

Foreword

“Race has been a constant arbiter of difference, as have wealth, class, and gender – each of which is about power and the necessity of control.” (Toni Morrison, *The Origin of Others* p. 3). In these words by Toni Morrison I find the main structure of meaning that is exposed in Gonçalo Cholant’s book, *Reconfigurations of the Bildungsroman: Taking Refuge from Violence in Kincaid, Danticat, hooks, and Morrison*. Through an insightful confluence of theoretical concepts such as coloniality (Quijano; Mignolo; Lugones), the Ecology of Knowledges and the Sociology of Absences (Santos), subalternity (Spivak), intersectionality (Crenshaw) and the need of its epistemological revision (Roth), Cholant dismantles the logic of systemic oppression and violence that marks the everyday experience of subaltern subjects and deprives them of their rights of citizenship. This rich theoretical framework provides the opportunity to unveil how colonialism continues to leave a mark on the experience of African-American and African diasporic subjects, and promotes a decolonial rethinking of hegemonic patterns of knowledge (Mignolo; Maldonado-Torres).

The focus of *Reconfigurations* is contemporary literature by a few women authors of African descent, from the United States and the Caribbean, “as [l]iterature offers a setting where the process of unearthing histories is possible, and while doing so, it brings to the forefront the complexities derived from the erasure fabricated by colonial historiography.” (Cholant 33). The author’s selection follows this order: Jamaica Kincaid (*Lucy*, 1990); Edwidge Danticat (*Breath, Eyes, Memory*, 1994); Toni Morrison (*God Help the Child*, 2015); and bell hooks (*Bone Black – Memories of Girlhood*, 1996). Mostly fiction, but also texts fluidly entangled with the autobiographical, these powerful narratives remake the connection between the present, history and memory. The writers are either from United States or chose the country as their destiny of immigration, therefore their narratives reveal an interesting transnational paradigm that connects the islands and the metropole, the immigrant experience and the diasporic one.

The circumstance of trauma, since it frequently derives from the experience of violence, direct and indirect, physical and psychological, individual and collective, is a common trace in these literary pieces and offers the author a superb opportunity to display the logic of coloniality and intersectional oppression. As Cholant argues, “[t]he imaginative work has transformative possibilities over trauma, revitalizing the event, transposing its literal character and eventually surpassing it.” (16) Besides displaying and analysing the traumatic processes in each story, the author underlines the way each protagonist works through trauma and builds her own strategy of resistance. The act of speaking out to

“break through silences to speak the truth of their lives, to give testimony” (hooks, *Sisters of the Yam* 35) such as the act of writing are an integral part of a struggle against invisibility for women in their plight against multiple oppressions of race, class and gender. For Cholant, the investigation that led to the production of this volume was also a political act and an act of ethical responsibility (cf. Butler, *Precarious Lives*) “trying to identify in the texts tendencies of emancipatory practices and knowledges.” (59)

A common pattern in the texts selected is the form of the *Buildungsroman*, or coming-of-age story. However, against the aforesaid background – historical, social and individual – the *Buildungsroman* could only be “reconfigured”, as the author chose to characterize the process of reassessment and revision of the canonical form. Through this process of reconfiguration the writers, as counter-hegemonic subjects, have searched for a more adequate means to convey experiences preyed by poverty, racism, sexism, and other kinds of violence and discrimination. Thus, as Cholant argues, we are exposed to a “type of text [that] ends up reverting the unitary discourse into a communitarian discourse that was broader, expressing not only the concerns of the self, but also the collectivity, the support network that makes survival possible, turning writing into a space for contestation against hegemonic patterns” (31). The author presents literature as the ground on which trauma and violence are negotiated, made sense of, and ultimately resisted, working as a way of denouncing experiences that have been made invisible, as well as providing a safe point of reference to dealing with traumatic experiences.

Awareness about the causes of trauma and the different ways violence (direct and structural) act upon subjectivities – when many variants such as sex, race, class, origin, and sexual orientation, among others, complicate one’s experience – opens the space for Cholant’s analysis of the different ways the selected writers unsettle the traditional *Bildungsroman* in their coming-of-age stories of Black women in the Americas. Cholant also points out to the reconfiguration of the autobiographical in the case of hooks’ beautiful but so far quite neglected memoir. As he claims, new formulations of the genre are achieved

[...] complicating notions of narrative closure, questioning the status quo instead of abiding to it, rethinking sexual identities and gender roles, defying hegemonic culture, redefining the meaning of belonging to the United States and to the Caribbean. They also subvert the genre, demonstrating how porous and flexible the limits that separate autobiography from fiction are, offering readers narratives that dismantle aesthetic/literary patterns, and consequently, through the subversion of the conventions, undo constructs already established about identity and the women’s condition. (Cholant 39–40)

The reader of the present work can find not only a thorough and sensitive reading of the literary texts, but also a questioning of the possibility of representation, when the subject of analysis involves violence and trauma. But, as the author eloquently observes, “the possibility of representation of unbearably violent and traumatic events is not simply referential, but a transformative space where the resignification of the experience takes place. The remapping of experiences carried out by literature might be one of the first steps towards the mitigation of violence as a structural reality.” 39

Gonçalo Cholan is a young scholar and this is his first book, but reading through it we are led into a world of sociological and cultural significance of very topical issues, grappled with with a bold political stance and a mature awareness of inequalities in our contemporary world and our common humanity in times of deep global instability. As he writes, “reading literary fiction boosts the empathy capacity of subjects, since it forces them to deal with the perspectives of others, expanding the knowledge about them, helping to recognize similarities among readers and the stories found in literature.” (44) Academic research can also be a field that transforms us individually and collectively because we learn but also learn to unlearn.

To conclude, I believe that Gonçalo Cholan’s study is a noteworthy contribution to the fields of Inter-American and Studies of the literature of the African diaspora, also adding value to recent scholarship on the reframing of the *Bildungsroman* (LeSeur; Rishoi; Bolaki).

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