, which is when the grapevine is blooming and full of life, Henry becomes healthy and

his bald hair starts to grow again, but during winter time he is weak, his rheumatism becomes worse and his condition withers along as do the grapes.

Knowing of Henry's condition and how strong the slave got when the scuppernongs were healthy, McAdoo finds a way of making money off Henry, selling him to people during summertime and buying him back during winter, just so he could re-sell Henry again during the following summer when Henry would be strong and healthy again. According to Uncle Julius' narrative "w`en de sap rise n Henry's ha`r commence` ter sprout, Mars Dugal` sole `im ag`in, down in Robeson County dis time; en he kep` dat sellin` business up fer five year er mo`." (CHESNUTT, 2000, p. 41)

After these five years, though, McAdoo is visited by a stranger who convinces him to change the way he planted his scuppernongs by promising him that he'd make more money if he dug the soil from the grapevines and sprinkled a "mixtry er lime en ashes en manyo en po` it `round de roots er de grapevines" (CHESNUTT, 2000, p. 41). In the end of the short story, McAdoo is tricked by this stranger, his grapevine dies and so does the slave. After hearing Uncle Julius's story, his white audience from Ohio are left in awe and start to wonder whether Uncle's Julius narrative was a true story or just a tall tale meant to scare them off his land and persuade them to not buy the plantation. Dismissing it later as a fictional story, the couple buys the old plantation where they plant scuppernongs and never "noticed any developments of the goopher in the vineyard" (CHESNUTT, 2000, p. 43).

7. ANALYZING THE TWO SHORT STORIES

Right at the beginning of Page's short story, the reader is presented with an idyllic description of the Reconstruction South, that is, the South after the Civil War. The narrator builds a milieu of nostalgia and longing for a past that is no longer.

The road I was travelling, following "the race ridge" for miles, had just struck me as a most significant of the character of the race whose only avenue of communication with the outside world it had

formerly been. Their once splendid mansions, now fast falling to decay, appeared to view from time to time, set back far from the road, in proud seclusion, among groves of oak and hickory, now scarlet and gold with the early frost (PAGE, 1881/1998, p. 310).

In Chesnutt's tale, on the other hand, the narrator describes the demise of the Old South after the Civil War just the same as the narrator in Page's short story- the word "decay" is used in both texts-; however, the tone built by the narrator in *The Goophered Grapevine* is not one of longing for a "splendid" past of glory. His tone, in fact, is permeated by a subtle feeling of nonchalance towards a past that is gone and that will never come back.

We drove between a pair of decayed gateposts – the gate itself had long since disappeared- and up a straight sandy lane, between two lines of rotting rail fence, partly concealed by jimson-weeds and briars, to the open space where a dwelling-house had once stood, evidently a spacious mansion, if we might judge from the ruined chimneys that were still standing, and the brick pillars on which the sills rested. The house itself, as we had been informed, had fallen victim to the fortunes of the war (CHESNUTT, 2000, pp. 33, 34.).

In other words, Chesnutt starts weaving his narrative by signaling to his reader that his story is about a distant past, which, far from being celebrated, is dead and forgotten amongst the briars and jimson-weeds of time that conceal it from his contemporary readers. In comparison to Chesnutt's story, Page's narrative strikes the reader not only as a celebration of a lost cause, but also as a fairy tale that took place in the magical realms of the antebellum South, in the "proud seclusion, among groves of oak and hickory, now scarlet and gold with the early frost" (1881/1998, p. 310)

In terms of similarities, both stories are frame narratives told by former slaves. Nevertheless, the two short stories differ drastically in terms of the depth of their narratives and in amount of different characters in the short story. Considering the characters of color in each short story, it is safe to assume that in *Marse Chan* there is only one type of African American character: the narrator who is faithful to his master. On the other hand, *The Goophered Grapevine* presents

the reader to a former slave (the narrator, Uncle Julius), a “goopher” woman, Henry, and the other minor characters, such as the slaves who were eating the grapes.

This chasm between the number of characters in Page’s short stories and Chesnut’s fiction is blatant, and it is possible to argue that reducing the number of African American slaves in his short story is a literary sleight of hand used by Page to underplay the evils of slavery and to ignore the voices of those who were against and who suffered as slaves in the Old South. In addition, by showing a wide diversity of African American characters, Chesnut finds a shrewd way to add depth to his narrative and to challenge previous African American narratives told by white people in which African Americans are always depicted as stereotypes. In other words, the more details Chesnut brings into his fiction, the richer, the thicker and the more interesting it gets. Referring back to the discussion on social nature of literature and knowledge proposed by Said (1979) and Eagleton (1964), it is even possible to go as far as to index a social agenda behind Page’s short story. We may ask why would a white author write a narrative that only solidifies a positive view of slavery, that sees in a negative light the civil war that freed millions of African Americans, and whose only African Americans character praises black subservience and white supremacy if not to validate the Old South?

To illustrate this point, it is imperative to take Sam’s comment on his master and their relationship into consideration. According to Sam,

Dem wuz good ole times, marster- de bes` Sam ever see! Dey wuz, in fac`! N***** didn` t hed nothing` t all to do- jes` to `ten`to de feedin` an` cleaning de` hosses, an` doin` what the marster tell`em to do; an` when dey wuz sick, dey had things sont `em out de houses, an` de same doctor come to see `em whar `ten` to de white folks when dey wuz po`ly. Dyar warn` no trouble nor nothin`. (PAGE, 1881/1998, p.314)

(...) dey (the slaves) all loved ole marster... (PAGE, 1881/1998, p.312)

He sut`n`y wuz good to me. Nothin` nuver made no diffunce `bout dat. He nuver hit me a lick in his life- an` nuver let nobody else do it, nurr. (PAGE, 1881/1998, p.316)

As we can see, according to Sam, the past of slavery was good, “Dem wuz good ole times”, the master was kind, “He sut`n`y wuz good to me”, there was not violence, “He nuver hit me a lick in his life”. It is safe to assume that Page weaves a narrative that not only differs from Chesnutt’s narrative, but also counters the numberless accounts of slavery written by African Americans, such as those by Harriet Ann Jacobs and Frederick Douglass, for a reason: to reinforce his own racist views of racial relations in the United States and the history of the Old South.

The two short stories also differ drastically in terms of their depiction of white people. In *Marse Chan*, Page describes white southern men as honorable gentlemen who fought for a good cause and for the Old South in the Civil War. Although the difference in political beliefs in the Old South is also discussed in *Marse Chan*, especially between Southern Republicans and Southern Democrats, Page oftentimes paints his white characters with a broad brush, particularly when he describes their sense of morality. This is particularly clear when Sam tells of Marse Chan’s father going blind after trying to save his carriage driver, Ham Fisher, in a barn fire.

Den ole marster lost he eyes. (...) Well, one night de big barn cotch fire (...) Hit `peared to me like `twarn `no time befo` all de folks an` de neighbors dey come, an` dey wuz a-totin` water, an` a-tryin` to save de po`critters (...). Yo` could heah `em so pitiful, an` pres`n`y old marster said to Ham Fisher (he wuz de ker`ige-driver).`Go in dyah an` try to save`em; don`t let`em bu`n to death.`An`Ham he went right in. (...) an`Ham didn`t come back, an` de fire begun to lick out under the eaves (...) an` all of a sudden ole marster tu`ned an`kissed ole missis, who wuz standin` nigh him, wid her face jes` ez white ez a sperit`s. An` befo` anybody knowed what he wuz gwine do, jumped right in de do`, an` de smoke come po`in`out behine `im. (...) right out de same do` kyarin` Ham Fisher in his arms, come ole marster, wid his clo`s all blazin`. Dey flung water on `im, an` put `im out; an`, ef you b`lieve me, yo` wouldn`t a- knowed `twuz ole marster (PAGE, 1881/ 1998, p.315).

In Chesnutt’s story, however, McAdoo is not described as the stereotypical noble southern gentleman, but rather as a mean, greedy slave-owner who was so avaricious to the extreme extent of going to a

conjurer, and of having her cast a spell over his own grapevine to keep his slaves from eating his grapes. In doing so, Chesnutt represents the evil of slavery as reflected on the rotten psyche of his white southern characters. Adding still more depth to his work, on *The Goophered Grapevine*, Chesnutt additionally presents the reader to white people who are good (as the white couple from Ohio), breaking one-sided representations of racial groups.

The Goophered Grapevine has characters that speak from different social situations, weaving their very own viewpoints into the fabric of the narrative. In *Marse Chan*, however, the reader is introduced to one-sided characters whose opinions on the Old South seem to all be the same.

Still discussing the idealization of the Antebellum South in Page's narrative, Sam is describing a scene when he was about to be punished by Marse Chan's father.

(...) He sut'n'y wuz good to me. Nothin' nuver made no diffunce 'bout dat. He nuver hit me a lick in his life--an' nuver let nobody else do it, nurr.

"I 'members one day, when he wuz a leetle bit o' boy, ole marster hed done tole we all chil'en not to slide on de straw-stacks; an' one day me an' Marse Chan thought ole marster hed done gone 'way from home. We watched him git on he hoss an' ride up de road out o' sight, an' we wuz out in de field a-slidin' an' a-slidin', when up comes ole marster. We started to run; but he hed done see us, an' he called us to come back; an' sich a whuppin' ez he did gi' us!

"Fust he took Marse Chan, an' den he teched me up. He nuver hu't me, but in co'se I wuz a-hollerin' ez hard ez I could stave it, 'cause I knowed dat wuz gwine mek him stop. Marse Chan he hed'n open he mouf long ez ole marster wuz tunin' 'im; but soon ez he commence warmin' me an' I begin to holler, Marse Chan he bu'st out cryin', an' stept right in befo' ole marster an' ketchin' de whup, sed:

"Stop, seh! Yo' sha'n't whup 'im; he b'longs to me, an' ef you hit 'im another lick I'll set 'im free!"

"I wish yo' hed see ole marster. Marse Chan he warn' mo'n eight years ole, an' dyah dey wuz--old marster stan'in' wid he whup rai-

sed up, an' Marse Chan red an' cryin', hol'in' on to it, an' sayin' I b'longst to 'im.

“Ole marster, he raise' de whup, an' den he drapt it, an' broke out in a smile over he face, an' he chuck' Marse Chan onder de chin, an' tu'n right roun' an' went away, laughin' to hisse'f, an' I heah 'im tellin' ole missis dat evenin', an' laughin' 'bout it. (...) (PAGE, 1881/1998, p.316).

In this excerpt, not only are we, readers, shown a romanticized and idyllic view of the Old South, but we are also introduced to a distorted vision of chattel slavery and slave owners. Even though Marse Chan's father's willingness to use corporal punishment is depicted negatively, the focus of this scene is Marse Chan's benevolence and how he was so good as to save Sam from being beaten. In other words, Marse Chan's goodness outshines the darkness of corporal punishment. Therefore, since Marse Chan did not allow the use of violence, it follows that he was a good Master. The narrative further implies that there was nothing wrong in a human being owning other human beings so long as they were kind to each other. Thus, Page constructs a work of fiction that naturalizes slavery, downplays violence and plays well into the idea of the “white savior” as Marse Chan is placed on a pedestal for being a “good” slave owner.

Furthermore, while both stories are told to a white character by former African American slaves, it is equally imperative to discuss the difference in how both narrators view their white audience. In *Marse Chan*, Page introduces us to a slave character who, at first sight, seems eager to be able to share his short story with the northern traveler (PAGE, 1881/1998, p.311). In fact, he starts his narrative by answering a couple of questions posed by the northern traveler, not showing any sign of resistance or of being uncomfortable in his presence.

In *The Goophered Grapevine*, on the other hand, the narrator clearly feels uncomfortable, perhaps even threatened, in the presence of the white couple:

(...) we approach him at an angle from the rear, and were close to him before he perceived us. He respectfully rose as we drew near, and was moving away, when I begged him to keep his seat. (...) he

resumed his seat with somewhat of embarrassment (...). He went on eating his grapes, but did not seem to enjoy himself quite so well as he had apparently done before he became aware of our presence (CHESNUTT, 2000, p. 34).

As previously discussed in this article, not only is the narrator in Page's short story not uncomfortable around white people, but he was also very fond of his previous master. In Chesnutt's story, however, what we get is a character that does not romanticize his relationship with his old master, but rather, constructs his narrative very "shrewdly," discussing subtly the power relations in the Old South and, to a certain extent, even sounding deceitful to a white audience, as Annie, the main character's wife, wonders if the tale she had just heard on the goophered grapevine was true or not. Simply put, Page's slave character wants to please white folks whereas Chesnutt's Uncle Julius uses his narrative as a weapon in his own favor.

In sum, all the narrative constructed by the former slave in *Marse Chan* seem to serve solely to solidify a myth that the writer wants to build for the Old South: a myth of an idyllic land, of happy times and a noble southern aristocracy who fought for a lost cause in the civil war. Consequently, in *Marse Chan* we see a character, if not a whole tale, that exists to support a cultural fairy tale that the Confederacy invented for itself. In denying the racial conflicts and the negative consequences of slavery to African Americans, Thomas Nelson Page's text becomes partisan, reinforcing the interests of certain hegemonic groups of people (EAGLETON, 1996, p. 170), amongst whom he is included. That is not to say that Chesnutt's short story is any less partisan, though. In Chesnutt's narrative, albeit subtly, the narrator is constantly exposing the evils of slavery, the greed of slave owners, and the cruelties of the work in the plantations. Whereas the first writer glorifies the myth of a peaceful antebellum South, the latter questions its verity, exposes its problems and finds a way to re-write his own history in his stories.

8. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to go back to the literary importance of adding African American texts to the literary canon. If literature is a

social construct, then certain literary discourses reflect social issues and relationships of power. What follows is that when a minority group is unable to express their own realities and their own narratives through literature or when their perspectives are denied a place of prominence in the canon, some assumptions about these minorities are made clear and the relationships of power that underlie literary discourses surface as subtle ways of oppression via misrepresentation.

In Page's story both the northern traveler and the former slave shared the same perspective in regards to the Old South, even though they were speaking from different social situations. The way Marse Chan was constructed as the white benefactor and how the myth of the Lost Cause is constantly reinforced throughout the narrative not only shows a stereotypical outlook of what life on the plantation was like, but is also indicative of the ideologies that were interwoven into Page's work. After our analysis, we believe in the importance of arguing that Page creates a whole narrative in which only one voice has the floor: the voice of the white characters speaking through a former slave.

In *The Goophered Grapevine*, however, not only are we presented to a larger variety of characters, but each different character shows their unique outlook on life and, consequently, their different opinions on the Old South and on chattel slavery. This variety of characters and viewpoints is what Page's narrative lacks, but it is also what indicates that both short stories are quintessentially social constructs in that it is in Chesnut's brilliancy that we find a deeper depiction of the complexities of an antebellum South. It is through his subtle depictions of race conflicts, of greed and of slavery that we can see the South as a complex ground of contradictory ideologies and perspectives.

We would also like to conclude this article by underscoring the importance of reading foreign language literatures. As discussed throughout this text, we believe that reading is an intercultural activity in and by itself. As Matos (2012, p.126) puts it,

As the reader participates in making the text real, he/ she lives through the texts, finds a voice through them and moves toward appropriation of the text, working to understand both cultural and individual difference, both intra- and inter-subjectively. Meaning will grow out of this collective process. Instead of being a disadvantage

then, reading literary texts in a foreign language has the value of mobilizing languaging, a critical awareness of self and other (PHI-PPS; GONZALES, 2004, pp. 61, 62).

Keeping this discussion in mind, it is necessary to study African American writers in Brazil not only because of the necessity to include narratives written by minorities in our curriculums, but also because reading is an intercultural activity *par excellence*. Therefore, one way to understand ourselves and our society better is to understand the other. While reading African American literature in Brazil, we are led to thinking not only about the struggles of people of color in the USA, but also in the struggles of people of color in Brazil. Thus, reading a literature that is from another cultural group puts us in a position from where we can critically stare at ourselves and the other, a position that we would like to call the intercultural crossroads.

UMA LEITURA INTERCULTURAL DE *THE GOOPHERED GRAPEVINE* DE CHARLES W. CHESNUTT E DE *MARSE CHAN* DE THOMAS NELSON PAGE: REPRESENTAÇÃO RACIAL EM CONTOS DO SUL ESTADUNIDENSE PÓS-GUERRA CIVIL

RESUMO

Este artigo propõe analisar dois contos sobre o Sul dos Estados Unidos pré-guerra civil. O primeiro conto é *Marse Chan* de Thomas Nelson Page e o outro é *The Goophered Grapevine* de Charles W. Chesnutt. Para enriquecer a discussão, nós primeiro revisamos a literatura escrita por negros americanos sobre a escravidão durante o período anterior à guerra civil, em particular os trabalhos de Harriet Ann Jacobs e Frederick Douglass, e prosseguimos a articular que o escritor afro-americano Chesnutt é mais capaz de descrever uma narrativa complexa sobre a escravidão no Sul dos Estados Unidos do que o Page. A relevância da nossa análise se baseia em uma postura intercultural que entende não apenas a importância de ler-se literatura interculturalmente, mas que também reconhece que entender outras culturas e literaturas nos ajuda a melhor compreender nós mesmos e as culturas dentro das quais estamos inseridos.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: Literatura Afro-americana, Literatura Americana, Literatura Sulista, Interculturalidade.

UNA LECTURA INTERCULTURAL DE *THE GOOPHERED GRAPEVINE* DE CHARLES W. CHESNUTT Y DE *MARSE CHAN* DE THOMAS NELSON PAGE: REPRESENTACIÓN RACIAL EN CUENTOS DEL SUR ESTADOUNIDENSE POSGUERRA CIVIL

RESUMEN

Este artículo propone hacer un análisis de dos cuentos sobre el Sur de Estados Unidos preguerra civil a partir de un punto de vista brasileño. El primer cuento es *Marse Chan* de Thomas Nelson Page y el otro es *The Goophered Grapevine* de Charles W. Chesnutt. Para enriquecer la discusión, primero revisamos la literatura escrita por negros estadounidenses sobre la esclavitud durante el periodo anterior a la guerra civil, en particular los trabajos de Harriet Ann Jacobs y Frederick Douglass, y proseguimos a articular que el escritor afrobrasileño es más capaz que Page de describir una narrativa compleja sobre la esclavitud en el sur de Estados Unidos. La relevancia de nuestro análisis de estos dos cuentos bajo un punto de vista brasileño está basada en una postura intercultural, pero que también reconoce que comprender otras culturas y literaturas nos ayuda a comprender mejor nosotros mismos y las culturas dentro de las cuales no encontramos.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Literatura afroestadounidense, Literatura estadounidense, Literatura sureña, Interculturalidad.

NOTES

1. One famous lynching was that of Emmett Till. A 14-year-old African American boy that was tortured, murdered, and later thrown into a river.

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