

**The Other Opposite of Me: Self-Identity, Narrative Voices and the Answerable Act in the Novel *The Dark Side of Skin*, by Jeferson Tenório / *O outro é o meu avesso: autoidentidade, vozes narrativas e a filosofia do ato responsável no romance O avesso da pele, de Jeferson Tenório***

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**ABSTRACT**

This paper seeks to undertake an analysis of the novel *The Dark Side of Skin*, by Jeferson Tenório, in order to verify how the issue of racism is elaborated in and through language in order to impact the reader. Therefore, the Bakhtinian concept of heteroglossia is mobilized with the aim of reflecting on the artifice of second-person narration. Besides that, we seek to think about issues such as self-identity and subjectivities, as processes that subjects and characters go through in their journeys of self-knowledge. Finally, in order to expand our analysis, this reflection is supported by the concept of answerable act, by Bakhtin, seeking to reflect on the dialogical relationships of the narrative and characters with other literary works and with Brazilian music by black songwriters.

**KEYWORDS:** *The Dark Side of Skin*; Jeferson Tenório; Self-identity; Heteroglossia; Answerable act

**RESUMO**

*Este artigo busca empreender uma análise da obra O avesso da pele, de Jeferson Tenório, a fim de verificar de que modo a temática do racismo é elaborada na e pela linguagem visando impactar o leitor. Para tanto, mobiliza-se o conceito bakhtiniano de heterodiscurso com o objetivo de refletir sobre o artifício da narração em segunda pessoa. Em paralelo, procura-se pensar sobre questões como autoidentidade e subjetividades, como processos pelos quais passam os sujeitos e as personagens em suas jornadas de autoconhecimento. Por fim, visando expandir a análise, a reflexão ampara-se no conceito de ato responsável, de Bakhtin,*

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*buscando refletir sobre as relações dialógicas da narrativa e das personagens com outras obras literárias e com a música brasileira de autoria negra.*

*PALAVRAS-CHAVE: O avesso da pele; Jeferson Tenório; Autoidentidade; Heterodiscurso; Ato responsável*

*I'm the dead one who outlived  
Human body who triumphed*

Luiz Melodia<sup>1</sup>

## Initial Remarks

In 2020, the year of the release of his third novel in Brazil – *The Dark Side of Skin* released in English in 2024 – Jeferson Tenório was elevated to the pantheon of the most important writers in Brazilian Literature of the early 21st century. Born in Rio de Janeiro in 1977, Tenório is based in Porto Alegre (Brazil), holds a degree in Literature from the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS), and a Ph.D. in Literary Theory from the Pontifical Catholic University of Rio Grande do Sul (PUCRS). Among the themes that are part of his academic research are colonialism, post-colonialism, identity, and the African diaspora in postmodernity. His academic background and research topics are noticeable in his literary works.

According to researcher Alen das Neves Silva (2021), the first three novels by Jeferson Tenório – *O beijo na parede* [A Kiss on the Wall] (2013), *Estela sem Deus* [Estela with God] (2018), and *The Dark Side of Skin* – should be understood together, as they share a common theme of abandonment. João, the main character in Tenório's debut novel, is a child who loses his parents and must relearn how to live in a city that becomes increasingly hostile and indifferent to his suffering. Estela, on the other hand, is a teenager forced to deal with the most absurd forms of violence. Finally, Pedro, a young adult, has to rely on memories, stories, and experiences to understand the loss of his father and the pain of his sudden disappearance.

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<sup>1</sup> In Portuguese: “Sou o corpo humano que viveu / Corpo humano que venceu.”

The main theme of *The Dark Side of Skin*, winner of the Jabuti Award (2021), is racism in its different forms. The human relationships between the novel's characters are directly affected by the racial prejudice involving Henrique and Pedro, father and son, which drives the main plot and the parallel events that shape the novel. The work with language, capable of captivating the reader in the aesthetic experience of unveiling racism, is a strong point of the novel and the focus of this analysis. It is intriguing, therefore, that the novel's language was subject to censorship in early 2024, and that the censors did not consider racism to be the true scandal.<sup>2</sup>

The main objective of this paper is to investigate how the narrative voices in *The Dark Side of Skin* contribute to the impactful meaning of the work. For this purpose, the constructions of self-identity, identity, and the expansion of subjectivities are analyzed, employing Bakhtinian concepts such as heteroglossia and the philosophy of the answerable act.

## **1 Self-Identity Construction through the Narrative Self in *The Dark Side of Skin***

*The Dark Side of Skin* addresses themes such as identity, complex racial relations, violence, and Blackness in Brazil. The narrative follows Pedro who, after the tragic death of his father in a disastrous police encounter, embarks on a journey to recover his family's past and trace his father's footsteps. Thus, we can infer that the narrative revolves around identity construction and the search for the self.

In this way, our analysis, at this initial stage, seeks to briefly examine the construction of identity in *The Dark Side of Skin* and understand how the construction of a diegetic self can reflect on the construction of the extradiegetic self. According to Manuel Castells, professor, researcher, and former Minister of Universities in Spain:

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<sup>2</sup> In the first months of 2024, the novel *The Dark Side of Skin* (2024) was banned from a few public schools in Brazil, in the states of Mato Grosso do Sul, Goiás, and Paraná, on the grounds that it contained pornographic content and aimed to indoctrinate students regarding racial violence. In Rio Grande do Sul, a school principal requested the book's ban, which was denied by the state government.

By identity, as it refers to social actors, I understand the process of construction of meaning on the basis of a cultural attribute, or a related set of cultural attributes, that is given priority over other sources of meaning. For a given individual, or for a collective actor, there may be a plurality of identities. Yet, such a plurality is a source of stress and contradiction in both self-representation and social action (Castells, 2010, p. 34).<sup>3</sup>

The concept of social identity developed by Castells emphasizes identity as a process of constructing meaning based on specific cultural attributes or sets of them. As a reflection, we quote a passage from *The Dark Side of Skin* in which Pedro recalls his aunt's advice for when he finds his father's Ogum: "I remember now what my aunt Luara told me to do when I met her Ogun. Wrap it in a cloth, hold it in your hands, and take it to the river, she said" (Tenório, 2024, p. 9).<sup>4</sup> From this event, Pedro feels the need to understand his ancestry as he continues to go through his father's belongings, concluding that, from the traces of his existence, he would tell his father's story and, in a way, find himself in his own identity, as shown in the excerpt:

Before leaving, I head to your room and look in from the doorway. There are clothes scattered on the floor, some more tossed in the wardrobe. On the table are inkless pens, unmatched socks under receipts from the grocery, notebooks and sheets of paper, folders filled with your students' tests and essays. Your chaos moves me. I look at all this and realise these are the objects that will help me narrate who you were before you left. The same tools that defeated you now speak to me about you. These objects will appear to me like your ghost (Tenório, 2024, p. 9).<sup>5</sup>

Castells also emphasizes the idea that a person or group can have multiple identities, which can create tensions and contradictions both in how individuals represent themselves and in their social actions. He suggests that identity is not fixed, but rather dynamic and subject to contextual and social influences.

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<sup>3</sup> CASTELLS, Manuel. *The Power of Identity*. 2 ed. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010.

<sup>4</sup> TENÓRIO, Jeferson. *The Dark Side of Skin*. Translated by Bruna Dantas Lobato. Edinburgh: Charco Press, 2024. E-book.

<sup>5</sup> For reference, see footnote 4.

This volatility of identity is also perceived by anthropologist Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira and discussed in his lecture at the *XXIII Encontro Anual da Anpocs* [23rd Annual Meeting of Anpocs], Caxambu – MG, titled *Os (des)caminhos da Identidade* [The Mis-Steps to Identity] (1999). Oliveira uses the inherent ambiguity of the concept to create a double-meaning title for his lecture: paths and missteps, adopting a metaphorical approach to suggest the fluidity of identity. The expression (mis)steps evokes the idea of uncertain or contradictory directions, indicating the complexity of the topic. The author explains that:

The association of the two words, synthesized into a single expression, “(mis)steps,” suggests the direction I wish to give, in this presentation, to what I understand as the strategic point on which the scholar may best focus their attention on their attempt to elucidate identity as an object of anthropological or sociological investigation. This strategic point is precisely the opposite of the “blind spot,” that is, the place we are not allowed to see in the car’s rearview mirror (Oliveira, 2000, p. 7).<sup>6</sup>

In this scenario, the author suggests that this (mis)step points to a crucial strategic point in the study of identity: the path to finding one’s identity would not be a proper path, but a misstep, a path back to one’s origins, as Pedro does in Tenório’s narrative (2024), even venturing onto another path (his father’s footsteps), despite his veiled aversion to also becoming a teacher.

Maybe because I saw all of this, I never considered becoming a teacher. Seeing you always worried about marking tests and essays, always complaining about school bureaucracy, about rude students, the lack of infrastructure at public schools, and meetings with parents, in fact, it kept me from any chance of ever going into a classroom as a teacher. The parents always come with problems that have nothing to do with their child’s experience at school, you said (Tenório, 2024, p. 55).<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In Portuguese: “A associação das duas palavras, sintetizada numa única expressão, ‘(des)caminhos’, sugere a direção que desejo dar, nesta exposição, àquilo que entendo como sendo o ponto estratégico sobre o qual o estudioso melhor poderá fixar a sua atenção em sua tentativa de elucidar a identidade como um objeto de investigação antropológica ou sociológica. Esse ponto estratégico é precisamente o oposto do ‘ponto cego’, isto é, aquele lugar que não nos é permitido visualizar pelo espelho retrovisor do automóvel.”

<sup>7</sup> For reference, see footnote 4.

Oliveira (2000), in his study, proposes a (mis)step of identity anchored in a collective “we,” aiming to understand how collective identities manifest in contexts of ambivalence and social change. This approach allows for a profound reflection on how identities are constructed and redefined in response to contemporary challenges, much like Pedro, who never considered becoming a teacher, but turns to the teacher identity of his father. Another passage from Tenório’s narrative that aptly illustrates this search for self-identity through the collective is when, in a conversation with his aunt Luara, Pedro grasps the weight of being a person with his skin color:

Aunt Luara asked for the menu and, while we waited for the food to arrive, I asked her how she could stand it all. Stand what? she asked. All this, always being judged by the colour of your skin. My aunt looked at me with sadness, then said that we get used to it. We can get used to anything. We get used to people clutching their purses and backpacks when we walk by, we get used to men choosing lighter-skinned black women, we get used to being alone. We get used to pretending we don’t see the manager’s disappointed face when we arrive at a job interview (Tenório, 2024, pp. 77-78).<sup>8</sup>

This construction aligns with the racial identity studies of researcher Nilma Lino Gomes, from UFMG, in her study *Educação e Identidade Negra* [Education and Black Identity] (2002), in which the author reaffirms: “The idea an individual has of themselves, of their ‘self,’ is mediated by the recognition obtained from others due to their actions. No identity is constructed in isolation” (Gomes, 2002, p. 39).<sup>9</sup> In relation to such a matter the researcher adds:

On the contrary, it is negotiated throughout life through dialogue, partly external, partly internal, with others. Both personal identity and socially derived identity are formed in open dialogue. They depend vitally on the dialogical relationships established with others. This is a process that every

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<sup>8</sup> For reference, see footnote 4.

<sup>9</sup> In Portuguese: “A ideia que um indivíduo faz de si mesmo, de seu ‘eu’, é intermediada pelo reconhecimento obtido dos outros em decorrência de sua ação. Nenhuma identidade é construída no isolamento.”

identity undergoes and, therefore, also pertains to the construction of black identity (Gomes, 2002, p. 39).<sup>10</sup>

Once again, the possibility for reflection on Pedro's diegetic self-arises, as he begins a search for his identity upon witnessing his father being killed by police violence. Pedro starts to realize how the color of his skin influences the way people would treat him in his life. Since the identity journey in the search for the *self* depends on the *other*, it is necessary to consider the social context surrounding the subject's identity. According to Gomes:

In this sense, I understand Black identity as a social, historical, and cultural construction full of depth, conflicts, and dialogues. It involves the construction of the perspective of an ethnic/racial group or individuals belonging to the same ethnic/racial group about themselves, based on their relationship with the other. A perspective that, when confronted with that of the other, turns back upon itself, for only the other questions our own identity.

As two dense processes, constructed by social subjects throughout history, in social and cultural relationships, education and Black identity are immersed in the interplay between the individual and the social, between the past and the present, and are incorporated, while simultaneously incorporating, into the dynamics of the particular and the universal (Gomes, 2002, p. 39).<sup>11</sup>

Given the complexity of the reflections presented on the construction of identity, the fundamental role of the social, historical, and cultural context in shaping the narrative self in Jeferson Tenório's novel *The Dark Side of Skin* is undeniable. This quest for self-identity is

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<sup>10</sup> In Portuguese: "Ao contrário, é negociada durante a vida toda por meio do diálogo, parcialmente exterior, parcialmente interior, com os outros. Tanto a identidade pessoal quanto a identidade socialmente derivada são formadas em diálogo aberto. Estas dependem de maneira vital das relações dialógicas estabelecidas com os outros. Esse é um movimento pelo qual passa todo e qualquer processo identitário e, por isso, diz respeito, também, à construção da identidade negra."

<sup>11</sup> In Portuguese: "É nesse sentido que entendo a identidade negra como uma construção social, histórica e cultural repleta de densidade, de conflitos e de diálogos. Ela implica a construção do olhar de um grupo étnico/racial ou de sujeitos que pertencem a um mesmo grupo étnico/ racial, sobre si mesmos, a partir da relação com o outro. Um olhar que, quando confrontado com o do outro, volta-se sobre si mesmo, pois só o outro interpela a nossa própria identidade. Enquanto dois processos densos, construídos pelos sujeitos sociais no decorrer da história, nas relações sociais e culturais, a educação e a identidade negra estão imersas na articulação entre o individual e o social, entre o passado e o presente, e são incorporadas, ao mesmo tempo em que incorporam, à dinâmica do particular e do universal."

outlined through Pedro's journey, whose path is marked by tragedy and the need to recover his origins, through interaction with the other.

We can even infer that this is one of the key moments in the narrative, where the character realizes that his Black identity will always be a crucial factor in the process of discovering his identity. Thus, the fluidity and complexity of identity are assimilated not only as a linear path but as a set of (mis)steps that reveal the constant negotiation between the individual and their environment.

## **2 The Narrative Voices in *The Dark Side of Skin***

How to approach a complex topic like racism and, more importantly, make an impact on the reader? How can literature create a deeper understanding of structural racism, going beyond the surface? The narrative voice construction is a fundamental technique in *The Dark Side of Skin*. In Jeferson Tenorio's novel, this technique takes shape through a narrator who doesn't speak about the character, but to the character. The second-person narration, which gains complexity through a dual voice — the narrator's and the father's — amplifies the emotions of both characters.

In the opening lines of the novel, one might initially think they are reading an epistolary text. Soon after, however, it becomes clear that the narrator's voice, or consciousness, has access to the consciousness of the person he is speaking to—his father. The son's voice is doubled: it is his own, but also the voice of his father. It is worth noting that these two consciousnesses never fully merge, allowing their distinct otherness to remain marked and individualized in both characters. As Ana Paula Arnault (2002, p. 115) observes regarding the aesthetic techniques of notably postmodern narratives, the diversity of narrative voices in constant tension results in “pluridiscursivity, arising from the intersection and dialogic encounter between the narrator's discourse and other external discourses.”<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> In Portuguese: “[...] pluridiscursividade, resultante do cruzamento e do encontro dialógico entre o discurso do narrador e os outros discursos alheios.”



The plurality of narrative voices in *The Dark Side of Skin* contributes to the powerful aesthetic effect the text has on the reader. The narration, which both invokes and evokes the absent—the deceased father—also makes him present, bringing the narrated time into the time of narration.<sup>13</sup> [1] The father’s and the son’s timelines are distinctly different, but on the discursive level, they coexist through the dialogue between the characters.

As Altamir Botoso (2021, p. 321) notes: “the first novel written entirely from this perspective [with a ‘you’ that is an extension of an ‘I’] is *La Modification* [The Modification] by Michel Butor, published in 1957.”<sup>14</sup> Although this technique is not exactly a groundbreaking aesthetic innovation, it is relatively uncommon. By choosing this approach, Tenório invites the reader to immerse themselves in the complex universe of voices that recall and anticipate events, thoughts, sensations, and emotions. A defining feature that sets this narrative apart from an interior monologue is its dialogic interaction—marked by the presence of the other, with alterity as a fully present, tensely crafted consciousness within the discourse.

Interior monologue is rare in *The Dark Side of Skin* and generally marked by present-tense narration, as in: “While digging through your things, I find a photo. Me, you and my mother. It’s an unremarkable picture [...]” (Tenório, 2024, p. 32).<sup>15</sup> It is worth noting that immediately after, the return to the *you* and the otherness of the discourse coincides with a shift back to the past, evidenced by the change in verb tense: “we’re standing in a public square, there was no date [...] it must have been a cold day” (Tenório, 2024, p. 32).<sup>16</sup>

Although second-person narration may initially feel unsettling—constantly evoking the absent and the past, making us feel as if we are overhearing a private conversation—over

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<sup>13</sup> Regarding the (re)configurations of narrative time, we refer here to the reflections of Paul Ricoeur (RICOEUR, Paul. *Time and Narrative*. Vol. 2. Translated by Kathleen McLaughlin and David Pellauer. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), particularly in volume two where the author specifically discusses how narrative enables the human experience of perceiving time. According to Ricoeur, the time in a novel can break away from real time, but it is constantly reconfiguring itself according to the internal norms of fiction, which do not necessarily follow chronological time.

<sup>14</sup> In Portuguese: “o primeiro romance escrito inteiramente nesta perspectiva [com um ‘tu’ que é desdobramento de um ‘eu’] é *La modification*, [A modificação], de Michel Butor, publicado em 1957.”

<sup>15</sup> For reference, see footnote 4.

<sup>16</sup> For reference, see footnote 4.

time, it creates a sense of deep intimacy. The reader grows closer to the narrator and his double, the father.

The Bakhtinian concept of *pluridiscursivity* (or heteroglossia) illustrates a social phenomenon of clashing and conflicting voices, which the Russian philosopher transposed into literary construction, especially in the context of the novel:

Heteroglossia, once incorporated into the novel (whatever the forms for its incorporation), is another's speech in another's language, serving to express authorial intentions but in a retracted way. Such speech constitutes a special type of double-voiced discourse. It serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author. [...] Double-voiced discourse is always internally dialogized. (Bakhtin, 1981, p. 324).<sup>17</sup>

In Tenório's text, the omniscient narrator orchestrates a chorus of diverse voices, but as we have highlighted, it is in the *I-you* relationship with the father's consciousness that this tension is most effectively observed, marked by discursive ambivalence. Note, in the following excerpts, how the verbs in the sentences materialize the tension between the voices while simultaneously capturing the father's consciousness within the narrator's consciousness:

You were twelve when you first *experienced* what you'd later learn to call anxiety. [...] Your whole body *shuddered* as you *realised* the end of the world was real. [...] You *mourned* those yet to come, all the future generations (Tenório, 2024, p. 11; our emphasis).<sup>18</sup>

Note, in the lexical choice, verbs that denote feelings and perceptions, such as *experienced*, *shuddered*, *realised*, and *mourned*, which reveal the narrator's access to the tone of the other's voice, that is, the father's voice. This tone, in turn, is a marker of alterity, as it

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<sup>17</sup> BAKHTIN, Mikhail M. Discourse in the Novel. In: *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist. Translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1981. pp. 259-422.

<sup>18</sup>For reference, see footnote 4.

comprises valuation and carries peculiarities, emotions, nuances, and other distinctive features of the speaker.

As Bakhtin (1981)<sup>19</sup> studied, the discourse in heteroglossia is double-voiced, internally dialogic, and serves at least two speakers—an important device in the poetics of *The Dark Side of Skin*. In the strategy of double-voiced discourse, the voice of the other, in their own language, is incorporated into the narrator's discourse without losing its uniqueness. Let's examine another excerpt:

You've turned into a teaching machine. Into an explaining machine. Into a quiet, please machine. Into a pay attention, please machine. Into a no, you can't go to the bathroom right now machine. Into a patience machine, so you don't smack the students who don't care about subordinate clauses. (Tenório, 2024, pp. 13-14).<sup>20</sup>

The narrator captures the father's sense of tedious, repetitive work, particularly expressed through the word *machine*, which alludes to a dehumanizing work situation. The rhythm of the passage is further marked by the monotony of repetition ("a teaching machine," "an explaining machine," etc.) which metaphorically and visually conveys the father's boredom, portraying him as a cog in the social machine. The narrator also grasps the father's evolving self-awareness as a black man in a racist society, a realization that precedes his self-perception:

[...] very naturally, Bruno said that he didn't like black people. Until that moment, you'd never suered any racism, at least never so blatantly as this, not that you remember. But you weren't shocked, because a kind of inertia took over your body, you didn't know how to react (Tenório, 2024, p. 13).<sup>21</sup>

The double-voiced discourse in the excerpt reflects both the father's and the son's perceptions of the feeling of inertia in the face of their first encounter with the violence of racism. Later, they will also share the process of self-awareness and indignation.

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<sup>19</sup>For reference, see footnote 17.

<sup>20</sup>For reference, see footnote 4.

<sup>21</sup>For reference, see footnote 4.

Heteroglossia, used as a tool to shape the relationships between characters, is essential in crafting the meaning of the text. It extends beyond the racial theme and the exchanges between characters, serving as a metaphor for the broader narrative conflict.

The relationship between Pedro, the narrator, and his father confirms the structure of the narrative double, which becomes even more evident when comparing the narrator's connection to other characters in the novel. In the case of other characters, such as the mother, there is no sharing of consciousness, highlighting the unique bond between Pedro and his father.

In the therapy session, Pedro's father and mother express their feelings to the psychoanalysts. Once again, the father's voice interacts on equal footing with the narrator's, while the mother's voice seems to be subordinated to Pedro's consciousness. Notably, it is the memory of a tragic event that leads the father to approach the mother after the session. This memory, once more, is shared only between the narrator and the father: "So you decided it was best to get back to my mother, you sat down next to her, and you also didn't mind the cars passing so close by" (Tenório, 2024, p. 67).<sup>22</sup>

Another point worth highlighting is the use of third-person narration in the sections that tell the mother's story, reinforcing the narrator's emotional distance from this character. For example: "Contrary to what was expected, my mother and Flora didn't get along at first" (Tenório, 2024, p. 36). "They didn't know it yet, but they would relive this scene several times over the years. They would listen to the waves crashing on the shore and they wouldn't need to say anything" (Tenório, 2024, p. 43).<sup>23</sup>

It is important to note, however, that beyond the alternation of pronouns like *I*, *you*, *we*, *they*, etc., what is at play in the narrative is the enunciative shift from *I* to *we*, a transition that Alexandre Nodari refers to as *obliquation*. According to the author (2019, p. 1), this is "a dual yet intertwined movement,"<sup>24</sup> a feature unique to the literary experience:

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<sup>22</sup>For reference, see footnote 4.

<sup>23</sup>For reference, see footnote 4.

<sup>24</sup>In Portuguese: "de um movimento duplo, mas conjugado."

*Obliquation* is a complex movement of subjective unfolding and enunciative positions, whose most visible aspect appears when the subject, without entirely ceasing to be a subject, also occupies the position of object. [...] It is a transversal relationship, a third margin, between the self and the other (Nodari, 2019, p. 2).<sup>25</sup>

Beyond a suspension of disbelief, obliquation assumes the suspension of reference. Literature, as a privileged space for this phenomenon, anticipates otherness, which is expressed in the writing and incorporates the reading experience, even foreseeing it. The reader effectively occupies a space—whether that of the character, as an experimental self, or through the inevitable identification with the pain being narrated. The reader is, therefore, the third party, the in-between subject, another voice, lending body and subjectivity to the text.

It seems to us that obliquation closes the circle of narrative voices in *The Dark Side of Skin*, or rather, perhaps sets them in motion. The text-word gains the status of dialogue. The intersubjectivity of “I-you” anticipates subjectivity itself – or identity, if we prefer – and the experience of otherness shifts into a “we.” This movement, one can perceive, also operates obliquely, resembling a rhizome, and as such, goes beyond the idea of hierarchy or rootedness, outlining the characters as equipollent, unfinished consciousnesses that share differences and similarities. The expansion of what is subjective allows the subject to perceive collectivity, evoking here the notion of *escrevivência* [writing-life]:

[...] if the act of reading offers an understanding of the world, the act of writing goes beyond the limits of perceiving life. Writing assumes a dynamism inherent to the writer, enabling their self-inscription within the world. *Escrevivência* [writing-life] can be seen as the writer writing themselves, becoming both the fictional reality and the inventive force behind their own writing, and often, that is the case. But in writing about themselves, this gesture expands, and without leaving themselves, they gather lives and stories from their surroundings. Therefore, it is a form of writing that does not exhaust itself within the individual but deepens,

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<sup>25</sup> In Portuguese: “Obliquação [é] um movimento complexo de desdobramento subjetivo e das posições enunciativas, cuja face mais visível se apresenta quando o sujeito, sem deixar completamente de sê-lo, ocupa também a posição de objeto. [...] Relação transversal, de terceira margem, entre eu e o outro.”

broadens, and encompasses the history of a collective. It is not limited to writing about oneself or painting a self-portrait (Evaristo, 2020, p. 36).<sup>26</sup>

Thus, as Conceição Evaristo notes, the expansion of the act of writing occurs precisely in the encounter with the other, in the materiality of a voice that carries ancestral heritage and engages in tension with Brazilian reality, an Afro-diasporic territory:

Our *escrevivência* [writing-life] brings forth the experience, the lived reality of our condition as Brazilian people of African descent, a hyphenated nationality in which I situate myself and speak out to affirm my African heritage, celebrate my ancestry, and connect both with African peoples and the African diaspora (Evaristo, 2020, p. 30).<sup>27</sup>

The image of *escrevivência* as a nomadic movement, in constant contact with the other, can engage in dialogue with Édouard Glissant's *Poetics of Relation*, which finds its foundation precisely in the concept of the rhizome, as proposed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. The voice of *escrevivência* is also rhizomatic, and identities, therefore, are not fixed. For Glissant, the rhizome inherently implies otherness:

Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari criticized notions of the root and, even perhaps, notions of being rooted. The root is unique, a stock taking all upon itself and killing all around it. In opposition to this they propose the rhizome, an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently. The notion of the rhizome maintains, therefore, the idea of rootedness but challenges that of a totalitarian root. Rhizomatic thought is the principle behind what I call the Poetics of Relation, in which each and every identity is

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<sup>26</sup> In Portuguese: “[...] se o ato de ler oferece a apreensão do mundo, o de escrever ultrapassa os limites de uma percepção da vida. Escrever pressupõe um dinamismo próprio do sujeito da escrita, proporcionando-lhe a sua autoinscrição no interior do mundo. A Escrevivência pode ser como se o sujeito da escrita estivesse escrevendo a si próprio, sendo ele a realidade ficcional, a própria inventiva de sua escrita, e muitas vezes o é. Mas, ao escrever a si próprio, seu gesto se amplia e, sem sair de si, colhe vidas, histórias do entorno. E por isso é uma escrita que não se esgota em si, mas, aprofunda, amplia, abarca a história de uma coletividade. Não se restringe, pois, a uma escrita de si, a uma pintura de si.”

<sup>27</sup> In Portuguese: “Nossa escrevivência traz a experiência, a vivência de nossa condição de pessoa brasileira de origem africana, uma nacionalidade hifenizada, na qual me coloco e me pronuncio para afirmar a minha origem de povos africanos e celebrar a minha ancestralidade e me conectar tanto com os povos africanos, como com a diáspora africana.”

extended through a relationship with the Other (Glissant, 2010, p. 11).<sup>28</sup>

The relationship between Pedro, the son, and Henrique, the father, represents an unfolding of consciousness, particularly the consciousness shaped by the experience of a black body within a structurally racist environment. Pedro's awareness, it should be emphasized, is only made possible through his encounter with the other.

### 3 The Answerable Act in *The Dark Side of Skin*

The main objective of *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* (1999),<sup>29</sup> written by Bakhtin in the 1920s, is to understand how the genesis of a (artistic or philosophical) thought based on ethical, moral, aesthetic and cognitive principles take place. The result of such reasoning is entitled *architectonic* by the author – it is something structured by a philosophy of the act towards reality and the world lived by the individual. To exemplify the way in which such a human process is built, Bakhtin chose the metaphor of two-faced Janus to illustrate that every subject has got the ability to watch the past and the future simultaneously: the world of life and the universe of culture are seen in a compartmentalized manner and the Russian philosopher warns us that it is essential that we do a kind of decompartmentalization so that a conception of an answerable act can be possible.

In this way, such an attitude unifies the data present in culture and life, as there is a choice of values marked by a singularity, by a concreteness and which, marked by a center of values (the self and the other), both are inserted in a given historical context. Having said so, it is necessary to pose this question: how does Jeferson Tenório carry out his answerable act in the construction of *The Dark Side of Skin*? How do the author's choices of literary

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<sup>28</sup>GLISSANT, Édouard. *Poetics of Relation*. Translated by Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2010.

<sup>29</sup>BAKHTIN, M. M. *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. Translation and notes by Vadim Liapunov; edited by Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist. Austin: University of Texas Press, 1999.

works and Brazilian songs enrich one of the most commented novels in Brazilian literature of the 2020s?

At this stage of our paper, it is also necessary to highlight how the novel is conceived as a plurilingual genre whose nature is marked by the presence of multiple voices that manifest themselves in each work (dialogism) and by inconclusibility, among other aspects. This perspective subverts the logic of a monological art, marked by authoritarianism and the notion of completion. Paulo Bezerra's (2017) analysis of the condition of the novel in the context of a genre in formation highlights an evolutionary process of the characters, opposing an authoritarian bias. After all, as Bezerra says, "authoritarianism is associated with the indisputability of truths conveyed by a type of discourse, dogmatism; the finishing, the erasure of the characters' individual universes and their subjection to the author's horizon" (Bezerra, 2017, p. 191).<sup>30</sup>

If we consider Pedro and Henrique's path throughout *The Dark Side of Skin*, readers may perceive how their own findings explain the degrees of disruption of human relationships affected by racism. The prejudice and ignorance surrounding the dark tone of the skin nourish an incapable obscurantism of understanding that the elements present on the reverse of all human epidermis never differ one from another:

You need to protect the inside, you told me. Preserve the part of you no one can see. Because it doesn't take long for your colour to seep through your body and determine the way you exist in the world. And though your life will be seen through your colour, though your attitudes and lifestyle will be seen through this too, you somehow have to preserve some part of you that doesn't fit into that, you know? Because somewhere in your muscles and organs and veins there's a place all your own, remote and unique. And that's where your love is. And this love is what keeps us alive (Tenório, 2024, p. 42).<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> In Portuguese: "o autoritarismo se associa à indiscutibilidade das verdades veiculadas por um tipo de discurso, ao dogmatismo; o acabamento, ao apagamento dos universos individuais das personagens e sua sujeição ao horizonte do autor."

<sup>31</sup> For reference, see footnote 4.



There is a variety of artistic discourses that intersect in the narrative of Jefferson Tenório's novel: there are direct mentions of songs by black Brazilian songwriters and renowned novels from universal literature to illustrate the disagreements of a black school teacher regarding his troubled family life and profession, which imposed a series of challenges on him. Upon learning of his own father's death, Henrique dealt with the loss and made use of a playlist that helped him deal with the pain of the affection he had never had:

One day you heard the news of your father's death. But you didn't quite know how to react. Because you didn't grow up with him. Your father had always been a stranger. Time had passed and you still didn't quite know how to deal with it. So you took time off from school and travelled to Rio de Janeiro. You spent nearly twenty-four hours on the bus. Flying was too expensive. It was a sunny and sad day. You didn't know if you would make it in time for the funeral. In fact, you didn't want to go. But you used this situation as an opportunity to spend a few days away from school. On the way there, while watching the landscape, you put in your earphones and listened to 'Aculturado' by Itamar Assumpção, then to 'Ao que vai nascer' by Milton Nascimento. You spent the rest of the trip playing those two songs on repeat. When you arrived, you called your half-sister Isabel. It was an awkward phone call, you weren't close, but death seemed to force some kind of intimacy. You were only related through your father (Tenório, 2024, p. 49).<sup>32</sup>

*Acculturated*, lyrics and music by Itamar Assumpção, is one of the songs from *This is going to resound*<sup>33</sup> (2004) – first of his albums released after the songwriter's death, in 2003. This song was recorded featuring percussionist Naná Vasconcelos and it is about the lack of the common Brazilian's critic sense when it comes to the other peoples' cultures:

Culturally confused  
Brazilian people are acculturated  
Libyan, Lebanese, Arab, Turkish  
They think they're one of a kind [...]  
Don't get that a cafuzo  
mestizo ain't a mulatto  
What Caruso is all about  
What Bach is all about [...]

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<sup>32</sup>For reference, see footnote 4.

<sup>33</sup> In Portuguese: *Isso vai dar repercussão*.

Itamar Assumpção's lyrics<sup>35</sup> presents us interpolated rhymes in order to describe how Brazilian citizens' common sense not only causes a lack of knowledge and empathy towards other people, but also causes irremediable mistakes caused by racial prejudice, as expressed in the words "Don't get that a cafuzo / mestizo ain't a mulatto" (Assumpção; Vasconcelos, 2004, t. 6). Henrique's thoughts follow up his indignation at the lack of discernment from others regarding the racism that permeates generations of Brazilians.

The other song on Henrique's playlist which is on repeat mode during his trip to bid farewell to his father is *Ao que vai nascer* [To the one who will be born], written by Milton Nascimento and Lô Borges, which is the last song from the album *Clube da Esquina* [The Corner Club] (1972), one of Brazilian music's most important records. An excerpt from the lyrics can be read below so that we can understand how music and fiction can produce new interpretations on meaning as the novel seeks Nascimento's voice to translate the feelings of one of the characters in *The Dark Side of Skin*:

[...] Answers will come through time  
a clear and serene face tells me  
And I walk with stones on my hand  
On the fringe of days, I forget what's old  
what's lame, and it is how to meet you  
I run so as to meet you [...]  
Nascimento; Borges, 1972, t. 21<sup>36</sup>

The lyric self expresses, in the quoted excerpt, a state of incomprehension from somebody else. A reasoning voice tells him that some kind of evidence will emerge as the days go by, so that the voice that sings will forget something that no longer makes sense to

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<sup>34</sup> In Portuguese: "Culturalmente confuso / Brasileiro é aculturado / LÍbio, libanês, árabe turco / Acha farinha do mesmo saco / [...] / Não saca que um cafuzo / mestiço não é mulato / Que apito toca o Caruso / Que apito toca Bach [...]."

<sup>35</sup> Such a statement is based on the original lyrics, in Brazilian Portuguese.

<sup>36</sup> In Portuguese: "[...] Respostas virão do tempo / um rosto claro e sereno me diz / E eu caminho com pedras na mão / Na franja dos dias esqueço o que é velho / o que é manco, e é como te encontrar / Corro a te encontrar [...]."

him: “On the fringe of days, I forget what’s old” (Nascimento; Borges, 1972, t. 21).<sup>37</sup> If we contrast the *Ao que vai nascer* lyrics to Henrique’s reality, it is possible to infer that the song from The Corner Club expresses the character’s feeling towards the father he barely knew. The pain and the sadness expressed in the lyrics and in Milton Nascimento’s sad voice echo in the imagination of Pedro’s father in a sincere and poignant way.

In a 2020 interview to *Nonada* [Inthenothingness] online magazine, Jeferson Tenório remarked the importance of Brazilian music to his fiction during the novel’s writing process:

[...] Nonada - There are some really cool musical references in the book, such as Luiz Melodia, Jards Macalé... Is working with songs part of your creative process?

Jefferson – Yes, it is part [my creative process] mainly when I am creating. I need to be with some instrumental music or not during the scene setting. I keep on imagining the character with that music. Or a scene, as it was from a real motion picture. I need to visualize that scene with the music, and later on when I’m rewriting, it is complete silence then. And I specially chose these songwriters because they are part of my own playlist, they are part of my life. And they say something about the character. Luiz Melodia’s “Abundantly Death” brings some hints as it repeats “no one died, no one died,” I guess that this is what Pedro, the narrator, tries to tell the reader. He is trying to keep his father alive. [...] There’s Itamar Assunção [sic] as well, there’s Miles Davis, Racionais MCs.. I tried to put things which have been significant for my own life and that somehow would dialogue with the character [...] (Tenório *apud* Glória, 2020).<sup>38</sup>

The excerpt from the interview with the author of *The Dark Side of Skin* is quite enlightening in order to understand the answerable act undertaken by Tenório in the writing

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<sup>37</sup> In Portuguese: “Na franja dos dias esqueço o que é velho.”

<sup>38</sup> In Portuguese: “[...] Nonada – Há algumas referências musicais bem legais no livro, como o Luiz Melodia, o Jards Macalé... Faz parte do teu processo trabalhar sempre com música?

Jeferson – Sim, faz parte e principalmente quando eu estou criando. A criação de cena, eu preciso estar com alguma música, seja instrumental ou não. Mas eu preciso estar com alguma música. Fico imaginando o personagem com aquela música. Ou uma cena, como se fosse de um filme mesmo. Eu preciso visualizar aquela cena com a música, e depois na hora da reescritura, daí é silêncio total. E eu escolhi justamente esses compositores porque fazem parte da minha *playlist*, fazem parte da minha vida. E dizem alguma coisa também sobre o personagem. O Luiz Melodia, com a ‘Abundantemente Morte,’ então já vai dando alguma dica, que ‘ninguém morreu, ninguém morreu,’ acho que é isso que o Pedro, o narrador, tenta dizer para o leitor. Ele está tentando manter o pai vivo. ‘No dia seguinte, o seguinte falhou,’ mas ninguém morreu. [...] Tem o Itamar Assunção [sic] também, tem o Miles Davis, Racionais MCs... Eu tentei colocar as coisas que foram significativas na minha vida e que de certa forma dialogassem com o personagem [...].”

process of his novel. We must emphasize that all the musicians mentioned (directly and indirectly) are Afro Brazilian and share ideas and behaviors characterized by freedom, racist insubordination and the challenge of the *status quo*. It is worth mentioning, by the way, that the Brazilian composers mentioned by the writer – Luiz Melodia, Itamar Assumpção and Jards Macalé – were seen by music critics and some experts as *cursed* because they simply did not fit into the Brazilian music industry logic business at a time (1970s) in which our music conquered a considerable range of listeners and critical studies. The final result of this *conversation* undertaken by Jeferson Tenório is made by a black author who makes a point of putting his work in dialogue with artists who have got the same existential condition as his.

Jeferson Tenório cited one of the most unusual songs in Luiz Melodia's music in *The Dark Side of Skin: Abundantly Death*<sup>39</sup> is the last A-side track from *Pérola Negra* [Black Pearl], singer and composer's *debut* album, which lines helped us as the epigraph of the present paper. Here are the initial and final verses of the song:

I'm peroba  
I am the fever  
Who am I  
I'm the dead one who outlived  
Human body who triumphed  
No one died  
No one died  
No one died  
[...]  
No one attended  
The dance of death  
The cross the distance  
From irrelevant people  
A living dead  
Whose life prived from  
On the next day  
The big plan failed [...]  
Melodia, 1973, t. 5<sup>40</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> In Portuguese: *Abundantemente morte*.

<sup>40</sup> In Portuguese: “Sou peroba / Sou a febre / Quem sou eu / Sou um morto que viveu / Corpo humano que venceu / Ninguém morreu / Ninguém morreu / Ninguém morreu / [...] / A dança da morte / Ninguém frequentava

Pedro reports that his father heard this song on the way back home after an exhausting day of work at the school where he taught Portuguese. As reported by Melodia throughout the verses of *Abundantly death*, at the end of the day, Henrique is another black body who outlived a routine dramatically affected by underemployment, racism and the precariousness of his emotional relationships. Regarding professional life, it is pertinent to rescue an excerpt from the novel in which Pedro describes what the teaching job did to his father:

As time went by, your growing disenchantment took over your life. You turned into a sort of factory worker. Years and years of believing that you were doing something meaningful, then came more years and buried your expectations. The insecurity of the school won out, and you were tired (Tenório, 2024, p. 95).<sup>41</sup>

Literary books reading in the public transport was a way for that basic education teacher to find moments of inspiration or wisdom to deal with everyday problems. While rereading *Crime and Punishment*,<sup>42</sup> Henrique found in Dostoevsky's fiction an effective way to attract the attention of his students when relating Rodion Romanovitch Raskolnikov's saga, a young Russian man who commits a heinous crime against two women. By informing his learners about what had motivated the double murder, the Portuguese teacher had finally gotten the attention he needed from his students:

You got up and walked to the middle of the room, called for everyone's attention with an energetic shout and, for a few moments they all stopped to look at you. It was your chance. You had a few seconds to convince them to keep paying attention.

I'd like you to hear something: if you must know, I know a guy who killed two people, you said, in a low, dramatic tone, so they wouldn't have any doubts about what you were saying. They looked at each other and didn't quite understand why you'd said that. One of the students started laughing. But you were serious. Another student told the laughing kid to shut up, damn it, can't you see the teacher is talking? You realised you really had

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/ A cruz a distância / Do povo de nada / Um morto mais vivo / De vida privado / No dia seguinte / O seguinte falhou [...].”

<sup>41</sup>For reference, see footnote 4.

<sup>42</sup> DOSTOEVSKY, Fiodor. *Crime and Punishment*. Translated by Sidney Monas, Signet Classic, 2006.

them in that moment and you needed to continue. Well, like I said, I know a guy who killed two people, and there's more: I know what he thought right before he killed them, I know what he thought while he was killing them, and I know what he thought after he'd killed them. There was silence in the room, until someone said: ah, teacher, no one can know something like that. But I promise you, I actually can, you said, and I can prove it, you added. They were all looking at you now, they were curious, suspicious, they didn't know if they could trust you. You asked yourself: where are you going with this? How far does it go? [...] You replied: he himself will tell you next week, but I need you all to be here. No one will miss it, Senhor Henrique, John Lennon assured you, looking at the class with a menacing air. After that, you went back to your blackboard and for the first time you got to teach the Drummond de Andrade lesson. When you finished, the students said they'd enjoyed it. You were happy about that, like something in your life as a teacher had been salvaged (Tenorio, 2024, p. 119).<sup>43</sup>

By bringing the central conflict of Dostoevsky's novel to the context of a public school in a peripheral neighborhood of Porto Alegre, Henrique achieved the goal of making his apprentices finally find a reason in coming to Portuguese language classes: Raskolnikov might have been a subject who lived on the outskirts of the city, he might have been an acquaintance of these students, or he even might have been one of these students.

The epigraph of Jeferson Tenório's novel was taken from *Hamlet*,<sup>44</sup> one of William Shakespeare's most performed works: "Who's there?".<sup>45</sup> In the case of the renowned play by the English bard, it is Bernardo who wants to know the name of the person who haunts the other characters, creating a ghostly atmosphere in the theatrical plot. In *The Dark Side of Skin*, Pedro plays the role of inquiring about his father's existence which had recently vanished and the son needs to rebuild his father's footsteps in order to finally understand what kind of man he was, what kind of injustice what injustices were committed against him and how the police's approach ended up in Henrique's death took place. Tenório's choice of Shakespeare's work is not only justified because it was a simple reading, but also because there are affinities between some of the conflicts experienced by the characters in the works mentioned:

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<sup>43</sup>For reference, see footnote 4.

<sup>44</sup> SHAKESPEARE, William. *The Tragedy of Hamlet, Prince of Denmark* [London]: The Folio Society, 1954.

<sup>45</sup> In Portuguese: "Quem está aí?".

[...] I read *Hamlet* and it was one of the first books that had a big impact on me, especially because I also lived without a father, and so I can notice a lot in common between (...) [the character] Hamlet, in the sense of having a ghost father. (...) Henrique, although he is not an oppressive father, he is a father who doesn't know how to act like a father. He tries, then, without heroism, without glorifying himself, but also not transforming this father into an oppressor who causes trauma (Tenório *apud* Glória, 2020).<sup>46</sup>

Therefore, it is fully possible to affirm that Tenório's novel is the result of a full exercise of the answerable performed act, as it

[...] is a final result or summation, an all-round definitive conclusion. The performed act concentrates, correlates, and resolves within a unitary and unique and, this time, final context both the sense and the fact, the universal and the individual, the real and the ideal, for everything enters into the composition of its answerable motivation. The performed act constitutes a going out once and for all from within possibility as such into what is once-occurrent (Bakhtin, 1999, pp. 28-29).<sup>47</sup>

To sum up, it is not surprising that *The Dark Side of Skin* has been through censorship by conservative politicians: it is a literary work that not only shows how human lives are fatally impacted by racial discrimination, but also demonstrates that institutions still need to review their public views. By doing so, we can believe in a more egalitarian society which may guarantee fundamental rights for all its citizens, no matter what color their skin may be. The posture of more reactionary politicians is not only a reflection of ignorance and prejudice, but it is also a consequence of privileges that white-skinned men and women have always had and still have difficulty giving it up. This paper also values that such desires may really come true.

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<sup>46</sup> In Portuguese: “[...] eu li o *Hamlet* e foi um dos primeiros livros que me marcaram muito, até porque eu também vivi sem pai, e então me identifico muito com (...) [a personagem] Hamlet, no sentido de ter um pai fantasma. (...) O Henrique, embora ele não seja um pai opressor, ele é um pai que não sabe ser muito pai. Ele vai tentando, então, sem heroísmo, sem glorificar, mas também não transformar esse pai em um opressor e que causa traumas.”

<sup>47</sup> For reference, see footnote 29.

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## Research Data and Other Materials Availability

The contents underlying the research text are included in the manuscript.

## Statement of Author's Contribution

The authors declare responsibility for the manuscript, considering the following specifications: all contributed to the conceptualization, writing, and analysis. Cristiane Corsini Lourenção focused primarily on the Abstract, Keywords, part of the Introduction, section 2 of the article (“The narrative voices in *The dark side of skin*”), and the editing of the text, ensuring its compliance with Bakhtiniana’s submission guidelines. Rodrigo dos Santos Sbardelini prioritized part of the Introduction and section 1 of this work (“Self-identity

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construction through the narrative self in *The dark side of skin*”). Last but not least, Vinícius Rangel Bertho da Silva worked on the revision of the English used in the Abstract and Keywords, edited parts of the text, contributed to the Introduction, and focused on section 3 (“The answerable act in *The dark side of skin*”).

## Reviews

Due to the commitment assumed by *Bakhtiniana*. Revista de Estudos do Discurso [*Bakhtiniana*. Journal of Discourse Studies] to Open Science, this journal only publishes reviews that have been authorized by all involved.

## Review II

This is an analysis of the novel *The dark side of skin* by Jeferson Tenório, in which the concept of identity, according to Manuel Castells and Roberto Cardoso de Oliveira, is associated with Mikhail Bakhtin’s concepts. The issue of identity is appropriately linked to the theme of racism, which permeates the work. The study deeply addresses the heteroglossia of the novel, with a focus on reflections on dialogism through the use of the second person in the first part of the narrative, highlighting moments of double-voiced discourse. The concept of obliquation (Nodari), *escrevivência* (Evaristo), rhizome (Deleuze; Guattari), and the poetics of relation (Glissant) are adequately linked to Bakhtinian concepts. The exploration of heteroglossia is complemented by analyses of allusions and song lyrics in the novel. Finally, aesthetics and ethics are articulated based on reflections in *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. The work is excellent, very well-written, with the merit of effectively linking the sociological concept of identity and the issue of racism with the aesthetic elements of the novel. I strongly recommend its publication. APPROVED.

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