

ISSUES OF INVISIBILITY AND OTHERNESS IN AMERICAN LITERATURE: PEOPLE OUTSIDE THE HEGEMONIC PARADIGM OF WHITENESS

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Abstract. This article aims at looking at instances of invisibility in African American related to the focus of this theme. It presents thoughts and feelings about literature and its possible net of relations with other concepts, such as identity and invisibility of a group of undergraduate students of English as a Foreign Language taking the discipline Literature of English Expression. These relations are externalized in four of their concept maps as representations of the ways they have perceived invisibility in the context of American Literature.

1 Introductory remarks

The theme *invisibility* is too broad to be explored in a four pages. There are multiple possibilities of vantage points to look into it with different types of conceptual goggles: gender; skin color; ethnicity; cultures and traditions; social status; context (time/space). Pratt (2008)¹ stresses the role hegemony of being white, male, and especially European/American (United States) plays in the dichotomy explorer/exploited and the practices of these explorers upon those considered as *the others*—those that have been excluded from the circle of the white chosen few—whom white supremacy members trust are destitute of power.

We emphasize here the kind of invisibility ascribed and/or felt, or endured, by literary characters. We look at a minority group—labeled as minority by the dominant groups—in which descendants of African people have been inserted. Invisibility, though it has many different faces, appears here through instances of literary texts produced in English by African Americans.

2 Aims of this paper

The aim of this summarized paper is to set our sights on classroom situations that promoted the students' ways of understanding and of constructing knowledge on literature without focusing on a theoretical framework for the study of invisibility and literature. Our target was to get students willing to externalize, through representations in concept maps, perceived relationships between/among literature, identity, cultures, traditions, discrimination, and invisibility. These students, who worked in groups in cooperative interactions, were enrolled in the discipline Literature of English Expression, in 2006, at the University of the Valley of the Sinos River (UNISINOS), Brazil. They were already familiar with concept mapping from other disciplines they had attended with the author of this paper. There were some who quite mastered the instrument so that, when working in heterogeneous groups, they provided scaffolding for those who still needed some help in mastering it.

3 Telling questions and brainstorming for answers

The telling questions underlying this study were:

- a) ¿What concepts can we relate to Literature?
- b) ¿How does invisibility relate to Literature?

¹ Pratt, Marie Louise. *Imperial eyes: travel writing and transculturation*. NY.: Routledge, 2008.

There were many answers to these questions at the initial stages of these classes, mostly when students were in groups brainstorming about possible replies to the focal questions. We selected an explanation that emerged from discussions and from the cooperative construction of a concept map, in the last weeks of the term², “*Now we feel readier to understand the linkages and laces of Literature concerning its comprehensiveness and its relevance, regarding life issues of literary characters, such as invisibility, which can be an umbrella concept that shelters events/matters and objects in a literary text—and even our daily experience—, most of the time passes through our eyes completely unobserved. It seems a natural instinct for us to avoid seeing it, feeling it, and listening to its muffled voice (when it can be perceived after all). Actually, we have never stopped to reflect about such issues in our daily life, or in literary characters.*”

4 Concepts related to literature and collaborative³ concept maps

Students and teacher intended to reflect together about the topic *invisibility* in American Literature and to build knowledge about it using concept mapping as the major instrument to organize this knowledge. Students in groups brainstormed about literature and invisibility after reading a selection of texts by Maya Angelou, James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Alice Walker, and others.

They produced various concept maps along the term and they selected four of them as emblematic of their progress in the discipline: the first one represents their negotiation and sharing of meanings as equal partners after four classroom meetings; zooms in on *literature* and its linkages with concepts such as *background*, *cultural identity*, *language*, and *group membership*, and it was drawn in the ninth week of study; is a concept map based on the previous ones and added to the scene concepts such as *power*, *globalization*, *standardization*, *invisibility*, *culture shock*, *isolation*, *acculturation*, and others; is a concept map that tries to summarize their feelings and thoughts about *literature* and *invisibility* along the semester. As it has been already mentioned, each of these four concept maps shown here result from cooperative interactions between and among peers and teacher, and they comprise discussions, brainstorming, parking lots for concepts, map presentations, and the construction of collaborative maps that represented ideas, feelings, and thoughts of students about the topic.

5 Final comments

The four concept maps, together with others related to each one of them to help reveal processes involved in knowledge construction, will be displayed on the poster. As the teacher-researcher I will let these concept maps speak for themselves about what students have felt and thought about the issue invisibility and its linkages, such as silenced voices (what is not said), discrimination, isolation, power, and exploitation. At the end of the semester, these undergraduate students stated that they had never had thought and reflected so much about how literary texts can rise above the limits of the written word and enter the souls of readers. They affirmed their satisfaction from having learned to work together in cooperative interactions to construct their concept maps, which, according to these students, improved their potential to *unpack* knowledge from a literary text.

References

- Johnson, D.W. & Johnson, R.T. *Working together and alone*. N.J Prentice Hall, 1975.
- Pratt, Marie Louise. *Imperial eyes: travel writing and transculturation*. NY: Routledge, 2008.

² This explanation was made orally, after students had written it down for the presentation.

³ The idea of cooperation here is according to Johnson, D.W. & Johnson, R.T. *Working together and alone*. NJ: Prentice Hall, 1975.