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Diasporization and family relations in Nella Larsen's Quicksand and Jamaica Kincaid's Lucy: the construction of female identity

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Dissertação apresentada, como requisito parcial para obtenção do título de Mestre , ao Programa de Pós-Graduação em Letras da Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. Área de concentração: Literaturas Língua Inglesa.

Orientador : Profª. Dra. Maria Aparecida Ferreira de Andrade Salgueiro

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RESUMO

PONTES, Renata Thiago. *Diasporization and family relations in Nella Larsen's Quicksand and Jamaica Kincaid's Lucy:* the construction of female identity. 2008. 113 f. Dissertação (Mestrado em Letras) – Instituto de Letras, Universidade do Estado do Rio de Janeiro, Rio de Janeiro, 2008.

O principal objetivo desta dissertação é investigar e analisar como os movimentos diaspóricos e as relações familiares exercem influência na construção das identidades das mulheres em *Quicksand*, de Nella Larsen, e *Lucy*, de Jamaica Kincaid. As questões a que pretendo responder são: "Como as personagens principais, Helga Crane e Lucy, lidam com as diferentes culturas que encontram nas suas trajetórias ?" ; "Como essas diferentes culturas lidam com essas mesmas personagens?"; e "Como o encontro entre essas diferentes culturas e as relações familiares são descritos e influenciam na construção da identidade feminina nessas obras?". Minha hipótese é que encontraremos nas obras selecionadas duas jornadas, portadoras tanto de aspectos comuns quanto distintos, que começam com o desejo das personagens principais de escapar da opressão patriarcal. Isto é, Helga Crane e Lucy passam por um período de muitas descobertas sobre elas mesmas e as sociedades com que têm que lidar, o que determina dois produtos diferentes: a construção das identidades híbridas de Lucy, em meio a sua solidão, na obra de Kincaid, e a construção e o sufocamento das identidades de Helga pela religião, o patriarcado e as relações familiares, na obra de Larsen.

Palavras-chave: Literatura afro-descendente. Hibridismo. Tradução.

ABSTRACT

The main aim of this thesis is to investigate and analyze how the diasporic movements and the family relations exert influence on the construction of women's identities in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* and Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*. Therefore, the questions I intend to answer are: "How do the main characters, Helga Crane and Lucy, deal with the different cultures they find in their trajectories?"; How do these different cultures deal with these same characters?", and "How is the meeting of such different cultures and family relations portrayed, as well as how does it exert influence on the construction of the female identity in these works?" My hypothesis is that in the selected works we will find two journeys, which have both similar and distinct aspects, and begin with the main characters' desire to escape oppression. Given these facts, the protagonists go through a period of many discoveries about themselves and the societies with which they have to deal, which unfolds into two products: the building of Lucy's autonomous hybrid identities in her loneliness in Kincaid's work, and the building of Helga's hybrid identities overshadowed by religion, patriarchy, and family relations in Larsen's work.

Key words: African–descendant literature. Hybridism. Translation.

SINOPSE

Investigação sobre a influência da diasporização e das relações familiares na construção das identidades das mulheres afro-descendentes nas obras *Lucy*, de Jamaica kincaid, e *Quicksand* de Nella Larsen. Análise de ambas as obras baseada nos estudos pós-modernos e pós-coloniais sobre a identidade, bem como nas teorias feministas.

SYNOPSIS

Investigation about the influence of diasporization and family relations in the construction of African-descendant women's identities in the novels *Lucy*, by Jamaica Kincaid, and *Quicksand*, by Nella Larsen. Analysis of these novels based on post-modern and post-colonial studies about identities and on feminist theories.

Diasporization and family relations in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*: The construction of female identity

SUMMARY

Out of the huts of history's shame
I rise
Up from a past that's rooted in pain
I rise
I'm a black ocean, leaping and wide,
Welling and swelling I bear in the tide.
Leaving behind nights of terror and fear
I rise
Into a daybreak that's wondrously clear
I rise
Bringing the gifts that my ancestors gave,
I am the dream and the hope of the slave.

Maya Angelou

FIRST WORDS

In the beginning of 2005, while undertaking a research on the Internet to one of my undergraduation subjects at UERJ, I found a comment about Jamaica Kincaid's novel, *Lucy*, and I decided to buy the book. The mixing of cultural elements and the effects of colonization over colonized subjects conveyed by the novel amazed me and I could not stop reading the book until the end of the story. Kincaid's book was a gift to me and I found it exactly when I most needed it. I was looking for a way to take a graduation course that would unite what I had learned in my two undergraduation courses: English and its literatures, and History.

In August 2005, I started auditing some classes of the Masters Program at UERJ in its subject 'Literature and Postcolonialisms'. The subject in question was being taught by Professor Maria Aparecida Salgueiro and it was mainly concerned with postcolonial theory and postcolonial writings written by African-descendant women. One of the readings assigned to the classes was the first chapter of Nella Larsen's novel *Quicksand*. When I read it I got fascinated by the story, ordered the book, and as soon as it arrived I read it without stopping until there were no words written on the pages anymore. Although being a book written in the end of the 1920's it surely had many relations to be established with Kincaid's novel, written in the 1990's, since writers, Kincaid and Larsen, and their characters are products of colonization processes that happened in the world. Besides that, both characters, Lucy Potter and Helga Crane, are oppressed subjects by colonial and patriarchal rules, denouncing that oppression still takes place in the world and we still have to work a lot against ethnical and gender oppression. As a result, I decided to present a project to the examination board of the Masters Program when they were selecting students to start the graduation course in 2006 and here I am, two years later, presenting this thesis.

Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* (1990) and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* (1928) are fictional works that deal with identity, hybridity, gender, sexuality, social status, family relations, and diasporization, among other issues. These works were chosen to be analysed because they are important samples of postcolonial literature and because both works are representations of African-descendant women's enterprise to criticize the postcolonial patriarchal society that prevent them from achieving an equal social position in relation to men, being them white or black.

Researching about these two works and the incredible women who wrote them has been extremely rewarding and pleasant. During this period I could not avoid remembering two canonical and worldwide known authors: Geoffrey Chaucer and William Shakespeare. Chaucer denounces and criticizes the bad habits and problems of the society of his time in *The Canterbury Tales* as wells as Nella Larsen and Jamaica Kincaid do the same in relation to the societies in which they live. Shakespeare also criticizes the society of his time but he also does something new and incredible to his time: he creates complex minor characters in a way that they are extremely important to the plots of his plays even not being the protagonists. All of them have psychological, political, social, and economic aspects that influence their lives and the play and delineated their personalities; their identities. Nella Larsen and Jamaica Kincaid would be considered by many people as some of the minor characters of world's history, but their choice to react against colonialism, patriarchalism and all its institutions, and the choice to make Lucy and Helga, who have the profile of many considered minor characters in other author's stories, the protagonists of their story, empower and make them protagonists of a new world history that takes into account not only the colonizers and patriarchal institutions versions.

My analysis of both novels is focused on how the diasporic movements and the family relations influence on the construction of women's identities in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. This thesis is divided into four main parts. The first chapter develops some topics related to the beginnings of Cultural Studies, Postcolonial Studies, the recognition of African-descendants as writers and the importance of women as African-American writers. The second chapter focuses on Nella Larsen's life and her novel *Quicksand* and the influence of the African diaspora and family relations on the construction of the main character's identities: Helga Crane. The third chapter has as its main core Jamaica Kincaid's life and her novel *Lucy* and the influence of the African diaspora and family relations on the construction of the main character's identities: Lucy. The fourth chapter develops some ideas related to Intercultural Translation as it employs the concepts of tradition and translation as presented by Stuart Hall to depict how two hybrid subjects, Helga Crane and Lucy Potter, interpret the societies which both have to face. Considering that Jamaica Kincaid's Lucy and Nella Larsen's Quicksand are both postcolonial and postmodern, the methodology of this research is based on postcolonial, postmodern, and feminist theory and criticism. It is important to highlight that this research aims at contributing to the strengthening of the field

of the postcolonial writings' studies and with other students' and researchers' studies as well as researches on the construction of postcolonial identities.

I – THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

> You taught me language; and my profit on't
> Is, I know how to curse: the red plague rid you,
> For learning me your language.
>
> William Shakespeare[1]

I.1 – The beginnings of Cultural Studies

Nowadays much is said about the Cultural Studies, and the word culture has acquired a huge importance, being used in different contexts and locations by various social groups for many purposes. But, in fact, what is culture? Or in other words, can we have a single definition for "culture"? And what do we mean by Cultural Studies? How important are they to Literary Studies?

> Culture is one of the two or three most complicated words in the English Language … This is partly because of its intricate historical development, in several European languages, but mainly because it has now come to be used

[1]SHAKESPEARE, W. *The Tempest*. London: Penguin Books, 2001.

> for important concepts in several distinct intellectual disciplines and in several distinct and incompatible systems of thought (WILLIAMS, 1985, p.87).

The notion of culture has stimulated many interesting works in the field of the social sciences as well as some of the most contradictory ones. According to Armand Mattelart and Erik Neveu, the way to reflect upon cultures and to articulate them is confluent to the national traditions. We may say that in Latin America some scholars concentrated their attention in the mediation between popular cultures and mass culture production. The French, just to give a different example, have been playing an important role in the development and diffusion of literate culture for centuries through schooling, universities and even television since the 1960's. Indeed, France has tried to make its literate culture and the works that theorized this culture a contribution of universal value having diplomatic concern about it all the time. The German contribution also knew a vast diffusion in the XIXth century through Humboldt or Herder, and in the XXth century through the School of Frankfurt. In the socio-anthropological field, the early contribution of the American researchers, Margaret Mead and Clifford Geertz, via the School of Chicago is prominent (MATTELART & NEVEU, 2004, p.12 -13).

Robert Bocock states that the meaning of culture changed over time especially in the period of transition from traditional social formations to modernity:

> The **first** and earliest meaning of "culture" can be found in writing of the fifteenth century, when the word was used to refer to the tending of crops (cultivation) or looking after animals. This meaning is retained in modern English in such words as "agriculture" and "horticulture". The **second** meaning developed in the early sixteenth century. It extended the idea of "cultivation" from plants and animals to more abstract things, like the human mind. Francis Bacon, for example, wrote of "the culture and manurance of minds" (1605) and Thomas Hobbes of "a culture of their minds" (1651). There soon developed the idea that only some people – certain individuals, groups, or classes – had "cultured" or cultivated minds and manners; and that only some nations (mainly European ones) exhibited a high standard of culture or civilization (BOCOCK, 2005, p.151).

Bocock's considerations about culture also enclose other three definitions that the term 'culture' acquired through history: culture as a general process of social development (the

Enlightenment conception of culture); culture as the ways of life shared by particular nations, groups, classes, periods; and culture as the practices which produce meaning: signifying practices (BOCOCK, 2005, p.152 – 154).

According to Maria Elisa Cevasco, the word ´culture` is a derived word from the Latin word *colere*, meaning ´to live` and also ´to cultivate` and ´to take care of '. The acceptance of the word happened mainly in the XVI century, and up to the XVIII century the word culture designated an activity. It was in this period that the word ´culture`, joined by the correlate word ´civilization`, started to be used as an abstract noun to designate a generic process of intellectual and spiritual progress in the social and individual spheres – the progress of human development. In England and in Germany, specially, during Romanticism, the term ´culture` started to be used as an antonym to the word ´civilization` in order to emphasize the culture and the folklore of the nations, and later, during the Industrial Revolution, the domain of the society values in opposition to the mechanical character of the civilization that was starting to organize itself in a new way (CEVASCO, 2003, p.10).

As people may be manipulated, words may, too. The word culture suffered one of the most dangerous, empowering and oppressive manipulations. It started to be used in an imperialistic way, in the XIX century, to define that some characteristics and some peoples were superior to others. This acceptance lasted up to the XX century, when it was applied to facts of everyday life, to the arts, to the intellectual and spiritual development and to the way that someone lived. But, by the end of the XX century it would change again, as the world was changing too and acquiring a new organization after the Second World War. By the 1950's, when the subject of the Cultural Studies started to structure itself, the word ´culture` would start a shift from its previous meaning, the one that focused on the social differentiation, and started to give preeminence to the anthropological usage, the one that defines the term as a way of living: "The history of the idea of culture is a record of our reactions in thought and feeling, to the changed conditions of our common life. Our meaning of culture is a response to the events which our meanings of industry and democracy most evidently define" (WILLIAMS, 1985, p.285).

Raymond Williams (1921 – 1988), a central figure in the foundation of the Cultural Studies, saw in the criticism of the literary creation the first steps in the direction of the current stage of the Cultural Studies. Cevasco says that it is the interpenetration of the economic, ideological and historical spheres that characterize our cultural era, an era that

mingles economic power, cultural expansion and the production of goods inspired by the compulsion of creating new needs to many people and giving only to a few the possibility to meet them. As an example, she shows us that Hollywood movie's industry and the 'Americanization` of many parts of the world, are two powerful instruments to spread an ideology that tries to convince people to be and live as the people of the United States of America. Cevasco declares that in the 1950's it was crystal clear to Raymond Williams that it was necessary to take a stand about culture and to intervene in the debate to show the connections between the several spheres and to safeguard the concept to a democratic use that would lead to social transformation (CEVASCO, 2003, p.12). Different reactions and resulting situations have created different cultures and consequently there are many different kinds of culture: "The idea of culture describes our common inquiry but our conclusions are diverse, as our starting points were diverse. The word, culture, cannot automatically be pressed into service as any kind of social or personal directive"(WILLIAMS, 1985, p.285).

As the preexistent subjects could not answer the new needs and questions raised by the criticism proposed by intellectuals like Raymond Williams, Cultural Studies started their way. To Williams, the first step in this way should be a deep historical research about the ways culture was conceived throughout English Modern History.

Industrialized England developed an original debate about culture as an instrument of reorganization of a society clouded by the machine, of "civilization" of emerging social groups, as the basis to a national conscience. This debate would give birth to an original enterprise after the Second World War. A debate that would consider culture in a broader sense – the anthropological one -, passing from a centered meditation of the bond culture-nation, to an approach of the culture of social groups (MATTELART & NEVEU, 2004, p.13).

There are three books which are considered the key stones of Cultural Studies: Raymond Williams's *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (1958), Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* (1957), and Edward P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). The first examines the ideas of culture and society intertwined in the changes in meanings of terms such as ´culture` and ´society`, since the beginning of the consolidation of the Industrial Revolution up to 1950. This was done because the semantic changes hide information about the reactions to the intense social changes. By means of using different intellectuals with different points of view and that are separated by traditional studies according to their subjects, Williams constructs a discourse that criticizes industrial society,

showing that, even when they have different opinions about some topics, all of them criticize the new and industrial England, the new democracy and the new industrialism, creating strong critical traditions that were very well known until the middle of the XX century.

Williams traces a lineage that starts with Edmund Burke (1729-1797), the keen antagonist of the French Revolution, and William Cobbet (1763-1835), the polemic defender of a working class that organizes itself, and continues with Robert Southey (1774-1843), one of the founders of the New Conservatism, who believed that the state should take care of the physical and moral health of the poor people before they start a revolution, and that the culture is responsibility of the entire society. Williams lineage continues with Robert Owen (1771-1858), one of the founders of socialism and cooperativism, to whom the human nature is a product of a way of life, of a culture; goes on with the Romantic poets, specially William Wordsworth (1770-1850) and Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834), who considered culture the measure to human excellence and the spirit of a people. The main point of this tradition is Matthew Arnold (1822 – 1888), whose work contemplates the main problematic points of his society: the problematic of industrialization, the unfair income distribution, the contradiction of religion and science and the urge for culture to play a new social role, a role which has as its main objective to organize and pacify the anarchy of conflicts and social disputes existing in the real world. Arnold would recommend culture as one of the main auxiliaries to solve society's difficulties and poetry as the solution to achieve social cohesion, since, to him, poetry connects emotion to idea, and idea is fact. To assure culture's right to be the expression of all humanity, culture and its critics should be apart from politics, to assure that their language would be innocent. According to Arnold the whole scope of his essay *Culture and Anarchy* is to recommend culture as the great help out of difficulties of his time; considering culture as

> a pursuit of our total perfection by means of getting to know, on all the matters which most concern us, the best which has been thought and said in the world, and, through this knowledge, turning a stream of fresh and free thought upon our stock notions and habits, which we now follow staunchly but mechanically, vainly imagining that there is a virtue in following them staunchly which makes up for the mischief of following them mechanically (ARNOLD, 1869, p.8).

Arnold would also criticize the Americans by saying that it was not fatal to Americans not to have any religious establishments or effective centers of high culture; but it was fatal to them to be told by their flatterers, and to believe, that they were the most intelligent people in the whole world, “when of intelligence, in the true and fruitful sense of the word, they even singularly, as we have seen, come short” (ARNOLD, 1869, p.56).

Williams's *Culture and Society*'s, second part, focuses on the generation that followed Arnold's generation, and covers the years 1880 to 1914, maintaining the general characteristics of tradition. According to Cevasco, it is in the XX Century, with the analysis of how this tradition influences the work of influent intellectuals as the poet, critic and playwriter T.S. Eliot and the literary critics Frank Raymond Leavis and I. A. Richards, that the political intervention that motivates Williams's project is clear. The book shows how the tradition of culture and society attacks the *status quo* on behalf of a more organic society. This position loses its strength and starts to structure itself as nostalgia of a social and cultural past that was lost, as the assertion of culture as absolute, a domain separated from the real and material relations. In the context of the 1950's England, these ideals are the basis of the positions that needed to be displaced to move the debate to the field of a more democratic and engaged political culture. T.S. Eliot believed that education would have a very important role in our society and would stipulate who would be the most important ones in the upper class. Leavis, the commander of the very influential magazine *Scrutinity*, considered culture as a possession of a minority that should preserve the human values and divulge them through education to minimize the damages of the modern civilization (CEVASCO, 2003, p.18-19).

In opposition to the idea that a minority decides what culture is and latter diffuses it among the other classes, Williams proposes the community of culture, in whose central aspect is to facilitate the access to knowledge and to the means of cultural production to all. The idea of a single culture is presented as a critique and an alternative to the shared and fragmented culture in which we live. It is a conception based on the alternative principle of solidarity that Williams identifies with the working class. Williams notices that the word ‘masses’ is often associated with a ‘mob’ and he sees this emerging from three social tendencies: the concentration of population in industrial towns; the concentration of workers in factories; and the development of an organized and self-organizing working class prone to social and political massing.

> Yet the masses was a new word for mob, and the traditional characteristics of the mob were retained it its significance: gullibility, fickleness, herd-prejudice, lowness of taste and habit. The masses, on this evidence, formed a perpetual threat to culture. Mass-thinking, mass-suggestion, mass-prejudice would threaten to swamp considered individual thinking and feeling. Even democracy, which had both a classical and a liberal reputation, would lose its savour in becoming mass-democracy (WILLIAMS, 1985, p.288).

Williams sees the new problem as the power of the media to change public opinion. Yet he also finds a certain prejudice in the term, ‘mass-democracy’. Democracy is the rule of the majority and Williams wonders whether this might also constitute mass rule, mob rule of the rule of lowness and mediocrity. Williams reflects about the label, ‘masses’, and identifies it with working people:

> But if this is so, it is clear that what is in question is not only gullibility, fickleness, herd-prejudice or lowness of taste and habit. It is also from the open record, the declared intention of the working people to alter society in many of its aspects, in ways which those to whom the franchise was formerly restricted deeply disapprove (WILLIAMS, 1985, p.288).

Continuing to challenge the term, ‘masses’, Williams considers the notion of the individual or ‘man in the street’. In a collective image, the masses are different to us as we are unique individual yet they are similar so that the public includes us hitherto not being us.

> I do not think of my relatives, friends, neighbours, colleagues, acquaintances, as masses; we none of us can or do. The masses are always the others, whom we don’t know, and can’t know. Yet now, in our kind of society, we see those others regularly, in their myriad variations, stand, physically, beside them. They are here and we are here with them. And that we are with them is of course the whole point. To the other people, we also are masses. Masses are other people (WILLIAMS, 1985, p.289).

Williams states that there has been a dominative theory of communication that has called for the science of penetrating the mass mind:

> It is easy to recognize a dominative theory if, for other reasons, we think it to be bad, a theory that a minority should profit by employing a majority in wars of gain is easily rejected. A theory that a minority should profit by employing a mass of wage slaves is commonly rejected. A theory that a minority should reserve the inheritance of knowledge to itself, and deny it to the majority, is occasionally rejected (WILLIAMS, 1985, p.301).

Williams points out that while in the past culture was the pastime of 'the old leisured classes' it is now 'the inheritance of the new rising class'. For Williams, 'working class culture' is key. Working class culture is not the dissident element of proletarian writing such as post-Industrial ballads. Neither is it a simple alternative to Marxist-defined, 'bourgeois culture', a term that evokes Williams' skepticism. Williams writes that, 'even in a society in which a particular class is dominant, it is evidently possible both for members of other classes to contribute to the common stock, and for such contributions to be unaffected by or in opposition to the ideas and values of the dominant class'. Williams is not afterward setting up Working Class Culture as an opponent to tradition, but suggests something more complex. (WILLIAMS, 1985, p.306- 307)

Williams wonders whether there is 'any meaning left in "bourgeois" ' and he remarks that education has enabled a more even access to culture:

> We may now see what is properly meant by 'working-class culture'. It is not proletarian art, or council houses, or a particular use of language; it is rather the basic collective idea, and the institutions, manners, habits of thought, and intention which proceed from this. Bourgeois culture, similarly, is the basic individualist idea and the institutions, manners, habits of thought, and intention which proceed from that. […] The culture which it [the working class] has produced […] is the collective democratic institution, whether in the trade unions, the co-operative movement or a political party. Working-class culture, in the stage through which it has been passing, is primarily social (in that it has created institutions) rather than individual (in particular intellectual or imaginative work). When it is considered in context, it can be seen as a very remarkable creative achievement (WILLIAMS, 1985, p.313).

Solidarity, in contrast with service, is 'potentially the real basis of a society', yet Williams realizes that the negative, defensive aspects of solidarity must be changed. Williams recommends that 'diversity has to be substantiated within an effective community which

disposes of majority power' and that the aim must be that of 'achieving diversity without creating separation'. Solidarity does not mean exclusion: 'A good community, a living culture, will […] not only make room for but actively encourage all and any who can contribute to the advance in consciousness which is the common need'. Neither does solidarity mean being closed to possibilities, since 'while the closed fist is a necessary symbol, the clenching ought never to be such that the hand cannot open, and the fingers extend, to discover and give shape to the newly forming reality' (WILLIAMS, 1985, p.318 - 320).

E. P. Thompson (1924-1993), a member of the Communist Party, which he would abandon in 1956, is the author of one of the books that changed the way to write History in England: *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963). It was a book that tried to recover the history of the ones not belonging to the upper classes, as a movement that would impel World History. Thompson and Williams were influent members of the N*ew Left*, one of the most prominent intellectual movements of the English cultural history of the XX Century. Richard Hoggart (1918 -), as Williams, originally belonged to the working class. He graduated in literature and published *The Uses of Literacy* in 1957, a book in which he studies the cultural traditions of the urban working class and the impact of the mass culture over its habits and traditions. These habits and traditions would have been destroyed by the vulgarity and low level of the new manifestations. Hoggart's focus in *The Uses of Literacy* was in the procedures of the popular press, of the movies and the habits of everyday life. In 1964, Hoggart founded the Center of Contemporary Culture Studies (CCCS), when he was Professor of Modern English Literature at the University of Birmingham. This center congregated many important figures of the new subject, such as Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige and Paul Gilroy (CEVASCO, 2003, p.21).

Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* is a representation of the life of the working class as something beyond mass culture's degraded consumption of goods. On the other hand, this book does not question who attributes cultural value to what and why. It does not inquire the domain of culture, forgetting to declare that it is not static, but it is open to contradictions and re-appropriations. In this sense Hoggart's project, as Leavis's, retains Arnold's inflection of guiding and protecting the masses. Williams's discourse deconstructs the dichotomy between culture and civilization and its correlate oppositions between spiritual and material, creativity and mechanism, art and ordinary life. The main difference that Williams's contribution brings

to the debate is the materialist perception of culture: the cultural properties are the result of material means of production that make possible complex social relations involving institutions, conventions and forms. To define culture is to declare one's opinion about the meaning of a way of living. This was the huge field of study and intervention open to the Cultural Studies in the moment of its formation (CEVASCO, 2003, p.22 - 23).

Nowadays the concept of Culture, with a capital letter, has been replaced by the concept of cultures, in the plural form. The focus is not the achievement of a culture in common, but the disputes among the different national, ethnic, sexual or regional identities. Mathew Arnold's concept of culture as a repository of the fundamental human values is going to find its disciplinary expression in the teaching of English literature. Cultural Studies, as a subject, changed the way literature was taught and studied.

It took some time for the new subject to be institutionalized in universities such as Oxford and Cambridge. It would happen after the First Great War with a specific social function. The main question to the subject, Literature, in that moment was to humanize people activating nationalism. The echoes from this movement remain strong in the conceptions of the social role of the subject until today. For a long time then, the Literary Studies had been concerned with words only and not with the historical and social contexts, or the biography of the author. I. A. Richards, in his *Practical Criticism* (1929), gave to the ascendant Literary Studies the idea that they would evolve by themselves apart from the other subjects. Richards started to work at Harvard, in the United States, where his method was fundamental to the constitution of the New American Criticism. The work in Cambridge was continued by F. R. Leavis, the most influent British literary critic in the XXth Century. English literature started to be used, in the 1930s, as a ´civilizational` weapon (CEVASCO, 2003, p.31 – 34).

The literary critic, in Leavis's tradition, started to have much power, since he decided what should be considered literature and who were the authors who used literary language, the language of culture. It would mean that the reader would not be a part of the process. Leavis's ideas were spread in his classes, books and in his magazine, *Scrutinity*, founded in 1932, but they were elitist and idealist (CEVASCO: 2003, p.38-39). His criticism was limited to show the misuses of the society of the machines without questioning or reflecting upon its foundations. However, Leavis's generation conquered a space in society where a more social and cultural criticism would be born in the future. The Cultural Studies would try to conquer this space some years later.

Many contemporary literary critics and scholars are reticent when speaking of Cultural Studies. They tend to think that Cultural Studies as a subject came to destroy the literary value of works by excluding high class literature, or the canon, instituted by Leavis's generation. On the other hand, many other critics and scholars see Cultural Studies as a way to celebrate the popular, but as the opposed critics to this thought, they do not question what or who has the power to attribute cultural value, to decide what has to be considered as belonging to culture.

The impulse of Cultural Studies, specially following Williams's version, was to make the exclusive culture to become part of a common culture, where the meanings and values could be constructed by everybody and not only by a small group of privileged people. A vision of culture that would be inseparable from the idea of a radical social change, and that demands an ethics of common responsibility, democratic participation of all in all levels of social life and an equal access to the forms and means of cultural creation. In the contemporary debate, where the positions are many times polarized, placing in one pole the ones in favor of the elitism of the high culture and in the other the defenders of a ´popular` culture, that should be separated from the high, it's important to pay attention to the fact that in Williams's common culture what is questioned is exactly this separation.

Cultural Studies are set over against Literary Studies exactly in a moment of political struggles for the transformation of society. A moment of expansion of the means of mass communication and of cultural industry, when culture presents itself as totally connected to the general process of goods' production. Both Cultural Studies and Literary Studies lived times of entrenchment in the universities, passing from antagonistic practices, that through different ways were opposed to the social organization and tried to influence society's course, to successful academic subjects.

Cultural materialism changes not only what is studied, but also how it is studied. If culture is the production and reproduction of values, it is necessary to review many of its aspects. Materialism does not consider the products of culture as ´objects`. It sees them as social practices and has as its main concern the understanding of the parts that compose the artistic object, in such a manner that this object can be used in a proper way. In the field of literary criticism, we can see this in I. A. Richards's New Criticism, introduced in the 1920s, which considered that to read is to discover which effect this object or an isolated text would have over the reader. According to Williams, one of the main discoveries of cultural

materialism is to prove that the usual opposition between literature and reality, culture and society hides their deep interconnection: it is not possible to analyze one without the other, and not even conceive a literature without the reality it produces or reproduces, or a society without the culture that defines its way of life (CEVASCO, 2003, p.150).

Cultural Studies knew, in the 1980's, a considerable expansion. Works in the field gradually extended to cultural elements connected to gender, ethnicity and the consumption of goods, achieving a global range. Nowadays Cultural Studies are in a moment of expansion worldwide. Many universities have their own departments of Cultural Studies and editors have been publishing more and more works in this field, but what is really important to the survival of the subject is to maintain its essence, not forgetting its social and political function. Theories must have a social and political connection; they need to be led to the outside of the universities. In the 1990's the question of the identity started to be highlighted by Cultural Studies, since it started to guide and to be the core of main social conflicts, cultural manifestations and literary works of our time. Globalization emphasized even more the existence of conflicts based on the several social, political, ethnic, religious, and many other different identities.

It is important to notice that since the 1980's a vast field of studies was formed focusing on the so called subaltern or postcolonial cultures. A new generation of researchers started to question the Eurocentric view of History over the cultures of the Third World. They started to reflect upon the official imaginary of the national identities and histories. The Postcolonial Studies took as a starting point the discussions presented in the last great compilations of the Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) of the University of Birmingham (MATTELART & NEVEU, 2004, p.173 – 174).

I.2 –Postcolonial Studies

According to John Thieme, recent decades have seen major changes in critical practice and assumptions about the terrain of literary studies and, perhaps, the most significant curricular development of the last forty years has been the appearance of university courses in the Anglophone literatures of countries other than Britain and the United States. Post-colonial has become the most widely accepted descriptive shorthand for referring to this group of literatures which contain much of the finest writing being produced in the contemporary world (THIEME, 1996, p.1).

Post-colonialism, or postcolonialism, deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies. The term postcolonial was first used by historians after the Second World War and designated the post-independence period. Since the end of the 1970s the term has been used by literary critics to discuss the various cultural effects of colonization:

> Spivak, for example, first used the term ‘post colonial’ in the collection of interviews and recollections published in 1990 called *The Post-Colonial Critic*. Although the study of the effects of colonial representation were central to the work of these critics, the term ‘post-colonial’ *per se* was first used to refer to cultural interactions within colonial societies in literary cycles. This was part of an attempt to politicize and focus the concerns of fields such as Commonwealth literature and the study of the so-called New Literatures in English which had been initiated in the late 1960s. The term has subsequently been widely used to signify the political, linguistic and cultural experience of societies that were former European colonies (ASCROFT, 2002, p.186).

The expression was very controversial almost from the beginning, especially the implications involved in the use or not of the hyphen.

> The heavily post-structuralist influence of the major exponents of colonial discourse theory, Said (Foucault), Homi Bhabha (Althusser and Lacan) and

> Gayatri Spivak (Derrida), led many critics, concerned to focus on the material effects of the historical condition of colonialism, as well as on its discursive power, to insist on the hyphen to distinguish post-colonial studies as a field from colonial discourse theory *per se*, which formed only one aspect of the many approaches and interests that the term 'post-colonial' sought to embrace and discuss (ASCROFT, 2002, p.187).

Although this discussion still exists, the fact is that post-colonialism, or postcolonialism, is used in many ways to include the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European Colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtitles of subject construction in colonial discourse, the resistance of those subjects and many other aspects.

The prefix 'post' in the term is also controversial and a source of many debates among critics. The understanding of 'post' as meaning 'after' colonialism has been contested. Many questions have been asked about the limits of the term:

> Aijaz Ahmad complains, for instance, that when the term 'colonialism' can be pushed back to the Incas and forward to the Indonesian occupation of East Timor, then it becomes 'a transhistorical thing, always present and always in process of dissolution in one part of the world or another'(1995:9). It is clear, however, that post-colonialism as it has been employed in most recent accounts has been primarily concerned to examine the processes and effects of, and reactions to, European colonialism from the sixteenth century up to and including the **neo-colonialism** of the present day (ASCROFT, 2002, p.188).

The term post-colonialism / postcolonialism is still used from time to time to mean simply 'anti-colonial' or 'post-independence'. Nowadays the debates around the post-colonial / postcolonial are fundamental and they pay attention to precise location. Every 'contact zone', or colonial encounter, is different and needs to be precisely located and analyzed for its specific interplay:

> A vigorous debate has revolved around the potentially homogenizing effect of the term 'postcolonial' (Hodge and Mishra 1990; Christman and Williams 1993). The effect of describing the colonial experience of a great range of

> cultures by this term, it is argued, is to elide the difference between them. However, there is no inherent or inevitable reason for this to occur. The materiality and locality of various kinds of post-colonial experience are precisely what provide the richest potential for postcolonial studies, and they enable the specific analysis of the various effects of colonial discourse (ASCROFT, 2002, p.190).

According to Pratt, ‘contact zone’ is the term created to denote the space of colonial encounters, the space where peoples that were geographic and historically separated establish contact and lasting relations. These relations usually are based on coercion, racial inequality and almost uncontrollable conflicts (PRATT, 1999, p.30).

Pratt states that one of the main concepts that need to be decolonized is the concept of modernity. The process of decolonization of knowledge is the cause of the “post” in Postmodernity, not because it ended postmodernity but because it ended the interests that the center had in modernity, creating a crisis in the intellectual authority which academies still fight to confront and control (PRATT, 1999, p.47).

What must be observed is the fact that colonialism and post-colonialism / postcolonialism are not strict models independent from other aspects. They are strictly dependent to the historical conditions they occurred. Indeed it is difficult to consider these terms in the singular, since what we observed through history was the existence of many and diverse colonialisms and post-colonialisms/ postcolonialisms.

According to Pratt, the term postcolonial is extremely useful in the Americas as a way to reflect upon the purpose of our colonial condition. In this case, the prefix ´post` refers to the fact that some operations of colonialism and euro imperialism turned out to be available to us in a way they have never been before. But the term is also used to suggest the opposite: that the dynamics of the euro-imperialism is not important to the understanding of the world’s dynamics anymore. If we only try to establish the continuation, in the present, of a “colonial legacy” it will not be possible to explain the processes trough which this “legacy” has been continuously reintegrated in a world in mutation, by means of continuous permutations of its significative power. The term decolonization, usually avoided by postcolonial critics, creates the possibility of having scholars compromised to the change of the dynamics of the present. According to Pratt, in the 60’s started a vast intellectual challenge through the destruction of the last wave of European colonial empires, a process that could be named as the

decolonization of knowledge. This process was possible due to an incredible generation of intellectuals created by those empires and the opposition to them: Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Edouard Glissant, and many others (PRATT, 1999, p.20 - 21).

The decolonization of knowledge includes the duty to understand the ways through which the West builds its knowledge of the world in consonance with its economic and political ambitions, and subjugates and assimilates the knowledge of others and their abilities to produce it. Both mechanisms were important to the production of the subjects of imperialism and colonialism.

Pratt states that by the middle of the XVIII century two simultaneous and intertwined processes transformed the voyages and voyagers's literature in North Europe. The first is the emergency of natural history as a globalizing structure of knowledge, and the second is the end of the great navigation's phase and the advent of inland exploration. These developments register a change in what can be called European "planetary consciousness", a change that coincides with many others, including the consolidation bourgeoisie's models of subjectivity and the inauguration of new territorial phase of Capitalism. This territorial phase was stimulated by many factors: the expansion of the coastal intern trade; national rivalries that forced nations to dominate foreign territories to avoid being dominated by their enemies, and the search for raw material to expand the industrial capacity. Hispanic America and Africa, long connected through the transatlantic commercial triangle, became parallel places to new expansionist European initiatives aiming at inland exploration. Africa's "opening" started hesitating in the years of 1780's with the foundation of the African Association. Simultaneously in Hispanic America, movements of independence started and would provoke the opening of South America to the same energies. In the XIX century, the new capitalist expansion was translated into colonialism in Africa and neocolonialism in Hispanic America. In the decades of 1960 and 70 of the XXth century the movements of decolonization in Africa and the movements of national liberation in the Americas had the same ideals, strategies and intellectual leadership, and both the continents were conglomerated in the stereotypes of "Third World" (PRATT, 1999, p.22-24).

Anticonquest narratives, the ones that naturalize the presence of the European global authority instead of transforming them into invasion, emerged creating an impression more of innocence than of intervention. By the end of the XVIIIth century another protagonist of the anticonquest appears in the person of the romantic traveler. This protagonist, far from

dominating the world, describes himself as being subjugated by the world by means of captivity, slavery, shipwreck, or seduction of the native women, whose appeal is irresistible to him. In a moment in which emerging democratic views start to question colonialism, interracial love indicated an European supremacy assured by the romantic love. Sex takes slavery's place as a means of belonging to the white man; colonized's subservience undertakes the shape of Romantic love. Through this process a fundamental dimension of colonialism disappears; the exploration of workmanship, which is not a coincidence if we consider the growth, in these same decades, of a transnational abolitionist movement. The schemes of transracial love from the sentimental travelers' accounts confronted and mediated these contradictions, articulating what Peter Hume called "an ideal of cultural harmony through the romance." What makes this ideal an ideal is the myth of reciprocity. As an ideology, romantic love, as the capitalist transactions, considers itself as reciprocal, as being established in relations of equivalence between the parts, but this reciprocity does not exist. The lovers are separated, the European is assimilated again by Europe and the non-European lover dies in youth. Before the arrival of the postcolonial perspectives, sentimental travelers's accounts were read as a product of European romanticism, as a direct projection to the whole world of a sensitivity resulting from Europe originated from forces as, for instance, the reaction against rationalism (PRATT, 1999, p.28-29). Postcolonial critique has been questioning ingenuous diffusionist conceptions like this. One of the most important steps in this sense was the analysis of European representations of the others not as expressions of continental essences, but also as historical places to which they refer to.

Pratt asserts that to be epistemologically in the contact zone is to be located in the field of what Fernando Ortiz, in the 1940's, called transculturation, a term created by him to defy the simplistic models of cultural diffusion. According to Ortiz, subordinate groups are not simply assimilated by the dominant or metropolitan cultures; they create a transculturation of the dominant cultures. While the peripheral peoples cannot easily control everything that comes from the decisive centers, they, in fact, determine in variable degrees, what they will absorb and with what purpose. Transculturation is inevitable and unpredictable. It is part of the colonialist nature the fact that the colony will never reproduce the metropolis and nobody can totally control the signs. Modes of expression that can be called autoethnographic are of special interest to scholars of transcultural matters. Autoethnographic texts are the ones in which the Others try to represent themselves to the Others of the metropolis, in narrow connection to the metropolitan representations (PRATT, 1999, p.33-34).

According to Newton, Post-colonial/ postcolonial criticism emerged as a significant development in literary theory in the late 1980s. Post-colonial/postcolonial critics and theorists attack the explicit or implicit claims made for Eurocentric art and literature as having universal application and relegating what is different from the Western cultural forms to the margins. Said's *Orientalism* was particularly influential in exposing the biased representation of the East/Orient by Western writers, who either regarded it as an inferior 'Other" or projected onto it characteristics Westerners do not accept as typical of themselves, such as inhuman cruelty and pathological sensuality (NEWTON, 1997, p.283):

> …the Orient is not an inert fact of nature. It is not merely *there*, just as the Occident itself is not just *there* either. We must take seriously Vico's great observation that men make their own history, that what they can know is what they have made, and extended it to geography: as both geographical and cultural entities – to say nothing of historical entities – such locales, regions, geographical sectors as 'Orient' and 'Occident' are man-made. Therefore as much as the West itself, the Orient is an idea that has a history and a tradition of thought, imagery and vocabulary that have given it reality and presence in and for the West. The two geographical entities thus support and to an extent reflect each other (SAID, 1978, p.4).

Newton declares that post-colonial/postcolonial criticism tends to have a double focus concentrating either on the representation of the non-European in Western canonic literature or on writing from non-European cultural traditions, particularly writing from countries that have been colonized by Western nations. Cultural difference is consequently a central preoccupation of post-colonial critics and theorists (NEWTON, 1997, p.283).

Homi K. Bhabha is a theorist particularly concerned with the construction of subjects, considering the ways in which the colonial subjects as "Others" are constructed as stereotypes in colonial discourse and how this discourse operates as an 'apparatus of power':

> An important feature of colonial discourse is its dependence on the concept of fixity in the ideological construction of otherness. Fixity, as the sign of cultural / historical / racial difference in the discourse of colonialism, is a paradoxical mode of representation: it connotes rigidity and an unchanging order as well as disorder, degeneracy and daemonic repetition. Likewise the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy, is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already

> known, and something that must be anxiously repeated … as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual license of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved. It is this process of *ambivalence*, central to the stereotype that my essay explores as it constructs a theory of colonial discourse (BHABHA, 1997, p.293).

The function of ambivalence as one of the most significant discursive and psychical strategies of discriminatory power is still charted. Bhabha's reading of colonial discourse suggests that the point of intervention should shift from the identification of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *processes of subjectification* made possible through stereotypical discourse:

> I do not intend to deconstruct the colonial discourse to reveal its ideological misconceptions or repressions to exult in its self-reflexivity, or to indulge its liberatory 'excess'. In order to understand the productivity of colonial power it is crucial to construct its regime of 'truth', not to subject its representation to a normalizing judgment (BHABHA, 1997, p.294).

The colonial power starts with and is based on discourse. The construction of the colonial subject in discourse, and the exercise of colonial power through discourse, is possible due to an articulation of forms of difference: ethnical, sexual, and linguistic, among others. "The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction"(BHABHA, 1997, p.295).

The myths of racial purity and cultural priority produced in relation to the colonial stereotype function to "normalize" the multiple beliefs and split subjects that constitute colonial discourse as a consequence of its process of disavowal. Within the apparatus of colonial power, the discourse of sexuality and race relate in a process of *functional overdetermination* (BHABHA, 1997, p.297).

The stereotype, a limited form of otherness, becomes the primary point of subjectification in colonial discourse, for both colonizer and colonized, is the scene of a

similar fantasy and defense – the desire for an originality which is again jeopardized by the differences of race, color and culture:

> My contention is splendidly caught in Fanon's title *Black Skin White Masks* where the disavowal of difference turns the colonial subject into a misfit – a grotesque mimicry or 'doubling' that threatens to split the soul and whole, undifferentiated skin of the ego. The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations (BHABHA, 1997, p. 298).

The hybridization of cultures has been seen, by cultural theorists such as Bhabha, as a central aspect of the post-colonial / postcolonial experience and of culture more commonly. This thinking poses a major challenge to the notion that literatures should be studied in terms of the historical evolution of national traditions, traditions frequently conceived of in essentialist terms. If we replace national paradigms by a post-colonial model in which 'purity' is considered fiction and hybridity and cultural pluralism all-pervasive, areas once considered marginal (Europe's 'others') paradoxically become central. This explains much of the current popularity of post-colonial studies. A process of 'colonization in reverse' occurs as post-colonial theoretical practice invades the metropolis and begins to dismantle the monocultural assumptions that have characterized much of the thinking of Western societies and monocultural models of literary study.

> Unfortunately such reverse colonization is not without its own problems. One of the consequences of the popularity of hybridization theory has been a tendency (at odds with the practice of a theorist such as Bhabha) to dehistoricize and dislocate writing from temporal, geographical and linguistic factors which have produced it in favour of an abstract, globally conceived notion of hybridity which obscures the specificities of particular cultural situations; and this is perhaps the most powerful argument against the constitution of the 'post-colonial' as a single field (THIEME, 1996, p.3).

In his article “New Ethnicities”, Stuart Hall discusses the black cultural Politics of representation through a reflection that demonstrates that a change in this politics is in process in postmodernity, presenting two different ways of understanding representation. First he presents representation as an imitation of reality and then he emphasizes the fact that meanings attributed to things are cultural and mediated and legitimated by discourse (HALL, 1997, p. 224). Hall, as others postmodern and postcolonial theorists like Bhabha, demonstrates great preoccupation with topics as the construction of identity and subject representation. In *The question of cultural identity*, he highlights the decentering of the subject and the consequent crisis in representation, suggesting that the postmodern subject is fragmented, having many identities, and that the modern nations are cultural hybrids (HALL, 2005, p. 617).

In order to explain the fragmentation of identity, Hall develops a historical account about theories related to the topic. He mentions the rising of the Marxist theory, in which Marx considers social relations as the center of his work, abandoning the abstract notion of Man and challenging the humanist belief in the essence of Man as the attribute of ‘each single individual’ who is its real subject. Marx also stated that men make history, but only under historical conditions made by others into which they were born and using material and culture provided by previous generations. Considering this, Marx destroys the Cartesian subject as the subject is deprived from individual agency, which was the basis of Descartes’s “I think, therefore I am” (HALL, 2005, p. 606 - 607).

Hall considers Freud’s “discovery” of the unconscious as the second great “de-centering” of the subject in the twentieth-century western thought: “Freud’s theory that our identities, our sexuality, and the structure of our desires are formed on the basis of the psychic and symbolic processes of the unconscious, which function according to a “logic” very different from that of Reason.” Considering this, Stuart Hall declares Freud’s ideas as the destruction of Descartes’s knowing and rational subject with a fixed and unified identity (HALL, 2005, p. 607).

As the third de-centering moment of the self, Hall mentions Ferdinand Saussure’s theory, according to which we are not the “authors” of the statements we make or the meanings we express in language, since we use language conveyed by meanings that place us within the rules of language and the systems of meaning of our culture. “Meaning is inherently unstable: it aims for closure (identity), but is constantly disrupted (by difference). It

is constantly sliding away from us. There are always meanings over which we have no control, which will arise and subvert our attempts to create fixed and stable worlds" (HALL, 2005, p. 609).

Stuart Hall presents the work of Michael Foucault's as the fourth moment of the de-centering of identity and the subject. Foucault produced a sort of "genealogy of the modern subject". He isolated a new type of power which he calls "disciplinary power", a power concerned with regulation, surveillance, and government of, "first the human species or whole populations, and secondly, the individual and the body". A power regulated by the new institutions which developed throughout the nineteenth century and "police" and discipline populations (HALL, 2005, p.609).

The fifth de-centering moment mentioned by Hall would be the impact of feminism as theoretical criticism and as a social movement. Feminism questioned the classic distinctions between "inside" and "outside", "private" and "public" and had as its slogan "the personal is political". Besides it opened up to political contestation whole new arenas of social life as family, sexuality, housework, the domestic division of labor, etc. The issue of how we are formed and produced as gendered subjects was exposed by this movement, and what began as a movement directed at challenging the social position of women expanded to include the formation of sexual and gendered identities. "Feminism challenged the notion that men and women were part of the same identity – "Mankind" – replacing it with the question of sexual difference" (HALL, 2005, p.610 – 611).

Feminism is a key point to postcolonial/ post-colonial discourse since both patriarchy and imperialism can be seen exerting similar forms of domination over those they render subordinate. The experiences of women in patriarchy and those of colonized subjects can be paralleled in a number of aspects feminism and post-colonial/postcolonial politics oppose the dominance of their oppressors.

> Feminism, like post-colonialism, has often been concerned with the ways and extent to which representation and language are crucial to identity formation and to the construction of **subjectivity**. For both groups, language has been a vehicle for subverting patriarchal and imperial power, and both discourses have invoked essentialist arguments in positing more authentic forms of languages against those imposed on them. Both discourses share a sense of disarticulation from an inherited language and have thus attempted

> to recover a linguistic authenticity via a pre-colonial language or a primal feminine tongue. However, both feminists and colonized peoples, like other subordinate groups, have also used appropriation to subvert and adapt dominant languages and signifying practices (ASCROFT, 1999, p.102).

I.3 - The recognition of African – descendants as writers

In the history of the world's great literatures, few traditions have such origins as those created by African slaves and ex-slaves. A literature that testified against its captors and bore witness to the urge to be free and literate. A literature that tried to embrace the European Enlightenment's dream of reason and the American Enlightenment's dream of civil liberty. Slavery itself and the demands for its abolition had turned out to be an ironical inspiration for the creation of a new literature, a new literature accusing oppression and created by the oppressed. On the other hand, as the text of Western letters refused to speak to the African descendants, there was a refusal to the text created by those African descendants:

> In a very real sense, the Anglo-African literary tradition was created two centuries ago in order to demonstrate that persons of African descent possessed the requisite degrees of reason and wit to create literature, that they were, indeed, full and equal members of the community of rational, sentient beings, that they could, indeed, write (GATES, 1997, p.28).

The resistance even to the idea that an African, an African descendant or a slave could create literature was a fact and based on assumptions that black people were not part of humankind and should be considered animals. In fact, what started to be feared was the power of literacy. Measures were taken in relation to this question:

> Following the Stono Rebellion of 1739 in South Carolina, the largest uprising of slaves in the colonies before the American Revolution, legislators

> there enacted a draconian body of public laws, making two forms of literacy punishable by law: the mastery of letters, and the mastery of the drum" (GATES, 1997, p.29).

In the Stono Rebellion, both forms of literacy (of English letters and of the black vernacular) had been fundamental to the slave's capacity to rebel. Eighteenth-century European writers privileged writing in their writings about Africans as the principal measure of the African's humanity, their capacity for progress and their place in the great chain of being. To test this capacity for progress many European and American families educated young black slaves along with their own children. "El negro Juan Latino" published three books of poetry in Latin between 1573 and 1585 and was an example of this experiment. Phillis Wheatley, the first black person to publish a book of poetry in English, was also a product of this experiment. Her capacity to write, herself, poems of such accomplishment, was a matter of controversy in Boston in 1773. She had to go to the courthouse of Boston to submit herself to an oral examination to try to prove to eighteen of Boston's most notable citizens that she was capable of writing her own poems. Successfully, she was considered able to write her poems and recognized by the eighteen men as their author. Soon, reviews of Wheatley's book argued that the publication of her poems meant that the African was a human being, not an animal or a devil, and should not be enslaved. In fact, Phillis Wheatley was manumitted soon after her poems were published. Fifty years latter, by the mid 1820s, George Moses Horton had gained a respectful reputation at Chapel Hill as the "slave poet". Writing was Horton's medium to buy his freedom. This medium was also used by other slaves (GATES, 1997, p.30-33).

Almost one century latter, in the early 1920s a movement then known as "the New Negro Renaissance", which we now call "the Harlem Renaissance", started to flourish and survived until the onset of the Depression. During the first half of the XX Century many African descendants were traveling and living beyond the borders of The United States of America. The African-American culture was conquering international amplitude. During the 1920s, artists usually traveled to Europe and to England. Many of them had connections to the Harlem Renascence and traveled to other countries in order to work, study or relax.

Langston Hughes and Claude McKay were in France and in Africa on the first half of the 1920s, Josephine Baker, who was a showgirl in New York, became a star in Paris and, in 1924, after the publication of her first novel, Jessie Fauset traveled to France and to Africa to

study and rest. The internationalization of the African-Americans, especially after the First World War, coincided with the ascension of Nella Larsen as a novelist during the Harlem Renascence (DAVIS, 2002, p.7).

According to Steven Watson, the Harlem Renaissance was first and foremost a literary and intellectual movement composed by a generation of black writers born by the end of the XIXth century and the beginning of the XXth century. Among its best known figures were Langston Huges, Zora Neale Hurston, Countee Cullen, Claude McKay, Nella Larsen, Walter White and Jean Toomer. These young writers constituted the first self-conscious black literary constellation in American history. The most effective strategy of "race" building depended on art and literature and trusted a dual mission upon these writers: they were supposed to create art and, at the same time, to strengthen the image of their "race". Five themes are identified as the core of the movement: Africa as a source of pride, black American heroes, racial political propaganda, the black folk tradition, and candid self-revelation. "Evoking these themes, the Renaissance authors produced a body of literature which was not only exemplary in itself but also paved the way for succeeding generations of black writers who invoked the Harlem renaissance as the roots of their cultural tradition". Harlem Renaissance is still recalled in public imagination as a golden era of jazz, poetry, liquor, sex, and clubs (WATSON, 1995, p.9 - 10).

As money changes everything and no social individual is able to live without dealing with the consequences of the sociological forces in which he is included, it is no coincidence that the Harlem Renaissance began in the wake of World War I, prospered during Prohibition, and died with the beginning of the Depression. "Harlem flowered in the 1920s, and saw its descent into slumhood in the 1930s" (WATSON, 1995, p.11).

A theme that started to be developed by many writers of the Harlem renaissance would conquer major amplitude in the following decades to the movement and would survive until today: the quest for selfhood. The African descendant writers who took part in the Civil Rights Movement of the 60s brought to their work political issues and developed the discussions about their selfhood (SALGUEIRO, 2004, p.55).

African descendant literature has been enjoying a renaissance in quality and quantity in the last two or three decades by the writings of African descendant writers such as Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, Maya Angelou, Gloria Naylor and Jamaica Kincaid, among many

others. These authors have received many awards for their works and several times have appeared simultaneously on the best-seller list of the *New York Times*. "While the audience for this magnificent flowering of black literature crosses all racial boundaries, black readers have never been more numerous: in June 1996 the *Times* reported that African Americans purchase 160 million books a year". Black literature has also conquered an unthinkable path years ago; it has achieved the Academy and now is part of the *curriculum* of many academic courses and programs in the world (GATES, 1997, p.33).

I.4 -Women and their importance as African-American writers

How to write if the pen could be female but the paper was always male? How could a woman write and represent herself by her writings if the entire society had already determined how she should behave, feel and be; how her body and mind should obey strict and oppressive patriarchal codes? The postcolonial female writers developed many strategies to subvert this social order in order to undermine the patriarchy that oppressed and oppresses women. These strategies are very interesting and creative.

According to Carole E. Boyce Davies, while some women have been silent or silenced, many black women have spoken incessantly without fully being heard and have regularly reached a point where they say nothing verbally and instead operate from a silence which often speaks eloquently. The dual process of 'speaking anyhow' and criticizing 'strategic deafness' deals with some of the ways in which silencings have become entrenched. The denial of voice to black women produces emotional memory and stress that can implode or come out in explosive ways. This produces a construction: the 'angry black woman'. "Still it must be noted that it is not always anger that one sees in black women who have learned to speak, but passion. And in a culture where passion is negated, except in sexuality, a person who speaks passionately to issues is assigned to anger by the passionless" (DAVIES, 2001, p.3).

Actions or non-actions which follow the denial of a ‘hearing’ in such a way that they consign black women’s writing and thinking to the not spoken, not said, non-existent, the distorted, misunderstood or erased. Even in an era of great production of black women’s writing, we still find at the institutional level, only superficial attention paid to this field: sporadic courses in some department’s curriculum; a book here and there in some course’s syllabus. Historically there have been few avenues for the full hearing of black women’s testimonies. There have been systematic attempts to discredit black women as credible representatives of themselves. These attempts come from the larger institutional structures where black women’s voices are often absent to the local levels of women’s communities where black women’s voices are often dismissed as irrelevant. In fact, the sites of public speech have been historically barred to women. Women were consigned to the domestic or private sphere where a certain kind of talk was tolerated if it was about domestic issues. There were certain issues that were considered unspeakable: rape, date rape, marital rape, violence, abortion, etc. These are some of the subjects that some women who have spoken publicly have articulated. “The shifting of privatized discourses to the public arena creates empowerment of women. But therein may also lie the accompanying repression and application of ‘strategic deafness’” (DAVIES, 2001, p.4).

Davies states that historically black women have been seen as having nothing important to say and during slavery and its aftermath had no protection from harassment, abuse, rape. Their bodies were for the taking and in all black female slave narratives, the history of sexual harassment of black women by both white and black men as well as by white women has been written. Thus, when a black woman gets up in a crowd to speak, or presents herself publicly, she has to battle all the cultural and historical meanings about her and the content of her speaking is already framed as non-speech or not important. It is out of the recognition and understanding of this particular positionality that black women can express resistance. For black women occupy a range of class positions in a variety of societies and have different access to hearing. It is necessary to disrupt the monolithic categories like ‘community’, ‘black’, ‘women’ and examine them in terms of a variety of writers and speakers and their relationship to these. Black women who recognize their access can use this to best advantage or to speak against brutality by condemning its perpetrators (DAVIES, 2001, p.5).

While a few academics are witnessing and producing substantial research on black women, this has not yet had any major impact on the institutions, the state and its apparatus, the masses of people. In fact, the information produced by the researches on black women and black culture usually circulates only inside the academy. This is one possible explanation to the fact that it is possible to hear from black women themselves, as from dominant culture, the most negative and uninformed representations of ideas concerning black women's history and women's empowerment.

According to Molara Ogungipe-Leslie, African women, wherever they are, are not the most marginalized women on earth; contrary to western social misuse of Darwin's theories assuming that the African rests at the bottom of every scale. In some aspects, African women had economic and social structures which gave them more social space and influence than their European sisters. Nevertheless, all women are discriminated against and subordinated first as women and second as members of inferior classes. Women of African heritage know they must discover and affirm healthy and authentic versions of their various identities. They must discover class roles which will contribute to the positive development of women locally and globally, and give voice to the historically harassed black women of African descent and empower them to subvert their self-crippling silences (LESLIE, 2001, p.15-16).

Leslie states that the definition of empowerment to black women and their diaspora is:

> Social recognition and dignity just as, most of all, it means space to speak, act, and live with joy and responsibility; as it has always meant for our ever-so responsible foremothers wherever they were in history. Our work, writings and exhortations as women in various forms and media show that we want to end our silences and speak our truths as we know them. We wish to have power which recognizes responsibility in dignified freedom; power which positively promotes Life in all its forms; power to remove from our path any thing, person, or structure which threatens to limit our potential for full human growth as the other half of life's gendered reality; power to collapse all screen that threatens to obscure our women's eyes from the beauties of the world (LESLIE, 2001, p.17).

Barbara Smith declares that for books to be understood they must be examined in such a way that basic intentions of the writers are at least considered. Under the influence of racism, black literature has usually been viewed as a discrete subcategory of American

literature, and there have been black critics of black literature who did much to keep it alive long before it caught the attention of whites (SMITH, 2000, p.133).

Black feminist theory, according to Valerie Smith, refers not only to theory written by black feminists, but also to a way of reading inscriptions of race (not exclusively blackness), gender (not exclusively womanhood), and class in modes of cultural expression. She examines black feminism in the context of these related theoretical positions in order to raise questions about the way the "other" is represented in oppositional discourse and acknowledges that feminist literary theory and Afro-American literary theory have developed along parallel lines. Both arose out of reactive, polemical modes of criticism, recognized that the term *literature* as it was understood in the academy referred to a body of texts written by and in the interest of a white male elite and undertook archaeological work of locating and / or reinterpreting overlooked and misread women and black writers. Black feminist criticism originated from similar impulse. In reaction to critical acts of omission and condescension, the earliest practitioners identified ways in which white males, Anglo-American feminists, and male Afro-American scholars and reviewers had ignored and condescended to the work of black women and undertook editorial projects to recover their writings (SMITH, 2000, p.370).

Many Anglo-American and Afro-American feminists have found contemporary theory compatible with the goals of their broader critical enterprise. The strategies and assumptions of deconstructive criticism destabilize the narrative relations that preserve configurations according to genre, gender, culture, and other aspects. Anglo-American and Afro-American feminists are being asked to consider the extent to which their deconstructive practices, which have been adopted by the academy, undermine the assumptions of patriarchy and of the white domain, for instance, since many feminists use the theories elaborated by white and black men, and sometimes are entrapped by their points of view.

Kadiatu Kanneh declares that the term 'Black' is unstable and applied to various related political positions. It is geographically, culturally and politically indeterminate, relying on context and time. As a place of antagonisms and conflicts, Black feminism distinguishes itself from White feminisms, and is involved in cultural ideologies in a complex way. Contexts as academic convention, cultural domination and cultural currency become determinate factors. For instance, in the United States 'Black" is a term used to refer to the African-American population, whereas Asian-Americans, Latinas and Native Americans are

categorized as ‘people of color’, and in Britain, ‘Black’ describes Asians, Africans, Afro-Caribbeans and a wider range of ‘non-White’ people (KANNETH, 1998, p.86).

In the hyphenated communities, as the African-American and Latin-American communities, the female characters fight against the stereotypes defined through gender, race, ethnicity, social class and sexual preferences. In these communities they try to build an identity of their own and free of prejudices that restrain their development. In all texts produced by these writers, the appropriation of a legacy uttered in the oral tradition, rituals, myths and legends of their respective cultures, allow them to find, through the rewriting of these narratives, ways of strengthening their female roles and to free themselves from the stereotypes.

The feminine body and sexuality are privileged in the literary production of the contemporary female writer because they were the principal objects through which a whole mechanism of male and patriarchal domination was built and maintained. Largely, the work of the feminist criticism is still connected to the deconstruction of a series of discourses - medical, legal, religious, psychoanalytic – that built the “truths” in relation to what would be considered feminine, of how the female body and emotions should work, and, finally, what should be the true essence of femininity. For many years these discourses reigned alone, without being questioned and only recently feminist critics started to point out and denounce the ideological process of construction of this woman, in relation to her sex, biologically speaking, and in relation to her gender, socially and culturally speaking.

According to Simone de Beauvoir, the word woman is usually associated to words like “womb”, “ovary” and “female” by “fanciers of simple formulas”. For the man the word female is almost an insult and he is proud of his condition as a male and of his animal nature. The term female, according to Beauvoir, is derogatory, not because it emphasizes woman's animality, but because it imprisons her in her sex. She considers that if this sex seems to men to be despicable and hostile even in harmless irrational animals, it is evidently because of the uneasy hostility stirred up in them by women. Beauvoir calls our attention to the fact that men try to find in Biology a justification to consider women as having an animal nature and, thus, inferior (BEAUVOIR, 1997, p.35).

As men try to define women's inferiority as biologic data, Beauvoir uses biology to contest this inferiority. First, she calls our attention to the fact that, although males and

females are two types of individuals differentiated by the function of reproduction, even this division of species in two sexes is not always clear-cut. In fact, to some species as the amoebae and sporozoans multiplication is distinct from sexuality. Each cell divides and subdivides independently, without needing a partner. In many species, as worms, reproduction occurs asexually and in other species, as bees, we have cases of parthenogenesis, were the egg of a female develops into a new subject without being necessary the fertilization by a male. “More and more numerous and daring experiments in parthenogenesis are being performed, and in many species the male appears to be fundamentally unnecessary” (BEAUVOIR, 1997, p.36).

Concerning the functions of the two sexes, society has created a great variety of beliefs. At first they had no scientific basis and were created upon social myths. These myths were the basis upon which patriarchy and its society would build themselves and assure their power over women. In terms of procreation it was necessary to grant the mother her role because it was not possible, for evident reasons, to completely exclude her from this process. How could they say that the mother had no role in procreation when everybody could notice that the baby developed itself inside her? To solve this problem a myth was created: the mother carried and nourished the living seed, created by the father alone. The mother was only a vessel, having a passive role:

> Aristotle fancied that the foetus arose from the union of sperm and menstrual blood, woman furnishing only passive matter while the male principle contributed force, activity, movement, life. Hippocrates held to a similar doctrine, recognizing two kinds of seed, the weak or female and the strong or male. The theory of Aristotle survived through the Middle Ages and into modern times (BEAUVOIR, 1997, p.40).

Nowadays the equivalence of the gametes is known and it placed men and women as equivalent in reproduction. In the past, people used to think that the sperm was the life and the eggs were only nourishing devices, and, curiously, women were blamed for not producing a baby-boy. Today, we know that, concerning human beings, it is the sperm that defines if the baby is going to be a boy or a girl. Besides that, against sexist preferences, girls have proved to be as intelligent, independent and strong (psychologically and physically) as boys.

> What we should note in particular at this point is that neither gamete can be regarded as superior to the other; when they unite, both lose their individuality in the fertilized egg. There are two common suppositions which – at least on this basic biological level – are clearly false. The first – that of passivity of the female – is disproved by the fact that new life springs from the union of the two gametes; the living spark is not the exclusive property of either ... The second false supposition contradicts the first – which does not seem to prevent their coexistence. It is to the effect that the permanence of species is assured by the female, the male principle being of an explosive transitory nature. As a matter of fact, the embryo carries on the germ plasm of the father as well as that of the mother and transmits them together to its descendants under now male, now female form. It is, so to speak, an androgynous germ plasm, which outlives the male or female individuals that are its incarnations, whenever they produce offspring (BEAUVOIR, 1997, p.43).

Something that must be observed is the fact that the individual can be profoundly affected by the environment in which he or she develops. When a boy or a girl is born he or she doesn't know the role society expects him or her to play. This could be another proof that theories that state men's braveness and women's fragility and passivity are biased and have no scientific basis at all. Bodies are texts where ideology and social practices are written. “The body being the instrument of our grasp upon the world, the world is bound to seem a very different thing when apprehended in one manner or another” (BEAUVOIR, 1997, p.65).

The body is not a destiny. It is a construction of discourse, a discourse permeated and manipulated by power and the assurance of it. It is discourse and not biology that determines that women should be fragile, quiet, polite, dependent, staying at home cooking and raising children. The same discourse states that men should be brave, independent, strong and not attached to the house or not having responsibilities over the raising of children. “To be present in the world implies strictly that there exists a body which is at once a material thing in the world and a point o view towards this world; but nothing requires that this body have this or that particular structure”(BEAUVOIR,1997, p.39).

According to Susan Bordo, common visions of the body in Western culture consider it as animal, appetite, deceiver, prison of the soul and confounder of its projects. But it does not mean that the body always had a negative connotation. The body has been historically variable. Different scholars have attributed many imageries to it.

> Plato imagines the body as an epistemological deceiver, its unreliable senses and volatile passions continually tricking us into mistaking the transient and illusory for the permanent and the real. For Schwartz, the body and its passions are obstacles to expression of the “inner” life; his characteristically modern frustration over the isolation of the self and longing for “authenticity” would seem very foreign to Plato (BORDO, 1995, p.3).

Concerning Christian thought, the body is evil, the root of sin and “for the mechanistic science and philosophy of the seventeenth century, on the other hand, the body as animal is still a site of instinct but not primarily a site of sin. Rather, the instinctual nature of the body means that it is a purely mechanical, biologically programmed system that can be fully quantified and (in theory) controlled” (BORDO, 1995, p.4). At different moments in history, the body assumes new images and associations because of society’s pressure or intentions. What remains a constant characteristic throughout history is the construction of the body, or of a discourse over and about the body as it was something apart from the self, and “the fact that the very location of ´the sexual` in the body is itself historically mutable. And ´the body` is never above – or below – history” (RILEY, 1999, p.222).

Women's bodies have always been portrayed as something negative, evil, away from God, and to this body all problems of humanity have been attributed. For instance, in the Bible a seductive and evil nature is attributed to women as Eve convinces Adam to eat the forbidden fruit, and, as a consequence, death and all the miseries start to exist in the world and the couple is banished from Paradise. Based on examples like this, taken from the Bible, society oppresses women and creates many prejudices against them. Women do not need to speak anything to be considered provocative or temptresses. In many cases, due to the discourse attributed to their body, women have been attacked by rapists, or even verbally by men in general, because they were wearing a mini skirt. The dictator patriarchal society preaches that if a woman is wearing certain types of clothes it does not mean that she likes it or feels comfortable wearing it; it means that she wants to tease men. In other words, if a woman is not inside her house wearing socially considered very decent clothes, she is hunting men, attracting and seducing them.

Unfortunately this view of women's bodies is not preached only by men. Some women do behave in a sexist way, criticizing and complaining about other women and agreeing with some men's violence against women because of their clothes, for instance.

> Women and girls frequently internalize this ideology, holding themselves to blame for unwanted advances and sexual assaults. This guilt festers into unease with our femaleness, shame over our bodies, and self loathing. For example, anorexia nervosa, which often manifests itself after an episode of sexual abuse or humiliation, can be seen as at least in part a defense against the “femaleness” of the body and a punishment of its desires (BORDO, 1995, p.8).

The shapes, the formats, of the bodies must also be taken into account in this reflection over the body. The ways in which diet, environment and the typical activities of a body vary through history. Usually the feminine body was supposed to exist in the domestic sphere and the male body in the public sphere. When one of them inverts this order, it can be constructed in a different way:

> The body of a woman confined to the role of wife/ mother/ domestic worker, for example, is invested with particular desires, capacities and forms that have little in common with the body of a female Olympic athlete. In this case biological commonality fails to account for the specificity of these two bodies. Indeed, the female Olympic athlete may have more in common with a male Olympic athlete than with a wife/ mother. This commonality is not simply at the level of interests or desires but at the level of the actual form and capacities of the body (GATENS, 1999, p.228).

Culture is also a ruler of the body. It can make bodies act as puppets in a puppet show. It can define how, what and when a person should speak, sit, think, dress, eat ... It confines women to their houses, to the beautification of their bodies, to reproduction and to the taking care of their family. In fact, culture helps to make women their worst enemies. Alongside with patriarchal dictatorship, culture in general is internalized by women and is propagated to their sons and daughters in a way that it strengthens even more the cycle of oppression over them. But not all women internalize these beliefs and practices. Many critics call our attention to the

fact that through history there were always instances of resistance against the oppression over women. They were not passive, without agency. What were the witches, for instance? Many of them were burned at the stake because of their non-corresponding actions or behaviors to the patriarchal societies in which they lived.

According to Lucy Irigaray, we need to disconcert the staging of representation that follows exclusively “masculine” parameters, but that does not mean replacing the phallocratic order by another. It is necessary to disrupt and modify it, starting from an outside that is exempt, in part, from phallocratic law (IRIGARAY, 1995, p.68). “´The body` is not, for all its corporeality, an originating point nor yet a terminus; it is a result or an effect” (RILEY, 1999, p.221). If we follow this model, gender may be understood not as the effect of ideology or cultural values but as the way in which power controls and constructs bodies in specific ways (GATENS, 1999, p.230).

According to Maria Aparecida Salgueiro, with the already existent production we can affirm that Afro-American literature is one of the most productive areas of the Literary Studies in the United States, awakening interest not only in that country but also in different parts of the world, due not only to its literary value, but also to its social, cultural and political strength. Among the important facts that contributed to its acknowledgement, contemporary literary critics point out the internal feminist movement. The Afro-American writers, many of them activists in the Civil Rights movement of the 60s, brought vigor, strategy and political vision with their literary works, transforming this literature into a powerful force (SALGUEIRO, 2005, p.8-9).

Novels as Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* and Jamaica Kincaid’s *Lucy*, give voice and opportunity to characters that are usually forgotten by the canonical texts. The postcolonial female writers are remodeling literature by subverting and problematizing the traditional literary canon and by telling stories of marginal groups or characters. Nowadays, with all the struggles and wars happening among different ethnicities and groups, this female literary production deserves even more to be widely known and analyzed.

II – NELLA LARSEN'S FICTION

My old man died in a fine big house.

My ma died in a shack.

I wonder where I'm gonna die,

Being neither white nor black?

Langston Hughes2

II.1 – Nella Larsen: her life and her time

According to critic Arthur P. Davis, of all the New Negro authors, Nella Larsen is the most elusive in the matters of biographical details, especially dates. "Evidently there were certain things in her background which she felt were private, and she kept that way. A few facts, however, have come to us, several taken from the jacket of her first novel" (DAVIS, 1974, p.98). But even these facts could have been manipulated by Larsen, since she was the one who wrote them under the urge of her publisher. Thadious M. Davis declares that many scholars had been unable to uncover specific dates for Larsen's birth or death; they concluded, moreover, that she had literally disappeared from public view in the 1930s. Her dazzling rise to prominence at the end of the 1920s had been followed by almost as rapid a decline during which she did not publish another novel. Instead, she became the subject of rumors about her passing for white. Thus, Larsen became in the decades following the Harlem Renaissance a

figure in the shadows. Her life and her novels were linked “with the tragic mulatto passing for white”, a rubric that Sterling Brown used as organizing a category for discussing a group of novels in his 1937 study *The Negro in American Fiction,* but that afterwards became the primary way of approaching Larsen and her work in the criticism of Hugh M. Gloster (*Negro voices in American fiction, 1948),* Benjamin E. Mays (*The Negro’s God as reflected in His Literature*, 1949), and Robert Bone (*The Negro Novel in America, 1958*). Little more could be clearly discovered about her vital statistics, the rest of her canon, her literary intentions, or her racial loyalty (DAVIS, 1994, p. XIV -XV).

In the 1960s, however, Afrocentric literary studies, growing out of the civil rights struggle and the attendant Black Arts and Black Aesthetics movements, explored African–American cultural traditions with renewed awareness of the importance of tradition. As the modern antecedent of the Black Arts movement, the Harlem Renaissance attracted much attention, Artists and thinkers of the 1920s and 1930s were investigated not simply because of their individual accomplishments, but because of their contributions to African–American culture and to a black cultural consciousness.

At the beginning of the 1970s and of the 1980s, two historians brought the world of the Harlem Renaissance and its major and minor actors to life. Nathan Irvin Huggins’ *Harlem Renaissance* (1971) treated Larsen with a brand new focus on her exploration of the dilemma of the “cultured – primitive” and discovered in her rejection of “genteel formula” a “sharp dichotomy of realist and romantic”(HUGGINS,1971, p.157-161). David Levering Lewis in *When Harlem was in Vogue (1981*) also placed her within the activities of the Renaissance, but concluded that she remained “a figure of some mystery, luminous, unconventional, and in the end, perhaps one of those who found vagaries of a white identity preferable to the pain of Africa” (LEWIS, 1981, p. 231).

By the late 1990s, according to George Hutchinson, Nella Larsen’s enigmatic novels, dismissed at the time of her death in the mid-1960s as insignificant, foolish and poorly written, had become canonical and were taught in classrooms around the world. Editions multiplied at the turn of the twenty-first century; advanced scholars in several fields came to see her as one of the truly important modernists, and students responded to her work

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2 HUGHES, L. Cross. In: *The Weary Blues*. New York: Knopf, 1926.

enthusiastically in the classroom. The work of reconstructing her long-hidden life had also begun (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.2).

Thadious M. Davis believes that Larsen was transformed from the historical author of period pieces in the "passing" genre to a modern writer of complex, women-centered fiction. During five years he traced Nella Larsen through a quagmire of written records and oral testimonies that followed the dramatic imagery in her novel *Quicksand*:

> Through city directories and telephone books in New York and Chicago, from departments of vital statistics in Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Tennessee, out of letters, postcards, and photographs in research libraries, from school transcripts, employment records, fellowship and award applications, passport documents and census records, through old friends and older neighborhoods, over hundreds of miles, correspondence, and conversations, I tracked an elusive Nella Larsen (DAVIS, 1994, XVI) .

Davies found no record of Larsen in many of the documents mentioned above, but The Alfred A. and Blanche Knopf Collection at the University of Texas at Austin had in the Knopf publicity files the standard author's information sheet that, in 1926, Larsen herself had filled incompletely in favor of a written statement asked by her publisher. That text latter appeared almost in full on the dust jacket of *Quicksand*. These records, although scarce and incomplete, confirmed Nella Larsen's construction of her gendered and racial self during a period when power relations within society usually did not allow for women or black self-construction:

> Ironically, during that same period, the historical Nella Larsen attained renewed visibility as a woman novelist of consequence. African-American historians, novelists, and critics, such as Lewis, Alice Walker, and Cheryl Wall, all made references to Larsen, and in 1986, Deborah McDowell edited *Quicksand* and *Passing* for Rutgers University's American Women Writers Series. By the end of the 1980s, Hazel Carby had situated a reading of *Quicksand* as the conclusion of *Reconstructing Womanhood: The Emergence of the Afro-American Woman Novelist* (1987) and alerted a new generation of critics to Larsen's place in literary history. Not surprisingly, then, the January, 1990, issue of *PMLA* presented Ann E. Hostetler's "Aesthetics of Race and Gender in Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*" in the first

> special issue on African-American writing by that prominent journal (DAVIS, 1994, p. XVII).

Even so, much of Larsen's life remained a mystery because she left no specific identification of her extended family that might be traced, and her single sibling, now dead, denied knowledge of her existence:

> Just after Easter 1964, when told that she was in position to inherit $35,000 from Nella Larsen Imes, Anna Elizabeth Larsen Gardner exclaimed, "Why, I didn't know I had a half sister!" but she did know, and there was no need for the ruse. Even the friend she said this to, Mildred Philips, knew about Anna's dark half-sister "Nellie". Mary Larsen had spoken of her to Mildred's mother years before. But Mildred had never asked Anna or Mary about the "other" Larsen daughter, and never heard her mentioned in the Larsen or Gardner homes (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.23).

Elmer Imes, her ex-husband, died in 1941, and the couple had no children. Besides, she intentionally broke off communication in the 1920s with friends who knew her as a writer, and afterward she chose to spend much of her life reclusively as a nurse who revealed little of her private life or past experiences:

> I discovered eventually that Nella Larsen herself was responsible for the mystery surrounding her life and career. She had created the limits of her known biography, just as she had later positioned the veil shrouding it from view. "Nella Larsen is a mulatto, the daughter of a Danish lady and a Negro from Virgin Islands, formerly the Danish West Indies," she wrote for her 1926 author's publicity statement (DAVIS, 1994, p. XVIII).

Thadious M. Davis affirms that Larsen's internal psychological world was directly influenced by the broader exterior culture, its beliefs, attitudes, values, and prejudices, and by the social dynamics transforming and transformed by individual human agency. Davis recognizes that not all the critical questions about the "real Nella Larsen" within either material culture or historical moment can be answered definitively because Nella Larsen was

not only an imaginary name, a public and private pseudonym, but also a self-created persona, willed and perpetuated from youth through old age by a woman, for a short time at least, attained the meaning of her own enterprising self-invention (DAVIS, 1994, p. XIX).

Nella Larsen Imes was found dead in her Manhattan apartment on March 30, 1964. The cause of her death was a heart failure due to hypertensive and atherosclerotic cardiovascular disease. Several acquaintances feared that she might have died a week before the discovery of the body. A former co-worker informed the coroner's office that Mrs. Imes was a widow and a nurse who had lived alone on lower Second Avenue for twenty years, information that shows how people who knew her at that time did not know anything about her past. Even in the 1940s, many believed that after writing about crossing the color line, she had opted to do so herself. Some people incorrectly placed her in Brooklyn, passing for white. Others assumed she had moved to a fast track in Bohemian Greenwich Village. In time she began to fade from people's memory (DAVIS, 1994, p.1).

By the 1960s, few witnesses to the Harlem Renaissance remembered Larsen, but few of them had forgotten that she was a novelist. In the 1920s Larsen had molded herself into a novelist at the historic moment when African-Americans were poised for unprecedented literary accomplishment. Her struggle toward writing and completing novels rather than short stories were comparable to refining her identity and reclaiming it from the dictates of others. In 1929 when *Forum* and *Liberty* magazines asked Larsen to submit short stories, "I can't write short stories" was her response. After *Quicksand* in 1928, "New Negro novelist" became the major aspect of her public identity and she flowered as an artist of the urban New York world and succeeded on the social activity accompanying a literary career. Her works were representations of women seeking full expression of their racial, social, and sexual identities, and served as well to demystify the urban, middle-class black woman (DAVIES, 1994, p.2-3).

Thadious M. Davis states that half Scandinavian, Half West Indian citizen of the United States, with traces of German and African ancestry, Larsen embodied the image of the hybrid. She was born on April 13, 1891, and her name was Nellie Walker. Walker was the daughter of a Danish immigrant woman and a man whose nationality was unknown, but whose racial designation on the birth certificate was "colored". The little Nellie Walker was also designated as "colored". The fact of having a non-white appearance would complicate her relationship not only with the black community, but also with her own family, who would

increasingly become a part of the American economically mobile population (DAVIS, 2002, p.7 - 8).

In her fiction her resentment against her family is present and is an important aspect that influences Larsen's characters. In many aspects, her family is also a mystery. The baby girl Nellie Walker, "colored", was the first child of Mary Hanson Walker and Peter Walker. Her mother gave birth unattended by a physician or a midwife, and a local druggist, E. A. Lynn, filled out the statement of birth nearly a month after the baby's birth. Lynn failed to list the father's nationality, place of birth, or age, but he knew that Peter Walker, a cook by occupation, was "colored", and designated the child "colored" at birth. Despite Larsen's contradictory stories about her background and family, she listed Chicago, Illinois, as her birthplace in applications for the Harmon Awards (1928, 1929), for the Guggenheim fellowship (1929), for United States passports (1930, 1932), and gave the same state as her birth place for her marriage license (DAVIS, 1994, p.21-22).

Davis presents some possibilities about Larsen's parents. One of these possibilities is that her parents separated shortly after her birth or that her father died and her mother married the white Peter Larson, from whom Nella took her surname. Another possibility is the speculation that Peter Walker and Peter Larson might, in fact, be the same person. Larsen grew up in Chicago and attended the public schools there. This was the period where she constructed many variations of her name until it became "Nella Larsen". In 1907, Peter Larsen enrolled her in Fisk University's Normal School, an event that marked her permanent alienation from her birth family. Davis also explores the possibility of efforts from her family members to conceal Larsen from public attention, since she might have been the only non-white member of the family. That could be a reason why her sister declared not knowing anything about her (DAVIS, 1994, p.26-30).

Hutchinson rejects the idea of Larsen's father and stepfather being the same person. According to him, there was a Peter Walker and a Peter Larsen, and Nella would have received her stepfather's last name. He states that one man was five years older than the other and that Nella Larsen always said that her father had died before she was old enough to know much about him except that he was a black man from the Danish West Indies – now the U. S. Virgin Islands. He and her mother could speak Danish and their colors would not have seemed the obstacle most "native" Americans considered it. In the Danish West Indies, St. Thomas, St, John, and Dt. Croix, which would not be sold to the United States until 1917,

racial classifications differed from those in the United States. It was illegal in the Danish West Indies to designate a person's race on official forms such as census or church records. In the informality of everyday life, the "Negro" designation applied only to lower classes, the so-called "full-blooded negroes". Even those Americans would consider dark-complexioned black men could be designated "white" on the basis of social position and reputation, and there were many other intermediate designations between "negro" and "white". Unlike Nella Larsen, Peter Walker, her father, may never have considered himself a Negro. Census forms of the early twentieth century show that most racially mixed families in Chicago involved blacks and recent white immigrants from Northern Europe and Scandinavia. "Native-born whites were all too aware of the costs of "crossing the line"" (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.19).

Considering Peter Larsen, Hutchinson believes that his decision to marry Mary Hansen / Walker (because no marriage license could be found) was a godsend for her, who was husbandless, with a mulatto child, living in a poor neighborhood and having to earn money to survive. The marriage of Mary Hansen / Walker to Peter Larsen saved Nellie Walker from a miserable destiny, but it was also an important event in her emotional life. As she grew older, she would come to recognize that she was a burden to her mother and the reason of constant tension in her home. "At a time of widespread belief that white women could give birth to brown or "coal-black" babies if they were married to "invisible" / passing Negroes, Nellie's obvious "African" features would have raised suspicions about the racial identity of Peter and / or Mary, not to mention her sister". The explanation that Mary Larsen had previously been married to a "colored" man, and that Nellie was his daughter, would hardly diminish concerns of those with courage to ask. Mary Larsen tried to find paths for her "colored" daughter into a fulfilling life, one of a higher class status. Gradually, it became clear that Nellie would have to live a life apart (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.25).

On the other hand, Hutchinson calls our attention to many errors made by scholars when trying to unveil Larsen's life. He believes that the causes of these mistakes about her biography might have been derived from the great difficulty of finding source material, a tendency to avoid looking in certain places, misreading of sources that could be difficult to decode or products of expectations of the scholars:

> For example, convinced that Mary Larsen would deny giving birth to Nella in 1910, and that Larsen had lied about her childhood in Denmark, Davis understandably surmised that Larsen's family forced her to leave Fisk after only a year, begin unwilling to support her. Or perhaps, since scholars could

> find no record of Larsen for the next three years and suspected the story of living in Denmark was a fabrication, she had gotten pregnant or married a black man and settled in the South for several years. I went to Fisk in hopes of discovering what had happened, despite assurances that nothing there was likely to be of help. Eventually, in the long-undisturbed minutes of faculty meetings, I discovered that Larsen had been told not to return after she was involved in a student rebellion against dress codes and social restriction on girls. Her family had not pulled the plug on her education, after all. In fact, it became clear that Mary Larsen had been very concerned for her child, and remained so. After this expulsion, Larsen went to live in Denmark with her mother's family – the trip that supposedly had never happened (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.5-6).

Hutchinson declares that information about Nella Larsen's mother is hard to come by and contradictory in certain details. He states that there is no doubt about her maiden name, Hansen, and that she immigrated to the United States from Denmark, alone, in the late 1880s. Evidence suggests that she was born September 24, 1968 and that she was born in the borderland between Denmark and Prussia, over which Danes and Germans fought for many years. Larsen's mother, Mary Hansen, worked as a dressmaker in Nella Larsen's youth (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p. 17-18).

The regime of race in the United States was created precisely to ensure a "natural" correlation between race and family identity – which, in turn, would help in the exploitation of the so called racial minorities. Mixed families were considered "unnatural" according to theories promulgated by prestigious natural and social scientists in the United States and Europe. These theories, in turn, became the intellectual bulwark for judicial matters, affirming racial segregation based on the theory that legislation is powerless to eradicate racial instincts. In 1892, a thirty-year-old French-speaking "colored" man who looked white boarded a "white" passenger train car in Louisiana with the purpose of being arrested. The arrest had been planed by a committee composed primarily of "colored" Creoles in New Orleans and their white lawyer, the novelist Albion Tourgee, who believed that the separation of people by race perpetuated the features of slavery. The objective of the group was to have all racial distinctions in law declared unconstitutional by making someone of "mixed blood" violate the law in order to highlight the arbitrary nature of racial classification and thus bring the "equal-but-separate" system into crisis. Homer Plessy had agreed to be the bait, and a railroad conductor and a private detective arranged the arrest.

During four years, the case worked its way to the Supreme Court of the United States. In 1896 the majority of judges concluded that social mingling of the races was against nature. It was not until the 1950s that the NAACP legally challenged the “separate” concept. Nella Larsen’s worries surpassed the fact that she had a white mother and lived in a white family with no knowledge of her black relatives. Another ghost that haunted her was the fact that she was the daughter of recent immigrants. Her mother had been in the United States for only five years when she was born and probably spoke at least some Danish at home, since in adulthood, without having studied the language formally at school, Larsen could both read and speak Danish without the help of a dictionary. Many African-Americans looked down on immigrants and took pride in their “native” status on the beginning of the twentieth century. Nella Larsen had a different position in relation to this matter. She did not feel much loyalty to any national identity, and criticized the patriotism of African-Americans in her works (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p. 29 - 31).

When Nella Larsen was a child in the end of the1890s, she visited Denmark with her mother and sister. A trip that enhanced her sense of connectedness to the Danish culture, but also highlighted her sense of racial difference. The particular version of one of the Danish games Larsen later described in her first publication was played specifically on the rural Jutland peninsula in the 1890s. Living in such a small town, in a land where the majority of people lived and died without ever seeing a person of other than German or Scandinavian complexion, the little Nellie Larsen must have been quite a sensation.

The Danish were not ignorant about the existence of non-white people, since Denmark had some colonies in the Caribbean, but one thing was to know about them and another very different one was to actually see one dark complexioned person. If Nella Larsen was hoping to find acceptance among the Danish, not as an exotic but as one of themselves, this trip would have been very disappointing. However, it could not have been all bad, since later she would return alone to Denmark for an extended stay and the situation for interracial families was quickly deteriorating in Chicago. In Denmark, she could always be a curiosity, but this was not nearly threatening as the situation she, her mother and her half-sister faced in turn-of-the-century America, a period in which Chicago developed into an overwhelming segregated city (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.31-36).

According to Davis, teaching had become in the decades after the Civil War a haven from racial debasement and a source of social value for African-Americans, especially for

women. Despite Nella Larsen's separation from her family and a resulting self-polarization, Larsen's prospects for a productive future rested in a connection to others through service (DAVIS, 1994, p.51).

In 1907, when Nella Larsen left Chicago to study at Fisk University to become a teacher, one of the most respected institutions of the "race", Nella Larsen and her family might have created great expectations, since Fisk graduates could be found in prestigious posts all over the country and many marriages came out of the relationships formed at Fisk, where men far outnumbered women. For Larsen it was a new world. Almost one-third of Nashville's population was Negro, compared to one-fiftieth of Chicago's. Larsen was used to be the only black student among a sea of whites, but at Fisk there were no white students (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.52-55).

When Fisk opened in January, 1866, its aim was a classical education for both sexes that would expand to the necessities of the African-Americans in the future. The qualifiers suggested something of the pervasive notion of a downtrodden race that characterized Fisk's mission. When Larsen arrived at Fisk the great emphasis was on industrial education for African-Americans. W.E.B. Du Bois, Fisk's most famous graduate, class of 1888, was at the forefront of an ongoing fight against vocational training as the only available curriculum for African-Americans. The American Missionary Association paid part of the teachers's salaries and was responsible for great part of the administration. The president, Reverend James Griswold Merrill, D. D., was white, as were a number of officers and faculty; however, there were no white students because after 1900, Tennessee's law prohibited racial mixing in its schools (DAVIS, 1994, p.52-53).

At Fisk the African-American Protestantism was strong and there were many rules regarding clothes and dating. Women could only go out with a chaperon and could not wear jewelry (only one ring) and were obliged to wear uniform on all social occasions, because some of them have dressed in a manner contrary to the wishes of several members of the faculty. Nella Larsen was expelled by the end of her last year because the faculty members seem to have determined that she and some other students were not following the dressing code's rules and should be severely punished as an example to the others (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.56).

From the time she left Fisk in June 1908 until May 1912, when she entered Lincoln Hospital and Home Training School for Nurses in New York City, the only documentation of her whereabouts is a ship's manifest of January 1909 marking her return from a trip to Denmark and giving her address in Chicago. "Larsen consistently maintained that she had lived in Denmark with her mother's relatives during the years between her departure from Fisk and her entry into nursing school, and she seems to have been telling the truth". In this period, she came to the United States to visit her family in 1909 and returned to Denmark. She could not have stayed in Chicago after January 1909, since her family was living in Englewood, a white neighborhood particularly unfriendly for a black teenager because residents feared the southward movement of black citizens. In the fall of 1908 a wave of anti-black violence had hit the south side in the wake of a race riot in Springfield, Illinois.

According to the census taken in Larsen's neighborhood in 1910, she was not living with her family and the family had only one daughter: Anna. Peter Larsen had erased Nella Larsen from the family when he filled out the census form, an act of denial that could indicate shame about her color and the expectation that she could never return. She probably spent a crucial period of her life in Scandinavia, a period in which society would have expected her to get married. She established affectionate contacts with her Danish relatives and received a pair of silver candlesticks from her grandmother as a keepsake. Larsen was never officially enrolled in the University of Copenhagen, but she could easily have followed lecture series there or attended the affiliated "Folk University", as she claims in her autobiographical note written to her editor in the jacket of *Quicksand*. This period of Larsen's life is obscure and all the hints we can have about it are in *Quicksand*, when Helga Crane goes to Denmark to visit her uncle (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.64 -68).

Between 1912 and 1915, Larsen trained as a nurse in New York and, upon her graduation, went down to Tuskegee Institute in Alabama to work as head nurse at John Andrew Memorial Hospital and Nurse Training School (DAVIS, 1994, p.71-88). According to Hutchinson and Davis, Tuskegee was Larsen's inspiration for Naxos, the University where Helga Cranes works on the beginning of *Quicksand*. Hutchinson declares that Tuskegee differed from all the other prestigious black college and institutes of the time in being run entirely by African-Americans. Pride had created a group spirit that helped to define Tuskegee. "Race consciousness" was one of Tuskegee's mantras. By the time Larsen arrived, more and more African Americans had their doubts about the institute theories, mantras and purposes, since its leader, Booker T. Washington, had come to wield immense power, was

accommodated to white supremacy, tried to control black press and to squelch dissent, but in the campus almost all people were under the spell of their leader and trusted in what they were accomplishing. People should take sides at Tuskegee: one either got with the program and entered wholeheartedly into the mission, or one resigned or got kicked out (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.92).

Nella Larsen was out of place at Tuskegee. The contained, self-conscious community allowed no space in which she could fit and no place where she could develop her interests or her sense of self. In her literary works, she would denounce and criticize Tuskegee's restrictive and dictatorial atmosphere alongside with an intolerant dislike of difference. She resigned and severed forever any naïve notions she had held about racial uplift and southern blacks (DAVIS, 1994, p.105). Her character Helga Crane, from *Quicksand*, summarizes Larsen's feelings about Tuskegee:

> This great community, she thought, was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's inefficiency. Life had died out of it. It was, Helga decided, now only a big knife with cruelly sharp edges ruthlessly cutting all to a pattern, the white man's pattern (LARSEN, 2002, p.8).

By 1916, however, Larsen returned to New York and worked as a nurse there. In New York, she met Elmer Imes, a physicist, to whom she married in 1919, and began her acquaintances with people influential in the bourgeoisie's Harlem arts movement; what would later be known as the Harlem Renaissance (DAVIS, 1994, p.111- 122). Larsen presented herself as the daughter of an interracial couple and as having been raised in a white Danish family to her husband, Dr. Elmer Samuel Imes. She suggested that race separated her from her relatives and this unusual background attributed to her certain glamour within the black bourgeoisie. Thadious M. Davis declares that in labeling herself a mulatto, she appropriated language less prevalent among African-Americans and popular among West Indians, who used this term to distinguish themselves from black masses and to evoke a class officially situated between whites and blacks in their native lands. Nella Larsen had both Danish and West Indian origins as a mark of uniqueness. Secrecy was used by Larsen as a weapon to conceal her past. The black elite could not trace her lineage since she did not reveal details

about her past. There was an aura of mystery around Nella Larsen that protected but isolated her (DAVIS, 1994, p.5-6).

Her connection with Imes allowed her to meet all the right people in the literary and social community of upper-class African-Americans. However, Davis states that Larsen vacillated between desiring Imes prominence and resenting it, along that of his religious family, whom she alternately satirized and conformed to. She moved with greater assurance outside the sphere dominated by her husband and his family, and gradually gravitated towards the white world downtown. Struggling to define her on value solely in terms of her husband's achievements and connections, she renounced Imes and others from his class (DAVIS, 1994, p.7).

Larsen understood the dynamics of racism and sexism and fought against personal vulnerability to either. However, the odds were against her. In a field dominated by men, she was a woman who had courage and conviction to pursue her writing and to bring attention to it. In her work, Larsen discovered a female identity apparently free of race, but entrapped by it. In the mid-1920s she confirmed her interest in writing as a profession. In January and April, 1926, she published two short stories in *Young's Magazine* under the pseudonym of Allen Semi (Nella Imes in reverse): "The wrong man" and "Freedom". In 1928 she published her first novel *Quicksand* and in 1929 she published her second novel *Passing* (DAVIS, 1994, 8-9). Her first publications were two articles about Danish games, published in the *Brownies' Book*, a children's magazine edited by Jessie Redmon Fauset. In 1921 Larsen left her nursing position and took a job at the New York Public Library's 135th Street branch in Harlem and attended library school at Columbia University (DAVIS, 1994, p.137-144). She continued at the NYPL until 1926 and worked at honing her writing skills, writing several pieces of short fiction which she published, some under the pseudonym Allen Semi (her married name reversed). She was also at work on her first novel, *Quicksand,* which would be published in 1928 to some critical acclaim (DAVIS, 1994, p.154-170).

In her development from nurse to housewife to librarian to novelist we see little appreciation for life outside cities and no nostalgia for the past. Her arrival in the 1910s's New York anchored a fascination with urban existence emanating from her girlhood. "While race and gender were the social constructions that negatively affecting her youth, they recombined in New York to inspire and internal drive toward agency, visibility, and voice that went beyond mere survival". She found an emerging middle class of African-Americans in

the Bronx and Brooklyn, on Staten Island and Manhattan. That was the “black bourgeoisie”, a class which differentiated itself from the generally poor in the beginning of the twentieth-century African-American community by engaging in forms of conspicuous consumption and entertainment. As a way to compensate for exclusion from the dominant white population, the black bourgeoisie created behavioral codes and color snobbery to establish class distinction. White ancestry and features became less crucial in determining who should belong to this elite; the most important criteria for inclusion were income and occupation. When Larsen met this bourgeoisie in New York it was a time of transition, when the criterion of inclusion was changing to physical appearance. Family background and color consciousness as well as professional status, education and money were the criterion for acceptance (DAVIS, 1994, p.4-5).

Her writing and life placed her in opposition to patriarchal prescriptions about appropriate texts for women:

> She smoked in public, wore silk stockings and short dresses, mocked the religious conservatives and racial uplifters, played bridge, and drove a stylish automobile. More than anything else, she projected a propensity for modernity in an avant-garde attitude toward race, politics, sex, and, religion, often ridiculing old-fashioned mores or manners regarding them. Her behavior expressed her resentment of confinement into race without ethnicity, into feminine roles without substance. She rebelled against the dominance of socially prominent others, yet she both sought and rejected social status as a goal and objective (DAVIS, 1994, p.10).

Larsen was considered by some Harlemites as a racial renegade. This happened because, among other aspects, she believed that the racial beliefs adhered to by them were contradictory, since they considered rank prejudice some situations, as when Nordics talked against the admission of black people in their homes, but when black people took the same attitude about white folks those Harlemites considered it as race loyalty. From 1925 until her disappearance Larsen’s health was delicate. She suffered from many debilitating colds, flu and pneumonia. Her health usually presented problems when she was under too much stress. This isolated her at the height of her popularity as a Harlem writer (DAVIS, 1994, p.12-14).

Nella Larsen had the support of leading New Yorkers, black and white, for the Harmon Awards in 1928 and 1929: James Weldon Johnson, W.E.B. Du Bois, Van Venchten, Lillian Alexander, Walter White, Blanche Knopf and Muriel Draper. She also carefully selected her references for her 1929 Guggenheim fellowship application because she knew that the foundation had not yet awarded a grant in creative writing to an African-American woman and she hoped to be the first. In 1930 Larsen published the story "Sanctuary" under her own name. This story was accused of being a plagiarism from another writer. A sensational divorce and economic powers distanced her from her former life in Harlem and her black and white associates in New York started to damage her career. "The failure to publish her subsequent texts reiterates familiar problems of outlet and audience for writers of color, particularly females. This circumstance beyond her control furthered a devastating personal isolation from which she never recovered." She spent nearly three decades of her life in obscurity and died alone, in 1964, in a studio apartment. As in her book *Quicksand*, Larsen disappeared from her active life into passive enactments of her own worst nightmare (DAVIS, 1994, p.17).

According to Thadious M. Davis, with only two novels, *Quicksand* (1928) and *Passing* (1929), Nella Larsen established a reputation as one of the three most important novelists of the New Negro, or Harlem, Renaissance. Along with Walter White and Jessie Fauset, she had carved out a special place for herself among writers who would become the preeminent figures of the early modern African – American literature: Langston Hughes, Countee Cullen, Zora Neale Hurston, Claude Mckay, Rudolph Fisher, and Wallace Thurman. In 1928 Fauset's second novel, *Plum Bun*, and Larsen's first, *Quicksand*, were published. On the basis of both productivity and promise, however, Larsen matched White and Fauset by the end of the decade, when the three were the only New Negro authors to have written two novels published by major New York firms. Her acclaim, like White's, helped establish the novel as a creative form for New Negro writers, her success, like Fauset's, focused the attention on women as literary artists in a cultural movement of extremely visible men, most of whom initially wrote poetry or short fiction (DAVIS, 1994, p. XIII).

Transformation demarks Larsen's existence. She lived trough the most eventful decades of the last century for all American population and especially for ethnic and racial minorities and for women. Born Nellie Walker, her childhood was imprinted with modern buildings and technological inventions. As Nellie Walker, Nellye Larson, Nellie Larsen and

Nella Larsen she witnessed the struggle of immigrant communities for Americanization and amalgamation, for success and material comfort. She soon learned that the limitations sometimes constricting the American dream for immigrants were worsened by race and gender. Her “maple syrup” skin prevented her from assimilating into Chicago’s Scandinavian community in which she lived as a child. Her gender bound her to fewer opportunities than her male counterparts. “Denied access to the social and economic opportunities available to her white, immigrant relatives, she entered the world of African Americans, where she functioned without the resources and protection of family” (DAVIS, 1994, p.4).

II.2 – Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand*

When *Quicksand* was released on March 30, 1928, it was exactly a year to the month Nella Larsen had discovered that Knopf had accepted her manuscript. The novel carried an epigraph from Langston Hughes poem “Cross”, which is also the epigraph of this chapter. The epigraph served two introductory purposes: first, it established the connection between the novel and the Harlem Renaissance by evoking Hughes, the best known younger writer at that time due to his two volumes of poetry, *The Weary Blues* and *Fine Clothes to the Jew*. Second, it announces the cross-cultural and interracial thematic core, bringing the ideas of conflict with heritage and quest for place and identity (DAVIS, 1994, p. 252). I chose the same lines as the epigraph of this chapter, because they are an illustration of the inner conflict lived by Helga Crane, *Quicksand*’s main character, and Nella Larsen herself.

The major part of Larsen’s transnational identity was in her Danish heritage. Her first novel, *Quicksand* (1928), explores the possibilities inherent from her identification to her ethnical heritage. The hybrid characteristics of the author inspire her description of Helga Crane, a restless modern protagonist determined to escape from the traps of marriage and motherhood, which she associates to racial and gender limitations in the United States and to the oppression of the considered proper black middle class life. Helga Crane is the

representation of some of the tensions that divide the African-descendants' spaces and minds. The life of the non-white community in the western hemisphere and the treatment given to this community because of its different color are the main themes discussed by Larsen. Larsen's view of racism does not forget to depict gender oppression. *Quicksand* is a literary work that deals with questions related to identity, hybridism, gender and diasporization among other aspects. The analysis of this work according to the Cultural Studies views is important because it is a matchless example of postcolonial literature. Besides, diasporization, gender questions and hybridization appear in this work as important aspects in the construction of the identities of African - descendant women. *Quicksand* is a representation of African-American women's enterprise to criticize the post colonial patriarchal society that prevents them from achieving the same social position of men, being them white or black.

When we read this novel, we can notice that Helga Crane is a character inspired in Nella Larsen herself. Although *Quicksand* is not a declared autobiography, it is important to notice that it has many strong autobiographical traces. For instance, Helga's mother is white and Danish and her father is black and has no origin as Larsen's parents were. Ethnically Danish and born in the north of the United States, but with a non-white skin and educated in the south of the country, Helga is the representation of the hybrid, the one who belongs to everywhere and to nowhere at the same time. Her physical description can be seen in the following passage:

> An observer would have thought her well fitted to that framing of light and shade. A slight girl of twenty-two years, with narrow, sloping shoulders and delicate, but well-turned, arms and legs, she had, none the less, an air of radiant, careless health. In vivid green and gold negligee and glistening brocaded mules, deep sunk in the big high-backed chair, against whose dark tapestry her sharply cut face, with skin like yellow satin, was distinctly outlined, she was – to use a hackneyed word – attractive. Black, very broad brows over soft, yet penetrating, dark eyes, and a pretty mouth, whose sensitive and sensuous lips had a slight questioning petulance and a tiny dissatisfied droop, were the features on which the observer's attention would fasten; though her nose was good, her ears delicately chiseled, and her curly blue – black hair plentiful and always straying in a little wayward, delightful

> way. Just then it was tumbled, falling unrestrained about her face and on to her shoulders (LARSEN, 2002, p. 6).

Helga Crane suffers a lot in her life since her biological father abandons her family, her stepfather and her half-brothers treat her badly and her mother dies very young. Crane's inner conflict in her search for her identity, for a place where she could belong, is related to the view she has of the United States and of Denmark. The first clearly presents great ethnical diversity, but it does not treat all ethnical groups in the same way. This can be seen in passages as the following one, in which a white preacher goes to Naxos, the black school, to preach:

> This was, he had told them with obvious sectional pride, the finest school for Negroes anywhere in the country, north or south; in fact, it was better even than many schools for white children. And he had dared any Northerner to come south and after looking upon this great institution to say that the Southerner mistreated the Negro. And he had said that if all Negroes would only take a leaf out of the book of Naxos and conduct themselves in the manner of the Naxos products, there would be no race problem, because Naxos Negroes knew what was expected of them. They had good sense and they had good taste. They knew enough to stay in their places, and that, said the preacher, showed good taste (LARSEN, 2002, p.6).

The second has a population formed mainly by white people and presents a kind of veiled racism that makes people treat Helga Crane well, but as an extremely exotic, different being. This can be seen, for instance, when her Danish aunt asks Helga to wear colorful and exotic clothes to go the party where she would be presented to the Danish society: "Oh, I'm an old married lady, and a Dane. But you, you're young. And you're a foreigner, and different. You must have bright things to set off the color of your lovely brown skin. Striking things, exotic things. You must make an impression" (LARSEN, 2002, p.70).

Helga Crane’s trips make her to be in contact with many communities Nella Larsen herself knew. First we see Helga Crane in Naxos, a small town which has a school for African-descendant people. She is a teacher and initially was full of many positive ideas and suggestions as how to improve “Negro education” and is engaged to another very influential teacher. But, as times passes, she feels unwelcome and out of place, often finding herself alone and isolated. She realizes that Naxos’s school is a place not to promote equal conditions to white and African-descendant people. It is a place to teach African-descendants the place that white people had separated for them: “This great community, she thought, was no longer a school. It had grown into a machine. It was now a show place in the black belt, exemplification of the white man's magnanimity, refutation of the black man's inefficiency. Life had died out of it" (LARSEN, 2002, p.8).

As the story continues, Helga leaves the town of Naxos behind, breaking up with her fiancée, and boards a train to Chicago. Yet she soon discovers that this city is not her home: "Helga Crane, who had been born in this dirty, mad, hurrying city had no home here. She had not even any friends here" (LARSEN, 2002, p.30). In fact, her family, biologically speaking, lives in Chicago, but they do not like each other.

Continuing her trips, she moves to Harlem, where she finds a refined black middle class, which is hypocritical and obsessed by the “race problem”: "It was as if she were shut up, boxed up, with hundreds of her race, closed up with that something in the racial character which had always been, to her, inexplicable, alien. Why, she demanded in fierce rebellion, should she be yoked to these despised black folk?"(LARSEN, 2002, p. 57). Helga relocates to Denmark to live with her white relatives. There she is received as an exotic treasure. In Copenhagen, she is treated as an exotic being and an object of desire. In time, though, Helga longs again for life in Harlem. She comes back to Harlem, and after having her heart broken by a married men, she attends a revival service one night, and meets her future husband, Reverend Green, thinking that God’s providence has led her, at last, to her place in the world. She moves to the poor south of the United States. After delivering three children in only twenty months, Helga realizes that she has wasted her life away and is disillusioned with the blind devotion of people to religion.

In each one of her trips, or diasporas, Helga Crane fails in her search for a place in society and for her identity. According to some postmodern critics and theorists as Stuart Hall e Homi K. Bhabha, Helga Crane could never, and can not, negate her origins and delineate

one cultural identity for herself as black or white, American or Danish, since identity is something in constant mutation and impossible to be labeled. Homi K. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture*, declares the idea of identity abandons a monolithic and totalizing character to give occasion to identities built in the gaps, in “in-between spaces” (BHABHA, 1994, p.2). In *Signs Taken for Wonders*, Bhabha claims that from this contact between colonizer and colonized, result hybrid modalities of expression which challenge the assumption of the “pure” and “authentic” concepts upon which the resistance often stands. He declares that despite the “imitation” and “mimicry” with which the colonized cope with the imperial presence and authority, the relationship between these two forces is one of constant – even if implicit – contestation and opposition (BHABHA, 1997, p. 34). Stuart Hall also suggests that the postmodern subject is fragmented, having many identities, and that the modern nations are cultural hybrids (HALL, 2001, p.62). This hybridization and fragmentation are in *Quicksand* and have great influence in the family relations of the characters of this work. In this literary work, hybridization can even be physically noticed, since Helga Crane is the representation of the hybrid, the “mulatta”, someone who is neither white nor black being both at the same time. By the end of the novel, Helga Crane gives up from her dreams so as not to abandon her children and has her voice suffocated by a society that does not have, and does not want to have, a place for her.

One of the aspects responsible for the destruction of Helga's dreams is the discourse written to her body by patriarchal conceptions. Through her entire life she is asked to not be single, to have a husband and babies, to conform to white people's ideas or to try to be like them in her physical appearance. After getting married, she is obliged to stay at home and have as many babies as possible, abandoning her professional life. A professional life that is also destroyed by gender oppression. When she quits Naxos, she can not find a job as a teacher anywhere because she starts to suffer an embargo by the educational institutions. She has to find other kinds of jobs, for instance, as a librarian or as the assistant of a writer, because being a single woman who was a “mulatta” makes her an unreliable person according to the rules of the society where she lives. Furthermore, her skin color places her in the position of the seductive “mulatta”, who is unwelcome by other women and a temptation to men. This brings to surface another aspect that can not be forgotten when talking about the body or the discourses created upon it: the color of this body.

Prejudice also made its way through the “creation” of bodies discourse. As an example we have many stereotypes concerning non-white people. These stereotypes state that African-descendant men are oversexed animals, sexually animalistic and rapists by nature. African descendant women are stereotyped as “amoral Jezebels who can never be truly raped, because rape implies the invasion of a personal space of modesty and reserve that the black woman has not been imagined as having” (BORDO, 1995, p. 9). Hispanic women are also depicted as instinctual animals guided by sexual desires, but slavery brought an additional characteristic over black women's body's discourse: as a slave her body was not only like that of an animal but it was also a property to be used according to the owner's will. In fact, stereotypes of African-descendant women in literature and in everyday life tend to consider them as a mere body, whose feelings and beliefs need no attention. Nella Larsen's novel, *Quicksand*, is not only an attempt to destroy those stereotyped visions of African-descendant women, but it also shows how patriarchal society is suffocating and destructive to “the other”, or, in this case, women.

Hutchinson states that in *Quicksand* Larsen exposes much of her past and inner life for the first time to the public. It is a work where she releases all the rage against the forces she had fought against for so long: the social institutions in which Larsen herself had for so long been trapped. Some readers get shocked by Helga Crane’s sudden break from one style of life to another totally different from the first at the end of the novel. Critics declare that Larsen does not provide sufficient narrative preparation for Helga Crane’s sudden conversion to Christianity and marriage to a Southern preacher. According to Hutchinson, Helga’s personality lacks unity and coherence, “it lacks identity” (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.224).

Far from lacking identity, as Hutchinson argues, what can be observed is that Helga Crane is one representative of the postmodern identity depicted by Stuart Hall. An identity that is not monolithic and does not conform to a pattern because it is always changing, it is in constant stage of mutation. That is to say that Helga’s personality does lack unity and coherence and it is a sample or a characteristic of her very fragmented identity, or better: identities. In a way, the rupture in the plot of the novel that leads Helga to become the wife of a religious man humanizes and brings her close to the reader, since human beings are not flawless and many times do things that they never thought they could be capable of.

Something that must be highlighted about this novel and about other works which have autobiographical traces or are autobiographies, is the notion that we can not take an

autobiography or a work with autobiographical traces as the representative of a group of individuals, even when they are a legitimate space where voices that are usually forgotten can be heard:

> Since Western autobiography rests upon the shared belief in a commonsense identification of one individual with another, all "I"s are potentially interesting autobiographers. And yet, not all are "I"s. Where Western eyes see man as a unique individual rather than a member of a collectivity, of race or nation, of sex or sexual preference, Western eyes see the colonized as an amorphous, opaque collectivity or undifferentiated bodies. In this way, argues Rey Chow, "Man (hence Europe) … hails the world into being … in such a way as to mark [the non-European world] off from European consciousness or universality". Moreover, heterogeneous "others" are collapsed and fashioned into an essentialized "other" whose "I" has no access to a privatized but privileged individuality (WATSON & SMITH, 1992, p.17).

In 1927, Larsen made revisions to her manuscript, apparently under the request of her editors at Knopf. Van Vechten and Larsen were concerned that the book was too short, particularly in the Copenhagen episodes and the conclusion, thus she expanded the manuscript from 35,000 to 56,000 words. The initial title was "Cloudy Amber" and it was changed to *Quicksand*, shifting the focus from the color of the protagonist and the "clouds" obscuring her life, or the appearance of a semiprecious jewel, to the motif of disappearance, of being swallowed up without a trace. The book was dedicated to Nella Larsen's husband, but she chose to use her maiden name, Nella Larsen, as author. On the future years she would be known by the two names, Larsen and Imes (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.225).

The theme of "mulatto tragedy" had a long history in American fiction, but Nella Larsen's novel differed sharply from the conventions of works by both blacks and whites centering on mixed-race protagonists. "This may have less to do with a conscious decision to undermine the old models than with the fact that, as far as "race" literature is concerned, the models available to Larsen bore no resemblance to her personal history". With few

exceptions, in fiction about mulattos the mother was black and the father a wealthy white man, a convention that has largely been maintained to the present day. The many mulatto children born over the generations remain largely absent from North-American literature (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.225).

When Larsen was writing and revising her novel, the continuing fierce battles over the direction of black literature occupied her attention. She followed the debates in the newspapers and literary journals and spent much of her time with people who were involved or implicate in the debates. When her book was released, she rose from the status of wife of Dr. Elmer Imes to a Knopf author named Nella Larsen. She grew more confident and the routine of her marriage was altered. Dr. Imes status derived mostly from traditional black institutional connections – Fisk, where he was working; family and fraternity- and from his job, whereas hers derived increasingly from her writing and her reputation within the high bohemia of Manhattan modernism. In 1928, after reading *Quicksand*, a white southern critic would write: “Nella is a woman of sense, thank goodness, and I am anxious to see what she will do next” (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.240-260).

However, not all reviews of the book were so good. Officially released on the last day of March, the novel had received little immediate notice. Larsen was feeling low and the reason was probably the very first review, which came out in the *New York Times*, on April 8, entitled “A Mulatto Girl”. The review, as the decryption made by the publishing house of the story on the jacket of the book, was not signed and suggested that race was not the central concern of the novel:

> “Quicksand” is not part of the tradition which began long ago when Mrs. Stowe pictured for us Simon Legree beating Uncle Tom, nor is it very much in the tradition which begun recently when Van Vechten pictured for us the bright lights and social subtleties of Harlem. Miss Larsen can not help being aware that the negro problem is a real one, cannot help being aware that negro exhibitionism, in the manner of *Nigger Heaven*, is a vivid and interesting spectacle; but she is most of all aware that a novelist’s business is primarily with individuals and not with classes, and she confines herself to the life of Helga Crane … This is an articulate, sympathetic first novel,, which tells its story and projects its heroine in a lucid, unexaggerated manner. In places, perhaps, it is a little lacking in fire, in vitality one finds it more convincing than moving. But it has dignity which few first novels have and a wider outlook upon life than most negro ones (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.275).

On April 14, George Schuyler's review came out in the *Pittsburg Courier*. Unlike the *Times* reviser, Schuyler noticed the attack on some sectors of the black bourgeoisie, an attack that could make some readers recoil. He assured to his audience that the novel was not a story of "bull-dikers, faggots, slums, cabarets, prostitution, [and] gin parties", but a tale of Negroes like the people "we know":

> One may disagree with the author in some of her insinuations and assumptions, and to many – as to me – the heroine, Helga Crane, will appear unreal and incredible, and yet the story smacks of biography and is very well done. Few Negroes have written with the objectivity that characterizes this first novel. A few of them have etched character as successfully as Nella Larsen (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.276).

Langston Hughes also appreciated Larsen's effort and sent her his congratulations, even though she had not sent him a copy of the novel. Nella Larsen answered his letter writing: "Thanks for your letter. It cheered me very much. I fear the book is having a very hard time, and am therefore grateful for any kind words. You will be interested to know that Floyd Calvin says that the only part of the book worth printing is the verse of your poetry". Another critic who wrote about the novel was Gwendolyn Bennett. In her critique the novel's incisive social critique and attack on racial subjection went almost completely unnoticed. She asserted that the novel

> does not set as its tempo that of the Harlem cabaret – this is the story of the struggle of an interesting cultured Negro woman against her environment. Negroes who are squeamish about writers exposing our worst side will be relieved that Harlem night-life is more or less submerged by this author in the psychological struggle of the heroine (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.277).

The "positive" responses to *Quicksand* continued, but all were based on a class bias and an ethos of uplift that were opposite to Larsen's point of view. Only after almost six decades the critics gave a closer look to the novel. Even nowadays, in the XXI century, gendered and racist definitions still permeate our society, trying to erase people's otherness by excluding them or trying to make them the same, by erasing their differences and not "the

others" anymore. Nella Larsen's *Quicksand* was written in the end of the 1920's, but it is extremely up-to-date. It shows many ways in which a person, specially a woman, can be oppressed and her struggle to survive and find her identity and a sense of belonging to somewhere. In our postcolonial, multicultural and globalized world, that preaches to be equal, fair and to have a place to everyone, literary works as Larsen's show us that our world is far from achieving all the equality and fairness it preaches, and that it is not eager to find a place for everyone or to respect everyone's places.

II.3 – *Quicksand* and the diaspora

Stuart Hall states that in the entire globe cultural not fixed identities are emerging, poised in transition, between different positions; which draw on different cultural traditions at the same time, being the product of complicated crossovers and cultural mixes which are increasingly common in a globalized world. There is a dilemma which seems to be false. This dilemma preaches that identity in the age of globalization is destined to end up in one place or another: either returning to its roots or disappearing through assimilation and homogenization. Hall presents another possibility to this dilemma: Translation. This term would describe those identity formations which cut across and intersect natural frontiers, and which are composed of people who have been dispersed forever from their homelands. Such people retain strong links with their original places and their traditions, but they have no illusion of a return to the past. They are obliged to face the new cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them and losing their identities completely. They bring with them the traces of the particular cultures, traditions, languages, and histories by which they were shaped, but they will never be unified in the old sense, in a pure way, because they are the product of several interlocking histories and cultures, belong at one and the same time to several homes. People belonging to such *cultures of hybridity* have had to renounce the dream of rediscovering any kind of cultural purity, or ethnic absolutism. They are irrevocably translated (HALL, 2005, p.629).

Migrant writers, like Nella Larsen, who belong to two worlds at once, are translated beings. They are products of the diasporas produced by the postcolonial migrations and must learn to inhabit at least two identities, to speak two cultural languages, to translate and negotiate between them. Hall states that some people argue that hybridity and syncretism, the fusion between different cultural traditions, is a powerful creative source. Others, according to him, argue that hybridity, with the indeterminacy and relativism it implies also has its costs and dangers. Salman Rushdie's novel about migration, Islam, and the prophet Mohammed, *The satanic verses*, offended the Iranian fundamentalists who passed sentence of death on Rushdie for blasphemy (HALL, 2005, p.629-630). Rushdie declares that those who oppose the novel believe that intermingling with different cultures will weaken and ruin their own, but he believes that his book celebrates hybridity, impurity, intermingling, and the transformation that comes from new and unexpected combinations of human beings, cultures, ideas, politics movies, songs; a manifestation that fears the absolutism of the pure (RUSHDIE, 1991, p.394).

On the other hand, as we can see in some events narrated by Helga Crane in *Quicksand* where the character was asked to determine a pure identity to herself in order to survive, there are powerful attempts in the world to reconstruct purified identities, as this act could restore coherence, closure and Tradition, in the face of hybridity and diversity. Two examples quoted by Hall are the resurgence of nationalism in Eastern Europe and the rise of fundamentalism (HALL, 2005, p.630).

> Both Liberalism and Marxism, in their different ways, implied that the attachment to the local and the particular would gradually give way to more universalistic and cosmopolitan or international values and identities; that nationalism and ethnicity were archaic forms of attachment the sorts of thing which would be "melted away" by the revolutionizing force of modernity (HALL, 200, p.632).

Nella Larsen was a woman ahead of her time. Her work, *Quicksand*, was written in 1928, but it could be used as an illustration to many topics that are being discussed nowadays, specially the question of hybridism. Analyzing the book we can notice that it is a hybrid construction because it is a product of a borderline between fact and fiction, written by a hybrid writer and about a hybrid character, products of many diasporas as the African and the

Danish. We can assume that some parts of the book, some situations, are part of the author's autobiography because they perfectly match events that occurred in Larsen's life, but about other cases, other events depicted in the book, we can not say the same. Even concerning the events that are correspondent to the author's life we need to be suspicious about their accuracy, since, if we consider them as memories, we are going to have only one point of view of the events: the author's.

The question in focus here is that, as it was said before, the main character, Helga Crane is a hybrid, not only culturally but also physically. If *Quicksand* were a Science Fiction book, Crane would probably be a cyborg, and consequently Larsen herself, since the cyborg is a construction, a mix of organism and machine, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction, being both and none at the same time. An outcast who has no place in the world. An outsider, having a minor or none social status. Considering this we might compare the cyborg, and all hybrid forms, to Donna Haraway's definition of irony: "Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary and true" (HARAWAY: 1991, 149).

However, Haraway empowers the cyborg as Larsen is empowered by being able to write and publish her story. Haraway's cyborg myth "is about transgressed boundaries, potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities which progressive people might explore as one part of needed political work" (HARAWAY, 1991, 156). Haraway's cyborg and Larsen's works are ways to challenge the patriarchal society and the power of some groups over others. They are powerful weapons to promote the subversion of the social order and constraints. They are instances and strategies of resistance:

> I would suggest that cyborgs have more to do with regeneration and are suspicious of the reproductive matrix and most of birthing. For salamanders, regeneration after injury, such as a loss of a limb, involves regrowth of structure and restoration of function with constant possibility of twinning or other odd topographical productions at the site of former injury. The regrown limb can be monstrous, duplicated, potent. We have all been injured, profoundly. We require regeneration, nor rebirth, and the

> possibilities for our reconstruction include the utopian dream of hope for monstrous world without gender (HARAWAY, 1991, 181).

An important concept elaborated by Linda Hutcheon is the role played by the marginal or marginalized, silent or silenced, character. A member of any of the many minorities, inhabitant of the margins of the dominant culture, a character Hutcheon names ‘ex-centric’. Hutcheon shows how postmodern literature has brought to the narrative centre this marginalized character, giving him his own voice and the position of subject of his own history (HUTCHEON:1995).

Nella Larsen’s *Quicksand* is extremely up-to-date. The many diasporas that happened through the centuries, and are still happening, transformed and transform the society of the XXI century in an enormous mosaic formed more and more by pieces with new shapes that look for a space between the old pieces. What needs to be observed, studied and understood is the way these pieces fit into the mosaic. It is important to know if those pieces fit in a violent or in a peaceful way, what happens when these pieces are not able to fit, and what kinds of strategies these pieces use in order to guarantee their places in this multicolored and heterogeneous shaped mosaic.

II.4 – Family relations in *Quicksand*

When analyzing family relations in *Quicksand* we have to work with different possibilities of family relation. First, we have the relationship established between Helga and her parents; secondly, we have the relationship established between Helga and her stepfather and half siblings; thirdly, we have the relationship established between the character and her

American uncle and his wife; fourth, we have the relationship established between Crane and her Danish family, and fifth, we have the relationship established between Crane and her husband and kids.

Concerning Helga's relations with her parents we have few hints in the text. Her father, according to her, seems not to have established much contact with her: "My father was a gambler who deserted my mother, a white immigrant. It is even uncertain that they were married" (LARSEN, 2002, p.24). Her mother dies when she is very young and Helga feels the pain of her loss and her stepfather and half siblings start to display their prejudice against her.

> Helga's sense of personal integrity, bound up with her relation to her mother, makes her relationship to "whiteness" and "blackness" different from that of her black friends. This is not a pride in "white blood"; it is a psychologically necessary identification with the one woman who had loved her but whom "race" had defined as utterly different from her. What accommodation can she make to this institution, which pits itself directly against the most primary human bonds (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.229)?

Returning to Chicago to seek shelter and aid from her kindly uncle after her resignation from Naxos, Helga discovers that he had got married. His wife rejects her and she cannot stay at her uncle's house. After she introduces herself as Peter Nilssen's niece, his sister's daughter, she feels the wife's latent antagonism followed by a completely denial of their family connection:

> She stood in the large reception hall, and was annoyed to find herself actually trembling. A woman, tall, exquisitely gowned, with shining gray hair piled high, came forward murmuring in a puzzled voice: "his niece did you say?" "Yes, Helga Crane. My mother was his sister, Karen Nilssen. I've been away. I didn't know Uncle Peter had married." Sensitive to atmosphere, Helga had felt at once the latent antagonism in the woman's manner. "Oh, yes! I remember about you now. I'd forgotten for a moment. Well, he isn't exactly your uncle, is he? Your mother wasn't actually married, was she? I mean, to your father?" "I – I don't know," stammered the girl, feeling pushed down to the uttermost depths of ignominy. "Of course she wasn't." The clear, low voice held a positive note. "Mr. Nilssen has been very kind to you, supported you, sent you to school. But you mustn't expect anything else. And you mustn't come here any more. It – well, frankly, it isn't convenient. I'm sure an intelligent girl like yourself can

> understand that." "Of course," Helga agreed, coldly, freezingly, but her lips quivered. She wanted to get away as quickly as possible. She reached the door. There was a second of complete silence, then Mrs. Nilssen's voice, a little agitated: "And please remember that my husband is not your uncle. No indeed! Why, that, that would make me your aunt! He's not" (LARSEN, 2002, p.31).

After a while, when Helga Crane is living in Harlem, uncle Peter sends her $5000 and suggests that she should go to Copenhagen and visit her Aunt Katrina, who had always wanted to keep Helga in Denmark, the native country of Helga's mother. In contrast to Helga's Danish relatives, a white American family could scarcely conceive of arranging a marriage between their mulatto niece and a white artist as a means of advancing class position. Helga's uncle, Peter, effectively disowned her to avoid a confrontation with his white wife.

> In the United States, Helga must hide her connection to her white mother and learn to mix only with Negroes. But aboard the steamer that Helga takes to Copenhagen, a white Danish purser asks her to dine with him, remembering her from the earlier trip she took with her mother. Only outside her own country can Helga be publicly identified with the woman who gave birth to her, loved her, and raised her (HUTCHINSON, 2006, p.233).

Europeans treat Helga as a fascinating exotic being, emphasizing her racial difference, contrasting with the attitude of American whites in the novel. This can be seen in one of Helga's first comparative cultural observations after meeting members of Copenhagen's high society: "'How odd', she thought sleepily, 'and how different from America!'"(LARSEN, 2006, p.74). While she had been kicked out of her white family in America, her Scandinavian aunt and uncle are, in contrast, trying to look after her and to find a husband for her. Her aunt Katrina tells her that if Helga was intelligent she owed it to her father: "If you've got any brains at all they came from your father". This is a behavior very different from the American one.

Although she was happy in Denmark, Helga started to miss her life in America because in Denmark she was always different from everybody else, and even not feeling prejudice against her in that country, she was already over-hurt by the prejudice she suffered in America and did not trust anyone in Denmark. In fact, Helga does not feel comfortable

among whites. When she comes back to America, her old roommate, Anne Grey, has married Robert Anderson. Although feeling emotionally connected to him and having kissed him Helga starts to feel lost among blacks again. Helga meets and marries Reverend Green and moves to the poor black South with him. In the book she does not seem to be in love with him but she has five babies with Reverend Green and seems to give up life in order to not abandon her babies. The book does not give many hints about her relation with the Reverend or even about Helga's relation with her babies, since, by the end of the book, she spends most of her time in her bed in a catatonic state.

We may say that Helga Crane's search for a place of belonging is related with her lack of family unity or of a family. She seeks independence and paradoxically seeks a family. She does not seem to resent her mother, what she resents is not raving a traditional family. Her stepfather and stepsiblings scorn her. They do not accept her as a member of their family. She is seen by them as someone who happens to be at their home sometimes and is completely unwelcome. Her white uncle is kind to her up to the point where being kind to her would represent a conflict with his wife. He does not abandon her completely, but sends her money to go to Denmark in a way that seems that his wife is not aware of it. Her Danish relatives treat her well but Helga fears that this love is a different love than that she expects from a family. She wants to belong and to love and be loved, and not to be an art work in an exhibition. Her husband and kids seem not to establish a major connection with her because, when the story ends, she does not seem to be much aware of what is happening around her due to all the suffering she has been facing in her life. Helga could also associate maternity with entrapment, because in that community in the South, and at that period, women were supposed to be housewives and mothers only, and Helga Crane had studied a lot and had more ambitious dreams.

III – JAMAICA KINCAID'S FICTION

> I'm someone who writes to save her life," she says. "I mean, I can't imagine what I would do if I didn't write. I would be dead or I would be in jail because - what else could I do? I can't really do anything but write. All the things that were available to someone in my position involved being a subject person. And I'm very bad at being a subject person- Jamaica Kincaid, in an interview to *The New York Times Magazine*,October 7th, 1990(GARIS, 1990, p. 42).

III.1 – Jamaica Kincaid: her life and her time

British West Indies, Antigua, St. John's, a paradisiacal place well known by its amazing beaches. However, it was not, and it is not, truly a paradise. Not in the biblical sense. Not for everybody. Not for Elaine Cynthia Potter Richardson, who was born in St. John's, the capital of the small Caribbean Island of Antigua, on May 25, 1949, and remembers life on that former British Colony as a series of ongoing tensions between appearance and reality. Antigua, although the largest of the British Leeward Islands, is a small territory, with a land area no larger than 108 square miles. Its indented coastline is cut by numerous coves and bays; its interior is characterized by gentle hills covered by dryland scrub, the result of intense plantation-era deforestation. In the past it was an agrarian society with an economy dependent on the cultivation of the sugar cane. During Kincaid's lifetime it was dependent on the tourist industry. Its population of 65,000 is chiefly composed of African descendants. Kincaid's childhood and adolescence were spent in St. John's. Despite the island's small size and short

distances from village to village, she did not travel beyond the capital until her return to the island for a visit after many years in the United States. Kincaid's family members were poor and disconnected from the mainstream of economic and political life. They were banana and citrus-fruit farmers, fishermen, carpenters and obeah women (GEBERT, 1999, p.1).

Annie Richardson Drew, Kincaid's mother, was a homemaker and one-time political activist who had a brief but intense period of political activity as an opponent of the Bird regime. She belonged to a family of landowning peasants from the neighboring island of Dominica. Drew's parents, a Carib Indian and a part-Scot, part-African Dominican policeman – would serve as inspiration for the central characters in her third novel, *The Autobiography of My Mother*. Frederick Potter, Kincaid's father, was a taxi driver later employed by the exclusive and racially segregated Mill Reef Club of Antigua and did not meet his biological daughter until she was an adult. Kincaid has described her father in interviews as a man who was proud of fathering children in whom he would show no interest or bear any responsibility. Their relationship was restrained to the status of distant acquaintances. The man Kincaid recognizes as her real father in her nonfiction, and from whom the father figures of most of her autobiographical fiction derive, was in fact the man her mother subsequently married, David Drew, the island's "second best" carpenter. Kincaid and David Drew seem to have enjoyed a mutually supportive relationship until his illness during her early adolescence forced her into relinquishing her schooling and leaving Antigua for the United States to work as an au pair (GEBERT, 1999, p.2)

As a young child, the only child in the family, she was happy and deeply connected to her mother. But when she was nine the first of her three brothers was born, and life changed. Her mother's focus shifted from her to the new baby and an enlarged family caused a sharpener sense of their poverty. Meanwhile she became an adolescent and the oppressive education provided under the British rule started to suffocate her. As a means of escape she began to steal books, hide them under the house and read in secret:

> When I was a child I liked to read. I loved 'Jane Eyre' especially and read it over and over. I didn't know anyone else who liked to read except my mother, and it got me in a lot of trouble because it made me into a thief and a liar. I stole books, and I stole money to buy them. . . . Books brought me the greatest satisfaction. Just to be alone, reading, under the house, with lizards

> and spiders running around. . . .- Jamaica Kincaid, in an interview, Aug. 19, 1990(GARIS, 1990, p. 42).

Kincaid's family was Methodist, her grandfather having been a lay minister; but they were surrounded by a community that practiced Obeah. According to Karla Frye, Obeah is a system of beliefs grounded in spirituality and an acknowledgement of the supernatural and involving aspects of witchcraft, sorcery, magic, spells, and healing (FRYE, 1996, p.198). Gebert states that Obeah touched Kincaid's life directly because her mother and grandmother were believers and, consequently, its beliefs and practices were an everyday part of her life. Her mother made her wear protective sachets in her underwear and she often had special baths to thwart evil eye, prescribed by the Obeah woman her mother consulted every Friday (GEBERT, 1999, p.3).

Kincaid had been taught to read by her mother before she entered the Antiguan government school system in 1952. Her favorite subjects were history and botany. The two interests have informed her writing in profound ways: her fiction and nonfiction have been increasingly concerned with the question of how to write about Caribbean history of slavery and colonialism; botanical topics, and about the relationship of botany and gardening with colonialism and empire. Kincaid recalls with bitterness the lack of recognition she received from her parents and teachers. Her mother encouraged her reading, but failed to realize, to Kincaid's lasting frustration and disappointment, that her daughter's special gifts could be nurtured into channels more challenging or rewarding than a career as a seamstress or secretary. She witnessed with disillusionment her mother and stepfather's great expectations for her brother's professional futures and what she saw as indifference to her own prospects. Her teachers frequently punished her for impatience with the islanders' subservience to Antigua's British colonizers: that was seen as rebellious behavior. Once, she was forced to memorize long passages from John Milton's *Paradise Lost*, an event that is present in her fiction. She failed to make long-lasting friendships with her classmates, and was taller and thinner than them, being mocked by her peers who called her "Daddy Longlegs". Too often, for reasons she could not understand, some of her classmates would beat her up on her way home. Once she was rescued by her mother, who gave her torturers a worse beating than the one they were inflicting on her daughter (GEBERT, 1999, p.4).

As a teenager she started to awaken to her social position and the political position of herself, her family and friends, and her country. She realized that all Antiguans, including her, were subservient to the British. Antigua was a British colony until 1967, when it became a self-governing Associated State of Britain. In 1981 it became an independent nation within the Commonwealth. According to Kincaid's books, her family and friends appeared to accept their inferior status, but not her. She began to hate everything that was British and the acceptance of the British rule by her family and friends (GARIS, 1990, p. 42). Antigua's government has been controlled by the Bird family for more than thirty years. This government has been plagued by corruption and frequent scandals (GEBERT, 1999, p.1).

When she was thirteen, almost taking qualifying exams that could have led her to a university education, she was removed from school. Her stepfather had been ill and unable to work and her mother argued she needed her in the house to help with the small children (GEBERT, 1999, p.4). In *My Brother* she wrote*:* "I was always being asked to forego something or other that had previously occupied my leisure time, and then something or other that was essential (my schooling), to take care of these small children who were not mine" (KINCAID, 1997, p.126). Kincaid often mentions the domineering aspect of her mother, but her relationship to her mother was harmonious and loving before the birth of her three brothers. Kincaid associates the birth of her brother Joseph to the loss of her mother's love. She fictionalized the episode in "The Long Rain", a chapter of *Annie John*, where she uses the description of an illness she had suffered when she was seven as a metaphor for the isolation and pain she faced as an adolescent mourning her idealized relationship with her mother. Two other brothers, Dalma and Devon, had followed Joseph's birth in quick succession. Her parents' marriage also underwent a change around this period and she believed her mother and stepfather no longer liked each other. It is possible that this change in their relationship was due to his illness, financial problems, the burden of three young children, and the stress created by Kincaid's own adolescent rebellion. While Kincaid was struggling to assert her independence, her mother was determined to make her a well-behaved, soft-spoken, proper Afro-Saxon girl. She repeated to her daughter that her efforts were aimed at making sure that she would not end up having ten children of ten different men (GEBERT, 1999, p. 5-6).

Kincaid's mother strove to give her only daughter an upbringing based on notions she had culled from readings and observations of the habits and behaviors of the island's English colonial elite. In *Annie John*, *Lucy* and in many of her works Kincaid depicts the humiliations

colonial education imposed on black colonial children. Her precocious rebellion gave her an awareness of the many ways in which British and American institutions fostered racism in Antigua. Her mother would take her to be treated by a Czechoslovakian doctor whose wife would inspect patients before they were brought in to see him to make sure they were clean and did not smell, so that nothing apart from their skin's color would offend the doctor. The mistress of the girl's school she briefly attended would tell her changes to stop behaving as if she were a monkey just out of trees (GEBERT, 1999, p.8). "In a society like the one I am from being a child is one of the definitions of vulnerability and powerlessness" (KINCAID, 1997, p. 32).

In Antigua blacks are a majority of the population and Kincaid did not learn to see race as a marker of perceived inferiority until she arrived in the United States. According to her ideas more essential to race or national origin in determining one's identity, she asserts, is the ability to forget one's outward appearance and concentrate on what one looks like inside. She left her island to learn who she was, a self that cannot be reduced to racial categories that are ultimately only expressions of relations of power (GEBERT, 199, p.15-16).

When Jamaica Kincaid, previous Elaine Cynthia Potter Richardson, was sixteen she came to New York to work as an *au pair* and to try to become a nurse. Her parents had heard of an American family that needed a live-in baby sitter at their home in Scarsdale, New York. There she was, as she describes it to Garis, a servant, and she felt depressed and hopeless. She thought she could attend college but discovered that her Antiguan education was not adequate to American standards. Even so she took classes at night at *Westchester Community College*, near White Plains. Her mother wrote her letters, but she never opened them (GARIS, 1990, p. 42).

She left Scarsdale after a few months and answered an advertisement for a job as an *au pair*, and thus began a three-year job, taking care of four little girls for a family in the Upper East Side. This experience was the inspiration for her second novel *Lucy* (1990). While working with this family, she got her high-school diploma and began college courses. She studied photography at the *New School* and left the *au pair* job for a secretarial position at *Magnum Photos*. She decided to go back to school to learn how to type, and won a full scholarship to *Franconia College in New Hampshire* (GEBERT: 1999, p 9-10).

She changed her name to Jamaica Kincaid around the time she met George Trow, who was a regular contributor to the *New Yorker*, and he began to take her with him when he researched his *Talk pieces* (GEBERT: 1999, p.11). In 1974, after being quoted in *Talk pieces*, she began to write them herself, and William Shawn, the editor of the *New Yorker*, liked them: “Her first New Yorker story was a piece about a West Indian carnival that she had gone to with Trow. She had gathered some notes for him about her impressions, and he gave them to Shawn, who published them just as they were. That was the moment that changed her life” (GARIS, 1990, p. 42).

Changing her name was "'a way for me to do things without being the same person who couldn't do them - the same person who had all these weights'" (GARIS, 1990: 42). George Trow, in his *Talk pieces*, quoted Kincaid, “calling her "our friend Jamaica Kincaid,' or sometimes "our sassy black friend" (GARIS, 1990, p.42). According to her, being called “sassy black friend” was not offensive for her:

> A lot of Caribbean writers are obsessed with race and class in a way that I don't see or feel. They think the idea of race and class is fixed from beginning to end, but I think it's just a question of power - who can enforce race, who can enforce class. I don't think anything is fixed (GARIS, 1990, p.42).

The *New Yorker* published *Girl* (1978), sections of *At the Bottom of the River* (1983), a collection of ten short stories, and *Annie John* (1985), Kincaid's first novel. *Annie John* is Kincaid's work most often assumed to be autobiographical, but it is not the only one. In fact, the great majority of Kincaid's works are full of autobiographical traces. Jamaica Kincaid is recognized in The United States as a talented writer and continues writing books. “She did not return to Antigua until she was 36. By then she was Jamaica Kincaid, a respected author of fiction and a staff writer for *The New Yorker* magazine whose prose is studied in universities and widely anthologized”(GARIS, 1990: 6). She created the following works: *Antigua Crossing* (1978), *Annie John* (1993), *A Small Place* (1988), *Ovando* (1989), *Annie, Gwen, Lilly, Pam, and Tulip (1989), Lucy* (1990), *Biography of a Dress* (1990), *On Seeing England for the First Time* (1991), *At the Bottom of the River* (1992), *Song of Roland* (1993),*Best American Essays 1995* (1995), with Robert Atwan**;** *The Autobiography of My Mother* (1996), *My Brother* (1997), *My favorite Plant* (1998), *My Garden* (1999), *Talk Stories* (2001), with

Ian Frazier; *Seed Gathering Atop the World*(2002), *Mr. Potter*(2002), and *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* (2005).

Kincaid married Allen Shawn, a composer and son of the former editor of *The New Yorker*, William Shawn, and they had two children: a boy and a girl. When she got married to Shawn she converted to Judaism and seems to have been very active in the Jewish congregation of Beth El. Her position as a leading American writer has been recognized in recent years. In 1986 she was awarded a Guggenheim fellowship and since then she has been recipient of several honorary degrees from institutions like Williams College and Long Island College. In 1994 she joined Harvard's African-American Studies Department, where she teaches literature and creative writing. In her courses she pursues the topics so prominent in her fiction: the evils of colonialism, the relationship between the powerful and the powerless, the links between literature and empire. In a course on literature and possession she sought to explore, through literature, "how we claim things, how we possess things", echoing the themes of her most recent writings. She continues to create lucid, provocative and creative prose.

According to Moira Ferguson, Kincaid puts a new spin on women writers's implicit and explicit textual representations of women's relation to colonialism and postcolonialism. She underwrites the uncommon role and responsibility of women's sexual as well as political and cultural subordination. She puts an end to silence or to the idea that though a great deal does not seem to have been done, things will remain the same (FERGUSON, 1993, p.144).

III.2 – Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy*

Lucy is divided into five chapters, all of them published as independent pieces in the *New Yorker* between 1989 and September 1990 prior to their appearance in book form in late 1990. It is the first of Jamaica Kincaid's novels set outside her home island, and adds to Kincaid's autobiographical chronicle a new level of literary maturity. "*Lucy* could be viewed

as Kincaid's first truly mature work of fiction, one in which the autobiographical and novelistic elements are blended more deftly and with greater skill" (GEBERT, 1999, 118).

Kincaid has described the work as autobiographical and the novel was fairly well received, but Kincaid had to face some problems with her friends because of the novel and its descriptions of her former employers's lives and friends. In 1990, almost at the same time of the publication of *Lucy*, Kincaid suffered a nervous breakdown following a visit of her mother to her house in Vermont. During this visit mother and daughter had a violent quarrel. Kincaid's mother was not able to recognize how her actions had affected her daughter when she was young. The quarrel opened old wounds, reawakening memories of difficulties and cruelties Kincaid herself had forgotten. After her mother's departure Kincaid needed to be treated by a psychotherapist and given medications to relief her anxiety. She developed chicken pox again, a disease she had already had as a child (GEBERT, 1999, p.16).

The story starts with Lucy arriving in America. She finds everything new, from the weather to the refrigerator, but feels unexpected emotions. When she left home, she expected to feel excitement and relieve rather than homesickness. On the other hand, she likes the family she works for. Lewis, the father, is a successful lawyer, and his wife Mariah is an enthusiastic guide and source of support for Lucy. Mariah and Lewis yearn to expose Lucy not only to new things but also to new concepts. After Lucy tells the family about a dream full of sexual imagery in which she was naked and running away from Lewis, they realize that she would better grasp the dream's implications if she had read Freud. Throughout her time with the family, Lewis and Mariah buy Lucy books on various topics such as photography and feminism.

One day, while talking to Mariah, Lucy discovers that daffodils are one of Mariah's favorite flowers. Lucy despises these flowers even though she has never seen them. As a child she was obliged to memorize a poem, *Daffodils*, written by Wordsworth. Although she recited the poem perfectly, she deeply resented it. Lucy meets her new best friend Peggy and she helps Lucy to get used to the American culture.

The family travels to their summer home by the Great Lakes. Lucy has never been on a train before, but she realizes that all the people who look like her relatives are servants. Lucy and the four girls get accustomed to the daily routine at the lake house, where they walk through the forest to the beach. At the lake house, Lucy meets Dinah, Mariah's friend, and her

brother Hugh. Lucy and Hugh instantly find a connection and become lovers. At the end of the summer, however, their affair ends.

The family returns to New York and Lucy drops her nursing classes and studies photography instead. One night, at a party with Peggy, Lucy meets a fascinating artist named Paul. Lucy and Paul become lovers and Peggy and Lucy make arrangements to share an apartment. Meanwhile, Mariah and Lewis argue more frequently, and she asks Lewis to leave after his affair with Dinah has been revealed.

Lucy's relative Maude Quick arrives at the house unexpectedly and bears the news of Lucy's father's death. It has been over a month, but Lucy is unaware of it, never having opened any of her mother's letters. She immediately sends all of her savings home, and Mariah contributes with money too. As she is still angry with her mother, along with the money, she sends a bitter letter blaming her mother for marrying the kind of man who would leave her in debt. Lucy goes through a period of depression, quits her job with Mariah and moves into an apartment with Peggy. Lucy becomes a photographer’s secretary. Lucy starts to think that Peggy has an affair with Paul, but she does not seem to care much about it. The novel ends with Lucy, alone in her apartment, writing her full name on a blank journal and blurring it with her tears.

Lucy is Kincaid’s most accessible work of fiction. In the character of Lucy Kincaid dramatizes the political, class, and race dynamics. The book can be read as the third installment in Kincaid’s fictional recreation of her own life. The protagonist is characterized by her unflinching truthfulness and refusal to yield to sentimentality and the abbreviated time span (only two years) and the character’s isolation from her home environment confer greater immediacy and psychological richness to the story. Lucy, courageous, reckless, and at times brutally candid, is considered Kincaid’s most sympathetic heroine. In the novel Kincaid’s charts Lucy’s rejection of personal intimacy as stemming from the dissolution of her difficult relationship with her mother. The novel’s revelation that Lucy’s determined search for independence is leading her to an emotional void is poignantly rendered in the character’s realization that her struggle to detach from her mother has left her incapable of establishing deep emotional connections with anyone(GEBERT, 1999, p.33-34). In the story Lucy writes “I wish I could love someone so much that I would die from it”, and then, as she looks to her sentence, a great wave of shame comes over her and she weeps (KINCAID, 1990, p.164).

Reviews of *Lucy* were perhaps the most encouraging Kincaid had received to the date of its release. Carol Anshaw, in the *Chicago Tribune*, described the novel as "a graceful, complex narrative that is at the same time about sexual awakening, the construction of identity out of the scraps at hand, the elaborate misunderstandings that can arise from different cultural assumptions and the essentially harrowing nature of love". Critics particularly admired the heroine's refusal to assume an identity circumscribed by race or gender (GEBERT, 1999, p.35).

III.3 – *Lucy* and the diaspora

In *Lucy* Jamaica Kincaid intertwines discussions of gender relations with colonial and postcolonial rebellion. The novel could be seen as a continuation of the *Bildungsroman* begun with *Annie John*, although the name of the central character has been altered. *Annie John* ends with the young Annie leaving Antigua for England to study to become a nurse whereas *Lucy* opens with a teenager named Lucy arriving in an unnamed American city that is very much similar to New York, where Lucy will work as an *au pair* for a wealthy family. In both models we witness the young heroines in the beginning of their journeys, according to Daryl Cumber Dance, usually made by protagonists in West Indian novels into the white and Western world "starting with the journey to England (or more recently to the United States or Canada) [which generally] reinforces the fact that the cold and alien land is not home and that the traveler must divest himself of his Europeanization or his Westernization" (DANCE: 1986, p.18). Dance states that the second journey would be to Africa (or India) and the third a return to the West Indian home. In the third journey author and character often feel too different from the person they once were to fit in at home since they have been too far from "their people, their roots and thus themselves" (DANCE, 1986, p.19).

According to Diane Simmons, on arriving in the wintry American city, Lucy does indeed feel herself to be in a cold and alien land, a place that surely is not her home. On the other hand, she does not come to any awareness about dissociating herself from

Europeanization or Westernization. Rather it is possible to see in *Lucy* a philosophy similar to that developed by Françoise Lionnet (SIMMONS, 1994, p.120).

Lionnet advocates that the very idea of essential racial, sexual, geographic, or cultural oppositions is the result of a European worldview predicated on the existence and manipulation of hierarchical relationships. Thus, to attempt to divest oneself of Europeanization could be interpreted as accepting a philosophical system of hierarchical division, engaging hegemonic power on its own terms and then becoming a term inside that system of power (LIONNET, 1989, p. 6-9).

The stereotype, a limited form of otherness, becomes the primary point of subjectification in colonial discourse, for both colonizer and colonized, is the scene of a similar fantasy and defense – the desire for an originality which is again jeopardized by the differences of race, color and culture:

> My contention is splendidly caught in Fanon's title *Black Skin White Masks* where the disavowal of difference turns the colonial subject into a misfit – a grotesque mimicry or 'doubling' that threatens to split the soul and whole, undifferentiated skin of the ego. The stereotype is not a simplification because it is a false representation of a given reality. It is a simplification because it is an arrested, fixated form of representation that, in denying the play of difference (which the negation through the Other permits), constitutes a problem for the *representation* of the subject in significations of psychic and social relations (BHABHA, 1997, p. 298).

Kincaid's *Lucy* does not show a protagonist attempting to choose between two identities, but it does not indicate that Lucy is unaware of this dichotomy. "She is quite aware of the two options most readily available to her: to remain in a place where she cannot really be at home or to journey to a place where she will be a vulnerable outsider" (SIMMONS: 1994, p.121).

Lucy's story, the story of a new generation of coloured migrants in a white Western urban context, resembles the events of Kincaid's own life history. In the novel, we follow Lucy from her arrival in New York to her independent life sharing an apartment with a friend, and witness her personal struggle against a hostile environment permeated by latent racism.

Being very determined, Lucy refuses any contact with her mother, with whom she has a love-hate relationship, and leads a life of discoveries and personal failures that help her to grow. At the end of the book, Lucy writes her full name down in her notebook, and then starts crying, so that her tears erase her name. By doing it, Lucy tries to assert her identity, and then blurs it. This attempt of assertion and the blurring of her name by her tears can be seen as a symbol of her hybrid identity, an identity that is not Caribbean, not English, and not white North-American being a mix of all these cultures:

> Lucy thus rejects the available identities offered by her mother and Antiguan society, the British Empire, her well-meaning employer Mariah, the American man who finds her exotic, and her employers' African-American maid, who thinks her manner of speaking and acting is disgustingly prim and proper. What all of these seem to offer Lucy is a role, based on their perception of her place in a framework of "essential oppositions", whether "racial, cultural, sexual or geographical" (SIMMONS, 1994, p.121).

Set apart from her old world and not yet a part of the new, Lucy can see the manipulative power of both empire and the white world clearly. As a child she had memorized that ode to the daffodil, a flower adored by the British but never seen by West Indian children. When Mariah shows Lucy a daffodil for the first time in her life, Lucy reacts with rage, since she recognizes in the flower a disguised weapon of imperial domination disseminating the notion that everything that is European should be considered better than anything found in the West Indies:

> I said, "Mariah, do you realize that at ten years of age I had to learn by heart a long poem about some flowers I would not see in real life until I was nineteen?" As soon as I said this, I felt sorry that I had cast her beloved daffodils in a scene she had never considered, a scene of conquered and conquests; a scene of brutes masquerading as angels and angels portrayed as brutes (KINCAID, 1991, p.30).

Lucy is treated kindly by her wealthy employers and their four children, but their six yellow-haired heads remind her of a bouquet of flowers. At the same time that Lucy appreciates their apparently innocent beauty, she also realizes that they, like the daffodils in the poem she was forced to memorize as a child, embody the white Western world that children from her land have been taught to value at the expense of their love for their own world. Lucy starts to see the loving family as a threat, fearing that whoever her emerging self turns out to be, it may not hold up under the friendly onslaught of this confident and energetic family. A dream reflects this fear as bunches of daffodils chase Lucy until she disappears being buried by a pile of flowers (SIMMONS, 1994, p.124).

Kincaid's work, *Lucy*, written in 1990, could be used as an illustration of many topics that are being discussed nowadays, specially the question of hybridism. As mentioned when discussing Nella Larsen's *Quicksand,* Kincaid's book is a hybrid construction because it is a product of a borderline between fact and fiction, having a hybrid protagonist and written by a hybrid author. If the novel *were* a Science Fiction book, Lucy could also, as Helga Crane in Larsen's book, be a cyborg, and consequently Kincaid herself.

III. 4 Family relations in *Lucy*

Concerning family relations in Kincaid's novel, we might say that the most important and strong family relation established in *Lucy* is the one between Lucy and her mother. Lucy's father is not very present in her life. She speaks about him, but gives no further details about her relationship with him. Some critics might consider Lucy's relationship with the family she works for as a family relation, but although they have a very good relationship it is not a family relationship. Lucy and her boss, Mariah, although being friendly to each other do not forget that they are not a family and sometimes establish a stronger relationship of power having Mariah as the boss and Lucy as the servant.

In *Lucy*, Kincaid's protagonist gets a glimpse of her mother as a flawed personality, someone who has a strong necessity to control everything and who is not able to see that sometimes her child's "needs were more important than her wishes" (KINCAID,1991,p.64). Lucy sees her mother as a conflicting figure: sometimes the lost love of her life, sometimes the very devil. About her relationship with her mother, Lucy says: "I had been mourning the end of a love affair, perhaps the only true in my whole life I would ever know" (KINCAID, 1991, p.132). Comparing her mother to a devil, Lucy compares herself to a girl who escapes an abusive, devil-possessed parent by crossing the ocean "because the Devil can not walk over water" (KINCAID, 1991, p.21).

Lucy's mother seems to be pleased with her child when she follows the patterns of behavior established by her, but when her daughter does not fulfill her expectations she reacts as if her daughter is doomed to be a non respectable woman. Lucy realizes her mother's necessity to adapt her to a pattern:

> I had to come to feel that my mother's love for me was designed solely to make me into an echo of her; and I didn't know why, but I felt that I would rather be dead than become just an echo of someone. That was not a figure of speech. Those thoughts would have come as a complete surprise to my mother, for in her life she had found that her ways were best ways to have, and she would have been mystified as to how someone who came from inside her would want to be anyone different from her (KINCAID, 1991, p.36).

Lucy rejects proffered roles and tries to follow a powerful instinct to find a self that feels authentic and not determined by social conventions. She, rather than finding herself trapped between worlds, finds herself with no world at all. All she has is her will and courage to never surrender or capitulate. In her home her mother remains dominant, and in the United States, although having escaped her mother's reach, she has not escaped the magnetic field of her mother's power. The mother's power grows even larger when viewed from a distance. She seems to be a goddess and not a human. Lucy does not dare to open her mother's letters:

> I had, at that very moment, a collection of letters from her in my room, nineteen in all, one for every year of my life, unopened. I thought of opening the letters, not to read them but to burn them at the four corners and send them back to her unread. It was an act, I had read somewhere, of one lover rejecting another, but I could not trust myself to go too near them. I knew if I read only one, I would die from longing for her (KINCAID, 1991, p.91).

Like Kincaid's other works, *Lucy* offers another exploration of Kincaid's love/hate relationship with her mother; however it opens new avenues for Kincaid's fiction, particularly in its examination of the narrator's search for a medium for artistic expression. *Lucy* is Kincaid's portrait of the artist as a young woman (GEBERT, 1999, p.117). We may say that Lucy, being aware of the dominant and oppressive forces working in the Antiguan and the American society, associates the figure of her mother to the figure of the colonizer, of the patriarchal institutions, and of the stereotypes that try to shape people and erase their differences. This might be the reason why Lucy and her mother are not able to have a harmonious relationship.

In a way we can say that Lucy considers her mother a traitor to her sex. In one passage she explains that when she most needed her mother's understanding about her wishes and plans for the future, her mother had surrendered to patriarchal rules:

> I was an only child until I was nine years old, and then in the space of five years my mother had three male children; each time a children was born, my mother and father announced to each other with great seriousness that the new child would go to university in England and study to become a doctor or lawyer or someone who would occupy an important and influential position in society. I did not mind my father saying these things about his sons, his own kind, and leaving me out. My father did not know me at all; I did not expect him to imagine a life for me filled with excitement and triumph. But my mother knew me well, as well as she knew herself: I, at the time, even thought of us as identical; and whenever I saw her eyes fill up with tears at the thought of how proud she would be at some deed her sons had accomplished, I felt a sword go through my heart, for there was no accompanying scenario, in which she saw me, her only identical offspring, in a remotely similar situation. To myself I then began to call her Mrs. Judas, and I began to plan a separation from her that even then I suspected would never be complete (KINCAID, 1991, p.130-131).

According to Gebert, her resistance is focused primarily on her mother, because she symbolizes all the limitations Lucy has fought against. Her mother becomes a foil to Lucy because, having lived her life within the confines of what tradition and colonial mores demanded, she takes for granted that her daughter would accept those limitations, too. In Lucy's eyes her greatest flaw is to dream on behalf of her sons while reducing her daughter to the most mundane expectations. She represents and speaks for the authorities that will try to keep Lucy "in her place" as a young black colonial woman of very limited means. It is in her rebellion against her mother that Lucy enacts her quest for independence that will make it possible for her to write. Lucy portrays herself as an artist to be discovered, turning her own history into the narrative of resistance with which she has filled a notebook (GEBERT, 1999, p.139).

In many aspects Lucy and her mother's relationship can be a metaphor for hybridism. Lucy will never be able to detach herself completely from her mother as well as she will never be able to forget the Antiguan, British or American cultures. They are part of her. They are inside her as her mother blood is, too. They help to shape her identities as her mother's blood and teachings also do. What differentiates Lucy from many other post-modern protagonists is the fact that she is aware of all these aspects.

IV-TRANSCULTURAL/INTERCULTURAL TRANSLATION: *LUCY* AND *QUICKSAND*

> Differences of habit and language are nothing at all
> if our aims are identical and our hearts are open.
>
> J.K. Rowling[3]

IV.1 Helga Crane translating the American and the Danish Cultures

According to Gayatri Spivak, language may be one of many elements that allow us to make sense of things and of ourselves. Making sense of ourselves is what produces identity. One of the ways to get around the confines of one's identity is to work at someone else's title, as one works with a language that belongs to many others. This is one of the seductions of translating. It is a simple miming of the responsibility to the trace of the other in the self (SPIVAK, 2004, p. 369).

Sherry Simon states that it was only a question of time until cultural studies "discovered" translation, since the globalization of culture means that we all live in translated worlds. The spaces of knowledge we inhabit assemble ideas and styles of multiple origins and transnational communications and frequent migrations make every cultural site a crossroads and a meeting place. The hybridization of diasporic culture and the mobility of all identities are central to cultural studies. Language, as well as the position of speakers within dominant codes, has acquired an important role in this panorama. Languages are understood to be central pieces in the processes by which individual and collective selves are built. Translation

[3] ROWLING, J.K. *Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire*. London: Scholastic, 2002.

is most often used by cultural studies' theorists as a metaphor, a rhetorical figure describing on the one hand the increasing internationalization of cultural production and on the other the fate of those who struggle between two worlds and two languages. Women translate themselves into the language of patriarchy; migrants strive to translate their past into the present. Translation has come to stand for the difficulty of access to language, of a sense of exclusion from the codes of the ones who are in power. For the ones who feel they are marginal to the authoritarian codes of Western culture, translation stands as a metaphor for their ambiguous experience in the dominant culture. Migrants begin to define themselves as translated beings. Cultural Studies bring to translation an understanding of the complexities of gender and culture and emphasize the multiplicity of languages circulating in the world today, the competition between local and global forms of expression, the reactualizations of cultural forms. They have irrevocably put to rest the myth of pure difference, showing that the passage from one location to another always involves displacements and changes in the relationship between terms and people (SIMON, 1996, p.134-136).

As it has already been mentioned in this thesis, Stuart Hall states that in the entire globe cultural not fixed identities are emerging, being the product of complicated crossovers and cultural mixes which are increasingly common in a globalized world. Translation would describe those identity formations which cut across and intersect natural frontiers, and which are composed of people who have been dispersed forever from their homelands. Such people retain strong links with their original places and their traditions, but they have no illusion of a return to the past. They are obliged to face the new cultures they inhabit, without simply assimilating to them and losing their identities completely. They will never be unified in the old sense because they belong at the same time to several homes. People belonging to *cultures of hybridity* have had to renounce the dream of rediscovering any kind of cultural purity, or ethnic absolutism. They are irrevocably translated (HALL, 2005, p.629).

Apart from Nella Larsen herself, one example of these translated beings is Helga Crane, the protagonist of *Quicksand.* In the novel we may say that Helga Crane translates the American and the Danish cultures becoming a translation herself. In the novel we have many moments where Helga struggles to translate the world in which she lives. One of these moments is when she is living in Harlem and is subordinate to a black elite obsessed by the question of the color but that mimics the white elite. In other words, a black elite who is always translating the white North-American culture. A black elite that opposed the mixing of

whites and blacks. In order to survive Helga has to surrender to translation and ends up by hiding, negating, her origins, never saying a word about her white mother to anyone and passing as entirely black to that society. But Helga, differently from her friend Anne Grey, who is always wearing fashioned clothes similar to white women's clothes and is always listening to whites' songs, decides to resist in some aspects and attaches herself to what she considers not white: she does not wear white women's fashioned clothes and she listens to Jazz.

In another event, Helga goes to Denmark to live with her white aunt and uncle, but this culture is too different from the American one and Helga has already internalized many aspects and prejudices of the American culture - she has translated them. When she arrives to Denmark she enjoys the freedom of living among whites without being scorned, but, although not wanting to be treated as an exotic being she wears the colorful clothes her aunt chooses for her and starts going to white Danish parties. On the other hand, when we think that Helga is finally translating the Danish culture by mimicking it, the American black culture she translated in Harlem starts to play its role. Her aunt Katrina tries to arrange Helga's marriage with the Danish artist Axel Olsen. Helga steps back based on what she internalized in Harlem. She has internalized American views of miscegenation and her Danish relatives cannot understand her. She asks her Danish aunt whether she doesn't think mixed marriage is wrong and her aunt replies that is a foolish question: Danes do not think such things in relation to individuals. To her aunt, Helga reveals the reason why she could not think of marrying a white man. According to her, such marriages only brought trouble to children. Katrina, her aunt, is not able to understand this reasoning. Axel Olsen asks Helga to marry him, but she responds that she is not for sale to any white man. She explains to him that she fears he might grow ashamed of a marriage with a black woman, and that he might come to hate black people as her mother did. Axel's differences from white American men appear in his incredulity about her fears: "I have offered you marriage, Helga Crane, and you answer me with some strange talk of race and shame. What nonsense is this?"(LARSEN, 2002, p. 90).

Helga is at a loss to explain something that in the United States would go without saying. After watching a Circus show where the performers were black and the audience white, she decides to go back to the United States as if she had realized that Danish people were interested in her because she was not one of them. Helga is misplaced again, as she will always be. The more she travels, the more she translates different cultures and patriarchal

codes. In another moment we find Helga living in the south of the United States, in a black community, married to Reverend Green, and surrendering to all patriarchal expectations.

We might say that to Helga, the option of tradition, or going back to her roots, is never available, since she is the product of a translation, being physically and culturally a hybrid, the daughter of a white Danish mother and a "colored" father who lived in the United States. Even if she wanted, to which root would she return?

IV.2- Lucy Translating the Antiguan and the American Cultures

Another example of the postcolonial translated beings is Lucy, Jamaica Kincaid's character. Being an autobiographical creation, Lucy, as well as Kincaid, embodies an eternal conflict lived by a great number of postcolonial beings: the conflict of being in an in-between space in relation to tradition and translation. Although being exposed to a new culture and to new things in America, Lucy sometimes faces her memories and the teachings she learned in Antigua, being them Antiguan or taught by the British colonizers. To establish the contrast between her new environment and her West Indian home, she starts her story telling of the first encounter with elevators and refrigerators in New York. Lucy seems to enjoy the opportunity of a rupture with her past and is amazed by what she finds in America. Everything is different and big.

On the other hand, Lucy starts to feel homesick and to remember events and things she learned in Antigua. In the second chapter of the novel we can notice, for example, the different significance of the daffodils to both Lucy and her employer, Mariah. As it was mentioned before, while Mariah delights in the expectation of the daffodils, pushing their way out from the ground as a sign of early spring, Lucy is reminded of an old poem by the English Romantic poet William Wordsworth about the daffodils, which she was required to read in the old British colonial system of education before independence in Antigua. For children being schooled in the West Indies in the early part of the twentieth century, like Kincaid herself, this poem glorifying flowers that were not found in the Caribbean became emblematic

of a colonial system that imposed its own values and cultural standards through a system of education that fell outside local control.

Lucy fights against British teachings and we may say that she translates them, mimes them, in a way they could assure her survival in the Antiguan society, but she rejects and hates them and starts to try to erase all those teachings from her mind because they were not originally from her culture, the Antiguan. In another moment of the story, when Mariah and Lewis get a divorce, Lucy remembers the baths in the Obeah tradition her mother would give her in order to protect her from other women who wanted to kill Lucy and her mother in other to marry her father. This is a moment of going back to tradition, since Lucy seems to doubt it but she still fears the obeah tradition and associates what happened in her life to what happens in the life of the children she is taking care of.

Lucy always remembers the day she asked her mother what the origin of her name was. Her mother told her that she had been named after Lucifer, the one who was expelled from paradise. Lucy starts to associate this story with the story of a book she had read, *Paradise Lost*, written by John Milton. She starts to feel as if she had been expelled from paradise, Antigua, and was forced to live in a strange sphere, America. In many ways, although she denies Antigua and her mother because of the power the British rule has over them, many times she is caught by her mind traps which express her connections with the Antiguan Obeah traditions and the British culture. She lives between translation and tradition, but tradition offers her a paradoxical situation, since going back to her Antiguan roots would mean surrendering to the British rule, something she really despises but cannot always run away from.

Since a translation is not just the act of finding synonyms of words from one language into another language, but a very complex process that should take into account the culture of the language being translated, Lucy cannot pass from one culture to the other, since she is a hybrid being, full of complex relations with history, the cultures she knows and the other human beings around her. At the same time she belongs to all cultures she belongs to none of them. In America she starts to work and to live an independent life in an apartment she shares with a friend, something very different from the life women had in Antigua and the plans her mother had made for her, but she also suffers Americans' prejudice against her non white skin color.

FINAL WORDS

When I started to write this thesis I stated that the analysis of both novels would be focused on how the diasporic movements and the family relations influence on the construction of women's identities in Jamaica Kincaid's *Lucy* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*. This analysis calls our attention to the urgency contemporary societies should pay attention to in order to understand the diversity of cultures, people and ideas as something that should be achieved without separating or labelling people and cultures. This work also tried to destroy some myths, showing that no culture is superior to other cultures as, unfortunately, many people still think them to be, and it intends to have a social and political function as it shows that oppression, of the so considered ex-centric people and women in general, still exists and that some groups still try to impose their culture on other groups by trying to erase or silence the manifestation of their cultures.

This thesis is also concerned with highlighting women's enterprise to question all patriarchal codes that try to limit them to the roles of mothers and wives through literature, proving that literature is still one of the most powerful weapons of humankind's history. It is supposed to be a work that calls our attention to the process of building African-descendant literature, since the struggle of slave writers to prove they were capable of writing "good literature" up to Nella Larsen's and Jamaica Kincaid's critiques of their societies in very well built novels. It is also aimed at showing that African-descendant literature is an example of the many successful literatures which testify against their captors and bear witness to the urge to be free. They have conquered a legion of passionate readers and space in many academic curricula in the last decades.

While I was working on this thesis I started to ask myself many questions concerning ex-centric literature and African-descendant literature, especially Afro-Brazilian literature. I have already started some research, and, have begun understanding that questions of identity, hybridity and patriarchal oppression, among other questions, are also very strong in Afro-Brazilian literature. If all turns well, I intend to research more about these questions and about the two authors studied in this Thesis in a PhD Course. I believe that there is still much to be said, but I would like this thesis to become a tool to help other students and researchers in their works to build a better world for all human beings.

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ANNEX

Nella Larsen

Jamaica Kincaid