



“ALL ART IS POLITICAL”: JOHN KEENE’S BLACK HISTORICAL RESISTANCE IN *COUNTERNARRATIVES*

**“TODA ARTE É POLÍTICA”: A RESISTÊNCIA HISTÓRICA NEGRA DE
JOHN KEENE EM *COUNTERNARRATIVES***

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ABSTRACT: This article deals with the engaged writing of prose writer, poet, translator, and Professor John Keene. The Black North-American author clashes of political struggles, for he seeks to rewrite history as a literary witness, bringing assessments, evaluations, and social issues of the bygone ages – and their following outcome in the present. Keene’s historical approach and critical attitude uphold the line in his awarded short stories, *Counternarratives*, published by New Directions in 2015. Concerns about canon, rewriting history, Afro-descendent voice, and resistance will be approached, backed by writers and researchers such as Fanon (1963), Spriggs (1965), Baraka (1969), T’Shaka (2012), among others.

KEYWORDS: John Keene; *Counternarratives*; resistance; rewriting history.

RESUMO: Este artigo aborda questões relacionadas à escrita engajada do prosaísta, poeta, tradutor e Professor John Keene. O autor negro norte-americano trava embates políticos, pois busca reescrever a história como testemunha literária, trazendo análises, avaliações e problemas sociais do passado e seus subsequentes desfechos no presente. A abordagem histórica e a atitude crítica de Keene são as linhas condutoras em seu premiado livro de contos, *Counternarratives*, publicado em 2015 pela editora New Directions. Questões referentes ao cânone, à reescrita da história, à voz afrodescendente e à resistência serão abordadas, amparadas por escritores e estudiosos como Fanon (1963), Spriggs (1965), Baraka (1969), T’Shaka (2012), entre outros.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: John Keene; *Counternarratives*; resistência; reescrita da história.

INTRODUCTION

The title of this article stands for a statement pronounced by storyteller, poet, translator, and Professor John Keene during an interview for *Front Porch*, the online literary journal produced by the Masters of Fine Arts (M.F.A.) Students from Texas State University:

To utter a banal truism, all art is political. Even artworks that appear to have no politics are political and ideological. To put it another way, as Adorno suggested, every work of art is an aesthetic artifact and a social fact. It never exists in a vacuum outside the political and social economy of its time [...].

I'd say that overtly political art must walk a fine line not to tumble into cant (All of us bear the responsibility of becoming politically engaged in a direct way, however) (KEENE qt. in HANSEN & CLINE, 2018, p. 4).

Keene, born and raised in St. Louis, in 1965, stands as an engaged contemporary Black North-American writer. His academic trajectory builds up the political content that embodies his discourse: when a Bachelor of Arts at Harvard University, he was a member of the Harvard Black Community and of the Student Theater (C.A.S.T.), as well as he cooperated with the Art Board of the Harvard Advocate, the oldest published college art and literary magazine in the U.S. Further, when the author was a student in the M. F. A. Program at New York University, he became

a New York Times Foundation Fellow. He was also a Cave Canem Foundation member (founded in 1996 by poets Toi Derricotte and Cornelius Eady to fight against the under-representation of African American poets in M.F.A. Programs across the country)¹. Notwithstanding, for years he was a member of the Dark Room Collective, founded in 1988 to celebrate Afro-American writers (GORDINIER, 2014, p. 1). About his career as a Professor, the author has taught English and African American studies at Northwestern University, and formerly works in the M. A. F. Creative Program at Rutgers University-Newark as a Professor and Chair of African American and African Studies. The author has also contributed as an editorial board member of the African Poetry Book Fund².

The author is also a translator. He has published from Spanish, French, and Portuguese, including names as the French Congolese writer and Professor Alain Mabanckou, and the Dominican writer and editor Mateo Morrison. He also translated the Brazilian Black writer and Professor Edimilson de Almeida Pereira; and the Brazilian female poets Claudia Roquette-Pinto, and Hilda Hilst – adding up the latter notorious novel, *Letters from a Seducer*, released by Nightboat Books in 2014 (KEENE, 2016c, p. 2).

Concerning Keene's literary production, it starts up with his first novel, *Annotations*, published in 1995 by New Directions editors (WITHING, 2005, p. 3). Eleven years later,

1. About John Keene's biography, cf. the following webpages: New Directions (2020); Poetry Foundation (2020); Cave Canem Foundation (2020).

2. Cf. the following webpages: Poetry Foundation (2020); Rutgers (2020).

in 2006, the author published *Seismosis* (by 1913 Press), with the artwork of writer, editor, and visual artist Christopher Stackhouse. In 2016, he wrote *Grind* (by ITI Press), an art-poetry book created along with writer and photographer Nicholas Muellner. In the same year, he released *Playland* (by Seven Kitchens Press), a chapbook of his old and recent poems (WEEBER, 2016, p. 1).

Nevertheless, this essay deals specifically with Keene's most rewarded book: twenty years after his first novel, New Directions published *Counternarratives* (2015), the writer's collection of short fiction. The book received a set of prizes, amongst the American Book Award by Before Columbus Foundation (2016); the Lannan Literary Award for Fiction (2016)³; and the Republic of Consciousness Prize for Small Presses in United Kingdom (2017).

A BRIEF LOOK AT CONTEMPORARY AFRICAN AMERICAN LITERATURE CANON FORMATION

In *Counternarratives* (2015), John Keene's political engagement is highlighted, mainly due to the fact the author works with African-American history, from the original rebellions when the enslaved arrived in the U.S. up to recent days. Taking into account the important prizes the author received⁴, plus his academic and engaged presence during the last decade on North-American literature, Keene outstands in opposition to the "white canon", for the political process of deciding canon was, for centuries, under the choice of white

America, or under the power of the "white country", as James Baldwin calls the nation in the text "On Being White... And Other Lies" (1984, p. 91).

Since late-1960's and early-1970's, literary canon revision manifolds a distinct paradigm from the tradition. According to Rutledge (2017, p. 2), this epoch targets the beginning of Black Studies' Programs, grasping "a shift in the literary canon and the academy [...]. The birth of various ethnic studies programs in the 1960s reflected the social upheavals of the time". What happened back then was that scholars connected with African-American culture denied the outdated white canon, isolated as the only source of knowledge.

T'Shaka, in an article for *The Journal of Pan African Studies*, retraces the scenario of the time:

Black youth and Black people in general were given a new sense of strength and vigor when the slogan "Black Power" was announced in 1966. All of these struggles (Civil Rights, Black Nationalism, Urban Rebellions, Black Panthers, US organization and Black Power) helped create an atmosphere that encouraged struggle – in the Black community and among Black students on the college campus.

Black Power, and the previous struggles of Black people, helped create an ethic of Blacks being responsible to Blacks. For Black students, this meant that they should be concerned

3. Note: In the U.K., *Counternarratives* was published in 2016 by Fitzcarraldo Editions.

4. Besides the prizes already cited, he won the Whiting Award for fiction/poetry (2005), and the Windham–Campbell Literature Prize in Fiction/Yale (2018).

about their identity, and about using their skills for the benefit of the Black community. (T'SHAKA, 2012, p. 18).

The Professor Emeritus of the Department of Africana Studies at San Francisco State University compiles his memories understanding that Black dialogue was significant because it “combined a Black Nationalist political analysis of fundamental issues arising out of the Civil Rights Movement, with a cultural analysis concerned with the position of Black Art, Black Poetry and Black Performing Arts” (T'SHAKA, 2012, p. 17).

Back in time, in 1965, Spriggs published the article “Négritude Americaine”, which-so-ever worked as a background for the Negritude Movement, explaining “Négritude” as “the whole complex of civilized values – cultural, economic, social and political – which characterized the Black people, or, more precisely, the Negro-African world” (1965, p. 9). Hereinafter, the author broadens this idea as if he could foretell the future: “The emergence of Black subjectivity in the writing of Afro-American writers will ultimately lead to a kind of Négritude Americaine. [...] New Negro writers [...] are beginning to assert their inalienable right to reject definitions not of their own making” (SPRIGGS, 1965, p. 9). Spriggs achieves this view attesting that his fellow writers “are now ushering in a new vocabulary and arriving at definitions meaningful to themselves” (1965, p. 9), and that Black artists should question their “destiny as people in America” (1965,

p. 10). He finishes his discourse praising ancestry: “We are demanding the right to rediscover and embrace our heritage” (1965, p. 10).

During the Black Arts Movement (1960-1975), writers realized literature could be an important mechanism for empowerment. Although at this time Keene was just a newborn, he got the breakthroughs from the engaged posture of his predecessors. From the 1960's up to 1990's, there was a deep change over the literary canon regarding African-American writers – it was a new moment apt to “catalyze canon reform and lead to the production of new anthologies that presented underrepresented perspectives” (BATES, 2013, p. 4). Next decade, by the end of the 20th Century, new anthologies started to appear, therefore, the traditional canon was firstly “undermined by activists and revisionists who want to de-bunk the canon by redrawing the landscape in a more historically accurate fashion that makes very clear how different the reality is from the inherited misconception” (BEHRENDT qt. in BATES, 2013, p. 4).

In agreement with Behrendt's understanding of “inherited misconceptions” towards historical circumstances, Baraka, in “Revolutionary Theatre”⁵, emphasized that theatre should force changes by instructing people to fight for the “constant possibility of widening the consciousness. And they must be incited to strike back against any agency that attempts to prevent this widening” (1965, p. 4).

5. This essay was originally commissioned by the *New York Times* in 1964, however, it was rejected by the editors with the allegation that they were not able to understand its message. The culture paper, *The Village Voice*, also refuted it. In 1965, *The Liberator* released it; and in 1969, the negritude culture and politics paper, *Black Dialogue*, republished it.

Baraka's essay was truly revolutionary since he claims: "Americans will hate the Revolutionary Theatre because it will be out to destroy them and whatever they believe is real" (1965, p. 5). This sentence is a refusal of the imposition of the white governance/ways of living/role models/beliefs, which in turn runs in opposition to the singularities and demands of the black voices in the U.S. At the end of his manifest, Baraka states that "The play that will split the heavens for us will be called THE DESTRUCTION OF AMERICA" (1965, p. 5). In this play, he points out that the new heroes will arise, different from the official ones, electing names such as Crazy Horse (leader of Lakota resistance against the North-American government, 19th Century), Denmark Vessey (free Afro-American leader of a slave revolt in South Carolina, 19th Century), and Patrice Lumumba (Anti-colonial leader in the Belgian Congo and later prime minister of the Democratic Republic of the Congo, 1960s). These heroes, though, should not evoke "sad sentimental groping for a warmth in [their] despair" for "these will be new men, new heroes, and their enemies most of you who are reading this" (BARAKA, 1965, p. 6).

Holmes, in "Recontextualizing Black Resistance: A Review Essay", wittingly evaluates that "attempts to revise American history, centering on African Americans and their role in making it" have the tendency to "fall short of creating the kind of balance that is necessary to begin the process of creating a complete, unadulterated picture of the American past and

its relation to the present" (1994, p. 141). Following Baraka's claim, the Professor Emerita in the School of Education at Quinnipiac University criticizes the views that "chain African Americans to the victimization and voicelessness of a slave past", for "Black resistance, rather than passivity" must "present an Afrocentric view of American history and literature through a variety of strategies and perspectives [...]" (HOLMES, 1994, p. 141).

In this respect, other than the 'heroes' mentioned by Baraka, from the 1960s up to these days hundreds of Black North-American intellectuals, activists and artists may be quoted as iconic Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Bayard Rustin, Roy Wilkins, Mary Frances Berry, Patricia Hill Collins, James H. Cone, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Edmond J. Keller, Thomas Sowell, Randall Kennedy, Niara Sudarkasa, Spike Lee, Barry Jenkins, Boots Riley, among others. Concerning the writers, since the debates and new perspectives beyond the "white male canon" (BAYM, 1989, p. 477) have been emphasized, Black North-American canon finds its own ways: W. E. B. Dubois, Ralph Ellison, Alice Walker, Angela Davis, James Baldwin, Alex Haley, Octavia E. Butler, Samuel Delany, Langston Hughes, Zora Neale Hurston, Toni Morrison, Maya Angelou, Hilton Als, Robin Coste Lewis, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Margo Jefferson, Ishmael Reed, Charles M. Blow, Nathaniel Mackey, and John Keene are names that represent a rising number of engaged voices.

Joyce, in the article “The Black Canon: Reconstructing Black American Literary Criticism”, ponders that a brief glance at the emblematic works from the Black American literary canon (chosen by all sorts of screening) “reveals that the most predominant, recurring, persistent, and obvious theme in Black American literature is that of liberation from the oppressive economic, social, political, and psychological strictures imposed on the Black man by white America” (2000, p. 293). In other words, “Black American literary critics, like Black creative writers, saw a direct relationship between Black lives – Black realities – and Black literature” (JOYCE, 2000, p. 293). The author perceives that “in the relationship between the critic and the work he or she analyzes, the critics take his or her cues from the literary work itself as well as from the historical context of which that work is a part” (JOYCE, 2000, p. 293).

Precisely, White, in his notorious text “The Problem of Change in Literary History”, dwells on history and literature, considering that “literary history must be nothing more nor less than an account both of change in continuity and of continuity in change” (1975, p. 105). That applies in the case of Black canon establishment from the 1960s up to recent days, for African American authors arise as a “change in continuity” since they claim for their original place in the literary field – not as fleeting examples; yet writers who fight to maintain themselves working and spreading their words

as a “continuity in change”. That is the genuine movement of John Keene in *Counternarratives*.

KEENE’S HISTORICAL VOICES IN COUNTERNARRATIVES

If African-American literature and arts are built under the fortress of empowerment, then John Keene is an author who echoes Baraka’s (1965) claim. In fact, the title of *Counternarratives* itself reaches out this sense: while the noun “counter” stands for “the one who counts or calculates”; “an apparatus for keeping count on revolutions”; the verb is a synonym for “acting in opposition”; “lying or tending in the opposite directions”; “to engage in context, dispute against” (OXFORD, 1968, p. 405, v. 1).

Labored in a revolutionary mood, *Counternarratives* may be described as tales of resistance, stories of opposition. In an interview for issue number 22 of *Breakwater Review*, the online literary magazine run by the M.F.A. Program of the University of Massachusetts, the author sets forth the political voice of his writing:

[...] I think there is a consonance in terms of the politics in here and what is going on right now. And one thing that I think is fascinating is this: People will tell me, “Oh, the book has done so well!” And it has! But I did not get a single US newspaper review for this book. Not a single one save for the Wall Street Journal. And when the British paper appeared, not a single

one save the Times of London. And they wrote about the book three times. I don't know what that's about! Someone said to me that it's because the book critiques liberalism. It is not conservative, it's progressive! But when you write about the American Revolution in Massachusetts, and you put slavery at the center of that story, that is deeply discomfoting to some people. But I wasn't thinking about that! I was thinking, "Who is this character Zion?" What would it be like to be somebody who is a true embodiment of one kind of freedom, but also of a true unfreedom, at a moment when the discourse all around this person, his body, is about freedom. Right? But he cannot be free. There is no space for him to truly be free (KEENE qt. in BEVIS, 2018, p. 2).

Keene's critical undertone over the reviews of *Counternarratives* expresses the awareness of his narrative, plus his historical consciousness. Words, expressions, dilemmas and images are shaped by political concerns fluently dialoguing with ethnicity, history, identity, and fight for freedom. The author rescues Black North-American cries from the past, for he works with polemical themes such as slavery, racism, Catholic inquisition, African legacy, dominant kingdoms and dominated colonies, among others in the thirteen chronologically arranged stories that fulfill the book. Here are the titles: "Mannahatta", "On Brazil, or *Dénouement: The Londônias-Figueiras*", "An Outtake from the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution", "A Letter on the Trials of the Counterreformation in New Lisbon", "Gloss, or the

Strange History of Our Lady of Sorrows", "The Aeronauts", "Rivers", "Persons and Places", "Acrobatique", "Cold", "Blues", "Anthropophagy", "The Lions".

"Mannahatta", the first story, brings Latino/Hispanic Jan Rodrigues, a "mulatto from San Domingo, [...] the son of a Portuguese sailor father and a mother of African descent, the first non-Native American settle of what is now New York City" (MILLER, 2015, p. 3). The year was 1613. He was not only the first alien to be there as well as he was also "the first person of African descent"⁶. Indeed, "in *Mannahatta*, Keene's language is a machete slashing through the underbrush of the history of Western Civilization 'tearing the white out' by giving voice to the marginalized" (MILLER, 2015, p. 4).

Hereby we consider the concept of "marginal man" as the one who lives "in two societies and in two, not merely different but antagonistic cultures" (STONEQUIST, 1965, p. xiv). In fact, Jan Rodrigues represents the synthesis of two antagonistic cultures – he is not the dominant due to his ethnicity, even though he is the land discoverer, the founder. The inaugural narrative strengths Keene's discourse that the first man to enter Manhattan was a Black mestizo, tearing it apart the dominant discourse of the official, royal explorers.

From the "marginal" Jan, next narrative, "On Brazil, Or *Dénouement: The Londônias-Figueiras*", begins in recent

6. KEENE, 2014. Cf. "Mannahatta" (Introductory Note).

days, with a newspaper headline about a young heir, Sérgio Inocêncio Maluuf Figueiras, found beheaded in a São Paulo poor neighborhood. Thereupon, the plot switches back four hundred years to rebuild the past of his powerful family, who owned sugar cane plantations and subdued the Dutch and the Natives. However, although it seems justice is only for rich men, the end of this tale reinforces destiny's prowess: as soon as the Colonel leaves jail, he dies in a street fight. The protagonist does not end up as the master, but dies as a victim of violence.

In fact, each story of *Counternarratives* unfolds a historical path, so the narrative voice is often sustained by documents and/or newspaper articles that Keene discovered while researching such themes. "An Outtake from the Ideological Origins of the American Revolution" dialogues with distinct newspaper texts. It tells the drama of an enslaved man who ran away from prison in the times of Massachusetts Independence, during the 1770's. Zion, the main character, is sentenced to die, however he does not accept this decision. He resists, and the outcome of the narrative surprises when Zion's cell is found empty before he is hung. Here irony is under the spotlight – because the prisoner is missing, a new decision comes out: "given the severity of his crimes and the necessity of preserving the ruling order, another Negro" (KEENE, 2015, p. 104) will be hanged in his place. Foucault understands that "torture rests on a whole quantitative art of pain", and it is taken as part of a "ritual": "It is an element

in the liturgy of punishment and meets two demands. It must mark the victim... And, from the point of view of the law that imposes it, public torture and execution must be spectacular, it must be seen by all almost as its triumph" (1977, p. 34).

So, simply like that, another "Negro" is hanged in Zion's place in the Slavery Trade Square in Worcester. About this disclosure, "there's no mention of the witnesses' reaction, whether they notice the switch or care. The contemporary reader recognizes the indiscriminate ease with which 'justice' interchanges one black body for another" (PETT, 2016, p. 3). Frantz Fanon, in the text "Concerning Violence", from *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963), deliberates about a similar topic:

The colonial world is a Manichean world. [...]. The native is declared insensible to ethics; he represents not only the absence of values, but also the negation of values. He is, let us dare to admit, the enemy of values, and in this sense he is the absolute evil. He is the corrosive element, destroying all that comes near him; he is the deforming element [...]; he is the depository of maleficent powers [...] (FANON, 1963, p. 40).

Keene's ability in demonstrating the signs of "absence of values", "insensibility to ethics" and "maleficent powers" is clear in other texts of the book, as in "Rivers". John Keene brings back notorious Huckleberry Finn ("Huck"), Tom Sawyer, and Jim Watson, characters from *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn* (1884-85, by Mark Twain). The

narrative draws back the Antebellum South, from the end of 18th Century up until the start of the American Civil War, in 1861. In short, first person Huckleberry Finn (the narrator of two other Twain's novels) is a fourteen-year-old boy, who hangs around with his buddies. Tom Sawyer is a trickster who acts as one of the main players in the novel. Huck becomes intimate with Jim Watson, a slave who escapes from his owner, Miss Watson. From then on, the three of them begin an adventure down the waters of the Mississippi River. In "Rivers", however, Keene traces a breakdown: both Huck and Tom meet, by chance, Jim Watson. They are not kids anymore, but young folks in their mid-twenties. In *Counternarratives* this gathering does not come out as idealized as in Twain's story: Huck is very worried about which politically correct terms he should use with Jim while Tom is the typical Southern white supremacist, cursing the mistakes of abolitionism. At this point, we verify the underlying prejudice of the characters, mainly captured in Tom's typical Southern accent, demonstrating his efforts to threaten Jim:

Huckleberry nodded, but Sawyer was watching me closely. He said nothing for a while, until I moved to take my leave and walk away. As soon as I stirred he laughed, more a cackle than an expression of humor, leaned close to me and said loudly, as passersby looked on, "You'd better watch yourself, Jim, you hear me? Good thing we know you but you walking these streets like they belong to you, and they don't to no nigger, no matter what you might think these days, so you watch it,

cause the time'll come when even good people like me and Huck here had enough" (KEENE, 2015, p. 278).

This passage resembles a historical episode from the slave trader from South Carolina, Henry Laurens, and his son, John. The father proudly claps when his son attacks the right of freedom: "There may be some Inconvenience and even Danger in advancing Men suddenly from a State of Slavery [...] there may be danger I say in advancing such Men too suddenly to the Rights of Freeman" (LAURENS qt. in MASSEY, p. 507). Henry Laurens succeeded John Hancock as President of Congress, being the signatory to the Articles of Confederation, in 1777. Having such sceneries as backgrounds for the racist ideologies of the time, Keene's narrative is notably political because it brings plots, characters, and turnarounds – or "counternarratives" – that berate segregation, white supremacy, tyranny, oppression, greed, violence, among other contents. The author's engaged points of view are not only captured in the stories' lines, but right at the prologue, when he displays the thoughts from the African-American writer and social critic James Baldwin, from the Black North-American poet and scholar Fred Moten, and from the Black American-Caribbean writer, feminist and activist Audre Lorde. Here, a quote of Lorde's verse: "So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive" (KEENE, 2015, n. p.).

Another narrative that works with the aggressiveness of the dominant to control the dominated is "The Lions".

The last story “culminates in the dramatization of a loss of faith – spiritual and imaginative faith – and religion in the face of greed and power, absolute power” (KEENE qt. in MCELROY, 2016, p. 6). Hereby, it may be noticed a puzzling conversation between a dictator of a fictional African nation and his prisoner, known as “Prophet”. It takes place in a cell, where the poor thrall is waiting to be killed. The dialogues are plagued by a highly demagogical discourse: “[...] money buys power, power buys money, always the two shall meet and screw and someone ends up as the surplus in the equation. I can crap on the floor and order someone to lick it up” (KEENE, 2015, p. 313); “[...] I put the bullet through his temple and so many others” (KEENE, 2015, p. 316); “Bury me in the desert, Deliverer, cast me into the ocean near my home [...]. / You have no home. No home, no state, no brothers, no sisters, no people, no lineage, not a thing” (KEENE, 2015, p. 315).

Whatsoever, the greedy politician and the Prophet’s resignation may serve as a metaphor of Fanon’s words about the wicked relation between the colonizers/dominants and the natives/dominated: “Violence in the colonies [...] seeks to dehumanize” the subjugated men, in such a way “everything will be done to wipe out their traditions, to substitute our language for theirs and to destroy their culture without giving them ours” (FANON, 1963, p. 14). In addition, the thinker says that a “frequent mistake [...] is to try to find cultural expressions for and to give new values to native culture

within the framework of colonial domination” (FANON, 1963, p. 243). He even speaks out loud that a “gangrene” is “ever present at the heart of colonial domination” (FANON, 1963, p. 130).

Yet, slavery was the gaining mechanism of the European Christian kingdoms for over 400 years. That is why, when Keene reopens the past, there is a rejection by readers, editors, and critics. As the author exposed before: to “put slavery at the center of a story is deeply discomforting to some people” (KEENE qt. in BEVIS, 2018, p. 3). Because the author’s material is history – therefore facts – he is accurate in destroying the democratic myth that “people decide”. Slavery and prejudice in the past, mass-based interest and business groups in the present: that is how Keene draws his narrative: “It is up to the historian to make sense of the archive, but who and what institutions and structures give the historian authority to do so?”. He follows on with this argument: “[...] nowadays with the omnipresence of social media, then a carefully controlled, univocal fictional or historical narrative voice” is mediated, since “narratives themselves are constructed and mediated entities” (KEENE qt. in MCELROY, 2016, p. 6).

If narratives are somehow built by the issuer of the message, Keene makes it clear that history and the connection with the African diaspora are the predominant elements in *Counternarratives*, as he himself quotes: “The book is [...] deeply about blackness and Americanness” (KEENE qt. in

MCELROY, 2016, p. 4). In other words, the narrative voice acts as a witness of the facts, transcending the official version of the bygone events:

Counternarratives is fascinated with marginality. The short stories and novellas move between the Caribbean, South America, and North America, as well as an unnamed territory troubled by revolutions and corruption, revealing how black subjects are central to, but erased from, the history of modernity. [...] These stories not only reveal the interconnectedness of diasporic, transatlantic histories but also suggest that such historical moments continue to influence contemporary culture and politics. [...] It is full of direct and indirect reflections on the nature of historiography (WEEBER, 2016, pp. 3-4).

Although Keene's narrative is strongly concerned about historiographical points, the author produces in the realms of both collective and personal memories, which in turn characterize his aesthetic project, accomplished by a mosaic of social facts, inner experiences, and literary fiction:

Thirteen sections, ranging from novella to brief rumination, divided into a tripartite structure, together endeavour to re-align the Caucasian settler-centred narrative of the Americas and give minorities – particularly Afro-Americans – suitable acknowledgement for their influence on the contemporary nation. [...]. This work is an insatiable pursuit

of racial recognition and redemption which ultimately develops into a galactic investigation into human nature itself, all the while sustaining the control and measure indicative of an accomplished writer, and a perspicacious mind (HENDRIKS, 2017, p. 2).

This “investigation into human nature” meant by Hendriks is recurrent in *Counternarratives*. Take for instance the story “Cold”, which pictures the last times of African-American composer Bob Cole, who killed himself in 1911 at a hotel. Keene enters into the desperate soul of the musician, describing him all sweated, lost in lavender linen suit, haunted by “devil’s arias”. Lyrics from his famous “coon songs”⁷ appear along the narrative, as a sad blue song: “undreamt, unsummoned, sonic suns blasting behind your eyes, these terrible samplings of the old and the unfamiliar” (KEENE, 2015, p. 243). Attention to the negative prefixes “un” that start each word, a signal of the lack of faith Cole had during his last minutes. His death was mainly caused by the humiliations he suffered by his performances as a vaudevillian and coon songs singer for white audiences, cheerfully clapping for the racist content.

Counternarratives' material is moved by historical criticism. Irony takes place in the entire book once the writer does not only create stories, but acts as a refined researcher of the facts. Keene points out: “No style is solely the product of a given author, but a conversation with and response to a vast network of

7. According to Blesh and Harris, in *They All Played Ragtime* (1950, p. 36-37), “Coon songs” were a genre of music very popular in the U.S. and U.K. from around 1880 up to the 1920's. Lots of the songs had racist lyrics and portrayed blacks as inferior in the American social order. The songs were written either by blacks and whites. Here are four of the most famous black composers of Coon songs: Ernest Hogan (who wrote “All Coons Look Alike to Me”); Sam Lucas (who wrote the most racist early coon songs by modern standards); Sidney L. Perrin (who wrote “Black Annie”, “Dat’s De Way to Spell Chicken”, “Gib Me Ma 15 Cents”); and Bob Cole (who wrote dozens of songs, including “Under the Bamboo Tree”, “I Wonder What the Coon’s Game Is?” and “No Coons Allowed”). Cole introduced the first New York musical ever created and owned by black showmen, *A Trip to Coontown*, in 1898.

styles that preceded, parallel and follow that of the author. [...] no author ever truly writes alone” (KEENE, 2018, p. 2). Indeed, if “no author ever truly writes alone”, both historic and fictional voices from the past are co-writers. In “A Letter on the Trials of the Counterreformation in New Lisbon”, story starts with the voice of Dom Joaquim D’Azevedo, sent from Portugal in 1629 to Brazil in charge of the House of the Discalced Brothers of Holy Ghost in Alagoas. His report, written in the style of a religious clerk, describes a monastery filled with mysterious noises and weird situations. This epistolary novella brings up the reverse of hierarchic values, a clear writing procedure to invert thoughts established as “real”, as “official”. At the end of the story, the reader gets to know the narrative was handled by a slave known as João Baptista. However, he no longer wants to have his Christian name. Now he desires to possess his African name, Burunbara. The character is able to foretell the future: “I can speak to the living, as now, and to the dead. I can feel the weather before it turns and the night before it falls. Every creature that walks this earth converses with me” (KEENE, 2015, p. 161).

In “Gloss, or the Strange History of Our Lady of Sorrow”⁸, the oracular voice is also found in the protagonist Carmel, the slave of a family killed during the Haitian revolution. She accompanies to a convent in Kentucky the only surviving daughter of the family. There, Carmel’s powers of divination lead her to speak with the dead. She enters a world that goes beyond sensorial experience. This seems to be an engaging

way out to resurrect the silenced voices of the African speakers. In fact, African diviners are, literally, complex individuals often constituted by a number of elements. “A divination system is a standardized process deriving from a learned discipline based on an extensive body of knowledge. This knowledge may or may not be literally expressed during the interpretation of the oracular message” (PEEK, 1991, p. 2). The majority of African societies maintain relations with their spirit doubles (as well as other entities). Throughout the continent, religious and political leaders develop the experience of having other natural forces/entities/spirits who speak for them (PEEK, 1991, p. 2).

Gates Jr., in “Criticism in De Jungle”, the introduction of *Black Literature and Literary Theory*, considers that “black people have always been masters of the figurative: saying one thing to mean something quite other has been basic to black survival in oppressive Western cultures” (1984, p. 14). **Keene himself asserted that** “the contestation between faith and organized religion is a recurrent element throughout” *Counternarratives* (KEENE qt. in MCELROY, 2016, p. 78). For the author, it all “goes beyond magic, or Christianity versus African and indigenous spirit traditions, to the very ground of belief’s power – grounded in narrative – to structure and shape reality” (KEENE qt. in MCELROY, 2016, p. 8).

In *Counternarratives*, Keene plentifully molds reality, though sometimes with poetical touches, as in “Acrobatique”.

8. “Gloss, or the Strange History of Our Lady of Sorrows” is literally a gloss, an extended footnote or commentary on what begins as a work of history of Catholicism in early America” (GREEN, 2015, p. 67).

The protagonist/narrator, Miss La La, gives her impressions about the encounter with famous painter Edgar Degas, right when he was capturing her skillful movements in the air. Actually, the artwork “Miss La La at the Cirque Fernando” is real, and it was painted by the artist in 1879 – Degas’ only circus painting. It shows the Black acrobat suspended from the rafters of the circus dome by a rope clenched between her teeth at the Cirque Fernando in Paris (THE NATIONAL GALLERY, 2020).

In an interview for New York Public Library, Keene explains how he came up with the idea of writing a tale about Ms. La La, also known as Olga Braun (Kaira), after seen the image at the Pierpont Morgan Library, in New York:

[...] I immediately saw a Black woman – as well her performances and flyers for the circus’ shows, and reproductions of Degas’ preparatory sketches, pastels and various attempts in oil to capture her remarkable artistry, covered the upper floor walls of the library’s exhibition space. I was transfixed with her story and Degas’ struggle to paint her, in particular because despite the fact that he had African-American relatives in Louisiana and had even painted a scene set in the New Orleans cotton market, she was the only Black person he ever put on canvas. As I left the Morgan Library I was under her spell, and the outline and even words from the story started to pour into my head (KEENE qt. in WRIGHT, 2016, p. 3).

In Keene’s tale, Miss La La narrates while she performs high above the ground. The literary innovation in this text is that a single, lengthy sentence makes it all, as if it symbolized the artist’s movement in the air:

[...] I am hovering above, the mouthpiece in my teeth and no harness or net to rescue me, [...] but I have never, ever let it go, never dropped it, never come close to allowing it to slip, tough the metal cuts my embouchure and my jaws and head and neck ache for hours after, and someone is crying out, Bravissima, Madame La La, une miracle, magnifique, followed by the barely audible But how does she do it? and another, My God, it is impossible, but she is an angel – or do I hear an animal? – la mulâtresse-canon, la Venus noire, elle là la nôtre, a marvel of nature, cheers, applause and catcalls fire [...] (KEENE, 2015, pp. 177-78).

Several are the historical personalities named in *Counternarratives*. In “Persons and Places”, student Du Bois and Professor Santayana cross each other on a Cambridge street. They do not maintain a dialogue; however, each is aware of the other. Their connection stands over and above all conventions, sentences, or discourses and the strategy Keene found to make it possible was to create two diary entries dated from the same day, in 1890. Brazilian writer and musician Mário de Andrade is also in the book – “Anthropophagy” relates a day in the life of the famous Modernist: “having just finished breakfast downstairs once

the cup of cafezinho and the bowl of half-eaten papaya, the glass of freshly squeezed orange juice have been cleared, the letters to Anita and Murilo and Henrique and Manuel written, the reviews for his column, and he begins the strophe [...]” (KEENE, 2015, p. 309).

Counternarratives is a book filled with historical elements, including facts, letters, diaries, annotations, interviews, and names of people who have a connection either with decolonial thoughts, fights for freedom, among all innovative insights towards social and artistic life. All the stories demand the reader to cross over the barriers of linear vision and translate the text in a stream-of-consciousness mood – always linked with history, tough. John Keene extends history in his literature as an engaged writer of his time, or as a “soldier”, accomplishing Fanon’s reflection: “It simply is that in the past we made history and now it is being made of us. The ratio of forces has been inverted; decolonization has begun; all that our hired soldiers can do is to delay its completion” (1963, p. 27).

Way back in time, texts produced by black authors from 18th and 19th Centuries were truly actions of resistance. Narratives written by the enslaved were tools to denounce the suffering and horrors of the epoch. Centuries later, John Keene reframes reality by using the same power of the words of his predecessors. That is his literary way to redeem the

prejudiced, violent, and dreadful past in America, to fight racism, to rewrite history.

In *Counternarratives* the author repels the ideal of the “American way of life” and in place grasps injustice and barbarism against African and African-American people, as well as the impact of racism and exploitation at particular periods in society. When recalling centuries of abuses, violence, lack of freedom and resistance, Keene’s work simultaneously bothers part of readers’ consciousness while call another part to approach not only towards the social blackspots, but also to the history itself.

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