

# **A identidade de Identidade e Diferença: Modernismo e Literatura Africana**

## **The identity of Identity and Difference: Modernism and African Literature**

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RESUMO: O TEOREMA HEGELIANO DA "IDENTIDADE DE IDENTIDADE E DIFERENÇA" SUGERE A JUS-  
TAPOSIÇÃO DE DOIS AUTORES DIVERSOS: UM MODERNISTA TARDIO AMERICANO (WILLIAN GA-  
DDIS, 1985) E UM ESCRITOR ANGOLANO (PEPETELA, 1992). AMBOS OS ROMANCES TRAZEM UMA  
QUESTÃO IMPLÍCITA, HISTÓRICA E FORMAL, SOBRE A REPRESENTAÇÃO LITERÁRIA DA EXPERIÊNCIA  
POLÍTICA CONTEMPORÂNEA REBAIXADA SOB A ÉGIDE DO CAPITAL.

ABSTRACT: THE HEGELIAN THEOREM OF THE "IDENTITY OF IDENTITY AND DIFFERENCE" SUGGESTS  
THE JUXTAPOSITION OF TWO DIFFERENTS AUTHORS: AN AMERICAN LATE MODERNIST (WILLIAN GA-  
DDIS, 1985) AND AN ANGOLAN WRITER (PEPETELA, 1992). BOTH THE NOVELS POSE A IMPLICIT  
QUESTION, HISTORICAL AND FORMAL, ABOUT THE LITERARY REPRESENTATION OF THE POLITICAL  
CONTEMPORARY EXPERIENCE DEGRADED UNDER THE CAPITAL.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: ROMANCE ANGOLANO, MODERNISMO TARDIO AMERICANO, DIALÉTICA,  
EXPERIÊNCIA HISTÓRICA, LITERATURA COMPARADA.

KEYWORDS: ANGOLAN NOVEL, AMERICAN LATE MODERNISM, DIALECTICS, HISTORICAL EXPERIENCE,  
COMPARATIVE LITERATURE.

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While I hope the readings I am going to offer, which are really a single reading, hold some interest in themselves, this essay is also intended as a demonstration of the fecundity for African literary studies, and for transnational cultural studies more generally, of the Hegelian theorem of the identity of identity and difference. A singularly unpromising lens, one might think, especially if one is inclined to be at all reflective about relationship between forms of knowledge produced in the West and those produced elsewhere. But in an historical moment when the genuinely non-Western (if by that we mean that which has not been hollowed out by its subsumption under global capitalism) is increasingly hard to come by, one might be forgiven for advancing the paradoxical thesis that Hegel – a certain Hegel, anyway – has become the last non-Western thinker.

Certainly few theoretical languages meet with more resistance in the United States today than that of the dialectic, whose laundry list of evils – it begins with teleology, eurocentrism, idealism – are familiar to us all. These are genuine evils, if not uniquely Hegelian ones, but our hostility derives from something else; after all, there is as much or more to be discarded in, say, Spinoza – who, in a tradition stretching from Gilles Deleuze through Italian *operaismo* to Michael Hardt, has been a hero and model for anti-dialectical thought – and this antiquated material is, perhaps, harder to extricate from contemporary Spinozism than the husk of Hegelian narrative is from the living heart of the dialectic.

Our contemporary unease in the dialectic comes from elsewhere, and one gets closer to its source when one recalls that in our recent past the dialectic was officially dominant not in the West but – often in more or less vulgar and sclerotic forms – in the communist East. Leaving aside a host of questions that cluster around the fate of dialectical reason under Communism, one is left to remember that the richest development in the Left experience of the dialectic since Marx himself is its deployment in the anti-imperialist and anticolonialist movements of the mid-twentieth century, such that in many instances a version of the dialectic became the very language of anti-colonial resistance.

Hegel, whose unflattering opinion of pre-colonial societies is well known, becomes, through pathways we cannot begin to trace here, the formal inspiration for some of the profoundest insights of the anticolonial and anti-imperialist movements – as well as, of course, for some of their more em-

barrassing certitudes. In our immediate context, then, the reconsideration of the dialectic marks, in a sense different than the one Cabral intended but one that he might have recognized, a return to the source.

In any case, much of Hegel can be thought of as an extended riff on the theorem of the “Identity of Identity and Difference,” even if the development of this theorem in its explicit and abstract form (*Encyclopedia Logic*, ch. VIII) is forbiddingly opaque.<sup>1</sup> The formula looks like our everyday stereotype of the Hegelian procedure: the reduction of Difference to the rule of Identity. But the dialectic is not a philosophy of identity (an argument for another occasion), and one can read Hegel’s formulation in the other direction: every identity contains difference within it. Everything that appears self-contained and solid hides a secret self-contradiction, an internal rift whose unrest we call “history”; from another perspective, everything that appears self-contained and solid is in fact determined by its relation to something else, comprising an external rift – whose unrest we call “history.”

The relevance of this basic maxim has to do with the problem of what might go by any of a half dozen names, like “globalization and the novel” or “transnational literary studies.” Now, it is true that even the most sophisticated analyses sometimes forget that the objects of analysis – a novel, a nation – are not as self-contained and solid as they seem. But far more common today is to grasp the inconsistency that characterizes them, while understanding this inconsistency as mere variety: the diverse, the multiple, the fluid and shifting. But the philosophical problem here, if we can incautiously use that word, is that such an understanding of things merely displaces self-evidence, so that now the various elements simply are what they are, unaffected by the relations in which they stand to one another.

That is, these relationships remain external, and leave their constitutive parts in their simple positivity. No ground unites them, thereby intervening in their meaning; or rather, what ground unites them is left unthought. Examined, the ground of variety turns out to be none other than the pleasure of the agent who identifies its elements and brings them together. In this sense variety is essentially an aesthetic category. Things stand differently with the identity of identity and difference. We are not here dealing with “binary

1. See especially §112-130. *Hegel’s Logic*, trans. William Wallace (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1975) 162-186.

oppositions” in the sense to which we have become accustomed. The oppositions through which the dialectic moves are meant to be false ones; that is, they are explicitly and inherently unstable, always already on their way to becoming something else.

The theorem sounds like a riddle, and in the Logic, the answer to the riddle is none other than the ground which, in the thought of the multiple, remains a question. Simply put, the ground is an explicit, non-arbitrary framework of comparison. The ground is what brings out relations that reach into and determine the meanings of things themselves, which then must be understood not to have independent significance outside of these relations. A canon is supposed to differ from a collection in precisely this way; the elements of the former derive their meaning from their relationships with the rest; the elements of the latter sit alone next to the others, their unity established, if at all, by the whim of the collector.

That said, the comparison between the two texts juxtaposed here may seem willfully arbitrary, though both novels were written in more or less the same period: William Gaddis’s *Carpenter’s Gothic*, an American late modernist novel published in 1985, and *A Geração da Utopia* [*The Utopian Generation*], which the Angolan novelist Pepetela published in 1992. *Carpenter’s Gothic* takes place entirely within the four walls of a house in upstate New York; *A Geração da Utopia* ranges from Lisbon to Luanda, and follows an approximately thirty-year period in the lives of fictional leaders of the Angolan revolutionary movement. But the texts are not as alien from one another as they might initially seem.

*Carpenter’s Gothic* turns out to be an African novel in a very peculiar sense, its plot ultimately hinging, against all expectations, on a mutation in Cold War hostilities as they play out in Southern, particularly Portuguese-speaking Africa. In other words, Gaddis’s novel is completed, off the scenes, in Pepetela’s. The ground that both novels share, however, is more substantial than this. Both texts are passionate responses, both from the Left but from radically different (but at the same time intimately connected) geographical and social situations, to a single historical political problem – which is, perhaps even to a greater degree than it was when either of these novels was written, our own.

Our reading is going to focus very narrowly on four moments, two in each text, which are not representative passages but which rather frame decisive turns in each novel. We will begin with *Carpenter’s Gothic*, whose sub-



tantial peculiarities stem from a simple formal problem: how to narrate the profound world-historical changes, affecting all individual destinies, that we know today as the endgame of the cold war, while at the same time doing justice to the real insulation from history that characterizes Gaddis's North American and largely upper-middleclass narrative milieu.<sup>2</sup>

Gaddis's problem is recognizable as an attempt to resolve the opposition between realism and modernism: on one hand, a responsibility to historical truth; on the other, a fidelity to the formal energies released by the emergence of a form of subjectivity liberated (or alienated) from historical consciousness. A great deal of what would be required to produce a narrative map of the late cold war – the moment of the Reaganite policy of “rollback,” which entailed the overthrow or strategic weakening of legitimate postcolonial governments perceived as hostile to the U.S. or friendly to the Soviet Union – would take place in the third world, specifically southern Africa; but the narrative itself is constrained to the insular world of Croton-on-Hudson, as emphasized by the modernist conceit of constraining the narrative to intensities experienced within four walls.

The measures taken in this attempt to square the circle are several. In Joycean fashion, Gaddis leaves clues strewn around the house; for example, a real New York Times headline from July 1980 alerts us to a crisis in the rate of profit that conditions much of the action of the novel. But this dead fact is no more a felt part of the characters' lives than it is of ours, and Gaddis knows this: the newspaper remains unread, “of no more relevance than than now in its blunt demand to be read”.

The second attempt is the great tentacled plot itself, essentially a conspiracy narrative that draws together big business, religious fundamentalism, and the cold war, ultimately producing a direct strategic American military intervention in Southeast Africa, support for which is drummed up by means of a sham mineral deposit. This is not a particularly plausible narrative and that's not the point. Rather, Gaddis uses the pulp form to produce a kind of force-diagram of American society circa 1980 by directly personalizing relationships that are too diffuse to narrate otherwise. To take just one example among many, a shadowy financier named Grimes is improbable as the puppetmaster behind the

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2. William Gaddis, *Carpenter's Gothic* (1985; New York: Penguin, 1999).

whole charade, but we are reminded that the policies that ended the recession that brought Reagan into office disproportionately benefitted finance capital at the expense of other sectors of the economy. The whole thing is quite wonderful, and yet it does not accomplish what Gaddis sets out to do, which is to connect up this force field to bourgeois domestic life.

The final and truly desperate attempt is named McCandless, who bursts in – this is our first citation – to tell us all we need to know about, say, our relationship to South Africa, “our great bulwark against the, what was it? aggressive instincts of an evil empire?” *no, take a look at every country bordering South Africa you’ll see who’s doing the destabilizing... Who set up the Mozambique National Resistance Movement in the Transvaal when Rhodesia went down, want to write to them they’re at Clive Street, Robindale, Randburg, want to see a reign of terror see them raiding into Mozambique beating, raping, disfiguring the locals, teachers, health workers, all the forces of darkness and the whole rickety thing collapses, Mozambique’s brought to its knees like Lesotho...* (p. 190)

By the end of the novel, McCandless, a semiautomatic version of Stendahl’s “pistol shot in the middle of a concert,” threatens to destroy completely the narrative texture of the novel. As McCandless takes over the narrative, he becomes a kind of Ancient Mariner, trying the patience whoever will listen, including the reader. The diatribe I just extracted from takes up most of twelve pages.

In its last third Carpenter’s Gothic threatens to become a didactic novel – rather than paring his Joycean fingernails, Gaddis is down here on earth explaining how the final stage of the Cold War works, and the self-referential turn of making McCandless himself an author whose protagonist resembles him a little too much does little to repair the damage. Just to emphasize how desperate this attempt appears to be: if McCandless is going to explain to us the mediations between American domestic life and the endgame of the Cold War, then there is no need to have written the novel in the first place, since the whole aim is to produce these mediations in narrative form: to show, not tell.

In the final pages, however, the protagonist of the novel interrupts McCandless in the middle of his denunciation of millenarian Christianity: - *Because you’re the one who wants it, she said abruptly in a voice so level he stopped, simply looking at her...* - *And it’s why you’ve done nothing...She put down the glass, – to see them all go up like that smoke in the furnace all the stupid, ignorant, blown up in the clouds*

*and there's nobody there, there's no rapture no anything just to see them wiped away for good it's really you isn't it. That you're the one who wants Apocalypse, Armageddon all the sun going out and the sea turned to blood you can't wait no, you're the one who can't wait! The brimstone and the fire and your Rift like the day it really happened because they, because you despise their, not their stupidity no, their hopes because you haven't any, because you haven't any left.* (pp. 243-44)

The reversal here is complete. (It should be noted here that the cool diegetic tone of the “she said abruptly” clause, though it might look quite normal in another novel, is so radically out of tune with the breathless cacophony of the dialogue that precedes it throughout the novel that it already marks the passage as a kind of break). A perspective which had seemed to violate the canon of immanence – making statements rather than pseudostatements, to use Brooksonian language – is suddenly ironized in the most abrupt and absolute way, as the real content of McCandless’s jeremiad is shown to be identical with what it denounces – worse, in fact, because the desire that feeds religious fundamentalism is here understood not as despair but hope.

McCandless’s diatribes are only pseudo-statements after all, no more true in themselves than the pathetic selfdeceptions of the other characters. What had looked to be an attempt to give us an experienceable relationship to events of geopolitical magnitude turns out to give us one man’s neurosis. Gaddis thus returns safely to the Joycean realm above his handiwork, refined out of existence; McCandless himself is a modernist fragment, telling us something obscure about the modern American condition; and Carpenter’s Gothic becomes, once again, just another late modernist novel.<sup>3</sup>

So Carpenter’s Gothic abandons its quest for pedagogical truth – statements – and flees to the safety of modernist truth, which is of a different order, that of the pseudo-statement, of language which is symptomatic rather than informative. But things are not so simple; the link between Gaddis’s

3. For an elaboration of this idea of the modernist fragment, please see my own *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth Century Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005), which develops a thesis similar to the one broached here at much greater length. The “Joycean realm” here refers, of course, to Stephen Dedalus’s disquisition on the aesthetic in *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*: “The artist, like the God of the creation, remains within or behind or beyond his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails.” James Joyce, *Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: Modern Library, 1996) 294.

didactic impulses and those of his character McCandless cannot be so easily severed. If McCandless secretly desires a raptureless Apocalypse, Gaddis in his turn unleashes an Armageddon on the central characters. Some of the deaths in the final pages of the novel are unmotivated in purely narrative terms. But it is precisely the extravagance and destructive fury of these final pages that suggests that we are looking at something more than the simple recontainment of pedagogical energy.

Unlike most of the main characters, McCandless the intellectual survives. But the death of the characters surrounding him only serves to focus attention on his final act. In fact, McCandless's fate – exile – is in fact the one unforgivable choice in the book. Rather than acting, like the protagonist Liz, in an imperfect, compromised, and even hypocritical way, he retreats to a “*quiet shore where [he] can be secure in enjoying the distant sight of confusion and wreckage.*”<sup>4</sup> For McCandless maintains his purity and innocence rather than commit himself to something that might involve compromise and hypocrisy – and by his inaction, therefore, commits himself to the deepest complicity and hypocrisy. It should be clear that his dilemma – not only his, but Gaddis's, and the first-world intellectual's more generally – is both political and representational.

For what is missing in McCandless's understanding of the Cold War – what is missing in Gaddis's representation of McCandless, and what is missing in our own most urgent political discourses – is a way out: not necessarily a map of the future, a path to salvation, but simply the possibility that things might be otherwise: what, for Liz, even fundamentalism possesses in the form of hope. Without this possibility – without the notion of the present as itself impossible, as fragile, riddled with unsustainable antagonisms and therefore the transition to a future which is still to be invented – the very idea of political action, while demanded at every point by the fury of the text, is at the same time rendered incoherent.

The actual is intolerable, but also unshakable, and this is a corollary of Gaddis's representational dilemma: the failure to produce any plausible connection between subjectivity and history is, simply restating the problem, the failure to produce a political subject. This representational flaw, as Gaddis implicitly understands, is founded on a choice: Gaddis's escape from didacticism

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4. Hegel, *Introduction to the Philosophy of History*, trans. Leo Rauch (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1988), p. 24.

into modernist truth follows McCandless into his more literal exile from the possibility of compromised engagement. The singular pathos and genius of Carpenter's Gothic is that Gaddis separates himself from McCandless only by aligning himself with him. For the unforgivable choice made by McCandless is one for which, by exposing it, Gaddis does not forgive himself.

Across the continent of Africa from Gaddis's imagined Mozambique, Pepetela will raise precisely the question that Gaddis cannot: the question of the impossibility of the present. But despite its title, *A Geração da Utopia* does not immediately present itself as a utopian narrative at all. On the contrary, its central impulse seems to concern the death of Utopia, specifically, the descent of former Angolan revolutionaries into either deliberate political mystification or disillusion and intellectual cynicism. (The main character, whose nom de guerre is Sábio or "Savant," is in fact McCandless's third-world counterpart). The revolution has died, but it lives on as the "husk of utopia" which "*today stinks, like any other putrifying corpse.*"<sup>5</sup> This is allegorized in any number of ways, but for now I'll limit myself to one.

One of the characters is named Mundial, or "Global." The name is originally the nom de guerre of a guerrilla who takes as his name the worldwide contagion of the third-world anti-colonial movements that dismantled classical imperialism. By the end of the novel, this same Mundial has become the representative of the new economic globalization as the broker of government contracts to foreign businesses, coming at last to stand for global capital itself, "*the most vicious capitalism yet seen on this earth.*"<sup>6</sup>

This is far from an unfamiliar narrative structure in African fiction of the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: the "novel of disillusionment" is a veritable genre. Our first citation encapsulates the movement of the novel as a whole, the sclerosis of political and social invention into rigid bureaucratic orthodoxy:

*I was thirteen years old when Luanda mobilized en masse to greet the heroes of liberation. ... We marched, we listened to the stories of the elders come back from the bush, we sang revolutionary songs, we invented that dance-march that exploded over the entire Country, mixed of patriotic fervor and creative imagination. And then they wanted to discipline us. They said, you must march like soldiers, you are the future soldiers. We could*

5. morreu. E hoje cheira mal, como qualquer corpo em putrefacção. (p. 240)

6. o capitalismo mais bárbaro que já se viu sobre a Terra (p. 277)



*no longer do those crazy moves that got everyone going, go forward, a step to the side, one to the back, a crazy little twist in the middle. Even during Carnaval, years later, one could only dance like the soldiers, the groups gave up dancing. They liquidated the imagination...*<sup>7</sup>

Our second citation, however, will perform a precise inversion of the first. Here collective joy will initially be manufactured, in bad faith, by a group of former guerillas hoping to profit from collective misery. Mundial and others back a new church, and in a climactic scene they work up the crowd into a fervor of religious joy that is mainly channeled towards filling the coffers of the church with “the money and the baubles and even the shirts”<sup>8</sup> of the celebrants. But for all that, this scene, the final scene in the novel, is deeply ambiguous. The energies of this multitude (Pepetela’s word), once released, cannot be so easily re-contained, overflowing the boundaries set for them by Elias’s church. In other words, Carnaval returns:

*Everybody dancing and kissing and touching, dancing belly to belly even in the aisles and hallways and later in the square in front of the Luminar and in the streets nearby ... toward the markets and the streets, the beaches and the slums, in self-multiplying processions like in Carnaval, leaving the Luminar to reach the World and Hope.*<sup>9</sup>

This scene marks the reemergence of the same musical collective joy that had been last seen at the moment of independence, fifteen years earlier, when “the multitudes were singing the slogans of independence with equal fervor.”<sup>10</sup> The movement from creative joy to bureaucratic regimentation is answered by a movement from the culture industry to creative joy. But the power of this reversal derives from its ambiguity, precisely from the fact that the creative joy of the poor is initially organized for profit. The powers thus magnified then struggle against this arrangement and must be, ever after – the novel ends here without a period – either placated or repressed.

7. E depois quiseram enquadrar-nos. Disseram, devem marchar como os soldados, vocês são os futuros soldados. Já não podíamos dar aqueles passos malucos que arrancavam palmas a toda a gente, vai para a frente, um passo para o lado, volta para trás, uma piada no meio. Mesmo no Carnaval, anos mais tarde, só se podia marchar como os soldados, os grupos deixaram de dançar. Liquidaram a imaginação... (p. 361)

8. o dinheiro e as poucas jóias e até mesmo as camisas (p. 375)

9. Todo o povo dançando e se beijando e se tocando, se massembando mesmo nas filas e nos corredores e depois no largo à frente do Luminar e nas ruas adjacentes... a caminho dos mercados e das casas, das praias e dos muceques, em cortejos se multiplicando como no carnaval, do Luminar partindo felizes para ganhar o Mundo e a Esperança (p. 375)

10. as multidões [estavam] cantando as palavras-de-ordem da independência com igual fervor (p. 375).

This is a familiar dialectic, probably originating with Marx and given contemporary expression by Hardt and Negri. But for all the excitement generated by the reemergence of this collective joy – and always keeping in mind that its conditions of possibility are nothing if not dire – we have to note the relation of this moment to the earlier one it echoes. The earlier moment of political, social, and aesthetic creativity bore all of the problems associated with a Leninist vanguard party – but it was capable of delivering the coup de grace to an empire; and it might, but for superpower Realpolitik, have been able to deliver much more. One must ask of Pepetela's multitude the same thing one must ask of Hardt and Negri's: How can it become a political subject?

Despite their radically different settings and techniques, despite the different stakes being played for in the lives represented in each, the fundamental representational dilemma in both *Carpenter's Gothic* and *A Geração da Utopia* is the same. How can one represent Utopia – by which I mean here the bare existence of political possibility – when there is no political subject available, no class, party, or movement, that might conceivably make such a possibility actual – that might, in Hegelian terms, make it concrete? Only once this ground is established does the real difference that passes through the two novels become apparent.

The problem in *Carpenter's Gothic* remains implicit, hidden in the circularity of the novel's self condemnation: the novel can see no way out of the present, no viable opening for the creation of a political subject, and so produces the present as one with no way out – but this very structure is radically condemned, in the figure of McCandless, by the narrative itself. In *A Geração da Utopia*, on the other hand, the problem can be made explicit: the question becomes that of the contemporary Angolan poor, the multitudes whose labor is deemed superfluous by capital, but who nonetheless have recourse to no other system of satisfying their needs than capitalism – and who do not (or do not yet) exist for themselves as a movement or class. I have suggested elsewhere that this relationship – African literature as the making-explicit of problems that canonical modernism circles without being able to formulate – is a more general one.<sup>11</sup>

11 See *Utopian Generations: The Political Horizon of Twentieth Century Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2005).

I hope to have in some measure demonstrated that the “identity of identity and difference” – in other words the positing of an internal frame or point of identification which then shows up a specific difference – enables one to produce a truth about Gaddis that one could not access without reference to *Pepetela*, and to produce a truth about *Pepetela* that one could not access without reference to Gaddis, thus producing one more line of flight from the insularity of our separate literary fields. It is worth pointing out, finally, that the difference I hope to have established between the two texts is not “idealist” in the bad sense; that is, it does not posit its own existence as outside history, as the relationship between two opposed essences. Rather, it is itself grounded in the mundane but fateful difference between economies that can afford to keep the appearance of the rift between capital and superfluous human labor at bay and those that cannot.

But I will suggest that in a final twist, this genuine difference, the implicit versus explicit posing of the question of political subjectivity, is itself incomplete and on its way to something else. Like Hardt and Negri’s multitude (by whose own admission the concept of the multitude is still “poetic”)<sup>12</sup> *Pepetela*’s Angolan multitude has no project; it is not a political subject; its obscure desires can be mobilized for ill as well as for good. The explosive political potential of the global poor is thus only implicit, in-itself. The question posed by the juxtaposition of these novels is now this: how to make this potential explicit, to move from the poetry of the multitude to the prose of a possible politics?

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12. Nicholas Brown and Imre Szeman, “What is the Multitude? Questions for Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri,” *Cultural Studies* 19.3 (May 1995): 372.