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THE COLOR OF EXPERIENCE. SEXUALITY AND POLITICS IN BLACK FEMINIST THOUGHT¹

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Abstract

The essay investigates some aspects concerning that ‘economy of practices’ called into question by Hortense Spillers to indicate the symbolic and material process that has determined the concept of Colored Woman and has configured the subordination of the black female body, excluded from gender and, at the same time, slipped into the interstices of that peculiar colonial order of the discourse originating from capitalism. Starting from the historical partiality of ‘Blackness’, Black feminist thinkers have shown the interrelated functioning of male and racial domination within modern discourse, laying the foundations to reorganize the practical field of truth produced by scientific reason in order to the principle of human classification.

Keywords

Blackness, Woman, American grammar, Truth, Praxis.

1. Reception date: 15th February 2021; acceptance date: 23rd March 2021. The essay is the issue of a research carried out within the Dipartimento di Studi Politici e Sociali, Università degli Studi di Salerno.

Resumen

El ensayo investiga algunos aspectos relativos a esa ‘economía de las prácticas’ puesta en cuestión por Hortense Spillers para indicar el proceso simbólico y material que ha determinado el concepto de Mujer de Color y ha configurado la subordinación del cuerpo femenino negro, excluido del género y, al mismo tiempo, deslizado en los intersticios de ese peculiar orden colonial del discurso originado en el capitalismo. Partiendo de la parcialidad histórica de la “negritud”, las pensadoras negras feministas han mostrado el funcionamiento interrelacionado de la dominación masculina y racial dentro del discurso moderno, sentando las bases para reorganizar el campo práctico de la verdad producido por la razón científica en orden al principio de la clasificación humana.

Palabras clave

Negritud, Mujer, Gramática americana, Verdad, Praxis

“Once upon a time there was an old woman
Blind. Wise”.

Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 1993

Black Woman

In an article published in 1971 in *The New York Times*, the writer Toni Morrison explains the deep reasons for the distrust perceived by the black woman towards the feminist liberation movement that exploded in those years in the United States of America (Morrison, 1971). These reasons are inscribed in the groove of a historical experience carved in the past, yet tremendously alive, at work, branched into an “archeology of the present” (Amin, 2010) from which it continues to re-emerge as an unconscious inheritance-specifies Ash Amin in his essay *Remainders of race*, in which he analyzes the

persistence and historical depth of racial phenomena in contemporary global existence. If, in fact, in the seventies of the last century, slavery had been abolished for more than a century, its discriminatory logic, establishing race as a code of naturalization of human difference, has continued to operate undercurrent, marking the skin of black women in the sign of a granitic, irreducible otherness that cannot be homologated to other forms of social exclusion and discrimination.

It is no coincidence, therefore, that the symbolic efficacy of signs in the hierarchical classification of human beings is indicated by Morrison as the silent driving force of the racist domination perpetrated in the mid-twentieth century within American democracy. In *What the Black Woman Thinks About Women's Lib*, the African-American writer reflects on the controversial—and, at the same time, in some ways, failed—relationship that since the 1970s has been established between racial oppression and feminist liberation, catapulting the gaze of those who read on the violent discriminatory impact produced by signage in public places. *White Ladies/Colored Women*, this is the subtle, reassuring “color line” spread by road signs in every banal aspect of daily life, the border of racial segregation that divides women's bodies in the public space and thus breaks the compact front of the battle feminist inaugurated in those years for the equality of the sexes.

They were always there. Whenever you wanted to do something simple, natural and inoffensive. Like drink some water, sit down, go to the bathroom or buy bus ticket to Charlotte, NC Those classifying signs that told you who you were, what to do” (Morrison, 1971). If white women are called “Ladies”, Ladies worthy of masculine respect and protection for the ‘innate’ gender qualities conferred on them by patriarchy—gentleness, fragility, modesty—, women of color are excluded from the feminine ideal, because “tough, capable, independent and immodest. (Morrison, 1971)

Already from this mention on the cultural climate of the time we can deduce the deep reasons set out by Morrison about the sense of extraneousness matured by the black woman towards American liberal feminism. The goal of the American movement is, in fact, social equality, the inclusion of women in the labour market and the liberation “from the mystique of femininity” (Friedan, 1977): the emancipation from the stereotype of the “Lady”, emblem the ancillary role assigned to the white woman as a subject of care destined for the domestic sphere. It is evident, then, that at this height a

further polemical break is decided (Rudan, 2020) on the terrain of modern universalism governed by male domination that presides over the representation of femininity (Boccia, 2002; Bordieu, 2009).

The distrust of black women towards the progressive instances of the American movement is explained, then, by the lack of recognition of their difference. Their extraneousness—the refusal to join the feminist project of emancipation—is rooted in the “uniqueness of their experience” (Morrison, 1971): a personal and collective story closely linked to the history of slavery (Davis, 2018) from which they inherit the configuration of a subordinate position, subjected to the “universalizing taxonomy” (Vivan, 2009) of a language forged by slavery in the contemporary global space.

This passage contains the nucleus of a reflection from which the work starts. The goal is to focus our gaze on the semantic shift highlighted by Morrison to indicate the hybrid, mutilated, gender-excluded position that the patriarchal domination assigns to the Black woman, starting from the hierarchical order of human differentiation established by the American signage:

Significant as that shift in semantics is, obvious as its relationship to the black - woman concept is, it has not been followed by any immediate comradery between black and white women, nor has it precipitated any rush of black women into the various chapters of Now. (Morrison, 1971)

This essay therefore considers the symbolic removal (shift in semantics) that invests the black female body as the effect produced by “a general economy of practices” (Spillers, 1987) rooted in the institution of slavery and in imperial logic of the capitalism that promoted its market. The economy of these practices—field work, rape, torture—determined the material conditions for the production of a historical subjectivity placed in the ‘interstices’ of a symbolic order defined by Hortense Spillers as “American grammar” (Spillers, 1987), and decided, in turn, the different positioning that Black feminism has taken with respect to the gender norms established by the patriarchy for self-determination.

Concomitantly with the emergence of the so-called “second wave” in Europe, voices of authoritative thinkers from the United States of America—Angela Davis, Bell Hooks, Hortense Spillers, Audre Lorde—from which emerges a radical instance of self-determination in relation to a specific condition of female oppression: not only the ancillary dimension imposed by the patriarchal culture inscribed in the political form of the

modern State, but the racial subordination imposed on the black woman by the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” (hooks, 1984, p. 51) rooted in the symbolic legacy of colonialism. On the level of theory, understood by radical black feminism as a creative and liberating practice (hooks, 2020), this means considering the material and symbolic effects produced by the colonization of the black woman, observing the legacy of slavery reproduced by social relations of power in the division of labour and the prison industrial complex of contemporary American society.

It is about exploring the symbolic - productive arsenal of racial and gender violence—traceable in modern representation, in the tradition of thought inaugurated by the theorists of natural law (Pateman, 1988) and consolidated after about two centuries by the scientific project of the division into races established by Darwin on the basis of classifying parameters of bodies (Darwin, (1859), 1994; Da Silva, 2007)—. If, in fact, in the patriarchal version of white femininity, the woman is subordinated to male control as an object of functional property to the act of procreation and to the servile dimension to which she is destined in the domestic sphere (Lonzi, 1971), the black woman is subjected to unlimited practices of exploitation as a slave: a living thing, and at times, a hetero-determined subject, a “sub-human creature” (hooks, 1981, p. 71), a full-time worker to be masculinized and mutilated as a sign of “economic supremacy of the owner” (Davis, 1983).

The partiality expressed by the subordinate female body thus highlights for bell hooks the impossibility of universalizing the word ‘Woman’ in a stable, homogeneous concept and at the same time indicates the need to question the positioning concrete (hooks, 1994) from which black women take their word, imprisoned by the slavery of European empires in a silent, invisible space, excluded from the gender norms that American feminism has articulated as the univocal signifier of the category of femininity. Instead of the antagonism between masculine and feminine, bell hooks considers the division between the colonized subject and the colonizer: for this, she delves into the interconnections between the social status produced by colonial logic in order to show the irreducible differences that divide the signifier “woman” in concrete historical relationships: hybrid, fragmented, contradictory positions, of which must be taken into account if we want to adopt a feminist critique capable of affirming a field of resistance to male domination through the creation of a new imaginary.

I wanted to say unequivocally that the matter of feminism is not the antagonism of women against men, that they are two interrelated and intertwined systems.

When we emphasized the issue of race, it was very difficult for white women to understand that gender is not the only element that determines our reality. (hooks, 1984, 189)

For bell hooks, therefore, the experience of being a woman is not substantially determined by gender, but is decided, rather, by the intersection of differences that materially affect the concrete positioning of the subject in a space. The experience of this interconnection is what the philosopher calls ‘margin’: a condition of life, an expressive and existential way that allows the subordinate to articulate an alternative vision using the language of the oppressor, with the awareness of the marginal place from which speaks and of the whole of which it is part:

To be in the margin is to be part of the whole but outside the main body. As black Americans living in a small Kentucky town, the railroad tracks were a daily reminder of our marginality. Across those tracks were paved streets, stores we could not enter, restaurants we could not eat in, and people we could not look directly in the face. Across those tracks was a world we could work in as maids, as janitors, as prostitutes, as long as it was in a service capacity. We could enter that world but we could not live there. We had always to return to the margin, to cross the tracks, to shacks and abandoned houses on the edge of town. (hooks, 1984, 1)

As in Carla Lonzi, so also in bell hooks the experience of female freedom manifests itself through the awareness of an unexpected subjectivity that subverts the power relations legitimized by the political universal of modern representation (Lonzi, 1971; Fraise, 2016). However, if this gesture of revolt and liberation, in the feminist thought of sexual difference, is affirmed through the radicalism of a frontal, antagonist, separatist move between women, for Hooks, it is given in the excess of “a move to the side” (Nadotti, 2020, p. 24), through a stance that articulates resistance within the power relations, in a mobile perspective of interconnection between different parts and not predetermined by a principle of belonging.

This has a decisive consequence on the level of subjectivation in the global present, because, in the face of the incessant neutralization of the antagonism in the economic order of neoliberal governmentality, this theory focuses on the potential inscribed in a practice in which the instances are not co-opted, individualized or canceled, but they take on political force—singular and collective (Rudan, 2020)—within a discourse that

connects elements not united by preordained belonging to a group or class (Hall, 1986). The articulation of this discourse attributes to the subject a power: the possibility of manifesting himself in a “space of radical openness” (hooks, 1989, p. 203), practicable not only for the self-determination of black women, but for anyone who chooses to place himself in the partiality of the margin, at the point of intersection between the fact—the condition imposed by the center—and the openness of meaning that the articulation of differences can offer to each one. At this point, it is a question of investigating some aspects concerning that ‘overall economy of practices’ called into question by Hortense Spillers to indicate the symbolic and material economy of slavery: the process of naming that has determined the concept of Black Woman and has configured the subordination of the black female body, excluded from gender and, at the same time, “slipped” into the interstices of that peculiar colonial order of the discourse originating from the slave trade from West Africa to the Americas and referred to by Spillers as “American grammar”. It is therefore a question of analyzing the racial logic operating in this grammar that determined “the violent formation of a modern African consciousness” (Spillers, 1987, p. 68) and established the position of the black woman as a slave in a system of exploitation and appropriation of value: on the one hand, an object of property, a movable good, a body to be brutalized, annulled and, on the other, a historical subjectivity torn by an insoluble dilemma.

The Color of Experience

Going to the bottom of the status of this contradiction, investigating the symbolic structure that tells the truth about the subordinate woman, focusing on the “degenerate” representation ordered by the patriarchy and, at the same time, listening to the lived experience and of the thought expressed by the black women, all this becomes a necessary and, at the same time, liberating task. Necessary, because for a feminist critique equal to the global present, the difference in its concrete articulation cannot be understood except through the exploration of the ways in which sexism, racism and colonialism intertwine, starting “of the inter-connections between various systems of domination” (hooks, 1984, p. 19), in the stratified plurality of times and voices that resist the dominant narrative of neoliberal governmentality. Liberating, because digging into the darkest parts of modern representation brings to the surface an imaginary that has colonized the European mind (Da Silva, 2007)—“*Nous autres, victoriens*” (Foucault,

1976, p. 8)—through an idea of race functional to a system based on “three orders: the male, reproductive order of patriarchal monogamy; the white economic order of mining capital; and the global, political order of empire (McClintock, 1995, p. 4).

Here the geopolitical function carried out by scientific knowledge in the modern era should be emphasized (Mignolo, 2011). In fact, at the end of the XVIII century, Georges Cuvier (1769-1832) inaugurated a particular form of knowledge around the racial construct—the “science of life”—aimed at classifying the world population on the basis of organic parameters establishing links between bodies, minds and spaces: between body structures, mental attributes and continental regions (Cuvier, 1863; Da Silva, 2007). Postulating the inferiority of the “savages” (Rousseau, 1964; Galli, 2001) the biological classification of the human species into races—Mongolian or yellow, Ethiopian or black, Caucasian or white—thus provides the criterion of racial justification of modern imperialism in Europe: the global space event promoted by the maritime and commercial powers of the Empires in the Americas and in other parts of the world for the expropriation of the lands, the natural resources and labor force produced by the indigenous peoples in those territories. In fact, in the classification scheme envisaged by Cuvier, each living being located in a region of the globe corresponds to a certain degree of social and cultural “progress” (Da Silva, 2007, p. 106). In this standard, the “Caucasian” occupies a place of privilege, since only his racial variety corresponds to the human specimen located in the field of civilization, endowed with a mental function that emancipates him from the natural laws to which other races are subordinated. The economic-juridical process of the constitution of America therefore required a symbolic mediation of the domino relations imposed by the conquest: a conceptual reformulation of modern grammar useful for promoting the historical emergence of the Atlantic economy through the establishment of a “human difference” in scientific knowledge: a difference between “*humanitas* and *anthropos*”: between Man as a self-determined subject, and the Others, as racial subordinates, placed in a context determined by external laws (Da Silva, 2017).

Decolonizing the gaze from this imaginary, taking leave of the symbolic arsenal that forged the European conscience of the post-Enlightenment civilization: this is the task to be carried out and the challenge that belongs to the feminist theory understood by bell hooks as a “liberating practice” (hooks, 2020, p. 93), an exercise of collective liberation mobilized from places of experience and personal healing. For hooks, in fact, theory becomes intrinsically liberatory (hooks, 1994, p. 59)—with respect to the hierarchical structures of race and gender naturalized by the modern tradition and incorporated by

capitalism (Chicchi, 2019)—when it connects to a practice experienced in first person as the starting point of a discourse from which to imagine new horizons of meaning and “possible futures” (hooks, 1994).

Hence the problem on which to focus the analysis emerges: the white supremacy of patriarchy reinvented by extractive capitalism to legitimize the expropriation—the “imperial plunder” (McIntock, 1995, p. 5)—of the productive and reproductive labor force in the territories of conquest. The institution of female subordinate bodies then assumes a strategic value in relation to the historical experience of Black women, whose sexuality has been captured in the economy of slavery and whose resistance has given rise to a significant movement for the politics of present. Considered in her historical partiality, the black woman embodies, in fact, a “global position” (Rudan, 2020, p. 156), that is, a condition in which the totality of the individual racial and sexual differences produced by the systems of domination, intertwine, re-determined by capitalism, as a “social relation” (Chicchi, 2019, p. 47).

Many black thinkers have deconstructed the universalizing category of “Woman” starting from here: from the historical partiality of “blackness” experienced in the first person as a mute, blind, invisible, productive condition of exclusion in the epistemic configuration of contemporary global space. As evidenced by the liberation stories witnessed by the first Black women who spoke in the name of their own unique experience—Sojourner Truth and Anna Julia Cooper—Black feminist thought has shown the interrelated functioning of male and racial domination within modern discourse, laying the foundations to reorganize the practical field of truth produced by scientific reason in order to the principle of racial classification (Darwin, [1859]1994).

If, therefore, as Anne McIntock writes, “imperialism is not something that happened elsewhere—a disagreeable fact of history external to Western identity. Rather, imperialism and the invention of race were fundamental aspects of Western, industrial modernity” (McIntock, 1995, p. 5)—only by giving voice to the historical and epistemological archive of Black women is it possible to discourage “lump thinking” (Morrison, 1971) through a praxis capable of articulating the different demands expressed by women in the world. If, in fact, the decisive contribution made by the thought of sexual difference lies in having introduced the “position of the different who wants to bring about a global change in the civilization that has enclosed him” (Lonzi, 1971, p. 15)—through criticism of the modern universal and the putting into play of relational practices between women—then one cannot ignore the “color of ex-

perience” claimed by black thinkers in relation to the position of the oppressed, since in this the material and symbolic effects are condensed and produced by different systems of domination. Morrison writes in this regard in the article already cited at the beginning:

There is not only the question of color, there is the question of the color of experience. Black women are not convinced that Women’s Lib serves their best interest or that it can cope with the uniqueness of their experience, which is itself an alienating factor. The early image of Women’s Lib was of an elitist organization made up of upper—middle—class women with the concerns of that class (the percentage of women in professional fields, etc.) and not paying much attention to the problems of most black women. (Morrison, 1971)

Starting from a perspective that knows how to articulate without eliminating the intersections and contradictions, the intimate and contradictory relationships produced by the different domains (McClintock, 1995, p. 4), and placing the feminist question within a global thought (Fraisse, p. 57; 70), it is then a question of undoing the norms, the representations, the metaphors of imprisonment and mutilation objectified by the white patriarchy, overturning the mythic narrative - which naturalizes “la difference des sexes et des races” (Fraisse, 2016)—in the concrete partiality of a space-time configuration. Invented by the Enlightenment philosophy and developed by the scientific rationality of the XVIII century, the principles of racial classification—elaborated by Hume, Buffon, Kant, Herder, Cuvier - in fact naturalize social categories by introducing into the field of discourse both “man” as a self-determined subject, and the ‘others’ as hetero-determined subjects confined to a space of necessity (Da Silva, 2017).

The stakes of a feminist theory understood as a “liberatory practice” (hooks, 1994), then, is to subvert this metaphysical structure of discourse, theorizing starting from a place of experience that allows us to broaden the perspective from which you are speaking. For this, it is necessary to make a necessary gesture: to decolonize the gaze from the racial imaginary inherited from “We other Victorians” Foucault through the imperial cult of ‘domesticity’, imposed as a model of truth in the bourgeois societies of nineteenth-century Europe:

Imperialism suffused the Victorian cult of domesticity and the historic separation of the private and the public, which took shape around colonialism and the idea

of race. At the same time, colonialism took shape around the Victorian invention of domesticity and the idea of the home (...) as domestic space became racialized, colonial space became domesticated. (McIntock, 1994, p. 20)

This means that in the economic and ethical system governed by colonial power, the domestic sphere takes on a racial connotation. And vice versa, it also means that raciality takes on a domestic imprint, connected to the discursive production of a “feminized” world (McClintock, 1994), a “Virgin Earth” destined for exploration and male appropriation according to imperial strategic interests. This is how the Empire becomes “home” (McClintock, 1994, p. 18).

‘What are We Worth?’

Around the category of whiteness, imperial Modernity has built “an architecture of racial formation” (Amin, 2010), from which another history of sexuality emerges, contemporary to that described by Michel Foucault in *La volonté de savoir*. Within this architecture—observes Spillers—“the respective subject positions of female and male adhere to no symbolic integrity” (Spillers, 1987, p 66): the racialized body is mutilated by gender—made “degenerate”—degraded by symbolic values of kinship and of the respective rights/duties of paternity and maternity attributed by social norms. Inscribed in a regime of meaning based on public obscurity, social illegitimacy and gender undifferentiation, the black woman’s body is nullified, de-humanized—de-gendered, reduced to “captive flesh” (Spillers, 1987, p. 68)— at the zero degree of conceptualization, because it is invested by the traumatic reality of slavery and its symbolic inheritance. This is what William Du Bois defines

the color line: the problem of the twentieth century, the question as to how far differences of race—which show themselves chiefly in the color of the skin and the texture of the hair—will hereafter be made the basis of denying to over half the world the right of sharing to utmost ability the opportunities and privileges of modern civilization. (Du Bois, 1900 *To the Nations of the World*)

As already mentioned at the beginning, an accurate analysis of the semantic field determined by the patriarchal representation of black female sexuality is focused on by

Hortense Spillers in her fundamental essay *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book*. In it, the author highlights the contradictions and paradoxes produced by “American grammar” right into the capitalist process of exploitation of the human body: “1) The captive body becomes a source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) At the same time, in the stunning contradiction, the captive body reduces to a thing, becoming being for the captor” (Spillers, 1987, p. 67). Perceived as the source of an excess sexuality, objectified as a movable good, placed “in the same context with beasts of burden, all and any animal (s)” (Spillers, 1987, p. 79), the black woman experiences in this grammar a tragic paradox: from a body reduced to a thing, it becomes in the eyes of the slaveholder a *being* without a subjective position—of individual identity and autonomous will—expression of a constitutive *human otherness* (*otherness*). For this reason, the racialized female body is placed by Spillers in the interstices of a symbolic order in which the practices of dehumanization and degradation of the ego are mixed with the phantasmatic element of the racist patriarchal imaginary. In the light of this analysis, the black woman emerges, therefore, as the general instance of a “science of the economy of practices” made up of rape, veneration, torture, exploitation. In order to understand how productive the symbolic legacy of slavery is in the reproduction of subordination, it is worth recalling the analysis carried out by Spillers on *The Case for National Act of 1965*: a public document written by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and presented with the aim of discouraging subsidies and welfare measures, among which the main beneficiaries were precisely black women. The document analyzes the structure of the black family, considered by the author to be a “tangle of *pathology*” (Moynihan, 1965, p. 28), due to the breakdown of bonds caused by the predominant matriarchal structure and the absence of the male figure.

Now, as Melinda Cooper recently observes, the problem concerns the shift of attention operated by Moynihan in the analysis of the causes relating to social unrest, the high rate of crime and youth alienation. Instead of tracing the phenomenon to “the structural factors of urban segregation, discrimination, and educational disadvantage that might implicate contemporary white racism in the reproduction of poverty” (Cooper, 2017, p. 38), Moynihan identifies slavery as the root cause of the degenerate and pathological composition of the black family. “Slavery vitiated family life” (Moynihan, 1965, p. 15). The Absence of the Father—of the paternal law and its symbolic function—is therefore displaced in the territory of the Mother, blamed for the masculine conduct within a disintegrated family structure. For this reason, according to Spiller, the public document belongs to the symbolic paradigm which inscribes ethnicity out of history, in a “scene of negation” (Spillers, 1987, p. 67), devoid of temporality.

Let us return, therefore, in the light of this analysis, to the starting point, namely, to the article by Toni Morrison, published in 1971 in the *New York Times*, in which the writer focuses on the racial matrix of the American language, productive of that *shift in semantics* mobilized by the patriarchal system to name the concept of *Colored Woman* with respect to the white ideal of the *Lady*. American grammar takes shape from this act of naming, based on a game of symbolic substitutions (Spillers, 1987, p. 67) that invest the black female body as a “metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements” (Spillers, 1987, p. 66). As a paradigm of a relationship based on the ownership of human beings considered commodities, this grammar therefore expands in an immeasurable way the violence of capitalist abstraction (Ziarek, 1983, p. 140) incorporated by the slave power. “The captive body, then, brings into focus a gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for value so thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that distinctions between them are virtually useless” (Spillers, 1987, p. 68).

In the economy of slavery - we read in this passage from *Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe*—the prisoner body polarizes a set of effects material and symbolic, literal and figurative—mobilized at the same time by the capital that works in language and from the language that produces *a metaphor for value*. A monetary value attributed to a body devoid of history, confined to nature, split off from the abstraction of the form-commodity (Ziarek, 1983) over which the white monopoly of capitalist production is exercised. Thus Ewa Ziarek focuses on the specific condition of the female body subjected to the grammar of slavery:

Enslaved bodies reproduce the failure of the spiritualization of matter that is associated either with the destruction of social values or with the racist “value” of primitivism. In so doing, they become the bearers of death, illegitimacy, or the exotic unrestrained sexuality. (...) Consequently, the difference between the commodified white female body and the black female body is that the economic and aesthetic value of the latter depends on its inability to spiritualize / specularize matter. (Ziarek, 1983, p. 141)

Femininity thus becomes the symbolic referent of slavery, of life destined for social death, public obscurity and human insignificance, the embodied metaphor of the purely material, quantitative—and not spiritual—”value” that capitalist patriarchy confers on colonized racial entity. This presupposes the annihilation of the political and

social position conferred on the subject. If, in fact, as Spillers observes, the prisoner body becomes the territory of maneuver for a symbolic mutilation in which there is no gender differentiation, at the same time, this same body is objectified in a figure of unbridled sexuality, expression of a primitive humanity, not evolved, confined in a space of nature devoid of reason. It is precisely the racial value of “primitivism” established by social Darwinism that constitutes the scientific instrument for legitimizing the colonial process mobilized by the “New World” order of which Spillers speaks. As already mentioned earlier in reference to this point, the turning point must be placed in the discursive field of biological science in which man emerges as an *object* of racial classification. Inaugurated by Georges Cuvier through the “laws on the conditions of existence”, this specific way of representing the human is further explored by Charles Darwin with the formulation of the “principle of natural selection”.

In the Darwinian work, the discursive construction of racial subordinates would be consolidated, that is, of subjects “whose minds are subjected to their natural (in the scientific sense) conditions” (Da Silva, 2007, p. XIII), placed in a subordinate moral region, subordinated to the laws of nature, rather than to the principle of legality as happens for the subject entitled to self-determination.

At this height of the modern discourse on scientific racism—widely spread in the United States of America during the 19th century—stands the “Voice” of the African-American thinker Anna Julia Cooper. Black woman of the South, born a slave and a free doctorate at the Sorbonne in Paris, her public word against sexism and racism in America shakes the foundations of the capitalist discourse on white supremacy embodied by the nineteenth-century social sciences, first of all, evolutionary biology and cultural anthropology:

What are you worth? What actual value would go down with you if you were sunk into the ocean or buried by an earthquake tomorrow? Show up your cash account and your balance sheet. In the final reckoning do you belong on the debit or the credit side of the account? According to a fair and square, an impartial and practical reckoning. It is by this standard that society estimates individuals; and by this standard finally and inevitably the world will measure and judge nations and races. (Cooper, 1988, p. 229)

Through these tight questions, placed at the center of the essay entitled *What are We Worth?*, Anna Cooper focuses on the measure of value imposed by the epistemological

structure of American culture, made explicit by the declaration of the American politician Henry Ward Beecher with which the author opens the text:

Were Africa and the Africans to sink tomorrow, how much poorer would the world be? A little less gold and ivory, a little less coffee, a considerable ripple, perhaps, where the Atlantic and Indian Oceans would come together - that is all. Not a poem, not an invention, not a piece of art would be missed from the world. (Cooper, 1998, p. 228)

By placing at the center of the analysis the standard of measurement established by the market economy to evaluate the value of Black lives—constantly indebted, recalled to a debt to be paid—Anna Cooper makes a gesture of realism and, at the same time, of challenge to the epistemological structure which governs the US productive system. The African-American thinker works, in fact, within the dominant discourse to subvert its ideological foundations. Her intent is to bring out the racist and sexist matrix of the categories used, in order to make visible the symbolic arsenal that structures the apparatus of knowledge on which the ideals of progress in American democracy are based. If it is true, in fact, that, for Beecher, the decline of Africa would have constituted a considerable loss only in terms of raw materials and natural resources, then for Cooper, it is necessary to develop a practice (Cooper, 1998, p. 254) within of this discourse capable of bringing to light an alternative measure of value to that imposed by the racial paradigm of economic evaluation of lives. This measure is traced by the author in “Black Womanhood”, that is, in the particular form of oppression experienced by the Black Woman, as a unique and partial perspective from which to look at the world and promote a change in American civilization. “Only the BLACK WOMAN can say” when and where I enter, in the quiet, undisputed dignity of my womanhood, without violence and without suing or special patronage, then and there the whole Negro race enters with me” (Cooper, 1998, p. 31).

Measure of value as a cipher of an unrepresentable truth, which cannot be united, yet precisely for this reason, capable of expressing “what moves at the margin” (Morrison, 1993), capable of articulating the different forms of oppression experienced by subordinates in their condition of invisibility and silence. For Anna Cooper—as it will later be for bell hooks and Hortense Spillers—one cannot ignore the oppressor’s language. Rather, it is necessary to relate to it and live into it—“living into it” (Cooper, 1998, p. 285)—to subvert the normative criterion from within through a transformative, inter-subjective

and intergenerational practice. Only in this way can we find an alternative “measure of our lives” to that continually reproduced by the oppressive language and invoked by Toni Morrison starting from the unique, material and symbolic experience of the Black Woman:

Tell us what it is to be a woman so that we may know what it is to be a man. What moves at the margin. What it is to have no home in this place. To be set adrift from the one you knew. What it is to live at the edge of towns that cannot bear your company. (Morrison, 1993)

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