

Violence, Community History and Selfhood in African and African American Fiction: Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Leonora Miano's *L'intérieur de la nuit* (*Dark Heart of the Night*)

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Abstract: This paper examines the similarities in Zora Neale Hurston's and Leonora Miano's representations of violence in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and *L'intérieur de la nuit* (*Dark Heart of the Night*) in a bid to explain the link between violence, community history and selfhood. This essay purports that as African and African American old community histories have been tainted by violence brought on by slavery, colonization and decolonization, new community histories must be written. Hurston and Miano thus write new community histories through their heroines who confront analogous claustrophobic and exclusionary social environments. The analysis of the texts, which utilizes Sartre's and Fanon's theories on violence, drives to the conclusion that both novels are metaphors for their authors' self-assertion in the literary coterie and their search for new avenues for African and African American literatures.

Keywords: violence, history, community, Zora Neale Hurston, Leonora Miano.

Violence is a recurrent theme in African and African American women's writings. It pervades Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and Leonora Miano's *L'intérieur de la nuit* (*Dark Heart of the Night*) (henceforward *Their Eyes* and *L'intérieur*). A world's calamity, violence impacts on culture in general and literature in particular. It is one of the most recurrent issues in the mass media and literary texts. Wars, terrorism, natural disasters, and a string of economic crises which threaten mankind today, drive the literary scholar to raise the question of violence and its representation in literature, and specifically in two successful novels that have attracted much critical attention. Since its publication in 1937, a good number of critical essays on Hurston's *Their Eyes* have centered on the heroine's search for self and voice. Most feminists critics have focused on the way women, and specifically Janie Crawford, empower themselves in the novel. In "I Love the Way Janie Crawford Left Her Husbands," Mary Helen Washington argues that "feminists have been eager to seize upon this text as an expression of female power." Unlike these feminist critics, she demonstrates that the novel is about women's exclusion from power and particularly from the power of speech (Wall 27). Like Washington, Henry Louis Gates, Jr.

focuses on speech in “*Their Eyes Were Watching God*: Hurston and the Speakerly Text,” but he mainly investigates the way the text represents the voice of the black oral tradition through direct speech and Hurston's use of free indirect discourse. This discourse acts as the rhetorical analogue of the text's metaphors of inside and outside which depict Janie's wish to become a speaking black subject. In contrast, Sherley Anne Williams's “Encountering Zora Neale Hurston” re-examines some stereotypes assigned to African American women, and shows how Janie, the heroine of Hurston's novel, departs from these clichés. She is portrayed neither as “the strong ham-fisted matriarch, who is loyal to the white family she serves, nor as the amoral, instinctual slut” (Wall 20). Ryan Simmons's essay, “The hierarchy itself”: Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* and the sacrifice of narrative authority” explores authorship and authority embedded in Joe Starks, Janie's second husband. Simmons demonstrates that although Joe stands for traditional authorship and its rigid hierarchical language with alternative forms of narration and power, the destruction of his authority and leadership goes along with a sense of loss (Simmons par. 2). Simmons's mention of Joe's store and its ability to represent the genesis of the communal dialogic narrative, and his comment on Joe's failure to be a part of the community dialogue are of interest to my paper which shows Janie's endeavor not only to be a part but the originator of a new community dialogue through her mediator Pheoby Watson.

Like *Their Eyes*, *L'interieur de la nuit*, Miano's first novel, has attracted critical responses since its publication in Paris in August 2005. Tshitenge, Lubabu M.K in “Leonora Miano: 'Je veux faire mal aux Africains!'", provides information about the reception of the novel. Some Africans who live in the Diaspora consider the human sacrifice described in the book a cliché often used by the white colonialists to demean Africa. Tshitenge mentions Miano's acquaintance with the works of Caribbean and African American writers. As for Vounda's “On peut traverser les ombres pour trouver la lumière, au lieu de s'y installer,” it centres on Miano's perception of violence which she relates to the global context. Vounda's interview conveys Miano's social message: Africans had the duty to transform Africa (the heart of darkness) into a viable and glinting place. NB's “L'interieur de la nuit” un roman de Leonora Miano : Une traversée des profondeurs de l'Afrique,” an interview with Miano published in *Amina*, gives an insight into the source of inspiration of the novel, its setting, characters, and major themes which back the author's criticism of Africa. In her article, Valérie Marin La Meslée notes that Miano's criticism aims to warn Africans against their indolence, their fear to assume responsibility and their reluctance to monitor their destinies. Although all these articles inform my paper, the latter differs from the previous essays by the way it analyses violence and selfhood through new community histories suggested by an African American and a Cameroonian female writers. Using Jean-Paul Sartre's and Frantz Fanon's theories, my analysis intends to show that although Hurston and Miano depict culture, the family, marriage, and economics as generators

of violence, they lay more emphasis on history. Slavery in Hurston's *Their Eyes* and the pseudo revolution/decolonization in Miano's *L'intérieur* are the main roots of otherness which leads to violence and thus reveals men's and women's vulnerability. Sartre defines violence as "the action of freedom on freedom by the mediation of the inorganic matter. Free praxis can directly destroy the freedom of the other or put it in parenthesis, as it were, by mystifications and stratagems" (Laing and Cooper 172-173). According to Sartre, praxis is a dialectical organization of the means to satisfy need. It "is manifested as free development of action in the other" (172). In other words, the "I" is afraid of the freedom manifested by the "other", as this freedom may undermine his/her power or possession of the rare object in the context of scarcity. Violence is thus perceived as a means through which men and women seek empowerment. Yet, while the perpetrators of violence debase their victims, they endorse the inessentiality of the latter. The victims' resistance to what Jean-Paul Sartre terms "serialization" enables them to build a new self or identity. To paraphrase Fanon, violence transforms its victims crushed with their inessentiality into privileged actors. The 'thing' which has been brutalized becomes man/woman during the same process by which it frees itself (*The Wretched* 36-37). Miano and Hurston therefore question the old histories of their communities and the roles of men and women in these histories. Both authors contend that slavery and colonization have generated alterity, serialization and violence that have destroyed the freedom and identity of the individual and group, as evidenced by the African and African American old community histories. To curb the impact of this violent past, new histories have to be written and new roles assigned to men and women. When interviewed by Marcellin Vounda Etoa, Miano posits that violence is a global phenomenon (*Patrimoine* 4). The selection of this theme therefore shows the global dimension of Miano's work that makes her rank among the new generation of Cameroonian writers who, as André Ntonfo points out, are concerned with the identification of the real enemies of their present society-traditions and their numerous setbacks-and antiquated mentalities. These authors also deal with universal themes such as the definition of self and the assertion of individual freedom (Ntonfo 85-86). Miano's novel can thus be compared to Hurston's *Their Eyes* which tackles the same issues despite its American setting. Miano has been influenced by African American writers. During an interview, she observed:

I've been reading lots of African-American writers since I was a teenager. People like James Baldwin, Ralph Ellison, Toni Morrison, Chester Himes, Audre Lorde, Ntozake Shange, Sonia Sanchez, and Percival Everett... and of course the poetry of Langston Hughes and Countee Cullen...

When asked if she had read Hurston's novels, Miano replied: "I own everything she wrote. She is a major writer" (Interview March 1, 2011). Hurston has therefore, one way or another influenced Miano, a fact which justifies a comparative study of the novels of the two female

writers. In the context of my article, violence is not circumscribed to physical exertion. It encompasses historical, verbal, domestic, cultural, economic and psychological forms. As for community history, it includes history (the superficial chronicle of great events), and intrahistory (the texture of culture defined by the people, by the history of everyday life and people).¹ My article thus attempts to answer the following questions: How is violence entwined with community histories in the novels? How do men and women attempt to reconstruct these community histories? Can the individual achieve selfhood in the new histories? The first part of this essay will examine in the two novels the old community histories that present violence as the Sartrean “free praxis that [destroys] the freedom of the other, or put it in parenthesis by mystifications and stratagems” As for the second part, it will give an insight into the victims’ responses to violence and their endeavor to define or redefine themselves in the new community histories or narratives that deconstruct the master narrative of their exclusionary communities.

I

Violence and Old Community Histories

Hurston and Miano present communities where violence is perceived as a consequence of an individual's or group's fear to lose their power or possession of a rare object in the context of scarcity. They purport that this phenomenon, which prevails in the domestic, cultural, and economic spheres, is partly rooted in slavery and colonialism which have brought on alterity. African and African American communities are thus marked by a violent past that impacts on men's and women's (re)construction of the self. *Their Eyes* portrays three generations of men and women: Nanny, Janie Crawford's grandmother and Logan Killicks - her first husband - are part of the first generation. Leafy, Janie's mother, and Joe Starks, her second husband, form the second generation while Janie, Pheoby, and Vergible Woods (Tea Cake), her third husband, represent the third generation. Nanny embeds the past marred by slavery and its violence on black men and women. She constantly reminds her granddaughter of this past that has shaped her life (Nanny's life) and that of Janie's mother. The latter was raped by her schoolteacher who, endorsing the violence of his community ruined the great expectations that Nanny had of her daughter. Having been victimized by the white slave master, the African American male asserts his freedom by annihilating that of his female counterpart. In the novel, the African American woman thus becomes the white and black men's victim, which justifies Nanny's observation:

Honey, de white man is de ruler of everything as fur as Ah been able tuh find out. Maybe it's some place way off in de ocean where de black man is in power, but we don't know nothin' but what we see. So de white man throw down de load and tell de nigger man tuh pick it up. He pick it up because he have to, but he don't tote it. He hand it to his womenfolks. De nigger woman is the mule uh the world so fur as Ah can see. Ah been prayin' fuh it tuh be different wid you. Lawd, Lawd, Lawd! (186)

In this excerpt, Nanny presents her oppressive and hierarchical American society that positions the black woman at the bottom of the social ladder. Adopting the values of her society, Nanny forces her granddaughter into an arranged marriage by inflicting physical violence on her: "She slapped the girl's face violently, and forced her head back so that their eyes met in struggle" (Hurston 186). Nanny's behavior vis-à-vis Janie is conditioned by her past marked by the violence inflicted on her by her slave master, his wife and the rest of her society. As a black and a slave she is a nonentity, subjected to the violence brought on by history:

'You know, honey, us colored folks is branches without roots and that makes things come round in queer ways. You in particular. Ah was born back due in slavery so it wasn't for me to fulfil my dreams of whut a woman oughta be and to do. Dat's one of de hold-backs of slavery. But nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will. Ah didn't want to be used for a work-ox and a brood-sow and Ah didn't want mah daughter used dat way neither. It sho wasn't mah will for things to happen lak they did. Ah even hated the way you was born. But, all de same Ah said thank God, Ah got another chance. Ah wanted to preach a great sermon about colored women sittin' on high, but they wasn't no pulpit for me. (187)

Having been conditioned by her past, Nanny sees marriage as protection and financial security for Janie. However, through her admonitions that aim to persuade her granddaughter into marrying Logan Killicks, Nanny teaches a lesson to Janie: "But nothing can't stop you from wishin'. You can't beat nobody down so low till you can rob 'em of they will." This lesson is Janie's life buoy in her first marriage where she is treated as a beast of burden by her husband who, like Nanny has literally absorbed the values of his society that relegates the black woman to the rank of mules. Although he does not beat his wife, Logan inflicts violence on her by making her understand that she is a sex object and a mule he can use whenever he wants to: "You ain't got no particular place. It's wherever Ah need yuh. Git uh move on yuh, and dat quick (199). Susan Willis notes that the brutality of the sharecropping economic system "is not necessarily related to physical violence and abuse... it resides in the stifling of dreams; the death of spirit; the denial of art, imagination and creativity" (Gates & Appiah, 123-124). Logan's mystification of his financial power (land ownership) and his brutality are related to his sharecropping economic system. His animal-like physique ("Logan with his shovel looked like a black bear doing some clumsy dance on his hind legs") (*Their Eyes* 199), his lack of hygiene and wrong conception of marriage stifle Janie's dreams and kill her imagination and romance. But Janie's second marriage to Joe Starks, who, she thinks, will fulfill her dream of love and romance is also a source of violence. Joe is the prototype of the power monger American capitalist; when Janie takes "a lot of looks at him," she notices that he is "kind of portly like rich folks" (201). As he resembles the rich white folks, Joe also endorses their oppressive capitalism that acts on the freedom and essentiality of the Black, the

woman and the poor:

Joe Starks was the name, yeah Joe Starks from in and through Georgy. ... been workin' for white folks all his life. Saved up some money-round three hundred dollars, yes indeed, right here in his pocket. Kept hearing 'bout them buildin' a new state down heah in Floridy and sort of wanted to come. But he was makin' money where he was. But when he heard all about 'em makin' a town all outa colored folks, he knowed dat was de place he wanted to be. He had always wanted to be a big voice, but de white folks had all de sayso where he come from and everywhere else, exceptin' dis place dat colored folks was building theirselves. Dat was right too. De man dat built things oughta boss it. Let colored folks build things too if dey wants to crow over something.' (196)

Joe is a potential maker of the new community history; he wants to change the old history by reversing the roles long established by slavery that confers all the powers on the White while the Black is stripped of all authority. Janie rightly notices that Joe “did not represent sun-up and pollen and blooming trees, but he spoke for far horizon. He spoke for change and chance” (197). This change, for Joe, can be effected in the all-black community of Eatonville. Janie is therefore positively influenced by the change brought by Joe and “a feeling of sudden newness and change [comes] over her.” For Janie, the change should be expressed in new words: “Her old thoughts were going to come in handy now, but new words would have to be made and said to fit them” (200). But Joe cannot find these new words because he defines change not in terms of expression, but in terms of material property symbolized by his capability to build, to change the town which is still “a baby” into a developed one, an achievement that only money can realize and “he [is] glad he [has] his money all saved up” (192). As Joe understands that “de man dat built things oughta boss it,” he becomes so interested in building his town and making a name for himself that he keeps Janie confined in his shop and transforms her into his chattel. Janie, Logan's former mule becomes Starks's possession and speechless ornament. Like Logan who tells Janie “don't you change too many words wid me dis mawnin” (199), Joe orders his wife to hush her voice: “mah wife don't know nothin' 'bout no speech-makin.' Ah never married her for nothin' lak dat. She's uh woman and her place is in de home” (208). Logan and Joe's free praxis thus deprives Janie of the power to express her change in new words. As Susan Willis observes, “Hurston shows a deft sense for the influence of the forces of history on people's lives in refusing to portray Killicks as a personally mean man. If he regards his young wife as a mule, it is because in this system of backbreaking rural labor, women were expected to bear the burden of fieldwork as well as domestic toil (Gates & Appiah 123). As Logan Killicks has imbibed the principles laid down by his old community history, he finds it normal to reduce his wife to a beast of burden because by marrying her, he has rescued her from the white folks' kitchen where black women used to work as slaves. Joe is also influenced by history; he worked for the white bosses because they had money, as a

result, he too becomes the boss of the black people of Eatonville because he has money now and he is the builder of the town. Joe cannot build a new community history, as he excludes not only his wife but the other members of Eatonville. He becomes the wind while the rest of the community changes into grass that bends whichever way he blows (Hurstons 214). Joe exemplifies the authoritarian bourgeois: he is the mayor, postmaster, landlord and storekeeper, and he exhibits his economic power through his new desk, swing-around chair and spittoons, possessions which separate him from the rest of his community. After Joe's death, Janie can realize her dream with Tea Cake who owns nothing but a guitar. As both lovers move to the muck where they find financial security and love, they are faced with a hurricane that causes damage, forcing men and animals to seek protection. As he tries to protect Janie, Tea Cake is bitten by a mad dog and infected with rabies. To protect herself from Tea Cake's madness, Janie has to shoot the only man she has ever loved and who has made her dream come true. Although Tea Cake differs from Janie's first two husbands, he embeds violence, which is perceptible when he slaps Janie to show that he is the boss (295), and when he attempts to shoot her during his madness. His madness frees him and exposes the violence that was latent in his unconscious that has been conditioned by his community's collective unconscious marked by historical violence. The novel thus represents physical violence that slavery, and whippings embody, as well as economic violence that is inflicted on the male and female slaves. Similarly, violence which pervades *L'intérieur de la nuit* has its roots in history, rituals, and traditions which create an oppressive environment where men and women struggle to achieve self-knowledge and self-fulfillment. Set in Mboasu, an imaginary Bantu country, the novel, like Hurston's *Their Eyes*, depicts three generations of men and women. Io, Eyoum and Ié stand for the first generation. Eke, Aama (Ayané's father and mother), Inoni, Ekwe and Esa are members of the second age group, while Ayané, Isilo, Isango and Ebanga form the third.

The old generation has experienced the political and social upheaval brought on by colonization which has made the natives' world all topsy-turvy (Miano 77). The members of this age group are immured in the past and in unbending traditions and practices that breed alterity. Eke is ostracized by his relatives and erstwhile friends because he has married Aama, a girl from Losipotipe, a neighboring village. Uneducated, and unable to earn a living in their village, the unskilled but physically strong male workers desert Eku, their village, to look for menial jobs in Sombe, the post-independence town that symbolizes misery and economic violence for the proletariat. Men's desertion lays a heavy burden on women's shoulders. These women have to cater for their children alone. Whenever these absentee men come home, they impregnate their wives and subject them to scolding and beatings to show their manhood and power, which they cannot wield in Sombe, as many of them are subalterns in the postcolonial town. With colonization, the roles assigned to men and women in the traditional African society were somewhat altered as

African men had to serve the white colonialist who robbed them of their manhood. To reassert this manhood, the male folks of Eku, who cannot assert their identity in the post-independence neo-colonialist society, boss their womenfolk around and change their wives into mules, thus ruining their freedom of action. Their society exerts on men and women the same violence that it has inherited from the colonial administration. In Miano's text, physical, cultural and economic barriers lead to psychological violence, schizophrenia and madness embedded in Epupa, Ayané's university mate, who roams the streets and shouts loud to manifest her revolt against a corrosive post-independence society. Like *Their Eyes*, Miano's novel shows that new personal and community histories are needed.

II

New Community Histories and Selfhood

Both Hurston and Miano argue that to curb violence, new community histories should reconcile the group and the individual. The latter should be able to find self-fulfillment and happiness in a community rid of norms and practices that enslave men and women. In Fanonian terms, the passive victim must be transformed into an active actor. The individual should be given a voice within the community in a bid to (re)define the self. The self is synonymous with identity, and is connected to one's character and behavior, to what one really is. In postcolonial discourse, self implies subject and power in the binary opposition self/other. In order to create harmony and confidence among community members, the master narrative should include other narratives. In *Their Eyes*, Janie decides to make history by subverting Nanny's narrative, hence moving from the status of the thing to that of an active actor. She first of all rejects the old economic systems: Nanny's plantation and household labor, Logan's sharecropping, and Joe's trade and capitalist ethic. Janie throws away the sixty acres of land that Logan so much values:

Youse mad 'cause Ah don't fall down and wash up dese sixty acres uh ground yuh got. You ain't done me no favour by marryin' me. And if dat's what you call yo'self doin', Ah don't than yuh for it. Youse mad 'cause Ah'm tellin' yuh what you already knowed." (Hurston 199)

In her statement, Janie rebels against Nanny and Logan who consider marriage a favor a man does to a woman. The heroine therefore makes her husband understand that he and Nanny stand for the past which may influence her life, but cannot deter her search for freedom and selfhood. Both Nanny and Logan are "old tree[s] that [have] been torn away by storm," they are "foundation[s] of ancient power that no longer matter[s]" (184). Hence, when Janie says "Youse mad 'cause Ah'm tellin' yuh what you already knowed," she wants Logan to acknowledge his loss of authority that was grounded in his landed property that she devalues. Janie also abandons the material comfort that Joe provides her by enslaving her in the store where she assumes the role of a beautiful doll. She sees men talk, play games and make merry, but she has no right to partake in their merry making. Logan's farm and Joe's store generate a

claustrophobic environment that mars Janie's freedom. As a consequence, Janie adopts a stratagem that she utilizes, in Sartrean terms, to destroy or put in parenthesis the freedom of the other (Nanny's, Logan's and Joe's). To write new personal and community histories, she moves to the muck with Tea Cake to start all over in Tea Cake's way which "ain't no business proposition, and no race after property and titles. [It is a] love game" (267). After Janie has lived her Grandma's way, she wants to live her own way. The muck or the Everglades thus becomes the third space where men and women become partners and assume similar roles. Sherly Anne Williams purports that on the muck, the booming farming area, Janie comes *down*, that paradoxical place in Afro-American literature that is both a physical bottom and the setting for the character's attainment of a penultimate self-knowledge (Wall 24). On the muck, Tea Cake and Janie wear overalls and share the work. Janie freely partakes in men's games and talks. She is an active participant in the new community history. When this third space is ruined by violence caused by the hurricane and the dog bite, Janie undergoes a test which leads to her full maturity, to her "attainment of a penultimate self-knowledge": She has to kill Tea Cake or be killed. She makes a choice and assumes responsibility thus bringing an answer to the Shakespearean existential question "to be or not to be." She, like Celie in *The Color Purple*, enters into creation (Walker 207). When she decides to be, Janie creates a new self, her history that she wishes, will become her community's history. Before this last test, the heroine has understood that to assume responsibility is in a way, to make her *prise de conscience* become *prise de parole*. This *prise de parole* is a weapon against Logan when she says: "You don't need mah help out dere Logan. Youse in Yo' place and Ah'm in mine" (Hurston 199). Janie assigns new roles to men and women laying emphasis on shared work and division of labor. She also uses her oratory power to redefine Joe when the latter gives five dollars to free Matt's skeletal mule. His humanitarian action is initiated by Janie who later uses the right words to give a different identity to her husband: "'Freeing' dat mule makes uh mighty big man outa you. Something like George Washington and Lincoln... You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king uh something' (221). As Janie decides to make a speech, she transcends her community's barriers and can now be identified by Hambo- a man of the community- as "a born orator" who puts the right words to men's thoughts. From this moment, contrary to Mary Helen Washington, I contend that Janie is empowered and she can positively influence her community. Her speech-making reduces Joe to silence. He "bit down hard on his cigar and beamed all around, but he never said a word" (221). This is the beginning of Janie's resistance to her husband's violence and this resistance culminates when she reveals Joe's impotence to retaliate against the verbal and physical violence that he inflicts on her when he purports that "somebody got to think for women and chillun and chickens and cows" because they cannot think for themselves, and when he "slapped Janie until she had a ringing sound in her ears" (232).

But neither the insult nor the slap weakens the heroine's *prise de parole*; she uses her new-found freedom and power to instruct the men who comment on Mrs. Robbins at the porch of the store:

"Sometimes God gits familiar wid us womenfolks too and talks His inside business. He told me how surprised he was 'bout y'all turning out so smart after Him makin' yuh different; and how surprised y'all is goin' tuh be if you ever find out you don't know half as much 'bout us as you think you do. It's so easy to make yo'self out God Almighty when you ain't got nothin' to strain against but women and chickens."
(235)

Janie defies male authority and their assumed knowledge of women whom they discuss and boss around every day. She unveils men's pretentiousness by showing that although menfolk define themselves as surrogates for God, their discussions and reflections on women and chickens are otiose. The heroine thus lectures not women but men, a fact that Joe Starks considers a threat to male authority as he tells his wife: "You gettin' too moufy, Janie" (235). Getting too mouthy, Janie becomes active and even destructive when confronted with violence. She thus frees herself by resorting to violence to counteract her victimizers'. Turning into what Gates calls a speaking subject, Janie destroys Joe's freedom of action with her rhetoric:

Naw, Ah ain't no young gal no mo' but den Ah ain't no old woman neither. Ah reckon I looks my age too. But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it. Dat's uh whole lot more'n you kin say. You big bellies round here and put out a lot of brag, but 'tain't nothin' to it but yo'big voice. Humph! Talkin' 'bout me lookin' old! When you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life." (238)

When Janie reveals Joe's impotence, she makes him lose his male status and neither property nor titles can redeem his self that is completely shattered by his wife. Joe endorses the inessentiality of his victim, while the latter asserts her being by her pronouncement "But Ah'm uh woman every inch of me, and Ah know it," which is opposed to "when you pull down yo' britches, you look lak de change uh life." As Janie asserts her selfhood by affirming her womanhood, Joe loses his sense of self through her negation of his manhood. When she returns to Eatonville after Tea Cake's death, Janie can teach the men and women of her community through her friend Pheoby. She declares that "Ah done been tuh de horizon and back and now Ah kin set heah in mah house and live by comparisons (332). From the state of object she is transformed into a subject with a voice. Being the master of her change, she transforms her personal experience into a new community history. She teaches her community to transcend gender, societal, cultural, economic and historical barriers. In contrast, Isilo can neither write nor tell a new community history in Miano's novel. Isilo's revolution, a parody of decolonization, is a channel through which he intends to rewrite the history of Africa. When he notices that Eyoum does not have the stamina indispensable to the new actors of this history, he turns to Ié after he has killed Eyoum, a metaphor of the indolent and passive Africa. But if Ié is

the spokesperson of her community, she is incapable of creating a third space that enables the definition of the self within the new history. She imposes silence to Inoni who kills her husband after the latter has murdered the young Eyia whose flesh is later given to the people as communion. By killing her husband, and committing suicide later, Inoni asserts her freedom from a society that stifles the individual. She is the only one who breaks the silence to inform Ayané about what happened in the night. The human sacrifice, a practice unknown to the people of Eku and the assassination of the members of the clan undermine Isilo's revolution that aims to reinstate the luster of pre-colonial Africa (Miano 78-79). This bloody revolution does not breed harmony in the society but only revives barbaric practices that ruin the youths of the country. Isilo's ideal is doomed to failure. The new roles that Isilo assigns to the men and women of Eku bring neither self-knowledge nor self-fulfillment, as his revolution is more oriented towards Africa's mythic past. The murder that the young Epa commits—he kills Eyoum—and the one committed by Ekwé, Esa and Ebé (they slaughter Epa's younger brother) isolate them from their community. Contrary to Isilo, the author no longer concerns herself with that mythic past that cannot solve the burning problems of Africa today. Her fiction targets the present Africa and its future. Tshitenge observes that Miano does not want to cling on to a glorious and mythic past that no longer exists (Tshitenge par. 3). As Eyoum, Ié and Isilo are unable to write the new history, Miano uses Ayané as a substitute. But Ayané's status of an outsider makes her task difficult. She is left with a choice: move to Sombe and fly back to France without knowing her people and their plight, or return to Eku and learn more about the dark night and its impact on her people's history. When she returns to Eku with her aunt Wengisané, Ayané acknowledges that she can't write nor tell the story of Eku if she is not part of it (Miano 172). She, like Janie in *Their Eyes*, assumes responsibility by joining the clan. Her journey back to Eku (even if she does not settle in her village) becomes an initiation rite and her acceptance to serve as the voice that will replicate Inoni's narrative of the dark bloody night. This narrative—which exposes the horrors perpetrated by the revolutionaries and the natives of Eku—admonishes the inhabitants of Mboasu to face their new reality and their roles in the fashioning of this reality.

Miano's and Hurston's protagonists endeavor to understand their past characterized by historical violence, and they assume responsibility vis-à-vis this past in a bid to monitor their present and future destinies. In the two texts, the authors connect the psychological development of their characters to the journey motif, a journey from immaturity to maturity. Meanwhile contrast is evidenced by the use of binary oppositions such as day/night, sun up/sun down, inside/outside, and men/women. Detailed description and metaphors are used by the two female writers to explore the themes of schizophrenia, madness, and death that are entwined with violence. The tree is also a common trope in the two texts; it connotes rejuvenation, and self-realization. The pear tree in *Their Eyes* is related to the awakening of Janie's sexuality, romance and imagination. The pear

tree is part of Janie's imaginary world that must come true through Johnnie Taylor, Logan Killicks, Joe Starks, and Tea Cake. But neither Taylor, nor Killicks and Starks can make this world real. Tea Cake thus becomes the man who fills the void. He is the pollen needed for the pear tree to blossom. In Miano's text, the mango tree, a refuge that Ayané chooses for her protection, is a window through which she observes the people of Eku and their responses to Isilo's revolution. The tree in a way leads to her second birth which is her self-realization. As Miano purports during an interview, Ayané is a witness of history. She starts to witness this history up the mango tree, and must complete it with Inoni's narrative of the subsequent events of the dark night. To complete the new history of the Eku community, the heroine must come back to her native village.

Miano's and Hurston's novels are both postmodern writings which deconstruct the master narrative. Todd McGowan notes that "it is the contention of contemporary poststructuralist criticism, however, that a novel is politically subversive not merely because of its content, but because of a form which dismantles hierarchies and deconstructs the binary oppositions of rational thought (Mcgowan par.1). The two novels deconstruct the master narrative. In the two texts, the first and third person points of view coalesce and this combination undercuts the omniscient narrator's point of view. Gates thus highlights three types of discourse in *Their Eyes*: the direct discourse, the indirect discourse, and free indirect discourse (Gates and Appiah 194-195). The title of the novel "Their Eyes Were Watching God," dissolves the gender dichotomies brought on by culture and history. Men, women, and animals are all subjected to natural violence (flood) and all of them attempt to escape the fury of the lake. As Jacques Derrida purports in "Structure, Sign, and Play in the Human Sciences," "by reorganizing the coherence of the system, the center of a structure permits the free play of its elements inside the total form" (Natoli and Hutcheon 224). Quoting Gates, McGowan stresses the role of playfulness in *Their Eyes*: "The idea that the political energy of *Their Eyes* lies in its playfulness marks perhaps the clearest disjunction between today's responses to the novel and the reception it received when first published" (Mcgowan par. 1). McGowan recalls Richard Wright's bitter critique of the novel which contrasts the responses of modern and postmodern critics who acclaim the text as a masterpiece because of its deconstruction of hierarchies. Similarly, the title "L'interieur de la nuit" (*Dark Heart of the Night*) introduces a spatial and temporal setting which deconstructs hierarchies by blurring gender-based roles during the dark night which indiscriminately subjects the men, women, boys and girls of Eku to violence. Isilo, the mastermind of the revolution, needs 18 young men for his fight. As there are only a few young men in the village, Isilo claims girls as substitutes for men. Likewise, Ié, a woman, becomes the spokesperson of her community, a role formerly assumed by Eyoum, the male chief of the village. This deconstruction of hierarchies and Derridan playfulness proceed in the presentation of the settings of the novels. The setting of *Their Eyes*-

Eatonville, Florida, an all-black town reveals the author's intention to present the Blacks-and not the Whites-as responsible for their community's history; the white influence is almost nil in this all-black community. In the novel, racism is epitomized by Mrs Turner, an African American mulatto who blatantly claims that "Ah jus' couldn't see mashself married to no black man. It's too many black folk already. We oughta lighten up de race" (Hurstons 289). This statement shows that Blacks have an important role to play in the eradication of intra-racial segregation. In the same way, the inhabitants of Eku, a small village in Mboasu, a post-independence African country, are left alone in the dark night to shape or reshape their history and destiny.

The settings of the two novels are somehow associated with their authors' lives. Eatonville, Florida (the first *incorporated* Negro town in America), the setting of *Their Eyes*, is Hurston's home town (Wall 17). Likewise, Sombe, the economic capital of Mboasu (the setting of *L'Intérieur*) may be compared to Douala (the economic capital of Cameroon), Miano's place of birth. Although Miano asserts that the source of inspiration of her novel is a documentary on the Liberian war, and that Mboasu represents any African country, the names she has used in her novel are in her mother tongue: Mboasu "our country/our home," Yenepasi "This side," Io "ancestor," Losipotipe "You are not far" and Eyoun are all in Duala, a Cameroonian language. Like the settings, the journey motif in the novels is related to the two authors' journeys. Hurston moved from Eatonville to Baltimore where she attended high school at Morgan Academy of Morgan College. She later attended Howard University at Washington, D.C., was sent to Barnard College and returned to Eatonville after she has completed her studies in anthropology (Wall 17-18). As for Miano, after she has completed high school in Douala, she travelled to France in 1991 to study Anglo-American Literature in Valenciennes and Nanterre. She has settled in France and from time to time, she visits Cameroon. Both authors' interest in anthropology is also perceptible in their novels. In *Their Eyes*, Hurston's blend of epic tales, songs and dance (302-303) shows her knowledge of folklore. Miano's detailed description of the human sacrifice in her novel proves her mastery of African rites and rituals. Although the two authors share many common traits, their major common trait is their search for novelty. Both female writers' search for new themes and new forms has impacted on their writings which provide them a space in the literary milieu. Hurston observes that:

While I was working I began to think of writing.[...]. I saw that what was being written by Negro authors was all on the same theme—the race problem, and saturated with our sorrows. By the time I graduated from college, I had sensed the falsity of the picture, because I did not find that sorrow. We talk about the race problem a great deal, but go on living and laughing and striving like everybody else. So I saw that what was being written and declaimed was a pose. A Negro writer or speaker was supposed to say those things. [...] So I made up my mind to write about my people as they are, and not to use the traditional lay figures. (Wall 18)

Miano's search for originality is visible in her characters and language. Ayané is endowed with a profound inner life, a characteristic that Miano considers an innovation in African literature (NB 68). The author also uses clear standard French at a time when most Cameroonian writers appropriate and reconstitute French and English by incorporating local idioms into their novels written in these languages, or by superposing the structures of Cameroonian languages and those of the French language (Onguene 24). Like Hurston, Miano remarks: "I was asked what I have done for the cause of the Blacks. But there is no cause that is only for the Blacks. I do not partake in chanting blackness. Human suffering is universal"² (La Meslée 116). The universal dimension of her work, has earned her numerous awards: the Louis Guilloux prize 2006, the Montalembert prize 2006, the René Fallet prize 2006, the Bernard Palissy prize 2006 and the Goncourt Prize 2006. Miano thus ranks among the new generation of writers who seek new distinctive voices and avenues for Cameroon and African literatures.

Conclusion

Hurston's *Their Eyes* and Miano's *L'intérieur* present history as originator of alterity and violence. In this context, the Sartrean and Fanonian definitions of violence show its impact on both the victimizer's and the victim's definition and assertion of the self. This phenomenon is therefore detrimental to the individual and community as a whole, as it mars individual and community histories. In both texts, the authors' heroines use narration as a mode of expression, liberation and attainment of selfhood. Likewise, the journey, -a biographical hint-and the trope of the tree are symbols of quest, rebirth and maturity in the two novels. For Hurston and Miano, slavery, colonization, and racism may be important themes in African and African American literatures; yet sticking to these old themes and to the past may not provide new avenues for new community histories. As Africans and African Americans are confronting new problems, "new words have to be made and said to fit them." These novelists thus require that Africans and African Americans assume responsibility by acknowledging the dark events of the past and by moving forward. Moving forward means fighting antiquated mentalities, lethargy, lethal rituals and traditions, poverty, gender bias, and other deleterious practices which, breeding violence, may sap Africans' and African Americans' self confidence and development.

End Notes:

1. "Historical Consciousness and Nation Building in American Poetry." *Annals*, Special Edition, 5-6 June, 2008, pp. 257- 274. University of Yaounde I. In her article, Manyaka Toko Djockoua refers to Paul Lekas who quotes Willis Barnstone's and Miguel de Unamuno's definitions of *historia* and *intrahistoria*.
2. The translation of the original quotation in French is mine.

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