## THE PLACE OF SPEECH IN THE GUIANAS LITERATURES

## O LOCAL DE FALA NAS LITERATURAS DAS GUIANAS

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**ABSTRACT:** The literature produced in the Guianas, a region in the extreme north of South America is a literature marked by cultural and linguistic ethnic plurality, the thematization of social contradictions and the discourse on the marginalization of a region that became known as "Green Hell". Of little reverberation and almost no prestige outside the Guianas territory, the narratives that compose this space inscribed in the heterogeneity are populated by characters silenced historically, as enslaved women, prisoners, plantations workers, the "marrons", among others, but who speak, despite being intermediated by a writer, as representatives of cultures not valued and / or little known. In this sense, this article will discuss the literary production in the Guianas, notably the French Guiana and Suriname literature, addressing, more specifically, the way in which this literature questions the current literary paradigms and rescues the problematic of other voices whose legitimacy is continually put in question.

Keywords: Heterogeneity; Place of speech; French Guiana; Suriname

**RESUMO:** A literatura produzida nas Guianas, região no extremo norte da América do Sul é uma literatura marcada pela pluralidade étnico cultural e linguística, pela tematização das contradições sociais e pelo discurso sobre a marginalização de uma região que ficou conhecida como "Inferno Verde". De quase nenhum prestígio fora do território das Guianas, as narrativas que compõem esse espaço inscrito na heterogeneidade estão povoadas de personagens silenciadas historicamente, como mulheres escravizadas, presidiários, trabalhadores das lavouras, os chamados "marrons", entre outras, mas que falam, apesar de intermediados por um escritor ou uma escritora, enquanto representantes de culturas não valorizadas e/ou pouco conhecidas. Nesse sentido, este artigo discutirá a produção literária nas Guianas, notadamente a literatura da Guiana Francesa e do Suriname abordando, mais especificamente, o modo como essa literatura questiona os paradigmas literários vigentes e resgata a problemática de outras vozes cuja legitimidade é continuamente posta em questão.

Palavras-chave: Heterogeneidade; Local de fala; Guiana Francesa; Suriname

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Guianas's literary production is quite unknown in the Literature Studies. In general terms, due to its themes and also because the region is located outside the places traditionally recognized as major centers that produce knowledge, it questions the current literary paradigms and highlights the problematic of voices whose legitimacy is continually put in question.

In order to understand these writers's place of speech and the context of the novel's production, first it's necessary to discuss the region, such as its geography, its social, cultural and linguistic characteristics, the perception this region has of the major centers and the way it looks at itself.

The Guianas are located in the extreme north of South America. It comprises Amapá (in the north of Brazil), French Guiana, Suriname, Republic of Guyana (formerly English Guiana), as well as a small portion of Roraima, in Brazil<sup>2</sup>, and Venezuela. Although located in South America, it has small interconnectivity with the region, like few highways or a small number of flights connecting the territory. On the other hand, it is a place of great relations with the Caribbean and, as a consequence, the region is also known as "Caribbean Amazon"<sup>3</sup>.

As regards Amapá, the state has the only Brazilian capital cut through the Amazon River. And the river, fundamental and structuring element for the people in Amapá, represents life, exit to other spaces, source of subsistence for the riverside communities. Located in the heart of the Amazon rainforest, it is influenced by nature, since events occur due to the rainy calendar or the "tide table".

Amapá shares international land borders with French Guiana. To cross the Brazilian border means to enter the territory of the European Union, since it is a "Territorial Collectivity" (*Collectivité Territoriale de Guyane* – CTG) of France. This means that Amapá, one of the Brazilian states with the highest poverty rate and lack of structure in the country (for example, only 3% of Amapá has basic sanitation and one of the smallest ldebs<sup>4</sup> in the country), is neghbor to a part of Europe. In other words, it

<sup>2</sup> Roraima and Venezuela will not be considered in this research.

<sup>3</sup> The region houses the headquarters of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) in Georgetown, Guyana.

<sup>4</sup> Ideb "Índice de Desenvolvimento da Educação Básica" or in English "Index of Development of Basic Education". It was created in 2007 by the National Institute of

means that French education, medicine and structure standards are just across the river that separates the cities Oiapoque (in Brazil) and Saint-George de l'Oyapock (in the French Guiana).

Despite French Guiana superior structure condition in relation to Amapá, Correa states that:

Another characteristic of the FG [French Guiana] is its extreme periphery condition (PORTO, 2010) which, in general, presents minor development rates than its metropolis and it is a low-density territory like Azores and Madeira, pertaining to Portugal, and Canary Islands in relation to Spain. FG's extreme periphery condition and its distance from the center of political decision does not mean a less presence of the State. On the contrary, there is a strong influence of metropolitan France in the Department stimulating an economic and political dependence on the central power and the European Union, which means the presence of an external power within the transnational Amazon. (CORREA, 2014, p. 98).<sup>5</sup>

Because of these aspects, the Brazilian migration to French Guiana is intense. According to Correa, it is estimated that for each legal migrant, three would be illegal. This means that the number of Brazilians living in Guiana Territorial Collectivity is almost 30% of its population. Among the causes of migration, jobs such as bricklayer in the construction industry or maid service and illegal mining are seen as activities that promote the flow of people moving to French Guiana. In the case of gold mining, apart from the extraction of gold, the activity needs other services such as catering, transportation, commerce and prostitution (CORREA, 2014).

The migratory flow of Brazilians is intense and fearing the Brazilian community increase in the Collectivity, the French government

<sup>5</sup> Our translation for: "outra característica da GF [Guiana Francesa] é sua condição ultraperiférica (PORTO, 2010) que, de forma geral, apresenta índices de desenvolvimento menor que sua metrópole e é território de baixa densidade como Açores e Madeira, pertencentes a Portugal, e Ilhas Canárias em relação à Espanha. A condição ultraperiférica da GF e sua distância do centro de decisão política não significa uma menor presença do Estado. Ao contrário, existe uma forte influência da França metropolitana no Departamento, estimulando uma dependência econômica e política do poder central e da União Europeia, o que significa a presença de uma potência externa dentro da Amazônia transnacional."



Studies and Educational Research Anísio Teixeira (Inep). It aims to measure the quality of the national learning and to establish goals for the improvement of teaching.

adopted measures such as a visa to enter French Guiana - a practice not required in metropolitan France for Brazilians - and several passport control points spread throughout the Collectivity.

The Republic of Guyana and Suriname, the youngest countries in South America, independents in 1960 and 1975, respectively, also house large Brazilian communities. The levels of poverty and inequality are high, mining and services linked to it are strong attractions for the flow of migrants. Besides Brazilians, immigration has established Javanese, Haitian, Chinese and Indian communities and this diversity of peoples also brings a diversity of languages and cultural and religious influences.

In the Guianas territory, it is possible to find the French, Portuguese, Dutch, English, Javanese, Chinese, Creole and amerindian languages, as well as various artistic expressions. The literature produced there has the mark of this cultural and linguistic ethnic plurality and, therefore, it is possible to think of "Guianas Literatures". Despite this plurality, some common elements are present in those novels, such as the thematization of social contradictions and the discourse about the marginalization of a region that became known as "Green Hell"<sup>6</sup>.

Of meager reverberation in South America and almost no prestige outside the Guianas territory, the narratives that compose this space inscribed in the heterogeneity are populated of characters silenced historically, such as enslaved women, prisoners, crop workers, "marrons", among others, but who speak, despite being intermediated by a writer, as representatives of cultures that are not valued and /or little known.

Without denying the isolation of Guianas in relation to the socalled major centers that produce knowledge, it's possible to find a literature that affirms itself as marginal and seeks to speak from this perspective. The diversity of perceptions through marginalized voices, or excentric voices, seeks recognition and, thus, the literature is inscribed in the sign of resistance, bringing to the surface the problem of the discourse legitimacy. According to Dalcastagnè,

The discourse control [...] is the denial of the right to speak to those who do not fulfill certain social requirements: veiled

<sup>6</sup> It is worth remembering that the Guianas are the region for the criminal exiles of French, English and Dutch metropolis. Numerous prisons were built to confine the most dangerous prisoners, such as Papillon in French Guiana.

social censorship, which silences the dominated groups. What is fundamental is to realize that it is not only the possibility of speaking [...] but the possibility of "speaking with authority", that is, the social recognition that the discourse has value and therefore deserves to be heard. (DALCASTAGNÈ, 2012, p. 19).<sup>7</sup>

When writers (from a region considered by major centers as "peripheral") yield the word to characters whose voices can not commonly be heard, they not only challenge the hegemonic discourses, but "also our own beliefs as readers and producers of knowledge and expertise." (SPIVAK, 2010, p. 09).<sup>8</sup>

The desire for the historical past reconstruction and for giving voice to the silenced people (or, in the words of Spivak, the subalterns9), are the basis of Guianas literatures. The events of the past can be changed, history can be rewritten because "Both fiction and history are cultural systems of signs, ideological constructions whose ideology includes their appearance as autonomous and self-sufficient." (HUTCHEON, 1991, p. 149).<sup>10</sup>

The creation of the history as an epistemological field, as Hutcheon points out, questions the Aristotelian notion (1982) that the historian could speak only about what happened, while the poet would speak of what might happen. For her, it is necessary to confront the paradoxes of the fictional / historical representation, since both are determined and historically limited discursive constructions, and which, for this reason, vary over time.

<sup>7</sup> Our translation for: "O controle do discurso [...] é a negação do direito de fala àqueles que não preenchem determinados requisitos sociais: uma censura social velada, que silencia os grupos dominados. [...] O fundamental é perceber que não se trata apenas da possibilidade de falar [...], mas da possibilidade de "falar com autoridade", isto é, o reconhecimento social de que o discurso tem valor e, portanto, merece ser ouvido."

<sup>8</sup> Our translation for: "também, nossas próprias crenças como leitores e produtores de saber e conhecimento".

<sup>9</sup> For Spivak, the subaltern is the one excluded from the market, from political and legal representation, and unable to fully participate in the dominant social statement.

<sup>10</sup> Our translation for: "tanto a ficção como a história são sistemas culturais de signos, construções ideológicas cuja ideologia inclui sua aparência de autônomas e auto-suficientes."

The "desire to rewrite the past within a new context" (HUTCHEON, p. 157)<sup>11</sup> occurs, in the first place, by the recognition that this subaltern / marginalized individual is not a monolithic and undifferentiated category, but, irreducibly heterogeneous. The first aspect of Guianas literatures is not to fall into exoticism, the picturesque descriptions of an Amazon whose natural mysteries conquered the reader more than the singularity of its inhabitants. Secondly, these lilteratures conceive the memory as a marek of social representation and identity.

According to Gagnebin (2005), one can not subtract individual memory from the collective memory. It means that memory is impregnated, embedded, crossed by the social environment of which the individual is a part of. The construction of identity implies the narration of oneself, constructed from diverse histories of the individual and his participation of the wider life.

Bosi (1979) agrees with this idea. For her, the construction of identity is linked to narration. These collective histories, gradually, create a history of the individual. In other words, when we remember certain events, much of our memory is tied to the reports and experiences of other witnesses who also experienced the same event, such as family members, friends, neighbors, community colleagues.

The collective memory, rescued / updated through certain novels, does not constitute a pure evocation of the past, but it is a "reconstruction" of it, because in the words of Bosi, "most of the time, to remember is not to revive, but to remake, reconstruct, rethink the experiences of the past with images and ideas of today" (1979, p. 17)<sup>12</sup>

For example, *Des hommes libres*, by André Paradis (2005), *Prix Carbet des lycéens 2006* awarded book, narrates the story of Thibaut, a young metropolitan13 who searches his origin because he, the biological son of a French couple, physically differs from his relatives,

<sup>11</sup> Our translation for: "desejo de reescrever o passado dentro de um novo contexto"

<sup>12</sup> Our translation for: "na maior parte das vezes, lembrar não é reviver, mas refazer, reconstruir, repensar, com imagens e ideias de hoje, as experiências do passado".

<sup>13</sup> The term "metropolitan" refers to the French citizen who was born in the Metropolis. In opposition, the "creole" would be the citizen born in one of the Territorial Collectivities.

Maman. [...] Je peux imaginer quel choc ma naissance fut pour elle. Absolument rien n'expliquait qu'elle ait put donner la vie à un petit mulâtre. La seule question qui se posa, pour elle, fut de savoir si j'étais une punition du ciel, et dans ce cas pour quelle faute [...]. (PARADIS, 2005, p. 29).<sup>14</sup>

Apart from the fact that he is rejected by the family members or apart from a racial question, what is set in this novel is the self-knowledge acquired through the recovery of certain French Guiana historical facts presented to Thibaut by Adelphe, a Guianese who was in Paris at the time.

Adelphe, the Guianese, is an old man of humble origin. He opposes Thibaut by the age difference and by the pride of its color and creole origin. He accidentally meets the young guy in a coffee shop and they become friends. During the many conversations, he tells Thibaut about his land and about Guyanese culture. His view of history emphasizes events that are not recorded in the books, such as the struggle for the end to slavery by the rebel leader Hector Menenius and the day-to-day lives of those who experienced the *marronage*, that is, the life of runaway slaves.

At the level of the literary structure, the focalization is variable, initially in the young French Thibaut, showing how the non-acceptance of one's physical appearance represents its disintegration as an individual being. Then the focalization moves on to Adelphe, the Guianese, and returns to Thibaut, who reconciles with himself as far as he gets to know the Guianese history and culture. At the end of the narrative, the young Frenchman finds his Guianese descendence and decides to leave for the Territorial Collectivity of Guiana.

Despite a rather predictable end, it is worth noting that in *Les hommes libres*, identity is established from multiple collective histories. These stories, in turn, ground an individual narrative, in which one can no longer distinguish the collective from the particular. Thence, one can remember without having belonged or participated in historical events.

The historical perspective is reviewed and retold by an unauthorized individual. In the novel, Adelphe does not even have a surname, he is only a stranger who accidentally collides with the

<sup>14 &</sup>quot;Mom. [...] I could imagine what a shock my birth was to her. Absolutely nothing could explain how she would have given birth to a small mulatto. The only question that would arise would be, for her, whether I was a punishment from heaven and, in that case, by what mistake."

protagonist. Nevertheless, it is precisely his view – considered outside the patterns established by the hegemonic centers – that is able to reconcile the dramas of the main character.

Another feature of the fiction produced in the Guianas is the demystification or deconstruction of an exotic view of historical characters. An example of this process occurred with the figure of D'Chimbo. According to records, he would have arrived in French Guiana on September 26, 1858 along with others enslaved to work in the fields, but he ran away to the forest until he was captured and killed many years later. His biography was recovered by Guianese collective imagination and gave way to one of its most famous legends.

The popular stories built around him show a rebel whose behavior is close to savagery. In countless descriptions, he is an outlaw portrayed as someone who has tattoos covering his whole body. He also has sharp, pointed teeth to devour his human victims. Besides, he is a vagabond, a professional killer and a rapist.

However, the novel *Le Nègre du Gouverneur* (2001), by the French-Guianese Serge Patient, shows another perspective about this historical character. It portrays him as a slave who is no longer in the master / slave dialectic that only have the *marronage* or submission as alternative.

The construction of a black savage image, which also frightened the slaves who might escape into the forests at that time, is contested by Patient. His novel is a journey through the history of French Guiana, from slavery to the current questioning of its institutional future, and of course colonization, departmentalization and other institutional aspects that characterize relations between French Guiana and France.

It is also interesting to highlight Suriname's novels, specifically those by Cynthia McLeod, because before the difficulty for a larger audience of reading in Dutch, the writer herself is responsible for translating her books into English. McLeod is also a historian and her historical novels often value the perspective of women in order to deconstruct the vision of submission given to eighteenth-century women.

The free negress Elisabeth: prisoner of color (2004) is an example of this change of perspective. It is a novel that recounts the life of Elisabeth Samson (1715-1771), a free-born black woman who lived in Suriname in one of the most cruel periods of slavery. Despite the poignant racism, Samson was the wealthiest woman in the country, because besides owning a coffee farm, she also did business with the largest Dutch merchants.

In the novel preface, McLeod attempts to explain the idiosyncrasies of the Surinamese colonial society in order to situate the reader in relation to the difficulties faced by blacks. In addition to severe punishments, marriages between white men and black women were prohibited by law<sup>15</sup>. In this aspect, Elisabeth Samson was also revolutionary because she refused to establish a relationship of concubinage with the man she loved. Therefore, she fought for interracial marriage to be sanctioned. In the preface, the author affirms:

The Free Negress Elisabeth, who in the last years of her life took the name Samson, ensured herself a permanent and unrivalled place in the annals of colonial history particularly Dutch - on 2 counts: First, her request in 1764 to marry a white man; and second, on account of her extreme wealth – she was a self-made black business magnate in the 18th century at the height of slavery. Many historians wrote about this fact: J.J. Hartsinck, J. G. Stedman, J. Wolbers. R.A.J. Van Lier, Lichtveld em Voorhoeve. Althou they did not write in the same words, they all assumed that Elisabeth Samson was a slave woman who had cohabited with a white or Jewish man, who set her free and made her his heir. [...] I searched in the National Archives in The Hague, in the district archives of Amsterdan and Rotterdam, in the archives of Keulen and Emmerich in Germany. After a while I had collected so many documents, that I could prove that the historians were absolutely WRONG, and the statements that she surely must have inharitared her wealth from a slave master who set her free, told us something about the historians, but not about Elisabeth. It was excellent proof of machismo and white supremacist thinking: "When a black woman is rich, she can only have gained her wealth thanks to a White Man, who made her rich!" In Elisabeth's case it was the contrary!!! (McLEOD, 2004, p. 06).

McLeod builds a plot that questions the views which attributed to Elisabeth the enrichment by inheritance. She describes her as a cultured person, diligent in the conduction of the business and, above all, aware of its differentiated condition in relation to the other blacks of the time. In that sense Samson uses her skills - and, why not, the legitimacy that money can bring - for the sake of a noble cause: the transformation of a society. She

<sup>15</sup> In colonial Suriname it was forbidden for black men to have any physical relationship with white women. However, this law did not apply to black women, who could establish a relationship of concubinage with white men.

understands that social change would only be achieved when turned into law. For this purpose, Elisabeth does not measure efforts be successful.

In another novel, *Tutuba: the girl from the slave-ship Leusden* (2013) McLeod narrates the life of Tutuba, a young inhabitant of Elmina, in Ghana. She was abducted on the eve of her marriage to be brought to Suriname in order to work in the fields as enslaved. The wreck of the slaveship Leusden, which carried 663 other prisoners is considered the greatest accident involving a vessel of this type. The fact remained forgotten and / or ignored until McLeod rescues the event and gives voice to those who had never before been remembered by history, as she points out in the preface:

The sinking of the slave ship Leusden, in which six hundred and sixty-four prisoners and abducted Africans lost their lives, attracted hardly any attention at the time. In the ensuing years, too, no mention has ever been made of it. In fact it was the greatest disaster involving a slave ship in the whole three-hundred-year history of the transatlantic slave trade, and involved the greatest loss of life. Dr. Leo Balai 'discovered' this disaster by chance. Thanks to this research, spanning several years, the Leusden has been 'salvaged' after almost three hundred years [...]. (MCLEOD, 2014, p. 05).

The focalisation in the protagonist, who names McLeod's novel, shows how the process of enslavement empties the individual being and his culture. On the way from Ghana to Suriname, before the psychological and physical torture, rape, violence and the manifest reality that they would never return to their homeland, the slaves who survived the Leusden wreckage gradually learned about the new territory, its language (*sranan tongo*) and the cultural habits of a place that was organized, on the one hand, through the concentration of slave labor, but on the other hand, (upon the arrival of peoples from other regions) a place that showed the plurality of cultures that would constitute the post-colonial Suriname.

Both in *Tububa: the girl from the slave-ship Leusden* and in *The free negress Elisabeth: prisioner of color*, McLeod forces the limits of the fictional with the purpose of rewriting the historical discourse. In each preface or presentation, she does not fail to position herself in favor of a revision of the ethnocentric perspective that guides historical and literary texts.

Another point that deserves to be highlighted in the novels of McLeod is the language used as an instance of valuing cultural elements. In *Tutuba*, for instance, the author chooses to write in the footnotes the dialogues between characters in *sranan tongo*. Thus "sigh, my child, sigh. If we couldn't sigh and moan, our hearts would break." (McLEOD, 2014, p. 99) has its correspondence in *sranan tongo* as "geme mi pikin! Ay, geme nomo nomo. Efu geme no bem de, un hati bem sa priti" (McLEOD, 2014, p.100). It is noteworthy that the first publication of Tutuba was written entirely in *sranan tongo* and, only later, the author translated the novels into Dutch and English.

In *The free negress Elisabeth*, the standard English variant is presented through the speech of the enslaved characters, highlighted by quotation marks as in:

"Dey gon either pierce her tongue with awls or she go'n get a hundred lashes." "I think dey gon cut off her tongue and d'en her ears." "Oh, she going to be sentenced to death before dey torture and burn her alive." [...] "No, no! Yuh all talking stupid. What you're talking are punishments for slaves. Misi Elisabeth is no slave. Dey can't do this to her." "Yu hush with yu talk about slave or no slave. She's black. She's a Negro, like yu and me: and she'll find out soon."

She's a Negro, like yu and me; and she'll find out soon." (McLEOD, 2003. p. 97-98).

In the dialogue between the two enslaved, the marks of orality call attention to the social and racial disparity. The quotation marks reinforce this difference at the same time as they mark the place of speech of the excluded people. The black identity is also defined by the language and it is through it that McLeod imprints her struggle: as woman, as black, as writer in a region considered peripheral she carries out the famous adage "The pen is mightier than the sword".

All things cosidered, if identity is crossed by temporality, André Paradis and Serge Patient sought to revive in their novels the memory of a people, their origins and struggles through history. In *The free negress Elisabeth: prisoner of color* and in *Tutuba: the girl from the slave-ship Leusden,* in addition to criticizing the established colonization model, the historical rescue of the slave-owning period reveals, albeit indirectly, the

cultural mosaic that underlies the Surinamese society and the valorization of the language as an element of identity.

It's necessary to remember that literature, as a form of representation, conveys interests, values, perspectives. Thus it's also important a greater awareness of its repercussion inside and, why not, outside the literary text because academic criticism and research have an important role in the legitimation of these literatures.

This is not to say that as a researcher one must speak for minorities, but one must question the very place from which one theorizes. It is worth remembering that the term "representation" in German has two meanings: *vertretung* which refers to the act of taking the place of the other (and in this process the word has a political meaning), and *darstellung*, linked to an aesthetic vision (rhetoric as a *tropo*). That is to say, in the words of Dalcastagnè (2012), that "what is said is simply no longer the fact that literature provides certain representations of reality, but rather that these representations are not representative of the variety of social perspectives". (p.17).<sup>16</sup>

Finally, there is still one last aspect about the Guianas literatures. It is possible to say that the common element of these narratives is the creation of 'real' universes of discourse '"(BOSI, 1979, p. 27)<sup>17</sup> in which the past, when redefined in the light of the present, when spoken by voices once silenced, reveals aspects previously hidden in a history that selected only certain points of view, which promoted a consecrated version of events. In these literatures, memory reappears as an identity trait evidencing the valorization of other stories and other voices.

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<sup>16</sup> Our translation for: "o que se coloca não é mais simplesmente o fato de que a literatura fornece determinadas representações da realidade, mas, sim, que essas representações não são representativas do conjunto das perspectivas sociais". 17 Our translation for: "verdadeiros 'universos de discurso'".

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Recebido: 04/05/2018 Aceito: 28/07/2018