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*Translating African American Language and
Culture: A Translation Proposal of the Short
Story “Meditations on History”*

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Introduction

Over the course of my university career, I have had the opportunity to attend a number of extremely interesting courses, one of which was certainly the Anglo-American literature course. Since in secondary school the teaching of literature is fundamentally limited to the British English scene, immersing myself in the culture and literature of the African-American community was an entirely new experience. I was thus able to appreciate and discover authors who had been unknown to me until that moment, and to gain more insight into a multifaceted linguistic variety which has been characterized by prejudice and numerous misconceptions. My decision to undertake an MA thesis on African-American literature and on the translation of the variety of English known as African American English (AAVE) or Black English, therefore, depends on my fascination for this new field of literature and on the fact that, having completed my bachelor's degree in an institute for interpreters and translators, I had the desire to try out my own translation abilities, thus putting myself to test in a literary field that I had never explored before. Therefore, in choosing to structure my thesis in this particular way, I decided both to expand my knowledge of the culture and, above all, the language of the African American community, and to tackle an extremely complex translation which has allowed me to acquire a great amount of knowledge in the process. In addition to translating the short story "Meditations on History" written by African-American author Sherley Anne Williams and unpublished in Italian, I also decided to include two chapters dealing with translation theories and on the specific problems that I encountered, which would provide me with the opportunity to delve into significant issues that are fundamental to the understanding and appreciation of this translation proposal.

In the first chapter, I begin by introducing the concept of cultural translation and the circumstances that led to the so-called cultural turn in Translation Studies, basing myself on important works by scholars such as Lawrence Venuti, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere. By doing so, I have been able to illustrate the changes that have occurred in the field of translation and the new understanding of the role of the translator, who is no longer expected to translate the text word for word but has now the important task of translating while taking into account the culture of both the source and the target text. Furthermore, since they have proved to be very useful for my translation

choices in this thesis, I illustrate the theories concerning domestication and foreignization strategies in translation, relying on Schleiermacher's ideas, as explained by Venuti, and some observations regarding the demanding task which must be performed by the translator, that is accepting the inevitability of loss throughout the complex translation process. I then explain the strategy I have decided to base my translation of the aforementioned short story on. After having illustrated such important translation theories, I then proceed to introduce the literary genre to which the short story I translated belongs, namely the neo-slave narrative, providing some background concerning its origins, purposes, and characteristics, by drawing inspiration from works by scholars Ashraf H.A. Rushdy and Kelly Lynch Reames. I also introduce the author of "Meditations on History", her cultural background, and the origins of the short story and of the novel which came after it, namely *Dessa Rose*. I also address important cultural and intellectual movements, such as the Black Power, illustrating the many changes that led to the emergence of important neo-slave narratives, such as the one authored by Sherley Anne Williams.

The first chapter of my MA thesis is essential to better understand the contents of the second chapter and, above all, my translation of "Meditations on History". Studying in depth the debate about domestication and foreignization, which are fundamental in order to establish whether a text will be 'flattened' or respected in its 'otherness', and the historical and cultural circumstances that led to the emergence of the text that is the object of my translation, was of course a crucial step before engaging in the translation process with some awareness of the difficulty and problematic issues of my task. After introducing the cultural and historical context from which the story I translated originated, in the second chapter I then concentrate on defining the peculiarities and the origins of the variety of English which is featured in it, that is, African American Vernacular English, so as to familiarize the reader of my thesis with the dialect he or she will encounter while reading the source text of my translation. In order to introduce AAVE and its characteristics, therefore, I have essentially relied on the studies of renowned scholars such as Geoffrey K. Pullum, Lisa J. Green, and John R. Rickford. Drawing inspiration from some of their works I therefore discuss the origins, the numerous labels that have been attributed to it over the years, its syntactic and phonological peculiarities and the numerous linguistic phenomena which

distinguish this particular dialect. Furthermore, I illustrate the persistent struggle to debunk the false myths, the prejudice and the numerous stereotypes that have constantly been associated with this dialect of the English language, while also addressing its complicated relationship with Standard English and the criticism that has been directed at it over time. Afterwards, I concentrate on the more practical aspects related to the actual translation, that is the methods and strategies proposed by scholars to deal with the translation not only of another language but more importantly of a dialect of a foreign language into my mother tongue. In order to do so, I have relied on the theories and studies of established translators and academics such as Franca Cavagnoli and Antoine Berman who have extensively investigated the difficulties and challenges involved in translating dialects. The strategies available to the translator in order to approach and translate a dialect proposed by Franca Cavagnoli have indeed been of great importance for my work. Although the suggestions included in the works of such scholars are quite useful, this sort of translation will always pose a number of challenges that may be difficult to overcome, especially for a university student. For that reason, I have devoted the last section of this chapter to illustrating some significant examples of the difficulties I encountered while translating “Meditations on History”. I therefore discuss the difficulty I encountered in attempting to avoid flattening the text and making it too homogeneous, in differentiating the different varieties of language found within it, and in deciding the extent to which to adopt the typical elements of orality in my rendering of the text into Italian. It is also extremely important to address the number of complex concepts and cultural elements which do not have an equivalent in the language, culture and imagination of the Italian reader and how I have decided to tackle them. As a consequence, I deal, for instance, with the complexity of the role of motherhood for enslaved women and the ambivalence of the ‘slave driver’ figure in the plantation system, as a way to explain the impossibility to fully convey their meaning in the Italian language.

In conclusion, I believe that all the themes and issues which I have discussed throughout these two introductory chapters can provide the reader of this thesis with at least the basic knowledge necessary to approach and read my translation of Sherley Anne Williams’ short story while being able to better appreciate the linguistic

peculiarities, the cultural challenges, and the choices I have decided to make in my proposed translation of “Meditations on History”.

1. Cultural Translation and the Fight against Cultural Appropriation

There is extensive research and documentation on the vast subject of cultural translation but, in this first chapter, I will mainly introduce the concept of cultural translation and the context in which this discipline emerged, with reference to works by renowned scholars such as Lawrence Venuti, Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere. Due to the fact that the main object of this MA Thesis will be my translation of the short story “Meditations on History”, written by African-American author Sherley Anne Williams, in this chapter I will also provide an overview of translation strategies which have proved quite useful when translating a text belonging to a culture very different from that of the target audience.

Once I have illustrated the debate on whether a translation should be source- or target-oriented and the most effective strategies to these ends, I will then proceed to introduce the literary genre of the neo-slave narrative, to which the text I have chosen belongs, and its historical context, by relying on works such as Ashraf H. A. Rushdy’s *Neo-Slave Narratives. Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* and Kelly Lynch Reames’ *Women and Race in Contemporary U.S. Writing. From Faulkner to Morrison*. I will then provide an in-depth introduction to Sherley Anne Williams, the author of the short story “Meditations on History”, and to the cultural atmosphere from which the short story and the novel that came afterwards, that is *Dessa Rose*, were born. Throughout this extensive chapter, I will therefore address a number of issues related to translation theory and also to the concept of cultural appropriation, that is to say the practice according to which a dominant culture appropriates the culture of a minority group. In this particular case, cultural appropriation refers to white people exploiting and domesticating the culture and history of African-American slaves and their descendants.

I believe that providing a good overview of the practice of cultural translation, of the context in which the short story originated and of the main themes the author focused on, will give the reader of this thesis the necessary tools to understand and appreciate in the best possible way my translation of “Meditations on History” and the contents of the second chapter, which will deal in depth with the problems encountered throughout the translation of the text from English into Italian and the translation

approach I have chosen. Therefore, I will now proceed to introduce the topic of cultural translation and the so-called ‘cultural turn’ in translation.

1.1 The cultural turn in translation

In the 1998 book *Constructing Cultures. Essays on Literary Translation*, edited by scholars Susan Bassnett and André Lefevere, the former introduces the so-called ‘cultural turn’ in translation studies by quoting the following passage from an earlier work they co-authored, that is *Translation, History and Culture*:

Once upon a time, the questions that were always being asked were ‘How can translation be taught?’ and ‘How can translation be studied?’ Those who regarded themselves as translators were often contemptuous of any attempts to teach translation, whilst those who claimed to teach often did not translate, and so had to resort to the old evaluative method of setting one translation alongside another and examining both in a formalist vacuum. Now, the questions have changed. The object of study has been redefined; what is studied is the text embedded in its network of both source and target cultural signs and in this way Translation Studies has been able both to utilize the linguistic approach and to move out beyond it. (Bassnett and Lefevere, 1998; p.123)

This shift of attention and emphasis was denominated by Bassnett and Lefevere as the ‘cultural turn’ in translation studies. Up until the 1970s “translation was the Cinderella subject, not taken seriously at all, and the language used to discuss work in translation was astonishingly antiquated when set against the new critical vocabularies that were dominating literary studies in general.” (Bassnett and Lefevere, 1998; p.124) The year 1976 was particularly important because it was the year in which the Leuven seminar was held. Here, scholars from Israel working on the polysystems theory were brought together with scholars in the Low Countries and from various parts of Europe for the first time. During the Leuven seminar André Lefevere was given the task of determining a definition of translation studies which, as Bassnett states, he saw as a discipline in which “theory and practice were to be indissolubly intertwined; theory was not to exist in the abstract, it was to be dynamic and involved a study of the specifics of translation practice.” (1998; p.124) One key factor in the Leuven seminar was the refusal to consider translation studies as strictly being part of literary studies or linguistics: this makes us realize how, already in 1976, what was being proposed was for translation studies to be its own separate entity and to play a more significant role.

Around that time translation studies already shared common ground with another interdisciplinary field: cultural studies.

This field of study is generally held to have begun in the 1960s, initiated by the publication of a series of texts by British academics who had worked in universities and in adult education. Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy* appeared in 1957, followed by Raymond Williams' *Culture and Society* and by E.P. Thompson's *The Making of the English Working Class* in 1963. Hoggart set up the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham in 1964 and the rest, we might say, is history. (Bassnett and Lefevere, 1998; p.130)

Translation studies and cultural studies have much in common, such as for example the fact that:

Both cultural studies and translation studies practitioners recognize the importance of understanding the manipulatory processes that are involved in textual production. A writer does not just write in a vacuum: he or she is the product of a particular culture, of a particular moment in time, and the writing reflects those factors such as race, gender, age, class, and birthplace as well as the stylistic, idiosyncratic features of the individual. (Bassnett and Lefevere, 1998; p.136)

In support of her claim, Bassnett also quotes a passage from Lawrence Venuti's *The Translator's Invisibility. A History of Translation*, in which the scholar claims:

Translation, wherever, whenever and however it takes place, is always to some extent circumscribed: Every step in the translation process from the selection of foreign texts to the implementation of translation strategies to the editing, reviewing and reading of translations is mediated by the diverse cultural values that circulate in the target language, always in some hierarchical order. Translation is therefore always enmeshed in a set of power relations that exist in both the source and target contexts. The problems of decoding a text for a translator involve so much more than language, despite the fact that the basis of any written text is its language. Moreover, the importance of understanding what happens in the translation process lies at the heart of our understanding of the world we inhabit. (1998; p.137)

In other words, the role of the translator, which has always been much debated, is not only that of performing word-for-word or sense-for-sense translation by only worrying about the linguistic aspects of a text, but also that of taking into consideration the cultural settings of the designated target audience. This is because, as Anna Scacchi states in the book *Parlare di razza. La lingua del colore tra Italia e Stati Uniti* (2012), in the context of translation studies, the growing space given to the study of the cultural, social and political dynamics involved in translation processes has challenged the idea of translation as the simple transfer of a text from source language to target language and has instead emphasized its weaknesses and limitations, as well as the power asymmetries and socio-cultural issues that govern translation policies.

In her book entitled *Translation* Bassnett (2014) argues that, as regards the distinction between word-for-word , or literal, translation and sense-for-sense translation, which is the kind of translation which does not closely follow the original linguistic structures but aims to transfer the text's meaning to the target audience, the

responsibility of the translator has always raised debate about whether his or her responsibility should be mainly to the original author of the source text or to the language and culture of the target reader. Bassnett also mentions a classic essay by Roman Jakobson, *On Linguistic Aspects of Translation* in which the Russian scholar quoted Bertrand Russel's statement that "no one could understand the word 'cheese' without first having a non-linguistic acquaintance with the object that is cheese."(2014; p.7) According to Jakobson, someone from a cheese-less culture could still understand that cheese is a dairy product obtained from curds and yet an exact equivalent for the English word 'cheese' could never be found in Russian, "not because Russians do not have a food made of pressed curds, but because the Russian language makes distinctions between types of cheese that English does not." (quoted in Bassnett, 2014; p.8) This subtlety helps us to fully understand how fundamental the cultural aspect is within the translation process.

This kind of understanding is the issue at the very heart of translation: not only are languages not the same, but the ways in which languages are used are never the same, so the task of the translator is indeed a highly complex one, for it requires negotiation of difference that is both linguistic and cultural. (Bassnett, 2014; p.9)

Because a translation and the way the reader interprets it depend on the social and cultural factors in which the text is produced or read, it is crucial to note that the relationship between translation and culture results in a somewhat violent activity, which entails "the reconstruction of the foreign text in accordance with values, beliefs, and representations that preexist it in the translating language and culture, always configured in hierarchies of dominance and marginality, always determining the production, circulation, and reception of texts." (Venuti, 2008; p.14) Considering, therefore, the violent nature of the translator's act, it is important to take into account the fact that the latter

is forced not only to eliminate aspects of the signifying chain that constitutes the foreign text, starting with its graphematic and acoustic features, but also to dismantle and disarrange that chain in accordance with the structural differences between languages, so that both the foreign text and its relations to other texts in the foreign culture never remain intact after the translation process. (Venuti, 2008; p.14)

Due to the fact that translation is not simply the untroubled communication of the meaning of a text from one language to another, and that the cultural aspect must always be taken into consideration, it is important to bear in mind that "the violence wreaked

by translation is partly inevitable, inherent in the translation process, partly potential, emerging at any point in the production and reception of the translated text, varying with specific cultural and social formations at different historical moments.” (Venuti, 2008; p.15)

1.2 Domestication and foreignization strategies

In his work *The Translator's Invisibility*, Venuti (2008) states that, although it has been said that translation depends on linguistic, political, cultural, and ideological factors, there is also a substantial portion of the translation that depends on the translator's choices. The latter, as a matter of fact, has a certain degree of freedom in deciding the extent of violence in his or her practice. One could describe the translator's choice in several possible ways, but the approach that Venuti considers best is surely the one elaborated by the theologian and philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher. In a lecture which Schleiermacher held in 1813 on the different methods of translation, as Venuti reports, the philosopher argued that there are only two methods: “either the translator leaves the author in peace as much as possible and moves the reader towards him; or he leaves the reader in peace, as much as possible, and moves the author towards him.” (2008; p.15) In sum, according to Schleiermacher the translator had the possibility to choose between a domesticating strategy, which Venuti describes as an “ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to receiving cultural values, bringing the author back home,” and a foreignization strategy, an “ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad.” (Venuti, 2008; p.15)

Venuti illustrates how Schleiermacher made his preference for foreignizing translation clear, to the detriment of the domesticating one, and seizes the opportunity to concur with his vision. Drawing on Schleiermacher's theories, Venuti supports the use of the foreignization strategy more on ideological rather than on aesthetic grounds, stating that using this type of strategy instead of domestication fosters the fight against the hegemony of the most culturally influential languages, that is essentially the English language. As Venuti phrases it, “foreignizing translation in English can be a form of

resistance against ethnocentrism and racism, cultural narcissism, and imperialism, in the interests of democratic geopolitical relations.” (2008; p.16)

It seems useful to take a step back and observe how these two translation strategies have been used in the past and in different corners of the world. The foreignizing translation practice has been very popular in certain European countries at certain historical times: Venuti reports how this strategy was first elaborated in Germany during the classical and, especially, romantic periods and how it was also very much in vogue in France throughout poststructuralism. As regards the domesticating translation practice, in contrast, British and American cultures have long been influenced by domestication and transparency theories which aimed mainly at inscribing the foreign text with “a partial interpretation, partial to English-language values, reducing if not simply excluding the very differences that translation is called on to convey.” (Venuti, 2008; p.16) One example of this approach in *The Translator’s Invisibility* (2008) is that of Eugene Nida, translation consultant to the American Bible Society. According to Venuti, Nida put forth an ethnocentrically violent translation theory, based on the concept of the translator’s transparency, considered essential for the promotion of Christian humanism abroad. According to Nida’s view, translation should be based on the concepts of fluency and dynamic equivalence, which aim at a “complete naturalness of expression.” (Venuti, 2008, p.16) Venuti affirms that, in his opinion, Nida’s work involves the process of domestication, which is tightly linked to the above-mentioned concept of fluency. As a matter of fact, Nida believes that “the translator must be a person who can draw aside the curtains of linguistic and cultural differences so that people may see clearly the relevance of the original message” (Venuti, 2008; p.16), and in this he is actively “imposing the English language valorization of transparency on every foreign culture.” (Venuti, 2008; p.16)

As opposed to Nida’s domesticating vision, those who advocate foreignization promote the development of a translation theory which can resist the values of the dominant British and American cultures and respect the various linguistic and cultural differences of the foreign text. While Schleiermacher had recommended “only close adherence to the foreign text to evoke a sense of foreignness in the translation” (Venuti, 2008; p.18), the scholar Philip Lewis developed the concept of “abusive fidelity,” which “acknowledges the abusive, equivocal relationship between the translation and the

foreign text and eschews the prevailing fluent strategy in order to imitate in the translation whatever features of the foreign text abuse or resist dominant cultural values in the foreign language.” (Venuti, 2008; p.18) By relying on this idea of ‘abusive fidelity’, one is faced with the possibility of experimentation within translation, without completely abandoning fluidity, since it would be impossible to reach such a level of foreignization as to maintain the source language and culture completely intact in any translation. As argued by Maria Tymoczko in an essay included in *Post-colonial Translation. Theory and Practice*, edited by Bassnett and Trivedi (1999), it is more than clear that, within the practice of translation, there is no text that can be completely translated in all its details while achieving perfect homology between the source text and the translated text. The translator will always be forced to make choices, whether it be omissions or additions. She also illustrates that the differences between source text and the translated text can sometimes be due to incompatibilities between the two linguistic systems, at times inescapable, or to deep cultural differences related to elements such as objects, history, customs and so forth. When cultural elements appear to be deeply unfamiliar to the receiving audience, then the translator will have to adapt, change, or sometimes explicitly explain any given matter. A significant example of cultural differences is dialects since they are of fundamental importance throughout “Meditations on History”. In her work *La voce del testo* (2012), Franca Cavagnoli explains that, when faced with dialects, the translator must make important decisions, such as choosing between domesticating and ‘flattening’ the original text or foreignizing the target one. In some cases, however, as the reader will find in the third chapter, the choice to foreignize an element as unique as a dialect can lead to an excessive foreignization, thus resulting in some sort of mockery of the original culture. This issue, however, will be further elaborated in the third chapter.

Having analyzed and reflected upon the different viewpoints concerning domesticating and foreignizing translation strategies, in my translation of the short story “Meditations on History” by African-American author Sherley Anne Williams, I will attempt to maintain as much as possible the foreign essence of the source text while at the same time producing an Italian text that is readable, understandable and in no way disrespectful or derisive to African-American culture. Nevertheless, before the reader can fully appreciate the translation and the discussion of my translation choices, a deep

knowledge of the cultural context of the translated text is essential, so in the next paragraph, I will focus on the literary genre in question, i.e., the neo-slave narrative, as well as the author's cultural background and, above all, the circumstances from which the story originated.

1.3 The debates of the '60s and the emergence of the Neo Slave Narrative

In his work *Neo-Slave Narratives. Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* Ashraf H. A. Rushdy (1999) explains that between 1966 and 1968, due to the emergence of movements such as Black Power and to the rise of the New Left, there was a significant evolution within the intellectual sphere of American historians and the social movements of the time. The New Left, and particularly the working students belonging to Students for a Democratic Society (SDS), witnessed minorities, ranging from African Americans to other ethnics, to the working class, women, and students themselves raise their voices to ask the government to introduce changes to improve their lives, demanding new laws and social and educational services for all citizens. Faced with this important demand for rights from those who were usually politically powerless, the New Left and the historians who sympathized with its perspective became convinced of the idea that the history of a country does not depend only on the imperial past of the nation and its major actors but is also made by those masses of people who are seemingly powerless from an institutional and political point of view and passive subjects of history.

Therefore, during the 1960s a sea change happened in historiography, which started to study the past 'from the bottom up', and especially in the historiography of slavery in the United States, because of this set of social and intellectual circumstances, including the action of the above-mentioned Black Power. The fact that the social movements of those times coincided with a turning point in the intellectual sphere, according to Rushdy, meant, among other things, that the subject of the history of slavery was treated very differently both in historical narratives and fiction. In the 1960s, therefore, there was an actual renaissance of African American fiction which, in addition to receiving numerous prestigious cultural awards, also began to be included in the curricula and programs of educational institutions. All this led, of course, to such

fiction becoming increasingly important on the literary scene. Among the many and varied works written by talented African American authors, many were focused on African American slaves and the history of slavery. Among these works were Margaret Walker's *Jubilee* in 1966, Ernest Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman* in 1971 and Toni Morrison's *Beloved* in 1987.

As regards the subject of American slavery, therefore, a new respect for the direct testimony of slaves, previously disregarded as reliable historical document, began to be shown, which translated into a new attention on the part of historians as well as writers to slave culture and to the resistance of slaves themselves. This emerging interest in narrating new accounts of the past appealed also to the above-mentioned African American authors and Black Power intellectuals who, in turn, wanted a chance to tell the stories of slave testimony. The particular form of contemporary narrative on slavery they used, which is especially relevant for the purposes of this thesis, is that of the neo-slave narratives, defined by Rushdy as "contemporary novels that assume the form, adopt the conventions, and take on the first-person voice of the antebellum slave narrative" (1999; p.3), which had as their main goal, among others, that of criticizing the romanticized representation of slavery typical of the mainstream imaginary of the stories of slaves in the United States, caused precisely by the absence of firsthand testimonies by African-American authors. The four neo-slave narratives of the seventies and eighties mentioned by Rushdy, i.e., *Flight to Canada* by Ishmael Reed, *Dessa Rose* by Sherley Anne Williams, *Oxherding Tale* and *Middle Passage* by Charles Johnson, appeared following the major social and intellectual shifts of the sixties. "All four novels raise and meditate on the issues developed out of the debates over the historiographical representation of slavery, the meaning of Black Power, and the significance of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*." (Rushdy, 1999; p.5) All these novels were indeed meant to be a sort of response to the publication in 1967 of what was considered by the white literary establishment to be "the first novel adopting the formal conventions of the first-person antebellum slave narrative" (Rushdy, 1999; p.4), the first novel that was actually written "from the slave's point of view" (Rushdy, 1999; p.4), namely *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. As Rushdy underlines, Black Power intellectuals criticized Styron's novel, which was passed off as a neo-slave narrative but was actually a master text, for different reasons: first of all, he portrayed the character of

the slave as rebellious and non-heroic, appropriated the voice of a slave and African-American culture despite being uninformed in the matter, remained deeply faithful to the traditional historiographical portrait of slavery as a patriarchal institution, and last but not least, sent a completely wrong message at a time when black empowerment was on the rise. The authors of the four neo-slave narratives of the seventies and eighties were very much interested in the politics and debates of the sixties, since they were experiencing their legacies and had also been influenced by them in the writing of their novels. Sherley Anne Williams, for instance, began writing the initial version of her later novel *Dessa Rose* back in 1968, precisely as a response to Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner* and to the debates of the time. While I will discuss *Dessa Rose* and its initial version later, it is important now to concentrate on the reasons behind the choice made by these authors to use the literary form of the antebellum slave narrative, which is something that no African-American author had done before. In his work Rushdy illustrates that there are basically two reasons behind this choice. First of all, Reed, Williams and Johnson chose to write from the point of view of the antebellum slave to be able to respond to the white people's appropriation of the slave's voice and to comment on cultural politics and cultural appropriation in America, in this repeating fugitive slaves' act of narrating their own story themselves, that is, they had written the original slave narratives so as to give authority to their own life experiences. The second reason, still according to Rushdy, is that "the writers of neo-slave narratives wished to return to the literary form in which African American subjects had first expressed their political subjectivity in order to mark the moment of a newly emergent black political subject." (1999; p.7)

It is important to keep in mind that the neo-slave narratives of the seventies and eighties take the form of the antebellum slave narrative not to emulate Styron, but to allow the authors to have their say and intervene in the cultural, historiographical, and intellectual debates that had been raised by Styron's novel. The choice to use the first-person voice of the fugitive slave is necessary to challenge the acts of cultural appropriation of which Styron's book is an important example, while asserting the relevance of that form of testimony for the historical profession and at the same time revising the conventions and themes of the slave narrative from a contemporary perspective. By reopening the debate surrounding Styron's novel, the authors of these

neo-slave narratives have drawn attention back to those issues that were still unresolved, such as cultural appropriation and racial subjectivity.

Shortly after the publication of William Styron's *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, a collection containing the opinions of black critics replying to Styron appeared. This collection was edited by John Henrik Clarke and is entitled *William Styron's Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond*. These two works, which were published respectively in late 1967 and early 1968, constitute the cornerstone of an important historical and cultural debate during the post-civil rights era. Firstly, cultural critics of the time believed that Styron's novel showed the blind spots about the way slavery had been dealt with before. Secondly, his choice to base his book and rely on the testimony of a slave and then adopt his point of view in the first person triggered conflicting opinions on the issue of cultural appropriation. The black intelligentsia, which emerged in the post-civil rights period, had no choice but to come together in the face of such an example of historical and, above all, cultural misrepresentation. Rushdy reports that, after the release of Styron's book, there arose an awareness among African Americans that had never appeared before with such unanimity among black people. It was precisely the debate that emerged from the contents of this novel that favored the emergence of Black Power intellectuals and a profound shift in the American literary world. Among the various problems posed within this debate we find the question of what materials can be accepted as historical documents, and the difficult question of who has the 'right' to speak for a certain culture. Rushdy divides the debate into two phases: the first one focuses on the critics, that is, the black writers included in Clarke's collection, and the second on the reply of those whom Rushdy calls respondents, i.e., those who criticized the ten black authors between 1968 and 1971. What the black critics wanted to emphasize most in the debate was that the problem was not so much the historical inaccuracies, but the fact that Styron's novel was not at all a 'meditation on history', but the cultural appropriation of the voice, life and testimony of a slave. The gesture of appropriating the voice of a black cultural figure was seen by the critics as a political gesture, aimed at stressing the dominance of white culture over black culture. However, this simple message that the critics wanted to pass on was, of course, ignored or completely twisted by the so-called respondents, who interpreted it in an entirely different way. Basing themselves on the belief that Styron's novel was the only one that

truly told the story from the slave's point of view, the respondents implemented a strategy to discredit Black Power intellectuals, claiming that what it really was happening was "an innocent white man besieged by a group of ten intellectual thugs who resorted to mean-spirited ad hominem critiques of Styron himself." (Rushdy, 1999; p.57) The black critics were accused of having assaulted Styron with absurd allegations and of having started what was called, as Rushdy reports, 'an attack by ten black writers'. Their criticism was therefore dismissed as, according to the respondents, Black Power intellectuals were not objective enough and were influenced by their race and the Black Power ideology.

The debate between those who criticized Styron's novel and those who defended its artistic license is interesting from a cultural point of view because it presents us with the changes that were occurring in the politics of the sixties, the development of new discourses around the representation of slavery and the emergence of a new black intellectual force within the American political discourse. Furthermore, the fact that this debate has led to the recognition of slave testimony as valid source of knowledge about the events of the past but also limited, because of the lack of freedom of the narrators in telling the whole truth about slavery, has prompted many authors to start writing from the point of view of the antebellum slave, giving rise to important new narratives of the slave past. A further achievement resulting from this debate was the fact that it started a discourse that not only takes into account how to represent the culture and the figure of the slave, but also who has the right to represent it, without stumbling into cultural appropriation. Black historian and scholar Vincent Harding described cultural appropriation by white people as a "total negation of our power and our truth, indeed an ultimate betrayal of all creative power and liberating truth." (quoted in Rushdy, 1999; p.94) Harding was convinced that the solution to such appropriation was for African-American intellectuals to reclaim the representation of the history of slavery by ensuring that such cultural productions were written exclusively by black authors. Indeed, this was the case with the above-mentioned first four neo-slave narratives, which adopted "the same form of first-person representation of slavery that white reviewers believe Styron to have inaugurated and that the black critics believe Styron to have appropriated." (Rushdy, 1999; p.94)

Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada*, published in 1976, was the first of the four neo-slave narratives of the seventies and the eighties. This novel appeared during a nostalgic yet critical period in which former sixties activists and their opponents found themselves faced with the emergence of neoconservative politics. The three neo-slave narratives of the eighties, on the other hand, appeared at a time in which the enthusiasm of the sixties seemed completely over and yet it remained the only hope in a society ruled by neoconservative forces. The rise of Reagan's Republicans and the lack of attention paid to the lives and problems of African Americans in the United States prompted a renewed response from black intellectuals and authors. Looking at the various gains and losses suffered by African Americans since the 1960s we find "a 400 percent increase in the black middle class, a devastating rise in the black underclass, and a steady decline in the median income and quality of life for the majority of African Americans." (Rushdy, 1999; p.133) If to these elements we also add the dismantling of social support service programs, we are confronted with what has been called "the post-civil rights era of the Eighties." (Rushdy, 1999; p.133) Nevertheless, not all former activists of the sixties were nostalgic for that period. Some of them embraced the neoconservative vision and began to support the Republicans

by appealing to simple-minded pop psychology ("black Americans are today more oppressed by doubt than by racism"), by advocating a muscular individualism (respect would be won for the race through "the outstanding achievements of individual black persons"), by emphasizing cultural and ignoring historical factors. (Rushdy, 1999; p.133)

Going back to the gains and losses mentioned above, it is important to note that the gain from the growth of the black middle class has been that it has had a very positive effect on black cultural production. This growth in the black middle class has also led to the emergence of a black readership to whom authors of black novels could finally turn, instead of continuing to write exclusively for a white audience. These authors could therefore finally become the spokespeople, as Rushdy tells us, of the desires and anxieties of the new black middle class. In the light of what has just been said, the two authors of the neo-slave narratives of the 1980s, Sherley Anne Williams and Charles Johnson, wrote their novels bearing in mind the new black middle class and addressing the issues underlying the debates of the 1960s, both because they used the literary form of the neo-slave narrative, which was born in those years, and because the two were deeply involved in the politics of the 1960s when they started working on their neo-

slave narratives. The next paragraph will be devoted to Sherley Anne Williams' political vision concerning these debates and to the circumstances in which "Meditations on History" and the novel *Dessa Rose* came into being.

1.4 Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* and the origins of "Meditations on History"

The novel *Dessa Rose* by Sherley Anne Williams, which was published in 1986, consists of three main sections: *The Darky*, *The Wench* and *The Negress*. As the first section of the novel begins, the eponymous protagonist has been imprisoned for having participated in a slave revolt in which white men were killed. While waiting to give birth and then to be executed, Dessa is interviewed by Adam Nehemiah, a functionary interested in finding out what happened during the slave revolt and where the other escaped slaves went in order to write a book on the correct management of slaves. In this section, as Kelly Lynch Reames remarks in her work *Women and race in contemporary U.S. writing. From Faulkner to Morrison* (2007), we are introduced to Nehemiah's thoughts and his conversations with Dessa which "are interspersed with her memories of her life as a field hand." (Reames, 2007; p.114) The section *The Darky* provides us with Dessa's background, the story of her love for a man named Kaine, the motivations behind the slave revolt and her imprisonment and it eventually leads us to her second escape which will take her to Miss Ruth's house. While the title of the first section, *The Darky*, is the name Nehemiah uses for Dessa, the second section's title, *The Wench*, is how Miss Ruth, the white woman who shelters escaped slaves in her house and who is mainly referred to as 'Rufel' throughout the entire novel, thinks of the "sickly escaped slave who is recuperating in her bed." (Reames, 2007; p.114) In the second section we are introduced to Rufel's background and the circumstances that have led her to being alone in a house where she is sheltering escaped slaves. In this section, we discover that Rufel is on her own because her husband has abandoned her, and she needs the help of the slaves and of her Mammy to run her plantation. Finally, the third section focuses on the relationship between Rufel and Nathan, one of the slaves she shelters, and on the final escape of the entire group. In the last two sections the relationship between Rufel and Dessa plays a very relevant role. Firstly, as Reames underlines, there is a parallel between the two women's lives in the relationship they

both seem to have with the memory of their Mammy. Rufel remembers the Mammy who raised her since she was a child, while Dessa recalls the Mammy from the plantation from which she escaped. When Dessa hears Rufel talking about Mammy for the first time, she is convinced that the white woman is referring to her Mammy and the two have a terrible argument. Even after she realizes that Rufel was referring to another person, Dessa continues to deny Rufel's experience because "she is offended by the white woman's appropriation of a slave's affection, which Dessa wants to believe could be given, at least genuinely, only to other slaves." (Reames, 2007; p.122) The two women are united by the fact that they have both learned from their Mammy's love to recognize their own strength and identity and for this reason both give much importance to this relationship, which they remember as special and, above all, unique. Hence the difficulty in accepting and recognizing each other's experience. Rushdy argues that Williams, by letting us delve into the "world that black and white women shared in the antebellum South" (1999; p.148) introduces the issue of the possibility of the emergence of interracial friendships or coalitions both in the past and in the present. At the end of the third section of this novel "the black woman and white woman become friends through a set of extraordinary events, yet they realize their unequal social positions prevent their sustaining a meaningful friendship." (Reames, 2007; p.113) The prejudices and the fear of difference, which only fuel the hostility that the two women feel towards each other at the beginning of their relationship, and the social and historical barriers they are confronted with at the end of the third section are, according to Reames (2007), "depressingly contemporary" for the history of slavery is very much linked to the contemporary antagonism between African American and white women. Indeed, Reames claims that Sherley Anne Williams' *Dessa Rose* teaches and shows that, for white and African American women to become friends, they must learn to move beyond their preconceptions about the other race.

In addition to these three sections, however, there is also another significant element, namely an Author's Note, in which the author describes the novel's origins. Williams had heard about two stories that had aroused her curiosity. The first was the story of a pregnant slave from Kentucky who had taken part in a revolt and who, once she gave birth, was supposed to be sentenced to death, while the second story was about a white woman from North Carolina who had been sheltering escaped slaves in her

plantation. Since Williams wondered what would have happened if these two unusual women had met, she created the two characters of Dessa Rose and Miss Rufel. The origins of this novel, however, are not only linked to Williams' discovery of these two fascinating stories but also, as she herself mentions in her Author's Note, to a desire to respond to William Styron's novel, which will be further discussed below. The author, in fact, started writing a first version of this novel, the short story "Meditations on History", in response to the debates of the sixties following the publication of William Styron's novel and then continued with the writing of the novel *Dessa Rose*, in which Williams wanted to expose the injustices perpetrated by institutional power within cultural production as well as the recreation of racial categories made possible by cultural appropriation.

In *Neo-Slave Narratives. Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* Rushdy (1999) illustrates how Williams, in the novel *Dessa Rose*, investigates the way in which power, and especially institutional power, interferes with and influences cultural production. Through the novel, therefore, the author exposes the degree of inequality involved in the power relations between authors and institutions and how much this inequality can affect the lives of ordinary citizens. Through the character of the white intellectual who questions Dessa but cannot really communicate with her, nor is he interested in listening to her other than in order to use her story to write his book and become a well-paid, famous author, Williams unveils how institutions such as publishing houses and the different media exercise their power by controlling the cultural production of minorities especially. These institutions foster the practice of cultural appropriation and Williams uses as a most blatant example of this William Styron's infamous novel. Regarding *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, Williams observed that it was "greeted with wild applause by white critics who know nothing of the history of experience which Styron sought to portray." (quoted in Rushdy 1999; p.135) By granting importance and authority to novels that narrate the "other" without really knowing his/her story, institutions reinforce the practice of the appropriation of the cultures of minorities and, particularly, of the personal stories of black people. Although Williams strongly believed that the social changes of the 1960s had transformed the literary world, the author worked hard to demonstrate how, despite these changes, unequal power relations within the literary field were still very influential and she

achieved this by taking apart the so-called master texts. Her aim was therefore to dismantle “both the master narratives that define and reify racial categories and the master texts that appropriate and colonize enraced voices.” (Rushdy, 1999; p. 135) To that end:

Williams exposes what she calls the “hypocrisy of the literary tradition” and its institutional supports, demonstrates the ideological ramifications of this “literary tradition” in the daily recreation of race, and represents the process by which the historically oppressed recuperate their own narratives, telling the story of how the dispossessed become possessed of their own history. (Rushdy, 1999; p.135)

Williams’ neo-slave narrative *Dessa Rose* appears to be part of an actual dialogue with the so-called ‘prototype’ of this literary form, i.e., William Styron’s *The Confessions of Nat Turner*. In her book the author made clear and explicit the connection between *Dessa Rose* and Styron’s neo-slave narrative and, upon her publisher’s request, wrote the abovementioned Author’s Note explaining the reasons and circumstances that drove her to pen this novel. In her Author’s Note Williams claimed to be “outraged by a certain, critically acclaimed novel” that had “travestied the as-told-to-memoir of slave revolt leader Nat Turner.” (quoted in Rushdy, 1999; p.136) It is crucial to investigate how Williams parodies Styron’s novel in the section of *Dessa Rose* titled *The Darky*. Critics and reviewers have observed how Williams’s Adam Nehemiah closely imitates the role that Thomas Gray played in his report of the event, *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, upon which Styron based his own novel. Nehemiah interviews Dessa when she is in prison and Thomas Gray did the same thing with Nat Turner. Nehemiah’s motive is that he is attempting to write a tract to advise masters on the best ways to handle their slaves, while Gray wanted to write a document about Turner’s rebellion that would alleviate the general fear of slave revolts.

That section of the novel is a rewritten version of a short story Williams had originally entitled “Meditations on History” (parodying the term Styron employed in his “Author’s Note” to describe the kind of fiction he was writing: “less an ‘historical novel’ in conventional terms than a meditation on history”). (Rushdy, 1999; p.136)

Since Williams had started writing the short story “Meditations on history” at the end of the sixties, just at the same time Henrik Clarke’s *William Styron’s Nat Turner: Ten Black Writers Respond* was published, her novel is also obviously linked to Styron’s and to the numerous protests coming from outraged black intellectuals. However, Rushdy reports that Williams herself stated that the real connection between *Dessa Rose*

and Styron's text is basically limited to the original short story and to her Author's Note. Her novel, therefore, was not supposed to be a revision of Styron's book including a constant intertextual relationship with it. Despite the outrage she felt towards his novel, this did not really influence Williams' entire work. The author's aim was therefore not to establish a constant relationship with Styron's *Confessions of Nat Turner*, but to write "a Neo-slave narrative that established a discontinuous intertextual relationship with the social and historical epoch of its formal origins." (Rushdy, 1999; p.136)

Regarding the historical era in which the novel was written, it is important to analyze the connection that Williams had with the Black Power and the Black Arts movements. Williams's attitude towards these movements is described by Rushdy as ambivalent, although she always maintained an unwavering respect for the principles on which they were based. The ambivalence towards these movements resides substantially in the fact that Williams "found herself puzzled and frustrated by a movement that would consciously condemn past generations and disparage historical cultural formations that Black Nationalists deemed 'unheroic' or 'counterrevolutionary.'" (Rushdy, 1999; p.137) As a matter of fact, Williams believed that the Black Power "should not be premised on a rupture with the past, nor should it establish its revolutionary credentials by dismissing those people in the past whose lives and forms of resistance appear at odds with contemporary social movements." (1999; p.163) Despite these doubts, the author's respect for the movement remained intact since the Black Power had contributed greatly to the development of a new cultural identity for African Americans, prompting historians to unveil the new approach to the history of slavery which we have discussed so far. In his work, Rushdy recounts how Williams grew up in the forties and fifties feeling that "there was no place in the American past I could go and be free." (1999; p.138) When reading about the history of slavery she was always confronted with "either insulting versions of the plantation romance or the facile efforts of consensus historians" (quoted in Rushdy, 1999; p.138), but once she became older, she realized that the problem with these stories was that the slave's voice was completely absent, as he was treated as a mute sambo or a heroic pawn in the story, incapable of speaking his mind. Therefore, her criticism of Styron's novel stems from his adoption of the very same stereotypes that were typical of the literature which

Williams read throughout her childhood and to ignore the major breakthroughs which had been initiated by the Black Power movement. The connection between Williams' novel and the politics of Black Power is marked by an epigraph by African American activist Angela Davis, to whom the story is dedicated. The epigraph was included by Williams as a preface to her story and it reads:

We, the black women of today, must accept the fully [sic] weight of a legacy wrought in blood by our mothers in chains ... as heirs to a tradition of supreme perseverance and heroic resistance, we must hasten to take our place wherever our people are forging on towards freedom. (quoted in Rushdy, 1999; p.138)

Aiming to criticize those historians who had overlooked and ignored the relevance of African American women in the slave community, Williams used her novel to emphasize the great importance of heroic slave women and of their numerous acts of resistance. Among these important acts of resistance is surely the one performed by Dessa who, by opposing orality to literacy, takes her story back into her own hands and tells it to Nehemiah using misleading words that, in the end, deceive him to the point of enabling Dessa to escape. Through this stratagem Williams wanted to give Dessa back her voice and show her ability to get free from Nehemiah's intention to inscribe her "within a discourse that suppresses her voice." (Rushdy, 1999; p.140) The path to achieving the goal of allowing the slave to tell his or her story, while being recognized for his or her credibility and authority, was neither short nor smooth or fair. As previously mentioned, the first section of the novel was originally the short story "Meditations on History", written in 1968 in response to Styron's novel. What has not been mentioned yet, however, is that Williams tried to find a journal that would be interested in publishing "Meditations on History" for many years but never succeeded. The editors of the black magazine to whom she sent the story were too swamped to publish it whereas the white editors failed to grasp the importance of the story and of its characters. Thus, Williams was confronted with the awareness that the world of cultural production, like the politics of the United States, was very much unequal towards minorities. When she later managed to have the entire novel published in 1985, Williams was even more disappointed when she was asked by her editor to write a statement in order to clearly separate historical reality from fiction, since, as Rushdy reports, her editors "seemed scared to death readers wouldn't know where fact ended and fiction began." (1999; p.141) Eventually she had to surrender, albeit reluctantly, and

wrote what we have previously referred to as the Author's Note. Furthermore, Rushdy explains how, after witnessing the inequities in the cultural production field both while attempting to have the short story "Meditations on History" published and right before the publication of *Dessa Rose*, Williams felt that "white boys won prizes for creating fictions that were obvious reconstructions of the past, and this sudden concern for 'historical accuracy' struck her as a way of telling her that she was not one of the white boys." (Rushdy, 1999; p.141) Realizing that her voice as an author had been questioned by her editors in the same way as the voice of slaves in master texts, Williams decided to make some alterations to the initial short story "Meditations on History" when writing the novel *Dessa Rose*. One of the most important changes concerns the beginning of the first section of the novel and the moment when we hear Dessa's voice for the first time. In "Meditations on History" the first section begins with a diary entry written in the voice of Nehemiah, and we meet Dessa's voice for the first time only in the fifth diary entry. In the novel, however, Nehemiah's voice is replaced by that of an omniscient narrator in the third person, so as to reduce the importance of his role and to avoid making him the first one to tell the story. Furthermore, the author also turned the character Nehemiah from a "writer with no institutional affiliation" in "Meditations on History", to a "functionary of larger sectional and national interests operative in the field of cultural production" (Rushdy 1999; p. 143) in *Dessa Rose*, thus linking his role to that of the unfair cultural production institutions with whom she had already had extensive experience. As Rushdy explains, moreover, the choice of Nehemiah's name was certainly not accidental. His name was indeed chosen by the author because it recalls two important biblical functions: Adam is 'the namer', and Nehemiah is the name of 'the chronicler'. The character, however, fails in both of these functions: he misnames Dessa by calling her 'darky' or 'Odessa' because he is incapable of listening to her and he also fails to produce the chronicle he was attempting to write. Nehemiah's chronicle is in the end nothing more than a collection of illegible scribbles and blank pages and Dessa takes her narrative back into her own hands by telling her own story orally to her grandchildren. Thus, the story we obtain in the end is the one told by Dessa rather than by Nehemiah. What the author wants to emphasize and make clear to us is that, in Nehemiah's case, his true and original act of appropriation is not so much in his desire to record and write about Dessa's tale, but in his "willful imaginary

‘reconstruction’ of it.” (Rushdy, 1999; p.151) The realization we come to, however, at the end of the novel, is that Nehemiah’s written text is unable to represent or appropriate the protagonist’s story. Indeed, in the last section of the novel, Dessa takes on the role of narrator and only upon reaching the epilogue do we discover that her voice has been prevailing over Nehemiah’s writings and Rufel’s memories throughout the entire novel. Precisely as Williams intended, “a novel that had begun as a written representation of a master text ends as an oral performance of a slave’s narrative.” (Rushdy, 1999; p.166) In concluding this chapter, it is important to keep in mind how Williams taught us, especially through this novel, “to read resistantly, to look for the submerged voices in master texts, to examine the cultural apparatus that create hegemonic literary traditions, and to recuperate the performative acts that trace the fault lines of any oppressive racial formation.” (Rushdy, 1999; p.166)

2. Translating “Meditations on History”: The Challenges Posed by AAVE

Having established the historical and literary context to bear in mind while reading the short story “Meditations on History”, this chapter is devoted to introducing the particular language variety featured in this text and, more generally, to discussing and analyzing the manner in which I chose to translate it. This chapter, therefore, will aim both to introduce and illustrate the origins and peculiarities of African American Vernacular English, and to illustrate and clarify some of my translation choices and the challenges I encountered in dealing with Sherley Anne Williams’ short story.

I will therefore begin by outlining what is intended when one uses the term African American Vernacular English, which is simply one of the many names by which it has been referred to over time, and by providing a brief overview of the theories concerning the origins of this dialect. Furthermore, I will introduce the peculiarities and typical characteristics of the abovementioned language, by relying on works by researchers and academics such as Lisa J. Green, Geoffrey K. Pullum, and John R. Rickford. Once I have introduced the main features of AAVE, I will then proceed to address the difficult task of translating a language as rich and peculiar as AAVE into Italian, by outlining the choices I made throughout the translation process after having studied the works by academics such as Antoine Berman, and Franca Cavagnoli.

This chapter will therefore be fundamental in providing the reader with the most detailed overview possible of the core of this thesis, i.e., the challenging, but also fascinating work of translating not only from English into Italian, but also and above all from the African American vernacular into Italian, in an effort to respect the great cultural diversity of a people by providing an Italian version that attempts to convey the linguistic and cultural diversity of the African American characters in this story, while at the same time making sure not to ridicule or demean them.

2.1 African American Vernacular English (AAVE): history and origins

In this first subchapter I will begin by introducing a dialect which has been highly debated among scholars and linguists and constitutes a fundamental theme for the purposes of this MA thesis. The dialect in question has been referred to over time with many different names, each aimed at emphasizing a specific characteristic or a different origin. What has been mentioned above as African American Vernacular English (AAVE) is also known as Black English, African American English, and Ebonics, among many other denominations. As illustrated by Lisa J. Green in her work *African American English. A Linguistic Introduction* (2002), the names, or labels, which have been attributed to this dialect reflected, already by the 1960s, the social climate and the trends in society regarding the way African Americans were perceived and, consequently, treated.

A list of labels for the variety is given below, in which the last four are more commonly used today. However, those beginning with 'Black' may also be heard: Negro dialect, Nonstandard Negro English, Negro English American, Negro speech, Black communications, Black dialect, Black folk speech, Black street speech, Black English, Black English Vernacular, Black Vernacular English, Afro American English, African American English, African American Language. (Green, 2002; p. 6)

Green explains how the word 'English' is included in many of these labels in order to underline the similarities of this dialect with the English language or with some of its varieties, while in some others the word does not appear at all in order to diminish its relation to the English language and connect the dialect to African or Creole origins instead. The author provides a valid example of this when she refers to the terms 'Negro dialect' or 'Negro English', which were generally used during the time when African Americans were still referred to as 'Negroes'. Regarding the term 'Ebonics', first coined by black scholar Robert Williams, one may notice that it is not included in the list of labels provided by Green. The reason behind this is that, according to Green, Williams coined the term Ebonics so as to include the numerous different languages spoken not only by black people in the United States but also by blacks coming, for example, from the Caribbean. In order to substantiate this argument, therefore, Green quotes a passage taken from the introduction to Robert Williams' work *Ebonics: The True Language of Black Folks*, in which this definition is given:

A two-year-old-term created by a group of black scholars, Ebonics may be defined as “the linguistic and paralinguistic features which on a concentric continuum represents the communicative competence of the West African, Caribbean, and United States slave descendant of African origin. It included the various idioms, patois, argots, idiolects, and social dialects of black people” especially those who have been forced to adapt to colonial circumstances. Ebonics derives its form from ebony (black) and phonics (sound, the study of sound) and refers to the study of the language of black people in all its cultural uniqueness. (quoted in Green, 2002; p. 7)

Given the controversial nature of this term, it appears quite evident that this topic requires a separate in-depth discussion, so as to better explain where Ebonics originated and what it is.

John R. Rickford in his article “What is Ebonics (African American English)?” explains that the term ‘Ebonics’ was coined in 1973 by Robert Williams and other black academics to oppose the use of derogatory names for Black language such as, for example, Nonstandard Negro English. Such disparaging names had begun to circulate since the 1960s, a time when scholars were beginning to show increasing interest in studying the language of African American communities. The word ‘Ebonics’ appears to stem, as stated by Williams and reported by Rickford, from two terms: ‘ebony’, meaning ‘black’, and ‘phonics’, meaning ‘sounds’. Thus, it can be deduced that the term Ebonics simply means ‘Black speech’, as is explained by Rickford in his abovementioned article. As Green (2002) states, linguists tend to refer to the particular language of African Americans with different names, including Black English, African American English (AAE) or, when intending to emphasize how this variety deviates from the standard English language, African American Vernacular English (AAVE). However, according to Rickford, the term Ebonics essentially refers to the same speech forms attributed to the dialect whose different names have been listed above. This term, however, was hardly used in society and by linguists until 1996, when the Oakland school board in California designated Ebonics as the primary language spoken by the majority of its African American students. Since then, the term has become more popular and gained more prominence in the linguistic scene. Therefore, having established that this variety of English can be referred to by different names and that, at least as regards general linguistic characteristics, Ebonics, AAE and AAVE refer to the same variety, in this thesis, from now on, I shall mainly refer to the dialect of African Americans or, as Sonja L. Lanehart defines it, to “English as it is spoken by or among

African Americans” (2001; p.25), by the term African American Vernacular English or simply by AAVE.

Regarding the origins of AAVE, numerous academics have investigated and conducted studies on the matter and such research is still going on today. Although this issue is still very much unclear, there seem to be at least three broad trends. As Green explains in her previously mentioned work, one theory tends to connect the development of AAVE to West African languages such as some Niger-Congo ones like Kikongo and Kwa because of a supposedly shared set of linguistic patterns. According to this view, AAVE descends mainly from West African languages and its similarities to English are superficial. Green illustrates how this theory is often referred to as the substratist hypothesis since West African languages, which in this case are considered substrate languages, have supposedly influenced the linguistic structures of AAVE. According to this hypothesis there is a reference language, which in this case would be English, and a language which presents, as stated by Goodman, a “subordinate social or cultural status of its speakers vis-à-vis those of the reference language” (quoted in Green, 2002; p. 8), namely, AAVE.

A second theory, as stated by Louise A. De Vere in her article “Black English: Problematic but Systematic” (1971), is based on the idea that AAVE supposedly resulted from a pidgin-creole cycle. According to this theory, then, AAVE was initially, as also stated by Green, “a creole such as Jamaican Creole or Gullah, the creole spoken in the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia” (2002; p.9). Green states that “a creole is a language that develops from a pidgin, simplified means of communication among speakers who do not speak the same languages” (2002; p.9) and that the main difference between these two elements lies in the fact that creoles, unlike pidgins, have native speakers and a broader vocabulary and grammar. Rickford, in *African-American English. Structure, history and use*, clarifies the meaning of these two terms even more thoroughly by explaining that:

Pidgins and creoles are new varieties of language generated in situations of language contact. A pidgin is sharply restricted in social role, used for limited communications between speakers or [sic] two or more languages who have repeated or extended contacts with each other, for instance through trade, enslavement, or migration. A pidgin usually combines elements of the native languages of its users and is typically simpler than those native languages insofar as it has fewer words, less morphology, and a more restricted range of phonological and syntactic options. A creole [...] is a pidgin that has acquired native speakers, usually, the descendants of pidgin speakers who grow up using the pidgin as their first language. In keeping with their

extended social role, creoles typically have a larger vocabulary and more complicated grammatical resources than pidgins. (1998; pp. 155-156)

This theory, although supported by numerous scholars including Rickford himself, cannot be considered as verified because of the lack of sufficient evidence and data concerning the development of the languages spoken by the first African slaves who were brought to colonial America and of the languages that supposedly derived from them.

Finally, DeVere (1971), in her abovementioned article, introduces a further theory, the Anglicist hypothesis, which affirms that AAVE was mainly influenced by and developed from the variety of British English spoken by the early settlers. This hypothesis, as well as the other two which have been mentioned above, has yet to be confirmed since studies concerning the controversial origins of AAVE remain ongoing.

Its origins, however, are not the only controversial matter surrounding AAVE. The status, relevance, and ‘prestige’ of such language have been, and on occasion still are, the subject of numerous misconceptions and of stereotypical bias. Such misconceptions have often led to doubts and debates regarding the nature and status of AAVE with respect to Standard English. Among the scholars who have taken an interest in this matter, an important one to mention is linguist Geoffrey K. Pullum who offers valuable insights into this topic. In his essay “African American Vernacular English is not Standard English With Mistakes”, Pullum begins by referring to the events of December 1996 in Oakland, which have already been discussed above, in order to clarify his view concerning the relationship between AAVE and Standard English. The scholar recounts how the Oakland school board decided to revisit some of its educational policies in order to include and pay more attention to the distinct language spoken by a large segment of its students, namely AAVE. When the *New York Times* reported the news, this provoked reactions of derision, fury and indignation. According to Pullum, the reason behind the uproar was that the language in the crosshairs was not any relatively uncontroversial one such as Spanish or Russian, but rather AAVE, the language spoken by a large portion of the city’s population. The one thing that in Pullum’s view makes AAVE much more problematic than other widely spoken languages in the U.S., such as Spanish, is that AAVE has a unique and much closer relationship to the language considered most prestigious in the country, that is, Standard English. The central problem Pullum poses is that the close relationship

between AAVE and Standard English is also a complicated one because it has always been characterized by much prejudice and racial bias. Pullum states that, indeed, “most speakers of Standard English think that AAVE is just a badly spoken version of their language, marred by a lot of ignorant mistakes in grammar and pronunciation, or worse than that, an unimportant and mostly abusive repertoire of street slang used by an ignorant urban underclass” (quoted in Wheeler, 1999; p. 40). Considering that many speakers of Standard English regard AAVE as being merely slang and that, a few days after the main story was published, a *New York Times* editorial stated that the Oakland school board had declared black slang to be a distinct language, perhaps this explains the public outrage. The *New York Times* reporters had incorrectly written that the school board had defined black slang as a distinct language, and not AAVE, which, contrary to what some may think, is definitely not a slang. Needless to say, the Oakland school board had no intention of defining black slang as a distinct language and had no desire to endorse the use or teaching of slang in schools, since, as Pullum states, an expression is considered slang when

it represents a vivid, colloquial word or phrase associated with some subculture and not yet incorporated as part of the mainstream language. No subculture’s slang could constitute a separate language. [...] Slang is by definition parasitic on some larger and more encompassing host language. It has no grammar of its own; it is a small array of words and phrases used under an aegis of some ordinary language and in accordance with its grammar. The majority of slang words and phrases are in the language already and are merely assigned new slang meaning by some subpopulation. (quoted in Wheeler, 1999; p.40)

What the Oakland school board truly intended to do was to recognize that AAVE is a distinct language spoken by a great many people and should therefore be granted much more space in the educational setting. This may perhaps help eliminate, as Pullum states, two of the most prevalent false myths about AAVE, namely “that AAVE is just English with two added factors: some special slang terms and a lot of grammatical mistakes.” (quoted in Wheeler, 1999; p. 41) Having clarified that AAVE is neither slang nor bad English, Pullum explains how the real problem was that the Oakland school board was wrong in wanting to define AAVE as a separate language, when in fact it is not exactly so. As a matter of fact, according to Pullum, AAVE is not a distinct language from English, but simply a dialect, a variety of it. According to him, the fact that every word used in AAVE can also be found in Standard English and that the two grammars are extremely similar means that AAVE can be rightfully classified as a

dialect of Standard English. The fact that AAVE is a dialect of English, and not a distinct language, should not, however, imply, as Pullum claims, that it deserves any less acceptance or respect. In her abovementioned article, DeVere claims that AAVE is not some sort of an indolent confusion or continuous misinterpretation of Standard English but a logical and coherent language system. DeVere then proceeds to quote the opinions on the matter of some respected sociolinguists, such as -William Labov's statement that "it differs from other dialects in a regular and rule-governed way, so that it has equivalent ways of expressing the same logical content." (quoted in DeVere, 1971; p. 39) Among the linguists DeVere quotes in her work there is also William Stewart who, similarly to Labov, refers to AAVE as a "language system which, though it may differ from Standard English in form and sometimes even in function, is nevertheless logical, coherent and... grammatical." (1971; p.39)

Thus far, we have established that AAVE is neither a slang nor a language of its own, but rather a very unique dialect of English which deserves the same respect as any other language or dialect. Although many have questioned, in the past and still to this day, the prestige of this dialect, several academics support its validity by basing it primarily on such elements as its grammar, phonology and the many features that contribute to making AAVE the fascinating dialect that it is. Therefore, in the next subchapter I will devote my attention to providing the reader, on the basis of studies by renowned linguists and scholars, with a brief and descriptive overview of some of the most typically observed and studied features of AAVE, including a few examples from the text by Sherley Anne Williams, which I have translated.

2.2 AAVE: a brief overview of its characteristics and structure

In this subchapter I will concentrate mainly on AAVE's most distinctive phenomena which could be mistaken for errors or proof of this dialect's lack of grammar and syntax and yet are actually the backbone of AAVE. To this day, there are still numerous doubts and misconceptions about the typical structures and features of AAVE and, therefore, I have researched and based myself on the studies of several academics in order to dispel these doubts and shed light on some of the most observed and salient features of the

grammar, syntax and phonology of AAVE. One might say that the most noticeable differences between AAVE and Standard English can definitely be found in their syntax. As Stefan Martin and Walt Wolfram explain in *The Sentence in African-American Vernacular English*, what people who are not familiar with AAVE describe as syntactic differences are actually just lexical peculiarities which are typical of AAVE. In fact, the syntax of AAVE is virtually the same as that of Standard English, i.e., it is based on a Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) sentence structure. Throughout this subchapter, I will therefore briefly analyze the most common peculiarities of AAVE syntax, while also providing some examples which I encountered in Sherley Anne Williams's "Meditations on History".

The first misconception I intend to address is the so-called misuse of the copula, that is 'be'. Pullum argues that many non-AAVE speakers believe that the copula in AAVE is omitted randomly or misused because AAVE speakers are ignorant of its correct usage. In AAVE the copula can indeed be omitted or used differently than in Standard English but, as Pullum argues, this never happens randomly, and it follows some very specific rules. Therefore, Pullum provides a detailed list of such rules and a few examples, as can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Rules concerning the copula “be” in AAVE

Rule	Example
If the copula bears accent it cannot be omitted.	<i>There already is one!</i>
Auxiliary verbs at the end of a phrase are always accented, so the copula is not omitted.	<i>Couldn't nobody say what color he is.</i>
There is a special <i>remote present perfect tense</i> , completely lacking in Standard English, expressed with an accented form of the word <i>been</i> , and this is not omitted.	<i>She been married</i> (which means “she is married and has been for some considerable time”).
If the copula is negated, it is not omitted.	<i>You ain't going to no heaven or I ain't no fool.</i>
The copula is not omitted when it is infinitival and has the base form <i>be</i> .	<i>You got to be strong or Be careful.</i>
The <i>be</i> that expresses <i>habitual aspect</i> is not omitted.	<i>He be singin'</i> (which means “he usually or habitually sings” and not “he is singing”).
The copula is not omitted when it is in the past tense (<i>was</i> or <i>were</i>).	<i>I was cool.</i>
The present-tense copula is not omitted when it is first-person singular (<i>am</i>).	<i>I'm all right.</i>
The present-tense copula is not omitted when it begins a clause.	<i>Is that you?</i>
When the copula occurs in a confirmatory tag on the end of a sentence, it is not omitted (because such tags have the grammar of elliptical interrogative clauses),	<i>I don't think you ready, are you?</i>

Therefore, Pullum concludes that the copula ‘be’ can only be omitted in AAVE when it is used “as present tense, when it is not first person, not accented, not negative, and not expressing the habitual or the remote present perfect.” (quoted in Wheeler, 1999; p.46) I also personally found a few examples of the use and omission of the copula ‘be’ in the English version of “Meditations on History”. Among these examples, one that caught my attention is “this Kaine Poppa”, which is a line from a song Dessa’s lover Kaine sings where the copula can be omitted while, in the sentence “Now, yo’ll know I be tryin’”, Kaine uses the copula expressing habitual aspect which, as Pullum states, does not allow for the copula to be omitted.

Another quite common characteristic of AAVE, and also of a few other English varieties, is a phenomenon generally known as negative concord, multiple negation or pleonastic negation. Negative concord is described by Martin and Wolfram as “the use of two or more negative morphemes to communicate a single negation.” (quoted in Mufwene, 1998; p.17) In order to make this statement as clear as possible, the two scholars give a few examples of negative concord in AAVE and how those sentences should logically be in Standard English:

- a. He *ain’t* got *no* car.
- a’. He *doesn’t* have a/*any* car.
- b. *Nobody* round here *ain’t never* heard of him (at all).
- b’. *Nobody* around here has ever heard of him (at all).

Pullum argues that many critics claim that a double negation, as seen in examples a. and b., would not make a negative, but rather a positive. Thus, Pullum states that in an AAVE sentence such as ‘He didn’t see nothin’’, critics could claim that “if he did *not* see *nothing*, that means he *did see something*, and it is illogical to use that form of words to mean the opposite.” (quoted in Wheeler, 1999; p.48) This statement follows what Martin and Wolfram define as ‘logical’ double negation, which is typical of Standard English but cannot be applied to AAVE. Pullum explains that AAVE, like for instance Italian, is a negative-concord language, and these languages require the use of negative words, such as ‘nobody’, instead of indefinite words like ‘anybody’ in

sentences such as the AAVE ‘Ain’t nobody called’ and the Italian ‘Non ha telefonato nessuno’. By means of this explanation and comparison, Pullum aims to show us how neither AAVE nor Italian are to be considered as illogical, rather simply as differing from Standard English. An example of negative concord which I was able to find in “Meditations on History” is the sentence ‘This one nigga won’t never find out’, in which the double negation ‘won’t never’ appears to be perfectly in line with what has been illustrated so far.

A further characteristic typical of AAVE and connected to the topic of negation is the so-called negative inversion. Pullum defines negative inversion as “repositioning a negative auxiliary verb at the beginning of the sentence when the subject is indefinite.” (quoted in Wheeler, 1999; p. 49) In order to better explain this definition, the author gives the example of the Standard English sentence ‘Somebody is going to find out’. In Standard English, then, the most natural and direct way to negate this sentence would be to replace ‘somebody’ with ‘nobody’ in order to obtain the negative sentence ‘Nobody is going to find out’. As regards AAVE, however, the situation is not as straightforward. This dialect requires that the clause be made negative by its auxiliary verb and for that reason ‘ain’t’ is used. Furthermore, since, as previously stated, AAVE is a negative-concord language, indefinite words, such as in this case ‘somebody’, must be replaced by negative words such as ‘nobody’. Thus, according to what has been stated so far, the negative sentence in AAVE should become ‘Nobody ain’t gonna find out’. However, as mentioned at the beginning of the paragraph, swapping the order of subject and verb in negative sentences is a rather common feature in AAVE. Therefore, by exchanging the subject ‘nobody’ with the verb ‘ain’t’, we obtain the negative sentence ‘Ain’t nobody gonna find out’. Although in Standard English the auxiliary verb appears at the beginning of the sentence only in interrogative sentences, the AAVE sentence ‘Ain’t nobody gonna find out’ respects the completely different rules of AAVE grammar and is not an interrogative sentence at all, but rather a declarative sentence which makes perfect logical sense in AAVE syntax. One example of negative inversion that I came across while translating “Meditations on History” is the sentence “ain’t no way in the world I’d chance what Boss Smith put behind them licks jes to get some mo somewhere else”. However, Pullum points out that negative inversion is not possible for all types of subject noun phrases. It is very difficult, if not almost

impossible, to find negative inversion when the subject of the phrase is a personal name, such as Mary, or when it has the definite article ‘the’ or the possessive article ‘your’. This phenomenon is therefore quite complex and governed by well-defined structures which are not random, as some AAVE critics might claim.

However, there are also typical features of AAVE which are mainly related to the phonological dimension of language and, therefore, essentially to the pronunciation of words. These characteristics are also often represented in written form, as it happens in “Meditations on History”, when, for example, an African American character speaks AAVE in literature; thus, in a written conversation, elements typical of oral language and related to pronunciation might appear. DeVere, quoting Bailey, mentions the phenomenon of ‘terminal fading’, that is, “the loss or weakening of a final consonant, final consonant cluster, or final syllable of a word.” (1971; p.40) Naturally, this cannot be merely simplified by stating that the general rule of AAVE pronunciation requires that all consonants at the end of words be cut off at all times. This matter is slightly more complex than that and reflects something which has been previously stated, namely that nothing in the grammar, syntax, or phonology of AAVE is left to chance and that its structures are usually governed by specific rules. DeVere explains that “in words terminating in a single velar stop (/k/ or /g/) or alveolar stop (/d/ or /t/), the stop is neutralized to a glottal stop (/’/)” while “in words which end in a final consonant cluster, the final consonant is not pronounced; the tendency is particularly evident in words ending in /p/, /t/, /d/, and /k/.” (1971; p. 40) Nevertheless, as Pullum states, there are some exceptions. One of them is that consonants are never dropped and are always pronounced when they follow a vowel. Pullum provides a few examples such as ‘up’, ‘out’ or ‘rob’ in which, in accordance with the AAVE pronunciation rules, the final consonant is always pronounced.

One last phonological feature of AAVE that I intend to discuss, although some others exist as well, is the absence of /r/ in medial and final positions. DeVere briefly examines this peculiar phenomenon explaining how Standard English words such as ‘door’ and ‘four’ turn into /do/ or /fo/ in AAVE pronunciation. Bailey, as quoted by DeVere, hypothesizes the cause of this phenomenon claiming that it probably derives from AAVE’s general tendency to drop the final consonant, as occurs with the abovementioned phenomenon of terminal fading.

Although this subchapter cannot cover all the typical features found in a variety as rich and expressive as AAVE, I believe that the brief overview of AAVE structures offered so far will be enough to provide the reader with a general idea of the language he or she will encounter in the original version of the translation that is the focus of this MA thesis, namely, “Meditations on History”, which will be discussed in depth in the next subchapter.

2.3 Translating AAVE: theories and examples from my translation of “Meditations on History”

In the previous subchapters, I have introduced what AAVE is, described the numerous names by which it is referred to and the theories regarding its origins, and presented the main syntactic and phonological features of this unique variety of English. I have decided to present such fundamental concepts in this particular order and manner so that the reader may reach this last subchapter with a sufficient basic knowledge of AAVE so as to better appreciate the theories concerning its translation and, most importantly, my translation choices for the Italian rendering of the short story “Meditations on History”.

Therefore, as has already been thoroughly illustrated in the first chapter of this thesis, in order to attempt the translation of Sherley Anne Williams’s short story, I have studied several translation theories and based my work on the theories of prominent academics such as Venuti, Jakobson, Bassnett and several others. Through these enlightening theories I was able to position myself within the debate regarding the domestication and foreignization of a text, by resolving not to flatten the source text so as to make it more readable to an Italian audience, despite the unavoidability of cultural and linguistic loss throughout the translation process. In this regard, Franca Cavagnoli, in her work - “*La voce del testo. L’arte e il mestiere di tradurre*”-, mentions the French philosopher Ricoeur, who argues that it is not possible for two different languages to match perfectly and therefore one cannot expect to achieve a perfect translation. Thus, the translator must simply learn to accept the inevitability of loss in translation. Needless to say, this loss occurs both with an ethnocentric and domesticating translation strategy and, although probably to a lesser extent, with a foreignizing strategy. Through an ethnocentric strategy one completely eliminates the particularity and uniqueness of

the source culture but, unfortunately, some loss is inevitable with foreignization strategies as well. The problem of being as faithful as possible to the source culture becomes even more complex when one is faced with any sort of dialect. In such cases, the available strategies are multiple and highly debated.

AAVE, as has already been established in the previous subchapters, can be defined as a variety or dialect of the English language. Although the translator already has to make compromises and accept loss when translating a standard language, the situation becomes even more complex when he or she is faced with a dialect. Because a fundamental question of my translation work has been precisely that of finding methods and strategies for translating a dialect, I will now proceed to present the theories and studies from which I have been most inspired when making my translation choices. First of all, Franca Cavagnoli's studies have been extremely useful in terms of outlining a precise strategy of how to properly handle the presence of dialect in the source text. In her aforementioned work *La voce del testo*, Cavagnoli illustrates the different ways in which a dialect might be translated from a source language to a target language:

- By eliminating the peculiarities of a dialect in the translation process, thus limiting the text to its mere informative function, to the detriment of the aesthetic one. Therefore, this strategy renders the source text flat, transforming it into a standard target language text, devoid of any particular dialectal features. Unfortunately, as explained by Cavagnoli, in a translation the vernacular and the dialect, when confronted with the written literary language, often risk being defeated. This strategy corresponds to what Berman calls “the destruction of vernacular networks” or more simply “the effacement of the vernacular.” (quoted in Venuti, 2012; p. 244)
- By resorting to exoticizing the dialect by first translating it into the target literary language, in our case Italian, and then indicating that the source text contained a dialect by typing the translated version in italics. Cavagnoli argues that this strategy often risks confusing the reader, leading him or her to constantly wonder where those italicized phrases stem from and what is the reason behind this, as Berman calls it, “typographical procedure.” (quoted in Venuti, 2012; p. 250)

- By using an additional exoticization strategy, namely that of inventing a sort of ad hoc dialect. This strategy, however, is considered by Cavagnoli as inappropriate, as it misrepresents the idea of spontaneity that is conveyed in the source text through the original dialect. Thus, by creating a new dialect, the translator risks rendering the language too artificial and, unfortunately, often stereotyped or outright racist. One instance of a translation that supposedly respects foreign cultures by implementing foreignization strategies is translator Giuseppe Culicchia's Italian translation of Mark Twain's novel *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Anna Scacchi argues that Culicchia, in his translation, has turned AAVE into a highly irregular language comparable to that of someone who has just arrived in the United States, which is not true in the case of the African American character in this novel, that is Jim. In an effort to help make what is being discussed more understandable, Scacchi quotes an excerpt from Culicchia's translation in which Jim speaks as follows: "No, non fare male me! Mai fatto male me, a uno di fantasma. Sempre piaciuti me, morti, e tutto quello che poteva ha fatto me, per loro. Andate e ributtatevi dentro fiume, che quello sta posto di voi, e non fate male vecchio Jim, che sempre amico vi stato." (quoted in Njegosh and Scacchi, 2012; p. 280) Academic Peter Douglas, in analyzing said translation, has observed how this type of language winds up reflecting racial prejudice which makes Jim appear as a childish character who cannot speak the same language as his interlocutor, Huck. Mark Twain was well acquainted with AAVE and in his novel Jim and Huck speak two very similar forms of English: Jim's English certainly deviates from standard English, but it does so in a regular way which makes us understand how his language is based on a specific grammar and is never left to chance. However, Culicchia's Huck speaks a colloquial Italian characterized by some deviations from the standard language, especially with regard to verb tenses, while his Jim speaks an ill-defined language not unlike those that could be found in the movies of the 1930s and 1940s which depicted African Americans as being incapable of learning any language.

- By taking exoticization to the extreme and combining it with popularization, thus turning the dialect of the source language into a local dialect of the target language (the dialect spoken in Naples, Milan, or Rome, for instance). In this regard, Berman argues that:

Exoticization may join up again with popularization by striving to render a foreign vernacular with a local one, using Parisian slang to translate the lunfardo of Buenos Aires, the Normandy dialect to translate the language of the Andes or Abruzzese. Unfortunately, a vernacular clings tightly to its soil and completely resists any direct translating into another vernacular. Translation can occur only between “cultivated” languages. An exoticization that turns the foreign from abroad into the foreign at home winds up merely ridiculing the original. (quoted in Venuti, 2012; p. 250)

Concerning this strategy, Cavagnoli argues that, by seeking to turn a foreign culture into something that it is not, the translation would result in a sort of cultural appropriation.

- Finally, by avoiding creating languages which ridicule the source culture and instead, as suggested by Cavagnoli, rendering a dialect in the source language with a language characterized by features which are typical of orality in the target language. In her essay “*Negro, nero, di colore o magari abbronzato: la razza in traduzione*”, Scacchi states that in recent years, unlike in the past, there has been a decline in target-oriented strategies, thus favoring the empowerment of source cultures. While in the past there was always an attempt to mitigate otherness by trying to familiarize the foreign as much as possible, especially when African Americans were involved, today translators seem to experiment more in the rendering of these cultures. Therefore, one example of such strategies is that of rendering a dialect through orality, which is the solution I opted for while translating “Meditations on History”. By drawing inspiration from the characteristics of orality, one can avoid erasing the peculiarities of the original text and creating controversial languages, thus relying on a colloquial language characterized by elements typical of oral speech. Among these elements, Cavagnoli suggests, for example, the use of the pronoun ‘ci’ before the verb to have (‘c’ha’), the dislocation of pronouns, the use of ‘che’ instead of ‘che cosa’ at the beginning of sentences and in questions and the substitution of the subjunctive with the indicative form. Throughout my translation, these small suggestions

proved extremely useful in conferring that sense of orality to the AAVE language of some characters. Therefore, I used phrases such as “Non c’ho mai creduto che era davvero così”, using the pronoun ‘ci’ with the verb ‘to have’ and replacing the subjunctive with the indicative, “Che gli hanno fatto?”, using the more colloquial ‘che’ instead of ‘che cosa’ and I inserted other elements suggested by Cavagnoli, such as the reinforcing adverb ‘mica’, typical of speech and orality when there is a negation, in phrases such as “I bambini non sono mica facili per i negri.”

Throughout the translation, the reader will find numerous other examples of such typical elements of orality. However, despite the fact that Cavagnoli’s studies proved to be extremely valuable and have greatly helped me in tackling such a complex translation, a text so rich in cultural references inevitably leads to numerous difficulties and problems for such an inexperienced translator as I am.

2.3.1 The main difficulties encountered in the translation process

Although this translation was especially interesting due to its complexity and to the challenges it poses, the translation process was certainly not always smooth. When setting out to translate a text from a deeply multifaceted language and a culture that is profoundly different from that of the target language, it is virtually inevitable to find a number of difficulties.

In her work “*Il proprio e l’estraneo nella traduzione letteraria di lingua inglese*”, Cavagnoli (2010) argues that often, when multiple varieties of the same language are found in the same text, the translator tends to strive to eliminate the difference between varieties in order to obtain a final target text that is as homogeneous as possible. This, according to the author, can occur out of ignorance of such varieties, which are then mistakenly perceived as ‘ungrammatical’, or out of latent classism and racism on the part of the translator or reviewer. The first time I read “Meditations on History” and pondered how I could convey the cultural richness of the text, I became convinced that this short story could not be flattened and made homogeneous. As a matter of fact, I was able to identify three different forms of the same language throughout the text: the AAVE dialect spoken by Dessa and in the dialogues between the slaves; the colloquial but slightly more similar to Standard English language used by

the narrator, which at times morphs into Dessa's thoughts; and finally, Nehemiah's pompous and formal Standard English. Therefore, a major challenge was that of attempting to ensure that the translated text in Italian was not homogeneous and that the substantial differences between the three different language varieties and forms were clearly visible to the reader. Thus, we find an extremely colloquial language, which deviates from the grammatical norm of Standard Italian and is characterized by elements of orality, a colloquial and informal language, although its grammar corresponds more or less to that of Standard Italian and, for example, the subjunctive and the conditional are used correctly, and, finally, a more formal language, distinctive of the written form, with more refined and sophisticated expressions. Attempting to avoid a homogeneous Italian rendering was by no means a simple task, as it required lengthy deliberation as to the best way to interpret and give voice to each specific character and his or her specific culture. Therefore, it was quite challenging to decide the extent to which to include elements typical of orality, and to try to empathize with the character and imagine how he or she would pronounce a specific line. Naturally, the translation I have achieved is certainly improvable and tackling this difference between language varieties was one of the major difficulties I encountered throughout the translation process.

Another significant challenge was deciding how to address concepts which I encountered in the original text that are not immediately understood in Italy and do not have a corresponding linguistic or cultural equivalent, because of the specific history they are related to. There are various concepts that refer to the so-called slave culture, a major component of the history and culture of the United States which is hardly acknowledged in Italy. Overall, one might argue that anything pertaining to the organization and life on the plantations is likely to be relatively obscure to an Italian reader who has never read any such material before. Understanding some fundamental cultural aspects is therefore crucial both for the reader of the translation and for the person in charge of the translation itself. One cultural theme that will probably appear unfamiliar to the Italian reader is that of the role of women, of motherhood, and of the value the children of enslaved women held: all these concepts recur very often in the short story "Meditations on History" and I felt I needed to explore them further before I could translate the text to the best of my ability. In the story, Dessa's pregnancy plays

an important role since it saves her, at least temporarily, from a death sentence, but also because it is a central theme in her relationship with the slave Kaine. Two crucial issues related to African enslaved women are motherhood and reproduction: in an article on gender and slavery, Kirsten E. Wood illustrates how gender has influenced slavery since the very beginning. African women were considered inferior and ‘other’, since they accepted polygamy and lowered themselves to work in the fields, something that Europeans considered to be strictly a man’s job. These concepts of inferiority and otherness were therefore used to justify enslavement. Furthermore, “Easy parturition, meanwhile, suggested that African women did not share in Eve’s curse, and thus that Europeans need not treat Africans as fellow children of Adam and Eve.” (Wood, 2012; p.2) From the very beginning, therefore, the culture and, above all, the reproductive potential of African women was often the focus of attention as regards slavery. Scholar Emily West explains how black women’s motherhood was fundamental to the continuation of slavery, especially following the 1662 Virginia law of *partus sequitur ventrem*, which established that, according to the law, a slave’s child would automatically be a slave as well. This only increased the value of the reproductive capacity of female slaves in the eyes of slave owners, especially following the abolition of the international slave trade at the beginning of the nineteenth century, which made it illegal to import slaves from abroad, thus rendering the children of slaves even more valuable and crucial to the survival of slavery. Therefore, reproductive acts were part of the ways in which whites exercised their superiority and they frequently involved coercion:

As Thelma Jennings argued in 1990 and as Daina Berry has recently confirmed, when slave owners instructed two slaves to pair off, they coerced both men and women to perform sexual acts not of their own choosing. At the same time, some enslaved men were potential beneficiaries of breeding: some planters encouraged high-status men, such as drivers, to father children with whichever bondswomen they fancied. Freedpeople’s own testimony suggests that some bondsmen took full advantage of the privilege. In its varied forms, sexual coercion did a lot of work for slaveholders: it produced new chattels; it marked all slaves’ inferiority; it terrorized enslaved women and many enslaved men; and it humiliated and brainwashed many white women, all in ways that reinforced both gender and racial hierarchy. (Wood, 2012; p. 5)

Another important example of such unfamiliar cultural aspects is that of the slave driver, or simply ‘driver’, as Wood refers to it in the quotation above, which is a rather distinctive character in slave culture and in the plantation system. As far as my translation is concerned, finding an Italian term that corresponded exactly to the concept

of ‘slave driver’ has proved to be quite problematic. The reason for this is that a slave driver was a person in charge of supervising black slaves as they worked in the fields although this person was actually a black man himself. Since there is not a specific Italian term for ‘a black man supervising black slaves at work’, referring monolingual and bilingual dictionaries was of little help in resolving the dilemma. Merriam Webster’s online monolingual dictionary defines a slave driver as “a supervisor of slaves at work” or “a harsh taskmaster”. Although the first definition is not necessarily incorrect, it is definitely vague and imprecise and does not facilitate finding a correct Italian equivalent. However, the online MacMillan Dictionary and the Oxford Advanced Learner’s Dictionary offer respectively the following definitions: “someone who makes other people work very hard”, and “a person who makes people work extremely hard”. Since these definitions seemed rather unclear, I decided to search for a solution in the Garzanti bilingual dictionary in which the entry ‘slave driver’ was translated with the Italian term ‘negriero’. Afterwards, I looked up the Italian definition of the word ‘negriero’ in the *Enciclopedia Treccani* which reads:

negriero = **negriero** agg. e s. m. [der. di *negro*]. – **1.** agg. Che concerne la tratta dei negri, o degli schiavi in genere: *traffico n.; nave n.*, nave usata per il trasporto degli schiavi negri dagli imbarchi delle coste occidentali dell’Africa (dal Marocco alla Guinea) agli approdi americani. **2.** s. m. **a.** In origine, chi esercitava la tratta dei negri, e, per estens., mercante di schiavi in genere. **b.** In senso fig. (anche scherz.), datore di lavoro, padrone, capoufficio e sim. che sfrutta i propri dipendenti e, con scarso senso di umanità, li costringe a turni e a prestazioni di lavoro eccessivamente onerosi o mal retribuiti, spesso oltre i limiti stabiliti dal contratto di lavoro e dalla legge. Con questa accezione fig., è usato talvolta anche il femm. *negriera*.

This definition of the Italian word ‘negriero’ refers to meanings related to the slave trade, to slave traders or to inhumane employers and is therefore unsuitable to express the very specific concept of ‘slave driver’. Finally, seeing that my research did not lead to any adequate results, I decided to resort to an existing translation of the term contained in the Italian edition of the book “Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass” (*Narrazione della vita di Frederick Douglass*), edited by M. Giulia Fabi. Here I have come across the translation “sorvegliante di schiavi”, or simply “sorvegliante”, which the reader will find in my translation as well since, while certainly improvable and questionable, it appeared to be the only acceptable solution as it had already been used by another experienced translator.

In conclusion, although the difficulties encountered were numerous, the issues on which I have dwelt and which I have decided to illustrate in this subchapter were the

ones that I thought would best summarize the different and various complexities I was faced with while writing this MA thesis. Therefore, I hope I have painted the best possible picture of my experience of studying, analyzing, reading, translating, and writing about all of the subjects covered throughout this thesis, which I hope the reader will find as engaging and captivating as I have.

3. Translation Proposal of “Meditations on History”

The myth of the black matriarchy and the castrating black female must be consciously repudiated as myth and the black woman in her true historical contours must be resurrected. We, the black women of today, must accept the full weight of a legacy wrought in blood by our mothers in chains... as heirs to a tradition of supreme perseverance and heroic resistance, we must hasten to take our place wherever our people are forging on towards freedom.

From “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” by Angela Davis, to whom this story is respectfully, affectionately dedicated.

“Sho was hot out there today.”

“Yeah, look like it fixin to be a hot, hot summer.”

“Hope it don’t git too hot.”

“Naw, dry up the crop, it do.”

The desultory conversation eddied around her but she took no part in it. The day’s heat still hung in the air even though the sun was only a few minutes from setting. The sweaty dust that clung to her skin was reminder - and omen - enough of how hot it could get in the fields. It was enough to feel it; she didn’t have to talk about it, too. Even

Il mito del matriarcato nero e della femmina nera castratrice deve essere consapevolmente ripudiato come mito e la donna nera, nei suoi veri contorni storici, deve essere riportata in vita. Noi donne nere di oggi dobbiamo accettare tutto il peso di un’eredità forgiata con il sangue dalle nostre madri in catene... quali eredi di una tradizione di suprema perseveranza e di eroica resistenza, dobbiamo affrettarci a prendere il nostro posto ovunque il nostro popolo stia avanzando verso la libertà.

Da “Reflections on the Black Woman’s Role in the Community of Slaves” di Angela Davis, a cui questa storia è rispettosamente e affettuosamente dedicata.

“Faceva un caldo là fuori oggi”.

“Mi sa che sarà un’estate proprio calda”.

“Basta che non diventa troppo calda”.

“Nah, così si secca il raccolto”.

I frammenti di conversazione le vorticavano attorno ma lei non vi prendeva parte. Il caldo della giornata aleggiava ancora nell’aria anche se il sole sarebbe tramontato di lì a pochi minuti. La polvere sudaticcia che le si attaccava alla pelle era memoria e presagio di quanto potesse fare caldo nei campi. Era già abbastanza doverlo provare; non c’era

the ones talking, Petey and Brady and them, didn't seem very interested in what they were saying. She smiled. Talkin bout "the weather" and "the crop" - knowin they jes puttin on fo Ta'va.

"I see ol crazy Monroe been ova Mas Jeff'son place agin."

She listened more carefully now. Monroe had been trying for the longest time to get Master's permission to be with some girl over at the Jefferson plantation. But young Mistress had said all the girl was good for was housework and they didn't need another wench up to the House. And that should have been that, but Monroe kept sneaking over to see her every chance he got - which was no more than saying he made chances. As much as Boss Smith worked people in the fields, there was no way any of them were just going to *find* a chance to wander off and go "visiting". All this was common knowledge among them, though none of them ever said anything about when Monroe left or when Monroe returned unless Boss Smith learned on his own that Monroe had gone visiting before the visit was over.

"What *did* they do him?" she asked when it seemed that no one would answer - had it been Brud who asked the first time? No matter; she knew they didn't want to talk about Monroe in front of Tarver. But talk couldn't hurt Monroe

bisogno anche di parlarne. Persino quelli che parlavano, Petey, Brady e gli altri, non sembravano particolarmente interessati a quello che dicevano. Sorrise. Parlavano del "tempo" e del "raccolto", sapendo che era solo una presa in giro per Tarver.

"Quel matto di Monroe è andato un'altra volta da Padrone Jefferson".

Si mise ad ascoltare con attenzione. Monroe aveva cercato a lungo di ottenere dal Padrone il permesso di stare con una ragazza della piantagione dei Jefferson ma la Padrona aveva detto che la ragazza era buona solo a fare i lavori domestici e che non avevano bisogno di un'altra serva alla Casa. La questione sarebbe dovuta finire lì ma Monroe continuava a filarsela via di nascosto per vederla ogni volta che ne aveva l'occasione, che in realtà significa che era lui a crearsi le occasioni. Con quanto Boss Smith li faceva lavorare nei campi, non era possibile che *capitasse* l'occasione di andarsene in giro a "fare visita" a qualcuno. Tutto questo era risaputo tra loro, anche se nessuno diceva mai nulla su quando Monroe se ne andava o quando tornava, se Smith non si accorgeva da solo che Monroe era andato a far visita prima del suo ritorno.

"*Che* gli hanno fatto?", chiese quando sembrò che non avrebbe risposto nessuno. Era stato Brud a chiederlo la prima volta? Non era importante, sapeva che non volevano parlare di Monroe davanti

now and Harriet - that had been her talking – shouldn't have brought it up if she didn't want to continue with it. It was too hot to start thinking about something and then have to stop just because Harriet didn't know the difference between "talking" and "talking smart". "What they do him?" she asked again.

"Mas jes chain him out to one-a the barns; say he gon sell him," Santee, who walked a couple of feet ahead of her, said over his shoulder.

"Lawd, why won't these chi'ren learn."

Sara was always making as if she were so old, so experienced in dealing with the world. She started to reply but someone else spoke.

"Can't learn a nigga nothin."

The laugh Petey's quick answer brought took away most of the evil Sara's statement and Harriet's reluctance to answer had made her feel.

"Well," Brady said, breaking in on their laughter. "I sho wished I knowed what that lil gal – what her name is?"

"Thank it Alberta," someone supplied.

"Yeah, that's it."

a Tarver. Ma parlare non poteva nuocere a Monroe adesso e Harriet, era stata lei a parlare, non avrebbe dovuto tirar fuori la cosa se non aveva intenzione di continuare. Faceva troppo caldo per iniziare a pensare a qualcosa e poi doversi fermare solo perché Harriet non conosceva la differenza tra "parlare" e "saper parlare". "Che gli hanno fatto?", chiese di nuovo.

"Il Padrone l'ha incatenato fuori da uno dei granai; dice che lo vende", disse Santee, che camminava un po' più avanti, voltando la testa.

"Signore, questi ragazzini non imparano mai".

Sara faceva sempre quella adulta, quella esperta nell'affrontare il mondo. Fece per rispondere ma qualcun altro parlò.

"Ai negri non c'è verso di imparare niente".

La risata che seguì la battuta di Petey portò via gran parte della brutta sensazione che l'affermazione di Sara e la riluttanza a rispondere di Harriet le avevano provocato.

"Beh", disse Brady interrompendo le loro risate. "Vorrei proprio sapere che c'ha quella ragazza... com'è che si chiama?"

"Mi pare Alberta", rispose qualcuno.

“Well, whatever it is, I sho wished I knowed what she got to make a nigga walk fifteen miles a night and jes be *da’in* a beating when he get back.”

“Don’t know,” Santee said loudly, “but it sho *gots* to be goood.”

“This one nigga won’t never find out.” Charlie was laughing with the others even as he said it.

“Now you talkin some sense.” She hated it when Tarver broke in on their conversations. Since Boss Smith had made him driver, he thought he knew everything and was better than everybody else. She waited, her lips poked out, knowing whatever he said would make her angry. “Much give-away stuff as it is around here, ain’t no way in the world I’d chance what Boss Smith put behind them licks jes to get some mo somewhere else.”

Only way *you* get any, at all, is cause if a woman don’t, you see Boss Smith or Mas hear bout it. But she didn’t say it. Tarver wouldn’t even have to run to Boss Smith or Master with that. He’d just slap her in the mouth and no one there would go against the skinny driver. That would mean that two – or however many more helped her – would get whipped instead of just one. But she couldn’t resist cutting her eyes knowingly at the women who walked on either side of her. Polly looked as though she wasn’t listening but Martha’s lips were pushed forward in a taut line

“Sì, esatto”.

“Beh, vorrei proprio sapere cosa c’ha questa qui per far fare a un negro quindici miglia ogni sera per poi buscarle di sicuro quando torna”.

“Non lo so”, disse Santee ad alta voce, “ma *deve* essere qualcosa di mooolto buono”.

“Questo negro qua certo non lo saprà mai”. Charlie rise con gli altri mentre lo diceva.

“Adesso sì che dici cose sensate”. Odiava quando Tarver si intrometteva nelle loro conversazioni. Da quando Boss Smith lo aveva nominato sorvegliante di schiavi pensava di sapere tutto e di essere migliore di tutti gli altri. Rimase in attesa con la bocca corruciata, consapevole che qualsiasi cosa lui avesse detto l’avrebbe fatta arrabbiare. “Con tutta la roba che ti danno gratis qua, di sicuro non vado a beccare le botte da Boss Smith solo per averne di più da qualche altra parte”.

Tu puoi avere qualche donna solo perché, se lei non ci sta, vai a dirlo a Boss Smith o al Padrone. Ma non lo disse. Tarver non aveva neanche da andare da Smith o dal Padrone a riferirglielo. Le avrebbe semplicemente tirato una sberla e nessuno si sarebbe messo contro il sorvegliante smilzo perché questo avrebbe significato che, invece di una sola, almeno due o più persone sarebbero state frustate per averla aiutata. Tuttavia, non seppe resistere

flattened their fullness. Martha was the only lone woman Tarver never passed sly remarks with, and that was saying something. Since he had been made driver, Tarver wasn't even above trying to pat on women who already had men. But Tarver hadn't so much as looked at Martha for some time, now, and if he did say something to her it was only an order about what work she should do.

Martha put her hand on her hip, pulling the shapeless over-blouse she wore tight against her heavy breasts, emphasizing the smallness of her waist, and she swung her hips in an exaggerated arc. Even dirty and with that old sweaty head rag on her hand, she looked good. "Yeah, I give it away – to some; othas got to take it." There was a choked kind of laughter from the men and the other women hid their smiles behind their hands. Go on, girl, she thought and then, looking over at Tarver, she saw the muscle along his neck jump. "Too bad you ain't gived Monroe none; if it all that good he might woulda stayed home," she laughed as she said it and pushed Martha lightly on the shoulder.

"Naw, Monroe was one that'd had to take it," Martha said with a sigh that caused even more laughter.

And she relaxed. Tarver was laughing, too.

"I jes meant, I don't want to *love*..." She liked to

dallo schioccare uno sguardo d'intesa alle donne che le camminavano di lato. Polly aveva l'aria di non stare ascoltando ma le labbra di Martha erano tirate per lo sdegno. Martha era l'unica donna sola a cui Tarver non rivolgeva commenti maliziosi, e il che era tutto dire. Da quando era stato nominato sorvegliante, Tarver non si faceva nemmeno scrupoli ad allungare le mani su quelle che già avevano un uomo. Ma da un po' di tempo nemmeno la guardava e, se le diceva qualcosa, era un ordine riguardo il lavoro da svolgere.

Martha si mise la mano sul fianco, tirando la camicia informe che indossava stretta contro i suoi seni pesanti e sottolineando la vita snella, e scrollò esageratamente i fianchi. Anche sporca e con quella vecchia bandana sudaticcia in mano aveva comunque un bell'aspetto. "Beh, io ad alcuni la do. Altri invece se la devono prendere". Ci fu una specie di risata soffocata da parte degli uomini e le altre donne sorrisero coprendosi la bocca con le mani. Vai così, ragazza, pensò lei e poi, rivolgendo lo sguardo verso Tarver, vide il muscolo del suo collo guizzare. "Peccato che non l'hai data a Monroe; se sei così brava magari rimaneva a casa", rise mentre lo diceva e diede una leggera pacca sulla spalla a Martha.

"Nah, Monroe è uno di quelli che se la devono prendere", disse Martha con un sospiro che provocò ancora più risate.

watch the older man shake his head like that when he talked; no matter what he said after he did his head like that, it was bound to be funny. “No, I’m a nigga,” and again the shake of his head, “what can’t *love* where he don’t *live*.”

“Listen to Charlie talk!”

She didn’t join in their laughter this time. Someone was coming down the quarters. It was him. She knew that even before he raised his hand or opened his mouth – who else could still move like that at the end of the day, like he’d just started out fresh not two minutes ago; even without the banjo banging against his back, she would have known him – and she quickened her steps.

“Somebody sho is walkin fas all a sudden.”

She heard the voice behind her as she pushed past the people in front of her but she paid no attention; already, and almost of their own will, her lips were stretched wide in a grin. She could see him clearly now though he was still some distance away, see the big head of nappy hair and the pants hiked up around his waist so that his dusty ankles showed. She stayed in front of the others, but now used the hoe like a cane, swinging it high in pretend nonchalance.

Hey, hey, sweet mamma

Allora si rilassò. Anche Tarver rideva.

“Volevo dire che non voglio *fare all’amore...*”. Le piaceva osservare l’uomo più vecchio scuotere la testa quando parlava; qualsiasi cosa diceva, quando scuoteva la testa in quel modo, c’era di sicuro da ridere. “No, io sono uno” e scosse di nuovo la testa, “che non può *fare all’amore se non dove vive*”.

“Sentite come parla Charlie!”.

Questa volta lei non si unì alle loro risate. Qualcuno stava scendendo verso le baracche. Era lui. Lo sapeva ancora prima che alzasse la mano o aprisse la bocca - chi altri poteva ancora muoversi così a fine giornata, come se avesse iniziato neanche da due minuti; anche senza il banjo che gli sbatteva contro la schiena, lei lo avrebbe riconosciuto - e accelerò il passo.

“Qualcuno all’improvviso va di fretta”.

Sentì la voce dietro di sé mentre si faceva strada tra le persone che le stavano davanti ma non le prestò attenzione; le sue labbra, quasi di loro spontanea volontà, si erano già aperte in un gran sorriso. Riusciva a vederlo chiaramente adesso, anche se era ancora un po’ distante, vedeva la massa di capelli crespi e i pantaloni tirati su in vita che mettevano in mostra le caviglie polverose. Rimase davanti agli altri ma adesso usava la zappa come un bastone, dondolandolo in alto con finta

His voice high and sweet and clear as running water in a settled stream, always made her feel so good, so like dancing just for the joy of moving and all the moving would be straight to him.

*Say, hey now, sweet mamma
Don't you hear me callin you?*

“Seem like they been wid each otha long nough now fo them to stop all that foolishness.”

Huh; you jes mad cause you ain't got nobody to be foolish wid. But she didn't say it aloud. That had been Jean Wee's voice and Jean Wee's man, Tucker, had been sold to Charleston not three months ago. She simply quickened her steps.

Hey, hey, sweet mamma, this Kaine Poppa

His arms were outstretched and though she couldn't hear them, she knew his fingers were snapping to the same rhythm that moved his body.

Kaine Poppa calling his woman's name

Behind her, they were laughing. Kaine could always give you something to laugh about. He made jokes on the banjo, came out with a song made up of old sayings and words that had just popped into his head a second before he opened his mouth, traded words with the men or teased her and the other women. But she never more than

nonchalance.

Hey, hey, mamma

La sua voce alta, dolce e chiara come l'acqua corrente in un ruscello calmo la faceva sempre sentire così bene, le faceva venir voglia di ballare solo per la gioia di muoversi, e quel muoversi l'avrebbe portata dritta da lui.

Ascolta, mamma

Non senti che ti sto chiamando?

“Stanno insieme da così tanto che possono pure smetterla con queste scemenze”.

Ah, ti dà fastidio solo perché tu non hai nessuno con cui farle queste scemenze. Ma non lo disse ad alta voce. Era stata Jean Wee a parlare e il suo uomo, Tucker, era stato venduto a Charleston neanche tre mesi prima. Solo, andò più veloce.

*Hey, hey, mamma, sono il tuo papino
Kaine*

Lui aveva le braccia tese e, anche se lei non poteva sentirlo, sapeva che stava schioccando le dita allo stesso ritmo con cui muoveva il corpo.

Papino Kaine chiama la sua donna

Dietro di lei gli altri ridevano. Kaine riusciva sempre a farti ridere. Faceva battute sul banjo, se ne

half heard the laughter he created. By then she'd thrown the hoe aside and was running, running... He caught her and lifted her off the ground and the banjo banged against her hands as she threw her arms around him. "What you doin down here so early?" She was scared. After that first spurt of joy seeing him always brought, she would get frightened.

Lawd, if Boss Smith saw him – And that no-good Ta'va was still behind them – Why he want *do* crazy thangs like this.

"They thank I'm still up there at that ol piece-a greenhouse trying to make strawberries grow all year round." This was said into her neck as they turned to walk on. Then he laughed aloud. "Why I jes got hungry fo my woman," he said with a glance back over his shoulders.

There was appreciative laughter from behind, but neither the laughter nor his words eased her fear. There must have been something for him to do back at the Big House. Either Childer could have found him a closet to turn out, some piece of furniture to move so the girls could clean behind it, or Aunt Lefonia might have had some spoons or some such to polish in the kitchen. And she knew Emmalina would have wanted him to help serve supper if there was nothing else he had to do. Master was always complaining about how they couldn't afford to have a nigger sitting

usciva con canzoni piene di vecchi modi di dire e parole che gli passavano per la testa un secondo prima di aprir bocca, faceva battute con gli uomini e punzecchiava lei e le altre donne. Ma, lei sentiva appena l'allegria che suscitava. A quel punto aveva già buttato via la zappa e correva, correva...

Lui la prese e la sollevò da terra e le sue mani sbatterono contro il banjo mentre gli gettava le braccia al collo. "Che ci fai qua così presto?". Era spaventata. Dopo quel primo sprazzo di gioia che provava ogni volta che lo vedeva, poi le veniva paura.

Dio, se Boss Smith lo vedeva – e quel poco di buono di Tarver era ancora dietro di loro – Perché faceva sempre delle pazzie come questa?

"Pensano che sto ancora là in quella serra vecchia a cercare di far crescere fragole tutto l'anno". Lo disse con il viso contro il collo di lei mentre si giravano per proseguire. Dopodiché lui rise ad alta voce. "Avevo voglia della mia donna", disse lanciando uno sguardo alle sue spalle.

Da dietro arrivò una risata di apprezzamento ma né le risate né le parole di lui alleviarono la sua paura. Sicuramente doveva esserci stato qualcosa da fare alla Casa. Childer poteva trovargli un armadio da svuotare o un mobile da spostare, così che le ragazze potevano pulire là dietro, o magari Zia Lefonia voleva che lucidasse dei cucchiaini, o qualcosa del genere, in cucina. Inoltre, sapeva che

around eating his head off while he waited for some flowers to grow. But Young Mistress would cry and say how the gardens at the House had always been the showplace of the county. Then, so Aunt Lefonia said – and Aunt Lefonia always knew – Old Mistress would get a pinched look around her mouth and her nose would turn up like she'd just smelled the assfidity bag Merry-Day wore around her neck when she had a cold in her chest, and start talking about how Master was forever trying to drag the Reeves down in the mud where he and the rest of the Vaughams had come from. And Master would really get mad then and say the Reeves had finally arrived at their true place in life and since it was his money that kept the House a showplace, that nigger, meaning Kaine, better turn his hand to whatever needed doing. That would be the end of it until next time Master got peeved about something and he would start again. Kaine wouldn't tell her about it, but Aunt Lefonia and Emmalina did and she was afraid that someday Master wouldn't care about Young Mistress' tears or Old Mistress throwing his family up in his face and would sell Kaine to Charleston or the next coffle that passed their way.

“You jes askin fo trouble, comin down here like this.”

“Baby, I'm all *ready* in trouble.”

Emmalina di sicuro voleva che la aiutasse a servire la cena, se non c'era altro da fare. Il Padrone si lamentava sempre che non potevano permettersi di avere un negro che se ne stava seduto pigramente a mangiare mentre aspettava che crescesse qualche fiore. La Padrona giovane, però, si metteva a piangere e a dire che i giardini della Casa erano sempre stati l'attrazione della contea. Allora, così diceva Zia Lefonia, che sapeva sempre tutto, la Padrona vecchia stringeva le labbra e arricciava il naso come se avesse appena odorato il sacchetto di assafetida che Merry-Day portava al collo quando aveva il raffreddore e iniziava a dire che il Padrone cercava sempre di trascinare i Reeves nel fango da cui lui e il resto dei Vaugham erano venuti. A quel punto il Padrone si arrabbiava davvero e diceva che i Reeves avevano finalmente trovato il loro vero posto nel mondo e, dato che erano i suoi soldi a far rimanere la Casa un'attrazione, quel negro, ossia Kaine, faceva meglio a dedicarsi a qualunque cosa ci fosse da fare. La questione finiva lì, almeno finché il Padrone non si infastidiva per qualcos'altro e ricominciava da capo. Kaine non le diceva niente ma Zia Lefonia ed Emmalina sì, e lei temeva che un giorno il Padrone non si sarebbe curato delle lacrime della Padrona giovane o della Padrona vecchia che gli sputava in faccia quello che pensava della sua famiglia, e avrebbe venduto Kaine a Charleston o alla prima colonna di schiavi che passava da quelle parti.

“Ti cacci nei guai se vieni qui così”.

The quarters were filling up now, people coming in from other parts of the plantation, the children who were too small to work coming back from Mamma Hattie's cabin where she kept an eye on them during the day. A few fires had already been lighted and she could smell frying fat-back and wood smoke. Her breath caught at his words.

“What you mean?”

“Mean a nigga ain't born to nothin but trouble.” Lee Tower, who headed the gang that worked the rice fields, stopped as he spoke “and if a nigga don't cou't pleasure, he ain't likely to git none.”

He was the best driver on the plantation, getting work out of his people with as much kindness as he could show, not with the whip like Luke, who headed the gang that Master hired out to cut timber, or Tarver who drove the group she worked with. But she couldn't return Lee Tower's smile or laugh when Carrie Mae, who had come up behind him carrying her baby on her hip, said, “Naw, Mas done sent his butt down here to git it *out o'* trouble; takin care that breedin bidness he been let slide.”

“Now yo'all know I be trying.” Kaine was laughing too. “But I got something here *guaranteed* to ease a troublin mind.” And he patted her shoulder and pinched her lightly in her ribs.

“Piccola, ci sto già nei guai”.

Le baracche si stavano riempiendo di persone che arrivavano da altre parti della piantagione e di bambini troppo piccoli per lavorare che tornavano dalla capanna di Mamma Hattie, dove lei li teneva d'occhio durante il giorno. C'erano già alcuni fuochi accesi e lei sentiva l'odore di lardo fritto e di fumo della legna. Nel sentire quelle parole le si mozzò il fiato.

“Che vuol dire?”.

“Che un negro ci nasce nei guai”. Lee Tower, che guidava il gruppo che lavorava nelle risaie, si fermò mentre parlava “e se un negro non se lo va a cercare il piacere, finisce che non lo avrà mai”.

Era il miglior sorvegliante della piantagione e faceva lavorare la sua gente con tutta la gentilezza possibile, non con la frusta come faceva Luke, che guidava il gruppo che il Padrone aveva dato in appalto per tagliare la legna, o come Tarver che dirigeva il gruppo dove lavorava lei. Tuttavia, non riuscì a ricambiare il sorriso di Lee Tower o a ridere quando Carrie Mae, che era apparsa dietro di lui con il suo bambino in braccio, disse, “Nah, il Padrone ha spedito il suo culo quaggiù per toglierlo dai guai e finalmente darsi da fare a figliare”.

“Lo sapete bene che mi ci impegno”, anche Kaine

Lee Tower and Carrie Mae laughed and passed on.

“Kaine –”

“Lefonia gived me –”

“Afta how much talkin?”

“Didn’t take much.”

The laugh was choked out of her; she had looked into his eyes. They were alive, gleaming with dancing lights (no matter what mamma-nem said; his eyes did sparkle) that danced only for her. And when they danced, she would love him so much that she had to touch him or smile. She smiled and he grinned down at her. “Don’t neva take much – you got the right word, and you know when it come to eatin beef, I *steal* the right word if it ain’t hidin somewhere round my own self tongue,” he said as he pulled her in their doorway.

She laughed despite herself; he could talk and wheedle just about anything he wanted. “And I pulled some new greens from out the patch and seasoned em wid jes a touch o’ fatback.”

“A touch was all we had. Kaine, what -”

“HMMMM mmmmm. But that ain’t all I wants a

rideva. “Ma qua ho qualcosa che *sicuramente* dà pace alle smanie”. Le diede un buffetto sulla spalla e un pizzicotto sulle costole.

Lee Tower e Carrie Mae risero e proseguirono.

“Kaine -”.

“Lefonia m’ha dato -”.

“E quanto c’è voluto?”.

“Non tanto”.

Le uscì una risata strozzata; lo aveva guardato negli occhi. Erano vivi e brillavano di luci danzanti (non contava cosa diceva mamma; i suoi occhi brillavano davvero) che ballavano solo per lei. Quando ballavano, sentiva di amarlo così tanto che doveva toccarlo o sorridere. Sorrise e lui le rispose con una risata. “Non ci vuole mai molto - hai usato la parola giusta, e sai che quando si tratta di mangiare un bocconcino del genere, la parola la *rubo* se non ce l’ho da qualche parte sulla punta della lingua” le disse tirandola dentro casa.

Lei rise suo malgrado; era bravo a parlare e ottenere quello che voleva con le lusinghe. “Ho anche preso delle nuove verdure dall’orto e le ho condite con un po’ di lardo”.

“Era tutto quello che avevamo. Kaine, che –”.

touch of”, he said holding her closer and pulling the dirty, sweaty rag from her head. “Touch ain’t neva jes satisfied me.”

She laughed and relaxed against him. They were inside, the rickety door shut against the gathering dusk. “Us greens gon get cold.”

“But us ain’t.” He stood with one leg pressed lightly between her thighs, his lips nibbling the curve of her neck.

“I got to clean up a little.” She said it more to tease, to prolong this little moment, than because she really felt the need to wash. Sometimes he got mad – not because she was dirty, but because the dirt reminded him that she worked the fields all day. She couldn’t say why his being angry about this pleased her so, but it did. Or, sometimes, he would start a small tussle: she trying to get to the washbasin, he holding her back, saying she wasn’t that dirty and even dirty she was better than most men got when their women were clean. And that response pleased her, too. She liked the little popping sound “men” made as it came from his mouth.

He ran the tip of his tongue down the side of her neck. “Ain’t no wine they got up to the House good as this.” His fingers caught in her short kinky hair, his palms rested gently on her high cheekbones. “Ain’t no way I’m eva gon let you

“Mm mm. E voglio anche un po’ di qualcos’altro”, disse stringendola a sé e togliendole il fazzoletto sporco e sudato dalla testa. “Un po’ non mi è mai bastato”.

Rise e si rilassò contro di lui. Erano dentro casa, la porta traballante chiusa a separarli dal crepuscolo imminente. “Le verdure ci diventano fredde”.

“Ma noi no”. La sua gamba spingeva leggera tra le cosce di lei, mentre con le labbra le mordicchiava la curva del collo.

“Devo darmi una pulita”. Lo disse più per stuzzicarlo, per prolungare questo piccolo momento, che perché sentisse davvero il bisogno di lavarsi. A volte lui si arrabbiava - non perché lei era sporca, ma perché la sporcizia gli ricordava che lavorava nei campi tutto il giorno. Non sapeva dire perché il suo arrabbiarsi per questo le faceva tanto piacere, ma era così. Oppure, a volte, si metteva a fare la lotta: lei cercava di raggiungere il lavandino, lui la tratteneva dicendole che non era così tanto sporca e che, anche da sporca, era meglio delle donne pulite degli altri maschi. Anche questa risposta le faceva piacere. Le piaceva lo schiocco con cui la parola “maschi” gli usciva dalla bocca.

Le fece scorrere la punta della lingua lungo un lato del collo. “Su alla Casa non hanno un vino buono come te”. Le dita di lui si infilarono tra i suoi capelli crespi, i palmi posati dolcemente sui suoi

get away from me, girl. Where else I gon find eyes like this?”. He kissed her closed lids, his hands sliding down her neck to her shoulders and back, his fingers kneading the flesh under her tow sack dress, and she wanted him to touch all of her, trembled as she thought of his lips on her breasts, his hands on her stomach, or his legs between her own. “Mmmmmm mmmm.” He pulled up her dress and his hands were inside her long drawers. “I sho like this be-hind.” His hands cupped her buttocks. “Tell me all this goodness ain’t mine,” he dared her. “Whoa! And when it git to movin,” and he moved, “and I git to movin and we git to movin – Lawd, I knowed it was gon be sweet but not this doggone *good!*”

This was love talk that made her feel almost as beautiful as the way he touched her. She shivered and pulled at the coarse material of his shirt, not needing the anger or the other words, now, because his hands and mouth made her feel so loved. His skin was warm and dry under her hands and even though she could barely wait to feel all of him against all of her, she leaned a little away from him. “Sho you want to be wid this ol dirty woman? Sho you want –”

His lips were on hers, nibbling and pulling, and the sentence ended in a groan. Her thighs spread for him, her hips moved for him. Lawd, this man sho know how to love...

zigomi alti. “Tesoro, sicuro non ti lascio scappare, mai. Dove li trovo altri occhi così?”. Le baciò le palpebre chiuse mentre le sue mani le scivolavano lungo il collo, fino alle spalle e alla schiena e le dita le massaggiavano la carne sotto la veste di juta. Voleva che la toccasse dappertutto, tremava al pensiero delle sue labbra sui suoi seni, le mani sulla sua pancia, o le gambe di lui tra le sue. “Mm mmm”. Lui le sollevò il vestito e le infilò le mani nelle braghe. “Quanto mi piace questo sedere”. Le posò le mani sul didietro. “Dimmi che tutto questo ben di Dio non è mio”, la sfidò. “Wow! E quando si muove”, e si mosse, “e quando io mi muovo e ci muoviamo insieme - Dio, sapevo che sarebbe stato bello, ma non pensavo così *tanto!*”.

Queste parole d’amore la facevano sentire bella quasi quanto il modo in cui lui la toccava. Tremò e si aggrappò alla stoffa ruvida della sua camicia, senza più bisogno della rabbia o di altre parole ora, perché le mani e la bocca di lui la facevano sentire così amata. La sua pelle era calda e asciutta sotto le sue mani e, anche se non vedeva l’ora di sentire tutto il corpo di lui contro il suo, si allontanò leggermente. “Sicuro che vuoi stare con questa donna vecchia e sporca? Sicuro che vuoi –”.

Lui posò le labbra sulle sue, mordicchiando e tirando, e la frase terminò con un gemito. Le sue cosce si aprirono e i suoi fianchi si mossero per lui. Dio, certo quest’uomo sa come si fa all’amore...

It was gone as suddenly as it had come, the memory so strong, so clear it was like being with him all over again. Muscles contracted painfully deep inside her and she could feel the warm moistness oozing between her thighs. There was only the thin cotton coverlet that provided no weight and little warmth, the noise the corn husk pallet made each time she moved. It was moonlight that shined in her eyes, not his eyes that had been the color of lemon-tea and honey. She lay still but she could not conjure the visions again, and finally she turned her back to the tiny window where the moonlight entered, pulled the coverlet up around her breasts and closed her eyes.

Hey, hey, sweet mamma

(She knew the words, it was his voice that had been the music.)

*Hey, sweet mamma, this Kaine Poppa
Kaine Poppa callin his woman' name.*

*He can pop his poppa so good
Make his sweet woman take to a cane.*

MEDITATIONS ON HISTORY

The Hughes Farm

Il ricordo sparì improvvisamente, così come era arrivato, tanto forte e chiaro che le sembrava di essere di nuovo insieme a lui. I muscoli si contraevano dolorosamente dentro di lei e sentiva la calda umidità che trasudava tra le cosce. C'era solo la sottile coperta di cotone, che non aveva peso e dava poco calore, e il rumore che il pagliericcio di foglie di mais faceva ogni volta che si muoveva. Era il chiaro di luna a brillarle negli occhi e non gli occhi di lui, che erano del colore del tè al limone e del miele. Rimase immobile ma non riuscì ad evocare di nuovo quelle visioni e, alla fine, diede le spalle alla finestrella da cui entrava la luce della luna, si tirò la coperta sul petto e chiuse gli occhi.

Hey, hey, mamma

(Sapeva le parole, ma la musica era la voce di lui).

*Hey, mamma, sono il tuo papino Kaine
Papino Kaine chiama la sua donna.
Fatti trovare pronta
Sarai mia prima che il sole tramonta.*

MEDITAZIONI SULLA STORIA

Fattoria Hughes

Near Linden

Marengo County, Alabama.

June 9, 1829.

I must admit to a slight yearning for the comfort of the Linden House (comfort that is quite remarkable, considering Linden's out-of-the-way location), but Sheriff Hughes' generous offer of hospitality enables me to be close at hand for the questioning of the negress and the circumstance must outweigh the paucity of creature comforts which his gable room provides.

The negress is housed here in a little-used root cellar until such time as sentencing can be carried out. Hughes told me at dinner tonight the amusing story of how the negress came to be housed in his cellar. It seems that the town drunk, a rather harmless fellow who usually spends some portion of each week in housing provided at public expense, protested the idea of having to share quarters with the negress over an extended period of time. The other blacks involved in the uprising had, of course, been given a speedy trial and the sentences were carried out with equal dispatch, so the drunk – I cannot recall his name – had not been too inconvenienced. He drew the line, however, at protracted living with the wench in the close quarters which the smallness of the jail necessitates. In this he was supported by his wife, a papist from New Orleans but otherwise a good woman and normally a very meek one. She was

Vicino Linden

Marengo County, Alabama.

9 giugno, 1829.

Devo ammettere un certo desiderio per le comodità della Casa di Linden (comodità piuttosto notevoli, se si considera la posizione fuori mano di Linden) ma la generosa ospitalità offerta dallo sceriffo Hughes mi permette di essere a portata di mano per interrogare la negra e tale circostanza deve prevalere sulla scarsità di comfort del suo abbaino.

La negra alloggerà qui, in uno scantinato poco utilizzato, fino a quando non si potrà eseguire la sentenza. Stasera a cena Hughes mi ha raccontato la divertente storia di come sia finita nella sua cantina. Pare che l'ubriacone della città, un tipo piuttosto innocuo che è solito trascorrere parte della settimana in alloggi forniti a spese della comunità, abbia protestato all'idea di dover condividere l'alloggio con la negra per un periodo di tempo prolungato. Gli altri neri coinvolti nella ribellione, naturalmente, erano stati sottoposti a dei processi rapidi e le sentenze erano state eseguite con la stessa celerità, perciò l'ubriacone - di cui non mi sovviene il nome - non aveva avuto troppi incomodi. Tuttavia, egli aveva imposto un limite per quanto riguardava la protratta convivenza con la ragazza nello spazio ristretto che l'angusta prigione impone. Sua moglie, una papista di New Orleans che, aldilà di questo, è una donna buona e solitamente molto docile, ha preso le sue parti. La

convinced that the girl had the “evil eye” and was also possessed of a knowledge of the black arts – for how else, she asked at one point, could the negress have supplied the members of the coffle with the files which freed them when there were none to be had (a provocative question, but Hughes says that it was never proved that it was the negress who supplied the files). The woman demanded of Hughes, and later, when Hughes could give her no satisfaction, of the judge, the mayor and several of the large landowners in the vicinity, that the girl be moved or her husband be provided with separate quarters. She raised such a rumpus, invoking saints and all manner of idols, and pestered the gentlemen so repeatedly that Hughes in desperation offered his root cellar and, as his farm is also only a short distance from town, the village fathers jumped at his offer. Calmer reflection showed them the wisdom of this hasty decision: Jemina (a singularly inappropriate name for one of her size), the house servant here, is a noted midwife and excellent care is thus close at hand when the negress’s time comes.

There is, however, some uncertainty about when that time will be. The Court, at Wilson’s request, has postponed the hanging until after the birth of the child, which, according to Wilson’s coffle manifest, should be two to three months hence. Hughes, however, says that it will be sooner. Jemina declares that the wench is eight months

donna era convinta che la ragazza avesse il “malocchio” e che fosse a conoscenza delle arti oscure - poiché come altro avrebbe potuto la negra, chiese ad un certo punto, fornire ai membri della colonna di schiavi le lime che li avevano liberati se non vi era alcun modo di averle (domanda provocatoria, ma Hughes sostiene che non sia mai stato provato che le abbia fornite lei). La moglie dell’ubriaccone aveva preteso da Hughes, e più tardi, quando egli non aveva potuto darle alcuna soddisfazione, dal giudice, dal sindaco e da alcuni dei grandi proprietari terrieri nelle vicinanze, che la ragazza fosse trasferita o che al marito venisse fornito un alloggio separato. Aveva scatenato un tale putiferio, invocando santi e ogni sorta di idoli, e tanto tormentato i gentiluomini che Hughes, in preda alla disperazione, ha offerto il suo scantinato e, poiché la sua fattoria è poco distante dalla città, le autorità del villaggio si sono precipitate ad accettare l’offerta. Questa decisione affrettata si è rivelata poi saggia ripensandoci con calma: Jemina (un nome singolarmente inappropriato per una donna della sua stazza), la domestica di casa qui, è una nota levatrice e, pertanto, le sue eccellenti cure saranno a portata di mano quando arriverà il momento del parto per la negra.

Vi è, tuttavia, una qualche incertezza su quando quel momento arriverà. La Corte, su richiesta di Wilson, ha rinviato l’impiccagione a dopo la nascita del bambino, che, secondo la lista di schiavi di Wilson, dovrebbe essere da qui a due o tre mesi.

gone now and the entire district swears by the woman's prognostications. It is all in one to me, for, however far gone she proves to be, there is ample time for me to conclude my investigation of this incident before the law extracts the final punishment for her crimes. And the price will be paid. She will hang from the same gallows where her confederates forfeited their lives for the part they played in that perfidious and, fortunately, unsuccessful uprising.

It is late and the branches of the huge oak which commands the back yard brush softly at the shutters. It is a restful sound and the sense of urgency which had driven me since first I heard of this latest instance of negro savagery has finally eased. The retelling of this misadventure will make a splendid opening for the book and I am properly elated that I managed to reach Linden before the last of the culprits had come by their just deserts. It will be a curious, an interesting process to delve into the mind of one of the instigators of this dreadful plot. Is it merely the untamed, perhaps even *untamable* savagery of their natures which causes them to rise up so treacherously and repudiate the natural order of the universe which has already decreed their place, or is it something more amenable to human manipulation, the lack of some disciplinary measure or restraining word which brought Wilson and countless others to such tragic consequences? Useless to ponder now, for if I do

Hughes, tuttavia, sostiene che avverrà prima. Secondo Jemina la ragazza è ormai all'ottavo mese e l'intero distretto si fida ciecamente dei pronostici della donna. È indifferente per me, poiché, a qualunque punto della gravidanza si trovi, avrò tutto il tempo di concludere l'indagine su questo fatto prima che la legge le infligga la punizione finale per i suoi crimini. E ne pagherà il prezzo. Sarà appesa alla stessa forca dove i suoi compagni hanno perso la propria vita per il ruolo svolto in quella perfida e, fortunatamente, infruttuosa rivolta.

È tardi e i rami dell'enorme quercia che domina il cortile posteriore sfregano dolcemente contro le persiane. È un suono rilassante e quella sensazione di urgenza da cui sono stato preso fin dalla prima volta che ho sentito parlare di quest'ultimo caso di barbarie negra si è finalmente attenuata. Il racconto di questo infausto evento sarà una splendida introduzione per il libro e sono davvero lieto di essere riuscito a raggiungere Linden prima che l'ultimo dei colpevoli avesse la punizione che si merita. Scavare nella mente di uno degli istigatori di questo terribile complotto sarà un processo curioso ed interessante. È solo la ferocia non ammansita, forse persino impossibile da ammansire, della loro natura che li spinge ad insorgere in modo così insidioso e a ripudiare l'ordine naturale dell'universo che ha già decretato il loro posto, o è qualcosa che si può ricondurre all'intervento umano, come la mancanza di misure disciplinari o di chiari divieti, ad aver portato

not discover the answer with this one negress, I have every confidence that I shall find an answer in the other investigations I shall make.

June 10, 1829.

I have seen her: the virago, the she-devil who even now haunts the nightmares of Wilson. I had not thought it possible that one of his calling could be so womanish, for surely slave-trading is a more hazardous profession than that of doctor, lawyer or *writer*. Yet, this wench, scarcely more than a pickaninny – and the coffle manifest puts her age somewhere in the neighborhood of fifteen or sixteen – and one of such diminutive size at that is the self-same wench whom Wilson called a “raging nigger bitch.” In recollecting the uprising, it is the thought of *this* darky which even now, weeks after the events, brings a sweat to his brow and a tremble to his hand. Why, her belly is bigger than she is and birthing the child she carries – a strong, lusty one if the size of her stomach is any indication – will no doubt kill her long before the hangman has a chance at her throat. Oh, she may be sullen and stubbornly silent. Although, in this initial visit, she appeared more like a wild and timorous animal finally brought to bay, for upon perceiving that Hughes was not alone she moved quickly if clumsily to the farthest reaches of the root cellar which her leg iron allows. Hughes attempted to coax her in a really remarkable approximation of what he

Wilson e innumerevoli altri a conseguenze così tragiche? Inutile pensarci ora poiché, se non scopro la risposta con questa negra, ho piena fiducia di trovarla nelle altre indagini che svolgerò.

10 giugno, 1829.

L’ho vista: la virago, la diavolessa che ancora oggi infesta gli incubi di Wilson. Non credevo fosse possibile per qualcuno che svolge la sua professione essere una tale donnicciola, essendo quella della tratta degli schiavi una professione sicuramente più pericolosa di quella del medico, dell’avvocato o dello *scrittore*. Eppure, questa ragazza, poco più di una marmocchia – la lista degli schiavi in vendita la colloca da qualche parte nella fascia compresa tra i quindici e i sedici anni – e per giunta così piccola di statura, è la stessa che Wilson ha definito una “maledetta negra furiosa”. Nel rievocare la rivolta è il pensiero di *questa* negra che ancora oggi, settimane dopo gli eventi, gli fa sudare la fronte e tremare la mano. Beh, la sua pancia è più grande di lei e il parto del bambino che porta in grembo - un bambino forte e vigoroso, se la dimensione del suo ventre ne è un indizio - la ucciderà senza dubbio molto prima che il boia possa avvicinarsi alla sua gola. Oh, può darsi che sarà imbronciata e ostinatamente silenziosa. Benché, in questa prima visita, sia apparsa più come un animale selvaggio e timoroso messo finalmente alle strette, in quanto, percependo che Hughes non era solo, si è spostata rapidamente, anche se in maniera impacciata, verso la parte più

says is her own speech, saying that I was not there to aggravate her with further questions as the other white men had done. She, however, would approach us no closer than just enough to ease the tension on her chains. Still, I can imagine the dangerously excitable state which Hughes confirms characterized her actions upon first being apprehended. According to Hughes, she was like a cat at that time, spitting, biting, scratching, apparently unconcerned about the harm her actions might bring to her child. The prosecutor was naturally relentless in his questioning and it is only since removed to this farm that she has achieved a state of relative calm. Yet, to see in this one common negress the she-devil of Wilson's delirium is the grossest piece of nonsense. Hughes agrees with me, saying privately that he always believed that Wilson's loud harshness toward the blacks in his coffles hid a cowardly nature. Hughes, of course, has had more opportunity to judge of this than I, for Wilson has been bringing his coffles through Marengo County for well onto seven years. And this also confirms my own opinion of him. Even in that one brief visit I had with him in Selma, I detected the tone, the attitude of the braggart and bully.

I shall speak with Hughes about making other provisions for a meeting place. Even had I been of a mind to talk with the negress, the stench of the root cellar – composed almost equally I suspect of

lontana della cantina che la catena alla gamba le permettesse di raggiungere. Hughes ha tentato di convincerla con un'approssimazione davvero notevole di quello che lui sostiene essere il suo linguaggio, spiegandole che io non ero lì per assillarla con ulteriori domande come avevano fatto gli altri uomini bianchi. Nonostante ciò, lei si è fatta più vicina solo quel tanto sufficiente per allentare la tensione delle catene. Tuttavia, posso immaginare lo stato di pericolosa eccitazione che Hughes conferma abbia caratterizzato le sue azioni nel momento della cattura. Secondo Hughes, in quell'occasione si è comportata come un felino, sputando, mordendo e graffiando, apparentemente indifferente al danno che quelle azioni avrebbero potuto arrecare al suo bambino. Il pubblico ministero è stato naturalmente implacabile mentre la interrogava e solo dopo essere stata trasferita in questa fattoria ha raggiunto uno stato di relativa calma. Eppure, vedere in questa comune negra la diavolessa dei deliri di Wilson è la più colossale delle sciocchezze. Hughes concorda con me, e in privato sostiene di aver sempre creduto che la proclamata durezza di Wilson nei confronti dei neri nelle sue colonne di schiavi nascondesse una natura vile. Hughes, naturalmente, ha avuto più opportunità di me di giudicare tutto ciò, in quanto Wilson passa con i suoi schiavi in vendita per la contea di Marengo da ben sette anni. Questo conferma anche la mia opinione su di lui. Persino in quel breve incontro che ho avuto con lui a Selma ho percepito il tono e l'atteggiamento del

stale negro and whatever else has been stored there through the years – would have driven me away within the minute. And that would be a pity for there is no doubt that the negress was one of the leaders in that bloody proceeding. Her own testimony supports the findings of the Court. Now, she will be brought to re-create that event and all that led up to it for me. Ah, the work, *The Work* has at last begun.

June 13, 1829.

Each day I become more convinced of the necessity, the righteousness even of the work I have embarked upon. Think, I say to myself as I sit looking into the negress's face, think how it might have been had there been a work such as I envision after the Prosser uprising of 1800. Would the Vesey conspiracy and all the numerous uprisings which took place in between these two infamous events, would they have occurred? Would this wretched wench even now be huddled before me? No, I say. No, for the evil seeds which blossomed forth in her and her companions would never have been planted. I feel more urgency about the completion of *The Roots of Rebellion and the Means of Eradicating Them* (I have

millantatore e prepotente.

Chiederò a Hughes di predisporre un diverso luogo di incontro. Anche se avessi avuto voglia di parlare con la negra, il fetore della cantina - che sospetto sia composto in egual misura di sudore di negro e di qualsiasi altra cosa vi sia stata conservata nel corso degli anni - mi avrebbe allontanato immediatamente. Questo sarebbe un peccato in quanto non vi è dubbio che la negra sia stata uno dei capi di quel sanguinoso evento. La sua stessa testimonianza corrobora le conclusioni della Corte. Dunque, farò in modo che ricostruisca quella vicenda, e tutto ciò che l'ha causata, per me. Ah, il lavoro, *Il Lavoro* è finalmente iniziato.

13 giugno, 1829.

Ogni giorno mi convinco sempre più di quanto l'opera che ho intrapreso sia necessaria e addirittura moralmente giusta. Pensa, mi dico, mentre sono seduto a guardare il volto della negra, pensa a come avrebbe potuto essere se ci fosse stata un'opera come la immagino io dopo la rivolta di Prosser del 1800. La cospirazione di Vesey e tutte le numerose rivolte che si sono verificate nel periodo compreso tra questi due scellerati eventi sarebbero avvenute? Questa miserabile ragazza ora si troverebbe qui rannicchiata davanti a me? No, dico io. No, perché i semi del male che sono sbocciati in lei e nei suoi compagni non sarebbero mai stati piantati. Sento una maggiore urgenza di completare *Le radici della ribellione ed i mezzi per sradicarle* (ho optato per

settled upon this as a compelling short title) than ever I did about writing *The Complete Guide for Competent Masters in Dealing with Slaves and Other Dependents*. I am honest enough to agree with those of my detractors who claim that *The Guide* is no more than a compendium of sound, commonsense practices gathered together in book form (they forget, however, that it is I who first hit upon the idea of compiling such a book and the credit of being first must always be mine). *The Guide* was, in some sense, a mere business venture. But *Roots* – even though the first word has yet to be written – looms already in my mind as a *magnum opus*.

Yet, being closeted with the negress within the small confines of the root cellar is an unsettling experience. Thus far, I have not been able to prevail upon Hughes to allow us the freedom of the yard for our meetings. Despite his bluff firmness in dealing with her, he is loath to allow the negress beyond the door of the root cellar. It is preposterous to suppose that anything untoward could happen. He vouches for the loyalty of his own darkies and has strictly forbidden them to have any intercourse whatsoever with her unless a white person is also present. The negress would, of course, be chained and perhaps under the open sky, I can free myself from the oppressive sense of her eyes casting a spell, not so much upon me (I know that should it ever come to a contest, God will prove stronger than the black devils she no doubt worships). No, not upon me is the spell

questo avvincente e breve titolo) rispetto a quante ne abbia mai provata per la stesura de *La guida completa per padroni competenti nel trattare con schiavi e altri dipendenti*. Sono abbastanza onesto da convenire con quanti, tra i miei detrattori, sostengono che la Guida non sia altro che un compendio di solide pratiche di buon senso raccolte nella forma di un libro (dimenticano, tuttavia, che sono stato io per primo ad aver avuto l'idea di compilare un simile libro e che il merito di essere stato il primo rimane sempre mio). *La guida* è stata, in un certo senso, una mera impresa economica. *Le radici*, invece, - anche se non è ancora stata scritta la prima parola - si profila già nella mia mente come un *magnum opus*.

Eppure, trovarmi rinchiuso con la negra entro gli angusti confini della cantina è un'esperienza inquietante. Sinora non sono riuscito a persuadere Hughes a concederci la libertà di utilizzare il cortile per i nostri incontri. Nonostante finga fermezza nel trattare con lei, è restio a permettere alla negra di andare oltre la porta dello scantinato. È assurdo pensare che possa accadere qualcosa di spiacevole. Egli giura sulla fedeltà dei suoi negri e ha severamente proibito loro di avere qualsiasi tipo di contatto con lei, a meno che non sia presente anche una persona bianca. La negra sarebbe, naturalmente, incatenata e forse, sotto il cielo aperto, potrei liberarmi dal senso opprimente che i suoi occhi lancino sortilegi, non tanto su di me (so che, se mai si dovesse arrivare ad un conflitto, Dio

cast, but upon the whole of the atmosphere from which I must draw breath. This last I know is fanciful; I laugh even as I write it, and it is not *the* reason for my long silence. She refused on two occasions to speak with me. I forebore carrying this tale to Hughes. He is a crude, vulgar, even brutal man who would doubtless feel that the best solution to the negress's stubbornness is a judicious application of the whip. In another situation I might be inclined to agree with him – the whip is most often the medicine to cure a recalcitrant slave. In this instance, however, I feel that the information I require must, if it is to be creditable, be freely given. I trust that I have not placed too much dependence upon her intelligence and sensitivity. Or, more likely, upon the innate stubbornness and intractableness for which I believe blacks from certain parts of the dark continent are well known. I think not, for upon the first occasion she appeared unmoved when I reminded her that although the child she carries may save her yet a while from a hanging, it was certainly not proof against a whipping. She cannot be said to roll her eyes (a most lamentable characteristic of her race), rather she *flicks* them across one – much in the same manner a horse uses his tail to flick a bothersome fly. It is a most offensive gesture. It was thus that she greeted this statement. I was so angered that I struck her in the face, soiling my hand and bloodying her nose, and called to Hughes to open the door. I was almost immediately sorry for my impetuous action.

si dimostrerà più forte dei demoni oscuri che lei, senza dubbio, adora). No, non è su di me che viene lanciato il sortilegio, bensì sull'atmosfera tutta da cui mi tocca trarre respiro. Sono consapevole di quanto sia eccentrica quest'idea; rido persino mentre la scrivo, e non è *la* ragione del mio lungo silenzio. In due occasioni si è rifiutata di parlare con me. Mi sono astenuto dal riferire questa storia a Hughes. È un uomo rozzo, volgare, persino brutale, che senza dubbio riterrebbe che la soluzione migliore alla testardaggine della negra sia un giudizioso utilizzo della frusta. In un'altra situazione potrei essere incline a concordare con lui - la frusta è molto spesso la medicina migliore per curare uno schiavo recalcitrante. In questo caso, tuttavia, ritengo che le informazioni che richiedo, per poter essere attendibili, debbano essere fornite volontariamente. Sono certo di non aver fatto troppo affidamento sulla sua intelligenza e sensibilità. Oppure, più probabilmente, sulla testardaggine e l'intrattabilità innate per le quali reputo che i negri di alcune parti del continente nero siano ben noti. Credo di no, poiché la prima volta è apparsa indifferente quando le ho ricordato che, sebbene il bambino che porta in grembo possa salvarla ancora per un po' da un'impiccagione, non le avrebbe certo risparmiato una frustata. Non si può dire che alzi gli occhi al cielo (una delle caratteristiche più deprecabili della sua razza), ma piuttosto te li sbatte addosso con un movimento rapido, proprio come un cavallo sbatte la coda per allontanare una mosca molesta. Si tratta di un gesto

Hughes thinks of me as an expert negro tamer and although he has not, as he told me, read *The Guide*, he has heard from respectable sources that it has a “right good bit o’ learnin and common sense” in it. I, therefore, do not want it ever to appear, for even a moment, that I have been or will ever be defeated by a negress. As I take pains to point out in *The Guide*, it is seldom necessary to strike a darky with one’s hand and to do so, except in the most unusual circumstances, is to lower one’s self almost to the same level of random violence which characterizes the action of the blacks among themselves. It is always a lowering, even repellent reflection to know that one has forgotten the sense of one’s own teachings. It was Willis, I believe, on the plantation of Mr. Charles Haskin’s near Valadosta in Lowndes County, Georgia, who carried a riding whip in order to correct just such subtle signs of insolence as the negress had tried my patience with. But the violence of my reaction has perhaps made any such response unnecessary in the future.

My latest attempt to have speech with her was this morning and I find it difficult to interpret her attitude. We heard upon approaching the cellar a humming or moaning. It is impossible to precisely define it as one or the other. I was alarmed, but Hughes merely laughed it off as some sort of “nigger business”. He was perhaps right, for upon opening the door and climbing down the steps into the cellar proper, we found her with her arms

alquanto offensivo. È così che ha risposto alla mia affermazione. Ero così in collera che l’ho colpita in viso, sporcandomi la mano e facendole sanguinare il naso, e ho chiamato Hughes perché aprisse la porta. Mi sono pentito quasi subito della mia azione impetuosa. Hughes mi considera un esperto domatore di negri e anche se, come mi ha detto, non ha letto *La guida*, ha sentito da fonti rispettabili che in essa vi sono “un bel po’ di conoscenza e di buon senso”. Non voglio pertanto che sembri, neanche per un momento, che io sia stato o sarò mai sconfitto da una negra. Come sono molto attento a sottolineare ne *La guida*, raramente è necessario colpire un negro con la mano e farlo, tranne che nelle circostanze più insolite, equivale ad abbassarsi quasi allo stesso livello di violenza casuale che caratterizza l’azione dei neri nei confronti dei loro simili. La consapevolezza di aver dimenticato il senso dei propri insegnamenti è sempre un pensiero avvilente e persino ripugnante. Credo fosse Willis, nella piantagione del Signor Charles Haskin, vicino a Valadosta, nella contea di Lowndes in Georgia, a portare con sé un frustino per correggere i lievi segni di insolenza come quello con cui la negra aveva messo a dura prova la mia pazienza. La violenza della mia risposta, tuttavia, ha probabilmente reso superflua una tale reazione in futuro.

Il mio ultimo tentativo di dialogare con lei è stato questa mattina e trovo difficile interpretare il suo atteggiamento. Abbiamo sentito, avvicinandoci alla

crossed in front of her chest, her hands grasping her shoulders. She was seated in the stream of light which comes through the one window – an odd instance in itself for always before she had crouched away from the light so that her eyes gleamed forth from the darkness like those of a beast surprised in its lair. She rocked to and fro and at first I thought the sounds which came from her some kind of dirge or lamentation. But when I ventured to suggest this to Hughes, he merely laughed, asking how else could a nigger in her condition keep happy save through singing and loud noise, adding that a loud nigger was a happy one; it is the silent ones who bear watching. I asked tartly if he made no distinction between moaning and singing. Why should I, he replied with a hearty laugh, the niggers don't. I am obliged to rely upon Hughes' judgement in this matter; as slaveholder and sheriff he has had far greater contact with various types of darkies than I should ever wish for myself. And this last piece of information tallies with what I heard again and again while doing the research for *The Guide*.

Hughes left at this point and I was alone with the wench. I admit to being at a loss as to how to begin, but just as I was about to order her to cease her noise, she lurched to her feet and her voice rose to a climatic pitch. She uttered the words, "I bes. I bes." Just those two words on a loud, yes, I would say, even exultant note. Her arms were now at her side and she stood thus a moment in

cantina, come un mormorio o un gemito. Non è possibile definire con precisione se si trattasse dell'uno o dell'altro. Ero allarmato ma Hughes si è limitato a ridere e a definirlo come una "cosa da negri". Forse aveva ragione, perché, quando abbiamo aperto la porta e siamo scesi per i gradini giù nella cantina, l'abbiamo trovata con le braccia incrociate davanti al petto e le mani che stringevano le spalle. Sedeva nel fascio di luce che filtra dall'unica finestra - un caso strano di per sé, poiché prima si rannicchiava sempre lontano dalla luce, così che i suoi occhi lampeggiavano dalle tenebre come quelli di una bestia sorpresa nella sua tana. Dondolava avanti e indietro e, all'inizio, ho creduto che i suoni che provenivano da lei fossero una specie di nenia o di lamento ma, quando mi sono azzardato a suggerirlo a Hughes, lui si è limitato a ridere, e ha domandato come altro poteva essere contenta - una negra nelle sue condizioni, se non cantando e facendo chiasso, e ha aggiunto che un negro che fa chiasso è un negro felice; sono quelli silenziosi che vanno tenuti d'occhio. Gli ho chiesto aspramente se non facesse alcuna distinzione tra il lamento e il canto. Perché dovrei, mi ha risposto con una risata vigorosa, i negri non lo fanno. Sono obbligato ad affidarmi al giudizio di Hughes in questa faccenda; come proprietario di schiavi e sceriffo ha avuto molti più contatti con una varietà di negri di quanti io ne desidero avere. E quest'ultima informazione coincide con quello che ho sentito dire più e più volte mentre conducevo le mie ricerche per *La guida*.

the light. Her face seemed to seek it and her voice was like nothing I had ever heard before. "I bes. I. And he in air on my tongue the sun on my face. The heat in my blood. I bes he; he me. And it can't end in this place, not this time. Not this time. Not this. But if it do, if it do, it was and I bes. I bes."

I did not exist for her. And I knew then that to talk to her while she remained in such state would be to talk to the air she now seems to claim to be. We will try what a little pressure can accomplish with her reluctant tongue. Perhaps a day spent on nothing but salt water will make her realize how lightly we have thus far held the reins.

I am somewhat surprised that she feels so little inclined toward boasting of her deeds, dark though they are. I do not make the mistake of putting her silence down to modesty or even fear but the above-mentioned stubbornness. She will find, however, that there are as many ways to wear stubbornness thin as there are to wear away patience.

Hughes è uscito a quel punto e io sono rimasto solo con la ragazza. Ammetto di non aver avuto idea di come iniziare, ma proprio mentre stavo per ordinarle di tacere, lei si è tirata su barcollando e la sua voce si è alzata fino a produrre un vero e proprio acuto. Ha pronunciato le parole: "Io ci sono. Io ci sono". Solo quelle due parole a voce alta, sì, direi persino esultante. A quel punto, con le braccia lungo i fianchi, è rimasta così per un istante, in piedi sotto la luce. Il suo volto sembrava cercare la luce e la sua voce era diversa da qualsiasi cosa avessi mai sentito prima. "Io ci sono. Io. E lui c'è nell'aria sulla mia lingua il sole sulla mia faccia. Il calore nel mio sangue. Io sono lui; lui me. E non può finire in questo posto, non questa volta. Non questa volta. Non questa. Ma se finisce, se finisce, è stato e io ci sono. Io ci sono".

Non esisteva per lei. E allora ho capito che parlarle mentre si trovava in tale stato sarebbe stato come parlare con l'aria che ora sembra sostenere di essere. Vedremo cosa potrà ottenere un po' di pressione dalla sua lingua riluttante. Forse una giornata solo ad acqua salata le farà comprendere quanto sciolte abbiamo tenuto le redini fino a questo momento.

Sono alquanto sorpreso dal fatto che si senta così poco incline a vantarsi delle sue gesta, per quanto cupe. Non commetto l'errore di attribuire il suo silenzio alla modestia o addirittura alla paura, bensì alla suddetta testardaggine. Scoprirà, tuttavia, che

June 17, 1829.

I have spent the last few days at the courthouse, going through the trial records of this appalling incident, hoping to get a better understanding of what transpired and some insight into the motivation of the darkies. It is a measure of Judge Hoffer's confidence in me and the work upon which I am engaged that I was allowed access to the records. While I do not envision a narrative such as was made of the trial records of the Denmark Vesey case (which was later destroyed because of the inflammatory material it contained), I shudder to think of the uses to which the information contained in these records might be put should they fall into the wrong hands. The trials were conducted in closed sessions so that, while the records themselves contain little more than what Wilson and Hughes have already told me, none of this information is for public consumption.

The bare outline is this: Wilson picked up a consignment of slaves in Charleston at the end of March. While in the area, he attended a private sale where he heard of a wench, just entered upon childbearing age, and already increasing, that was being offered for sale on the plantation of Mr. Terrell Vaughan. He inquired at the plantation and was told that the wench was being sold

ci sono tanti modi di eliminare la testardaggine quanti ce ne sono di far esaurire la pazienza.

17 giugno, 1829.

Ho passato gli ultimi giorni in tribunale esaminando i verbali del processo di questo terribile incidente con la speranza di comprendere meglio quanto accaduto e approfondire quali potessero essere state le motivazioni dei neri. Il fatto che mi sia stato consentito l'accesso agli atti è una dimostrazione della fiducia che il giudice Hoffer nutre nei miei confronti e nel lavoro in cui sono impegnato. Anche se non mi aspetto di trovare un resoconto come quello che è stato fatto dei verbali del processo del caso di Denmark Vesey (che è stato in seguito distrutto a causa del materiale incendiario che conteneva), rabbrivisco al pensiero degli usi a cui potrebbero essere destinate le informazioni contenute in questi archivi qualora cadessero nelle mani sbagliate. I processi sono stati condotti a porte chiuse così che, sebbene gli archivi stessi contengano poco più di ciò che Wilson e Hughes mi hanno già riferito, nessuna di queste informazioni sia di pubblico dominio.

Il quadro generale è questo: Wilson prelevò un carico di schiavi a Charleston alla fine di marzo. Mentre si trovava in zona prese parte ad una vendita privata dove sentì parlare di una ragazza, appena entrata in età fertile e già incinta, che era stata messa in vendita nella piantagione del signor Terrell Vaughan. Si informò presso la

because she had assaulted Vaughanham. There is always a ready market for females of childbearing age with proven breeding capacity, so, despite the disquieting circumstances, Wilson chose to inspect the wench. There were still signs of punishment, raw welts and burns across the wench's buttocks and the inside of her thighs. Being in places which would only be inspected by the most careful buyer, such marks were not likely to impair her value. Thus satisfied, Wilson paid three hundred eighty-five dollars species for her: she would fetch at least twice that much in New Orleans. The wench gave every appearance of being completely cowed at the time of purchase and throughout the rest of the journey; thus no special guard was placed upon her. Also purchased at this time, through regular channels, were two bucks who were later whipped and branded as runaways because of their parts in the uprising. These purchases brought the number of slaves in the coffle to eighty: fifty males and thirty females ranging in age from about eleven to thirty (but then, no slave dealer will ever admit that any slave he wants to sell is older than thirty or younger than ten). Wilson will not take pickaninnies on these overland trips, feeling that they are more trouble than the price which they are like to fetch on the block warrants. Wilson and his partner, Darkmon, had with them six other men who acted as guards and drivers. It is generally agreed that this one-to-ten ratio is a proper one on a trip of this nature.

piantagione e gli fu riferito che la ragazza sarebbe stata venduta per aver aggredito Vaughanham. Poiché vi è sempre un mercato pronto per le femmine in età fertile con comprovata capacità riproduttiva, nonostante le circostanze inquietanti, Wilson decise di ispezionare la giovane. Erano ancora visibili i segni delle punizioni, vesciche aperte e bruciature sulle natiche e sull'interno delle cosce. Trovandosi in punti che solo l'acquirente più attento avrebbe controllato, difficilmente tali segni avrebbero potuto intaccare il suo valore. Soddisfatto di ciò, Wilson pagò trecentottanta-cinque dollari per averla: a New Orleans ne avrebbe ricavati almeno il doppio. La giovane aveva tutta l'aria di essere completamente sottomessa al momento dell'acquisto e per tutto il resto del viaggio e, pertanto, non le fu assegnata alcuna guardia speciale. Nella stessa occasione, attraverso i canali regolari, furono acquistati anche due giovani maschi che sono stati poi frustati e marchiati come fuggiaschi a causa del loro ruolo nella rivolta. Questi acquisti portarono a ottanta il numero degli individui nella colonna di schiavi: cinquanta maschi e trenta femmine di età compresa tra gli undici e i trent'anni (è anche vero che nessun commerciante di schiavi ammetterà mai che qualunque schiavo voglia vendere abbia più di trenta o meno di dieci anni). Wilson non compra mai mocciosi negri in questi trasferimenti, in quanto ritiene che causino più problemi di quanti soldi possano ricavare nelle aste. Wilson e il suo socio, Darkmon, avevano con loro altri sei uomini

On the morning of March 30, 1829, they set out on the journey which would eventually end in New Orleans around the middle of June – had all gone well. There were no untoward events during the first portions of the journey, in fact, the coffle moved so smoothly that the regular security measures may have been somewhat relaxed (and Wilson’s adamant denial of this does not convince me in the least. Men of his stripe are always more than willing to lay the blame for their own ineptness and laxity at someone else’s door). As usual, Wilson continued to sell off and buy up slaves at each stop along the way. This practice, according to Wilson, serves to prevent trouble during the journey. The number of slaves on the coffle remains constant; there is, however, a continuous turnover of bodies. Thus, there is little chance for the blacks to become too intimate with one another. However, in checking the manifest (a copy of which was admitted as evidence) against the list of those apprehended, killed or convicted, I discovered a fact which had evidently escaped notice: a small group of twelve slaves had been with the coffle since Charleston. Of these, ten were directly involved in the uprising. It is also significant that two of the other blacks who were named as ringleaders had been with the coffle for some time. One must therefore conclude that a rapid and regular turnover of slaves does not much to prevent the spread of discontent among them (perhaps this axiom can be modified and extended to include slaves on plantations and

che fungevano da guardie e sorveglianti. È opinione comune che questo rapporto di uno a dieci sia opportuno per trasporti di questo genere.

La mattina del 30 marzo 1829 partirono per il viaggio che si sarebbe concluso a New Orleans verso la metà di giugno - se tutto fosse andato bene. Non vi furono eventi spiacevoli durante le prime parti del viaggio, anzi, la colonna si muoveva tanto tranquillamente che può darsi che le normali misure di sicurezza siano state in qualche modo allentate (la categorica smentita di Wilson a questo riguardo non mi convince affatto. Gli uomini del suo genere sono sempre più che disposti a scaricare la colpa della loro inettitudine e negligenza su qualcun altro). Come di consueto, Wilson continuò a vendere e a comprare schiavi ad ogni fermata lungo il percorso. Questa pratica, secondo Wilson, serve a prevenire problemi durante il viaggio. Il numero di schiavi della colonna rimane costante e, tuttavia, si ha un continuo ricambio di corpi. Così, vi sono poche possibilità che i neri stringano legami. Tuttavia, mettendo a confronto il manifesto (una copia del quale è stata ammessa come prova) con la lista degli arrestati, uccisi o condannati, ho scoperto un fatto che evidentemente era sfuggito: un piccolo gruppo di dodici schiavi era sempre rimasto con la colonna da quando erano partiti da Charleston. Di questi, dieci furono direttamente coinvolti nella rivolta. È inoltre significativo il fatto che due degli altri neri indicati come capobanda fossero già da tempo con il gruppo di schiavi. Si deve pertanto

small farms).

Wilson had lately taken to chaining the blacks in groups of four and five to trees or other natural projections when no housing was available at night. He found that this method allowed them a more comfortable repose at night which in turn meant they were able to travel faster during the day and were also in better condition when they arrived at the market. He had saved considerable sums because the slaves no longer required expensive conditioning and grooming before being put up for sale. The darkies were strung together in the familiar single file when the coffle was ready to move. It is my firm belief that had Wilson used the tried and true method all along, he could have saved himself subsequent grief. A group of darkies had only to break away from the central chain which bound them to a projection in order to be free. This is precisely what happened.

In the early morning hours of April 29, the wench and the four bucks in her chain group managed to free themselves (whether with a file – which seems most likely – or because the locks were not properly secured – a terrifying oversight in a coffle of that size – was not revealed, even under the most intensive and painful methods of questioning. And the chains were never found). Two of these went to subdue the guards and drivers while the other three attacked Wilson and Darkmon, searching for the keys which would

concludere che un rapido e regolare avvicendamento degli schiavi non contribuisca notevolmente ad evitare il diffondersi del malcontento tra questi (forse questo assioma può essere modificato ed esteso in modo da essere applicato agli schiavi nelle piantagioni e nelle piccole fattorie).

Wilson ultimamente aveva iniziato ad incatenare i neri in gruppi di quattro o cinque ad alberi o ad altre sporgenze naturali quando di notte non vi erano alloggi disponibili. Secondo lui questo metodo permetteva un riposo più confortevole di notte, rendendo loro possibile viaggiare più velocemente durante il giorno ed essere anche in condizioni migliori quando arrivavano al mercato. Aveva risparmiato somme considerevoli in quanto gli schiavi non necessitavano più di costosi trattamenti e cure prima di essere messi in vendita. I negri erano legati insieme nella tipica fila per uno quando il gruppo era pronto a muoversi. Sono fermamente convinto che, se avesse usato il metodo collaudato e corretto sin dall'inizio, Wilson avrebbe potuto risparmiarsi gli affanni successivi. Un gruppo di negri non avrebbe dovuto far altro che staccarsi dalla catena centrale che li legava ad una sporgenza per potersi liberare. Ed è proprio ciò che è successo.

Nelle prime ore del mattino del 29 aprile, la ragazza e i quattro maschi incatenati nello stesso gruppo riuscirono a liberarsi (se sia stato grazie ad

free the rest of the coffle. The negress attacked Darkmon and it was his death screams which awakened Wilson. He was immediately fighting for his own life, of course, and just as he managed to climb atop the darky and had raised his arm to strike him with the very rock with which he himself had been attacked, the negress fell upon him. She wielded a pick made from a stone sharpened to a stiletto point (the same one which she later used in attacking members of the posse). Evidently, her screams and “gleaming eyes” struck terror in Wilson’s heart, for he is unable to recount what happened after this. Apparently, though, after Darkmon had been so foully murdered and while the negress went to the aid of the buck who had attacked Wilson, the other black used Darkmon’s keys to free the others in the coffle. These quickly dispatched the drivers and guards who had not been subdued in the first onslaught. The darkies then took the horses and pack animals, some provisions and all the firearms and other weapons, and left Wilson and two of his drivers for dead. These lone survivors were found the next day on the trail to Linden, weak from loss of blood and babbling deliriously. A posse was quickly formed and set out in pursuit. They soon came upon the horses and other animals which the darkies had loosed, the better to cover their trail. The posse also found, throughout the course of their pursuit, a number of darkies who either could not keep up with the main body of renegades or who had repented of

una lima - il che sembra molto probabile - o perché i lucchetti non erano ben fissati – un errore tremendo in una colonna di quelle dimensioni - non è mai stato rivelato, nemmeno con i metodi di interrogatorio più duri e dolorosi. Inoltre, le catene non sono mai state ritrovate). Due di loro sottomisero le guardie e i sorveglianti, mentre gli altri tre attaccarono Wilson e Darkmon, per impossessarsi delle chiavi che avrebbero liberato il resto degli schiavi. La negra attaccò Darkmon e furono le sue grida, in punto di morte, a svegliare Wilson. Egli, ovviamente, si trovò immediatamente a lottare per non morire e, proprio quando era riuscito a sottomettere il negro e con il braccio alzato era pronto a colpirlo con la pietra con cui lui stesso era stato attaccato, la negra gli si gettò addosso. La ragazza brandiva un piccone fatto con una pietra dalla punta affilata (la stessa che in seguito usò per attaccare i membri della squadra). Evidentemente, le sue urla e i suoi “occhi lampeggianti” seminarono il terrore nel cuore di Wilson, in quanto egli non è in grado di raccontare ciò che accadde dopo. Sembrerebbe, tuttavia, che dopo il terribile omicidio di Darkmon, e mentre la negra andava in aiuto del maschio che aveva attaccato Wilson, l’altro negro abbia usato le chiavi di Darkmon per liberare il resto degli schiavi. Questi uccisero subito i sorveglianti e le guardie che non erano stati sottomessi nel primo assalto. I negri presero dunque i cavalli e gli animali da soma, alcune provviste e tutti i fucili e le altre armi, e se ne andarono ritenendo morti Wilson e due dei

their impetuous action in following the malcontents and were eager to help in the capture. After three days of tracking the renegades back and forth in a northwesterly direction, the posse surprised them in a camp they had made some thirty-five miles north of Linden. After a fierce gun battle in which seven of the posse were wounded, two of whom did not recover from their wounds, the slaves were finally subdued in hand-to-hand combat at a cost to the posse of three dead and numerous minor injuries. A few renegades tried to slip away during the battle: they, too, were recaptured. However, three, seeing that the battle was lost, fled, and have thus far eluded capture. All told, there were some sixty-three blacks retaken, four having been killed in the initial skirmish with the drivers, eight, either outright or later as a result of their wounds, in the battle with the posse. The posse came up with the renegades on May 4; on the afternoon of the 6th, they arrived in Linden and the trials were held all day on the 8th. The slaves were tried in three groups: those who were thought to be ringleaders, those who were known to have been mostly directly involved in the attacks, either on the drivers or the posse (these groups often overlapped), and those who, perhaps, had been coerced into participation in these infamous proceedings. The sentences were carried out during the week of the 11th. The slaves were subjected to continual questioning from the time of their arrest until the time at which their sentences were carried out. I must

suoi sorveglianti. Questi unici sopravvissuti furono trovati il giorno dopo sulla strada per Linden, indeboliti a causa del sangue perso e in preda al delirio. Rapidamente si costituì una squadra che partì all'inseguimento. Presto si imbarcarono nei cavalli e negli altri animali che i negri avevano liberato per coprire al meglio le proprie tracce. La squadra trovò anche, durante l'inseguimento, diversi negri che o non erano stati in grado di tenere il passo con il gruppo principale dei rinnegati o si erano pentiti dell'impetuosa scelta di seguire il malcontento ed erano ansiosi di aiutare nella cattura. Dopo tre giorni passati ad inseguire i ribelli avanti e indietro in direzione nord-ovest, la squadra li sorprese in un accampamento circa sessanta chilometri a nord di Linden. Dopo una feroce battaglia a colpi d'arma da fuoco in cui sette della squadra furono feriti, due dei quali non se la sono cavata, gli schiavi furono finalmente sottomessi in un combattimento corpo a corpo che costò alla squadra tre morti e numerosi feriti. Alcuni ribelli cercarono di fuggire durante la battaglia e anche loro furono ricatturati. Tuttavia, tre di loro, vedendo che la battaglia era persa, fuggirono, ed hanno finora eluso la cattura. In tutto furono recuperati circa sessantatré negri: quattro rimasero uccisi nella schermaglia iniziale con i sorveglianti e otto nella battaglia successiva, immediatamente o in seguito a causa delle ferite. La squadra si presentò con i rinnegati il 4 maggio; il pomeriggio del 6 arrivarono a Linden e i processi si svolsero durante tutta la giornata dell'8. Gli

commend the sheriff, the prosecutor and the judge on their ability to obtain so much information in such a short period of time.

Thirty-three blacks were tried (all adults above the age of fifteen): six were hanged and quartered as ringleaders, thirteen were hanged and quartered because of the ferocity with which they fought the posse (of these last two totals, six were females); three were whipped only; seven were branded only and three were whipped and branded (these last punishments infuriated Wilson when he learned of them. Branding makes the slave almost worthless, for no one in his right mind would buy a slave with such an extensive history of running away and rebelliousness as branding signifies. Wilson had preferred that they be hanged along with the others and thus save himself the cost of housing and feeding them). The negress still awaits her fate. The three bucks who eluded the posse were Big Nathan, a major plotter who had been chained with the negress the night of the uprising; Harker, who had been purchased in Atlanta; and Proud's Cully, who had been purchased in Jeffersonville, just across the line in Georgia. According to the testimony of the slaves, it was this wench, the men in her chain group and five blacks from another group who were the sole plotters. The others had neither a part in the planning nor in the execution of these plans until all had been set free. This seems rather farfetched to me. Wilson, in his written statement to the

schiavi furono processati in tre gruppi: coloro che si pensava fossero capobanda, coloro che si sapeva erano stati coinvolti, per lo più direttamente, negli attacchi, sia contro i sorveglianti che contro la squadra (spesso si trattava delle stesse persone), e coloro che, forse, erano stati costretti a partecipare a queste azioni scellerate. Le sentenze furono eseguite durante la settimana dell'11. Gli schiavi vennero sottoposti a continui interrogatori dal momento dell'arresto fino all'esecuzione delle loro sentenze. Devo lodare lo sceriffo, il procuratore e il giudice per la loro capacità di ottenere così tante informazioni in un periodo di tempo così breve.

Trentatré neri furono processati (tutti adulti sopra i quindici anni): sei furono impiccati e squartati in quanto capobanda, tredici furono impiccati e squartati a causa della ferocia con cui combatterono contro la squadra (di questi ultimi due gruppi, sei erano femmine); tre furono solo frustati; sette furono solo marchiati e tre furono frustati e marchiati (queste ultime punizioni fecero infuriare Wilson quando ne venne a conoscenza. Marchiare a fuoco uno schiavo lo rende quasi privo di valore, poiché nessuna persona sana di mente comprenderebbe uno schiavo con precedenti di fughe e ribellioni così gravi come quelli indicati dal marchio. Wilson avrebbe preferito che fossero impiccati insieme agli altri, risparmiandosi così il costo del loro vitto e alloggio). La negra attende ancora di conoscere il proprio destino. I tre maschi sfuggiti alla squadra erano Big Nathan, un cospiratore di rilievo che era

Court, said that he changed the chain groupings at regular intervals. This would have made it easy for any plot to spread rapidly through the coffle. But as all maintained this posture, the Court accepted the statement of the blacks as true. In fact, one plotter, Elijah (charged by two of the others with being a “root-man”, a dealer in black magic; but as there was no further substantiation of this charge, he was not tried on this count), was even rather contemptuous of the idea of telling any of the other slaves about the rebellion plot. They were, he said, white men’s niggers who would have betrayed the plans at the first opportunity and who would accept freedom only if it were shoved down their throats. Big Nathan, Mungo and Elijah, who were hanged and quartered, and Black David, who was killed in the battle with the posse, were to lead them all to freedom, but none could specify where this place of freedom was. Elijah said that God would reveal the direction of and route to the free place at the proper time, that the means of escape had likewise been delivered into their hands by God and he would not question the will of God. This was all the “information” which the Court could obtain from any of them – save that the negress, when asked why she, rather than one of the males, had been chosen for so dangerous a task as securing the keys, would say only that it was best that way. (Questioning of her was not as severe as with the others. Wilson has developed an almost fanatical resolve to see in chains the child she carries and

stato incatenato con la negra la notte della rivolta; Harker, che fu acquistato ad Atlanta; e Proud’s Cully, acquistato a Jeffersonville, appena al di là del confine in Georgia. Secondo la testimonianza degli schiavi, furono solo la ragazza, gli uomini incatenati nel suo gruppo e cinque negri di un altro gruppo a organizzare la rivolta. Gli altri non avevano preso parte né alla progettazione né all’esecuzione di questi piani fino a che non furono liberati tutti. Tutto ciò mi pare alquanto inverosimile. Wilson, nella sua dichiarazione scritta alla Corte, affermò di aver cambiato i raggruppamenti alla stessa catena a intervalli regolari. Questo avrebbe reso facile la rapida diffusione di qualsiasi trama ma, poiché tutti mantennero questa posizione, la Corte accettò la dichiarazione dei negri come veritiera. In verità, uno dei cospiratori, Elijah (accusato da due degli altri di essere un fattucchiere, un praticamente di magia nera anche se, non essendoci ulteriori prove di tale accusa, non fu processato per questo reato), all’idea che il piano di rivolta potesse essere stato comunicato agli altri schiavi, reagì quasi sprezzante. Disse che erano negri degli uomini bianchi, che avrebbero tradito i loro piani alla prima occasione e che avrebbero accettato la libertà solo se questa gli fosse stata ficcata giù per la gola. Big Nathan, Mungo ed Elijah, che furono impiccati e squartati, e Black David, rimasto ucciso nella battaglia con la squadra, avrebbero dovuto condurli tutti alla libertà, ma nessuno sapeva dire esattamente dove si trovasse questo luogo. Elijah

the doctor feared that, should she lose the baby before this had been accomplished, it might upset Wilson's reason. The Court took this medical opinion into account when deciding to delay the consummation of the wench's sentence.) It is my own belief that she was chosen because of her very unlikeliness. Who would think a female so far gone in the breeding process capable of such treacherous conduct?

That, in bare outline, is what happened; my chore now is to fill in that outline, to discover and analyze the motivating factors which culminated in this outrage against the public safety. I feel that I have been richly rewarded for these past few days of work. In retelling this outline, I am filled again with a sense of my mission. I look forward to dealing with the negress again on Monday.

disse che Dio avrebbe rivelato la direzione e la strada per il luogo della libertà al momento opportuno, che anche i mezzi per la fuga erano stati consegnati nelle loro mani da Dio, e lui certo non metteva in discussione la volontà di Dio. Queste furono tutte le "informazioni" che la Corte riuscì ad ottenere da loro - salvo che la negra, quando le fu chiesto perché lei, piuttosto che uno dei maschi, fosse stata scelta per un compito così pericoloso come quello di procurarsi le chiavi, disse solo che era meglio così. (Il suo interrogatorio non è stato altrettanto severo quanto quello degli altri. Wilson è determinato al limite dell'ossessione a vedere in catene il bambino che porta in grembo e il medico temeva che, se avesse perso il bambino prima che tale obiettivo fosse raggiunto, questo avrebbe potuto offuscare la ragione di Wilson. La Corte ha tenuto conto di questo parere medico quando ha deciso di ritardare l'esecuzione della sentenza della ragazza). È mia convinzione che sia stata scelta proprio in quanto opzione improbabile. Chi considererebbe mai una femmina in una fase così avanzata della gravidanza capace di una condotta tanto infida?

Questo è il quadro generale di ciò che è accaduto; il mio compito adesso è quello di riempire quel quadro e di scoprire e analizzare i fattori motivanti che hanno portato a questo oltraggio contro la sicurezza pubblica. Sento di essere stato riccamente ricompensato per questi ultimi giorni di lavoro. Nel ripercorrere questi punti sono di nuovo pervaso dal

June 19, 1829.

“Was I white, I might woulda fainted when Emmalina told me that Mas had done gon up-side Kaine head, nelly bout kilt him iff’n he wa’n’t dead already. Fainted and not come to myself til it was ova, least ways all of it that could eva get ova. I guess when you faints you be out the world, that how Kaine say it be. Say that how Mist’s act up at the House when Mas or jes any lil thang don’t be goin to suit her. Faint, else cry and have em all, Aunt Lefonia, Freddy and the rest, comin, runnin and fannin and carin on, askin what wrong, who did it. Kaine hear em from the garden and he say he be laughin fit to split his side and digging, digging and laughin to hear how one lil sickly white woman turn a house that big upside down. I neva rightly believe it could be that way. But wa’n’t no way fo me to know fo sho – I work the fields and neva goes round the House neitha House niggas, cept only Aunt Lefonia. Kaine, when me and him first be close and see us want be closer, he try to get me up to the House, ask Aunt Lefonia if she see what she can do, talk to Mist’s maybe. But Aunt Lefonia say I too light for Mist’s and not light nough fo Mas. Mist’s ascarded Mas gon be likin the high colored gals same as he was fo they was married so she don’t low nothin but dark uns up to the House else ones too old for Mas to be beddin. So I stays in the fields like I

sensu della mia missione. Non vedo l’ora di avere di nuovo a che fare con la negra lunedì.

19 giugno, 1829.

“Se ero bianca, può essere che svenivo quando Emmalina mi ha detto che il Padrone aveva colpito Kaine in testa, che quasi lo uccideva se non era già morto. Svenivo e non mi riprendevo finché non era tutto finito, o perlomeno quello che poteva finire. Immagino che quando svieni sei fuori dal mondo, come diceva Kaine. Diceva che la Padrona faceva così alla Casa quando il Padrone o qualunque minima cosa non le andava bene. Sveniva oppure piangeva e faceva venire correndo Zia Lefonia, Freddy e tutti gli altri che la sventolavano e si preoccupavano e le chiedevano che c’era e chi era stato. Kaine li sentiva dal giardino e diceva che si metteva a ridere così tanto che gli faceva male il fianco e scavava, scavava e rideva al sentire come una sola donna bianca malaticcia riusciva a mettere una Casa così grossa sottosopra. Non c’ho mai creduto che era davvero così. Ma non potevo saperlo per certo – io lavoro nei campi e non mi avvicino mai alla Casa o ai negri della Casa, tranne Zia Lefonia. Kaine, quando io e lui ci siamo conosciuti e abbiamo visto che volevamo stare insieme, ha provato a farmi andare a lavorare alla Casa e ha chiesto a Zia Lefonia di vedere che poteva fare, magari parlare con la Padrona ma Zia Lefonia ha detto che ero troppo chiara per la Padrona e non abbastanza chiara per il Padrone. La Padrona ha paura che al Padrone piacciono le

been. Kaine don't like it when Aunt Lefonia tell him that and he even ask Mist's please could I change, but Mist's see me and say no. Kaine mad but he finally jes laugh, say, what kin a nigga do? But I see Mist's that time close-up and I can't rightly believe all what Kaine say. Maybe he jes make it mo'n it bes so when he tell it I laugh. But I neva do know fo sho. Kaine mus know though. He been round the Houses, most a House nigga hisself, though a House nigga neva say a nigga what tend flovas any betta'n one what tend corn. He jes laugh when Childer try to come the big nigga ova him, tell him, say, Childer, jes cause you open do's for the white folks don't make you white. And Childer puff all up cause he not like it, you don't be treatin him some big and he was raised up with the old Mas, too? Humph. So he say to Kaine, say, steadda Kaine talkin back at the ones what betta'n him, Kaine betta be seein at findin him a mo likely gal'n me."

She paused, her head lifted, her eyes closed as though listening. "He chosed me." I could not read the expression on her face; the cellar was too dark. Something, however, seemed to have crept into her voice and I waited, hoping she would continue. "He chosed me. Mas ain't had nothing to do wid that. It Kaine what picks me out and say I be his woman. Mas say you lay down wid this'n or that un and that be the one you lay wid. He tell Carrie Mae she lay wid that studdin nigga and that who she got to be wid. And we all be knowin it

ragazze mulatte come succedeva prima di sposarsi con lei e quindi permette di lavorare nella Casa solo a quelle scure o a quelle troppo vecchie per portarsele a letto. Quindi sono rimasta come sempre nei campi. A Kaine non gli è andata giù quando Zia Lefonia glielo ha detto e ha addirittura chiesto alla Padrona se per favore potevo spostarmi, ma lei mi ha vista e ha detto di no. Kaine era arrabbiato ma alla fine ha riso e ha detto 'che ci può fare un negro?'. Ma io ho visto la Padrona da vicino quella volta e non riesco a credere a tutto quello che mi ha detto Kaine. Forse le raccontava grosse così io ridevo. Ma non l'ho mai saputo per certo. Kaine doveva saperlo, però. Ha bazzicato le Case, era quasi un negro di casa, anche se un negro di casa non dice mai che un negro che sta dietro ai fiori è meglio di uno che sta dietro al granoturco. Lui rideva quando Childer cercava di fare quello meglio di lui, gli diceva 'sai, Childer, solo perché apri le porte ai bianchi non significa mica che sei bianco pure tu'. E Childer si gonfiava tutto perché non gli andava giù, era pure stato tirato su con il vecchio Padrone e uno non lo considerava con rispetto? Bah. Quindi, lui diceva a Kaine che, invece di rispondere male a quelli che erano meglio di lui, faceva meglio a trovarsi una ragazza meglio di me".

Ha fatto una pausa, la testa sollevata e gli occhi chiusi come se stesse ascoltando. "Mi ha scelta a me". Non riuscivo a interpretare l'espressione sul suo volto, lo scantinato era troppo buio. Tuttavia,

ain't fo nothin but to breed and time the chi'ren be up in age, they be sold off to notha 'tation, maybe deep south. And she jes a lil bitty thang then and how she gon be holdin a big nigga like that, carrying that big nigga child. And all what mamma say, what Aunt Lefonia and Mamma Hattie say don't make Mas no ne'mind. 'Luke known fo makin big babies on lil gals' Mas say and laugh. Laugh so hard, he don't be hearin Mamma Hattie say how Luke studdin days be ova 'fo' he eva touch Carrie. Mas, he don't neva know it, but Luke, he know it. But he don't tell cause the roots stop his mouth from talkin to Mas same as they stop his seed from touchin Carrie. Mas jes wonder and wonder and finally he say Luke ain't good fo nothin no mo cept fo to drive otha niggas inna field and fo to beat the ones what try fo to be bad. Carrie bedded wid David then and Mas gots three mo niggas fo to be studs, so he ain't too much carin. And Carrie gots a baby comin. Baby comin... baby comin... But Kaine chosed me. He chosed me and when Emmalina meet me that day, tell me Kaine don took a hoe at Mas and Mas don laid into him wid a shovel, bout bus' in his head, I jes run and when the hoe gits in my way, I let it fall, the dress git in my way and I holds that up. Kaine jes layin there on usses pallet, head seepin blood, one eye closed, one bout gone. Mamma Hattie sittin side him wiping at the blood. 'He be dead o'sold. Dead o'sold.' I guess that what she say then. She say it so many times afta that I guess she say it then, too. 'Dead o'sold.' Kaine jes

trapelava qualcosa dalla sua voce ed ho atteso, sperando che continuasse. "Mi ha scelta a me. Il Padrone non c'entrava nulla. È Kaine che mi ha scelta e ha deciso che ero la sua donna. Il Padrone diceva tu vai a letto con questa o quest'altra e quella era la persona con cui stavi. Ha detto a Carrie Mae di andare a letto con quello stallone e lei è dovuta stare con quello. Sapevamo tutti che era solo per farli figliare così che, quando avevano l'età giusta, i bambini potevano essere venduti a un'altra piantagione, magari più giù a Sud. Lei allora era uno scricciolo e come poteva riuscire a portare in grembo quel figlio così grosso. E tutto quello che dicevano mamma, Zia Lefonia e Mamma Hattie, al Padrone non gliene importava niente. 'Si sa che Luke fa bambini grossi con le ragazze piccole', diceva il Padrone ridendo. Rideva così forte che non sentiva Mamma Hattie dire che i giorni da stallone di Luke sarebbero finiti se solo toccava Carrie. Il Padrone non l'ha mai saputo, ma Luke lo sapeva. Non diceva niente, però, perché le pozioni gli chiudevano la bocca per parlare con il Padrone, e non facevano toccare Carrie al suo seme. Il Padrone si chiedeva il perché e alla fine ha detto che Luke non era più buono a nulla se non a guardare gli altri negri nei campi e picchiare quelli che si comportavano male. Così Carrie è andata a letto con David e il Padrone ha trovato tre nuovi stalloni, quindi non gli importava più tanto. E Carrie aspettava un bambino... un bambino... Ma Kaine a me mi ha scelta. Mi ha scelta e quando Emmalina mi è venuta incontro quel giorno e mi ha

groan when I call his name. I say all the names I know, eva heard bout, thought bout, Lawd, Legba, Shango, Jesus. Anybody, jes so's Kaine could speak. 'Nigga,' Kaine say. Nigga and my name. He say em ova and ova and I hold his hand cause I know that can't be all he wanna say. Nigga and my name, my name and nigga. 'Nigga,' he say. 'Nigga can do.' And he don't say no mo."

And that has what to do with you and the other slaves rising up and killing the trader and the drivers, I asked sharply, for it seemed as though she would not continue.

She opened her eyes and looked at me. Wide and black they are. She had had them closed or only half open as she talked, her head moving now and then, from side to side, in and out of the light coming in through the tiny unshattered window. She opened her eyes and her head was silhouetted in the light. I understood then what Wilson meant when he talked in his delirium about "devil eyes", a "devil's stare." Long, black and the whites are unstained by red or even the rheumy color which characterizes the eyes of so many darkies whether of pure or mixed blood, and she does not often blink them. "I kill that white man," she said, and in the same voice in which she talked about being allowed to work in the big house, in which she had talked about the young darky's dying. They were all the same to her. "I killed that white man cause the same reason Mas kill Kaine. Cause I

detto che Kaine aveva brandito una zappa contro il Padrone e lui lo aveva colpito con una pala e gli aveva quasi spaccato la testa mi sono messa a correre e ho buttato via la zappa che mi frenava e il vestito, che mi dava fastidio, l'ho tirato su. Kaine era steso là sul nostro giaciglio, il sangue che gli colava dalla testa, un occhio chiuso e l'altro praticamente andato. Mamma Hattie gli stava seduta vicino e asciugava il sangue. 'O moriva o lo vendevano', mi pare che ha detto così. L'ha detto così tante volte dopo quella che probabilmente l'ha detto anche allora. 'O moriva o lo vendevano'. Kaine ha fatto solo un gemito quando ho chiamato il suo nome. Ho detto tutti i nomi che sapevo, che avevo mai sentito o pensato, Signore, Legba, Shango, Gesù. Chiunque, basta che Kaine parlava. 'Un negro', ha detto Kaine. Un negro e il mio nome. Continuava a ripeterlo e io gli tenevo la mano perché sapevo che sicuramente voleva dire qualcos'altro. Un negro e il mio nome, il mio nome e un negro. 'Un negro', ha detto. 'Un negro non...' E non ha più detto altro."

Poiché sembrava non volesse continuare, le ho chiesto bruscamente cosa avesse tutto ciò a che fare con la ribellione e l'uccisione del mercante di schiavi e dei sorveglianti da parte sua e degli altri schiavi.

Ha aperto gli occhi e mi ha guardato. Sono grandi e neri. Li aveva tenuti serrati o socchiusi mentre parlava, con la testa che ogni tanto si girava verso

can.” And she turned her head to the dark and would not speak with me anymore.

I have read again this first day’s conversation with the negress. It is all here – even that silly folderol about “roots” – as much in her own words as I could make out. It must seem that one must be acquainted with darkies from one’s birth in order to fully understand what passes for speech amongst them. It is obvious that I must speak with her again, perhaps several times more, for she answers questions in a random manner, a loquacious, roundabout fashion – if, indeed, she can be brought to answer them at all. This, to one of my habits, is exasperating to the point of fury. I must constantly remind myself that she is but a darky and a female at that. Copious notes seem to be the order of the day and I will cull what information I can from them. And, despite the rambling nature of today’s discourse, the fact that she did talk remains something of a triumph for *The Guide*. Light punishment followed by swift relaxation of the punitive measure is a trick I learned of in Maryland, where they have long since realized that the whippings which the abolitionists deplore are not the only way to bring a rebellious darky to heel.

la luce che entrava dalla piccola finestra priva di persiane, e poi dall’altra parte. Ha aperto gli occhi, il profilo della testa illuminato dalla luce. In quel momento ho capito cosa intendesse Wilson quando nel delirio parlava di “occhi diabolici” e di uno “sguardo demoniaco”. Sono lunghi, neri e la parte bianca non è macchiata di rosso o addirittura di quel colore acquoso che caratterizza gli occhi di tanti negri, sia di sangue puro che di sangue misto, e non sbatte spesso le palpebre. “Ho ucciso quel bianco”, ha detto con la stessa voce con cui aveva parlato di non poter lavorare alla casa, o della morte del giovane negro. Non vi era differenza per lei. “Ho ucciso quel bianco per la stessa ragione che il Padrone ha ucciso Kaine. Perché potevo”. A quel punto ha rivolto la testa verso l’oscurità e non ha più voluto parlare con me.

Ho letto di nuovo la conversazione di questo primo giorno con la negra. C’è tutto - anche quelle sciocchezze sulle “pozioni” - almeno per quanto sono riuscito ad evincere dalle sue parole. Sembra che si debbano conoscere i negri fin dalla nascita per poter comprendere appieno ciò che tra di loro viene considerato linguaggio. È evidente che dovrò parlare di nuovo con lei, probabilmente molte altre volte, in quanto risponde alle domande in modo casuale, verboso e pieno di digressioni - ammesso che si riesca a farla rispondere. Questo, per una persona come me, è esasperante fino alla furia. Devo costantemente ricordare a me stesso che non è altro che una negra e, per di più, una femmina.

June 22, 1829.

She has talked again, perhaps the influence of the open air or perhaps there was one thing in the long string of questions I asked which touched her thought more than another. I have asked the same basic questions at each meeting. Today, I grew more than a little impatient with the response – or lack thereof – which I have thus far elicited, and would have despaired of completing my project, if completion depends upon this one negress – which, thank God! it does not. But it is not in my nature to admit defeat so readily and so, thinking to return to the one thing about which she had previously talked, I asked, How did it happen that this darky of whom you spoke attacked Mr. Vaughan? I had phrased this question in various ways and been met with silence. I had even nudged her slightly with the tip of my boot to assure myself that she had not fallen into a doze

Numerosi appunti sembrano essere all'ordine del giorno e raccoglierò tutte le informazioni possibili da essi. Inoltre, nonostante la natura sconclusionata del discorso di oggi, il fatto che abbia parlato rimane una sorta di trionfo per *La guida*. Una punizione leggera seguita da un rapido allentamento della misura punitiva è un trucco che ho imparato nel Maryland, dove si sono resi conto da tempo che le frustate che gli abolizionisti deplorano non sono l'unico modo per sottomettere un negro ribelle.

22 giugno, 1829.

Ha parlato di nuovo, forse è stata l'influenza dell'aria aperta o magari una tra la lunga serie di domande che le ho posto l'ha colpita più delle altre. Ad ogni incontro le ho posto le stesse domande elementari. Oggi, ho perso non poco la pazienza di fronte alla reazione - o all'assenza di reazione - che ho ottenuto finora, e avrei perso ogni speranza di portare a termine il mio progetto se la sua realizzazione dipendesse solo da questa negra - ma, grazie a Dio, non è così. Tuttavia, non è nella mia natura ammettere la sconfitta così facilmente e dunque, pensando di tornare all'unica cosa di cui aveva parlato in precedenza, le ho chiesto: "Com'è successo che questo negro di cui parlavi ha aggredito il signor Vaughan?". Avevo formulato questa domanda in vari modi e non avevo mai ricevuto risposta. Le avevo anche dato un colpetto con la punta dello stivale per assicurarmi che non si

(they fall asleep, I am told, much as a cow will in the midst of a satisfying chew, though I, myself, have not observed this), but aside from that offensive flick of the eye, she would not respond. I contained my irritation and my impatience and went on with my questioning. Was he crazed, drunk? Where did he get the liquor? She was seated on the ground at my feet, her back against the tree trunk. The chain which attached to her ankle was wound once around the tree and fastened to a rung of the chair in which I sat. The chair was placed to one side and a little behind so that she would have to look up at me. She would not. Sometimes she closed her eyes or looked out into space. At these times she would hum, an absurd, monotonous little tune in a minor key, the melody of which she repeated over and over. Each morning, we are awakened by the singing of the darkies and they often startle one by breaking into song at odd times during the day. Hughes, of course, finds this comforting. But thus far I have heard nothing but moaning from this wench. How did it happen that this darky attacked Mr. Vaughan? and I raised my voice so as to be heard over the humming.

She stopped humming for a second and when she resumed, she put words to the melody:

*“Lawd, gimme wings like Noah’s dove
Lawd, gimme wings like Noah’s dove
I’d fly cross these fields to the one I loves*

fosse appisolata (si addormentano, pare, quasi come le mucche mentre pascolano soddisfatte, anche se, personalmente, non l’ho notato), ma, a parte quell’offensivo modo di guardarti all’improvviso, non rispondeva. Ho trattenuto l’irritazione e l’impazienza e ho proseguito con l’interrogatorio. Era impazzito? Ubriaco? Dove aveva preso il liquore? Lei sedeva per terra ai miei piedi, con la schiena contro il tronco dell’albero. La catena agganciata alla caviglia era stata legata una volta intorno all’albero e fissata ad una traversa della sedia su cui ero seduto. La sedia era stata posizionata ad un lato e leggermente più indietro, così che lei dovesse alzare lo sguardo per vedermi. Non voleva farlo. A volte chiudeva gli occhi o fissava il vuoto. In questi momenti canticchiava un assurdo, monotono motivetto in chiave minore, di cui ripeteva continuamente la melodia. Ogni mattina veniamo svegliati dal canto dei negri e spesso ti spaventano mettendosi a cantare nei momenti più strani della giornata. Hughes, naturalmente, lo trova rassicurante. Tuttavia, finora non ho sentito altro che lamenti da parte di questa ragazza. “Com’è successo che questo negro ha aggredito il signor Vaughan?”, e ho alzato la voce per farmi sentire sopra il suo lamento.

Ha smesso di canticchiare per un secondo e, quando ha ripreso, ha aggiunto delle parole alla melodia:

Signore, dammi le ali come la colomba di Noè

Say, hello darlin; say, how you be.

Mamma Hattie say that playin wid God, putting yo self on the same level's His peoples is on. But Kaine jes laugh and say she ain't knowed no mo bout God and the Bible than what the white folk tell her and that can't be too much cause Mas say he don't be likin religion in his slaves. So Kaine jes go on singin his songs to me in the e'nin afta I gets out the fields. I be layin up on uses pallet and he be leanin ginst the wall. He play sweet-soft cause he say that what I needs, soft sweetin put me to sleep afta I done work so all day. He really feel bad bout that, me inna field and him in the garden. He even ask Boss Smith could I come work at the House o' he come work the field. I scared when he do that. Nobody ask Boss Smith fo nothin cause that make him note you and the onliest way Boss Smith know to note you is wid that whip. But Boss Smith jes laugh and tell him he a crazy nigga. But Kaine not crazy. He the sweetest nigga as eva walk this earth. He play that banger, he play it so sweet til Mist's even have him up to the House to play and she talk bout havin a gang o' niggas to play real music fo when they be parties and such like at the House. Ole Mist's used to would talk like that, so Aunt Lefonia say, cause that was how they done in Ole Mist's home. But it don't nothin comma it then, not now either. Side, Kaine say the music he know to play be real nough fo him. Say that that his banger. He make it his'n so it play jes what he

Signore, dammi le ali come la colomba di Noè

Volerei per questi campi fino al mio amato

Per dirgli, ciao tesoro; dimmi, come va.

Mamma Hattie diceva che era scherzare con Dio, mettersi allo stesso livello del Suo popolo. Ma Kaine rideva e diceva che lei di Dio e della Bibbia non sapeva più di quello che le dicevano i bianchi, e non poteva essere granché perché al Padrone non piaceva che i suoi schiavi erano religiosi. Così Kaine continuava a cantarmi le sue canzoni tutte le sere dopo che tornavo dai campi. Io stavo sdraiata sul nostro giaciglio e lui si appoggiava al muro. Suonava dolce perché diceva che era proprio quello che mi serviva per addormentarmi dopo che avevo lavorato tutto il giorno. Si sentiva davvero in colpa per questo, io nei campi e lui in giardino. Ha anche chiesto al Capo Smith se potevo andare a lavorare alla Casa o se lui poteva lavorare nei campi. Ho avuto paura quella volta. Nessuno chiede al Capo Smith niente, perché così ti nota e l'unica cosa che fa il Capo Smith quando ti nota è usare la frusta. Ma il Capo Smith si è messo a ridere e gli ha detto che era un negro pazzo. Ma Kaine non era pazzo. Era l'uomo più dolce che esisteva sulla faccia della terra. Suonava quel banjo, lo suonava così bene che la Padrona lo ha fatto anche suonare alla Casa e diceva di voler far suonare musica vera a una banda di negri quando c'erano delle feste e cose del genere alla Casa. La Vecchia Padrona diceva così, ha detto Zia Lefonia, perché era così che si faceva a casa sua. Ma non se n'è fatto nulla allora, e

want play. And he play it. Not jes strum strum wid all his fingers, but so you hear each strang when he touch it and each strang gots a diff'ent thang to say. And they neva talks bout bein sad, bein lonesome cause Kaine say I hep him put all that behind. Even when us be workin and he be up to the House and I be out inna field, it not bad, cause he be knowin, when the bell rang, I be comin fix that lil bit ration and we lay up on usses pallet. 'Niggas,' he tell me, 'niggas jes only belongs to white folks and that bes all. They don't be belongin to they mammas and daddys, they sista, they brotha.' Kaine Mamma be sold when he lil bit and he not even know her face. And sometimes he thank maybe his first Mas o' the driva o' maybe jes some white man passin through be his daddy. Then he say mus been some fine, big, black man muscled up like strong tree what got sold cause he go fo bad. And he be wishin he took looks afta his daddy, be big and strong like him, be *bad*, steadda the way he do look, nappy head and light eyes. Have a black man fo a daddy well as a white man, he say, but he can't neva know, not fo sho, no way. He be sold hisself lotta time fo he come to Mas 'tation. So he don't know bout stayin wid Mamma Hattie til you be big nough to work the fields, o' being woked up by mamma and eatin dry cornbread and 'lasses fo day in the mornin wid evabody and hearin Jeeter tease the slow pokes and havin mamma fetch you a slap so Boss Smith won't fetch his whip at you fo tarryin so. Onlest folks he

nemmeno adesso. E poi, Kaine ha detto che gli bastava la musica che sapeva suonare. Diceva che quello era il suo banjo. Se l'era costruito lui, e cosi suonava proprio quello che voleva suonare. E lo suonava davvero. Non era solo una strimpellata con tutte le dita, lui suonava in modo che potevi sentire ogni corda quando la toccava e ogni corda diceva una cosa diversa, e non parlava mai di essere tristi o di sentirsi soli, perché Kaine diceva che io lo aiutavo a lasciarsi tutta quella roba alle spalle. Anche quando lavoravamo e lui era su alla Casa e io ero fuori nei campi, non era male, perché sapeva che, quando suonava la campana, mi mettevo a cucinare quel poco che ci spettava e poi ci sdraiavamo sul nostro pagliericcio. 'I negri', mi diceva, 'i negri sono solo roba dei bianchi e basta. Non sono della loro mamma e del loro papà, della sorella, o del fratello'. La mamma di Kaine l'hanno venduta quando lui era piccolo e non sapeva nemmeno che faccia aveva. Certe volte pensava che forse il suo primo padrone o il sorvegliante, o forse solo un bianco che passava di lì, era suo padre. Poi diceva che doveva essere stato qualche nero bello, grosso e muscoloso come un albero forte, che era stato venduto perché era stato cattivo. E voleva avere preso dal papà, voleva essere grande e forte come lui, e cattivo, invece di essere come era, con i capelli crespi e gli occhi chiari. Il padre poteva essere stato un nero o un bianco, diceva, ma non poteva saperlo, non per certo, non c'era modo. Era stato venduto molte volte prima di venire nella piantagione del Padrone. Così, non sapeva nulla di

eva belongs to is the white folks and that not really like belongin to a body. He say first time he hear anybody play a banger, he have to stop, have to listen cause it seem like it talkin right at him. And the man what play it, he a Af'ca black, not a reg'la nigga like what you see eva day. And this Af'ca man say that the music he play be from his home, and his home be his, it don't be belongs to no white folks. Nobody there belongs to white folks, jes onlest theyselves and each otha. He tell Kaine lotta thing what Kaine don't member cause he lil bit then and this the first time he be sold. That in Charleston and I know that close to where I'm is and I wonder how it be if Mas had buyed Kaine then, steadda when Kaine be grown. But, it happen how it happen and that time in Charleston Kaine not know all what the Af'ca man say, cept bout the home and bout the banger, how to make it, how to play it. And he know that cause he know if he have it, home be his and the banger be his. Cept he ain't got no home, so he jes onlest have the banger.

“He make that banger hisself. Make it outen good parchent and seasoned wood he get hisself and when Mas break it seem like he break Kaine. Might well as had cause it not right wid him afta notha that. And I can't make it right wid him. I tell him he can make notha one. I pick up wood fo him from Jim Boys at the carp'ter shed, get horsehair from Emmalina Joe Big down to the stables. But Kaine jes look at it. ‘Mas can make

quando stavamo con Mamma Hattie fino a quando non eravamo abbastanza grandi per lavorare nei campi, o quando mamma ci svegliava e mangiavamo pane di granoturco secco e melassa al mattino con tutti, e di Jeeter che prendeva in giro quelli lenti o di mamma che ti dava uno schiaffo, così Boss Smith non ti prendeva a frustate per averci messo così tanto. Le uniche famiglie di cui ha fatto parte erano quelle bianche e non è proprio come appartenere a qualcuno. Mi aveva detto che la prima volta che aveva sentito qualcuno suonare un banjo, si era fermato per ascoltare perché sembrava che la musica parlava proprio con lui. E l'uomo che lo suonava era un negro dell'Africa, non un negro normale che vedi tutti i giorni. E questo negro africano diceva che la musica che suonava veniva da casa sua, e quella casa apparteneva a lui, non era di nessun bianco. Nessuno lì appartiene ai bianchi, solo a loro stessi e l'uno all'altro. Aveva detto tante cose a Kaine che lui non si ricordava perché era piccolo al tempo e era la prima volta che lo vendevano. Era successo a Charleston e so che è vicino a dove stavo io e mi chiedo che succedeva se il Padrone comprava Kaine allora, invece che quando era già grande. Ma è andata come è andata e quella volta a Charleston Kaine non capiva tutto quello che diceva l'uomo africano, tranne le cose sulla casa e sul banjo, come costruirlo, come suonarlo. E questo lo sapeva perché sapeva che se ce l'aveva, la casa era sua e il banjo era suo. Solo che lui non aveva una casa, quindi l'unica cosa che aveva era il banjo.

notha one,' he say, 'Nigga can't do shit. Mas can step on a nigga hand, nigga heart, nigga life, and what can a nigga do? Nigga can't do shit.

What can a nigga do when Mas house on fire?

What can a nigga do when Mas house on fire?

Bet NOT do mo'n yell, Fire, Fire!

Let some'un else brang the wata

Cause a nigga can't do shit!

He sing that and laugh. And one day Emmalina meet me when I come in outten field and tell me Mas don shoved in the side of Kaine head.”

She looked up at the sun and blinked her eyes rapidly several times. I did not question her anymore.

This is still a far cry from just how five slaves managed to free themselves and loose the rest of the coffle, how, having achieved this, they managed to murder the drivers and one trader and dangerously injure another (and I begin to think, too, that she must have some inkling of where the three darkies that the posse couldn't find have gotten to), but I begin to perceive how I may get to this point. We shall see tomorrow. Enough for tonight. I sat late with Hughes over a very smooth Kentucky whiskey (I must admit to having misjudged Hughes. I had not thought from either the appointments of his house or the fare at his table that he was capable of such fine taste.

“Ha costruito il banjo da solo. L'ha fatto con pergamena di buona qualità e legno stagionato che aveva trovato da solo e quando il Padrone l'ha rotto era come se ha rotto anche Kaine. Forse lo ha rotto davvero, perché c'era qualcosa che non andava in lui dopo che è successo. E non potevo fare nulla per sistemare le cose. Gli ho detto che poteva costruirne uno nuovo. Ho raccolto la legna per lui da Jim Boys al capannone del carpentiere, ho preso il crine di cavallo da Joe Big di Emmalina giù alle stalle. Ma Kaine l'ha solo guardato. ‘Il Padrone può farne un altro’, ha detto, ‘un negro non può fare niente. Il Padrone può calpestare la mano, il cuore, la vita di un negro e lui che può fare? Non può fare un bel niente.

*Che può fare un negro se la casa del Padrone
brucia?*

*Che può fare un negro se la casa del Padrone
brucia?*

Può soltanto urlare, a fuoco, a fuoco!

Fa' portare l'acqua a qualcun altro

Perché un negro non può fare un bel niente!

L'ha cantata e si è messo a ridere. E un giorno Emmalina mi è venuta incontro mentre tornavo dai campi e mi ha detto che il Padrone aveva colpito Kaine in testa”.

Ha alzato lo sguardo verso il sole e ha sbattuto gli occhi rapidamente diverse volte. Non l'ho interrogata oltre.

Perhaps it is only from want of proper exercise that his discriminating faculties are not more in evidence. What I had thought dead may only be dormant. As for means – in the case of the whiskey, I would say that being sheriff must not be without its advantages). It is curious, though, how the negress, well, how she looks in the sun. For a moment today as I watched her I could almost imagine how Vaughan allowed her to get close enough to stick a knife between his ribs.

June 23, 1829.

She demanded a bath this morning, which Hughes foolishly allowed her, and in the creek. Being

Sono ancora ben lontano dal capire come cinque schiavi abbiano potuto liberarsi e sciogliere il resto della colonna e come, una volta raggiunto questo obiettivo, abbiano fatto in modo di assassinare i sorveglianti e un mercante di schiavi e a ferirne gravemente un altro (e comincio anche a pensare che lei abbia qualche sentore di dove siano andati a finire i tre negri che la squadra non è riuscita a trovare), ma inizio ad intuire come potrei arrivarci. Lo vedremo domani. Per stasera basta così. Sono rimasto seduto fino a tardi con Hughes davanti ad un ottimo whiskey del Kentucky (devo ammettere di aver giudicato male Hughes. Non avevo immaginato, a giudicare dall'arredamento della sua casa e dal cibo della sua tavola, che fosse capace di un gusto così raffinato. Forse è solo per mancanza di un esercizio adeguato che le sue facoltà selettive non risultano più evidenti. Ciò che credevo morto potrebbe essere solo dormiente. Per quanto riguarda i mezzi - nel caso del whisky, direi che essere sceriffo debba avere i suoi vantaggi). L'aspetto della negra è, tuttavia, piuttosto curioso, beh, quando la si vede al sole. Per un attimo oggi, mentre la guardavo, ho potuto quasi immaginare perché Vaughan le abbia permesso di avvicinarsi abbastanza da potergli infilare un coltello tra le costole.

23 giugno, 1829.

Stamattina ha richiesto di poter fare il bagno, cosa che Hughes le ha stupidamente concesso, e per di

without a bathing dress, she must perforce bathe in her clothes and dry in them also. A chill was the natural outcome, whose severity we have yet to determine. And were that not bad enough, she cut her foot, a deep slash across the instep and ball, while climbing up the bank. Hughes thinks it a reasonably clean cut but she bathed near the place where the livestock come to water so there is no way of knowing. He claims that he was so nonplussed, “flustered” as he phrases it, at such a novel request coming from a nigger and a wench ready to be brought to light, too, that he had granted the request before he had time to think properly of the possible outcome. Since she was shackled during the whole business he thought no harm could be done, as though darkies are not subject to the same chills and sweats which overtake the veriest pack animals. It seems that I am never to be spared the consequences of dealing with stupid people. Pray God the wench doesn't die before I get my book.

June 27, 1829.

A curious session we had of it today. I know not what, even now, to make of it. She spoke of her own accord today, spoke to me, rather than the hot windless air, as has been her custom. The air,

più nel torrente. Non avendo una veste per bagnarsi deve necessariamente lavarsi e asciugarsi con i vestiti indosso. L'inevitabile risultato è stato un colpo di freddo, la cui gravità non è ancora stata determinata. Inoltre, come se non bastasse, si è anche tagliata un piede, un profondo taglio lungo il dorso e la pianta del piede, mentre si arrampicava sull'argine. Hughes ritiene che la ferita sia ragionevolmente pulita, ma ha fatto il bagno vicino al punto in cui il bestiame viene ad abbeverarsi, perciò non vi è modo di saperlo. Sostiene di essere stato così stupefatto, “agitato”, come afferma lui, di fronte a una richiesta così insolita proveniente da una negra in procinto di partorire, che ha accolto la richiesta prima ancora di avere il tempo di considerare adeguatamente il possibile esito. Poiché ha continuato a indossare le catene durante l'intera durata del bagno, pensava che non potesse accadere nulla di male, come se i neri non fossero soggetti agli stessi colpi di freddo e sudore che colpiscono gli animali da soma. Sembra che le conseguenze di avere a che fare con persone stupide non mi vengano mai risparmiate. Prego Dio che la ragazza non muoia prima di poter finire il mio libro.

27 giugno, 1829.

Che curiosa seduta abbiamo avuto oggi. Non so cosa pensare, nemmeno adesso. Oggi ha parlato di sua spontanea volontà, si è rivolta a me anziché all'aria calda e immobile, come è solita fare. L'aria,

even now, is oppressive, hot, still, strangely dry, and it was obvious, even as Hughes brought her up from the cellar, that the negress also felt it. Her movements, always slow, were even slower, her walk, not stumbling but heavy as though her feet were weighted. She eased her bulk onto the ground beneath the tree and leaned back against its trunk. Her dark woolly hair – which fits upon her head almost like a nubby cap – seemed to merge into the deeper shadows cast by the thick low hanging branches of the tree. I sat in my habitual place just behind her, stripped to my shirt sleeves and feeling that even this was not enough to lessen the sun's onslaught. The sharp, bright sunlight was too painful to gaze at from the depth of that shadow and I must look down at the pages of my notebook, blank save for the day's date, or at her. We were silent for some moments after she was seated, I thinking how limited my vision had become and she engaged in God knows what cogitations.

“That writin what you put on that paper?” I was somewhat startled by the question and did not immediately answer. “You be writin down what I say?” She was on her knees, turned to me now to see what was in the notebook. Instinctively, I held it away from her eyes and told her that although I had written nothing that day – we had said nothing so far – (I fear that this little pleasantry escaped her) I did indeed write down much of what she said. On a happy impulse, I flipped back

anche adesso, è opprimente, calda, ferma, stranamente asciutta, ed era evidente, già mentre Hughes la portava su dalla cantina, che anche la negra lo sentiva. I suoi movimenti, solitamente sempre lenti, erano più lenti del solito e, nonostante non barcollasse, camminava come se i suoi piedi fossero appesantiti. Si è lasciata cadere al suolo sotto l'albero e si è appoggiata al tronco. I capelli scuri e lanosi - che le calzano sulla testa quasi come un cappello bitorzolato - sembravano dissolversi nelle ombre scure dei fitti rami che pendevano bassi dall'albero. Mi sono seduto al mio posto abituale, appena dietro di lei, in maniche di camicia sentendo che neanche questo sarebbe bastato a mitigare l'assalto del sole. La luce del sole, forte e brillante, faceva troppo male allo sguardo dalla profondità dell'ombra e ho dovuto abbassare gli occhi sulle pagine del mio taccuino, vuote, tranne che per la data del giorno, o su di lei. Siamo rimasti in silenzio per qualche istante dopo che si era seduta. Io pensavo a quanto la mia visione fosse divenuta limitata e lei era impegnata in Dio solo sa quali riflessioni.

“Cos'è quella roba che scrivi su quel foglio?”. Sono rimasto alquanto sorpreso dalla domanda e non ho risposto immediatamente. “Scrivi quello che dico?”. Era in ginocchio, voltata verso di me per vedere cosa fosse scritto sul taccuino. Istantaneamente, l'ho allontanato dal suo sguardo e le ho detto che, sebbene non avessi scritto nulla quel giorno - non avevamo detto nulla fino ad allora -

through the pages and showed her the notes I had made on some of our previous sessions. “What that there... and there... and that, too?” I told her and even read a little to her, an innocuous line or two. She was entranced. “I really say that?” And when I nodded she sat back on her haunches. “What you gon do wid it?” I told her cautiously that I would use it in a book I hoped to write. I was totally unsure of whether she would comprehend the meaning of that. “Cause why?” She was thoroughly aroused by this time and seemed, despite the chain which bound her, about to flee.

Girl, I said to her, for at that moment, I could not for the life of me remember her name, Girl, what I put in this book cannot hurt you now. You’ve already been tried and judged. She seemed somewhat calmed by this utterance, perhaps as much by the tone of my voice, which I purposefully made gentle, as by the statement itself.

“Then for what you wanna do it?”

I told her that I wrote what I did in the hope of helping others to be happy in the life that has been sent them to live, a response with which I am rather pleased. Certainly, it succeeded in its purpose of setting her mind at ease about the possible repercussions to herself in talking freely with me, for she seemed much struck by the

(temo che questa piccola facezia le sia sfuggita), scrivevo effettivamente buona parte di quanto diceva. Preso da un impulso fortunato, ho sfogliato all’indietro le pagine e le ho mostrato gli appunti che avevo annotato durante alcune delle nostre sedute precedenti. “Che dice quello... e lì... e quell’altro?”. Le ho detto cosa c’era scritto e le ho anche letto qualcosa, una o due righe innocue. Ne era rapita. “Davvero ho detto così?”, e quando ho annuito lei si è di nuovo accovacciata. “Che te ne fai?”. Le ho risposto in maniera prudente che avrei usato gli appunti in un libro che speravo di scrivere. Non ero affatto sicuro che avrebbe compreso il significato di tutto ciò. “E perché?”. A quel punto era molto allarmata e sembrava in procinto di fuggire, nonostante la catena che la legava.

“Ragazza”, le ho detto, poiché in quel momento proprio non riuscivo a ricordare il suo nome, “ragazza, quello che scrivo in questo libro ormai non può più danneggiarti. Sei già stata processata e giudicata”. Lei mi è sembrata in qualche modo tranquillizzata da questa affermazione, forse tanto per il tono della mia voce, che ho intenzionalmente reso gentile, quanto per l’affermazione stessa.

“Allora che lo fai a fare?”.

Le ho detto che ho scritto tutto ciò nella speranza di aiutare gli altri ad essere felici nella vita che è stata destinata loro, una risposta di cui sono piuttosto soddisfatto. Certamente, è riuscita nello scopo di

statement, looking intently into my face for a long moment before she again settled down into her habitual pose. I allowed her to reflect upon this for a moment. She was silent for so long that I began to suspect her of dozing and leaned forward the better to see her. Her eyes were open (she seemed not to have the same problem as I with the harsh sunlight), her hands cupped beneath the roundness of her stomach. Your baby seems to have dropped; according to the old wives' tale, you'll be brought to bed soon. It was merely an attempt at conversation, of course; I know no more about that sort of business than I know about animal husbandry or the cultivation of cotton. She, of course, did not treat my words as the conversational gambit they were; she jumped as though stung. I cursed my stupidity, knowing what this unthinking comment must have brought to her mind, even as I realized that this was the first time I had seen her hands anywhere near her stomach. After the initial start, she straightened her back and scooted nearer to the tree, but said nothing. I waited, somewhat anxiously, for the blank sullen look to return. It did not, however, and, emboldened, I ventured quietly, Girl, where did the others get the file? even as she said:

“Kaine not want this baby. He want and don't want it. Babies ain't easy fo niggas, but still, I knows this Kaine's and I wants it cause that. And... and, when he ask me to go to Aunt Lefonia... I, I nelly bout died. I know what Aunt

rassicurarla sulle possibili ripercussioni che avrebbe potuto subire parlando liberamente con me, in quanto è sembrata molto colpita da tale affermazione e mi ha guardato intensamente in faccia per un lungo istante prima di tornare ad assumere la sua posizione abituale. L'ho lasciata riflettere per un momento sulla questione. È rimasta in silenzio così a lungo che ho iniziato a sospettare che si fosse assopita e mi sono sporto in avanti per vederla meglio. I suoi occhi erano aperti (sembrava non avere il mio stesso problema con la forte luce del sole) - e le mani posate sotto la rotondità del suo stomaco. “Il tuo bambino sembra essere sceso; secondo la vecchia leggenda popolare, partorirai presto”. Era un mero tentativo di conversazione, naturalmente; mi intendo di questo genere di affari tanto quanto di allevamento o di coltivazione del cotone. Lei, naturalmente, non ha preso le mie parole come un espediente per fare conversazione; è saltata su come se fosse stata punta. Ho maledetto la mia stupidità, sapendo cosa doveva averle fatto venire in mente quel commento sconsiderato, anche perché mi sono reso conto che era la prima volta che le vedevo le mani vicino al ventre. Dopo l'iniziale sussulto ha raddrizzato la schiena e si è spostata più vicino all'albero senza dire nulla. Ho atteso, con una certa ansia, che le tornasse lo sguardo cupo e vuoto. Tuttavia, non è successo e, sentendomi incoraggiato, mi sono azzardato pacatamente a chiederle: “Ragazza, dove hanno preso la lima gli altri?” proprio mentre lei diceva:

Lefonia be doin, though she don't be doin it too much cause Mas know it gotta be some nigga chi'ren comin in this world. And was anybody but, but Kaine, I do it, too. First time, a anyway. But, but this Kaine and it be like killin parta him, parta me. So I talk wid him; beg him. I say, this us baby, usses. We make it. How you can say, kill it. It mine and it yo's. He jes look at me. 'Same way Lefonia sons be hers when Mas decide that bay geldin he want worth mo to him than they is to her. Dessa,' and I know he don't want hurt me when he call my name, but it so sweet til it do hurt. Dessa, jes soft like that. 'Dess, where yo brotha, Jeeter, at now?' I'm cryin already, can't cry no mo, not fo Jeeter. He be gon, sold, south, somewhere; we neva do know. And finally I say 'run' and he laugh. He laugh and say, 'Run, Dessa (Lawd. Ain't no body neva say my name so sweet. Even when he mad like that, Dessa. Dessa, I always know the way he call my name). Dessa, run where?' 'No'th', I whisper. I whisper cause I don't rightly thank I eva heard no nigga say that out loud like when anybody, even yo own self's shadow could hear you, less'n it right up on you. 'No'th? And how we gon get there?' 'You know, Kaine.' And he know. I know he know. He know if he wanna know. 'And what we gon do when we gets there?' I jes look at him. Cause he know. 'Dessa.' Say my name agin. 'You know what is no'th? Huh? What is no'th? Mo whites. Jes like here. You don't see Aunt Lefonia, I see her fo you.' But I don't go, not then. I waits and one

“Kaine non lo voleva il bambino. Un po' lo voleva e un po' no. I bambini non sono mica facili per i negri, ma sapevo che era di Kaine e quindi lo volevo. E... e quando mi ha detto di andare da Zia Lefonia... io, io sono quasi morta. So che faceva Zia Lefonia, anche se non lo faceva tanto perché il Padrone sapeva che qualche bambino negro per forza veniva al mondo. E se il bambino era di qualcun altro invece che di Kaine, lo facevo anche io. Almeno la prima volta, comunque. Ma era di Kaine ed era come uccidere un pezzo di lui, un pezzo di me. Allora c'ho parlato, l'ho pregato. Gli ho detto, 'questo è il nostro bambino, è nostro. Facciamolo. Come fai a dire di ucciderlo? È mio e tuo'. Lui mi ha solo guardato. 'Proprio come sono suoi i figli di Lefonia quando il Padrone decide che quel castrone baio che vuole vale di più di quanto loro valgono per lei. Dessa', e so che non mi voleva ferire quando ha detto il mio nome, ma lo diceva in modo così dolce che alla fine faceva male lo stesso. Dessa, lo diceva in modo così dolce. 'Dess, dove sta tuo fratello Jeeter adesso?'. Stavo già piangendo, non potevo piangere più, non per Jeeter. Se n'è andato, venduto, è al sud da qualche parte; non lo sappiamo mai, noi. E alla fine ho detto, 'Scappiamo' e lui si è messo a ridere. Ha riso e ha detto: 'Scappiamo, Dessa? (Signore. Nessuno ha mai detto il mio nome in modo così dolce. Anche quando è arrabbiato, Dessa. Dessa, riconosco sempre come dice il mio nome). Dessa, scappiamo dove?', 'Al nord', ho sussurrato. L'ho sussurrato perché non penso che ho mai sentito un negro dirlo

night Kaine talk to me. I don't *know*, not then, bout all what he says, but I try to learn most o'it by heart so I can thank bout it and thank bout it til I does know. He tell me then how he been sold away from some massas, runned way from othas. He run, he say, tryin to find no'th and he lil then and not even know no'th a di-rection and mo places than he eva be able to count. He jes thank he be free o' whippins, free to belongs to somebody what belongs to him jes so long as he be no'th. Last time he runned way, he most get there and he thank, now he know which way free land is, what is a free town, next time he get there. But neva is no next time cause same time's patterrollers takes him back, they takes back a man what been no'th, lived there and what know what free no'th is. 'Now,' Kaine say, 'now this man free, bo'n free, but still, any white man what say he a slave be believed cause a nigga can't talk fo the laws, not ginst no white man, not even fo his own self. So this man gots to get a notha white man fo to say he is free and he couldn't find one quick nough so then the Georgia Man, that be what the no'th man call the patterrollers, they takes him back fo to be slave. That's right. But even fo the patterrollers caught him, white man hit, he not lowed to hit back. He carpt'na but if the white mens on the job say they don't want work wid him, he don't work and sucha thangs as that. He say it hard bein a free man o' color, he don't say nigga, say free man o' color, but it betta'n bein a slave and if he get the chance he

ad alta voce quando qualcuno, o anche la tua stessa ombra, poteva sentirlo, tranne se ti stava proprio vicino. 'Al nord? E come ci arriviamo?'. 'Lo sai, Kaine'. E lo sapeva. So che lo sapeva. Lo sapeva se voleva. 'E che facciamo quando ci arriviamo?'. L'ho guardato e basta. Perché lui lo sapeva. 'Dessa.' Di ancora il mio nome. 'Sai cos'è il nord? Eh? Lo sai cos'è il nord? Altri bianchi. Proprio come qua. Se non vai da Zia Lefonia, ci vado io al posto tuo'. Ma non ci sono andata, non quella volta. Ho aspettato e, una sera, Kaine mi ha parlato. Al tempo non *capivo* tutto quello che mi ha detto ma ho provato a imparare a memoria quasi tutto, così ci potevo pensare e ripensare finché non lo capivo. Mi ha detto che era stato venduto da alcuni padroni e che da altri era scappato. Mi ha detto che era scappato per cercare di trovare il nord ma era piccolo e non sapeva nemmeno che il nord era una direzione e che c'erano più posti di quanti poteva mai immaginare. Pensava solo di fuggire dalle frustate, libero di appartenere a qualcuno che apparteneva a lui finché era al nord. L'ultima volta che era scappato ci era quasi arrivato e pensava che ora che sapeva da che parte era la terra libera, - cos'era una città libera, la prossima volta ci arrivava. Ma non c'è stata mai una prossima volta perché, proprio quando le pattuglie lo hanno riportato indietro hanno preso anche un uomo che aveva vissuto al nord e sapeva com'era il nord libero. 'Quest'uomo', ha detto Kaine, 'era libero, nato libero e comunque, se un bianco qualsiasi diceva che era uno schiavo, gli credevano perché

gon runned way.’ But, Kaine say, he ask hisself, ‘That free? How that gon be free? It still be two lists, one say “White Man Can,” otha say “Nigga Can’t” and white man still be the onliest one what can write on em.’ So he don’t run no mo. ‘Run fo what,’ he say. ‘Get caught be jes that much worsen off. Maybe is a place wid out no white, nigga can be free.’ But he don’t know where that is. He find it, he say we have us chi’re then. That why he say go see Aunt Lefonia, but I don’t go. I jes can’t. I know Kaine be knowin mo’n me. I know that. He – He telled me lotta thang I not eva thank bout fo I wid him. But I does know us. I does. Me’n him. I knows that. And I knows this usses baby. And I thank bout what he say and I thank bout what I knows and I know they all bes the same thang. How they gon be diff’ent? I tell Kaine find it, least *try* fo you say see Aunt Lefonia. I don’t be cryin now and he don’t be mad. Jes, jes touch my face and say my name, Lawd, say my name. Say my name and his body be so hard, so hard and stiff ginst mine and I feel how he want me. ‘I try, Dessa. I try what I can do.’ No matter though,” she said looking up at me. “Mas kill him fo it get time fo us to go.”

We were both quiet for some time. I searched around in my mind for some way to bring he train of thought back to the immediate concern.

“You thank,” she asked looking up at me, “you thank what I say now gon hep peoples be happy in

un negro non può parlare davanti alla legge, non contro un bianco, neanche per difendersi. Quindi quest’uomo doveva trovare un altro bianco che diceva che era libero ma non l’ha trovato in tempo e gli Uomini della Georgia, così gli uomini del nord chiamano quelli delle pattuglie, lo hanno portato via come schiavo. Proprio così. Ma anche prima che le pattuglie lo catturavano, se un uomo bianco lo colpiva, lui non poteva rispondere. Era un falegname ma se i falegnami bianchi dicevano che non volevano lavorare con lui, lui non lavorava e altre cose così. Diceva che era difficile essere un uomo di colore libero, non diceva negro, diceva uomo di colore libero, ma che era meglio che essere schiavo e che se aveva l’occasione scappava’. Ma, Kaine ha detto, si chiedeva, ‘È questa la libertà? Come può essere questo? Ci stanno comunque due liste: una che dice “I Bianchi Possono” e un’altra che dice “I Negri Non Possono”, e i bianchi sono gli unici che possono scriverle’. Quindi non è scappato più. ‘Che scappo a fare?’, ha detto. ‘Essere catturati è anche peggio. Forse c’è un posto senza bianchi dove i negri possono essere liberi’. Ma lui non sapeva dov’era. Diceva che se lo trovava potevamo avere i nostri figli, lì. Ecco perché mi ha detto di andare da Zia Lefonia, ma io non ci sono andata. Non potevo. Sapevo che Kaine conosceva più cose di me. Lo sapevo. Lui – lui mi ha detto tante cose che non avevo mai nemmeno pensato prima di stare con lui. Ma io conoscevo noi. Proprio così. Io e lui. Conoscevo noi. E sapevo che quello era il nostro

the life they sent? If that be true,” she said as I opened my mouth to answer, “Why I not be happy when I live it? I don’t wanna talk no mo.” And she did not.

It is only now that I become aware of my failure to employ the strategy I have devised. Yet, she now suffers from no more than a small case of the sniffles and the gash, while painful, perhaps, causes her no more than a slight limp. Monday will thus do as well as today, for I feel that we have achieved a significant level in our relationship. Today was a turning point and I am most optimistic for the future.

bambino. E pensavo a quello che aveva detto lui e a quello che sapevo io e sapevo che era la stessa cosa. Come facevano a essere due cose diverse? Ho detto a Kaine che poteva trovare quel posto, almeno poteva *provare* a trovarlo prima di dirmi di andare da Zia Lefonia. Io non piangevo più e lui non era arrabbiato. Solo mi toccava il viso e diceva il mio nome, Signore, il mio nome. Ha detto il mio nome e il suo corpo era così duro, forte e rigido contro il mio e sentivo che mi voleva. ‘Ci provo, Dessa. Ci provo più che posso’. Non importa, comunque”, ha detto lei alzando lo sguardo su di me. “Il Padrone l’ha ucciso prima che potevamo scappare”.

Siamo rimasti entrambi in silenzio per un po’. Ho cercato di pensare ad un modo per riportare il filo del discorso sull’argomento principale.

“Pensi”, ha chiesto lei guardandomi dal basso, “pensi che quello che dico aiuta le persone a essere felici della vita che gli è capitata? Se è vero”, ha aggiunto mentre stavo per rispondere, “allora perché io non sono felice di viverla? Non voglio parlare più”. E non ha più detto nulla.

Solo ora mi rendo conto di non essere riuscito a mettere in atto la strategia che avevo elaborato. Eppure, lei ora risente solo di un piccolo caso di raffreddore e il taglio, seppur doloroso, forse, la fa soltanto zoppicare lievemente. Pertanto, lunedì andrà bene tanto quanto oggi, poiché ritengo che

June 28, 1829.

As has been my custom in the past, I held no formal session with the negress this Sunday. But, in order to further cultivate the tentative rapport achieved in yesterday's session, I read and interpreted for her selected Bible verses. We were in our habitual place under the oak tree and I must admit that the laziness of the hot Sunday afternoon threatened at times to overcome me (as Hughes had warned me it would). As a consequence, he was reluctant to give me the keys to the cellar. He felt my vigilance would be impaired by the heat. I replied that in as much as the negress would remain chained as usual, there was no danger involved in such a venture – unless, of course, he feared that his own darkies would rise up and free her. He was somewhat stung by my retort, but he did surrender the keys. I shall make it my business to obtain another key to the cellar and to the chains with which she is bound to the tree – these are the only ones which in her quieted state she now wears. It is not to my liking to be required to *request* permission each time I wish to talk with the woman.

My drowsiness was compounded, I finally realized, by the monotonous melody which she hummed. I have grown, it appears, so accustomed

abbiamo raggiunto un livello significativo nel nostro rapporto. La giornata di oggi ha segnato una svolta e sono molto ottimista per il futuro.

28 giugno, 1829.

Come sono stato solito fare finora, questa domenica non ho tenuto alcuna seduta formale con la negra. Tuttavia, per coltivare ulteriormente il timido rapporto instaurato nella sessione di ieri, ho letto e interpretato per lei una serie di versi della Bibbia. Eravamo nel nostro luogo abituale sotto la quercia e devo ammettere che la pigrizia del caldo pomeriggio domenicale minacciava talvolta di sopraffarmi (come mi aveva avvisato Hughes). Per questo motivo egli era riluttante a darmi le chiavi della cantina. Credeva che la mia attenzione sarebbe stata compromessa dal caldo. Ho risposto che, finché la negra fosse rimasta incatenata come al solito, tale impresa non comportava alcun pericolo - a meno che, naturalmente, non temesse che i suoi stessi negri potessero ribellarsi e liberarla. La mia replica lo ha punto un po', ma mi ha ceduto le chiavi. Farò in modo di ottenere un'altra chiave per la cantina e per le catene con cui è legata all'albero - ora che si trova in uno stato di quiete queste sono le uniche che ha. Non gradisco dover chiedere il permesso ogni volta che desidero parlare con la donna.

Alla fine, mi sono reso conto che la mia sonnolenza era aggravata dalla melodia monotona che lei canticchiava. A quanto pare, mi sono talmente

to them that they seem like a natural part of the setting like the clucking of the hens or the lowing of the cattle. Thinking to trap her into an admission of inattention, I asked her to repeat the lessons I had just imparted to her. She did so and I was very pleased to find her so responsive. However, the humming became so annoying that I was forced to ask her to cease. She looked up at me briefly and though I had not threatened her, I believe she was mindful of previous punishments and of the fact that it is only through my influence that she is able to escape from her dark hole for these brief periods.

“Oh, this ain’t no good-timmin song. It say bout the righteousness and heaven, same as what you say.”

I asked her to sing it and I set it down here as I remember and understand it:

*Gonna march away in the gold band in the army
bye’n bye.*

*Gonna march away in the gold band in the army
bye’n bye.*

Sinner, what you gon do that day?

Sinner, what you gon do that day?

*When the fire arollin behind you in the army
bye’n bye?*

It is, of course, only a quaint piece of doggerel which the darkies cunningly adapt from the scraps of scripture they are taught. Nevertheless, the tune

abituato a tali melodie che mi appaiono come una componente naturale dell’ambiente, come il chiocciare delle galline o il muggito del bestiame. Pensando di coglierla in un’ammissione di distrazione, le ho chiesto di ripetere le lezioni che le avevo appena impartito. Lei lo ha fatto e sono stato molto lieto di trovarla così reattiva. Tuttavia, il mormorio è divenuto talmente irritante da costringermi a chiederle di smettere. Ha alzato lo sguardo su di me per un istante e, anche se non l’avevo minacciata, credo che fosse memore delle punizioni precedenti e del fatto che è solo grazie alla mia influenza se è in grado di uscire dal suo buco nero per questi brevi periodi.

“Oh, questa non è mica una canzonetta allegra. Parla di rettitudine e del paradiso, come quello che dici tu”.

Le ho chiesto di cantarla e l’ho riportata qui sotto, per quanto ho capito e riesco a ricordare:

*Me ne andrò marciando con la banda d’oro
nell’esercito, prima o poi.*

*Me ne andrò marciando con la banda d’oro
nell’esercito, prima o poi.*

Peccatore, che farai quel giorno?

Peccatore, che farai quel giorno?

*Quando il fuoco divamperà dietro di te,
nell’esercito
prima o poi?*

Si tratta, naturalmente, solo di una pittoresca filastrocca che i negri adattano astutamente dai frammenti delle scritture che gli vengono insegnati.

was quite charming when sung; the words seemed to put new life into an otherwise annoying melody and I was quite pleased that she had shared it with me. We were both quiet for several moments after she had done. The heat was, by this time, an enervating influence upon me. She, too, seemed to be spent by that brief spurt of animation. After a few more moments of silence, I closed the Bible, prayed briefly for the deliverance of her soul, then returned her to the cellar.

June 29, 1829.

I asked how to pronounce the name of the young darky with whom she had lived (I am puzzled in my own mind about how to refer to him. Certainly, they were not married and she never speaks of having gone through even the slave ceremony of jumping over the broom). Did Kaine – is that how you pronounce – how you *say* his name? I asked her.

“You say it the same way you... you... spell? Spell it!”

Did Kaine talk much about freedom? This is part of my strategy, to frame all the questions in such a way that Kaine can be referred to in some manner. Her attachment to this Kaine appears quite sincere

Ciononostante, la canzone era piuttosto affascinante quando veniva cantata; le parole sembravano infondere nuova vita in una melodia altrimenti fastidiosa e ho apprezzato molto il fatto che l’abbia condivisa con me. Siamo rimasti entrambi in silenzio per diversi minuti una volta terminata la canzone. A quel punto, il caldo esercitava su di me un’influenza estenuante. Anche lei sembrava esausta dopo quel breve slancio di vivacità. Dopo qualche altro momento di silenzio, ho chiuso la Bibbia, ho pregato brevemente per la salvezza della sua anima, e l’ho condotta nuovamente nella cantina.

29 giugno, 1829.

Le ho chiesto come si pronunciasse il nome del giovane nero con cui aveva vissuto (sono confuso circa il modo in cui dovrei riferirmi a lui. Di certo non erano sposati e lei non parla mai di aver compiuto la tipica cerimonia nuziale degli schiavi del salto della scopa). “Kaine - si pronuncia così - si dice così il suo nome?”, le ho domandato.

“Si dice nello stesso modo che...che si scrive? Dimmi come si scrive!”.

“Kaine parlava spesso della libertà?”. Questo rientra nella mia strategia, ovvero formulare tutte le domande in modo tale da poter fare riferimento a Kaine in qualche modo. Il suo attaccamento a questo Kaine sembra alquanto sincero e, sebbene

and while it is probably rooted in the basest physical attractions, I cannot summon up the same sense of contempt with which I first viewed this liaison. I must confess also that I feel some slight twinge – Not of guilt, rather of *compassion* in using her attachment to the young darky as a means of eliciting information from her. But the fact is that my stratagems – while not perhaps of the most noble *type* – are used in the service of a greater good and this consideration must sweep all else before it. And I fear that in concentrating upon obtaining this greater good, I had finished asking the first question before I realized that she had made a slight jest. Looking at her in some surprise, I told her that it was quite a good joke, both in what she had said and in my own rather slow and dull reaction to her pleasantry. She in turn smiled, revealing for the first time in my memory the even white teeth behind the long thick lips of her mouth. Kaine did speak, then, a great deal about freedom?

She sat back. “Don’t no niggas be talkin too much bout freedom, cause they be knowing what good fo em.”

I did not believe her, but I chose, for the time being at least, to allow her to think that I did. Then what was your idea in trying to escape from the coffle?

She picked up a twig and began to mark in the dirt

sia probabilmente radicato nella più volgare attrazione fisica, non riesco a provare lo stesso senso di disprezzo con cui inizialmente ho giudicato questa relazione. Confesso, inoltre, di provare un leggero senso - non di colpa, ma piuttosto di *compassione* nell’usare il suo affetto nei confronti del giovane nero come un mezzo per estorcerle informazioni. Tuttavia, i miei stratagemmi - pur non essendo forse dei più *nobili* - sono impiegati al servizio di un bene superiore e questa considerazione non può che prevalere su tutto il resto. Inoltre, temo, poiché ero concentrato sul raggiungimento di questo bene superiore, di essermi reso conto del fatto che avesse fatto una sorta di battuta solo dopo aver finito di porre la mia prima domanda. Guardandola con un certo stupore le ho detto che era proprio una bella battuta, sia per ciò che aveva detto, sia per la mia reazione piuttosto lenta e sciocca davanti alla sua facezia. Lei a sua volta ha sorriso rivelando, per la prima volta da che mi ricordo, i denti bianchi e regolari dietro le lunghe labbra carnose. “Dunque, è vero che Kaine parlava spesso della libertà?”.

È tornata a sedersi più indietro. “Non ci stanno negri che parlano spesso di libertà, perché sanno che non gli conviene”.

Non le ho creduto ma ho deciso, almeno per il momento, di lasciarle credere che fosse così. “Allora cosa pensavi di fare cercando di fuggire dalla colonna di schiavi?”.

and to hum – not the same tune as the previous days, but one equally monotonous. She looked up at me, finally, and widened her eyes. “Was you black, you wanna be sold deep south? I neva been deep south, but Boss Smith, he always threats lazy niggas wid that and they don’t be too lazy no mo.”

And the others, I asked, was this what was in their mind?

She shrugged her shoulders. “Onlest mind I be knowin is mines. Why fo you didn’t ask them first?” I believe this was not insolence, rather it seems more simple curiosity, and I allowed it to pass, explaining that I had not heard of the incident until too late to speak with the others who had been charged as leaders. “You thank there be a place wid out no whites?” I looked at her in some surprise and she continued to herself, in a deeper dialect than she had heretofore used, really almost a mumble, something about Emmalina’s Joe Big (I have yet to determine if this is the name of Emmalina’s son or her “husband.” Because the father is seldom, if ever, of any consequence after conception, the children of these unions take their surnames from their owners and are distinguished from others of the same given names by prefacing their names with a possessive form of the mother’s. This form of address, however, is also used in referring to spouses. The question of Joe Big’s relationship to

Ha raccolto un ramoscello e ha cominciato a tracciare segni nella terra e a canticchiare - non la stessa melodia dei giorni precedenti, ma una altrettanto monotona. Ha alzato lo sguardo su di me, finalmente, e ha spalancato gli occhi. “Se tu eri nero volevi essere venduto nel profondo sud? Io non ci sono stata mai, ma Boss Smith usa sempre questa minaccia coi negri pigri e loro poi non fanno più tanto i pigri”.

“E gli altri”, le ho chiesto, “è a questo che pensavano?”.

Lei ha scrollato le spalle. “Io so solo quello che penso io. Perché non hai chiesto prima a loro?”. Non ritengo che si sia trattato di insolenza, bensì di semplice curiosità, così ho lasciato correre, spiegando che avevo saputo dell’incidente quando era ormai troppo tardi per parlare con gli altri accusati di essere i responsabili. “Pensi che c’è un posto senza bianchi?”. L’ho guardata con una certa sorpresa e lei ha continuato a parlare tra sé e sé in un dialetto più marcato di quello che aveva utilizzato fino ad allora, sembrava quasi farfugliasse a proposito di Joe Big di Emmalina (devo ancora scoprire se si tratti del nome del figlio di Emmalina o di suo “marito”. Il padre, nella maggior parte dei casi, non ha alcuna importanza dopo il concepimento, perciò i figli di queste unioni prendono il cognome dai loro proprietari e si distinguono da coloro che portano lo stesso cognome precisando, a seguito del proprio nome,

Emmalina, while of passing interest, is certainly extraneous to the present discussion, so I did not interrupt her ramblings) telling Kaine something and going, but where I could not make out. “They caught Bi – they caught the others what run?”

I asked quickly, perhaps too quickly, if she knew where they were and the blank sullen look immediately returned to her face. The humming started again. She moved as though uncomfortable and touched, almost as if frightened, the big mound which rises beneath her dress. When she spoke it was in the voice of the first day. “This all I gotta Kaine. Right here, in my belly. Mist’s slap my face when I tell her that, say, don’t lie, say, it must be Terrell, that how she call Mas, Terrell, say it mus be hissen, why else Mas want kill Kaine, best gard’er they eva has, what cost a pretty penny. She say, well, Terrell live, he live knowin his woman and his brat south in worsen slavery than they eva thought of and Aunt Lefonia stop me fo I kills her, too.”

It was almost like listening to the first day’s recital and I knew when she turned her head from me that for this day, anyway, I had gotten all from her that I could. This, together with the oppressive heat (the air has now become laden with moisture – a relief from the furnace-like dryness of the last few days – and the whole atmosphere is pregnant with the storm which must break soon), made me close my notebook for the day. But I now know

quello della madre. Questo metodo, tuttavia, è usato anche per riferirsi ai coniugi. La questione del legame tra Joe Big ed Emmalina, sebbene di interesse transitorio, non è certamente attinente alla conversazione attuale, per cui non ho interrotto i suoi sproloqui) che aveva detto qualcosa a Kaine e se ne era andato, ma non sono riuscito a capire dove. “Hanno preso Bi - hanno preso gli altri che sono scappati?”.

Le ho chiesto immediatamente, forse troppo velocemente, se sapeva dove si trovassero e lo sguardo vuoto e cupo le è tornato subito in volto. Ha ripreso a canticchiare. Si è mossa come se fosse a disagio e ha toccato, quasi ne fosse spaventata, la grande protuberanza che le sporge da sotto il vestito. Quando ha parlato lo ha fatto con la stessa voce del primo giorno. “Questo è tutto quello che m’è rimasto di Kaine. Qua, nella mia pancia. La Padrona mi ha dato uno schiaffo in faccia quando gliel’ho detto, ha detto di non dire bugie, ha detto che doveva essere di Terrell, lo chiama così il Padrone, Terrell, ha detto che era suo, sennò perché aveva ucciso Kaine, il giardiniere migliore che avevano avuto e che costava un bel po’ di soldi. Ha detto, beh se Terrell vive lo fa sapendo che la sua donna e il suo moccioso stanno al sud dove la schiavitù è peggio di quanto hanno mai immaginato e Zia Lefonia mi ha dovuto fermare se no ammazzavo anche lei”.

È stato quasi come ascoltare la recita del primo

that the thick-lipped mouth, so savage in its sullen repose, can smile and even utter small jests, that lurking behind her all too often blank gaze is something more than the cunning stubbornness which, alone, I first perceived, even noted that her skin, which appeared an ashen black in the light of the root cellar, is the color of strong tea and that even in the shade it is tinged with gold (surely this is a sign of good health in her. The baby should fetch Wilson a handsome price to repay him in some measure for what he has had to suffer through her agency). So, this lapse does not unduly discourage me. I know that she does not understand the project – it would be a wretched piece of business if she did – but she begins to have less distrust of me. She was not overly free in her speech but I begin to believe that she inclines towards this more than in the past. I fancy that I am not overly optimistic in predicting that one, perhaps two more sessions and I will have learned all I need from her. I shall have to think of a provocative title for the section in which I deal with the general principles apparent in her participation in this bloody business. “The Female of the Species,” something along those lines, perhaps.

giorno e sapevo, appena ha voltato la testa lontano da me, che per quel giorno, ad ogni modo, avevo ottenuto da lei tutto ciò che potevo. Questo, insieme al caldo opprimente (adesso l'aria è divenuta carica di umidità - un sollievo dalla secchezza simile a una fornace degli ultimi giorni - e l'intera atmosfera è intrisa della tempesta incombente), mi ha spinto a chiudere il taccuino per quella giornata. Adesso, però, so che la bocca dalle labbra spesse, così selvaggia nel suo accigliato riposo, può sorridere e persino pronunciare delle battute, che dietro il suo sguardo troppo spesso vuoto si cela qualcosa di più dell'astuta testardaggine che, da sola, ho percepito inizialmente, e ho persino notato che la sua pelle, apparentemente di un nero cinereo alla luce dello scantinato, è del colore del tè forte e che, persino all'ombra, si tinge di oro (questo è sicuramente un segno della sua buona salute. Il bambino dovrebbe fruttare a Wilson un ottimo prezzo così da ripagarlo in qualche modo per tutto ciò che lei gli ha fatto passare). Pertanto, questo passo falso non mi scoraggia eccessivamente. Sono consapevole del fatto che lei non comprenda il progetto - sarebbe un pessimo affare se così fosse - ma inizia a nutrire una minore diffidenza nei miei confronti. Non ha parlato molto liberamente, ma inizio a credere che sia più propensa a farlo rispetto al passato. Ritengo di non essere esageratamente ottimista nel prevedere che tra una, o forse due sedute avrò appreso da lei tutto ciò di cui ho bisogno. Dovrò farmi venire in mente un titolo stimolante per la

Later

Hughes says there is talk of a “maroon” settlement, an encampment of runaway slaves, somewhere nearby. There have been signs of marauding about some of the farms and plantations farther out from town. In the latest incident, several blacks (the wife of the farmer could not give an accurate count) stole into a small farm about twenty miles east of here and took provisions and the farm animals and murdered the farmer when he tried to protect his property. Fortunately, the wife was hidden during the raid and thus escaped injury. Hughes was inclined to treat this as an isolated incident – claiming that the other cases had happened so long ago that they had become greatly exaggerated in the telling – and thus dismiss the maroon theory as merely a fearful figment in the imagination of the larger slaveholders. He put down the missing provisions and the occasional loss of livestock to the thieving of the planter’s own darkies. I am aware, as I told him, that an unsupervised darky will steal anything which is not nailed down, yet, in light of Odessa’s talk of a

sezione in cui mi occupo dei principi generali che emergono dalla sua partecipazione a questa faccenda cruenta. “La femmina della specie”, qualcosa del genere, magari.

Più tardi

Secondo Hughes si dice che vi sia un insediamento di “cimarroni”, un accampamento di schiavi fuggiaschi, da qualche parte nei paraggi. Ci sono stati segni di saccheggi in alcune delle fattorie e delle piantagioni più distanti dalla città. Nell’ultimo episodio, diversi neri (la moglie del fattore non ha potuto fornire un conteggio preciso) si sono introdotti in una piccola fattoria a circa trenta chilometri a est di qui, hanno preso le provviste e gli animali della fattoria e hanno assassinato il fattore quando questi ha tentato di proteggere la sua proprietà. Fortunatamente, la moglie è rimasta nascosta durante il saccheggio ed è così riuscita ad evitare di subire lesioni. Hughes era incline a considerarlo un incidente isolato - sostenendo che gli altri casi erano occorsi così tanto tempo fa da risultare fortemente esagerati nei racconti - e perciò liquidare la teoria dei cimarroni come se fosse solamente il frutto della timorosa immaginazione dei maggiori proprietari di schiavi. Ha attribuito le provviste mancanti e l’occasionale perdita di bestiame ad un furto commesso dagli stessi negri del fattore. Sono cosciente, come gli ho detto, del

place without whites and her concern about the three renegades who escaped capture by the posse – talk which I repeated – I cannot dismiss the theory of an encampment of some sort so easily. It is, of course, pure conjecture, but not, I believe, groundless to say, as I did to Hughes, that perhaps these three had joined the maroons – which would certainly be one place without whites. And, despite the babbling of the fanatic Elijah, it is obvious that the darkies from the coffle had been making for *someplace* when they were apprehended. Hughes was much impressed with my theorizing and invited me to join the posse which leaves at dawn tomorrow in search of the renegades. I readily accepted, for, even knowing the imaginative flights to which the darky's mind is prone, I put much faith in this information precisely because it was given inadvertently. What information Hughes and the prosecutor were able to obtain from the others and from Odessa herself regarding the uprising is as nothing compared to this plum.

On the Trail
North and West of Linden

June 30, 1829.

fatto che un nero, in assenza di supervisione, ruberebbe tutto ciò che non è fissato con i chiodi, eppure, alla luce del discorso di Odessa a proposito di un luogo senza bianchi e della sua preoccupazione per i tre ribelli scampati alla cattura da parte della squadra - discorso che ho riportato - non posso accantonare così facilmente la teoria di un qualche tipo di accampamento. Si tratta, ovviamente, di semplici congetture, ma non credo sia infondato dire, come ho fatto con Hughes, che forse questi tre si siano uniti ai cimarroni - e questo sarebbe certamente un luogo senza bianchi. Inoltre, nonostante il farfugliare del fanatico Elijah, è ovvio che i neri della colonna di schiavi fossero diretti da qualche parte quando sono stati arrestati. Hughes è rimasto molto colpito dalla mia teoria e mi ha invitato ad unirmi alla squadra che partirà domani all'alba alla ricerca dei ribelli. Ho accettato prontamente, poiché, pur conoscendo gli scenari fantastici a cui la mente della negra è incline, ripongo molta fiducia in questa informazione proprio perché mi è stata data inavvertitamente. Le informazioni che Hughes e il procuratore sono riusciti ad ottenere dagli altri e dalla stessa Odessa riguardo alla rivolta non sono nulla in confronto a questa trovata.

Sul Sentiero
a nord e ad ovest di Linden

30 giugno, 1829.

We set out early this morning, picking up the trail of the renegades at the farm where they were last seen. It led us in a northerly direction for most of the day and then, just before we stopped for the night, it turned to the west. Most of the posse feel this is a good sign, for had the trail continued north we should have soon found ourselves in Indian territory and, with two enemies to contend with, the chances of being surprised in ambush would have greatly increased. The trackers expect to raise some fresher sign of them tomorrow, for they are laden with supplies and we are not (a fact to which my stomach can well attest. Dried beef and half-cooked, half-warmed beans are *not* my idea of appetizing fare). And, I am told, if the weather holds humid as it has been and does not rain, their scent will hold fresh for quite a while and the dogs will be able to follow wherever it leads.

I did see Odessa this morning before we departed. I heard singing and, at first, taking it to be the usual morning serenade of Hughes' darkies, I took no notice of it. My attention was caught, however, by the plaintive note of this song, a peculiar circumstance, for Hughes frowns upon the singing of any but the most lively airs. I listened and finally managed to catch the words:

*Tell me, sista tell me, brotha how long will it be?
Tell me, sista tell me, brotha how long will it be?
That a poor sinner got to suffer, suffer here?*

Siamo partiti questa mattina presto, rilevando le tracce dei ribelli alla fattoria dove sono stati visti per l'ultima volta. Queste ci hanno condotti verso nord per la maggior parte del giorno e poi, poco prima che ci fermassimo per la notte, si sono spostate verso ovest. La maggior parte della squadra ritiene che sia un buon segno poiché, se il sentiero avesse continuato verso nord, ci saremmo presto ritrovati in territorio indiano e, con due nemici da affrontare, le possibilità di essere sorpresi in un'imboscata sarebbero aumentate enormemente. Gli inseguitori si aspettano di trovare tracce più fresche domani, in quanto loro sono carichi di provviste e noi no (fatto che il mio stomaco può ben confermare. Carne di manzo essiccata e fagioli mezzi cotti e mezzi riscaldati non rappresentano la mia idea di cibo appetitoso). Inoltre, mi dicono, se il tempo rimane umido, come è stato finora, e non piove, il loro odore rimarrà fresco per molto tempo e i cani saranno in grado di seguirlo ovunque li conduca.

Ho comunque visto Odessa stamattina prima della partenza. Ho sentito un canto e, all'inizio, pensando che fosse la solita serenata mattutina dei neri di Hughes, non vi ho badato. La mia attenzione è stata però catturata dalla nota lamentosa della canzone, una circostanza particolare, giacché Hughes disapprova il canto di qualunque aria che non sia tra le più vivaci. Ho ascoltato e alla fine sono riuscito a cogliere le parole:

*Tell me, sista tell me, brotha when my soul be
free?*

*Tell me, oh, please tell me, when I be free
And the Lawd calla me home?*

I had no sooner figured out these words – and recognized Odessa’s voice – when another voice, this one lower and more mellow, took up the melody, singing at a somewhat faster tempo while Odessa maintained her original pace.

*Oh, it won’t be long. Say, it won’t be long
Poor sinner got to suffer here.
Soul’s goin to heav’n, soul’s gon ride that
heav’nly train.
Cause the Lawd have called us home.*

It gave the effect of close harmonic part singing and was rather interesting and pleasing to the ear, especially when other voices joined in, as they presently did.

I hoped that Odessa’s singing betokened a reflective mood and I went round to the cellar window, thinking that I might induce her to talk. I called to her and she broke off her singing in mid-phrase. “Who dat?” She spoke barely above a whisper and I could catch no glimpse of her, hidden as she was in the dark recess of the cellar. I stooped down by the window, the better to see her. “Who dat?” she called again. The appearance of her face at the window startled me, for I had

*Dimmi, sorella dimmi, fratello per quanto tempo
ancora?*

*Dimmi, sorella dimmi, fratello per quanto tempo
ancora?*

*Per quanto un povero peccatore dovrà soffrire
qua?*

*Dimmi, sorella dimmi, fratello quando sarò libera
la mia anima?*

*Dimmi, oh, dimmi, ti prego, quando sarò libera
E il Signore a sé mi chiamerà?*

Avevo appena compreso queste parole - e riconosciuto la voce di Odessa - quando un’altra voce, più bassa e suadente, ha ripreso la melodia cantando ad un ritmo lievemente più veloce, mentre Odessa manteneva il suo ritmo originale.

*Oh, non sarò per molto. Di, non sarò per molto
Che un povero peccatore dovrà soffrire
qua.*

*La sua anima andrà in Paradiso, prenderà il treno
per il Paradiso.*

Perché il Signore ci ha chiamati a sé.

L’effetto era quello di un canto armonioso a più voci ed era piuttosto interessante e piacevole da ascoltare, specialmente quando si univano altre voci, come è accaduto in quel momento.

Speravo che il canto suscitasse in Odessa uno stato d’animo riflessivo e mi sono recato alla finestra della cantina, pensando che avrei potuto indurla a

heard no warning sound of her approach. Her eyes gleamed once briefly in her face and then she closed them or perhaps only turned her head. I could not tell which, for the early morning light was still uncertain. I told her that I would be leaving in a few minutes and I do not think I imagined her quickened interest. "You don't be coming back?" I then assured her that I would indeed return in a few days and we would resume our conversations at that time. Hoping in this way to elicit some further information from her, I told her that we were going in search of a nearby maroon settlement. She clutched the bars of the window and peered at me through them. "Maroon?" I explained this term to her, telling her that it is rumored that there is one in the vicinity. I thought that I had perhaps imparted too much information, but what can such news avail her in that cellar? And she merely responded with a dumb stare. I am not even sure that she had understood what I said, for she asked, "You a *real* white man, fo true? You don't be talkin like one. Sometime I don't even be knowin what you be sayin. You don't be talkin like Mas and he a real uppity up white man, but not like trash neitha. Kaine says it bes white man what don't talk white man talk. You one like that, huh?" I had been angered, and, yes, I admit, a trifle offended by her question, and her emendations to the question only slightly mollified my emotions. I answered, somewhat haughtily, that I and others like me taught her master and his kind how to speak. My

parlare. L'ho chiamata e lei ha interrotto il suo canto a metà frase. "Chi sei?". Lo ha detto con un tono di voce appena più alto di un sospiro e non sono riuscito a intravederla, nascosta com'era nell'angolo buio della cantina. Mi sono chinato davanti alla finestra, così da poterla vedere meglio. "Chi sei?", ha chiesto di nuovo. La comparsa del suo volto alla finestra mi ha colto di sorpresa, poiché non si era sentito alcun suono che preannunciasse il suo movimento. Ho visto gli occhi brillarle brevemente in viso e poi li ha chiusi o forse ha solo voltato la testa. Non saprei dire quale delle due cose abbia fatto, perché la luce del mattino era ancora incerta. Le ho detto che sarei partito tra pochi minuti e non credo di aver solo immaginato di vedere il suo interesse accendersi. "Non ritorni più?". Le ho, dunque, assicurato che sarei effettivamente tornato tra qualche giorno e che avremmo ripreso le nostre conversazioni allora. Sperando in questo modo di carpire da lei ulteriori informazioni, le ho detto che saremmo andati alla ricerca di un vicino insediamento di cimarroni. Lei si è aggrappata alle sbarre della finestra e mi ha guardato attraverso di esse. "Cimarroni?". Le ho spiegato questo termine, dicendole che si vocifera che ce ne sia uno nelle vicinanze. Ho pensato di averle forse dato troppe informazioni, ma a cosa può esserle utile una notizia del genere in quello scantinato? Lei si è limitata a fissarmi ottusamente. Non sono nemmeno sicuro che abbia capito ciò che le ho detto, perché mi ha chiesto: "Sei per *davvero* un uomo bianco? Non parli come uno di loro. Certe

hauteur was, of course, lost on her, for she exclaimed happily that I was a “teacher man”. It seemed unnecessarily heartless to destroy her felicitous mood by further probing so I held my peace, which proved to be a fortuitous choice. She continued, “Was a teacher man on the coffle. He taught hisself to read from the Bible, then he preach. But course, that only be to the niggas and he be all right til he want teach otha niggas fo to read the Good Word. That be what he call it, ‘The Good Word’, and when his Mas find out what he be doin he be sold south same’s if he be teachin a bad word or be a bad nigga or a prime field hand.” I seized upon this, feeling that perhaps I had discovered the key to the insurrection, for no one of this description – except perhaps Elijah – had been implicated in the plot. Is he the one who obtained the file, I asked, and she laughed. She laughed. “Onlest freedom he be knowin is what he say the ‘righteous freedom’, that what the Lawd be givin him or what the Mas be givin him and he was the firstest one the patterollers kills.” She moved back into the darkness of the cellar still laughing softly and when I called to her she would not respond. Finally she moved back so that I could see the outline of her form. “Whatcho want?” she called. “Whatcho want?” I could feel the anger rising at the insolence of her tone, but just then Hughes called that we were ready to start. I rose and brushed the dirt from the knees of my trousers. I did not want to leave then, for I felt that some

volte non so neanche che dici. Non parli come il Padrone, e lui è un bianco proprio importante, ma neanche come un poveraccio. Kaine diceva che ci sono uomini bianchi che non parlano da bianchi. Tu sei uno di quelli, eh?”. Ero in collera, e, sì, lo ammetto, leggermente offeso dalla sua domanda, e le sue correzioni hanno placato le mie emozioni solo in minima parte. Ho risposto, in modo piuttosto altezzoso, che io e altri come me abbiamo insegnato al suo padrone e ai suoi simili a parlare. Naturalmente, lei non ha colto la mia fierezza, in quanto ha esclamato allegramente che ero un “maestro”. Mi è sembrato inutilmente crudele distruggere il suo felice stato d’animo indagando ulteriormente, così sono rimasto in silenzio, scelta che si è rivelata piuttosto fortunata. Ha continuato: “C’era un maestro nella colonna. Ha imparato da solo a leggere dalla Bibbia, e poi si è messo a predicare. Ma ovviamente, predicava solo ai negri e andava bene finché non ha deciso che voleva insegnare agli altri negri a leggere ‘la Buona Parola’. La chiamava così, ‘La Buona Parola’, e quando il suo Padrone ha scoperto che faceva, lo ha venduto al sud come se insegnava una cattiva parola o se era un negro cattivo o un negro dei campi di valore”. Ho approfittato della situazione, intuendo di aver forse scoperto il segreto della rivolta, poiché nessuno che rispondesse a questa descrizione - eccetto forse Elijah - era stato implicato nel piano. “È stato lui ad ottenere la lima?”, le ho chiesto, e lei ha riso. Si è messa a ridere. “L’unica libertà che conosceva era quella

barrier had risen between us which must be breached. I realize now, however, that it was a fortuitous circumstance that Hughes called at just that moment. Otherwise I might have been betrayed into some impetuous action that might have permanently harmed this project. You will learn what I require when I return, I flung at her, and went to join Hughes. I could hear her voice raised, joining with the others in the new song which the other darkies had commenced during my conversation with her:

Good news, Lawd, Lawd, good news.

My brotha got a seat and I so glad.

I hearda from heav'n today.

Good news, Lawdy, Lawd, Lawd. Good news.

I don't mind what Satan say

*Cause I heard, yes I heard, well I heard from
heav'n
today.*

Pray God that nothing happens to upset the mood evinced by her singing. We have much to talk about, Odessa and I, when we resume our conversations.

che lui chiamava 'libertà giusta', che è quella che gli dava il Signore o il Padrone e è stato il primo che le pattuglie hanno ucciso". È ritornata verso l'oscurità della cantina ridendo ancora sommessamente e quando l'ho chiamata non ha risposto. Alla fine, si è spostata di nuovo, così che potessi vedere il contorno della sua figura. "Che vuoi?", ha detto. "Che vuoi?". Sentivo la rabbia crescere per l'insolenza del suo tono, ma proprio allora Hughes mi ha chiamato dicendo che eravamo pronti a partire. Mi sono alzato e ho sfregato via la terra dalle ginocchia dei pantaloni. Non volevo andarmene allora, perché sentivo che tra noi si era alzata una barriera che doveva essere infranta. Ora, però, mi rendo conto che il fatto che Hughes mi abbia chiamato proprio in quel momento è stato un caso fortunato. Altrimenti, avrei potuto tradirmi compiendo qualche azione avventata che avrebbe potuto danneggiare irrimediabilmente il mio progetto. "Scoprirai ciò che voglio al mio ritorno", le ho detto bruscamente, e poi ho raggiunto Hughes. Ho sentito che la sua voce si levava per unirsi alle altre nella nuova canzone che gli altri negri avevano iniziato ad intonare durante la nostra conversazione:

Buone notizie, Signore, oh Signore, buone notizie.

Mio fratello è stato scelto e sono così felice.

Oggi ho avuto notizie da lassù.

Buone notizie, Signore, oh Signore. Buone notizie.

A Satana non penso più

Perché, sì, oggi sì, ho avuto notizie da lassù.

Somewhere West of Linden

July 3, 1829.

A wild-goose chase and a sorry time we have had of it. There is doubt in my mind that such an encampment, as I first conceived of, exists, at least in this vicinity, for we have searched a large area and come up with nothing conclusive. Several times, we sighted what might have been members of such a band, but the dogs could not tree them and it was more than we ourselves could do to catch more than what we *hope* were fleeting glimpses of black bodies. Whether they took, indeed, to the trees, as some in the posse maintain, or vanished into the air, I have no way of knowing. If they exist, they are as elusive as Indians, nay, as elusive as *smoke* and I feel it beyond the ability of so large a posse as ours to move warily enough to take them unawares. To compound matters, the storm which has been threatening for days finally broke this morning, putting an end to our search and drenching us in the process. We have stopped to rest the horses, for Hughes estimates that if we push hard, we should reach Linden by nightfall. A bed will be

Prego Dio che non accada nulla che possa turbare l'umore che il suo canto sembra suggerire. Abbiamo molto di cui parlare, Odessa ed io, quando riprenderemo le nostre conversazioni.

Da qualche parte a ovest di Linden

3 luglio, 1829.

Che ricerca vana e che brutta esperienza abbiamo avuto. Inizio a dubitare che esista un accampamento come lo avevo immaginato inizialmente, perlomeno non in questa zona, poiché abbiamo perlustrato una vasta area senza trovare nulla di conclusivo. Diverse volte abbiamo avvistato possibili membri di un tale gruppo, ma i cani non sono riusciti a costringerli sugli alberi ed era più di quanto potessimo fare noi per riuscire a scorgere qualcosa di più di ciò che *speriamo* fossero fugaci scorci di corpi neri. Non ho modo di sapere se siano saliti davvero sugli alberi, come sostengono alcuni della squadra, o se siano svaniti nel nulla. Se esistono, sono sfuggenti come gli indiani, anzi, come il *fumo*, e ritengo che muoversi in modo tanto cauto da riuscire a prenderli alla sprovvista vada ben oltre le capacità di una squadra numerosa come la nostra. Come se non bastasse, stamattina si è finalmente scatenata la tempesta che incombeva da giorni, ponendo fine alle nostre ricerche e inzuppandoci. Ci siamo fermati per far riposare i cavalli, poiché Hughes prevede che, se ci

most welcome after having spent so many days upon the back of this wretched horse, and I look forward to resuming my conversations with Odessa. She has a subtle presence, almost an influence which I have only become aware of in its absence. Perhaps – but that is useless speculation and must wait upon the certainty of Wilson’s return. Hughes has given the call to mount and so we are off.

July 4, 1829.

Early Morning.

I put the date in wearied surprise. We have been out most of the night scouring the countryside for signs of Odessa, but there were none that we found and the rain has by now washed away what we must have missed. It is as though the niggers who crept in and stole away with her were not human blood, human flesh, but sorcerers who whisked her away by magic to the accursed den they inhabit. Hughes maintained that the devil merely claimed his own and gave up the search around midnight. But reason tells me that the niggers were not supernatural, not spirits or “haints”. They are flesh and bone and so must leave some trace of their coming and going. The smallest clue would have sufficed me, for I should have followed it to its ultimate end. Now the rain

diamo dentro, dovremmo raggiungere Linden entro il crepuscolo. Un letto sarà ben gradito dopo aver passato tanti giorni sul dorso di questo miserabile cavallo, e attendo con ansia di poter riprendere le mie conversazioni con Odessa. Lei ha una presenza sottile, quasi un’influenza di cui sono divenuto consapevole solo durante la sua assenza. Probabilmente - ma si tratta di speculazioni inutili ed è necessario attendere la certezza del ritorno di Wilson. Hughes ci ha intimato di montare su e così ci siamo messi in viaggio.

4 luglio, 1829.

Mattino presto.

Ho scritto la data in uno stato di sfinita sorpresa. Siamo stati fuori quasi tutta la notte a perlustrare la campagna alla ricerca di tracce di Odessa ma non ne abbiamo trovate e la pioggia ha ormai cancellato ciò che deve esserci sfuggito. È come se i negri che si sono introdotti qui e l’hanno portata via non siano fatti di sangue e di carne umana, ma che piuttosto siano stregoni che l’hanno rapita e portata, come per magia, nel maledetto covo in cui vivono. Per Hughes il diavolo si è limitato a rivendicare ciò che gli appartiene ed ha abbandonato la ricerca intorno a mezzanotte. Tuttavia, la ragione mi suggerisce che i negri non fossero esseri sovranaturali, spiriti o “spettri”. Sono fatti di carne ed ossa e, pertanto, devono lasciare qualche traccia del loro andirivieni. Il minimo indizio sarebbe stato

has come up and even that small chance is gone, vanished like Odessa.

And we did not even know that she was gone, had, in fact, sat down to eat the supper left warming at the back of the stove against the chance that we would return, to talk of the futile venture of the last few days, to conjecture on God knows what. Unsuspecting we were, until the darky that sleeps with Jemina came asking for her. Hughes went to inquire of his wife – who had not arisen upon our return, merely called down to us that she was unwell and that food had been left for us. I was immediately alarmed, prescience I now know, upon learning that the woman had not seen Jemina since the wench had taken supper to Odessa earlier in the evening. And Hughes' assurances that Jemina was a good girl, having been with the wife since childhood, did nothing to calm my fears. Such a slight indisposition as his wife evidently had was no reason to entrust the keeping of so valuable a prisoner to another negress who is no doubt only slightly less sly than Odessa herself. I protested thus to Hughes, too strongly I now see, for he replied heatedly that if I did not keep my tongue from his wife – I marvel, even now in my exhaustion, at the quaintness of phrasing – my slight stature would not keep me from a beating. I am firm in my belief that these impetuous words of mine were a strong factor in his early abandonment of the search and I regret them accordingly. There are stronger words in my

sufficiente, poiché lo avrei perseguito fino in fondo. Ora, però, è arrivata la pioggia e anche quella minima possibilità è sfumata, svanita come Odessa. Non ci eravamo nemmeno accorti che fosse sparita, anzi, ci eravamo seduti a mangiare la cena che era stata lasciata a scaldare in fondo al fornello nel caso fossimo tornati, e a parlare della futile impresa dei giorni scorsi, a fare congetture su Dio solo sa cosa. Eravamo totalmente ignari, finché il negro che dorme con Jemina non è venuto a chiedere di lei. Hughes è andato ad indagare da sua moglie - che non si era presentata al nostro ritorno, limitandosi a dirci che non si sentiva bene e che era stato lasciato del cibo per noi. Mi sono immediatamente allarmato, preveggenza che adesso riconosco, quando ho saputo che la donna non vedeva Jemina da quando la ragazza aveva portato la cena a Odessa la sera presto. Le rassicurazioni di Hughes riguardo al fatto che Jemina fosse una brava ragazza e che era con la moglie sin dall'infanzia non sono servite a placare le mie paure. Un' indisposizione tanto lieve quanto quella che la moglie evidentemente presentava non era un buon motivo per affidare la custodia di una così preziosa prigioniera ad un'altra negra, senza dubbio scaltra quasi quanto la stessa Odessa. Ho dunque espresso la mia protesta a Hughes, troppo vigorosamente, me ne rendo conto adesso, poiché egli mi ha risposto animatamente che se non avessi trattenuto la lingua su sua moglie - mi meraviglio, anche adesso nel mio sfinimento, della singolarità delle sue parole - la mia bassa statura non mi avrebbe

mind now, but I forbore, at that time, carrying the discussion farther. I knew, even then, without really knowing why, that time was of the essence. But he shall find on the morrow that even one of my *slight stature* has the means of prosecuting him for criminal neglect. To think of having Odessa in the care of another nigger!

The root cellar when we reached it was locked, but the relief I felt was short-lived. It was Jemina inside and the wench set up such a racket, then, when it could not possibly serve any useful purpose, that one would have thought the hounds of hell pursued her. Even had I not recognized that such a cacophony could never issue from Odessa's throat, Hughes' startled exclamation was enough to alert me. The wench was, of course, incoherent – when was a nigger in excitement ever anything else? – but we finally pieced together, between the wench's throwing her apron over her head and howling, “oh Mas, it terr'ble; they was terr'ble fierce,” and pointing to her muddied gown to prove it, what must have happened. Three niggers (she said three the first time and the number has increased with each successive telling; perhaps there were only one or two, but I settle upon three as the most likely number, for they were obviously the niggers with whom Odessa was in league in the uprising on the coffle. I could scream to think that even as we were out chasing shadows, the cunning devils were even then lying in wait to spirit her away.

risparmiato dall'essere malmenato. Sono fermamente convinto che queste mie parole impulsive siano state un fattore determinante per il suo precoce abbandono della ricerca e, di conseguenza, me ne rammarico. Vi sono parole più incisive nella mia mente ora, ma mi sono astenuto, in quel momento, dal portare avanti la discussione. Ero consapevole, già allora, senza sapere bene il motivo, di come non vi fosse tempo da perdere. Domani, tuttavia, scoprirà come anche un uomo della mia modesta statura abbia i mezzi per accusarlo di negligenza criminale. Pensare di affidare Odessa ad un altro negro!

Quando l'abbiamo raggiunta la cantina era chiusa a chiave ma il sollievo che ho provato è durato poco. Al suo interno vi era Jemina, che aveva messo su un tale baccano, a quel punto, quando non sarebbe servito a nulla, che qualcuno avrebbe potuto pensare che i segugi infernali la stessero inseguendo. Se anche non avessi riconosciuto che una tale cacofonia non sarebbe mai potuta scaturire dalla gola di Odessa, è bastata l'esclamazione spaventata di Hughes a mettermi in guardia. La ragazza era, ovviamente, incoerente - quando mai un negro in stato di eccitazione non lo è? - ma alla fine siamo riusciti a ricostruire, mentre lei si tirava il grembiule sulla testa urlando “oh Padrone, è stato terribile, erano terribilmente feroci”, e si indicava l'abito infangato per dimostrarlo, ciò che deve essere successo. Tre negri (la prima volta ha detto tre e poi il numero è aumentato ad ogni successiva

And to think that she – *she* was so deep as to give never an indication that they were lurking about. Both Jemina and that woman of Hughes swear that except for a natural melancholy – which in itself was not unusual – *I* have been the only one to succeed in coaxing her into animated spirits – there was nothing out of the ordinary in Odessa’s demeanor these last day. And knowing now the cupidity of which she is capable, I must believe them). The three bucks overpowered the wench just as she opened the door to the cellar to hand down the evening meal to Odessa. At this point, Hughes ejaculated something to the effect that it was a good thing that “my Betty” was not present, at which the negress began what must have been, had I not intervened, a long digression on the “Mist’s” symptoms and how she might, at long last, be increasing. But I could *feel* those niggers getting farther away with Odessa and so could not bear the interruption. The niggers forced Jemina into the cellar, bound her, took up Odessa and escaped into the night. The wench swears she heard no names called, that except for one exclamation from Odessa, of surprise or dismay, she could not tell which, they fled in silence, swears also that she could not see well enough to describe either of the niggers, save to state that they were big and black and terrible as though that would help to distinguish them from any of the hundreds, *thousands* of niggers in this world who are equally as big and as black and as terrible. The wench could not even tell whether

narrazione; forse erano solo uno o due ma tre mi sembra il numero più probabile, poiché erano ovviamente i negri con cui Odessa era in combutta nella rivolta della colonna di schiavi. Avrei voglia di urlare al pensiero che, proprio mentre noi eravamo fuori ad inseguire fantasmi, quei diavoli astuti erano già lì, in attesa di portarla via. E pensare che lei - *lei* è stata così scaltra da non fornire mai un’indicazione del fatto che fossero lì in agguato. Sia Jemina che la donna di Hughes giurano che, a parte una naturale malinconia - che di per sé non era insolita - *io* sono stato l’unico a riuscire a indurla ad assumere un atteggiamento vivace - non c’era nulla di strano nel comportamento di Odessa in questi ultimi giorni. Adesso, essendo consapevole della cupidigia di cui è capace, non posso far altro che crederci). I tre maschi hanno sopraffatto la ragazza proprio mentre stava aprendo la porta della cantina per portare il pasto serale a Odessa. A questo punto, Hughes ha esclamato qualcosa sul fatto che fosse un bene che “la mia Betty” non fosse presente, al che la negra ha iniziato quella che sarebbe stata, se non fossi intervenuto, una lunga digressione sui sintomi della “Padrona” e sul fatto che potesse, finalmente, essere in dolce attesa. Tuttavia, sentivo che quei negri si allontanavano sempre di più con Odessa e, perciò, non ho potuto sopportare l’interruzione. I negri hanno spinto Jemina nella cantina, l’hanno legata, hanno preso Odessa e sono fuggiti nella notte. La ragazza giura di non aver sentito chiamare alcun nome e che, fatta eccezione per

they went on horseback or afoot, nor explain how a woman almost nine months gone could move so quickly and so quietly as to give no clue to the direction they took, nor less explain how it came about that she herself did not cry out, for surely if she had someone must have heard. This last question was again the occasion for that banshee-like wail about how “terr’ble fierce” the niggers were.

Hughes numbers among his four slaves one he termed an expert tracker, skilled in the ways of the Indians in hunting and trapping, but we did not need his help in finding the place where they had lain in wait for someone to open the cellar door. The earlier rain had made their sign quite plain. We found, also, with heartening ease the place where they had tied their animals. It was muddied and much trampled so we could not tell what kind of animals they were – whether horses or mules – nor even how many. Hughes’s jocular, and inappropriately so, prediction that we should find Odessa and her newborn brat – for what female as far gone as she could stand the strain of a quick flight without giving birth to something – lying beside the trail within a mile or so proved incorrect, for the tracks disappeared into the deep underbrush a short distance from the place where the animals had been tied. Both the nigger and the one bloodhound Hughes keeps were alike worthless in the quest. And then the rain came up, driven by a furious wind, lashing the needle-like

un’esclamazione di Odessa, non sapeva dire se di sorpresa o di sgomento, sono fuggiti in silenzio. Sostiene inoltre di non essere riuscita a vedere abbastanza bene da poter descrivere nessuno dei negri, affermando solo che erano grossi, neri e terribili, come se ciò potesse aiutare a distinguerli dalle centinaia, *migliaia* di negri nel mondo che sono altrettanto grossi, neri e terribili. Non sapeva nemmeno dire se fossero a cavallo o a piedi, né spiegare come una donna incinta di quasi nove mesi potesse muoversi così rapidamente e silenziosamente da non lasciare indizi sulla direzione presa, né tanto meno è riuscita a spiegare come sia possibile che lei stessa non abbia gridato perché sicuramente, se l’avesse fatto, qualcuno l’avrebbe sentita. Quest’ultima domanda ha scatenato ancora una volta l’urlo da banshee su quanto fossero “terribilmente feroci” quei negri.

Hughes annovera, tra i suoi quattro schiavi, uno che egli definisce un esperto inseguitore, abile nei metodi di caccia e di cattura degli indiani ma non abbiamo avuto bisogno del suo aiuto per trovare il luogo in cui i negri si erano appostati in attesa che qualcuno aprisse la porta della cantina. La pioggia di prima aveva reso le loro tracce piuttosto evidenti. Abbiamo trovato, inoltre, con incoraggiante facilità, il luogo dove avevano legato i loro animali. C’era molto fango ed il terreno era stato calpestato, pertanto non siamo riusciti a capire che tipo di animali fossero, se cavalli o muli, e neanche quanti fossero. La previsione inopportuna spiritosa

drops into our faces; washing away all trace of Odessa. Hughes, in giving up the hunt, charged that I acted like one possessed. He could not say by what and I know that this was merely his own excuse for failing in his lawful duty. For myself, I have searched, hunted, called and am now exhausted. She is gone. Even the smallest clue – but there was nothing, no broken twig to point a direction, no scent which the hound could hold for more than a short distance. Gone. And I not even aware, not even suspecting, just – just gone.

di Hughes secondo la quale avremmo dovuto trovare Odessa e il suo neonato - poiché quale femmina in stato di gravidanza così avanzato potrebbe sopportare la fatica di una rapida fuga senza partorire qualcosa? - nel raggio di un chilometro o giù di lì si è rivelata errata, in quanto le tracce sono scomparse nel profondo sottobosco a poca distanza dal luogo in cui erano stati legati gli animali. Sia il negro che l'unico segugio di Hughes si sono rivelati ugualmente inutili per la missione. Dopodiché, è arrivata la pioggia, spinta da un vento furioso che ha scagliato gocce pungenti come aghi sui nostri volti e ha lavato via ogni traccia di Odessa. Hughes, abbandonando la caccia, mi ha accusato di comportarmi come fossi posseduto. Non sapeva dire da cosa e, in ogni caso, so che si trattava solamente di una scusa per non aver adempiuto al suo legittimo dovere. Personalmente, ho cercato, cacciato, gridato il suo nome e ora sono esausto. È sparita. Persino il più piccolo indizio - ma non c'era niente, nessun ramoscello rotto che indicasse una direzione, nessun odore che il segugio potesse avvertire per più di una breve distanza. Scomparsa. E io non mi ero reso conto di nulla, non sospettavo nemmeno, semplicemente...è sparita.

Conclusions

As I come to the end of this MA thesis the issues to reflect on are definitely many and varied. Thanks to the extensive research, reading, studying, and translating it has taken me to reach the end of this journey, I have gained an in-depth understanding of many topics, each extremely valuable in its own way. Therefore, I deem it necessary to draw my conclusions concerning the many different subjects which have been discussed so far.

Surely, the so-called cultural turn, as discussed in the first chapter of this thesis, has produced radical changes in the field of Translation Studies, by transforming the old idea of translation as being simply 'literal' into a much more open-minded one, which considers not only the linguistic aspect but also, and above all, the cultural and context-related ones. Nowadays, especially due to this particular 'turn', we are well aware of the fact that translation is a vast, dynamic and fascinating field which cannot be limited only to the linguistic component since, otherwise, an incredible amount of values and meanings closely related to cultures other than our own would be overlooked. Furthermore, prior to the cultural turn, the fundamental and multifaceted work of the translator was limited and 'flattened', sort of as what happens in ethnocentric domestication strategies, and this damaged the image of the translator and of this crucial discipline. Indeed, these strategies of domestication, together with the ones based on foreignization, constitute the central themes of the first chapter and of my translation in general, since they have contributed to a better understanding of the power that lies in the hands of the translator, who can choose to completely erase the peculiarities of a culture, by domesticating them at will or, as it has been argued in this thesis, to try to convey them in the best possible way, albeit with some inevitable loss. This subject has therefore been fundamental especially in dealing with the debates of the 1960s' and the struggles of the African American community and especially its authors, who fought against ethnocentrism and cultural appropriation in the field, in this specific case, of literature. Thus, what is discussed in this thesis are the social movements which urged that the stories of African American slaves no longer be manipulated and told from the perspective of whites who had no direct investment in them. For this very reason, as has been previously explained, Sherley Anne Williams decided to write the novel *Dessa*

Rose and, prior to that, the short story “Meditations on History”, which I have read, appreciated, and attempted to translate. Having thus established the historical and cultural background in which the short story originated, the reader of this thesis and of my proposed translation has then been sufficiently informed so as to be able to approach the reading in a more conscious manner with regard to the important issues surrounding this author and this story.

Another key element for the reader of my thesis and translation is definitely the ability to recognize and understand the many forms of the same language that can be encountered in the text. Throughout the second chapter, therefore, it has been established how the origins of the dialect of African American Vernacular English, or AAVE, are still uncertain and characterized by different theories. Although it has not been possible to provide precise information on the origins of this variety of the English language, this thesis has at least succeeded in providing the reader with information and knowledge about the structures and phenomena typical of this dialect, often considered to be of little prestige and therefore unliterary, although its study has revealed to me its undoubted importance in giving expression to the culture, feelings and memories of the African American community. It was therefore established that AAVE is not street slang or bad English, but rather simply a dialect of the English language as there are many others and that it can be studied and analyzed like any other language, as it presents a well-defined grammar regulated by fixed rules. In this thesis, it was also fundamental to investigate Franca Cavagnoli’s theories regarding the translation of the language variety belonging to non-mainstream cultural communities: some strategies aimed at the domestication and elimination of the peculiarities of dialects, while others aimed at a foreignization process which, however, in some cases, ended up creating caricatural and ridiculous translations. The strategy I believe to be the most effective is the one that employs the typical elements of orality in the target language to render a dialect of the source language, and this was the strategy I decided to adopt throughout my translation of the short story “Meditations on History”.

In conclusion, although all the elements and stages that were necessary for the writing of this thesis were useful and interesting, the part which I enjoyed the most, despite it being very challenging, was most certainly trying my hand at translating “Meditations on History”, as this enabled me to acquire a great deal of new knowledge.

This complex task allowed me to put myself to the test in a practical as well as theoretical way, to put into practice theories and translation strategies I had previously studied and researched, but also more importantly, my linguistic, translation and even creative skills.

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Riassunto

Tra i tanti corsi che ho avuto la possibilità di frequentare durante la mia laurea magistrale, il corso di letteratura angloamericana è stato sicuramente uno dei più apprezzati. Poiché il mio approccio con la letteratura era sempre stato fondamentalmente limitato alla sola letteratura britannica, scoprire qualcosa sulla cultura e la varietà linguistica della comunità afroamericana è stato particolarmente stimolante per me. Inoltre, provenendo da una laurea triennale in traduzione ed interpretariato, desideravo poter mettere in pratica le mie abilità traduttive all'interno della mia tesi magistrale. Dunque, nella scelta di questa tesi, ho unito la mia passione per la traduzione con questo nuovo ed interessante tema ed ho così avuto l'occasione di organizzare la mia tesi in una mia proposta di traduzione del racconto breve di Sherley Anne Williams "Meditations on History", e in due capitoli teorici che fornissero il background storico, linguistico e culturale adatto ad affrontare tale testo.

CAPITOLO I

Nel 1998 Susan Bassnett e André Lefevere introdussero il concetto del "cultural turn", ossia la svolta culturale nella scienza della traduzione. Fino ad allora la traduzione non aveva tenuto particolarmente conto del contesto culturale e del suo peso all'interno di una traduzione o per un traduttore che, contrariamente a quanto alcuni potevano credere, non aveva dunque più solo il compito di svolgere una traduzione letterale, bensì tener conto della cultura del traduttore, dell'autore, e del lettore della lingua d'arrivo. Ciò screditò, dunque, l'idea della traduzione come semplice trasferimento di informazioni da una lingua di partenza ad una lingua d'arrivo e pose maggiore enfasi sulla questione della responsabilità del traduttore: quest'ultimo dovrebbe essere fedele principalmente all'autore originale o al lettore della lingua e cultura d'arrivo? La risposta a tale quesito è fornita da Venuti, che spiega come il traduttore, sia che scelga la prima o la seconda opzione, sarà in ogni caso costretto ad apportare delle modifiche o dei tagli ad entrambe le lingue e le culture, poiché nessuna lingua è uguale e nessuna lingua è utilizzata allo stesso modo. Il traduttore, dunque, avrà sempre il compito di causare una sorta di "violenza", inevitabile durante il processo di traduzione. La misura in cui questa violenza verrà messa in atto, tuttavia, dipende dalle scelte del traduttore. Venuti si rifà alle teorie del teologo e filosofo Friedrich Schleiermacher, che sosteneva esistessero

fondamentalmente solo due metodi per tradurre: il traduttore può avvicinare il lettore all'autore originale (“*domestication*”), oppure avvicinare l'autore al lettore (“*foreignization*”). Venuti spiega come Schleiermacher abbia reso evidente la sua predilezione per la seconda strategia e coglie l'occasione per concordare, sostenendo che spesso la “*foreignization*” possa rivelarsi un'arma per resistere ad etnocentrismo, razzismo e narcisismo culturale. Tuttavia, persino quando ci si affida ad una strategia di “*foreignization*”, le perdite e i cambiamenti nel testo sono ineluttabili, specialmente quando ci si trova a dover affrontare la traduzione di un dialetto, come è stato il caso per me nella traduzione del racconto breve “*Meditations on History*”. Prima di potermi concentrare sulla traduzione, però, è necessario fornire una conoscenza base del genere letterario a cui essa appartiene, ossia la neo-slave narrative, e del background culturale da cui la storia ha avuto origine.

Ashraf H. A. Rushdy spiega in una delle sue opere che tra gli anni 1966 e 1968 si ebbe una forte evoluzione tra la cerchia di intellettuali e storici americani e nei maggiori movimenti sociali. In particolare, la nascita del Black Power portò con sé una sorta di “rinascimento” della narrativa afroamericana, poiché gli storici e gli intellettuali del Black Power iniziarono a sentire il desiderio di poter raccontare storie sulla base delle testimonianze degli schiavi. Il genere letterario scelto per raccontare tali storie fu quello della neo-slave narrative, che Rushdy definisce come romanzi contemporanei che assumono la forma, adottano le convenzioni e assumono la voce in prima persona della narrazione degli schiavi dell'anteguerra e che puntano, tra le altre cose, a criticare la rappresentazione romanzata della schiavitù causata dall'assenza di testimonianze dirette di autori afroamericani. Tale assenza risulta ancora più evidente se si considera che il romanzo *The Confessions of Nat Turner*, pubblicato nel 1967 e scritto dall'autore bianco William Styron, era ritenuto il primo romanzo ad essere stato scritto dal punto di vista dello schiavo. In risposta a tale appropriazione culturale, diversi autori afroamericani scrissero delle neo-slave narrative e tra questi troviamo l'autrice Sherley Anne Williams, il cui romanzo, *Dessa Rose*, pubblicato nel 1986, consiste di tre sezioni: *The Darky*, *The Wench*, e *The Negress*. Nella prima sezione la storia si apre con la protagonista, Dessa, che è stata imprigionata per aver preso parte ad una rivolta di schiavi e attende di partorire per poter essere poi giustiziata. In questa sezione il funzionario bianco Adam Nehemiah punta ad intervistarla per scoprire tutto il possibile

sui fatti e scrivere un libro sulla corretta gestione degli schiavi. In questa sezione scopriamo della storia d'amore tra Dessa e lo schiavo Kaine e delle circostanze che hanno portato alla rivolta e poi alla fuga di Dessa dalla sua prigione. Nella seconda sezione, ci viene introdotto il personaggio di Miss Ruth, o Rufel, la donna bianca che ospita gli schiavi fuggitivi e instaura un rapporto conflittuale e molto complesso con Dessa, mentre nella terza sezione assistiamo alla fuga finale delle due donne e del resto dei fuggiaschi. Un elemento fondamentale, oltre alle tre sezioni principali, è la nota dell'autore, in cui Williams spiega come, prima di *Dessa Rose*, avesse iniziato a scrivere una prima versione intitolata "Meditations on History", ispirata dalla scoperta della storia di una schiava incinta in Kentucky che, avendo partecipato ad una rivolta, sarebbe stata giustiziata una volta dato alla luce il bambino che portava in grembo, e quella di una donna bianca in North Carolina che aveva ospitato schiavi fuggitivi nella sua piantagione. Le origini di "Meditations on History" e di *Dessa Rose* si basano, dunque, sull'idea di Williams di far incontrare queste due donne realmente esistite e sul desiderio di rispondere alla pubblicazione del romanzo di William Styron e ai dibattiti intellettuali di quegli anni.

CAPITOLO II

All'interno del racconto breve, estremamente importante è la presenza di un linguaggio conosciuto con diversi nomi ma che in questa tesi è stato indicato come *African American Vernacular English* (AAVE). Gli studiosi non sono ancora in grado di fornire le origini precise di tale linguaggio ma esistono tre teorie principali a riguardo:

- Una teoria collega lo sviluppo di AAVE ad alcune lingue dell'Africa occidentale, sostenendo che queste condividano un insieme di *pattern* linguistici particolari;
- Un'altra teoria afferma che AAVE provenga da un pidgin o un creolo, simile al creolo parlato dalla popolazione afroamericana Gullah;
- Secondo l'ultima teoria, invece, AAVE si sarebbe sviluppato a partire dall'influenza dell'inglese britannico parlato dai primi colonizzatori.

Il tema delle origini di AAVE, tuttavia, rimane ancora irrisolto e controverso, così come quello della relazione tra AAVE e l'inglese standard. Come spiegato anche dallo studioso Geoffrey K. Pullum, vi è una significativa quantità di pregiudizio circa il

prestigio e lo status di AAVE, poiché molti credono ancora si tratti di una versione incorretta dell'inglese standard costellata di errori grammaticali e parole appartenenti allo slang di strada. Tuttavia, AAVE è tutt'altro che uno slang e non è affatto "sgrammaticato", bensì è governato da regole grammaticali ben precise e rientra a tutto diritto nella categoria dei dialetti e delle varietà della lingua inglese. Tra i tanti luoghi comuni riguardo questa varietà vi sono elementi grammaticali come il cosiddetto uso improprio della copula *be*, che alcuni ritengono erroneamente venga omessa o utilizzata in modo casuale, il fenomeno della *negative concord*, criticata perché una doppia negazione dovrebbe risultare in un'affermazione nell'inglese standard, il fenomeno della *negative inversion*, che permette l'utilizzo della negazione al primo posto all'interno della frase, e il fenomeno fonologico del cosiddetto *terminal fading*, ossia la caduta di una o più consonanti finali che, contrariamente a quanto creduto da alcuni, segue delle regole ben precise.

Una volta fornita un'idea generale di quali siano le caratteristiche fondamentali di questo dialetto, il prossimo passo è dunque quello di osservare le diverse strategie esistenti per tradurle. Come già visto in precedenza, nessuna lingua può essere tradotta in un'altra senza che il traduttore incorra in un qualche tipo di perdita o adattamento. Ciò assume un valore ancora più importante quando ci si trova a dover tradurre un dialetto, come è stato il caso per me nella traduzione di AAVE all'interno di "Meditations on History". Franca Cavagnoli ha proposto una serie di strategie possibili per la traduzione di un dialetto:

- Eliminare le peculiarità del dialetto durante il processo di traduzione limitando il testo alla sua semplice funzione informativa;
- Tradurre le parti in dialetto in italiano standard scrivendole però in corsivo, così da indicare come nel testo d'origine vi fosse un dialetto;
- Inventare una sorta di dialetto ad hoc;
- Trasformare il dialetto nella lingua d'origine in un dialetto esistente nella lingua d'arrivo (ad esempio il milanese, romano o napoletano);
- Rendere un dialetto tramite elementi tipici dell'oralità nella lingua d'arrivo piuttosto che inventare dialetti fittizi e artificiali.

La mia scelta per la traduzione di AAVE è ricaduta sull'ultima strategia consigliata, ossia quella concernente l'utilizzo dell'oralità. Nella mia traduzione di "Meditations on

History”, dunque, si trovano frequentemente elementi come l’uso del pronome “ci” insieme al verbo avere, la dislocazione dei pronomi, l’uso di “che” al posto di “che cosa” a inizio frase o nelle domande e, soprattutto, la sostituzione del congiuntivo e del condizionale con il più semplice modo indicativo.

Nonostante i suggerimenti e gli studi di Cavagnoli siano risultati estremamente utili, il processo di traduzione non è stato sempre semplice. Un obiettivo importante per me nel tradurre questo racconto breve è stato quello di tentare di non appiattare il testo ed evitare di rendere il linguaggio al suo interno troppo omogeneo, per non correre il rischio di cancellare tutte le peculiarità linguistiche da me incontrate leggendo il testo d’origine. Una sfida significativa è stata dunque quella di mantenere la diversità delle tre forme della lingua inglese presenti nel testo d’origine: il dialetto AAVE usato da Dessa e dagli schiavi neri; il linguaggio colloquiale del narratore; l’inglese standard pomposo e sofisticato dell’intervistatore Nehemiah. Un’altra sfida è stata sicuramente tradurre concetti tipici della cosiddetta “slave culture”, molto lontani dall’immaginario del lettore medio italiano e spesso impossibili da rendere con un perfetto equivalente italiano, come ad esempio il termine “slave driver” per il quale non esiste una traduzione perfettamente corrispondente. Per risolvere questo dilemma mi sono ritrovata a consultare diversi dizionari, cartacei e online, monolingue inglese e bilingue italiano-inglese, senza riuscire però a trovare una soluzione soddisfacente. Per questo, sotto la guida della mia relatrice, ho deciso di affidarmi ad una traduzione già esistente di tale termine all’interno dell’edizione italiana del libro *Narrative of the life of Frederick Douglass*, in cui lo “slave driver” viene definito come “sorvegliante di schiavi”, o semplicemente “sorvegliante”. Nonostante questa traduzione non sia del tutto soddisfacente, in assenza di alternative migliori ho deciso di utilizzare questa versione, sicuramente migliorabile ma probabilmente non risolvibile a causa di una forte discrepanza culturale.