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Tales of Transit: 'Crossing' in Andrea Levy, Roshini Kempadoo and Julie Otsuka

Today the word 'diaspora' has widened its semantic scope: traditionally used to refer to the Jewish experience, it is now employed to address the experiences of many other people and communities. If Robin Cohen uses the expression "cultural diaspora" to refer to all the migratory phenomena of the late modernity, James Clifford, in his "Diasporas", emphasizes the variety and the extent of contemporary migrations, defining the twentieth century as a preeminently diasporic time. According to Clifford, this century is characterized by "dwelling in displacement", the experience of relentless 'crossing' commonly shared by ethnic and cultural communities today.[1]

[1] Robin Cohen, *Global Diasporas: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 2008 [1997]), 128; James Clifford, "Diasporas", *Cultural Anthropology*, 9.3, 1994.

Being displaced is one of the most difficult experiences of one's life, but it can, at the same time, offer new and other ways of knowledge. Organized on a transnational level, migration connects people, places and cultures; it disrupts hierarchies between center and periphery; it creates a variety of personal re-renderings of the shared uprootedness; it offers the chance to re-write the official versions of history by revealing the presence of intentionally forgotten pasts and of deliberately denied subjectivities. It is this last opportunity that propels my reading of the contemporary diaspora as it is re-written by some writers who have lived and shared the experience of dwelling in displacement. These authors witness the difficulties of diasporic life; at the same time, by working on the official discourses of history and the canonical practices of the Western archive, they are determinate to vindicate the subjectivities of their lives and of the experiences of their characters. Through their predicament of living in a displaced present, having personally experienced the pains and, at the same time, the gifts of the migratory condition, they discover new legacies and other forms of future.

Specifically, my paper reads the (present, past and future) experiences of migration through the narrative of Andrea Levy, according to the digital art of Roshini Kempadoo, and in the hybrid writing of Julie Otsuka. These writers inscribe their experiences of diasporic crossing in the very dwelling of their creative works. Reluctant to be constrained by any borders, even those set by the discipline of art, they cross writing through technology, in order to reach it back, improved and changed by the difference of their passages. Signing different poetics of relentless movements, urgencies and crossings, Levy's 'watery words', Roshini's 'live images' and Otsuka's 'chorus of voices' narrate the intense female 'tales of transit' from distant shores, different temporalities and other geographies, looking at the past and hoping in the future-*to-come*.

The 'Small Island/s' of Andrea Levy

As a daughter of the diaspora from the Caribbean to Great Britain during the 1950s, Andrea Levy writes novels that bear witness to the experiences of the black

migration. In her works, she is attentive to all forms of racism experienced by the migrants – from social, political and cultural displacement to the painful and everyday difficulties in past and present integration. Her writing is, first of all, a form of autobiographical writing. Born and raised in London, Levy belongs to 'Englishness' in a way that is reminiscent of the *incipit* of Hanif Kureishi's *The Buddha of Suburbia* (1990), which reads: "My name is Karim Amir, and I am an Englishman born and bred, almost. I am often considered to be a funny kind of Englishman, a new breed as it were, having emerged from two old histories."[2]

Indeed, if Kureishi's introduction emphasizes the birth of a new genre, a breed which is produced at the crossing of two waters, in Andrea Levy's writing, the seawater surrounding Jamaica and the British 'Mother Country' hints at a birth, which is almost impossible to deliver, especially for a writer needing a tradition and a literary legacy – two elements that are so strikingly missing in contemporary black British fiction. Levy knows that her diasporic generation has attracted little creative attention; it is a void that, she feels, must be occupied by a genre that bears witness to the experiences of both those who took upon themselves the colonial migration in Britain, and of those who, being English by birthright, nonetheless belong to what is called "new ethnicity".[3] In her practice, this genre is specifically inflected into the gendered voices of the women who have survived the 'crossing' by living suspended in the space between two stories, two worlds, two islands and two cultures.

Levy herself belongs to the second generation of British immigrants, directing her double perspective to a unique story: as she maintains, "every good writer is really only telling one story".[4] The story she tells finds hospitality in *Every Light in the House Burnin'* (1994), *Never Far From Nowhere* (1996), *Fruit of the Lemon* (1999), *Small Island* (2004), and the recent *The Long Song* (2010). These novels seem to be complex variations of the same theme: the life of black people, especially women, in Great Britain. The starting point is always London, the city where life is marked by racism and prejudice. The story, then, continues with Levy plunging into her personal memory, thus facing the (often forgotten) past of the Jamaican people under the British Empire, in order to delve deeply into the collective psyche of her diasporic community. What is singular to this intertwined narration is that the analysis of the harshness of the English society goes hand in hand with the emergence of Levy's literary agency and personal point of view. After having acquired her analytic frame, she is ready to approach the knot of her writing: the voyage from the Caribbean to the Mother Country, the crossing of the Atlantic towards the center of the Empire, and the consequent notion of 'liquidity', so strongly marked in British black history.

Small Island is the novel that best articulates this historical and cultural experience, relating the story of Gilbert Joseph and Hortense Robert, who migrate from Jamaica to England in search of a better life. Once in London, the couple finds a room in the flat of Queenie Bligh, an English woman who accepts Jamaican lodgers while waiting for the return of her racist husband Bernard, who is lost at

[2] Hanif Kureishi, *The Buddha of Suburbia* (Great Britain: Faber and Faber, 1999), 1.

[3] See Stuart Hall, "New Ethnicities", in Kobena Mercer, ed., *Black Film, British Cinema*, ICA Documents 7 (London: Institute of Art, 1989).

[4] Andrea Levy, "The Empire's Child", *The Guardian* (Saturday, January 31, 2004), 10 March 2012.

war. When the man unexpectedly comes back and discovers the black boarders, his racist fury explodes.

The plot of *Small Island* reads like a story of interracial conflict; in fact, Levy opens up a whole new setting for her creative interest. In truth, her story covers the crossing of three important nuclei of attention: the passage from myth to reality, the movement from matter to metaphor, the transit of time and space. Initially, the adjective 'small' of the title *Small Island* seems to refer to Jamaica, one of the biggest islands in the Caribbean, but smaller than the 'Mother Country' both in geographical terms and in terms of the lack of economic opportunities. England, differently, seems to be the place of endless chances.[5] Gilbert's decision to leave Jamaica is the outcome of the myth of the British motherland with its golden leaves – an image that can only fuel his imagination and aspiration:

> … his voice … described how in England the trees lose their leaves before the winter months. Every leaf on every tree turns first red and then golden. With the wind or the passing of time these dazzling leaves fall from the trees covering the parks, the gardens, the pavements with a blanket of gold (94).

[5] As Hortense remembers, Gilbert would often compare England and Jamaica: "He told me opportunity ripened in England as abundant as fruit on Jamaican trees. And he was going to be the man who pluck it". Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (London: Headline Review, 2004), 98; hereafter in the text.

The Jamaican immigrants think of themselves as British subjects, and, consequently, dream of their future in England in sheer hope. Little by little, however, the novel explains that the 'small island' refers to Great Britain, which represents a hostile society capable of shattering expectations, and which offers little or no opportunities at all. This is the general crossing, the circle of attention that Levy inscribes in the writing of her novel, soon to be followed by the crossing or the passage from matter to metaphor, presented through the natural images that connect the two small islands.

Levy sets some elementary images at the core of her narration, not as mere digressions of the main story but as a means to bring into it the essential imagery of liquidity. As in the history of the Caribbean diaspora, 'crossing' has necessarily and always occurred through the sea, similarly, *Small Island* constructs its plot through an infinite series of images of water. In Jamaica, these images converge on the hurricane and on its devastating effects over the landscape and its people, thus enabling an exploration of the differences between the native island and the Mother Country. "Hurricanes are phenomena of Caribbean climate, never to occur in England" (248), says Queenie, when, in her elocution lesson, she thinks of English words starting with "H". Climatic phenomena have a material value as well as a symbolic one in that they influence the world of the island and the lives of the characters. For instance, as the hurricane causes destruction – "the world was upside down" (55), observes Hortense – its physical devastation reflects a fury that belongs to the psyche of the island's inhabitants. During the storm, Hortense discovers that the man she has always loved, Michael Roberts, has an affair with a married woman; sharing the fury of nature with all the strength in her body, her act of revenge is the crying out of their secret to the community. At the same time,

the hurricane is what causes the Jamaican people to migrate to other parts of the globe, mainly to Great Britain. Here, again, it is the element of climate that brings to the forefront the difference between the 'small islands' of Jamaica and Britain, now set in a relation of contrast, rather than analogy. Hortense perceives the effect of the weather on her body as the sign of her leaving one island and approaching the other: "I did not dare to dream that it would one day be I … who would sail on a ship as big as the world and feel the sun's heat on my face gradually change from roasting to caressing" (11).

From burning to sweetness: on her setting foot on the soil of the 'Mother Country', she is overwhelmed by the environment that feels so different from what she has expected. Britain is, in truth, an icy and snowy land, with an unbearable rigor characterizing its climate, where the sun never shines:

> … [b]ut there was no sun – not even a feeblest shadow. How the birds wake in this country and know when to sing? … 'It's too dark' I said. 'It is winter. Always dark on winter morning', he told to me. … 'It gets dark early too', he said, although he was not addressing me but thinking loud. 'Most of the day dark' (220).

The character's encounter with England takes place under the spell of the inclement weather, but it conceals another kind of coldness: the refusal of its society to welcome migrants. To the Jamaicans, Britain appears as a cold and inhospitable place. The expectation of Britain as a lovely mother is therefore turned into an indifferent stepmother, who has no compassion for her sons and daughters coming from elsewhere. Mary Chamberlaine vibrantly describes the double – literal and metaphorical – bind of English coldness: "… for the most part Britain was experienced as hostile, dirty and immoral. Migration was necessarily a disruption to the routine, from the (remembered) warmth and closeness of the Caribbean to the literal and metaphorical coldness of Britain."[6]

Crossing myth with reality, moving from matter to metaphor, there rests the last 'crossing' that radically transforms the novel's writing: the passage of time into space. In order to tell her story, Levy has thoroughly researched history: Gilbert arrives at Tilbury, England, on the *Windrush Empire*, together with more than five hundred other Jamaicans. It is the 21st June, 1948, the date that Caryl Phillips defines as 'topic' in the encounter between the white society and the black immigrant:

> Fifty years ago the SS Empire Windrush dropped anchor at Tilbury docks and discharged 492 Jamaicans. It is these individuals, and the quarter of a million who succeeded them, who deserve our acknowledgment, respect and gratitude, for as they stood on the deck of the ship and stared out at the white cliffs of Dover, they carried within their hearts a dream. And like all great pioneers, in the face of much adversity and innumerable obstacles, they remained true to their dream.[7]

Six months later, Hortense joins Gilbert in joy and expectation: "I was leaving Jamaica. Getting on a ship the very next day" (108). After hours spent at the port waiting for him, she reaches Gilbert's address by taxi. Looking like a woman coming

[6] Mary Chamberlain, "The Family as Model and Metaphor in Caribbean Migration to Britain", *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 2 (1999).

[7] Caryl Phillips, "The Pioneers: Fifty Years of Caribbean Migration to Britain", in *A New World Order: Selected Essays* (London: Vintage, 2001), 282.

from a distant island, her body carries the sea air with it, still smelling of the crossing: "Placing her hand on Hortense's shoulder, [Jean] leans in closer to her, all the while sniffing like she is smelling something. 'Bloody hell – she's so fresh off the boat, I can smell the sea'. Hortense still smiling wide-eyed polite then feels Jean's door shut in her face" (31). The smell of the sea on Hortense's skin is the sign of her Atlantic crossing. At the same time, after the long journey, her arrival in England takes place at the harbor, the place that, as Alessandro Aresu observes, "may be also thought of as a *door* toward a further voyage … a station to begin a new questioning".[8] In truth, placed at the door of the unknown, the black woman – and the whole generation of women who encountered the land of their origin in these historical conditions – represents a newness, an interruption that dismantles all Western notions of cultural unity. In particular, she is able to question the demagogical Manichean views that rule the relationship between the center and the periphery, the familiar and the foreign, the internal and the external. As Iain Chambers remarks, the migrant is the inscribed blurring of all borders, limits and frontiers: "This dramatic figure is not merely a historical symptom of modernity; she is, rather, the condensed interrogation of the very identity of the modern political subject."[9] Hortense personifies the questioning of modern subjectivity, and, even more, she incarnates the interrogation of her own history. Her strategy is the crossing of the historical experience of her people with the inventive weaving of her own life. The result is that she transforms Queenie's flat, at 21, Nevern Street, into the place where the white and the black communities live together, like a ship in motion where the colonizers and the colonized cannot avoid being inextricably joined:

> The image of the ship – a living, micro-cultural, micro-political system in motion – is especially important for historical and theoretical reasons …. Ships immediately focus attention on the middle passage, on the various projects for redemptive return to an African homeland, on the circulation of ideas and activists as well as the movement of key cultural and political artefacts: tracts, books, gramophone records, and choirs.[10]

The living microcosm (a small place, with a sink, a bed, a table, and two broken chairs) of Hortense's flat-ship, with its rooms-cabins, becomes the place where untold stories and different cultures converge. In terms of a singular tradition to rely on, this converging is staged by Levy as the crossing that marks the novel's definite and final acquisition. At first, the perception that Hortense has of her room as made of high and dark walls, seems to evoke the squalor of the new conditions in which she will have to survive:

> 'This is the room', he said. All I saw were dark brown walls. A broken chair that rested one uneven leg on the Holy Bible. A window with torn curtain and Gilbert's suit … hanging from a rail on the wall. … [T]hree steps would take me to one side of this room. Four steps could take me to another. There was a sink in the corner, a rusty tap stuck out from the wall above it. There was a table with two chairs … pushed up against the bed. The armchair held a shopping bag, a pyjama top, and a teapot. In the fireplace the gas hissed with a blue flame. (20-21)

[8] Alessandro Aresu, *Filosofia della navigazione* (Milano: Bompiani, 2006), 63 (my translation).

[9] Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 7.

[10] Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic, Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), 16.

The scene, however, gains its aura when it acknowledges the *trait-d'union* which links the room's characterization to a different time and a different place. Its description cannot but remind the reader of the time and the place narrated by Jamaica Kincaid in *Lucy*, where the protagonist compares the room where she lives to a ship hold, and herself to its cargo:

> The room in which I lay was a small room just off the kitchen – the maid's room. … The ceiling was very high and the walls went all the way up to the ceiling, enclosing the room like a box – a box in which cargo travelling a long way should be shipped. But I was not cargo. I was only an unhappy young woman living in a maid's room, and I was not even the maid.[11]

[11] Jamaica Kincaid, *Lucy* (New York: Farrar Strauss Giroux, 1990), 7.

The Digital *Arrival* by Roshini Kempadoo

Fig.1: Roshini Kempadoo, screen still from *Arrival: Part One*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

This installation imagines and reflects recent experiences by African women having travelled by boat from North Africa to Spain across the Mediterranean (2005 – 2010). *Arrival: Part 1* reflects the 'irregular' migratory route taken in *cayucos* (small boats) from North and central West Africa to the Spanish coastland. Persons surviving the journey tell of unprepared and brutal experiences – of desperation, tragedy, hope and determination. The media coverage of sunbathers looking aghast at men, women and children as survivors of the crossing have become familiar to us living in Europe – disguising a more complex and yet continual story of migration and fantasy – the desire and possibility of leading a better life experience. This old migratory route across the Mediterranean has become a recurring visualised trope rehearsed by the popular media and politicians. The visual representation of boat people arriving is construed

> as central to the concerns of European citizenship, economic recession, bankruptcy, and potential threat to national security. On each screen an interlinking narrative imagines what could have happened, what we might know about the crossing, and what women might have gone through in making the journey. The work is self-reflexive to provoke an insight into the contradictory and contested effects of economic migration and the impact of the tenuous co-existence between extreme wealth and poverty that perpetuates everyday experiences. The challenge is to give a sense of what continues to take place, whilst acknowledging the limits of a mediated and European orientated point of view. *Arrival: Part 1* is a commentary from a 'situated perspective' offered by Donna Haraway, one that is from a 'limited location and situated knowledge' which 'in this way we might become answerable for what we learn how to see'.
>
> Roshini Kempadoo[12]

[12] Roshini Kempadoo presented *Arrival: Part One* as part of a lecture tour in Canada, Autumn 2010 including the Riddell Lecture 2010 at University of Regina. It was exhibited in Point Sud, Bamako, Mali in February 2011 as part of an international symposium and exhibition entitled *Photography and the Representation of African Migration* (Bamako Project 2011). The artwork was published as an artist's portfolio in the online journal *Hum 736: Papeles de Cultura Contemporánea* 14 (December 2011). See http://www.ugr.es/~hum736/revista%20electronica/numero14/revista14.htm. For the Artist's website, see http://www.roshinikempadoo.co.uk

The artist, teacher and writer Roshini Kempadoo deals with the legacy of slavery and with themes of immigration and exploitation. Her work can be defined as archival, in that it relies on documented research and personal witnessing that shed a light on the absence of the stories of migration told by women, and on the peculiar silence that covers contemporary black British art. These acts of caesura try to fill the spaces left empty in historiography by giving creative voices to those who have been marginalised by colonial power. Kempadoo, who is determined to incarnate this goal, adopts a multidisciplinary perspective, working on photography, digital installations, and writing at the same time. In crossing these different technologies, she asserts the specificity of her location as a woman, born in Britain from Guyanese parents: "My work is reflective of issues and attitudes that position us as black individuals."[13]

As Adrienne Rich's politics of location suggests, if women want to develop a female, feminine and feminist art that explores new physical, spiritual and emotional spaces, they must recognize their own location – be it the body, the home, the country or the continent. Kempadoo's singular location is to belong to the black British generation in a liminal condition, placed at the crossroad of the conceptual impossibility of being British and black at the same time. As Heidi Mirza claims, the terms are mutually exclusive, if the British identity is founded on racial belonging, inscribed in a hegemonic discourse that excludes all ethnic groups from the perimeter of its white 'purity':

[13] See Deborah Willis, *Roshini Kempadoo Autograph* (London: Autograph, 1997).

> To be black and British is to be unnamed in official discourse. The construction of national British identity is built upon a notion of racial belonging, upon a hegemonic white ethnicity that never speaks its presence. We are told that you can be either one or the other, black or British, but not both.[14]

[14] Heidi Mirza, "Introduction: Mapping a Genealogy of Black British Feminism", in Heidi Mirza, ed., *Black British Feminism. A Reader* (London and New York: Rouledge, 1997), 3.

In the spirit of Stuart Hall's theories, to be born in the diaspora pushes black artists to the margins; their creativity – British by birthright, but alien in ethnicity – must struggle to find a place within the British society. How does Kempadoo carry out her own fight? Her artistic education took place in the 1980s, a period which saw an incredible vitality in the arena of visual arts, witnessing the rise of independent cinema and photography also thanks to the activism of Sankofa and the Black Audio Film Collective. Hyphenated artists such as Kempadoo, adamant in opposing the cultural

caesura imposed upon them and with a clear political agenda, were searching for ways of expression that were new and specific to their experiences. Indeed, the media Kempadoo employs are meant to question the dominant regimes of representation, reflecting on the experiences of the black diaspora in Great Britain.

Kempadoo's poetics emerges from the documentary tradition, which she pushed to its limits, so as to distinguish it from all grains of realism and, at the same time, to allow the analysis of the relation between the art of photography and its technology. In her radical re-negotiation of places, identities and stories, the artist exploits the potential of the technological tools at her disposal, creating what she defines as 'photoconstructions', i.e. the counter-images, invented and generated by the computer, that construct a counter-narration of mainstream culture through specific acts of juxtaposition and multiplicity.[15] She deploys these techniques mainly in the arena of visual anthropology, working on the photographic archives that map colonial history. Her critical position is that, if photography is imbued with those racial prejudices that reassert dominant discourses, the ethnographic photos used to classify ethnicities can also be used to show the partiality of the science enforced by British colonialism to assert the biological inferiority of the colonized populations. If, as Maria Fernandez argues, technology is usually associated with ideas of progress, modernity and globality, and rarely with the power and the politics permeating it, in fact, the image is never innocent or transparent, but always complicit with the power and the politics of the West claiming the exclusion and the marginalization of the black experience from official history.[16]

[15] Gen Doy, *Black Visual Culture: Modernity and Postmodernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000), 88.

[16] See Maria Fernandez, "Postcolonial Media Theory", *Art Journal*, 58.3, 59-73.

Fig. 2: Roshini Kempadoo, screen still from *Arrival: Part One*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist.

Through her 'photoconstructions', Kempadoo questions issues of exclusion and marginalization. In *ECU. European Currency Unfolds* (1992), a project of ten photos of European banknotes, she replaces the characters printed on the notes with the faces of unknown immigrants, associating Western economy to colonialism, genocide, and exploitation. *Sweetness and Light* (1995) shows that, even if it is often negated, the concept of Englishness relies on the legacy of slavery and the burden of Empire. *Virtual Exiles* (2000) captures the experience of migration in a video and an interactive website, which both call for the contributions of others to make sense of a common diaspora. In *Ghosthing* (2004), the interconnection between the Caribbean and Britain is staged through the construction of an imaginary, 'digital' plantation.

It is, however, her work *Arrival* (2010) that directly deals with the experience of crossing by showing the gendered connections between slavery, colonialism and diaspora.

As Kempadoo explains, her origin greatly influenced this exploration of migration, linking it with the questions of belonging and citizenship in the host country.[17] Her specific topic is the diaspora that is taking place in the Mediterranean today, and that echoes both the 1950s Caribbean immigration to Britain, and, going back in time, the Middle Passage from Africa to the Caribbean. If the movements of African slaves during the colonial period share a strong relevance to the present diaspora, the artist's gaze is directed towards the violence of that past, at the same time remaining open to the conceptualization of a future that might be totally different.[18]

The installation, presented at "Photography and the Representation of African Migration" at Point Sud, Bamako, in Mali in February 2011, projects a series of stories on three screens. These stories are told from various viewpoints, in a plurality of vision that is already an embodied trait of its object – the impossibility of analysing diasporas from any single or totalizing perspective. As Nicholas Mirzoeff observes:

> There is … a problem concerning the representation of diasporas. Diaspora cannot by its very nature be fully known, seen or quantified, even – or especially – by its own members. The notion of diaspora and visual culture embodies this paradox. A diaspora cannot be seen in any traditional sense, and it certainly cannot be represented from the viewpoint of one-point perspective.[19]

In *Arrival*, this impossibility is rendered through the creation of an 'interpolating installation', that is, by manipulating its images and movements into a critical commentary that resists official history, and which is intended to restore black women's historical dignity.[20] The installation's multidisciplinary ensemble of photographs, writings, voices and sounds creates the proper milieu for dismantling the traditional and demagogical representations of migration. Within its general inscription, Kempadoo's image-sequences are presented as a way to suspend time, producing a sense of immobility that partakes with the absence, the loss, and the feelings of transiency experienced by diasporic people. The images are not sequenced in a linear way, but juxtaposed according to a technology of sampling and montage that interrupts the pretence of 'one' narration, materializing on the screens the interstices of

[17] Roshini Kempadoo, *Arrival (2010). La représentation de la diaspora black/noire – Migration et Europe*, 11, http://www.migrationandmedia.com/dat/Kempadoo_franz.pdf, 11 March 2012.

[18] What seems to interest Kempadoo is the fact that art is often complicit in rendering the 'black body' according to stereotypes that follow the rhetoric of institutions. Her project is meant to challenge and reverse traditional representations of blackness as a monolithic entity, by placing the black body at the centre of her artistic articulation of their emotional and physical visions.

[19] Nicholas Mirzoeff, ed., *The Visual Culture Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1998), 205.

[20] Ibid., 61.

history, and the spaces left unrecognized by the historical and cultural official notions of reality. The material rendering of the migratory experience is, however, only one part of the project, which, in truth, establishes what Derek Walcott once claimed: if the Caribbean lives a "loss of history", the only way out of this historical censura is to turn to imagination and to creativity.[21] Working on *Arrival*, Kempadoo is herself confronted with the emptiness of the official archive of the voyage from North Africa to Europe, personally experiencing the necessity, in order to tell her story, to turn to fantasy and imagination, to the capacity of the image to be evocative. The result is a work that begins by showing on the screens images of water slowly flowing, with the gentle movements of their undulating surfaces. The noise of the waterfall accompanies a line of writing that narrates the fatality of the destiny of the migrating people:

> Each year the Association Por Derechos Humanos de Andalucía (Sevilla) reports on those who die whilst immigrating to Southern Spain (*víctimas de la immigración clandestina en la frontera sur).*
> Between 2005 and 2009, they reported the death of 3,243 – three thousand, two hundred and forty three men, women and children, having attempted the journey to Spanish Coasts.[22]

The subject of the installation is the death at sea of the people undertaking their dangerous voyages, fighting for survival; its content is Kempadoo's desire to give visibility to this tragedy. On her website, she writes that her images "were created in response to the media coverage of crossings made during 2007", the demagogical and non-human rendering of the deaths of an incredible number of human beings during the mass migrations from Africa to Europe, especially to Spain.[23] The artist

[21] Derek Walcott, "The Caribbean: Culture or Mimicry?", in R. D. Hamner, ed., *Critical Perspectives on Derek Walcott* (Boulder, London: Lynne Rienner, 1997), 53.

[22] R. Kempadoo, *Arrival* (2010), http://vimeo.com/25865314,11 March 2012.

[23] See http://www.roshinikempadoo.co.uk, 11 March 2012.

Fig. 3: Roshini Kempadoo, screen still from *Arrival: Part One*, 2010. Courtesy of the artist

interrogates the construction of the phenomenon by the media, the truthfulness in their coverage, reflecting also on the connections between the reality of the event and its photographic rendering. The resulting installation is an act of re-appropriation both of history and of technology: if Western culture manipulates the conditions of races and peoples, the power of photography can be differently claimed to show the other side of the story and to reveal the other narrations suppressed by official history. This is the reason why contemporary migration is specifically constructed as the result of slavery and colonialism. In a postcolonial vein, Kempadoo criticizes the erasure of slavery from western consciousness, and the consequent ignorance of the role that its 'adventure' plays in the present economic and cultural system. As Paul Gilroy states,

> [i]t seems as if the complexity of slavery and its location within modernity has to be actively forgotten if a clear orientation to tradition and thus to the present circumstances of blacks is to be acquired …. Slavery, which is so deeply embedded in modernity, gets forgotten.[24]

[24] Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic,* 189-190.

In *Arrival*, Kempadoo envisions the voyage of a *patera* (a boat) of 40 people, on its difficult route from Morocco to Spain. During the journey, the traffickers throw some of the people into the water; many die, and only few are rescued. On the screens the images of this terrible happening alternate with the fictional tales of some of the women who have experienced the traumatic voyage: the woman who died at sea, the artist herself who is investigating the crossing. Their fictional stories are not separated one from the other, but rather follow their juxtaposition on the screens, as if to embody the dis-connected narratives of their diaspora. Some women die during the journey, while others arrive to Spain and settle there. The installation ends with the inscription of some images of veiled African women dancing against the background of the photos of an apartment in Sevilla, its walls decorated in Arabic writing, the last traces of a common tragedy. On the screens, at their closing moment, against the background of the water and the sand of the sea, the waves impress sometimes the trace of a female face on the foam; some other times, they silently bring ashore the remains of a corpse…

Women's Voices in Julie Otsuka's *The Buddha in the Attic*

Julie Otsuka, born in California to Japanese parents, started her career as a painter, but turned to literary writing at the age of 30, when she felt the need to bear testimony to her ancestors's stories. In a similar way as Levy's poetics, Otsuka begins her writing from the closest and most personal events, and then dives into the past, so as to be able to highlight her people's experiences of the 'voyage', the passage or the crossing of the ocean between Japan and the United States. Otsuka has published two novels so far. *When The Emperor Was Divine* (2002) deals with the personal memory of an episode that took place during World War II, when her grandfather was arrested as a spy, and her grandmother, her mother, and her uncle had to spend three years

in a Japanese internment camp in the desert of Utah. *The Buddha in the Attic* (2011), which constitutes a sort of prelude to the first novel, goes back to 1920s, and tells the 'strange' experience of the Japanese migration to America through the memories of the so-called 'picture brides'. It is a story that Otsuka intensively researched:

> I read a lot of oral histories and history books, and old newspapers. I had to learn about two worlds: the old Japan from which the picture brides came, and the America of the 1920s and 1930s which they immigrated to. I kept many notebooks filled with detailed notes about everything.[25]

Quite dissimilar from any historical genre (whose main feature is, for instance, its length), this novel, influenced by the Japanese *zuihitsu*, relates women's experiences of immigration. Its originality lies in the absence of 'one' protagonist: the narrative belongs to a chorus of women's voices identified with the plural pronoun 'we'. As Otsuka writes, "in my research, I came across so many stories, and I wanted to weave them all in, so the entire book is in the 'we' voice. There is no main character."[26] This choice might depend on the character of the diasporic condition, which cannot be told by one voice, or it can specifically link to Japan as an oriented group culture. In any case, for the writer, the subject 'we' belongs to a genealogy of women who, in the most disparate geographical places and historical periods, have crossed and still cross the oceans and the seas to satisfy their dreams, to survive against impossible conditions, and to find a future elsewhere.[27]

Here Otsuka's key word is 'genealogy', the historical approach that does not imply any linear return to an origin, but constitutes a practice of reading the past in its – real or imagined – discontinuities. Michel Foucault, drawing the term from Nietzsche, explains the genealogical conception of history as what is distanced from any rational continuity or evolutionary process, in order to reveal the real composition of its course made of breaks and disparities. The genealogical re-building of the past interprets the dominance of certain discourses, with the decision to re-present forgotten, or partially known, events in different ways. In Foucault's thinking, 'genealogy' is precisely opposed to the search for a pure and uncontaminated beginning:

> Genealogy is gray, meticulous, and patiently documentary. It operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents that have been scratched over and recopied many times. … [G]enealogy retrieves an indispensable restraint: it must record the singularity of events outside of any monotonous finality; it must seek them in the most uncompromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history – in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; it must be sensitive to their recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of their evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where they engaged in different roles. Finally, genealogy must define even those instances where they are absent, the moment when they remained unrealized.[28]

In *The Buddha in the Attic* the words-images used by Otsuka are genealogical in that they traverse the past of Japanese immigration to the States, without inscri-

[25] Jane Ciabattari, "Tragedy of the Picture Brides", http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2011/09/16/julie-otsuka-talks-about-new-novel-the-buddha-in-the-attic.html, 27 February 2012.

[26] Cordelia Palitz, "Q&A with Julie Otsuka", *Student Life*, September 16, 2009, http://www.studlife.com/news/2009/09/16/qa-with-julie-otsuka/, 10 March 2012.

[27] Patrick Ryan, "Interview with Julie Otsuka", http://www.granta.com/New-Writing/Interview-Julie-Otsuka, 20 March 2012.

[28] Michel Foucault, "Genealogy, Nietzsche, History", in *Language, Counter-Memory Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1996), 139-140.

[29] As Otsuka says, writing is like painting: "If you're a painter, … you set out your colors on your pallet, you put a mark on the canvas … you add, you take away. It's the same thing with writing." Penelope Lively, "An Extraordinary Evocation of an Ignored Episode in American History. Outstanding." http://readers.penguin.co.uk/nf/shared/WebDisplay/0,,178908_1_10,00.html, 14 March 2012.

bing it into any continuity of male-dominated history.[29] In her *Feminist Genealogies,* Chandra Mohanty argues that a female genealogy and a female legacy cannot be considered as fixed terms, but as forms of thought that, by dismantling both history and historiography, focus on the personal experiences of women:

> Thus, our use of the words like 'genealogies' or 'legacies' is not meant to suggest a frozen or embodied inheritance of domination and resistance, but an interested, conscious thinking and rethinking of history and historicity, a rethinking which has women's *autonomy* and *self-determination* at its core.[30]

[30] M. Jaqui Alexander, Chandra T. Mohanty, eds., *Feminist Genealogies, Colonial Legacies, Democratic Futures* (New York and London: Routledge, 1997), xvi.

A female genealogy, which cannot be discovered once and for all, implies a continuous rethinking, an analytic perspective that reads the autonomy and self-determination of women. Otsuka's novel breaches the oblivion where women's stories have been discarded. She places the picture brides at the heart of her narration that, delicately and passionately, uncovers the struggle, the force, the courage, the dreams and, at the same time, the deception at these women's expense. Such uncovering refuses to be contained within any narrative limits: the insistent repetition of the (grammatical) subjects that bear the burden of the storytelling –'some of us', 'most of us', 'one of us' – produces a musicality and a sonority that evokes a variety of literary forms. Although written in prose, the stories follow the rhythm of poetry, and, in the evocation of a chorus of female voices, they resemble theatre, as if the readers could be imaginatively taking part to a classical tragedy. The style is evocative and precise at the same time: the sections of the novel *Come, Japanese!, First Night, Whites, Babies, The Children, Traitors, Last Day* and *A Disappearance* tell, with extreme precision, the different phases of the migration process, from the departure of the picture brides to their arrival in America, to the difficulties they face in the new country. The *incipit* opens up by disseminating the most disparate perspectives on the boat-journey:

> On the boat we were mostly virgins. We had long black hair and flat wide feet and we were not very tall. Some of us had eaten nothing but rice gruel … and some of us were only fourteen years old and were still young girls ourselves. Some of us came from the city, … but many more of us came from the country …. Some of us came from the mountains, … some of us were the daughters of fishermen ….[31]

[31] Julie Otsuka, *The Buddha in the Attic* (London: Penguin Book, 2011), 3; hereafter in the text.

Through the plurality of the novel's points of view, Otsuka keeps track of the singularity of each experience, neglecting none. If the Japanese immigration to the USA is characterized by displacement, racism, dis-integration and misery, it also presents its positive aspects: the multifaceted diaspora appears in its nuances, where each of its experiences is worth to be told. As Edward Said argues in *Reflections on Exile*, the diasporic experience is not to be considered only in its loss, displacement and up-rootedness; living between many spaces and many cultures might also signify a privilege: "Seeing the entire world as a foreign land makes possible the originality of vision."[32] Said's perspective is shared by Otsuka's narration of the picture brides, the mail order brides who leave Japan to come to America with the photos of their unknown husbands in their hands, full of expectations, confident

[32] Edward Said, *Reflections on Exile and Other Literary and Cultural Essays*, (London: Granta Book, 2000), 186.

in the letters announcing a promising America. Their narration starts in the 1920s, when these women cross the ocean in terrible conditions:

> On the boat we slept down below, in steerage, where it was filthy and dim. Our beds were narrow metal racks stacked one on top of the other and our mattresses were hard and thin and darkened with the stains of other journeys, other lives (4).

The displacement of this voyage is not the first and it will not be the last in history: the boat echoes the presence of those who crossed the ocean before. During the transit, the women share the photos of their husbands, tell their stories, suffer from seasickness, fall in love with mariners, and comfort each other. Some die during the crossing, and others reach the American coast. The boat they are travelling on pullulates with passions, emotions, affects, fears and hopes. Whatever the attitude of the collective entity, for each of these women America means the future: "Because we were on the boat now, the past was behind us, and there was no going back" (12). Throughout the voyage, imagination is fuelled by the 'dream of America', which appears as a land of endless opportunities, especially for women. If, in Japan, they work in the fields, without any chance of changing their lives, or if, when coming from poor families, they are sold to geisha homes, in their minds during the journey, America can only be a better place:

> But even the most reluctant of us had to admit that it was better to marry a stranger in America than grow old with a farmer from the village. Because in America the women did not have to work in the fields and there was plenty of rice and firewood for all (7).

America is a mythic place, with dreams of big houses and chimneys; at the same time, it feels as an alien land, in its physical, geographical, religious and social difference from Japan. Soon after their landing in the beloved and different new home, the women experience the contact zones, the 'borderlands', as Gloria Anzaldúa would call them, between two worlds, two stories, two sides and two cultures:

> The Borderlands are physically present wherever two or more cultures edge each other, where people of different races occupy the same territory, where under, lower, middle and upper classes touch …. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is … a constant state of transition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants.[33]

[33] Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderland/ La Frontera, The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999), 25.

For Otsuka, living at the border is an existential condition that concerns the cleavage between two places and two cultures – the Japanese and the American – where the hosting one needs Japanese labor but is, at the same time, unable to accept the guest. This contact zone is announced by the little statue belonging to one of the women, the 'Buddha' of the title: "Haruko left a tiny laughing brass Buddha up high, in a corner of the attic, where he is still laughing to this day" (109). The statue is the symbol of everything that the women have left behind at home, before starting the dramatic journey that will deport them even to internment

camps. Life is hard in America for a Japanese woman, who finds only low-wage jobs, often becoming the victim of racial prejudice. And history does not help: in 1942 the bombing of Pearl Harbor made the situation more unbearable for most of them. The 'native' people started looking at the 'marked' immigrants in fear and suspicion. Day after day, the Japanese or the Japanese-Americans were arrested by the FBI and forced to leave the country. The Executive Order 9066, signed by President Franklin Roosevelt, finally sentenced them to internment camps. The end of the novel hints at the emptiness left behind by the unreasonable disappearance of these people. What is different now is that, after the crossing of Otsuka's novel, this inexplicable absence affects the ones who sent them away, the American townspeople who still cannot understand their violent and cruel historical negation:

> The Japanese have disappeared from our town. Their houses are boarded up and empty now … abandoned cars sit in their driveways. Thick knotty weeds are sprouting through their lawns, stray cats wander. Last loads of still cling to the line. In one of their kitchen – Emi Saito's – a black telephone rings and rings (115).

Conclusion

I have carried out my brief journey into the African, the Caribbean and the Japanese diaspora accompanied by three extraordinary writers: Andrea Levy, Roshini Kempadoo and Julie Otsuka. Their *oeuvres* articulate the forgotten, marginalized or ignored experiences of a crossing that belongs, as a foundational act, to a whole community of women. In the tales of transit narrated by Levy, constructed by Kempadoo and celebrated by Otsuka, the female protagonists listen to the wisdom of a memory that, surfacing from the bottom of the ocean, haunts their lives like a ghost. Under the spell of such wisdom, they – we, you – cross the oceanic routes in the present, looking back at a cruel past, at the same time staying hopeful in the future to-come. What history has inscribed on their minds and bodies cannot be put under the rug; still these women are certain that, with the support of writing, art and technology, they can re-appropriate their subjectivities and creative agency, beyond all forms of historical oblivion, social erasure and oppressive silence.