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BLACK LITERARY RESISTANCE: ALICE WALKER AND ZORA HURSTON FIGHTING BLACK POSTCOLONIAL AND POST-INDEPENDENCE NIGHTMARES

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Abstract

The twentieth-century African American women writers have not remained at the margins of the struggle for the true liberation of black people in the postcolonial and post-independence eras. They have used their novels as weapons to liberate their people from the postcolonial and post-independence nightmares prevailing within black communities. That is true of Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker. They have used their respective novels—*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992)—to help liberate black people from their different alienations following colonization and independence. However, these three novels have been perceived by some black critics as literary works reinforcing Blacks' alienation and oppression. Contrary to this critical opinion, this article aims to reveal, through the postcolonial theory, that the two writers' novels are truly works of liberation for black people from their political, cultural and social nightmares after colonization and independence. So, a deep inductive analysis of the three novels' characters reveals that the novelists struggle against black leaders' abuse of authority, Blacks' deculturalization and fratricidal hatred in postcolonial and post-independence societies.

Keywords: Walker, Hurston, black, postcolonial, post-independence

Résumé

Les écrivaines afro-américaines du vingtième siècle ne sont pas restées en marge de la lutte pour la véritable libération du peuple noir à l'époque postcoloniale et post-indépendance. Elles ont utilisé leurs romans comme des armes pour libérer leur peuple des cauchemars postcoloniaux et post-indépendance qui prévalent au sein des communautés noires. Cela est vrai pour Zora Neale Hurston et Alice Walker. Elles ont utilisé leurs romans respectifs—*Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970), et *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992) —pour aider à libérer les Noirs de leurs différentes aliénations après la colonisation et l'indépendance. Cependant, ces trois romans ont été perçus par certains critiques noirs comme des œuvres littéraires renforçant l'aliénation et l'oppression des Noirs. Contrairement à cette opinion critique, cet article vise à révéler, à travers la théorie postcoloniale, que les romans des deux écrivaines sont de véritables œuvres de libération pour les Noirs, face à leurs cauchemars politiques, culturels et sociaux après la colonisation et l'indépendance. Ainsi, une analyse inductive approfondie des personnages des trois romans révèle que les romancières luttent contre l'abus de pouvoir des dirigeants noirs, la déculturation des Noirs et la haine fratricide au sein des sociétés postcoloniales et post-indépendance.

Mots-clés: Walker, Hurston, noir, postcolonial, post-indépendance

INTRODUCTION

The black struggle for liberation through literature has not only been restricted to the colonial and pre-independence eras. It extended into the postcolonial and post-independence periods of the 20th century with regards to the persistent violence, oppression and negative colonial impacts faced by black people in their own communities. Being probably aware that their writings could contribute, to some extent, to fighting these twentieth-century nightmares and subsequently bring genuine peace within African American communities, Zora Neale Hurston and Alice Walker wrote and published, respectively, *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* (1970) and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* (1992). In these novels, African (American) characters sometimes imitate the white colonizer's oppressive attitudes and valorize his culture to the detriment of their own. This reflects Hurston and Walker's exposure of their people's violence and cultural loss, which highlights their struggle for peace and cultural reappropriation. However, these two African American female writers and their novels have faced hostility from black (male) critics, who have accused and condemned them for opposing the aims of the black struggle, badly depicting black people, and belittling their culture.

Talking about the Harlem literati's accusations against Hurston, Bloom (in *Bloom* 2009: 16) writes: "The harsh charges leveled against writers like Hurston included accusations of pandering to white readers who didn't want to be disturbed by angry portrayals of overt racism or Negroes with black pride". Yet, institutional racism—such as that institutionalized by Jim Crow Laws enforcing the separation of cemeteries for white and black people in the 20th century America—is criticized in the novel (Hurston 2020: 195-196). Similarly, black pride is valued in the work through the representation of the black female character, Daisy Blunt (Hurston 2020: 77).

Nevertheless, Hurston and her novel *Their Eyes Were Watching God* have been heavily criticized in the black community to the point of making Alice Walker panic. Confirming this in her *Womanist Prose*, Walker (2005: 86) substantiates that misunderstanding in the following words: "After reading the misleading, deliberately belittling, inaccurate, and generally irresponsible attacks on her work and her life by almost everyone, I became for a time paralyzed with confusion and fear". Regarding this negative critical reception of Hurston and her work, which actually conveys profound moral teachings and values, it can be argued that a complex problem of the contemporary world is the denigration of quality works and the depreciation of

competent individuals. Walker and her two didactic novels – *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* and *Possessing the Secret of Joy* – suffer the same fate.

Indeed, Walker's novels have been criticized for badly representing black people. Talking about the negative representations of black characters in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland*, Hami (2015: 60) contends that "Brownfield, like Grange, cannot care about his wife and his children-he even sinks to the depth of killing his wife, Mem. [...]. The sense of co-operation and support within the black community is therefore missing [...]". Plainly, the author is pointing an accusing finger at the negative portrayals of black men and the black community in the novel. Yet, a deep analysis of Walker's black characterization, as the study will further reveal, shows that her depiction of black characters is for a constructive purpose. Not seeing Walker's projection of black people on this angle, Nako (2004: 18-19) condemns Walker's representation of Tashi and her African culture in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*: "[...] Walker misreads Tashi's [African] culture because it is invisible to her, she sees it through her own. [...]. She needs to concretise Tashi's culture only to dismantle it, thus elevating her own culture above that of Tashi and people like her". Plainly, the author charges Walker with misjudging African culture and demeaning it.

From the above criticisms, Walker's and Hurston's selected novels greatly contribute to Blacks' alienation rather than their liberation or emancipation. Countering this critical view, my aim in this paper is to clearly demonstrate the contribution of Hurston's and Walker's novels to black freedom and true independence. The objective of this article is, therefore, to show the two novelists' effort to fight black political, cultural and social nightmares following colonization and independence through their novels. To achieve this objective, postcolonial theory, which scrutinizes the impacts of colonization on the colonized and the relations between the colonizer and the colonized, is used as a critical lens in this paper. Thus, the paper shows the novelists' struggle against black leaders' abuse of power in the post-independence era, on the one hand, and their struggle against the deculturalization of black people and fratricidal hatred after colonization, on the other hand.

I. THE STRUGGLE AGAINST BLACK LEADERS' ABUSE OF POWER AFTER INDEPENDENCE

During the colonial period, the white colonizer – who reigned supreme in Blacks' lives and countries – was the main oppressor of Blacks. Walker confirms this in *Possessing the Secret of Joy* through the African female character Tashi's following speech to Olivia: "We had been

stripped of everything [by the white colonizer] but our black skins” (Walker 1992: 22-23). Tashi adds, “We who had once owned our village and hectares and hectares of land now owned nothing. We were reduced to the position of beggars [by the white colonizer] – except that there was no one near enough to beg from, in the desert we were in” (Walker 1992: 21). Obviously, the white colonizer deprived Africans – the colonized – of their own villages and land without which life was unbearable. However, after seizing independence from white colonizers, who subsequently left, Africans have been expected to live peacefully and with dignity on their own land, because they were governing themselves. According to Ashcroft *et al.* (2007: 116), “In post-colonial usage [independence] usually refers to the achievement by a colony of full self-government”. Yet, despite having achieved self-governance, the suffering of Africans is far from being a thing of the past.

In fact, some African men who have now become leaders of their own countries have not hesitated to abuse their power to oppress their fellow citizens. Accordingly, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the government of an African village – Olinka – abuses its authority to illegally imprison the Olinkans who complain to it, to trust the story: “Half the people in prison in Olinka were there for expressing their discontent with the present government” (Walker 1992: 103). Even worse, the Olinka government did not merely imprison people who voiced dissatisfaction to it. It either killed credible journalists or compelled them to flee Olinka: “All the credible journalists have by now been [...] murdered, or chased into exile” (Walker 1992: 186). Clearly, to preserve its power, the Olinka government jails, torments and murders people without being subjected to judicial accountability. Based on this bitter observation on some African governments, Bazié (2022: 20) opines: “Our country needs a strong government. Not one that imprisons, tortures, and ‘gets its children [killed], and then nothing happens’”ⁱ. Thereby, borrowing words from Grange Copeland in *The Third Life*, it can be asserted that “some [black governments], in order to [monopolize political power], can’t be innocent” (Walker 2004: 206). The Olinka government is no different.

Presumably, the Olinka government imprisons its political opponents (Walker 1992: 103) in order to muzzle them or dissuade them from contesting its political power. So, it exactly behaves as the white colonizer did in colonial Africa, to trust Bernault’s (in Bernault 2003: 2) following assertion: “[...] colonial regimes built prisons on a massive scale for deterring political opposition [...]”. She goes further to write that “colonial conquest used the prison as an early instrument for the subjugation of Africans” (in Bernault 2003: 3). So, through the Olinka administration’s imitation of the same colonial violence – incarceration – to subjugate political opponents after Olinka independence won at the cost of the life of the former Olinka

leader (Walker 1992: 107-108), the novelist lets us clearly see something tragic. Africans fought fiercely against colonial oppression and snatched their independence from white colonizers, only to be oppressed in the same way again by some of their own political leaders. Such a sad reality gives credence to Veracini's (2023: 6) following assertion: "[...] colonialism leaves behind a type of subjection that is very hard to undo". It can, therefore, be inferred from this passage that Blacks' independence is not real. Walker approves it, in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, through her African female character Mbatia's following speech to Tashi: "[...] independence is killing us as surely as colonialism did. [...] that is because it isn't really independence" (Walker 1992: 145). Arguably, true independence goes with true freedom. So, Blacks are not truly independent because they are still alienated in their own communities by their own black leaders in power. Hurston's black characterization in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* endorses this viewpoint.

Indeed, the inhabitants of Eatonville, which is an all-black town in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, claim to be dominated by their black mayor, Joe Starks. Jeff Bruce complains about Joe in these terms: "He's uh whirlwind among breezes" (Hurston 2020: 56). From this metaphorical sentence, Jeff Bruce implicitly compares Joe to a whirlwind and the people of Eatonville he governs to breezes. Because a whirlwind is powerful and destructive even to the most innocent or inoffensive natural things like breezes, Jeff Bruce implicitly compares Joe to this force of nature in order to criticize how Joe misuses his mayoral power to oppress his inoffensive people likened to breezes. Anyway, Joe is a dictatorial black leader who only listens to his own voice and never to his people's. As his wife, Janie, blames him for such behavior: "You wouldn't listen. [...]. Too busy listening tuh yo' own big voice" (Hurston 2020: 98). Listening only to one's own voice means constantly ignoring the feelings and wishes of others while imposing one's own vision or will upon them, whether it is good or bad. Joe Starks acts in this exact way in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. As a result, his people who feels alienated is unhappy with him though he works hard for the economic and social development of Eatonville, which "wouldn't be nothin' if it wasn't for him" (Hurston 2020: 56). Here, the novelist's message to contemporary black leaders is clear: the development of black societies, as well as listening to the people, should simultaneously be the highest priorities in their governance if they truly want peace within black societies. Eigner (2008: 25) insists on the necessity of listening to others in the following excerpt:

"The tendency to listen to, or even seek out, the opinions of others is not necessarily pathological. It is pathological when one hears superficially what the other says and when the bond lacks consistency. Otherwise, it reflects our need for connection and

stems from the realization that we are not able to know everything. It brings back to the forefront the fact that the isolated individual does not exist and that, even if it hurts our pride, we must admit the need for sharing, for information, and to find alternatives to our own thoughts, however right they may seem to us”ⁱⁱⁱ.

Visibly, listening to others is important, and even necessary in human life. It is especially so in governing a country, a town, or a community. That explains why modern society needs true leaders who listen to their people; that is, allowing the people to choose the way they want to be governed. Indeed, this contemporary society does not need leaders who drive the populace like a manipulated herd of cattle. In this same vein, Fanon (1963: 184) asserts:

“‘Leader’: the word comes from the English verb ‘to lead,’ but a frequent French translation is ‘to drive.’ The driver, the shepherd of the people, no longer exists today. The people are no longer a herd; they do not need to be driven. If the leader drives me on, I want him to realize that at the same time I show him the way [...]”.

This excerpt seemingly offers advice on good governance; however, this notion is ignored by Joe Starks, who disregards the rule of law. In fact, he misuses his mayoral power to illegally punish the citizens. After catching Henry Pitts stealing his ribbon cane and recovering the stolen goods, Joe chases him out of the town. The story zooms in: “Like one day after [Joe Starks] caught Henry Pitts with a wagon load of his ribbon cane and took the cane away from Pitts and made him leave town” (Hurston 2020: 55). It can be agreed with Joe Starks that Pitts’s theft is punishable. However, in real circumstances of the modern justice, Pitts’s sentence, just like that of the “murderers, pimps, car thieves, drunkards and innocents [in *The Third Life*,] bore no set relation to [his crime]” (Walker 2004: 214).

Actually, Joe overstepped the law of Eatonville by chasing Pitts out of the town when he steals his ribbon cane. Talking about the punishment reserved to a thief, like Pitts, according to the criminal law and procedure of the state of Florida to which the town of Eatonville is part, Chatilovicz *et al.* (1974: 905) write: “The penalty for robbery is imprisonment ‘for life or for any lesser term of years, at the discretion of the court’”. It does not take a genius to understand that Pitts’s theft warrants a few years in prison, but not a life sentence or banishment from the city. Thereby, it could be concluded that by banishing Pitts from Eatonville for having stolen his ribbon cane, Joe misuses the authority conferred upon him as mayor to punish Pitts according to his own moods and not the law. Such an attitude from the black leader, Joe, towards one of his citizens is truly an injustice, a sin, and a shame, just as the male character, Sim Jones, claims in the following lines: “‘It’s uh sin and uh shame runnin’ dat po’ man way from here lak dat’” (Hurston 2020: 55). So, through Joe Starks’s portrayal, in *Their Eyes Were*

Watching God, Hurston forewarns black leaders worldwide that when they abuse their power and govern by mood rather than law, their decisions result in sin and injustice against the very people they serve.

Similarly, Hurston makes (black) leaders understand through Janie's speech to Joe – who subsequently uses his power to free the mule from Matt Bonner's oppression – that power is not meant to oppress, but to liberate the oppressed. As Janie tells Joe, "You have tuh have power tuh free things and dat makes you lak uh king uh something" (Hurston 2020: 66). This statement is sanctimonious for black leaders worldwide. Hurston's moralization of the latter is still perceptible in the rest of Janie's speech to Joe: "Freein' dat [oppressed] mule makes uh mighty [...] man outa you" (Hurston 2020: 66). By this declaration to the leader of a black community, the novelist clarifies that it is a black leader's liberation of the oppressed – not his oppression of the vulnerable – that makes him a powerful man. Consequently, being a powerful leader requires a certain level of consciousness and intellectual maturity to avoid abusing power merely to prove one's might. Is it not what leads the father of the Burkinabe revolution, Sankara (1988: 26) to assert that "power must be conquered above all by a conscious people"? In any case, a conscious people is one that never completely abandons its own culture in favor of that of another. It is also one that does not harbor hatred in its heart. Building on this fact, Walker and Hurston – who aim to sensitize their people – struggle against Black cultural loss and hatred towards one another after colonization.

II. THE STRUGGLE AGAINST BLACKS' DECULTURALIZATION AND (FRATRICIDAL) HATRED AFTER COLONIZATION

One of the serious consequences of colonization for people of African descent is the loss of their African cultural identity in favor of that of the white colonizer. As a result, although they are black, African descendants behave like the white colonizer. Joe Starks's portrait in the following lines confirms this: "He was a seal-brown color but he acted like Mr Washburn or somebody like that [...]" (Hurston 2020: 32). It is worth noting that Mr Washburn is a white man in *Their Eyes Were Watching God*. So, why does Joe act like a white man and not like a black man, despite being black himself? This might be due to the fact that behaving as a black man, for Joe, is being savage or uncivilized; hence the necessity, for him, to behave like the white man to look like a civilized man. Anyway, his imitation or copying of the white man's behavior alludes to mimicry, which is one of the concepts of postcolonial theory. Ashcroft *et al.* (2007: 125) define with conceptual pertinence this notion:

“[...] mimicry is the process by which the colonized subject is reproduced as ‘almost the same, but not quite’ [...]. The copying of the colonizing culture, behaviour, manners and values by the colonized contains both mockery and a certain ‘menace’, ‘so that mimicry is at once resemblance and menace’ [...]”.

Worse, some formerly colonized Africans do not merely copy the white colonizer’s culture, but promote the colonizer’s cultural values to the detriment of their own. That is the case of the African American female character, Olivia, and her missionary family who—though they have an African origin and therefore black—have returned from America to convert the Olinkans, who are also Africans, to the white man’s religion. Deploring such an attitude, Tashi reprimands Olivia and her family in these terms: “You don’t even know what you’ve lost! And the nerve of you, to bring us a God someone else chose for you!” (Walker 1992: 22). This statement from an African traditional character undoubtedly attests to Walker’s struggle against the loss of culture among Africans and their promotion of foreign religions to the detriment of African traditional religion. Deeply disappointed by this cultural alienation Olivia and her people are facing, Tashi addresses her as follows: “You are black, but you are not like us. We look at you and your people with pity [...]” (Walker 1992: 22).

Viewed differently from Tashi and the Olinkan people, Olivia and her missionary family – despite being warmly welcomed by the Olinkans (Walker 1992: 13) – are still considered foreigners. As Tashi bluntly reminds Olivia, “You are a foreigner” (Walker 1992: 21). Likewise, M’Lissa informs Adam while ignoring him, “You are a foreigner” (Walker 1992: 61). From the label “foreigner” which the African characters – Tashi and M’Lissa – give to the African American characters—Olivia and Adam—Walker intimates that “[the American Negro] is an American, and in Africa, he becomes an American in exile” (McLean 2022: 130). This might be one of the reasons why Tashi tells Olivia, “We look at you and your people with pity” (Walker 1992: 22). Anyway, one might still ask why Olivia and her people, as African Americans, inspire pity from Tashi and her African people. The answer to this question might be that, as African Americans, Olivia and her people have two identities: the American identity and the African one. So, culturally, they embody neither solely American culture nor exclusively African one. Consequently, for Tashi, they are worth pitying because, though they are black, they are not at home. This situation is known as unhomeliness according to postcolonial theory. Wahyuni *et al.* (2022: 632) define this concept with great clarity: “Unhomeliness is a sense of a person caught in two cultures”. That explains why Bhabha (1994: 9) sustains that “to be unhomed is not to be homeless, nor can the ‘unhomely’ be easily accommodated in that familiar division of social life into private and public spheres”. Unhomeliness is not the only sad reality experienced by former colonized black people. There

is also fratricidal hatred within the black community that Walker denounces in *Possessing the Secret of Joy*.

According to the reality of *Possessing the Secret of Joy*, the Olinka minority groups detested the ruling Olinkan population. M'Lissa testifies in this respect: “[the refugee camp was] filled with dying Olinkans who fled the fighting between the Mbele rebels and the white government’s troops, most of whom were members of the black minority tribes that hated the dominant Olinkans” (Walker 1992: 60). Actually, the Olinkans withdrew to a refugee camp because they were deprived of their own traditional land by the white man. Talking about black people who are deprived of their traditional land, Smis *et al.* (2013: 535) states that “[...] the indigenous peoples who leave from the lands are often forgotten. They are seldom consulted, do not have a say in the final decision and do not participate in the profits that the deals generate”. Thereby, the eviction or expropriation from one’s traditional land by the white colonizer was one of the biggest shames in Africa. Although Walker was brief regarding such a shame experienced by the Olinkans, it is reasonable to assume that they could have avoided this fate if the Olinka minority tribes and the dominant Olinkans had put their hatred aside and united against the white colonizer. So, one can deduce that the Olinkans have been shamed by the white colonizer because of their fratricidal hatred. With regard to this, Grange Copeland is truthful in *The Third Life of Grange Copeland* when he tells his granddaughter Ruth, “Hate left a man shamed [...]” (Walker 2004: 207).

Walker goes to extremes to intimate that the consequences of black people’s fratricidal hatred go beyond shame to confirm white people’s negative views of them. Mem and Brownfield’s following discussion says more about this:

“‘You reckon Captain Davis really would give a good goddam if I shot you, Brownfield?’ [...]. ‘What you reckon he’d say? Now Mem, I bet he would say, whoever heard of anybody going around shooting somebody else’s *balls* off? Why, you *colored* people—you never heard tell of any *white* people going around shooting each other’s balls off. Shame! Shame! He’d be thinking, I *always said niggers is crazy!* And this here Mem Copeland proves me right, going around shooting her husband’s balls off, for Lawd’s sake. [...]’” (Walker 2004: 125-126; italics in original)

Presumably, one only shoots at the person one hates to death. So, does the excerpt – “you colored people – you never heard tell of any white people going around shooting each other’s balls off. Shame! Shame! He’d be thinking, I always said niggers is crazy!” – imply that white people love one another whereas black people hate each other to death? To this question, Hurston responds affirmatively through her portrayals of African American characters.

In fact, despite being a light-skinned African American woman, Mrs Turner hated dark-skinned African Americans to death. This hatred overflowed so much from her heart that she does not want to be part of the black race. She tells Janie: ““Ah can’t stand black niggers. Ah don’t blame de white folks from hatin’ ’em ’cause Ah can’t stand ’em mahself. ’Nother thing, Ah hates tuh see folks lak me and you mixed up wid ’em. Us oughta class off”” (Hurston 2020: 160). This hatred from a light-skinned African American, Mrs Turner, towards dark-skinned African Americans raises the issue of colorism within the African American community. Shocked by colorism within black communities, Norwood (2015: 587) writes: “Even there, in a world of Black and shades of brown, lighter was better. I am embarrassed to admit that this shocked me. I did not understand the continued hold and power that the legacy of colonization had on African communities, no longer under colonial rule”. Norwood is not the only African American woman shocked by colorism in African communities; Hurston is as well. This is evident in Janie’s following reply to Mrs Turner’s hateful speech towards black Americans: ““Us can’t do it. [...]. How come you so against black?”” (Hurston 2020: 160). Through Janie’s reply to Mrs Turner, Hurston shows her discontent with fratricidal hatred in the black community while reminding the likes of Mrs Turner of black people’s collective responsibility to love and unite with one another.

CONCLUSION

The study of the three novels by Walker and Hurston shows that the main oppressors of black people after colonization and independence are no longer white colonizers, but rather their own black leaders in power. Therefore, Walker lets readers know that although black people are proclaimed independent, they are not truly free. Black leaders misuse their power to subject their citizens to the same colonial violence. Thus, the two novelists teach black leaders that the peace of their citizens and societies rests on the ethical use of power. Hurston supplements Walker by instructing leaders that the ultimate aim of power is to free the oppressed. It is only by achieving this aim that they become powerful men. Nevertheless, the two writers deplore black people’s loss of their cultural identity in favor of that of the white colonizer. Similarly, they condemn Blacks’ fratricidal hatred, which, for them, leads to shame and the validation of white people’s bad views of them. Consequently, Hurston reminds Blacks of the necessity to love and seek unity. Ultimately, although critics argue that the authors’ novels contribute to alienating black people, this study uses postcolonial theory to prove

otherwise. It clearly shows that their works fight against this alienation and help liberate black individuals from postcolonial and post-independence oppression.

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ⁱ The translation is mine. The original version is: «Notre pays a besoin d’un pouvoir fort. Pas de celui qui emprisonne, torture et « fait [tuer] ses enfants et puis il n’y a rien»» (Bazié 2022: 20).

ⁱⁱ The translation is mine. The original version is as follows: «L’orientation à écouter, voire à guetter les avis des autres, n’est pas forcément pathologique. Elle est pathologique lorsque l’on entend superficiellement ce que l’autre dit et que le lien n’a pas de consistance. Si non, elle témoigne de notre besoin de relation et part du constat que nous ne sommes pas en mesure de tout savoir. Elle remet au premier plan le fait que l’être seul n’existe pas et que, même si cela heurte notre fierté, nous devons admettre le besoin de partage, d’information, de trouver des alternatives à nos propres réflexions, aussi justes nous paraissent-elles» (Eiguer 2008: 25).