A Postcolonial Focus on the Margins:

Discussing Gender and Identity in the Literature of Women from the Americas.

MA degree in Inter-American Studies

Liliane do Espírito Santo
Kt.: 08011987-3869

Supervisor: Dr. Jessica Murphy
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Abstract

Imperialism and colonial practices dominated an entire system of representations, configuring ideological structures guided by a supposed essentialism, which, in turn, justified the oppression of women and the black population based on gender and race. This thesis analyses theories that focus on a pluralistic understanding of the world. In the context of postcolonialism, the review of cultural criticism through the literature of prominent women of the Americas proposes a critical reading about the continuity between colonial relations of domination and oppression, underscoring the dual colonisation of women. The assessment of the works Child of the Dark (1960), by Carolina Maria de Jesus, The Bluest Eye (1970), by Toni Morrison, and The Handmaid’s Tale (1987), by Margaret Atwood, reveals a socio-historical understanding of colonialism and its repercussions in contemporary times. Likewise, they indicate the necessity to give more visibility to literary works written by, and about, subjects in the margins. The analysis of their authorial voices aims to identify how each of their perspectives reveal a literature of social engagement, allowing other subjects to become aware of social injustice still very present in the Americas, through the context of their narratives. Thus, the primary objective of this thesis is to reflect upon the transformative potential of the literary text, as well as the origin and formation of the speech that expresses the subjectivity of the one who writes. Moreover, how in the relationship between writer and reader, the author’s voice compromised to the most diverse social realities have the highest potential of evoking other marginalized voices through literary practice.

Keywords: Postcolonialism; Feminism; Inter-American Literature; Identity; Borders.
# Table of Contents

**Introduction** .......................................................................................................................... 1

**The Colonial Heritage of the Americas** .................................................................................. 4

**Postcolonial Criticism** ........................................................................................................... 7

**The Repression of Postcolonial Women’s Identities** ............................................................... 16

**Literature Review** .................................................................................................................... 21

**The Marginal Narrative of Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus** ............ 24

**Identity and Agency in The Bluest Eye.** ................................................................................... 37

**A Slave Narrative on the White Woman in The Handmaid’s Tale** ........................................... 49

**Discussion** ............................................................................................................................... 59

**Conclusion** .............................................................................................................................. 63

**Works Cited** ............................................................................................................................ 65
A Postcolonial Focus on the Margins:
Gender and Identity in the Literature of Women from the Americas.

Introduction

Outlining the importance of gender in the process of constructing postcolonial identities, and understanding how it influences contemporaneity, becomes necessary since the concept of gender brings an essential contribution to postcolonial theory. Initially, postcolonialism did not consider the implications of gender when discussing dichotomies of power. Therefore, it is crucial to regard gender as a form of domination, a fundamental category in the institution and foundation of colonialism and the idea of modernity.

From the intersection between postcolonial studies and the feminist theory of resistance, such as Black Feminism, a postcolonial feminist episteme is built. To thinking of colonialism as a central source of struggles and ideas of resistance in the Americas also means to consider the specific needs of women who suffer conjoined forms of oppression. Furthermore, reflecting on hegemonic thoughts on feminism and the colonialism are important exercises in times that “the coloniality of gender” (Lugones) manifests itself concretely, especially in the lives of women of colour who live on borders, and in places of social difference. Considering Lugones’ argument that the end of patriarchy is only possible from the break with universality (“Toward a Decolonial Feminism” 1), a new demand of epistemology in a new feminist horizon is created. Its characteristics, needs and sources of resistance emerge from the axis of white, Eurocentric, universalist, and racist modernity, into a communal, non-hierarchical, and pluralist axis.

The struggles for political emancipation in the Americas has deep connections – and position itself against – the continuing imperialist logic which perpetuates the control and oppression of specific groups, based on nationalist ideas that create a vast mosaic of social inequalities still present in contemporary times. Regions throughout the Americas have often shown a higher level of multiculturalism as well as inequality in various aspects. Hence, what all the societies in this region have in common is the fact that a colonial past has profoundly affected their history. The colonial essence of these relations is evident in the various cases of domination and oppression defined by the establishment of hierarchical boundaries such as gender, racial/ethnic, class, creed, and so forth.

In this regard, colonial literature has a presumed legitimacy and influence since it has been a primary form of registration and propagation of knowledge from colonised regions for centuries. Further, the concept of literature has an unavoidable association with works
elevated to a literary canon. This ideological association of literature itself with specific works of a literary tradition obfuscates the actual social and historical role of storytelling and thus constructs a limited and reduced concept of literature. Nevertheless, a fundamental issue caused by literary standardising, which is focus of this research, is how canonical literature, a set of works held in high regard by its allegedly superior aesthetic quality/form, has failed to reflect multiple identities that escape white Eurocentric norms. The literary works valued as mandatory reading at various levels of education has undermined the necessity of plural representations.

In this sense, traditional literature scarcely approaches the richness of topics which postcolonial literature does with its ability to present a better understanding of the historical and social context of the culture they aim to represent. There lies the importance of diversity in literature. Racism – and, in fact, any prejudice – arises from the assumption that homogeneity is the natural state of things. Therefore, literature cannot be limited to a single perspective when it is not intended for a specific audience. If this happens, literature turns into a vehicle that propagates equivocate representations, therefore, contributes to the sustainment of prejudice.

The literary production of postcolonial individuals can respond to imperialism by bringing different views and experiences to the fore, ones that might challenge or replace a European perspective. Literature that present distinguished, but equally valued, perspectives to the culture which they aim to represent in their narrative can become communication vehicles of identarian empowerment. Nevertheless, the literature produced by marginalised groups, which once had no institutional or intellectual legitimacy, was – and still is – often ignored in academic studies. Consequently, the academic environment confirms the legitimacy of Eurocentric literature, if it does not counterbalance the promotion of the literature – anglophone literature, for instance – made outside the European thought and axis.

Hence, this research intends to assess later 20th-century narratives through a critical reading of the continuity of colonial relations of control and oppression of women in the Americas. Women throughout the continent – especially non-white marginalised women – suffer combined intersections of prejudice not only locally, but also abroad. Therefore, a study of the literature by women from the Americas effectively illustrates the conditions of peoples from different regions through the analysis of how the structured relationships between racism, class, and sexism generate common forms of oppression. In societies with actively enforced patriarchal/religious traditions, such as the Americas, women do not have
the same status as men from birth. They must be agreeable – understanding, polite, and motherly – to receive overall sympathy, which does no save them from being subject to various forms of violence based on gender. However, social pressure and the fear of violence can overshadow their strengths and their frustrations. Thus, when women rise from the place of objects to become the enunciators and protagonists of their own story, they contest a part of history which silenced them. Moreover, by opening the cracks in the homogenous surface of canonical literature women contribute effectively in sparking necessary discussions and positive social changes.

To this effect, the assessment of the intersection of themes present in the literary works of women from the Americas exposes the liminality of gender and race, a blurring of identities and boundaries that speaks directly to the tensions that have been building in the region – and in the world. The works here presented: Carolina de Jesus’ Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus (1962), Toni Morrison’s The Bluest Eye (1970), and Margaret Atwood’s The Handmaid’s Tale (1986), echo present-day worries about political and social issues currently discussed in the region, regardless of whether these concerns are broached in an autobiographical work or dystopic fiction. Further, they all denounce the danger of categorization by class, colour and/or gender in our societies. These texts combined create a panorama of the typical struggles of women throughout the Americas and the significance of their voice in the pursuit of civil rights and equality through their literary storytelling.
The Colonial Heritage of the Americas

Inter-American Studies rely on the interplay of collective and individual identities. That is, to create a comparative study that embraces the Americas in all its diversity – and concomitantly explores what is common to and specific in the American continental experience – means to transcend the traditional definitions of borders. In a broader sense, borders, boundaries, and frontiers bear a connection to any national, political, and geographical division and, concomitantly, to divisions among diverse ethnic, economic, and cultural groups. In this thesis, specific markers of difference, such as race, class, gender, location, and their representations, are subject to analysis from a postcolonial perspective. More precisely, a historical, socio-cultural, and literary analysis of 20th-century female literature in the American continent will be used to analyse the three texts mentioned above.

The notion of borders encompasses geographical, cultural, historical, and political dimensions. According to Edward Said, “men have always divided the world up into regions having either real or imagined distinction from each other” (Orientalism 39). The idea of borders as boundaries, zones, or territorial divisions that separate places and people are vastly exemplified in imperial maps – the cartographies that establish the colonial dominions in the so-called overseas territory. The frontier is also the limit from which spaces of enunciation are constructed; it is the place from which the subject speaks within the limitations of subjective experiences and perspective – or if either a subject has legitimacy to speak for others. This tenuous difference delimits an essential form of power since the one who retains the right to speak to a broad audience, can do so from a position of victimisation or one of agency and empowerment.

During the colonial period of the Americas, European domination subjected more than three-quarters of the world to a complex ideological system of otherness and inferiority. Consequently, the written history of the American continent begins with the arrival of different foreign groups to different regions. What these groups of explorers had in common, apart from their European origin, was their perception of the Americas as a New World, without a past, or earnest proprietors, and ready to be exploited. These widespread beliefs implied the inexistence of an authentic history of the American Continent that precedes or excludes European participation. Thus, the history of an affluent region, culturally and otherwise, along with the land of uncountable indigenous ethnic groups, has been merely reduced in anthropological studies to what is now called the Pre-Columbian Era.
When told from a foreign perspective, American continental history creates a tale about the discovery of a savage, lawless, and scarcely inhabited land as the official history of the birth of this continent. Furthermore, it is a history that is still consecrated in yearly celebrations such as the Discovery of Brazil and Columbus Day. After securing possession of their territories in the Americas, European settlers applied the same rules of division and subcategorisation to the historical struggle of other cultural groups that later composed the region. The political and geographic disputes between France, England, Spain in the Americas still cause conflict in attempts to understand the cultural hegemony of one group over another. However, whatever the imperialist dispute may be, the aboriginal peoples of the Americas, the seized and enslaved peoples of Africa, and the diasporic peoples who arrived at the Americas after the First and Second World War were all poorly acknowledged and, most of the times, ignored in terms of equality and progress. The consequence is that the erasure of these marginalised groups’ personal and collective stories has led to the institutional establishment of inequality throughout the continent.

The establishment of imperialist values endures through time in a political, social, and economic continuum, transmitting a legacy of prejudice that persists through generations until the present. The relations of power around the globe acquire new patterns of divisions: a vertical hierarchy of the developed substitutes the previous dichotomy of the Old and the New World – First Countries – in the North and the underdeveloped – Third World countries – of the South. That is, these nomenclatures are developed by cultures that arbitrarily locate themselves in the geographic centre of the globe, classifying others as sub-regions and subcultures. These nomenclatures both reinforce economic and political hierarchies, but also social, cultural, and ideological ones. However, they are easily disputed, since it is perceptible that universal equality is far from the reach of any so-called developed country. Besides, the idea that there is a point to which a country can consider itself fully developed must be disputed, since development must be perceived as a continuous process of transformation and adaptation.

The geographical and political division of the American continent into North America, Central, and South America is acknowledged worldwide. However, Anglophone countries, influenced by the United States, often use the term “American” to define what is from, or what is qualified as belonging to the USA, and subdividing the American continent into two: North America and South America. However, a predominant view in the various regions of the world has the definition of America as a single continent (Lewis and Wigen
The danger of the United States seizing the qualification of being American is that all other regions then are perceived as subcategories, that is, South America, Latin America, French America, and so forth. This example demonstrates the strong influence that the United States has over the continent—one that developed, in the 20th century, into a new colonial form known as Neocolonialism. Often in Brazil, and other South American countries, the use of the term United States is preferred over American or North American in order to prevent the detachment of the Central and South regions from the term and thus from what it means to be American. In addition, this designation allows for the differentiation between the US and Canada, for although both nations are considered to be developed countries, each one has very distinct policies concerning political positions on immigration, multiculturalism, and economic relations in the North and within the continent. Therefore, the specificity and bearing of each of these nomenclatures are of immense relevance when dealing with the policies and economic specifications of the region. Etymologically and culturally speaking, the use of language, nomenclatures, and their developments have vital importance to the dynamics of power relations in the region throughout its history.

The peoples of independent nations are still looking for a path to political development, one free from the imperialist influences that for so long have degraded their populations. With this in mind, postcolonial societies are continuously developing their aesthetics, free from the impositions of colonial tradition. Thus, the Spanish literature of Latin American and Caribbean countries, the Portuguese in Brazil, the English, and French—and the mixing/mixture of the two—in Canada, and the Caribbean as well as the Pidgin and Creole literary works from the Americas can all be postcolonial literature. However, the roots of imperialism are much more profound.

Imperialism is justified in the presumed superiority of the figure of the western white man through the spread of an ideology of territorial control that relies on the use of power, often resorting to violence whenever it is possible. Regarding state policies, imperialism imposes the submission to the concept of “Otherness” (Said Orientalism 21) disguised as a civilizing mission. Noticeably, civilization is a term frequently employed to signify a series of discriminatory political and cultural ideologies used strategically to marginalise the colonised peoples of the Americas. According to their imperialist perspective and under the pretence of belonging to civilised nations, European writers constructed and imposed ethnic and cultural images of the colonised countries onto the latter. As a result, the place of enunciation arose from the colonialists’ prejudice, one that was later perpetuated in their
stories. As a consequence, most canonical reading from the Americas do not represent the multiplicity of cultures, stories, and opinions of the population of this immense continent.

Although colonialism has become, to some degree, a past policy, the term postcolonialism does not represent a linear and absolute rupture from the colonial period. Instead, it proposes to make sense of the continuity of colonial relations of power during present times (Hall *The Fateful Triangle* 101). Postcolonial studies configure an epistemological field of critical approaches that study the effects of colonisation in current cultures and societies, in a set of theoretical contributions specially developed by literary and cultural studies (Bhabha; Hall; Said; Spivak). Inspired by poststructuralism, deconstructivism, and postmodernism, postcolonial theorists propose the dissolution of dichotomies and hierarchies that limit cultural identification, by highlighting the processes of essentialization and domination constructed historically since the colonial period, and maintained after independence.

**Postcolonial Criticism**

At first, the development of the literature of postcolonial individuals occurred as an imitation of European standards, linked to an essentialist and universalist form of literary criticism (Fanon *The Wretched of the Earth* 236-237). In contrast to the New Criticism¹, Postcolonial theory acknowledges the severe nature of colonial rule in the East, in Africa, and in the Americas in literature. Further, the theory aims to explore the representation of cultures and individuals made by privileged groups and used as instruments of domination, as well as the psychological effects of imperialism and decolonisation. Further, postcolonial criticism favours the literary works related to the resistance of native peoples to colonial domination and looks at their condition, post-independence, in literary texts. Provoked by the inability of old theories and categories to explain the world, postcolonial thought favours a critical approach that seeks to overcome a crisis of understanding. Thus, what becomes distinctive in postcolonialism is its ability to reassess the period of colonization and the present time from a “reading of the margin”, that is, the underlying themes of imperialist narratives (Hall *The Fateful Triangle* 109).

Postcolonialism, as a term, originated in discussions about the decolonization and independence of African and Asian colonies after the Second World War, in theories

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¹ New Criticism, is an early movement of literary theory that emerged in the 1920s in the United States. It proposes to separate the text and the author so that the text is an object in itself.
produced by intellectuals who had their origins in then-known-as Third World countries. These theorists have established their careers in Cultural Studies, as well as the English Language and Anthropology departments of English universities, and later, US universities. The expected result from this conception is that postcolonial studies have English as its main language of study and publishing. Consequently, it has a larger space and circulation in the English-speaking world.

An important derivation of postcolonialism – as an argumentative community – was the South Asian Subaltern Studies Group, aimed at dismantling colonial and nationalist reasoning in India while restoring to subaltern subjects their status as plural and decentralised groups. However, despite a long colonial history in Latin America and reactions to the effects of colonisation, intellectuals of this region did not figure expressively in the field of postcolonial studies. Accordingly, theorists such as Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, and Gayatri Spivak – some of the most significant names in the academic field of postcolonialism– make little reference to Latin America in their studies.

Due in part to the silence of postcolonial theory to the intellectual contributions in Latin America, at the turn of the millennium, a network of Latin American intellectuals who concentrate their research around the topics of modernity and coloniality was formed around the common interest in the colonial effects in Latin America. In this sense, it is imperative to regard that the critique of postcolonialism as a paradigm to Inter-American studies lies in the risk of it becoming an empty signifier if it is meant to contain and accommodate all possible historical and local experiences within postcolonial regions. If this were to happen, Latin America thought would simply change the context of postcolonial criticism, instead of formulating its own terms in postcolonial discussions. In other words, by proposing new regional epistemologies, Latin American theorists seek not only to distance themselves from a European model but also from all forms of knowledge that are proposed to be universal, be it postcolonialism or any other contribution to cultural studies and analysis.

Assuming that decolonial narratives from Latin America have existed since the period of the wars for independence, they were an intellectual production that preceded the dialogue with the post-structuralism of anti-colonial thought, and yet did not, decolonize/prevent colonialism. Based on a current concept known as Modernity/Coloniality, this term is used by Aníbal Quijano and developed by Walter Mignolo. The concept promotes the idea that these two terms are inseparable, as different sides of the same wall (Quijano “Coloniality and Modernity;” Mignolo). This concept forms a connection between Latin American criticism and deconstruction inspired by postmodernism – the latter being source of inspiration to
cultural studies and postcolonial/subaltern studies, such as the gender related studies by Maria Lugones.

The dominance of the European epistemology prevents the recognition of different perspectives while disregarding the knowledge produced by other groups or authors. The discourse itself constitutes the basis of what is perceived as reality in a system of affirmation established by dominant social groups. It is the discourse of a source from where the world can be known, determining what is truth through the imposition of scientific knowledge, disciplines, values, and beliefs over the repressed groups (Ashcroft et al.). Postmodern thinkers, such as Michel Foucault, have proposed a shift from the analysis that favours the tradition to the analysis of the discourse, mainly, the “gaps” and “ruptures” in discourse that break with traditions, rather than perpetuate it (Hutcheon 375). In “The Subject and Power”, Foucault recalls that “in order to understand what power relations are about, perhaps we should investigate the forms of resistance and attempts made to dissociate these relations” (780). From power oppositions such as men on women, Foucault argues that it would not be enough to say that these are namely anti-authoritarian struggles; however, we should try to define more precisely what they have in common.

Comprehending how this form of power applies to everyday life, how it categorizes individuals at the same time as it places them within their own individuality, Foucault understands that this characteristic of discourse is a form of power that makes subjects ‘subjective.’ To Foucault, there are two meanings for the word subject: the first one is the idea of being subject to someone else’s control or being dependent; the second one is the conception of the subject as attached to his own identity by a consciousness or self-knowledge (6).

Foucault argues that this form of power results in distinct types of struggles. There are those in which there is resistance against forms of domination, such as struggles against forms of exploitation, as well as the separation of individuals from the products derived from their production; then, there are those that bind individuals to a preconceived identity and subject them to the will of others. To illustrate his thought, Foucault suggests that struggles against different forms of ethnic or social domination have prevailed, although economic exploitation has been a critical factor, and one of the leading causes of revolt. In his own words,

I suspect that it is not the first time that our society has been confronted with this kind of struggle. All those movements which took place in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and which had the Reformation
as their main expression and result should be analyzed as a great crisis of the Western experience of subjectivity and a revolt against the kind of religious and moral power which gave form, during the Middle Ages, to this subjectivity. (782).

Since the sixteenth century, the reason this type of struggle prevailed in our society, according to Foucault, is owing to a new political form of power that has developed continuously. This new form of power would be the State. Though, the idea of the State would be linked to “a kind of political power which ignores individuals, looking only at the interests of the totality or, I should say, of a class or a group among the citizens” (782). To think about colonial power based on the Foucauldian notion of forms of power means to think of a complex system of symbols and practices that organise the existence and the social reproduction of colonial relations of production. Post-structuralist and deconstructionist thought, such as Foucault’s, was trendy in European literary criticism during the 1970s and had considerable influence in the method of postcolonial authors.

The theorist who most directly influenced the work of post-colonial critics, Frantz Fanon, was a psychiatrist, political theorist, and an African revolutionary originally from Martinique who joined the Algerian revolutionary struggle against the French settlers. Fanon’s works foreshadowed the foundation of postcolonial studies on race, nationalism, economics, geopolitics, and cultural identity in an active and combative form. With the use of historical interpretation, Fanon wrote *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952). In this work, the author applied psychoanalysis and psychoanalytic theory to explain the feelings of inadequacy that black people experience in the white world. The process of losing their native cultural origins, and embracing the culture of the colony, has formed an inferiority complex in the mind of the black subject, who then tries to appropriate and imitate the culture of the coloniser.

Later, in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Fanon argues that the coloniser – in addition to appropriate lands, resources, and ruining communities and institutions of the colonised peoples – attacks the culture of those whom they want to control, since culture is the last form of resistance to the coloniser. That is because culture is something less tangible than land and resources; yet, it is more effective as a way of undermining identities and systems of values which are distinct from the coloniser. Within colonial power, “the native’s reactions are not unanimous” says the author (Fanon *Wretched of the Earth* 236-237). Fanon affirms that the meanings of traditions are continually changing, and in the context of a revolutionary struggle for national liberation, even more so. According to Fanon, “while at
the beginning the postcolonial intellectual used to produce his work to be read exclusively by
the oppressor [...] now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his
people. It is only from that moment that we can speak of a national literature” (240).
Fanon refers to a combative stage of struggle, where the colonised subject acquires a greater
awareness of the the relationship between the culture they inhabit and the struggle for change.
Therefore, any universal truth is open to being questioned while no fundamental right must
be taken for granted.

Fanon’s ideas inspired various social movements around the world, such as the
Nuevo Cine Latinoamericano and their manifestos by Glauber Rocha, Fernando Solanas, and
Octavio Getino. He also profoundly influenced various theoretical literary works, such as
Orientalism (1978) and Culture and Imperialism (1993) by Edward Said, In Other Worlds
(1987) and The Post-Colonial Critic (1990) by Gayatri Spivak, and Nation and Narration
(1990) by Homi Bhabha. They formulated theories for the analysis of the relationship
between imperialism and culture and paved the way for an independent postcolonial thought.
These seminal works and others examine how the colonial discourse worked as an instrument
of power, offering many necessary inquiries about the end of imperialism in a contemporary
context.

Members of society who were the subject of any “cultural trauma” (Caruth) – such
as mass violence, famine, forced migration, slavery, among others – become, systematically,
the subject of statistics of media and government agencies which helps them create more
objective data for informational use. However, those instances of trauma mark the collective
memories of these social groups permanently “changing their future identity in fundamental
and irrevocable ways” (Alexander et al.), and turning them into statistics is a double form of
dehumanisation. As an alternative, rather than seeing these individuals as numbers, the stories
of their lives must become part of everyday news, parliament discussions, academic studies
that consider their perspective and protagonism. Furthermore, society would be required – or
instead, encouraged – to acknowledge that the wants and fears of people from all origins and
ancestries are relatable and thus realise that difference should not be feared, but embraced.

In this perspective, the place of enunciation of an individual has a direct relation to
their personal experience. The place of enunciation concerns the power which enable the
deconstruction of the narratives controlled by a “universal” enunciator which, in the
Americas, is patriarchal, colonial, Eurocentric, and Christian. According to Bhabha:
The reason a cultural text or system of meaning cannot be sufficient unto itself is that the act of cultural enunciation—the place of utterance—is crossed by the difference of writing or écriture. This has less to do with what anthropologists might describe as varying attitudes to symbolic systems within different cultures than with the structure of symbolic representation — not the content of the symbol or its “social function,” but the structure of symbolization. (“Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences” 1)

That is, the social place also becomes one of the conditions of the construction of any discourse, which is the fruit of the social relations of each person – in this case, each author – since everyone speaks from a context. Further, the place we occupy in society will bring us different experiences and perspectives, as well as determine our opportunities and possibilities of transcendence.

As a research field that seeks to systematise concepts and interpretive categories, postcolonial theory, has a very recent existence. Nonetheless, the process of decoloniality consists of a practice of opposition and intervention, whose actual existence began when the first colonial subject of the modern/colonial world reacted against imperial enterprises during the late 1400s. Further, without precisely using the term “coloniality,” it was possible to identify the idea that revolves around this concept throughout the tradition of revolutionaries and black writers. As an example, we can simultaneously find this idea in authors such as W.E.B. Du Bois, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Angela Davis, bell hooks, among others.

The place of the beginning of the capital / patriarchal / Christian / colonial European system in the Americas has significant repercussions for decolonial theorists. The clearest one is the understanding that modernity was not a project managed within Europe with origins in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and the Industrial Revolution to which colonialism was just an addition. Contrary to this interpretation which sees Europe as a container in which all the characteristics and positive traits described as modern would be found, colonialism was the essential condition of formation of Europe, and of modernity itself. In other words, without colonialism, there would be no modernity. Based on this formulation, the concept of the “coloniality of power” (Quijano) is central to the notion that race and racism constitute the organizing principles of power relations and capital accumulation on a world scale. Within this new world system, the difference between conquerors and conquered was organised within the idea of race. This pattern of power was not restricted to the control of labour, but it also involved the control of the state and its institutions, as well as the production of knowledge.
From the sixteenth century onwards, the formation of Eurocentrism legitimized imperial domination and exploitation through the creation of the dichotomy of the modern/colonial world. Thus, the Other – who was supposedly without religion, literature, history, without development, nor democracy – was seen as opposite to the European. Under the categorization of otherness lies the myth of modernity in which modern civilization has described itself as the most developed and superior. Therefore, according to this line of thought, Europeans carry the moral obligation to civilize cultures seen as primitive, despite their own will. This dominant idea was present in colonial discourses and later in the humanities and social science which, consequently, described the world through effective modern/colonial classifications. Alongside this system of classifications of the peoples of the world, there was also a process of dissimulation, oblivion, and silencing of other forms of knowledge that strengthened oppressed peoples and societies.

The sixteenth century demanded both the creation of a new world economy, and the emergence of the first great discourse of the modern world that would consolidate the conquest of America for the Spanish, Portuguese, French and British empires, among others. A speech that classified while subordinated Native populations, Africans, Muslims, Jews, and others. The context of modernity systematically subcategorize the other, denying their protagonism in the hegemonic descriptions of modernity. Since these descriptions are created according to an European standard, Europe itself becomes the standard place of enunciation.

Therefore, the first discourse that invents, classifies, and “subalternates” the other is also the first discourse of the birth of the modern/colonial world system. From a political-philosophical point of view, this frontier is established by the principle of blood/racial purity that established classifications and hierarchies among religions. This first great discourse that imposed the first colonial differences in the modern/colonial world system goes through successive transformations, such as nineteenth-century scientific racism, the invention of the East, the modern Islamophobia, and so forth. However, the colonial subjects who were on the borders - physical and imaginary - of modernity were not — and are not — passive beings. They can either integrate into the global design of the local stories being forged by the colonizer or reject them. It is in these frontiers, marked by the colonial difference, that the coloniality of power operates, and it is from these frontiers that border thinking can emerge as a decolonial project.

Thinking of borders is not a fundamentalist or essentialist thinking of those who are on the fringe or the frontier of modernity. Precisely because it is on the border that the thought of frontier is in dialogue with modernity— but from the subaltern perspectives.
Postcolonialism theorises boundaries that break with binary oppositions, that is, the-perceived limits around essentialist and fixed ideas. Additionally, the decolonial perspective is the place of enunciation where knowledge is formulated to become part of the perspectives and experiences of subaltern subjects and, further consider boundaries the space where differences are reinvented. This implies a connection between place and thought. However, it is necessary to distinguish the epistemic place and the social place. The fact that a subject sees oneself socially on the oppressed side of power relations does not automatically mean that one thinks epistemically from the subordinate epistemic place. Precisely, the success of the colonial system lies in bringing individuals socially situated on the oppressed side of colonial difference to think epistemically as those in dominant positions. To say that the place of enunciation of a marginalised individual must go against the hegemonic Eurocentric paradigms, even when speaking of a particular location, becomes difficult when the individual assumes her/himself to be universal and apolitical. The place of enunciation is not marked solely by our geopolitical location within the modern/colonial world system, but also marked by racial, class, gender, and sexual hierarchies that affect individuals.

In colonial discourse, the colonized body was seen as a body devoid of will and subjectivity, devoid of voice and ready to serve (hooks *Feminist Theory*). Enslaved bodies were treated as if they were devoid of emotion. The colonized man was reduced to the task of labour, while the colonized woman became the object of pleasure and desire. Through the colonial rationale, the body of the colonized subject had fixed identities. In response, black feminists have argued that dominant epistemology, though presented as neutral and universal, is masculine and white. Given this reality, the individual and collective trajectory of subaltern subjects (especially of black women) is an epistemological privilege from which the thinking of boundaries is also elaborated from a intersectional perspective.

Decoloniality, as we said above, does not constitute abstract universalism, nor does it constitute an academic project that cites its authors and key concepts – in particular, the ones that ascend to the condition of a universal proposal. If this were to happen, we would be faced with intellectual colonialism no longer in Europe, but in the Americas. On the contrary, the decolonial project aims to explore colonial history on the outer borders of the empires — in the Americas, Southeast Asia, North Africa. Besides, it investigates the results of colonial domination on the borders/internal frontiers of the empire; for instance, the Indians in England, the Blacks and Chicanos in the United States, the Blacks and Mestizos in Brazil, the Native Americans in Canada and all regions of the Americas. Above all, the racial axis
established a division of privileges, experiences, and opportunities among blacks and whites as well as indigenous and white populations, as exemplified by the mentioned books.

What is fundamental in the analysis of these political and cultural interpretations and practices is the restitution of the place of enunciation to the theoretical and political production of subjects who, until then, have been deprived of their ability to produce political theories and projects that forward their social situation. To (re-)discover authors who have been overlooked by the popular media outlets and educational curriculum means to learn about the effects of colonial domination through literature as a the register of multiple voices, that fight against marginality, discrimination, inequality while seeking transformation and social development.

The decolonial project proposes to go beyond the Eurocentric version of modernity. Instead of a single idea of modernity, centred on Europe and imposed on the rest of the world, the decolonial process proposes the confrontation Eurocentric modernity through a multitude of decolonial critical responses from the South and the East. This new epistemology is produced not only to those who find themselves geographically to these regions, but those epistemic peoples, cultures, and places that were subaltern to the Eurocentric modernity project. This project offers the possibility of forming a global network in favour of justice, equality, and epistemic diversity. Central to the political-academic project of decoloniality is the recognition of multiple and heterogeneous colonial differences, as well as the multiple and heterogeneous reactions of populations and subaltern subjects to the coloniality of power. Colonial domination would thus be the connector between various epistemic places. Furthermore, decoloniality is an invitation to go beyond the provincialism of the epistemology of European or Europeanised white men who produce the invisibility of other socio-historical experiences.

What is proposed here is the opening to critical dialogue with the purpose of building opportunities for future generations in the struggle for a more egalitarian, democratic, and just society. The search for solutions to patriarchy, racism, colonialism, and capitalism can be sourced from the various local histories, and various epistemic perspectives, to the various contexts in which projects of resistance are staged. Within this development, we would find ourselves no longer within universalisms, but within pluralisms. An invitation to produce a rigorous, non-provincial decolonial knowledge.
The Repression of Postcolonial Women’s Identities

Although some forms of colonialism have ended formally, imperialism and globalisation, however, perpetuate various forms of inequality. Colonialism legitimised specific identities and created structures of oppression that to this day privilege specific groups to the detriment of others. In other words, it rectified identities as a form of control over various cultures and established the hierarchies that govern them. At the top of the hierarchy is the white man who sees himself as a universal symbol, to which any other individual becomes a subcategory and, as a rule, the white man does not comprehend that he speaks from the perspective of a specific group. He does not comprehend how his speech has a direct impact beyond his social location and that all the privileges he might enjoy exist at the expense of systems of oppression operating over other groups. Therefore, it is reductionism on the part of the white man—who either feels offended or guilty for what he represents—to reason that he is expected to apologise for the acts of his ancestors. Instead, what minority groups seek is for people in a privileged position to become accountable by urging the latter to work actively to abolish the oppressive system they maintain, and from which they benefit, by using the legitimacy of his discourse. The increase in violence against women is a severe symptom of the expansion of the patriarchal, sexist belief that men are stronger and more capable than women; therefore, their ruling on any matter is somehow perceived as a sign of their natural authority. More dangerously, this ideology is transmitted systematically from primary schools to higher education, and socially through families, religions, cultures, and traditions.

Imperialism and colonial practices, including a patriarchal ideology, monopolise an entire system of representations. The power of representation is an essential ideological instrument that allows control over how the other is perceived whether it be in cultural, gender, or class relations. The question raised by Gayatri Spivak – “Can the subaltern speak?” — provoked a debate, after all: The one who speaks, speaks for whom and who listens? Moreover, how do we stand for ourselves and others? Her analysis of representation considers the act of “speaking for” and “representing” as acts of enunciation that presuppose the existence of a speaker and a listener in the space of interactive dialogue. It concerns a discursive position that is never granted to the subaltern, the latter being deprived of any form of agency. In her essay, Spivak concludes that the subaltern cannot speak (104). Accordingly, what sets women’s narratives apart from men’s is their struggle to continually reaffirm their equal capacity to men, while they are undermined by a belief in their fragility which, in turn,
reduces them to a place of submissiveness and dependence on the resources of men. Further, these situations lead to a life of fear – and abuse, both physical and psychological.

The control over the means of representation – the power of the colonial discourse allied to the means of production as well as a political, economic, and military force – guaranteed European hegemony. The ideology of race and the management of a society substantiated by patriarchy were crucial in the construction and naturalisation of unequal power relations. The classification of what was considered human and civilised at colonial times have excluded Indigenous and Afro-descendants of a subjective representation and, consequently, being often portrayed as primitive and hypersexualised. The production of difference in the intersection of gender and race, legitimated slavery, and oppression due to the inferiority attributed to the “Other” and her otherness, reinforcing racist and misogynist ideas. This pattern, however, is not distant from the recurring disregard to human rights of minorities nowadays. The configuration of colonial thought was based on bigotry and the classification of difference, not only related to history and civilisation but mostly in a natural/pre-determined manner. Moreover, it was often supported by the discourse from natural science – such as Charles Darwin’s Theory of Evolution – which was used as to classify humanity. Thus, scientific knowledge was also conveniently used as a justification to inhuman exploration.

Therefore, colonial domination and oppression based on gender and race are interconnected where the condition of the colonial domain determines, in symbolic and material terms, the subaltern condition of marginalised groups. Women and girls are judged harshly by their appearance, yet their sexuality is in high demand, and it is often exploited. Further, possibly due to a growing awareness of the gravity of violence against woman, the number of reports about sexual abuse and domestic violence are increasing. According to a UN report, 70% of women, at least once in their lives, are victims of an episode of violence by a man, who is usually a known person (“Global and Regional Estimates”). This means that billions of women and girls have been or will suffer abuse during their lifetime by somebody whom they know. Thus, not surprisingly, the leading cause of death for women in the world is homicide committed by a known person.

In matters of class, due to the logic of profit at all costs, prominent capitalist societies in the Americas use women as labour in accordance to their needs through the sexual division of labour and the precariousness of women’s working conditions. That is, when women are needed in production lines for their cheap labour force, there are campaigns to praise their capacity, and when there is an economic crisis or unemployment, they are the first to be fired.
There is also the female migration from Latin American countries to northern countries, to occupy part-time, low-skilled, and socially deprecating jobs, such as domestic servants, janitors, and babysitters. Additionally, in the private domain, women’s responsibility over domestic work prevails in households, once again indicating the vulnerability of female work force. Despite this, women increasingly incorporate themselves into the social production of goods and knowledge. Their inclusions in the labour market have developed over time, yet prominent levels of wage inequality, low-paying jobs, and poor working conditions often outside the formal market, remain in place.

Feminist struggles still oppose the Neocolonialism that has continued since the post-independence period. The liberation of postcolonial cultures has become a slow process, filled with internal struggles, which still combine demands for social recognition intertwined with demands for redistributive equality. This is mainly due to the condition of cultural subordination and economic exploitation of disadvantaged groups. The demands for wealth redistribution are often associated with the division of productive (paid) labour dominated by men, and domestic (unpaid) labour assigned to women, where women need to deny gender specificity to ensure redistributive equality. The demands for recognition in gender are associated with androcentric cultural practices and sexism that insists on privileging what is masculine and depreciating everything considered feminine. Thus, the struggle of women consists in valuing their own characteristics and making others do so as well.

Postcolonial criticism has insisted that the colonization should not be considered one entity or a single category to all individual affected by it, calling attention to the fact that women have a marginal place in the core of patriarchal/colonial societies. Therefore, colonial oppression works in considerably distinct ways to women and men; women suffer plural forms of colonisation, as they are subject to the colonial domination of the empire and the specific male domination of patriarchy. The colonial system used female bodies as sexual and reproductive means. Therefore, Indigenous and Afro-descendant women received subhuman treatment, and their sexuality was the object of curiosity of the naturalist scientific discourse.

In brief, a discourse can be used as a form of counter-argument; it is the mechanism through which social minorities and groups facing disadvantages must gain space in public debates with the offer of different points of analysis and the refutation of the traditional historiography and hierarchy of knowledge. Spivak, in her most famous postcolonial essay, poses the question: “What must the elite do to watch out for the continuing construction of the subaltern? The question of ‘woman’ seems most problematic in this context. Clearly, if you are poor, black and female you get it in three ways” (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 90).
The concept serves to help us understand how our speech lines mark our power relations and eventually reproduce prejudices and stereotypes. When we promote a multiplicity of voices, we break the single authoritative discourse that is continuously being presented as universal. Speech is not only the power to speak but also the tool of a violent hierarchy that decides who can and who cannot have a voice. This hierarchy, in turn, is built out of the gender, class, and racial classification of the population. Nevertheless, the subaltern voices must arise to refute the dominant epistemology, structured under a white, male, and European gaze. That is, while social position determines the place that an individual occupies in society, the social place where this individual determines how their knowledge, voice, and intellectual production will be received. People who occupy the same social position will share similar experiences inside relations of power. Therefore, the place we occupy in society confers distinct perspectives and experiences as well as determining which opportunities are available.

Decolonial feminism represents an essential epistemological turn in this respect by proposing a critical revision of the structures of domination of knowledge and of the powers that it establishes. In “Toward a Decolonial Feminism,” Maríà Lugones proposes to analyze gender, race, and capitalist exploitation from a border’s epistemology, established by colonial difference. She also explores the subjective experience of the coloniality of the gender relations located in the colonial wound itself, that is, the domination and oppression instituted by the logic of coloniality. According to the author, the frontier, or borders, is a fractured locus where subjectivity is constructed and perceived by a double or multiple consciousnesses, or according to Gloria Anzaldúa, “towards a new mestizo consciousness” (102). Thus, the idea of a consciousness of marginal character considers that only a part of the colonized subject is oppressed: the one that exposes colonial difference. Thus, the border symbolizes the peripheral place which simultaneously includes the hierarchical dichotomies that organize the subjectification of the colonized – such as West/East, civilized/savage, developed/underdeveloped, white/black, man/woman – and the subjectivity that resists the colonial invasion. Anticolonial movements, insurrections, and quilombo formations are good examples of the agglutination of these subversive subjectivities that organize themselves in the margins of society and political discussion.

The perspective of colonial difference also reveals the real oppositions experienced in the everyday experience of gender coloniality. Decolonial feminism promotes a critique against the universality imposed by colonial modernity, claiming intersections of gender, race, class, and sexuality in feminist epistemology. According to Lugones:
Contemporary women of color and third-world women's critique of feminist universalism centers the claim that the intersection of race, class, sexuality, and gender exceeds the categories of modernity. If woman and black are terms for homogeneous, atomic, separable categories, then their intersection shows us the absence of black women rather than their presence. So, to see non-white women is to exceed “categorial” logic. I propose the modern, colonial, gender system as a lens through which to theorize further the oppressive logic of colonial modernity, its use of hierarchical dichotomies and categorial logic. (“Toward a Decolonial Feminism” 742)

The coloniality of gender relations has multiple dimensions. Gender and race inequalities can be observed a broad spectrum within the domestic, family, locally, and globally, in the programs and projects for the development of women in the South. Chandra T. Mohanty’s proposal for a “feminism without borders” recognised within decolonial feminism, encompasses essential considerations about the theory and practice of Third World Feminism and the policies of Black Feminism (Mohanty). The colonial power relations have instituted, through dichotomous and hierarchical logic, categories that make much of the experiences of women in the margins invisible.

The western feminist hegemonic discourse erases race/ethnicity, social class, and geographical location of women by universalising or culturally homogenising them, limiting women’s political potential and subordinating them to women of higher social classes. The “new” colonial discourse has represented the women of the South as the Others of modernity, oppressed not only in gender relations but also by the underdevelopment of the so-called Third World. They are very often recipients of programs and projects for development that often do not recognize their knowledge and practices as a form of legitimate knowledge to face the daily adversities of life.

The focus on difference has been one of the most remarkable aspects of postmodern feminist critique. Lugones states that

Unlike colonization, the coloniality of gender is still with us; it is what lies at the intersection of gender/class/race as central constructs of the capitalist world system of power. Thinking about the coloniality of gender enables us to think of historical beings only one-sidedly, understood as oppressed (746).

The gender difference is claimed in the plural as the question of inequalities and oppression experienced by women is not limited to male/female binaries. Demands for the inclusion of the categories of race, culture, and social class have become part of the demands of feminist
critique. The prospect of the difference made it possible to shift our gaze to representations centred on middle-class, European, and white women, who did not necessarily reflect the claims of black women in the North, Latin women, and the so-called Third World, all over the world.

The theories and concepts presented here are ways to incorporate, more broadly, subaltern voices, including transformations in gender roles that may contribute to new practices and knowledge. By thinking from the margins, researchers’ work in cultural or cross-cultural translation crosses boundaries by establishing a critique of the imposition of hierarchies, presumably universal and essentializing, which excludes specific social groups, stigmatising them and marking them symbolically and socially as inferior.

Since the sixteenth century, the colonisers have imposed this way of thinking, using religious and military power, as well as other forms of exploitation that persist in the contemporary world, symbolising the domination of the West over the world. The paths presented in this work indicate an anti-essentialist understanding, which can recreate and subvert boundaries, while interpreting new subjectivities.

Literature Review

The first literary work discussed is the diary of the Brazilian writer Carolina Maria de Jesus, who saw in the city of São Paulo a chance to rewrite her history. Black and the great-granddaughter of slaves, she was born and lived in a country marked by transitions at the time of the publishing of her seminal and best-known book, *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus*, in 1960. The industrialisation of the country encouraged the rural exodus to the big cities and generated social scars such as the formation of *favelas* in large Brazilian metropolises. The story of Carolina de Jesus and her children, oppressed in the *favela*, erupted into the life of the reader as the physical presence of the results of centuries of discriminatory practices and veiled prejudice that are still present in Brazilian society. According to Robert Levine, “[a]n impoverished black woman with an aggressive, mercurial personality, Carolina was remarkably aware of the burden of the legacy of racism, gender prejudice, and political neglect of the marginalized” (55-56). In Carolina’s work, the lyrical self is also the object of her discourse, as seen in this passage: “And when I am in the favela I have the impression that I am an object out of use, worthy of being in a dumping

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2 The use of her given name is to avoid ambiguity
room” (de Jesus 21). This double object-subject narrative function mirrors the position and discursive place from which she speaks, her ambivalent worldview, her status as an author ahead of her time who sees beyond her surroundings. Yet, enslaved by the harsh reality of poverty and the lack of formal education.

The second literary work under review is the 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*. When we turn to Toni Morrison’s novel, we realise how it strongly reflects the power of a dominant ideology, responsible for instituting new social and economic practices that shape the lives of all the characters, and creating new dynamics of material and symbolic production. The anguish suffered by the protagonists Pecola Breedlove reflects the tension between the hegemonic discourse of the white dominant class and the subjective yearnings of individuals placed on the periphery of the development process. However, it is the ideology of the strongest that will define not only interpersonal relations but also interracial relationships, characterised in the novel, mainly by violence and hatred. In *The Bluest Eye*, it is within this social dynamic that each subject is formed.

The last work in the analysis is *The Handmaid’s Tale*, published in 1986. Margaret Atwood developed an incredibly insightful novel. *The Handmaid’s Tale* is a story about an ultraconservative society that forces women to assume limited domestic roles, with some of them being submitted to systematic rape as means of reproduction. The author calls attention to a possible reality where women’s bodies did not belong to them as they were used primarily for surrogacy. Thus, Atwood’s tale is, above all, about dehumanisation. Atwood’s novel, in contrast to the other two works, makes it explicit that it is possible for the most privileged part of society to live steeped in their reality, which leads them to ignore the real and absurd brutality that already exists for so many individuals in their midst. Interestingly, Atwood’s speculative literature, even as it constructs distant futures, improbable social arrangements, and dystopian worlds, goes no further than the realities suffered by marginalised women for centuries. Moreover, the ensuing destructive legacy of this violence can be seen today, in contemporary generations, in the present and future.

Literary works allow the encounter of two subjective perspectives, that of the author and the reader. The former would have the capacity to influence the subjectivity of the latter. Accordingly, the reader who apprehends a message that rises from the author’s presence behind their words would undergo a process of identity transformation. This is due to empathy and the development of social consciousness that would influence the reader to recognize the power of their own speech. The voices of Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison and Carolina Maria de Jesus would be the result of such a process. It was through their intense
relationship with literature that they developed the conditions to speak for themselves and to others wonderfully.

More than informing and entertaining, literature has a humanising potential. That is, literature can modify the individual who reads, making into developing a voice of their own. Therefore, access to the literary text can be a form of social inclusion, giving an opportunity for inclusion to those who are at the margins of the world of cultural production. As long as it is a long and slow process, it is entirely possible. Their voices would be the result of a long and continuous process of contact with reading. Through this contact, they acquired language to speak for themselves, but also to reflect and reveal the social context in which they lived.
The Marginal Narrative of Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus

*Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina de Jesus*, written between 1955 and 1960, is the literary portrait and testimonial account of the daily life of the writer and where she lived, the Favela do Canindé. It was written during a period of rapid expansion in the population of the city of São Paulo, with the consequent sufferings, indignation, revolts, and anguish that the marginalized population faced at the time. Carolina Maria de Jesus (1914 - 1977) is Brazilian writer best known for this book, which has been the object of several studies both in Brazil and abroad. She is considered one of the primarily black women writers to raise concerns over policies affecting the most vulnerable social groups in the region. The writer lived part of her life in the slums of São Paulo, a city of vast proportions which, according to demographic census, was home to over 3.8 million citizens in 1960s. Currently, it has over 12 million inhabitants (“Tabela 1287”), making it the largest city of the country and the 7th largest in the world (“Tabela 793”). This city was – and still is – the final destination of various emigrants such as Carolina, who left their birthplaces in search of better conditions in more abundant and wealthier regions.

The most impressive feature of Carolina Maria de Jesus’ narrative of her own life is the fact that she managed to turn the account of her daily personal struggles into a broader exploration of the common situation of her peers. Carolina had difficulty in accepting how there could be people as ignorant as some of her neighbours, who were always resorting to violence to solve their disputes. Furthermore, she saw how a child who moves to a *favela* quickly changes and becomes ill-mannered. Despite her daily toil in search of money for food and the hostile environment of the ghettos, she did not allow herself to fall into addiction but struggled to take care of herself and her children. Carolina was very fond of education and considered her best friends to be the books she read, and she kept on hoping that her books would one day be published.

The process of formation of the Latin American nations resulted from the violent confrontation between the European conquerors and native populations for territory ownership; and fuelled by the subjugation of indigenous peoples and the massive contingents of Africans forced into slavery and exiled in a foreign land. In this context, confrontation and occupation of the territory gave rise to multiple movements of diaspora, social exclusion, and mutual rejection between ethnic groups in search of survival and identity. Indigenous peoples

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3 Shanty town.
sought refuge in territories free from the occupation of European conquerors, while groups of fugitive slaves protected each other in communities or Quilombos.\(^4\)

Rising from this context to modern times, the tale of Carolina Maria de Jesus has an expressive power that goes beyond simple representation, since her testimony starts from a place of enunciation of the excluded. She represents the empirical knowledge of a migrant black woman, mother, descendant of the enslaved population in Brazil who lives a life without prospects as a slum dweller, a human being deprived of citizenship. In the pages of her diary, Carolina de Jesus’ existential testimony brings forth literary representations and symbolic images of a large part of society that is pushed to the margins and becomes invisible to other segments of the population.

In *Child of the Dark*, the gaze that emerges is that of a writer who seeks to escape the restricted and restrictive space that the history of Latin American has reserved for her and her descendants. It is a gaze that comes from inside the *favela*, the place reserved for individuals seen as nothing more than people without usefulness beyond servitude – the modern-day slave quarters. Carolina says,

> At dawn it was raining. Today is a nice day for me, it’s the anniversary of the Abolition. The day we celebrate the freeing of the slaves [...] May God enlighten the whites so that the Negroes may have a happier life [...] Vera asked for food, and I didn’t have any. It was the same old show. I had two cruzeiros and wanted to buy a little flour to make a virado. I went to ask Dona Alice for a little pork. She gave me pork and rice. It was 9 at night when we ate. And that is the May 13, 1958 I fought against the real slavery—hunger! (23)

Such reading allows the discovery of Carolina’s profoundly human character and, through the recording of micro-stories, the creation of a collective history. Carolina creates an expressive authorial subjectivity of local history and literature, and refuses to accept the condition of being an invisible and disposable object passively. She understands that prosperity derives from education; however, the promotion of education cannot happen without the eradication of hunger, since a healthy mind needs a healthy body. Carolina positions her existence as a subject in constant construction.

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\(^4\) See: Flávio dos Santos Gomes and João José Reis’ *Freedom by a Thread: The History of Quilombos in Brazil*. Diasporic Africa Press, 2016;
One of the most striking aspects that mark the narrative of her life, and which causes discomfort in reading it, is the recurrent mention of hunger. The words “bread”, “water”, “coffee”, along with “hunger” itself, are repeated in almost every day of the diary. Her fight against hunger is constant, and it persists during the whole period she wrote *Child of the Dark*, when the author had often turned to neighbours as poor as her for help. Carolina describes how hunger is an issue that is impossible to ignore, something that destroys everyday dreams and hopes of a decent life. She says:

I spent a horrible night. I dreamt I lived in a decent house that had a bathroom, kitchen, pantry, and even a maid’s room. I was going to celebrate the birthday of my daughter Vera Eunice. I went and bought some small pots that I had wanted for a long time. Because I was able to buy. I sat at the table to eat. The tablecloth was white as a lily. I ate a steak, bread and butter, fried potatoes, and a salad. When I reached for another steak I woke up. What bitter reality! I don’t live in the city. I live in the favela. In the mud on the banks of the Tiete River. And with only nine cruzeiros. I don’t even have sugar, because yesterday after I went out the children ate what little I had (31).

Carolina understands that an individual cannot function to the minimum of their capacity – much less fully prosper – without access to essential human needs such as food and basic sanitation. Accordingly, the author dreams of owning a middle-class house, a wish that makes clear the social divisions in the country. Having a house, a home for a happy family, represents a model of worthiness and social progress, a topic deeper explored by Morrison in her novel *The Bluest Eye*.

Besides drawing attention to the conditions of poverty and hunger, Carolina addresses political issues several times in her writing, which makes her book very relevant in current times. The way in which the author describes how such issues arise in the daily lives of those in her community gives the reader a better understanding of institutional policies and their relation to the population from a more human and concrete perspective. Further, it explores how these issues continue to appear in the lives of millions of Brazilians, due to the alienation of an extremely vulnerable section of the population. This prevents them from participating in the decision-making process when it comes to public policies as well as denies them their power of agency and their legal rights.

Through the significant materiality that manifests itself in the words of Carolina, readers can deepen their understanding of the history and culture of the Latin American
continent and, by extension, of humanity itself. Throughout her book, she is attentive to the social discrepancies surrounding her. She notes:

When I go into the city I have the impression that I’m in paradise. I think it just wonderful to see all the women and children so well dressed. So different from the favela. The different-colored houses with their vases of flowers. These views enchant the eyes of the visitors to São Paulo who never know that the most famous city in South America is ill with ulcers—the favelas (77).

Politics, politicians, elections, government, the economy, events in the community itself, people who come and go, fights between residents, marital problems, among others, are often subjects of conversations between Carolina with other residents. In situations of political instability that afflict Brazil and other countries in the region, where the institutions and their representatives control the news and debates in the public sphere, a return to reality is necessary. The reality of the social vulnerability of individuals living on the streets in our cities is a looking glass to the problems of our society as a whole—and to our prejudices and characteristic flaws. Therefore, it is always valuable to listen to and amplify the voice of those who remind us that there are a variety of human lives struggling with real concrete problems that need an immediate solution in the face of the inefficiency of governments and state institutions.

Carolina de Jesus considered the slum in which she lived, the favela, a garbage dump where everything useless in society was thrown away. Garbage Dump: The Diary of a Favelada, its original title in Portuguese⁵ (my translation), alludes to the symbolism she makes about the downtown neighbourhoods and the favelas in the outskirts of the city. When visiting the city centre, Carolina felt as though she was in a palace, and when she returned home, she felt as though she lived in a garbage dump. She wrote, “At 8:30 that night I was in the favela breathing the smell of excrement mixed with the rotten earth. When I am in the city I have the impression that I am in a living room with satin cushions. And when I’m in the favela I have the impression that I’m a useless object, destined to be forever in a garbage dump” (de Jesus 29). This garbage dump was the place reserved for all those who were marginalised by society, those who struggled daily to survive. Many of the country’s North Easterners – a region that lacked an infrastructure as well as basic sanitation and natural resources – came to São Paulo in search of opportunities and found closed doors, forcing

⁵ *Quarto de Despejo: Diário de uma Favelada.*
them to live in the favela with their relatives. These and other inhabitants fought; they drank; they went to sleep hungry, and they suffered.

Carolina described Sao Paulo as “a queen that vainly shows her sky-scrapers that is her crown of gold. All dressed up in velvet and silk but with cheap stockings underneath –the favela” (34). She wrote in the form of a daily journal in notebooks that she found in garbage bins, registering the tasks and events of her day while not sparing words to express in detail her pain and the absurdities of the life she led in conditions of extreme marginalisation. She wrote, “I heated rice and the fish and fed the children. Afterwards, I went to pick up kindling wood. It seems that I came into the world predestined to pick things up. The only thing I don’t pick up is happiness” (74). Accounts such as this one are sad and cruelly real. Carolina makes an unpredictable and peculiar use of language, full of orthographic and grammatical deviations, regionalisms and anachronistic expressions, and a refined vocabulary which sometimes has a dramatic effect: “Things thrown out // have significant importance // - like a man thrown away” (de Jesus XV). In short, the power of her narrative exists in its striking sentences and its vivid language, making her memoir compelling and often disturbing reading. It is inevitable that a reader that has a minimum of empathy for her story will feel the weight of her life in the favela, the agony of hunger, and the hope that she will lead a more comfortable life together with her children.

Another quality of her writing worth exploring is the author’s effort to bring her everyday oral or written language closer to the one she rated as superior, or as ‘classical.’ This language is, in her view, the one that would enable her to reach the high standards of literature and, thus, the social elevation to which she aspired and which would provide her with the means of projecting herself metaphorically, and literally, out of the misery that surrounded her. The writer does not recognise everyday language as an artistic form of expression. Thus, she distinguishes language two antagonistic and biased manifestations: the classical and the pornographic. The first would be poems; the second, her diary. By aiming to express herself for the first time to a large audience, she eventually produces a stereotype of the classic literature, and even of herself. Thus, we as readers see that the writer is aware that the language she uses in her journal is not the one idealised by her, according to the value judgment she adopts, but it is what corresponds to the editors’ expectations. She tries to conceal the disagreement by presenting the popular language as a voluntary choice that aims to ease the reading of her work. An important aspect to emphasize here is that Carolina’s writing inaugurates a form of literature that today is defined as marginal literature. That is both because its production is made by those who have historically had no voice, the
marginalized from the periphery, prisons, and so forth – a recent example of this genre, known in the mainstream media, is Paulo Lins’ *City of God* (2006). Because of its production outside the literary field itself, it further creates a new space for cultural production.

When the journalist Audálio Dantas, visiting the Favela do Canindé, met Carolina by chance and became enchanted by her diary, he began the work of promoting and aiding in the publication of Carolina’s work. *Child of the Dark: The Diary of Carolina Maria de Jesus* has been sold successfully in Brazil and abroad. At the time of its publishing, it raised a curious controversy about the veracity of its narrative; it was suspected that the journalist had forged it to achieve commercial success (...). In the face of such literary achievement and the ensuing publicity surrounding Carolina de Jesus and her work, there was the unfounded and prejudiced belief that such narrative could not be the work of a poor and semi-literate black woman although she was indeed the real author. To this, Carolina had an answer; she said:

*If I wasn’t so happy I would cry. When I first gave my manuscript to Brazilian editors they laughed at this poor Negro woman with calloused hands who wore rags and only had two years of schooling. They told me I should write on toilet paper. Now these same editors are asking for my works, actually fighting for them [...]* Today I had lunch in a wonderful restaurant and a photographer took my picture. I told him: “Write under the photo that Carolina who used to eat from trash cans now eats in restaurants. That she has come back into the human race and out of the Garbage Dump” (de Jesus XV)

To the ones acquainted with Carolina’s narrative, it is clear how meaningful this moment is to her. On another note, despite all prejudice from publishers and critics, Carolina’s narrative became an undeniably invaluable work of literature, mostly since Carolina uses her indignation as fuel for her narrative. In her writing, her situation of poverty and marginalisation is never naturalised. Instead, the author manifests her dislikes and her resentment; she expresses her suffering, and she dreams of changes in her personal life and changes in the political sphere that might improve the lives of the poor collectively.

The writer lived with prejudice both in her community and in other public spaces where she realised that her presence was unwanted. Many were bothered by her general appearance and her skin colour. She knew this was not personal but rather a structural problem. The Brazilian philosopher, Sueli Carneiro, points out that:

*In Brazil and Latin America, the colonial violation perpetrated by white masters against black and indigenous women and the ensuing miscegenation is*
at the origin of all constructions of our national identity, structuring the decanted myth of Latin American racial democracy, which in Brazil has reached its ultimate consequences [...] Black women have had a distinguished historical experience from the classical discourse on the oppression of women that has not been recognized, nor has it realized the qualitative difference that the effect of oppression suffered by these women had and still has on the identity of black women⁶ (Carneiro).

Accordingly, Carolina carries the weight of being a black mother in a society which excludes black people socially and economically at the same time as it undermines the feminist struggle. Bell hooks says, “There will be no mass-based feminist movement as long as feminist ideas are understood only by a well-educated few” (hooks 112). Thereof, although Carolina’s work is not part of the most prestigious literature in the continent, it is indeed the one which should be most publicised since her writing exposes situations which a large part of society often ignores; however, all individuals should be aware of them. Through her work, we witness her versatility. She stands for a community, yet she does not fit into it; she belongs to the favela, but she does not accept its violent ways; Carolina is the voice of her people, yet at the same time, she is the one who denounces them.

Another essential matter on the publication of her diaries is that meritocratic conditions for social ascension are not equally available to all. In Carolina’s case, she moved from a life of hardship in the countryside to another one in the city, supporting herself and her three children by selling paper and scrap metal until she became widely known after the publication of Child of the Dark. With the money from the book, the author moved from the favela to a modest, secluded home in the outskirts of the city and published other novels. However, none of them had the success of her first publication. Considered one of the most prominent writers in Brazil, Carolina died without owning the middle-class house she once dreamed of having and without seeing her dreams for her country come true.

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⁶ No Brasil e na América Latina, a violação colonial perpetrada pelos senhores brancos contra as mulheres negras e indígenas e a miscigenação daí resultante está na origem de todas as construções de nossa identidade nacional, estruturando o decantado mito da democracia racial latino-americana, que no Brasil chegou até as últimas consequências [...] As mulheres negras tiveram uma experiência histórica diferenciada que o discurso clássico sobre a opressão da mulher não tem reconhecido, assim como não tem dado conta da diferença qualitativa que o efeito da opressão sofrida teve e ainda tem na identidade feminina das mulheres negras.
In her diary, the author showed a strong critical opinion on politicians who completely ignore the poor after winning elections, the same ones who visit them insistently, exchanging promises for votes. That situation exposed the connection between politics and social inequality in Brazil. The different forms of violence narrated by Carolina, whether coming from the State or from a neighbour, imply a traumatic experience with a devastating impact on the physical and mental health of women and girls, with consequences ranging from problematic pregnancies, psychologic disorders, and compromised social relationships. These violations constitute the most noticeable part of the so-called ‘gender-based violence,’ (or GBV), being physical violence the most visible. In fact, numbers and statistics do not show the wave of everyday violence against girls and women and how females suffer greatly, albeit in more disguised or less apparent ways. The subjectivity of women is insidiously destroyed by discrimination masked as tradition, causing far-reaching psychological, economic, and social consequences.

That is the case of the many descriptions of domestic violence between slum dwellers, a complex issue which Carolina links to various other factors in their lives, such as drug abuse and illiteracy. Through accounts of harassment, abuse, and the active misogyny of society, Carolina shows that her gender puts her in a more vulnerable position than men in all social spheres. She comments on the relation between gender and power from memories of when she was a child:

When I was a girl my dream was to be a man to defend Brazil, because I read the history of Brazil and became aware that the war existed. I read the masculine names of the defenders of the country, then I said to my mother: “Why don’t you make me become a man?”

She replied: “If you walk under a rainbow, you’ll become a man.”

When the rainbow appeared I went running in its direction. But the rainbow was always a long way off. Just as the politicians are a long way off from the people. I got tired and sat down. Afterwards, I started to cry. But the people must not get tired. They must not cry. They must fight to improve Brazil so that our children don’t suffer as we are suffering. I returned and told my mother: “The rainbow ran away from me” (de Jesus 47).

The author shows how female writing is incompatible with traditional gender roles. The writer distances herself from the drunk, violent favelado. In her writing, Carolina Maria de Jesus allows us to locate dissenting voices between the mother who supports a house, with three children and without the support of their father figure. The writer, dissatisfied with her
condition and that of the world around her, criticizes the behaviour of the men of the *favela*, moving away from them, toward other subjects that match her expectations. The problem of alcoholism in the community is also important in Carolina’s account. Alcohol is often linked to marital and other disagreements with fights among family members and other residents serving as catalysts to physical or verbal violence; these altercations, in turn, often lead to crime and severe health issues.

In this sense, Carolina Maria de Jesus alternates between two discourses, since sometimes she describes the women in the *favela* as evil and perverse and makes generalizations about them; other times, she describes the ideal of a good mother and wife, while reproving those women who do not fit the expected model. The image that Carolina presents of the women of the *favela* as sometimes worse than men is due to the fact that she was often perceived as arrogant for being a single mother, self-reliant and found of writing. These factors might explain her more lenient judgment toward men and more severe judgment of women. However, these men who are seemingly more tolerant of her habits are the same ones who battered their wives, abuse alcohol, and fight among each other. That makes Carolina’s position, at the very least, contradictory, owing to the stereotypic assumption that women, in order to assert themselves, must resort to men as a neutral element placed above the good or evil, even if concrete facts prove the opposite.

Carolina’s diary provides an opportunity for its reader to experience, through her eyes, what it means to be a poor black woman in the 1950s, raising children on her own, and trying every day to get a bit of hard-earned money in the wealthiest city of her country. Carolina would get up every day, fetch water, and pick paper scraps for money to feed herself and her children, sometimes with and sometimes without success. She watched the environment in which she lived in a very ingenious way and tried to understand everything that happened around her, trying to help her neighbours, defending them when necessary— even from themselves— despite her continuous struggles against hunger and misery. Further, she cared about her country and always had a particular regard for the people who shared the same struggles she did.

In addition to GBV, as Carolina demonstrates in her narrative, the cuts in public expenses and the privatisation of services, such as primary education, nursing, and social assistance, affect women more severely since they are the most vulnerable group. Not only are women the ones who need these services the most, but they are also the ones who offer such services and perform many of these necessary tasks. Thus, when these services or jobs are cut, it causes higher rates of unemployment among them, denying the active participation
of women in social life. In fact, this restraint is justified by the false assumption that confining women to the private sphere and making them care for the family and do domestic work is beneficial for them and society. According to research from the International Poverty Centre:

The feminization of poverty is a change in poverty levels that is biased against women or female-headed households. More specifically, it is an increase in the difference in poverty levels between women and men, or between households headed by females on the one hand, and those headed by males or couples on the other. (Medeiros and Costa 6)

It is reasonably common to claim that women are the majority of the poor and that their income are incompatible to their position and the gains of their male peers, especially in the Americas. Since it encompasses two pressing problems - poverty and gender inequality - it needs urgent focus of public policies. It is essential to define the concept of the feminisation of poverty more clearly since the issue deserves particular attention from policymakers in determining the allocation of resources for gender equity or antipoverty measures. If poverty were not being ‘feminised,’ resources could be directed to other types of policy. However, that is far from being the case. As an example, Carolina further describes her visit to the Juvenile Court to pick up her children who were in the streets while she was working, or to clarify some conduct perceived as criminal. She comments on her repeated visits to law representatives to withdraw money from the pension paid by the father of her child; only to face long waiting hours, overdue payments, and bureaucracies that complicated further her economic situation while having to support three children on her own. When trying to retrieve the pension for her children, one that she seldom got, she saw how many other women were suffering from having almost no income.

The occurrence of crimes, both inside and outside the favela, is also part of the writer’s accounts. She states:

I was paying the shoemaker and talking with a black who was reading a newspaper. He was furious with a policeman who beat up a Negro and tied him to a tree. The policeman is white. There are certain whites who transform blacks into whipping posts [scapegoats]. Is this policeman aware of the fact that slavery has been abolished or does he think we are still in the era of the whip? (99)

On this matter, she mentions the selective criminalisation of the population of the favela by the police, where people who fall into the stereotype of black, poor, and favelado are usually
those targeted by the police. The author describes situations where the repressive apparatus of the State, through its radio patrol, intervenes in conflicts often as a neutralising agent, that is, by arresting or detaining people in police stations. Carolina also reports on thefts, robberies, and debt collections inside the *favelas* as well as the problem of personal revenge through lynching. The act of lynching a form of punishment of an alleged offender as means to intimidate, control, or manipulate a specific sector of the population – indigenous and black peoples. Lynching occurs in Brazil, mostly affecting the more impoverished populations, when someone practices (or is suspected to have practised) some crime considered intolerable by society. In this case, the situation that compels the population to commit such crimes is the government’s inefficiency along with the lack of public policies directed towards social equity and the low quality of services provided by the State, such as education and public safety.

Furthermore, Carolina writes about racial issues inside and outside the *favela*, reports episodes of racism, and reveals some of the structure of the racially divided society in the city of São Paulo, as well as the marginalised position that black women and men occupied therein. Preceding the rise of the Black Power Movement in the United States, Carolina expressed pride in her skin and in her desire for equality. Carolina de Jesus says:

> I wrote plays and showed them to directors of circuses. They told me:
> “It’s a shame you are black.”
>
> They were forgetting that I adore my black skin and my kinky hair. The Negro hair is more educated than the white man’s hair. Because with Negro hair, where you put it, it stays. It’s obedient. The hair of the white, just give one quick movement, and it’s out of place. It won’t obey. If reincarnation exists I want to come back black [...] The white man says he is superior. But what superiority does he show? If the Negro drinks *pinga*, the white drinks. The sickness that hits the black hits the white. If white feels hunger, so does the Negro. Nature hasn’t picked any favourites (57).

The rawness and honesty of Carolina’s words create a close and personal relationship with the reader. The power of her narrative also relies on the fact that this personal relationship to the reader introduces social problems through a character that is real, not a statistic, thus arousing real feelings of empathy, compassion, or even revolt. It is an essential piece of

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7 Distilled alcoholic beverage.
literature that should be held in high regard since it is a testimony that presents the facade of multiculturalism inside a structure that divides wealth unequally among individuals according to gender, race, and class.

Every reader, male or female, should feel the impact of the experiences that Carolina Maria de Jesus describes in her writing. Her testimony reverberates through time, drawing attention to the current social and deeply human issues that are often forgotten in the face of the latest news on politics. These are urgent and necessary institutional issues that need to be addressed quickly. However, they are overlooked—much like the actual suffering in a country that can only envision a promising future ahead. This becomes clear in Carolina’s testimony, where she puts her problems in perspective by making considerations about all forms of human misery, hunger, and different forms of violence. Her most significant legacy is undoubtedly the demonstration of her strength of character in such a debilitating situation.

In this sense, it is important to note how this book helps us to think about the condition of peripheral black women at that time and now. Further, towards an intersectional pursuit of women’s rights, Carneiro, speaking as a black woman, attests that:

“[We] are part of a contingent of women who have worked for centuries as slaves in the fields or on the streets, as saleswomen, cooks, prostitutes...
Women who understood nothing when feminists said women should win the streets and work! We are part of a contingent of women identified as objects. In recent past, in the service of fragile ladies and pervert mill masters

(Carneiro).

This distinction has been disputed by black working women since the beginnings of the feminist struggle in the Americas, most notably perhaps in Sojourner Truth’s “Ain’t I a Woman?” speech during the 1851 US women’s rights convention (Davis 61). At a clergy meeting where women’s rights were discussed, Sojourner rose to speak after hearing from pastors that women should not have the same rights as men because they were fragile and intellectually weak, because Jesus was a man and not a woman, and especially because the first woman in Christian mythology, Eve, was a sinner.

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8 Fazemos parte de um contingente de mulheres que trabalharam durante séculos como escravas nas lavouras ou nas ruas, como vendedoras, quituteiras, prostitutas… Mulheres que não entenderam nada quando as feministas disseram que as mulheres deveriam ganhar as ruas e trabalhar! Fazemos parte de um contingente de mulheres com identidade de objeto. Ontem, a serviço de frágeis sinhazinhas e de senhores de engenho tarados.
Today, women have more opportunities to study and work, but the representation of black women in universities and higher paid jobs is still low. Although there is an attempt to change this scenario, it is still insufficiently representative. Today, black women in Brazil can avoid falling into extreme poverty, but racism and sexism prevent them from being fully independent. There are still social ties that try to obstruct their social ascent. Thus, it is necessary to continue the fight for equal rights and public policies that meet the needs of the black female population, contributing to increasing their numbers in the labour force and universities.

Carolina Maria de Jesus is an example of resistance of a woman who fought against hunger and prejudice while staying true to her convictions; therefore, her account becomes a valuable representation of individuals on the margins of society. She was very politicised and closely followed the actions of politicians, both regionally and nationally, criticising them for appearing in the *favela* only to gather votes and then later forgetting their electorate. Carolina de Jesus did not let an oppressive system terminate her thought neglect and who achieved her greatest desire: to be published. Although the writer accomplished her goal, canonical selections still marginalise essential writings by women, African, Asian, and gay writers, among others. Even today, the principal literary works taught in schools are mostly written by men. Many people have read her story in order to understand what it means to live in the slums, yet they could not at first realise the importance of her literary legacy.

Black women produce art that is often valued only in their community; they produce knowledge that often only echoes in the walls of their homes; and they produce history daily, but the preferred versions of history are often those in which they are the victims, the numbers in statistics. In practice, it not only excludes them from prestigious literary circles but also prevents the recognition of writers of works of aesthetic quality equal or superior to those in established canons in favour of prejudiced criteria. However, without any academic knowledge or literary prestige, Carolina echoes the voices of those women who demand positive portrayals and real representation, in a way that has not previously been seen in Brazilian literature. The public has rediscovered the works of Carolina Maria de Jesus since her first publishing, yet the great landmark of her rediscovery was the celebrations of her centenary in 2014. Carolina de Jesus’ legacy to literature keeps on impressing for its critical lucidity.
Identity and Agency in *The Bluest Eye*.

In 1970, the author Toni Morrison began to transfigure the realities that were very present in the American imaginary though mostly overlooked in its literary practice. Her debut novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970), is a study of race, gender, and beauty – recurring topics in her novels. Born in Ohio, in the United States, into a lower middle-class family, Morrison was an avid reader. In 1949, Morrison joined Howard University, where she graduated in English in 1953. The currently internationally-known writer, publisher, and professor has won a Pulitzer Prize for her novel *Beloved* (1987) and she received the 1993 Nobel Prize of Literature for her sharp and poignant novels that chronicle the experiences of black individuals in the United States during the 19th and 20th centuries.

*The Bluest Eye* is a novel told from the perspective of a female narrator, Claudia McTeer; however, at the centre of it all is Pecola Breedlove, a black girl living in Lorain, Ohio, whose greatest desire is to have blue eyes. Claudia McTeer recounts their childhood story a few decades after the times of the events she narrates; thus, there is some distance between her and the action that unfolds in the narrative. Nevertheless, the exact time of the events in the narrative is never revealed. Claudia discloses, in the first few pages, that the narrative is a way of trying to understand what happened in the spring of 1941, the year Pecola became pregnant and lost her father’s baby. Claudia says that there is no way to explain why it happened, but it is possible to explain how – and how we, the readers, can find the answer as to why it happened (Morrison 20-21).

In the 1960s and 1970s, the necessity to discuss issues related to gender and ethnicity became imperative. Indian theorist Gayatri C. Spivak, influenced by the ideas of the Marxist philosopher Antonio Gramsci, would later scrutinize these years in her work. According to Spivak, the marginal place of women in society, particularly that of black and poor ones, contributes to silencing their voices (“Can the Subaltern Speak?” 294). Black female activists denounced the double invisibility of black women, both within anti-racist movements and within feminist movements. In between these decades, Morrison makes visible in *The Bluest Eye*, the experience of those who are the most ignored subjects of the Americas. After undergoing several violent experiences, Pecola Breedlove – the central character to the plot – starts building a connection between violence and her identity, grown from oppressive beauty standard ideals. Thus, Pecola wishes to have blue eyes as a means to be loved by others. Morrison chooses a very vulnerable subject, a female child, to display how racist and sexist patterns of beauty allied to gender-based violence can be devastating to the lives of black women.
*The Bluest Eye* means to question the historical conditions of a society that has begun to deconstruct the naturalisation of racism and, at the same time, experienced the perpetuity of underlying racism. To tell a story which simultaneously problematizes specific aspects of US society and offers visibility to the experience of black women, the author uses a third-person omniscient narrator that has the function of describing the events, as well as describing the physical characteristics and the emotional states of the characters, in order to convey the experiences of Pecola Breedlove.

The introductory text narrated by Claudia is a summary of the story. She places the events she narrates in the year 1941. How much time has passed is not explicitly clear; however, she knows it was enough time for Pecola’s innocence to be destroyed along with her childish dreams. In this respect, it is essential to consider the differences between the time of the narrative and the time of its publication, in 1970, but also the historical conditions that allowed its emergence. The anti-racist struggle was a process triggered not only by social movements such as the civil rights movement. Another form of social critique also fuelled it, namely writings that focused precisely on the marginalisation of black women, such as Carolina Maria de Jesus’ diaries in the peripheries and Kimberlé Crenshaw’s work on in the academy on *Black Feminism*.

Morrison uses a language that blurs the frontiers of academic thought, politics, and aesthetics to question the values of American society and the content of canons of so-called universal literature. She presents the theme of her novel on the first pages:

Here is the house. It is green and white. It has a red door. It is very pretty.
Here is the family. Mother, Father, Dick, and Jane live in the green-and-white house. They are very happy. See Jane. She has a red dress. She wants to play.
Who will play with Jane? [...] Here is the house it is green and white it has a red door it is very pretty here is the family mother father dick and jane live in the green-and-white house they are very happy see jane she has a red dress she wants to play who will play with jane [...] Hereisthehouseitisgreenand whiteithasareddooritisveryprettyhereisthefamilymotherfatherdickandjanelivein thegreenandwhitehousetheyareveryhappyseejaneshehasareddressshewants toplaywhowillplaywithjane (Morrison 18-19).

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Thus, through linguistic materiality, she indicates her intention throughout the plot: to deconstruct universal meanings with the intention of making Pecola Breedlove’s experience visible and possible. In the passage above, Morrison writes the same passage three times. The first time, she maintains all the conventions of standard language. In the second, the author leaves the spacing but removes the punctuation of the text. Finally, in the third, she removes all spacing and punctuation.

This passage of the text represents books popularly used at that time in the United States to teach literacy to children. The educational material presents Dick and Jane as prototypes of model citizens who are part of a white, patriarchal, and bourgeois family. This sort of text is the material that girls such as Pecola Breedlove used in their schools. Thus, to highlight the racist and sexist discourse that permeates the text of the booklet, Morrison turns the language of Dick and Jane’s story from perfect to chaotic, a strategy that translates into words the social patterns of exclusion that engender the experience of black girls and women.

The narrative, which runs through the time of one year, is divided into chapters that correspond to the four seasons. Each season corresponds to several situations that exemplify the attitudes that contributed to the moral and psychological obliteration of Pecola. Nevertheless, what we read are the memories of Claudia for the brief period that she had contact with Pecola. The chapters always begin from Claudia’s point of view and later change to the omniscient narrator. Claudia concludes only the last chapter.

In the chapter, “Autumn,” there are episodes narrated by Claudia that show, albeit subtly, Pecola’s desire to be physically different, which is a subterfuge to her desire to be loved. Thus, there is in this desire for physical change a negation of self. She believes that an apparent and superficial change would cause people to treat her with love and care. By wishing to be someone else, Pecola shows she cannot bear who/what she is. The first episode that demonstrates this desire occurs when Pecola spends a few days at Claudia’s house, since her drunk and violent father set the house on fire and left his family on the street. One day, Claudia and her sister, Frieda, offer cookies to Pecola, and they also bring a cup of milk decorated with the face of the young actress, Shirley Temple. According to Claudia, “she was a long time with the milk, and gazed fondly at the silhouette of Shirley Temple’s dimpled face. She and Frieda had a loving conversation about how cu-ute Shirley Temple was” (Morrison 34). In a later episode, during Pecola’s first menstruation, we witness her self-doubt and loathing. Pecola does not understand what is happening to her and thinks she will die. However, Frieda explains, “Noooo. You won’t die. It just means you can have a baby!” (28) At the end of that day, these words of Frieda still echoed in Pecola’s mind. She asks
Frieda how this happens, and Frieda answers that someone must love her. Then, Pecola Breedlove asks, “How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?” (32). Throughout the book, Morrison recounts the failure of Pecola Breedlove to feel loved and her growing feeling of rejection in connection to the aesthetic values of the time that demeaned her physical attributes.

Pecola suffers daily abuse by her father as well as at school and in her community. Consequently, there is no safe place for her. The narrative then connects the construction and deconstruction of Pecola’s identity to the textbook fragment presented on the first pages. Just as the fragment mentions Dick and Jane’s house, the narrator goes on to describe Pecola’s house. The description of the Breedlove house’s physical space reflects all the obscurantism and apathy of their lives. Beyond the simplicity and poverty described, its most impressive feature is the absence of life. It is as if the house were abandoned and as if no one had inhabited it for a long time. The narrator says, “The furniture had aged without ever having become familiar. People had owned it but never known it” (35). There were no good memories made in their house. The Breedlove family did not live in a beautiful home – much less a happy one. Their physical characteristics are also described as far from beautiful:

You looked at them and wondered why they were so ugly; you looked closely and could not find the source. Then you realized that it came from conviction, their conviction. It was as though some mysterious all-knowing master had given each one a cloak of ugliness to wear, and they had each accepted it without question. (Morrison 39).

Morrison here subtly suggests that ugliness is not an inherent quality of the family, but something they were made to believe they represent. In this case, the all-knowing master is the standard, and the cloak of ugliness is the prejudice that they absorbed from others.

Further, the omniscient narrator reports a violent quarrel between the parents of Pecola, Pauline, and Cholly Breedlove. Fights with verbal and physical aggressions like this are part of the family routine. The children, Pecola and her older brother, Sammy, watch the terrible scenes of violence between their parents. Sammy has the urge to flee, while Pecola only begs God to make her disappear (Morrison 45). In her fantasy, she can completely disappear except for the eyes, “Try as she might, she could never get her eyes to disappear” (45). However, it occurred to her that if her eyes were different, beautiful, she would be treated differently. She thinks about how her parents would remark, “look at pretty-eyed Pecola. We mustn’t do bad things in front of those pretty eyes” (46).
In addition to the physical violence at home, there is still an episode of symbolic violence in this chapter when Pecola suffers from racial prejudice while buying candies in a grocery store. The white merchant who attends her treats her with contempt and rudeness; when she hands him the money, he hesitates as if he is too disgusted to touch the black girl’s hand (Morrison 49). This embarrassing situation arouses a paralysing feeling of shame in Pecola, who is still too young to have any kind of reaction.

In the chapter, “Winter,” Claudia recounts an episode that shows the racial contempt of blacks for their colour. As children, they already have rooted in their minds the plague of racial prejudice that consumes and weakens them, without them realising it. The treatment of a black person at that time, and even today, was directly related to the tone of their skin. The darker they were, the more despised and humiliated they would be. One day, Claudia and Frieda, accompanied by a girl named Maureen Peal, witness a scene of coercion and verbal violence that a group of black boys directs at Pecola. Maureen Peal plays a vital role in this episode, due to her colour and the economic condition of her family. Maureen Peal is a light-coloured mestiza, with long brown hair, and is considered wealthy by the other children. She is respected and admired by the other boys and girls, and the teachers treat her kindly. With Pecola, the opposite happens; they treat her without the least respect. Pecola is trapped by the boys like a fragile animal that is about to be devoured by predators as they form a wheel that surrounds her and begin to insult her. These boys, who share Pecola’s skin colour and background, use her ethnicity as the central theme of their insult: “Black e mo black e mo ya daddy sleeps nekked” (Morrison 65). They had extemporized a verse made up of two insults about matters over which the victim had no control: the color of her skin and speculations on the sleeping habits of an adult, wildly fitting in its incoherence. Therefore, their insults become a form of self-denial, of what they are and what they represent. Frieda defends Pecola and confronts the boys to help out her friend. Claudia also finds in herself courage to defend her friend. However, only when Maureen Peal appears, the boys decide to retreat and leave.

In the chapter “Spring,” Cholly Breedlove is presented as a drunken and violent man; however, even more contemptible than his drunkenness or his violence is the fact that he rapes his own daughter. Pecola, then eleven-year-old, is brutalised by the person responsible for her wellbeing. This is a form of Cholly enforce his masculinity, a crucial issue in the construction of gender and racial identity. According to Patricia H. Collins:

[...] the reticence to speak out about rape and sexual violence upholds troublesome conceptions of Black masculinity. Within the domestic sphere,
many Black men treat their wives, girlfriends, and children in ways that they would never treat their mothers, sisters, friends, workplace acquaintances, or other women. Violence and love become so intertwined that many men cannot see alternative paths to manhood that do not involve violence against women (Black Sexual Politics 230).

Abandoned by his mother and left on a garbage heap at the side of a highway four days after his birth, Cholly was rescued by an old aunt who raised him. She always reminded him of where he was found, while being the only one who treated him with affection. His aunt died when he was still a teenager; thus, after her death, he decided to look for the father he never met. When he finds his parent, the man drives him away like a dog, causing him to suffer the greatest humiliation of his whole life. Consequently, he is physically and psychologically shaken: “Abandoned in a junk heap by his mother, rejected for a crap game by his father, there was nothing more to lose. He was alone with his own perceptions and appetites, and they alone interested him” (Morrison 160).

Additionally to growing up without paternal reference, Cholly’s first sexual experience is unsuccessful, possibly traumatizing. During his aunt’s funeral, he and a teenager girl walk into the woods. During intercourse, they are surprised by a group of white hunters who harass and threatens them. Meanwhile, one of them focuses the lantern on Cholly’s buttocks. From this symbolically sexual violence, Cholly does not direct his hate to the hunters who threatened him, but to the girl with whom he had relations. This hatred is later transferred to his wife. When Cholly meets Pauline and they get married, he continues to respond only to his instincts; there are no altruistic feelings. When their children are born, their relationship, which was already cold, worsens. Cholly is disoriented with the birth of his children: “Having no idea of how to raise children, and having never watched any parent raise himself, he could not even comprehend what such a relationship should be” (Morrison 160). Further, one afternoon when he arrives drunk at home and sees Pecola at the sink washing dishes, he overpowers her and rapes her. Then, he covers her with a blanket and leaves her lying on the ground as if she had fainted.

Morrison uses very subtle language to narrate the episode, one that viscerally affects the reader, revealing how Pecola Breedlove experiences all sorts of violence, but hardly any kind of love. Rape is a crime in which the victim is typically blamed, but in Pecola’s case, there is a double factor of blame; everyone wishes her baby would not survive – more than due to the incestuous nature of this violence, since, as Frieda and Claudia hear adults say, there should be a law that would ban ugly people from procreating. Pecola’s baby would be
ugly because the Breedloves were ugly and, most importantly, it would be a constant reminder of a collective guilt (Morrison 190). The way to withdraw from the brutality that Pecola Breedlove experienced is to wish something that others might admire: “Each night, without fail, she prayed for blue eyes. Fervently, for a year she had prayed. Although somewhat discouraged, she was not without hope. To have something as wonderful as that happen would take a long, long time” (Morrison 46). After being despised, humiliated, abused, and becoming pregnant with her father’s child, Pecola Breedlove advances to her frenzy of believing that she has blue eyes.

“Summer,” the last and the shortest chapter of the book, is comprised of an introductory part narrated by Claudia, an extended dialogue between Pecola and her imaginary friend, and, finally, Claudia’s considerations about what happened to Pecola. That summer, Claudia and Frieda leave the neighbourhood houses to sell seed packs. They receive a promise that if they sell all the seeds, they will win a bicycle. As they pass through the houses, they hear snippets of a terrible story. Thus, the girls discover that Pecola is pregnant with her father’s baby and had been beaten by her mother for the same reason, actually “they say the way her mama beat her she lucky to be alive” (Morrison 189). In addition, people also consider her guilty for what happened and wished that her baby will not survive. Claudia and Frieda are moved by the lack of sympathy from their community, for they want the baby to be born well. They still do not understand the process of having a baby from a man, particularly when this man is a girl’s own father. The girls, in their natural childish solidarity, decide to make a promise, so that Pecola’s baby will not die. They give up the seed money, and they plant the seeds in the back of the house; if the seeds happen-to sprout, they will know that everything went well (Morrison 192). However, those seeds never sprout.

To conclude this chapter, Claudia analyses and evaluates what happened to Pecola. The narrator considers everybody responsible, including herself:

All of our waste which we dumped on her and which she absorbed. And all of our beauty, which was hers first and which she gave to us. All of us—all who knew her—felt so wholesome after we cleaned ourselves on her. We were so beautiful when we stood astride her ugliness. Her simplicity decorated us, her guilt sanctified us, her pain made us glow with health, her awkwardness made us think we had a sense of humor. Her inarticulateness made us believe we were eloquent. Her poverty kept us generous. Even her waking dreams we used—to silence our own nightmares. And she let us, and thereby deserved
Morrison’s narrative, subverts the established canons without appealing to commonplace and stereotypes. The way in which the author makes visible the discourses that lead to objectification, as much as the solutions that characters create to resist it, constitutes the epistemological challenge for the review of the historical narrative. In a 1993 foreword to the novel, Morrison explains that

*The Bluest Eye* was my effort to say something about that; to say something about why she [Pecola] had not, or possibly ever would have, the experience of what she possessed and also why she prayed for so radical an alteration. Implicit in her desire was racial self-loathing. And twenty years later, I was still wondering about how one learns that [...] The novel pecks away at the gaze that condemned her (XI).

In this sense, Toni Morrison reveals that to circumvent dualisms, an author must write with utmost sensitivity. Thus, writing is conceived as a practice that seeks the intricacies and contradictions inherent in the processes of identification. Furthermore, Morrison chronicles the experiences of black women without reducing them to victims or individuals devoid of paradoxes.

Pecola is a girl with no voice in the novel. She is a girl who idolises the blue-eyed child actress Shirley Temple; who is bullied at school by virtually all her peers; who has a father with a severe drinking problem and a neglectful mother; who sees her parents having constant violent fights; and yet who will not be helped by anyone, even if they do not actively contribute to her humiliation. All Pecola wants is to understand what she must do to deserve to be loved, yet, like many other girls, she was never encouraged to love herself. In* Black Skin, White Masks* (1983), Fanon affirms that it is not history that engenders black individuals, but the idea that is made of them that begets history. As Frantz Fanon points out, “[t]he feeling of inferiority of the colonised is the correlative to the European’s feeling of superiority. Let us have the courage to say outright: It is the racist who creates his inferior” (69). Moreover, Fanon affirms that the ways in which society corrupts a personality – such as a black child wishing for blue eyes – do not relate to a personal culpability or weakness. Indeed, the inferiority complex is not an inherent aspect in the essence of black people, but the result of a concrete situation, namely, racism.

Therefore, according to Fanon’s observation, a child who is deemed ugly might, inevitably, believe that her presence is disagreeable and, while she continues to be so, she
will not be deserving of anything better. Pecola cannot be blamed for wishing to have blue eyes since blue-eyed girls like Shirley Temple were universally worshipped. In contrast, it is Claudia McTeer who presents an antagonist view, showing her struggle to accept these beauty standards. In this passage, the character recounts how,

Younger than both Frieda and Pecola, I had not yet arrived at the turning point in the development of my psyche which would allow me to love her. What I felt at that time was unsullied hatred. But before that I had felt a stranger, more frightening thing than hatred for all the Shirley Temples of the world (Morrison 19).

In fact, it is through Claudia McTeer that Morrison presents a different exit from the violence of racism and sexism. An example in this respect refers to the fact that Claudia owns only blue-eyed dolls. At this point, the character discloses her conflict between meeting the expectations of adults or attending her desires:

The big, the special, the loving gift was always a big, blue-eyed Baby Doll. From the clucking sounds of adults I knew that the doll represented what they thought was my fondest wish [...] What was I supposed to do with it? Pretend I was its mother? I had no interest in babies or the concept of motherhood. I was interested only in humans my own age and size, and could not generate any enthusiasm at the prospect of being a mother [...] I learned quickly, however, what I was expected to do with the doll: rock it, fabricate storied situations around it, even sleep with it [...] I was physically revolted by and secretly frightened of those round moronic eyes, the pancake face, and orangeworms hair. The other dolls, which were supposed to bring me great pleasure, succeeded in doing quite the opposite. (Morrison 35).

The way Claudia McTeer deals with her revulsion is by destroying her dolls. This process coincides with the insistence of a feeling that frightens her: the transfer of hatred for the dolls to the white girls. Throughout the plot, when the character faces a harsh reality, she is, at the same time, constructing strategies of resistance through confrontations. Thus, while Pecola Breedlove creates an illusion to survive and to stop her suffering, Claudia McTeer gets rid of the desire to be loved within the parameters of otherness, and thus she constructs other subjective spaces. At no time does Morrison address these choices regarding gains or failures, but as ways of making visible the processes of constructions of their character.

Morrison’s narrative form and content are inseparable. The way the author approaches the subject compels her readers to contemplations. As such, there is not an inherited essence
in the characters. Toni Morrison tells a story about complex and real characters, yet she hardly villainises any of them – neither the neglectful mother nor even the father who abuses his daughter. Although their actions are not justifiable, the author explains them to create a better understanding of the mechanisms behind the perpetuation of violence, with hardly any form of classification of the characters as being either heroes and villains at the end of the novel. At the same time, the white majority in the community of Lorain, Ohio is not characterised as the main antagonist. Instead, the author point out to a collective responsibility for the victimization of Pecola.

Claudia McTeer, who as a child could not enjoy the white dolls which all the girls supposedly loved to play with and pretended to be their daughters, did not hate the blond girls with blue eyes themselves; what she hated was what they represented and what she could not understand about their appeal. What she loathed was the fact that blue-eyed blond girls were universally worshipped while brown-eyed and dark-skinned girls who looked like her were not. Consequently, the novel forces readers to think about the imposition of the values and standards of beauty that appear so explicitly connected to whiteness, and their our role in perpetuating these beliefs. Furthermore, it makes readers reflect on our shared social responsibility to the most vulnerable members of society such as Pecola, whose hurt and neglect have devastating effects.

Claudia McTeer functions in the plot as a contrast to the main character: while Pecola Breedlove succumbs to violence, Claudia McTeer gradually builds up psychological, bodily, and linguistic resources of resistance to it. Given this, Morrison does not let the reader forget that Claudia was a child at the time of the main events. The lightness of the infantile symbolic universe makes the social commentaries of the young Claudia McTeer verisimilar regarding the use of language. The effects of this polyphony reflects Morrison’s exploration of the power of literature, where memory and reminiscences are recurrent features.

In Morrison’s narrative, established meanings are transfigured so that the experiences of black women become visible in the author’s representation of ever-changing bodies, instead of prefixed identities. Toni Morrison challenges her readers to distrust the way that we, as a society, perceive these experiences. If the abuse of innocent dark-skinned girls looked upon as sensual objects becomes so natural that we are no longer appalled by it, then who would have the courage to look into Pecola Breedlove’s eyes and acknowledge her humanity?

In addition to be an accomplished writer and professor and the winner of a Nobel and a Pulitzer prize, Toni Morrison has played an active part in the civil rights movement.
Morrison’s biography is source of inspiration to many black women since one of her greatest accomplishments is giving voice and agency to these women in her stories. Although Morrison is part of a distinguished group of American intellectual society, unfortunately her biography is an exception among black women in the Americas. As Patricia Hill Collins states,

Denying African-American women the credentials to become literate certainly excluded most African American women from positions as scholars, teachers, authors, poets, and critics. Moreover, while Black women historians, writers, and social scientists have long existed, until recently these women have not held leadership positions in universities, professional associations, publishing concerns, broadcast media, and other social institutions of knowledge validation. Black women’s exclusion from positions of power within mainstream institutions has led to the elevation of elite White male ideas and interests and the corresponding suppression of Black women’s ideas and interests in traditional scholarship (5).

Given this, in the late 1970’ and early 1980’, Black Feminism, a clear influence in Morrison’s life and work, emerges as a theoretical response to the invisibility of black women in political terms. Although it is not, in fact, a homogeneous movement, the central thesis of its approach considers that sexism, class oppression, and racism are intrinsically related; therefore, the experiences of white and non-white women must be thought of through these three dimensions.

Toni Morrison is herself quite critical of her work, especially in relation to language and the narrative voices which she chose to use in this novel (although she believed to them to be efficient at the time), for they imply Pecola’s total lack of agency. She considers that:

In trying to dramatize the devastation that even casual racial contempt can cause, I chose a unique situation, not a representative one. The extremity of Pecola’s case stemmed largely from a crippled and crippling family— unlike the average black family and unlike the narrator’s. [...] One problem was centering the weight of the novel’s inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than into an interrogation of themselves for the smashing. My solution—break the narrative into parts that had to be reassembled by the reader—seemed to me a good idea, the execution of which does not satisfy me now. (XI-XIII)
Morrison’s use of the narrators, if not ideal, is very efficient in causing reflection, although it is true that Pecola’s character lacks the agency found in other characters, such as in Frieda and Claudia. Morrison makes an effort to counterbalance everything that happens with the Breedlove’s with the dynamics of the McTeer’s family, while the weight of the story being told forces the reader to reflect on how we are complicit in this form of injustice as part of society.

Furthermore, Morrison shows inventiveness in dividing the chapters into seasons of the year to describe, through the recurrent use of metaphors and symbols, a theme still considered taboo at the time of the book’s publication. Much like Carolina’s work, this story broaches very uncomfortable issues. Nonetheless, they are a part of reality that needs to be urgently addressed, especially for those most affected by it. That is one of the main reasons why literary works such as Morrison’s are essential to the advancement of equality and fair representations in society. Although the author has been fairly recognised for her contribution in the advancements of civil rights through her literary work, Toni Morrison should be far from an exception in literary community, since works as hers genuinely represents the cultural richness and intersectionalities in the Americas, making a valuable contribution to social and cultural development.
A Slave Narrative on the White Woman in *The Handmaid’s Tale*

Margaret Atwood wrote the thoroughly-researched and quasi-prophetic dystopic novel, *The Handmaid’s Tale* in 1985; a book that later went on to become a bestseller. Atwood was born in Ottawa, Canada. Professor, poet, essayist, literary critic and an outstanding novelist of the Canadian literature, she began writing at an early age. *The Handmaid’s Tale* has been translated into more than 35 languages, adapted into a film in 1990, became a radio show on BBC and, currently, was adapted into the eponymous television series, created by Bruce Miller in 2017. Nowadays, the message of her work resonates more than ever. In a way, the idea she presents – of an ultra-conservative hegemony – seem to have come to fruition, considering the current increase acceptance of ultra-conservative speeches in democratic societies. Fundamentalist ideas in media, society and politics around the world seem to be on the rise, despite the threat that the circulation of these ideologies have historically posed to the fundamental rights of democratic States. For this reason, Atwood’s novel had been brought to the centre of the discussion raised by social movements, since it brings awareness to the threats of authoritarianism.

The main plot of the novel revolves around a terrorist attack that occurs in the USA. Christian-fundamentalists blame Islamic terrorists for the attack and take advantage of the moment to implant a theocratic regime in the country, which receives the name of Republic of Gilead. All rights to freedom and privacy, as well as the Constitution itself, cease to exist, and a decree puts an end to women’s rights. In the words of the main character, Offred, whose testimony is later reconstituted by two professors at an academic symposium in 2195:

> They blamed it on the Islamic fanatics, at the time. Keep calm, they said on television. Everything is under control. I was stunned. Everyone was, I know that. It was hard to believe. The entire government, gone like that. How did they get in, how did it happen? That was when they suspended the Constitution. They said it would be temporary. There wasn’t even any rioting in the streets. People stayed home at night, watching television, looking for some direction. There wasn’t even an enemy you could put your finger on.

(Atwood 128)

Throughout the narrative the reader discovers facts that show how things have reached that point. There were clues, but the vast majority of people did not give importance, as if there was a social inertia. In Atwood’s narrative, women such as Offred are enslaved by wealthy families – a project publicly justified by the need to preserve the planet and the human species through the forced management of the population, their workforce, their wombs, and
their knowledge. The income of every woman is suspended, and only accessible to men, whether it is the woman’s father, brother, or husband. Divorces are forbidden. Women cannot be hired for job vacancies; they cannot learn or be literate, and the ones who are already literate are forbidden to write and read.

The novel presents in its protagonist, an example of acts of resignation – page by page, the Handmaid Offred features reactions of incredulity and numbness and, increasingly, her wish for freedom is taken over by a surviving instinct. The protagonist remarks: “Not a hope. I know where I am, and who, and what day it is. These are the tests, and I am sane. Sanity is a valuable possession; I hoard it the way people once hoarded money. I save it, so I will have enough, when the time comes” (Atwood 83). The magnetism of the book lies in its reflection on what is to many, an unimaginable situation: the dismantling of all fundamental rights already guaranteed by law and the repression of individual liberties. In the Gilead regime, technology no longer exists. There are no newspapers, magazines, or movies. The food is scarce and the society returned in an almost medieval period. Further, the police forces act against the civilians, ensuring that there is no disturbance in the imposed order; while religion provides the standards of morality and acceptable behaviour; and patriarchy and social class divisions complete the profile of the new regime.

The women of Gilead might be Maids, Marthas, Wives, or Aunts, and each of these roles has a narrow dress code and specific colours that signal their status in that society. Women who do not fit into the new requirements are seen as “unwomen” (Atwood 15) and are sent to work in forced labour camps, a destination of certain death. Although Atwood’s novel seems extreme in its content, everything the author presents is inspired by real facts (Atwood XIII). Atwood’s work tries to show us the possibility of this happening, by bringing to light the memories of Offred from the events that preceded the establishment of the totalitarian and theocratic State.

Beyond not having the right to own money, some women cannot have a proper name. Housemaids are Marthas, Coras, or Ritas, according to the tasks they perform in the household - they have no other life than working as cooks, dusting furniture, washing clothes, and wearing their uniforms. The Commander’s wife, Serena Joy, is a former gospel singer who advocated traditional values for women and now has no other choice but to endure the repression of the regime she helped establishing. She also must follow social codes, such as wear blue dresses. She had to learn how to live without her fame, her previous life on the stage, and without voice in a world in which women are nothing more than details. Offred is a Handmaid. She is forbidden to read or write and is watched continuously to the point that
her comings and goings are controlled and supervised. A Handmaid’s purpose is to become pregnant and give birth to a healthy child for her masters, a ritual justified by the regime through conveniently interpreted passages from the Bible’s Old Testament, where Leah offers Abraham her slave to give him a son. Handmaids have no rights over their child, and as soon as the breastfeeding is over, they are assigned to a new house, where they take the name of her new master and must try again to conceive. The reward is the guarantee of not being sent to the Colonies.

The Handmaids are those whose previous conduct was disapproved of by the regime and the new laws. Offred, for example, is arrested when trying to escape because her marriage is illegal, since her partner, Luke, had already been married. As a Handmaid, Offred belongs to a class of fertile women at a time when healthy babies are rarely conceived. She is forced into a surrogacy confinement, not even knowing if Fred, the Commander, is fertile. That is because the fertility of men is not questioned and the word “sterile” is “outlawed” (Atwood 70-71). Women are either classified as fruitful or barren and, later, “unwomen.” Therefore, the imposition of a sexual ritual precedes a genuine necessity of procreation. Offred is thirty-three at the time she tells her story. Still, the reader does not learn much about her, not even her actual name.

When the coup d’état created Gilead, Offred lost her daughter, her husband, and the right to her own body. Her fertility and her relationship with a divorced man – which is an affront to the regime – makes her vulnerable to the regime’s oppression. In her duty as a Handmaid, Offred suffers a monthly rite called “the Ceremony” (Atwood 92) where Fred, the Commander, rapes her, laying the victim on the lap of his own Wife. The Martha and the driver, Nick, must pray for her to get pregnant soon. There is not any particular or collective movement that openly opposes the regime in Gilead. However, during the regime, there were rumours of an underground resistance that circulated between the Handmaids called “Mayday” (Atwood 212). The information about the operation is transmitted between fragments, because its circulation is too dangerous for them. For her part, the protagonist is not a fearless heroine. Faced with tragedy, she restricts herself to shopping, describing the domestic space, and remembering the past as if the 1980s were glorious times. Representing the typical middle-class, she fears police repression when she sees the police picking up a man and tossing him into a truck, and she thinks, “What I feel is relief. It wasn’t me” (126).

Further in the novel, when Offred vaguely complains that the situation is horrible for women, the Commander tells her: “‘You can’t make an omelette without breaking eggs. ‘We
thought we could do better [...] Better never means better for everyone . . . It always means worse, for some”’ (Atwood 155). He adds:

We’ve given them more than we’ve taken away, said the Commander. Think of the trouble they had before [...] This way they all get a man, nobody’s left out. And then if they did marry, they could be left with a kid, two kids, the husband might just get fed up and take off, disappear, they’d have to go on welfare [...] Money was the only measure of worth, for everyone, they got no respect as mothers. No wonder they were giving up on the whole business. This way they’re protected, they can fulfil their biological destinies in peace. With full support and encouragement. Now, tell me. You’re an intelligent person, I like to hear what you think. What did we overlook? (161)

Offred’s answer is: “Love.” Few writers have so well translated the yearnings of middle-class women from Canada and the United States such as Atwood. With different longings from that of immigrant, Latins, and Blacks compatriots, who were crushed between arduous work and racism well before the two World Wars, a generation of white women planned to improve their education, take university courses, and have access to skilled job opportunities. They adhered to working clothes. Without necessarily identify themselves as feminists, they lived their adolescence in a period of sexual liberation, knowing how to use contraceptive pills, although they still were expected to comply with beauty standards, masculine whims, and they were proud of earning their income, though without the guarantee of the still much-promised equality to men.

A critical discussion in feminism – and a key theme in Atwood’s narrative – is the concept of backlash: as society moves toward equal rights, there are also campaigns to cease these rights. In this sense, no right is permanent. Susan Faludi developed the concept of backlash in *Backlash: The Undeclared War Against American Women* (1991), which corresponds to the conservative reaction to the new achievements of women. In the 1980s, the recent achievements of women began to be questioned from the misconception that female emancipation would be the cause of female unhappiness. Attacking women’s rights began to be systematically spread across American culture, with allegations endorsed by physicians, intellectuals, newspapers and television editorials.

At that time, feminists were already in the mass media and were an important part of the political scene. At the same time, it was a time of contestation, in which voices of women who wanted to be recognized in their specificities emerged from within the movement. Black women had been rejecting the idea of the universal woman since the suffragette movement,
but they were joined by the non-white, Chicanos, natives, and lesbian women who sought to include their experiences in the feminist agenda. On the other hand, the Conservatives’ counter-attack was increasingly trying to suspend and reverse certain gender rights. In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, sexual and reproductive freedom are treated by the state as the main causes of the “decay” of women. In one episode, one of the Handmaids is compelled to report and take the blame for the rape she suffered in pre-Gilead times, since the violence suffered by women was their own responsibility, by demanding rights that were not consistent with their biological destiny. This bears close resemblance to the treatment given to Pecola Breedlove in *The Bluest Eye*. However, different from the Handmaids, Pecola was only twelve years old in Morrison’s narrative.

When Offred remembers her mother, she describes her pejoratively. The relation between mother and daughter had many frictions and points in which the two disagreed: “You were a wanted child, God knows, she would say at other moments, lingering over the photo albums in which she had me framed […] She would say this a little regretfully, as though I hadn’t turned out entirely as she’d expected” (Atwood 134). Often, Offred criticises her mother for her radical posture, for wearing overalls, for being different. Yet, her friend Moira had great admiration for her mother. In the following passage, Offred remembers her mother saying: “You young people don’t appreciate things, she’d say. You don’t know what we had to go through, just to get you where you are. Look at him, slicing up the carrots. Don’t you know how many women’s lives, how many women’s bodies, the tanks had to roll over just to get that far?” (Atwood 91); her mother remembered that, in other times, Luke would be considered ‘queer’. Thus, the novel presents these two feminist characters: the protagonist’s mother, a more traditional left-wing militant; and her lesbian friend Moira, whose thoughts are more aligned with those of queer feminists of the 1980s. Incorporating the spirit of the backlash, the narrator feels shame and fear for the two of them at separate times of the story.

When the coup is complete, she does not know what happened to her mother. She spends a few weeks without talking to her, but she is reassured by her husband and ignores the issue until she decides to visit her mother. The apartment was turned inside out, and she discovers too late that her mother had been taken. Offred says, “No mother is ever, completely, a child’s idea of what a mother should be, and I suppose it works the other way around as well. But despite everything, we didn’t do badly by one another, we did as well as most. I wish she were here, so I could tell her I finally know this” (Atwood 134). Only when she meets Moira again does she discover her mother’s fate: she was a woman who did not
adapt to the new regime, and thus she was sent to the colonies to clean toxic waste. Offred, however, is relieved since at least her mother is not dead.

Furthermore, the contrast between Offred and her highly combative mother makes the protagonist appear passive in the face of events and, thereof, less likely to get sympathy from the reader. After all, she wanted to abstain from acting until something happened to her. She observes the changes, suffers hardships and, in the end, she cannot tell her own story, as shown in the epilogue. The human experience always feels unique to us, as if no one before us had fought against the same things or felt the same pain, as if there was something unheard we might articulate in our existence. However, although there is uniqueness in our lives, everyone undergoes similar experiences and struggles. Currently, the concept of feminism is highly in vogue, yet feminism is a concept and a practice that precedes this day and age—as well as Simone de Beauvoir or even Mary Wollstonecraft. Therefore, it is imperative not to ignore the recent social advances or, for that matter.

Offred left her story recorded on tapes and no one knows the outcome of her life. What is known is that her story is transcribed on paper, sold and discussed in a standard history seminar by a man. During the teacher’s analysis, her entire life is devalued and treated coldly. Offred becomes an object of anthropological research like any other. She does not become a prominent figure in history, but the Commander she served does. She remains passive in the face of events, and in the way they manipulate her personal story afterwards.

However, the Epilogue speaks more about the vices of social scientists than about Offred herself. She lived and adapted as she could during challenging times and survived as she could. However, at no time in his speech does the social scientist use terms that refer to—or describes—the degrading and inhumane practices of Gilead. There is an entanglement with the idea that extremisms “are of necessity culture-specific” (Atwood 216). There is no word in his speech that portrays the horror of the situation itself. For him, it was only a time, less than a hundred years ago, when women lived a different way of life. With this epilogue, Atwood reminds her readers that the danger of a backlash is always near.

By the time the novel was released, in 1985, black authors within US literature came to find unprecedented recognition after decades of civil rights struggles: Alice Walker’s The Color Purple was highly praised, winning the Pulitzer and the National Prize of Fiction in 1983; Octavia Butler was reference in science fiction with stories, such as “Bloodchild” (1984), and Toni Morrison had already published four novels, including The Bluest Eye. Although Atwood speaks from a Canadian perspective, the fact that she sets her narrative in a dystopic future in the United States, and ignores completely the historical racial issues in the
region, is a fact that has been much criticized. That is because her book seemingly erases issues that go beyond problems of middle-class white women. Remarkably, the oppressed women in *The Handmaid’s Tale* are white, blue-eyed, well-educated US citizens who are part of the middle-class, unlike most narratives that deal with the themes of power and slavery.

In *The Handmaid’s Tale*, the racial question was removed with a plot subterfuge, which reduced the issue discussed in the novel mainly to the question of gender. To this effect, Offred describes how all the black people are forced – according to the State’s unreliable news – to move to the South, in an act called “Resettlement of the Children of Ham” (Atwood 66). In short, the name Ham refers to a racist interpretation of the Bible used, for centuries, to justify slavery. Offred speculates, “How are they transporting that many people at once? Trains, buses? We are not shown any pictures of this. National Homeland One is in North Dakota. Lord knows what they’re supposed to do, once they get there. Farm is the theory” (Atwood 66). In the narrative, TV images show the city of Detroit – Malcolm X’s home base and a place with a vibrant black cultural background – in flames. This “relocation” is all there is in the plot about the struggle of the black people and the black movement, underscoring the total absence of black characters.

However, considering the dystopic nature of this fictional narrative about a totalitarian and violent future, it is essential to realise that there is a pattern in society consonant to this story which appears neither fictitious nor futuristic. For the diasporic, nonwhite women of different nations and ethnicities, this plot is comparable to historical events, a reflection of real and tragic experiences that they endured from the colonial period to the present day. The problem lies in the fact that, despite addressing the hardships of the repression of female rights, the author chose not to include race as a determining factor in the story. Ignoring this element is a way of reproducing historical violence against non-white women; having only white female characters in the book is, by some means, insensitive to the causes of women and intersectionality. At best, it is artistically convenient.

The novel has been considered a critical feminist text, but it has also been rightly criticised for appropriating the struggles and oppression of black women in the United States. In her assessment of the novel, Dodson concludes that the very idea of forced reproduction recalls the forced reproduction of slaves in America. According to her:

Though victims of racial differences have been categorized and displaced from Gilead’s dominant culture, fertile Caucasian females remain within it, used as objects at the discretion of powerful males. Having been first hunted down as though they were the witches of Old Salem and then governmentally classified
as “Handmaids,” women with working wombs are branded as different from males and from other females. The surface similarities between the female protagonists of slave narratives and the Handmaids of Gilead are underlined by the legal role of the patriarchal white male in reproduction (Dodson 74). During slavery, slaveowners could exercise, without any censure, their lust on the body of the slaves they owned. When black women became pregnant, the property of their masters increased, according to the laws of the time, since the foetus in the mother’s womb was another prospective slave.

Another characteristic reminiscent of slavery shown in the novel, and still present in real world is the existence of the Marthas – the name of women who become domestic workers in the novel. This is a reminder of the emergence of black women as the domestic working class in Brazil and the United States during the Jim Crow Era. As mentioned above, Atwood stated in a 2017 foreword for the book’s new edition that all the horror she presents in her novel is drawn from the real-world experiences of different people around the world. However, the story is told strictly from Offred’s point of view. Accordingly, what seems to be the real outrage in Atwood’s narrative is that, in Gilead, these atrocities are now happening to white women. For instance, one of the white women in the narrative goes mad when she is forced to abandon her baby whom she has been breastfeeding in recent months; a wealthy white couple then raises the child. In fact, the invisible story here is that of so many black women whose bodies were used to breastfeed and raise the children of white people, and whose infants were sold into slavery.

Dodson further explores the appropriation that Atwood made of slave narratives in her representation of the cultural tension in the United States and the discrepancy between the American dream, where the U.S. is the land of the free and the home of the brave, and the sordid reality. The author exposes the dystopic nature of American history: from the atrocities of European invasion; the Puritan fear of otherness; the existence and the long legacy of slavery; and the nation’s failure to live up to its dream/promise. Dodson points out how Atwood’s novel is a recollection of various atrocities already explicit in the slave narratives of female writers. Moreover, Dodson calls attention to the remarkable similarities between Atwood’s first-person narrative and that of one of best knows slave narratives, Harriet Jacobs’ *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861):

To tell her own story of sexual violation, Jacobs creates Linda Brent, an alter-ego who narrates her history in the first person, as Offred does. Brent’s tale is chiefly her own sexual history, as is that of Atwood’s narrator, and both
storytellers illuminate the plight of being female chattel by confessing their lives as fallen women and by revealing the scarlet “A” written upon their chests by neo-Puritanical communities (Dodson 74). Further, she adds that:

The story of the Handmaid’s commodification is based upon an awareness that she shares with Brent, who remarks, “I was a piece of merchandise” [...] Offred similarly says, “I wait, washed, brushed, fed, like a prize pig.” [Offred] realizes that her coming-of-age was not defined by violence and oppression, though other women around her had suffered; [...] She further indicates that she will not have to face the maltreatment during pregnancy that black slave women historically suffered (Dodson 75).

In the Americas, the control of female and black bodies is essential to maintaining the structure of the current constituted economic and political powers. As Offred observes, “a rat in a maze is free to go anywhere, as long as it stays inside the maze” (Atwood 122). It is not by chance that the first measures after situations of economic crises – as shown in the recent budget cut proposals in Brazil (Phillips) and the United States (Gibson and Oliphant) – are the freezing of budget for human rights, welfair and wealth distribution. When trying to prevent economic losses to a privileged minority, individuals who hold the power to make decisions on a budget of millions of taxpayers clearly understand that undermining the most vulnerable communities means to repress their struggle for better living conditions. Therefore, this is a colonial formula updated and pierced by new forms of control.

This process is not only typical in these countries. Across Latin America, indigenous women face similar problems. In 1981, Angela Davis, in Women, Race, and Class, stresses that the meaning of emancipation for black women differs from approaches in liberal bourgeois feminism, which center around the experiences of white women. For this author, due to the historical trajectory of black women, it is fundamental to think how racism and sexism operate in conjunction with class oppression (97). Angela Davis also uses her work to bring attention contemporary policies of mass incarceration, as the reminicesnce of slavery past. According to her, vigilance and militarization increasingly define our societies, as to “what is called ‘security’ under the neoliberal state and ideology of security that bolster not only the privatization of security but the privatization of imprisonment, the privatization of welfare, as well as the privatization of health care and education” (Freedom Is a Constant Struggle 55). The ways of maintaining the subaltern status of black people after the official end of slavery, both in Brazil and the United States, are perennial and sophisticated, being
mass imprisonment one of its contemporary versions. This system promotes public policies aimed at the repression and prosecution of mainly non-white ethnic and racial groups, which provides for a very lucrative market that entails public investments directed towards payment for outsourced food, clothing, and security companies to maintain such structures.

Although social movements – pro-women, LGBT, rural, and ethnic minority rights – have worked incessantly for the responsible investments in social and welfare policies in accordance to the groups that they are aimed at, the influence held by these movements is much smaller than that of the dominant groups. According to Atwood’s narrative, the “unwomen” are sent to colonies where they will bury corpses and deal with toxic waste and elevated levels of radiation (181-2). This is the fate of sterile women and other detractors, like gays and revolutionaries who want to overthrow the regime. Therefore, Offred’s feminist mother is in the colonies. According to the Oxfam report (2016), we live at a time where there is an intense concentration of income as well as the re-enslavement of the workforce on a planetary level. Gender and race remain crucial elements for the reproduction of capital, privileges, and inequalities. Now, the world is opening for new politics in which communication, technology, and science work together for the configuration of systems of oppression and control.

Today’s omissions are acceptable because the structure of privileges entails comfort zones for some groups in society, including the left middle class. Margaret Atwood rightfully points to the need for women to be aware of the structure of privileges, to reach the necessary liberation from colonial political and social models that place subjects in comfortable passive positions.

However, authoritarian capitalism, in which militarisation and the media work together to control the populations, has shown how we have come out of a short historical period with the emergence of new middle classes to a possible future where a backlash might result in increasing situations of social vulnerability than we record today. If we do not prioritise women’s organisational actions, take intersectionality seriously and look at non-white poor women as legitimate sources of knowledge that forwards the thinking of our societies in various aspects, we will not be able to organise legitimate struggles to deal with the excesses and further legacy of authoritarianism.
Discussion

In the history of the Americas, there have been centuries of under-representation, and perverse representation of women by Western literature. Cinema and then television are heirs to that tradition. As a counterpoint, the three writers assessed in this thesis have each a very distinct background and biography. Each of them, to the best of their abilities, thrived in receiving recognition for the importance of their literary production in their countries and abroad. In this sense, one of their most significant achievement is to successfully reach a broad audience through works that present stories that escape the tradition and universalism of the most traditional literature. Further, these writers give voice to subjects that, historically, have had their right to speak up suppressed by a political and cultural system of classification.

The female protagonists in these narratives put in perspective the intersections of discrimination and prejudice in societies throughout the Americas that make women their most vulnerable target. Their stories range from the discussion of how society’s standards of beauty and success affect the construction of identity of girls since childhood in devastating ways – especially in regions with high rates of poverty and violence, and low levels of educations and social investment. Further, they show how these women must endure a life of hardship in societies where women are seen as chiefly responsible for the wellbeing of children. Poor non-white women endure a pattern of conjoined responsibilities for their household, children, and financial independence. Therefore, the condition of being women does not lie in the essence of the female being, but in a life of a constant struggle.

These works show how the colonial project in the Americas, and the idea of modernity, worked as a cruel form of human, social, and cultural classification, whose devastating consequences are seen throughout the continent. These books prove that, regardless of their origins in the Americas, their background and social class, people in the Americas are all affected by a system of classification in societies that are strongly multicultural. Therefore, to apply any universal concept to societies as such, is to support exclusion.

All three stories call to the conscience of the readers and to our conjoined responsibility to protect and embrace our communities in all their differences, not just because we share a similar background and a single identification as Americans – South, North, Latin, African, Asian, French, Native, and so forth – but also because in plural societies- like the ones in the continent, it is impossible to think of universal equality and justice if only one privileged part of society speaks for all.
Therefore, how can the historiographical narrative of the Americas, which is heir to the canons of masculine rationality, learn from the female and feminist literature in epistemological terms? How can we produce different meanings from those that are usually attributed to universal human experiences, through the contemporary literary practices which establish a creative relationship with their time?

Writing is not a neutral practice. Narratives are cultural constructs that create, as well as reflect, reality while producing meanings. These meanings are, therefore, infused with gender and racial values. In this way, the main implication of not taking into account the power relations that cross the narrative practices, is the legitimation of a neutral narrator who is authorized to speak for many. Thus, according to Nelly Richards, women cannot afford not to participate in these struggles, even if the rules are prefixed to benefit the male gender (Richards 25). That is, women must create theoretical productions that favour the practices of diversity.

From a theoretical point of view, the critique of the approaches of black feminism in the late 1970s and further was built, preliminarily, in the field of literature. There lies the importance to highlight the literary production of black American writers who, since the 1970s, have constructed narratives that problematize racial and gender identities and have therefore contributed to theoretical formulations. Writers like Alice Walker, Toni Morrison – and here I would like to place the pioneering work of Carolina Maria de Jesus – are some examples. As insiders, these authors have subverted the boundaries between thoughtful reflection, aesthetics, and politics.

Moments of rupture marked the Cultural Studies concerning the aspects mentioned above. From the mid-1970s, it was necessary to rethink the issues of hegemony and inequality as the strength of the black movement and the feminist movement grew in Western politics. These so-called ‘subcultures’ have come to resist some aspects of the dominant power structure. That is, they had the perception that those who operated the mechanisms of cultural domination were, for the most part, the white and male population, and this reality had a direct influence on the content reproduced by literature and the media.

Stuart Hall points to feminism as one of the decisive theoretical breakthroughs that altered practices in Cultural Studies, reorganising its agenda in concrete terms. Some aspects mentioned by Hall were “the opening of the question of the personal as political”; “the radical expansion of the notion of power”; “the centrality of the questions of gender and sexuality to the understanding of power itself”; “the opening of many of the questions that we
thought we have abolished around the dangerous area of the subjective and the subject”; and “the ‘re-opening’ of the closed frontier between social theory [...] and psychoanalysis” (“Cultural Studies” 268). It was necessary to deconstruct, from the racial point of view, the gendered nature of power (“Cultural Studies” 261) and to bring forward the critical issues of racial and cultural politics.

In this manner, the authors here presented produced a writing that reveals itself as an expression of their identities. They left imprinted in their works their perceptions about their realities. The humanizing force of literature is in its ability to make the individual more aware of the complexity of people and the world, to promote the appeal to feelings that lead to the exercise of reflection. Margaret Atwood, Toni Morrison and Carolina Maria de Jesus used literature to help them improve their lives. Each one in their historical context.

The story of Carolina Maria de Jesus impresses by the limitations she went through, and yet she managed to stand out through her writing. The language that the writer builds to compose her diary reveals her identity. Carolina is her text. Its language is configured as an expression of her identity. Her work, stands out for its narrative power and also for the elaborate use she makes of language. Toni Morrison brings to her writing many voices silenced throughout African American history. The author fulfills her social role through her writing, giving the reader a picture of what it is to be black, and more specifically, to be a black woman, in an extremely racist society. Her authorial voice defines herself as a voice committed to the history of American blacks struggle for spaces of representation in society. Margaret Atwood draws from reality and metaphors the experiences of many women around the world, proving that it is not necessary to experience an absolutist government to feel the difficulties of being a woman. Without raising any flag, the writer makes her protagonist a mirror of what might happen if we close our eyes. Atwood reminds us that her narrative is incomplete, since it is a reconstruction. Therefore, it lacks other points of view, besides being potentially distorted by the narrator’s emotions and memories, which reminds us that stories told by women are so often questioned. Thus, despite all the differences, these writers have in common the importance that literature had in their lives. By looking at the opportunities they had and where they came from, it is right to affirm that the magnitude of their achievements can be equated.

Literature can act effectively in the formation of the identity of a reader. The writers here represent the modifying force that the literary text can have on individuals. This potential can be better explored not only in the teaching of literature, but also by people on
the margins of society. Its function is also to recover the narrative ability of the readers, helping them to attain new linguistic resources to be able to speak for themselves, and to represent themselves as subjects. The reflections proposed here aim to highlight the works of these women who showed their value and capacity through their works. Their names will be forever engraved in history. And it is hoped that many other voices of literature, forgotten and neglected by prejudice, may also be exalted to the place they deserve.

In conclusion, if we think of the ethical recognition of the other and the desired representation of the common good as core questions related to identity, the idea of subjectivity must be deeply connected to what we consider as political thought. Moreover, if we reflect on the many existing ethical, political, and social concern, then we understand how important identity and subjectivity is as an essential complement to political thought and policy making. Indeed, one problem is that political and cultural institutions – like most institutions – often develop a sort of functional ideology.

Writers of postcolonial societies experience the world through the eyes of the “wretched of the earth” (Fanon). Literature has the power to break with all sorts of boundaries. The most stimulating literary works, even from a regional perspective, aim to discuss the contradictions and disjunctions of a nation. Literary works that narrate only a purely nationalist doctrine are of no interest to social advancement; they are merely interesting material for authoritarian politicians and dictators.
Conclusion

The literary works of Carolina de Jesus, Toni Morrison, and Margaret Atwood – in an overall representation of the literature on the Americas – raise awareness of the intersections of topics such as class, gender, and identity that speaks directly to the legacy of colonial intervention in the region. Whether autobiographical prose or in dystopic fiction, these works combined create a panorama of the typical struggles of women throughout the Americas and the significance of their voice in the pursuit of civil rights and equality through their storytelling. This research revised established postcolonial concepts and their intersections with Cultural and Feminist Studies through a critical reading of the continuity of colonial relations of control and oppression. Women from the Americas, mestizas and marginalised, suffer combined intersections of prejudice. Therefore, a study of the literature by women from the Americas effectively illustrates the conditions of the peoples of America from an intersectional perspective — that is, through an analysis of how the structured relationships between racism, classism, and sexism generate common forms of oppression. When women rise from the place of the subject to become the enunciators and protagonists of their own story, they contest a part of history.

The literary production of postcolonial individuals can respond to imperialism by bringing a variety of views on their history and experiences that can challenge stories of their culture told from a European perspective. However, the literature produced by marginalised groups, which once had no institutional or intellectual legitimacy, was – and still is – often ignored in academic studies. Consequently, the academic environment validates the legitimacy of Eurocentric literature, if it does not counterbalance the promotion of the literature – anglophone literature, for instance – made outside Europe. In this sense, traditional literature scarcely approaches the richness of topics which postcolonial literature does with its ability to present a better understanding of what has never come to readers in other traditional forms. There lies the importance of diversity in literature. Racism – and, in fact, any prejudice – arises from the assumption that homogeneity is the natural state of things. Therefore, literature cannot be limited to a single perspective when it is not solely intended for a specific audience. If this allowed to happen, instead of being a vehicle for change, literature becomes an ally to the status quo.

The effects of colonialism are still present in the Americas. Regions throughout the Americas have often shown a higher level of multiculturalism as well as inequality in countless ways. The colonial essence of these relations is apparent in the numerous cases of
domination and oppression defined by the establishment of hierarchical boundaries such as gender, racial/ethnic, class, or sexual orientation. Therefore, identifying what causes the interconnectedness between diversity, gender, and pronounced inequality, and to what extent colonial legacy and the associated institutional structures have been impacting the postcolonial societies of the Americas is an effective way to revise historical representations that inspire more inclusive cultural identities.
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