

Transculturation in Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*

Transculturação no romance
A História do Ventríloquo,
de Pauline Melville

Thomas Bonnici¹

BONNICI, Thomas. Transculturation in Pauline Melville's *The Ventriloquist's Tale*. *Mimesis*, Bauru, v. 22, n. 3, p. 07-21, 2001.

ABSTRACT

Hierarchization in metropolis-colony relationships provokes the transculturation phenomenon. The native is othered with loss of autonomy and identity. In The Ventriloquist's Tale the Guyanese author Pauline Melville makes the narrator Macunaima tell the recent story of an Amerindian family living in the Guyana savannahs. Colonial encounters between representatives of Western culture and Wapisiana Indians reveal constant encroachments against native culture. The textualized autoethnographic narrative shows that societal organization and mythology foreground the identity and the subjectification of the native.

Key Words: transculturation, Amerindians, post-colonial literature, identity, Pauline Melville.

INTRODUÇÃO

When Amos Tutuola and Chinua Achebe published two highly prized novels in the 1950s, the British reading public was astonished with the different sounds that were coming from Africa. It was a different literature in style and in contents. It was an answer back to the imperial metropolis, not exclusively England, of the hundreds of years of denigration and othering that Africa suffered during the colonial period. The theme of the two novels was that, contrary to European opinion, there were in Africa cultural activities and societal organization that the colonizers endeavored to suppress so that Western modes and costumes would repla-

1. Doutor em Letras pela UNESP (São José do Rio Preto) – Professor titular de Literatura Britânica na Universidade Estadual de Maringá – Rua Manoel Bandeira, 140 – Vila Esperança – 87020-580 – Maringá – PR.

ce traditional mores and exploitation in every sense could be possible.

Modern novels in English coming from the Caribbean and South America, such as Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* and Kincaid's *Annie John*, also aim at denouncing the century-old othering. They show that there was (and still exists) an ingrained healthy culture in colonized peoples. Striving against the deep scars of colonialism, many authors born in British ex-colonies maintain an extensive discourse about the subjectification and the autonomy of peoples who were constantly in contact with colonizers and their demolishing methods. In the wake of this trend Guyanese author Pauline Melville published *The Ventriloquist's Tale* in 1997 (translated into Portuguese by Beth Vieira and published by the Companhia das Letras). Through the worlding of the Amerindians living deep in the savannahs and backlands of Guyana, her text shows that there is great autonomy in their culture, mythology and organizational mores, even though damage to their subjectification may be stealthily encroaching on their heritage.

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PROBLEMS IN GUYANESE LITERATURE IN ENGLISH

The only English-speaking country in South America, Guyana only became independent from Britain in 1966. It has been known by Portuguese and Spanish sailors since the 15th century and Raleigh was highly interested in finding gold in the whereabouts and in an English settlement in the late 16th and early 17th centuries. Guyana became a crown colony in 1815 and produced sugarcane for the metropolis. With eighty percent of its population living in the coast region, the country harbors the descendants of slaves and of indentured laborers, mainly from India, introduced in the country after the abolition of slavery (1837). Amerindians and Euro-Amerindians, amounting to about 16%, live in the forests and the savannahs on the south and southwestern border with Brazil. The country's population is a mixture of nationalities comprising Amerindians, Black Africans, Portuguese, Brazilians, East Indians and Europeans, with a lot of intermarriage (Benson & Conolly, 1994).

It has always been naively narrated that European colonization in the Caribbean and in South American Guyana definitely suppressed and eradicated all native Arawak, Macusi and Carib peoples and their cultural representations (Ashcroft et al. 1991; Melatti 1972). Today this statement needs revision since Amerindians figure in the mythologies extant in the region and they are producers of extended Caribbean oral and written literature. Wilson Harris, Pauline Melville and Mark McWatt are partly Amerindians. However, it is also a fact that Amerindian culture has yet to be restored and published. A tremendous task lies ahead for those interested in the matter due to the difficulty in locating material, lack of serious debates between Amerindians and the Academy, the ideology gap and a narrow canon. Dabydeen (1996) sta-

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tes that even if the Amerindians are the most invisible of West Indian peoples, their future will bring the recognition that West Indian peoples are not merely creatures of Britain, forged by British cultural values and by the cultural values and practices that survived British colonization (Donnell & Welsh, 1996).

Pauline Melville was born in Guyana, daughter of a British mother and a Guyanese father of mixed race. To date she has published two books of short stories, *Shape-shifter* (1990) and *The Migration of Ghosts* (1998), and a novel, *The Ventriloquist's Tale* (1997). The latter won the Whitbread First Novel Award in 1998. As a little girl and teenager Melville witnessed the complicated social problems of a nation locked in a desperate struggle to modernize and overcome its colonial past. She has worn many hats and has been a comedian, cigarette girl, a teacher and an actress. Similar to many Guyanese and West Indian writers, Melville lives in London.

The Ventriloquist's Tale

At first sight *The Ventriloquist's Tale* seems to dabble in the literary genre of magic realism and would be included together with the classical works by Garcia Marquez and Borges, or with the innovators Angela Carter and Salman Rushdie, or even with the tellers of the fabulous Arundhati Roy, Alice Hoffman and Karen Joy Fowler. The novel, however, brings out the nightmare of European colonialism and its 20th century fallout as experienced by the McKinnon family in the Rupununi hinterlands of Guyana. Seething with the Amerindian Wapisiana mythology in contact with European culture, it approaches Achebe's classical *Things Fall Apart* and reveals the transculturation theme and the force of myth surviving facts.

The novel consists of a Prologue and an Epilogue, in which the prankish Macunaima styles himself the narrator of the McKinnon's tale, and of three parts in between. The novel opens in the backlands of present-day Guyana where Chofy McKinnon, of Amerindian and Scottish descent, is a small-time farmer and cattle-herder from the village of Moco-Moco at the foot of the Kanaku mountains. Faced with economic and marital problems, Chofy decides to travel to Georgetown in an effort to find temporary work, get some distance from his wife Marietta and take Aunt Wifreda for an overdue eye operation. In Georgetown he is invited to meet Rosa Mendelson, a British scholar researching into writer Evelyn Waugh and his visit to colonial Guyana back in 1933 which resulted in *Ninety-Two Days* and the short story *The Man who liked Dickens*. Waugh had spent some days with the McKinnons in the interior and Rosa, instigated by a one-time schoolteacher, Nancy Freeman, now living in London, hopes that Chofy will put her in touch with the older members of the family who may remember him. Rosa's visit to the Rupununi region

never occurs since she and Chofy began to have an eye for each other. It seems that Chofy forgot his aim in Georgetown (rebuild the family cattle farm destroyed by bats) and a love affair between ‘buck’ and an English academic female scholar begins.

Melville immediately devises an analepsis and takes the reader back in the beginning of the 20th century with the arrival of Chofy’s Scottish grandfather in the Guyana interior. The ‘freethinker’ Alexander McKinnon marries two sisters, Maba and Zuna, has ten sons and daughters (among whom are Danny, Beatrice, Wifreda, Alice and Alfred, Chofy’s father), and is particularly interested in certain scientific agricultural innovations and in photography (especially the 1919 solar eclipse). In 1905 the Jesuit Fr. Napier appears on the scene, intent on converting the McKinnons and other Wapisiana and Macusi Indians to the Catholic faith. In the 1930s Evelyn Waugh visits the place after Danny and Beatrice have had an incestuous affair. Alexander McKinnon charges Fr. Napier to look for the couple and bring them home. The incestuous couple are separated and segregated from the rest of the family not perhaps because of the inherent wrongness but for the eerie way it replicates an ancient Wapisiana myth involving the solar eclipse. Beatrice ends up in snow-ridden Canada and marries Horace Sands, while Danny marries a Brazilian wife called Sylvana. Their son Sonny simply vanishes. However, before going away, Beatrice becomes a *kanaima*, or avenger, and poisons Fr. Napier. The Jesuit priest raves in the savannah and has to be transferred to an asylum in Georgetown and finally repatriated to a Jesuit convent in Scotland.

Rosa’s visit to the Rupununi and her meeting with Aunt Wifreda fail because of the arrival of Marietta to Georgetown with Chofy’s son Bla-Bla injured in an American oil prospect in the Rupununi. The son dies and the reconciled Chofy returns to the hinterland, to his wife and daily chores. Rosa goes back to England to write her thesis “Evelyn Waugh - A post-Colonial Perspective” (Melville, 1999).

Transculturation

Coined by Fernando Ortiz in 1978 with Afro-Cuban culture in mind and assimilated in literary studies by Angel Rama in the 80s, *transculturation* denotes the reciprocal influences of modes of representation and cultural practices of various kinds in colonies and metropolises. Postcolonial theory has always insisted on the simultaneous fabrication of the Other and the other. Thus it is interesting to analyze the dynamics of the self-representation of the colonial subaltern and his/her resistance. Since cultural material is constantly transmitted by the dominant to colonized groups, the latter are independent to select, absorb and use some of it. Pratt raises some very important questions on transculturation. How are imperial representations received and appropriated by the periphery?

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How does transculturation occur from the periphery to the metropolis?
How does the periphery determine the metropolis?

Transculturation is a phenomenon of *contact zones*, or rather,

social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination - like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (Pratt, 1992, p. 4).

Therefore, in contact zones people who are geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish relationships, frequently associated with coercion, inequality and conflicts. These contacts between colonized and colonizers are seen in terms of co-presence, interaction, understandings and practices within hierarchized systems of dominance.

At the time of the European invasion and settlement of America the conquest was rhetoricized and highly celebrated. However, the strategies of common Europeans in the tropics were different and contrasting. They were seemingly innocent people who were just travelling and looking at things. Since they covertly asserted European hegemony, Pratt calls the practice *anti-conquest*. They may be either celebratory, or documentary or even allegorical instances of an existential nature. Further, somehow in the contact zone there must exist an *autoethnography* by which "colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms" (Pratt, 1992, p. 7). Whereas abundant ethnographic texts are extant by which Europeans represent to themselves the colonial object, autoethnographic texts are made by colonized subjects on a dialogic stance with their colonizers. Therefore, autoethnographic representations are really the story of the colonized from their own positions and retell their story of subjugation and resistance. Autoethnographic documents need not be written texts. In fact, more frequently they are the updating of ancient mythologies within the tradition of subaltern people or the reinterpretation of past events still encountered in people's memory.

Contact zones

The Prologue and Epilogue of the novel are the work of a hilarious narrator who calls himself Macunaima and claims "the noted Brazilian Senhor Mario Andrade" as his biographer. In a joking manner he justifies his presence through a criticism of recent developments in Theory of Literature. Playing with narrative conventions about anti-hero narrative, palimpsests, the dichotomy between writing and telling, the gap between European intellectualism and Latin American magic realism, and intertextuality (Wilson Harris, Angela Carter, Mario de Andrade are implied), Macunaima insists that his tale will extensively use his ventriloquist abi-

lities so that fiction could be disguised as facts. The ventriloquist is the master of his own voice, but the parrot which Macunaima leaves behind is a mere echo. Although he will recede into the background (“The narrator must appear to vanish”), Macunaima will control the tale so that the reader may judge for himself the contact between two opposite cultures with its gains and losses. He weaves a complex tale of the clash between European interlopers and the natives of Guyana. Through a sleigh of hand and mimicry the teasing Indian narrator’s voice will be heard above the Western one. In fact, the truth is much more complex, since native culture is threatened by colonial encounters.

It seems that the spatial gaps and approximations between ‘buck country’ and coastland in Melville’s novel are a metonymy of a contact zone where Amerindian and European/Western characters undergo transculturation. Although there is a sort of communication between these two regions, natural structures, such as the jungle, the rivers and the mountains, keep them apart and at the same time they exert influence on each other. Although Melville maintains events within the 20th century and since no mention is made on the historical double colonization of the natives and exploitation of resources, the author endeavors to focus on the contemporary colonization issue. ‘Buck country’ therefore comprises the Amerindians, their customs and laws, their mythology, their exuberant life and labors in the savannahs. Coastland means Western ‘civilization’ with its characters that invade the landscape, impose ideas and customs, live in an artificial environment with despondency, rationality and a dearth of vitality.

TRANSCULTURATION OF FOREIGNERS

Rosa Mendelson’s visit to Guyana deals with Evelyn Waugh’s visit to the Rupununi in 1933 as fictionally recorded by the schoolteacher Nancy Freeman in London and by old Aunt Wilfreda. The latter has also kept the writer’s copy of *Dombey and Son* all these years. Waugh, the European, possessor of the written word, is depicted as lecturing to the Amerindian whom, the Englishman remained unaware of, was an expert in orature. Waugh is represented as more interested in canonical fiction with its presumed superior stance than listening to the real stories and the mythologies that subjectify colonized people. The hierarchized image is corroborated by the description of the English writer and his activities: the impenetrable face and keen eyes, the utter horror at the natives’ habitat, the truncated remark about his broken marriage, the impatience and extreme suffering in staying in such dreadful places, astonishment at people’s lack of activity, his preposterous doubt about witchdoctor Koko Lupi’s magical powers, his complete failure to listen to the colonized and reduction of the exuberant savannah life to a mere piece of fiction.

Contrastingly McKinnon’s encounter is highly allusive to the European gone native. While the early story of the Scot Alexander McKin-

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non was surely told by himself, wife Maba narrated his arrival at the Wapisiana village and married life. His rejection of a European-styled life and his determination to keep the best distance between him and civilization made him turn native. He married two sisters Maba and Zuna with whom he had ten children, moved farther inland to Waronawa and immediately gathered an extended family on his cattle ranch. What characterized McKinnon were his attempts at interventions in nature. For the Wapisiana people these experiments were not approved since they meant "something was wrong with the order of things". The Amerindians thought that change was "an illusion behind which lay the unchanging reality of dream and myth" and, contrary to Western thought, they looked for "the mask behind the face" (Melville, 1999, p. 99). The anxiety to have change is a hindrance to see life as it is. If the natives derided his efforts at innovations, he couldn't understand the underlying mysteries, fears and traditions of the people into whom he married. However, there is a remarkable tolerance between the natives and the "native" Scotsman. For Westerners McKinnon had gone native and, if it were not for the great distance between the coast and the savannah dwellers, he would be politically dangerous.

In spite of his open-minded view of the world, Danny and Beatrice's incest gave him the shock of his life. Since no reassuring Amerindian mythology on the sun and moon eclipse was ingrained in his unconscious, he couldn't absorb the fact. His roaming onto stark nature helped his decision. "McKinnon knew that he would leave the savannahs, that he did not belong" (Melville, 1999, p. 210), even though he had spent more than twenty-five years as an Amerindian. After providing for his family and for Beatrice in Canada, he took with him four Wapisiana Amerindians to the Wembley's Great Exposition. They returned to South America and reported he had gone to Scotland and married there. Maba and Zuna just remarked that they were satisfied they had had him when he was young.

The seemingly radical transculturation between the Scotsman and the Amerindian people is an ambivalent factor. While extreme change seems to be impossible for the European since he lacks the vital mythological sub-layer of the natives and limits himself to mere cosmetic transformations, in the opinion of the colonizers this means loss of distinctness and identity. Lighting fire as an Amerindian and letting his cattle roam without any supervision do not delete the ingrained 'scientific' stance of experimentation and his trial and error attitudes. McKinnon's children are ridiculed because of this fact, in spite of all his 'buck' transformations. The Scotsman's absolute aversion to incest, contrary to the natives' relative shunning towards such a relationship is the straw that breaks the camel's back. On the other hand, his closest allies, wives, father-in-law, children and friends, experience superficial changes too. While the natives appropriate themselves with useful tools he brings from 'civilization', they are totally impermeable to his culture. Their life

view remains unaltered.

It is interesting to note that the gone-native McKinnon and Waronawa Amerindians seem to maintain a subject-subject relationship, without any hierarchization, stratification of culture or power politics. Deep transculturation does not occur in the hybrid, represented by the children and grandchildren with more contact with 'civilization'. They are still steeped in mythology and ancient mores. As aunt Wifreda experiences the replacement of blackness by light when approaching the Rupununi, the natives may have "difficulty focusing, but [they] could see" (Melville, 1999, p. 348).

Transculturation may be analyzed according to the hybrid's acceptance or refusal of transformation in special cases of momentous upheavals in the environment. The episode of McKinnon's children at the nuns' convent in Georgetown and of Danny's stay in Queenstown during three years is significantly given in just one chapter. Immediately the girls felt the constraints of the contact zone: wearing shoes, cleanliness, stereotyping by skin color, Western school subject-matters and social manners had to mould the girls into modern citizens and abolish definitely the Amerindian character. Led by Beatrice the girls establish linguistic and dream strategies to neutralize Westernizing influence and maintain their Wapisiana identity. Whereas contact with 'civilization' fails to de-characterize the girls, contact with the tropical environment make the Irish sister Fidelia go native in her own way. Heavy drinking and irresponsible action with some inmates bring her closer to the natives which, in the Western view, smacks of lack of character. Consequently she has to be constantly removed. No loss of identity occurs in the hybrids. "As soon as they reached Annai and saw the sprawling, golden landscape of the savannahs, Beatrice's heart lifted ... They were overjoyed to be back. Beatrice leaned over the side of the cart to feel the breeze on her face ... [Danny's] eyes shone with the pleasure of being home" (Melville, 1999, p. 156-8). Western mores are metaphorically shed off when the girls discard their shoes and put on cotton dresses and Danny fishes, hunts and whittles his arrows. Life on the savannahs is just the same.

FATHER NAPIER AND EMPIRE

The worldview of Jesuit father Napier is of empire. As a member of the universal church he arrives in Guyana to conquer and to do so quickly. The triumphal arrival of Fr Napier and the bishop at a place called Zariwa with band, photographs, speeches and crowds of naked Amerindians witnesses that the Jesuit is not prepared to listen but to evangelize and convert. In fact, he comes to lecture. In spite of McKinnon's religious indifference, the natives' religiosity, the great distances and difficulties of travelling, Fr Napier manages to make progress in the conversion of the Macusi, Wai-Wai and Wapisiana tribes. The imperial stance seems to be

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ingrained in his consciousness: he changes the name of the mission 'headquarters' from Zariwa to St. Ignatius; he takes for granted that everybody understands what he is taking about when he mentions Christian doctrine and the sacraments; he expects that all appreciate Mozart's sonatas; he even forces a small altar boy to climb Mount Roraima, with fatal results, to celebrate Mass on its top; he tries to repeat the feat on Bottle Mountain; he moves up and down the Guyana hinterland which he considers his realm where he can rear Christ's fold. Consequently, a moment's thought to the Amerindians' rich mythology, experience and worldview is never given. Although at the surface many become Catholics, their Amerindian heritage remains intact. The narrator presents the natives' vision of the priest: "Everyone else in the room, except McKinnon who was just amused, watched with a sort of horror as, before their eyes, the priest turned into a giant, buzzing, savannah grasshopper" (Melville, 1999, p. 119).

The struggle between the priest and the witchdoctor Koko Lupi and the defeat (madness and retirement) of the former should be seen not in the context of Beatrice's personal revenge on Fr Napier but as the tribes' reaction against empire. The priest's ideology embodies the absolute superiority of the Catholic religion and Western mode of thought and the sheer nonsense of the natives' myths and beliefs. "He tries to strike the sun out of the sky. Him with his dead god on a stick. He thinks he can stand between the sun and the moon. Give him this [poisonous beans] and leave the rest to the sun. The sun will finish him off" (Melville, 1999, p. 240). It is at the apex of success and after feeling self-satisfied at his achievements in a sort of "homoeroticism of the colonial paradigm" (Suleri, 1992, p.198), that the 'empire' crumbles. The mental deterioration that follows, culminating in the destruction by fire of the chapels he himself has built and in his stripping himself naked in the savannah, is associated with a disrapture in masculinity which has always been linked with patriarchy and colonialism. The colonizer's position with its displaying and self gazing, seen from the very beginning when he thought of martyrdom and heroism, has already been encroached upon by a suppressed pederasty. However, the final shutting in absolute silence is ambiguous, since another priest is already on the mission ministering to the Amerindians. Colonialism is not so easily vanquished.

THE 'JOURNEY' OF CHOFY AND ROSA

An idyllic strand of the novel is the encounter between English academic Rosa Mendelson and Amerindian cattle herder Chofy McKinnon, grandson of the original McKinnon in the Guyana backlands. Since Rosa's intention is to engage Chofy in convincing the older members of the family to narrate Waugh's visit to the Wapisiana Amerindians, they both set out on a 'journey' to the interior. The orderly, methodical and ra-

tional scholar is disrupted by the unexpectedness and spontaneity of Chofy. Their encounters at the Mynheer Nicklaus Lodge and on a rather bawdy journey to Pakuri are sufficient to change at least the smooth rhythm of her life. "Her actions were normally those of a slow, thoughtful woman whose progress through life was methodical and thorough. She exercised caution in her dealings with the world. What had happened?" (Melville, 1999, p. 76) No hierarchization occurs and a subject-subject encounter becomes normal since the female is not objectified territory. However, the Chofy-Rosa liaison is only skin deep and affects much more the English woman than the native. This fact may be corroborated by the lack of exaggerated hand wringing when Marietta discovers her husband's affair with Rosa. No accusations are made or debasing adjectives used. Rosa simply remembers that someone had told her that nothing keeps in the tropics and on her return to England resumes her stiff academic activities. Chofy returns to the Rupununi reconciled with his wife.

This is extremely contrasting with the attitude of anthropologist Michael Wormoal who happens to be in Georgetown too. His aloof and un-touchable racist attitude is unmistakable. "I think I probably know more about the Amerindian peoples than they know about themselves ... I have the entire map of this country in my head. I know about the history and movements of the indigenous peoples here, their kinship structures, occupations, philosophies, cosmologies, labour pattern, languages. We Europeans have access to all the books and documentation that they lack" (Melville, 1999, p. 78-79). Knowledge and the written word, highly Eurocentric, are thus the key to power. For the scholar, the Amerindians' lack of 'Western knowledge' tells their capitulation over their territory. Hierarchization is so deep that the anthropologist only pays lips service to wishing to discuss things with the flesh and blood Amerindian Chofy. The anthropologist returns to Europe in triumph, homoerotically satisfied with the subject-object stance in intellectual colonization. "I've had a very successful trip ... I've got most of the information I needed" (Melville, 1999, p. 351). Both Michael Wormoal and Fr Napier are very little aware of their forced silence, the former because of the rain that frustrates his anthropological discourse, the latter because of madness. Only the Wapisiana natives speak as subjects and with their identity unimpaired.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: LABOR AND ORGANIZATION

The text is fraught with stereotype impressions foreigners receive when they arrive in Guyana. One Guyanese musician tells Rosa that in that country she has to surrender to the unexpected, while the wife of the Canadian High Commissioner has a frightful list of complaints headed by the general remark that nothing works. "I find it excruciatingly dull in this part of the world. Nothing appears to happen here. What do

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you find to do?" reportedly said Evelyn Waugh. Worlding of the natives seethes with laziness, good-for-nothingness, sex, heavy drinking, dancing, just talking. However, the South American Indian narrator counterpoints such ideas with the picture of a day filled with fishing and hunting for food, preparing tools, sowing, harvesting, herding cattle, scraping deer and cow hides, washing clothes and kitchen wares, weeding, planting, harvesting and cooking cassava, preparing farine, whittling knives and arrows, carving on flat stones, keeping fowls and tending livestock, fencing, building or mending small thatched houses and stores, collecting cashew nuts, gutting fish, skinning deer or labba (wild pig), cutting lumber, preparing shingles for roof tops, planting corn, plantain and pumpkin. Division of labor is the norm, children are taught by experience and all have to do his or her daily chores. Chofy has difficulties to distinguish between work and leisure since all activity is simultaneously work and play.

The analysis of Coetzee (1988) that idleness was perhaps the most vigorous factor in the othering of the Hottentots in South Africa is applicable to the Wapisiana Amerindians. While the European colonialist had the right to leisure after a day's hard work, the native's laziness went unjustified. Since, in the European's opinion, no productive work is done, the natives' leisure is called idleness and laziness. This is not the general idea of the Amerindian that the narrator gives to the reader. It is high-brow Eurocentricity that imprints such stereotyping in the native, with terrible consequences regarding his othering.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: SOLIDARITY

Different from colonial society ridden with laws to keep the natives subdued, the Wapisiana Amerindians have no written law. Nevertheless, in the savannahs even suffering and ordeals seem contained within a certain order of things. Confusion, similar to that which occurred in the towns and cities, is non-existent. McKinnon "was impressed by the Indians' ability to keep order without government" (Melville, 1999, p. 267). Cooperation, especially in cases of disaster, underlies the Amerindian way of life. When drunkard Shibi-din sets his house on fire or when the cattle of Chofy's father-in-law are attacked by bats, help comes from all parts. Hospitality is never refused even though the people involved are disliked. The unknown German and Fr Napier are attended to in all their needs in the house of McKinnon. Marriage difficulties, such as McKinnon's return to Scotland, Aro's flight from an arson husband and Chofy's love-making with Rosa, are solved through dialogue and lightheartedness, without hatred or spite. Recreation, albeit bawdy and wild, is harmless. In the harvest camps "everyone drank themselves into oblivion on the fermented cashew liquor in one endless party. Dancing. Singing. Mass vomiting sessions. Fights and quarrels broke out. Someone

always pulled a knife. No one was ever killed. After two weeks of camping, everyone packed up and went home” (Melville, 1999, p. 133). Rodeo feasts and story telling are their pastime in which they identify themselves as a community.

AUTOETHNOGRAPHY: MYTHOLOGY

The subjectivity experienced by Amerindians in pre-Colombian times is disrupted by the invasion of the land, the subsequent objectification of the natives and the eradication of their culture. Melville’s text shows that Wapisiana Amerindians keep much of their identity through mythology. Although the novel deals with 20th century Guyana, myth still gives meaning to their life. Danny’s grandmother narrates the creation of the Amerindian woman and the beginning of the Wapisiana-Macusi people. The myth shows the climatic adaptation and survival of the “reddy-bronze colour” woman in the savannahs as contrasted to the white and black one. Due to his hybridity Danny immediately curses the Europeans, including his father. When Fr Napier asks McKinnon about the possibility of Maba and Zuna being baptized, the Scotsman tells him the Wapisiana myth of the flood in which his wives believe. The story gives the Amerindians a glimpse of their beginnings, from which a “betrayal to their origins” through baptism would be incomprehensible. The loss of immortality and the physical corruption of the flesh, the myth equivalent to the Biblical Garden of Eden and the Fall, are transmitted to the youngsters by Shibi-din. Equivalent to the Biblical labor, it explains and foregrounds the difficult life the Amerindian faces in the savannahs.

Wapisiana and Macusi cosmology analyzes the constellations and tries to find a connection between them and earth phenomena. In their cosmology the constellations Tamukang and Tapir indicate the rainy season, the appearance of certain stars reveals that meat and fish are plentiful and drought may be foreseen from the pale color of the sun. Since sexuality is also linked to the sun, to heat, to the scent of certain flowers and to colors, it seems that the sexual awakening of Beatrice immerses her in a more fundamental aspect of nature. Besides, sexuality is given an ecological dimension that the Western world has never had or has lost.

However, one of the main elements in Melville’s story is the incest issue involving Danny and Beatrice. The secret between Danny and Beatrice is only discovered by Wifreda, for which she is cursed by her sister. Gossip among the vaqueiros is covert but intelligent enough for the myth-steeped Indians. When notice of the fact is imparted to McKinnon, he at first cannot understand what Maba is telling him about. When he comes to, “he felt a wave of nausea at the news.... He thought he was an open-minded man, a free-thinker, not restricted by conventional morality, but the news shocked and revolted him” (Melville, 1999, p. 209). He asks Fr Napier to return to the jungle and find Danny and Beatrice. After their re-

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turn Danny marries a Brazilian girl, in spite of his sister's insistence on an Amerindian marriage between them. Beatrice is sent to Canada because of rumors about her having poisoned the priest. Although incest was not unheard of among the Amerindians, Maba, their mother, call it a "crime" and the vaqueiros sneer when it is mentioned. In fact, it seems that among the Wapisiana and Macusi Indians incest is either a *hamartia* or a taboo that they seem to rationalize through astronomy and mythology.

The interwoven eclipse and the incest themes may be divided into two layers: the scientific and the mythological. The anthropological analysis is conducted by Wormoal who absurdly tries to use algebra in his investigation on the eclipse myth, very much widespread in South America. The forced silence on the European's cold and haughty scientific investigation on the subject is symbolically manifested by Rosa's interruption of her reading of the paper and by the torrential rain that frustrates the professor's lecture at the University. Similarly, the great effort that McKinnon, also an amateur photographer, employs to record the 1919 eclipse and thus prove Einstein's theories, is foiled by the Wapisiana 'superstitions'. Melville therefore highlights the foolish inflexible intellectualism of the colonial and European representatives and contrasts it with the rich and exuberant mythology of the Amerindians.

The mythological analysis is given in diverse manners. For the Wapisiana Indians, an eclipse brings chaos and death on earth. The Tamukang and the Tapir constellations are in their turn a symbol of incest. Maba foresees disaster when the Tapir stars shine brighter in the evening sky. On the other hand, young Wario's narrative of incest is both tragic and romantic. According to Wai-Wai mythology the boy Nuni made love to his sister. Since she was unaware who the lover was, she smeared his face with genipap. When she discovered, Nuni became ashamed and realized he couldn't have his sister for a wife. So that they could live together, he made a ladder to the sky with his bow and arrow. Nuni became the moon with dark patches on its face and his sister became the evening star. The Taruma have a somewhat different story. An anonymous Indian says that the brother became the sun and the sister the moon. The brother is still chasing the sister. When he catches her and makes love to her, an eclipse occurs. The richness of the Indian mythology links incest to the tapir since the animal allegedly mates only inside its own family. Consequently, the Amerindians interpret the bright Tapir stars as intimations of an eclipse and an incest case and, consequently, of disaster.

DISASTER AND HOPE

The impending disaster is the encroaching, typically anti-conquest, of 'Western civilization' and its rationalizations, and the subsequent annihilation of the Amerindian culture. Contact and transculturation have always been the hallmark of colonial encounters. There is a constant re-

ference to the coming and going of coastlanders, Brazilians and foreigners in the savannahs occupied by the Wapisiana and Macusi Indians. Even though they have resisted foreign intrusion for hundreds of years, imperceptibly they are receiving Western influence through language and technological novelties which will slowly push their culture into the background to enhance Western priorities.

It is strange how Amerindians still preserve their culture and mythology so late in the 20th century. Perhaps the narrator Macunaima's prankish discourse is a clue. On one hand, there is the disastrous transformation of Beatrice in her Canadian home. "She barely had time to remember that other love which had flowed always under the grind of daily life; a sweet underground river that sometimes broke through to the surface and made its music, but mainly stayed hidden, so that she only carried the echoes of its song" (Melville, 1999, p. 293). On the other hand, the metonymy of the oil people hovers over the narrative in such a way that it sharpens the inexorable advance of 'Western civilization'. The death of Bla-Bla by mines placed by Americans may be a cautionary advice on the vanishing of the Amerindian civilization. Although 'foreign occupation' of the land is already a fact, Chofy's silence as an answer to the Americans' shallow attitude towards death and Marietta's return to her chores are paradigms of the natives' resistance to a way of life that dispenses myths and adopts rationalizations. The anti-conquest of the foreigners produces counter-discourses in the subject natives for the maintenance of their own identity.

On a metafictional level the ventriloquist's tale edges on the ambiguous, since, up to a point, it is a mediated representation of the Amerindian. This does not mean that the tale is not autoethnographic, but that it depends on previous accounts that have already been textualized. Besides the tales of fantasy in Raleigh's account and the stiffness in Waugh's story, Melville's text also comes through the English translation of *Macunaima* (1928), whose story originated from the Amerindian myth discussed by Theodor Koch-Grünberg. Since the salient point is that *Macunaima* deals with identity, it is precisely this element that vitally concerns the native tribes of Guyana (Murray, 2000). It is very probable that native resistance will win the day by strategies of language and mythology.

RESUMO

*A hierarquização no relacionamento metrópole-colônia causa o fenômeno da transculturação pela qual o nativo é posto na alteridade diante da perda de sua autonomia e identidade. No romance *The Ventriloquist's Tale*, publicado pela primeira vez em 1997, a autora guianense Pauline Melville escolhe o narrador Macunaíma para contar a história recente de uma família de ameríndios na região do cerrado na Guiana. Os encontros coloniais entre os representantes da ex-metrópole britânica e os*

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índios Wapisianas revelam as repetidas investidas da cultura ocidental para eliminar a cultura indígena. A narrativa autoetnográfica, abarrotada de intertextualidade, mostra que a organização societária e a mitologia fundamentam a identidade e a subjetificação do nativo.

Unitermos: transculturação, Ameríndios, literatura pós-colonial, identidade, Pauline Melville.

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