

Introduction to Lynn Book's Video Project *Escapes**

* The following text, with minor revision, has been delivered by the author at the projection of *Escapes* held at Wake Forest University on March 26, 2013. Hosted by IPLACe (Interdisciplinary Performance and the Liberal Arts Center).

It is an absolute privilege for me to introduce Lynn Book's video-work, *Escapes*. Last year I asked Lynn if she would like to contribute to an international online journal called *Anglistica AION* and issued by the University of Naples, as I was going to be its co-editor with my Italian colleague Silvana Carotenuto. The special issue focuses on *Writing Exile: Women, The Arts and Technologies*. Lynn, of course, was the perfect choice for a contributor. At the time, she was already working on this piece, and she immediately accepted to be on board our project.

In our special issue of *Anglistica AION*, which is a collection of transnational contributions from East to West, from North to South, we set out to explore on a larger scale and over different historical periods the following questions: what is the link between the condition of the exiled and creativity? More specifically, in what way do women use writing, the arts and technology to express the displacement of identities, geographies and cultures?

Lynn Book's *Escapes* answers these questions and exceeds them. For this reason, in our online journal we have placed her video-work at the end, as a way to summarize the central questions of our collection and also to re-circulate them in a gesture that, emblematically embodied by Phaedra, re-returns with a passion. Phaedra is presented, in the video that we are going to see, as a figure of migration and resistance, of creativity and desire.

Daughter of Minos and Pasifae and wife of Theseus, Phaedra is known to fall passionately in love with her stepson Hippolytus, who rejected her. From Euripides to Sophocles, from Seneca to Ovid, from Racine to D'Annunzio, from Marina Tsvetaeva to Frank McGuinness, in poetry, play, or novel and across different time periods, there are many variations of her story. In some versions, she kills herself and falsely accuses Hippolytus to have raped her. In other versions, when she reveals her love to Hippolytus, he tries to kill her with his sword. As a result of this unrequited and incestuous love, Theseus curses his son, who dies a violent death, and Phaedra has therefore generally been seen as a woman to be blamed.

Lynn Book lifts the patriarchal veil that has covered Phaedra's body for so long and gives it a new life, a new breath. Though Phaedra has been represented through the ages as a dark figure, in Lynn Book's work we are reminded of the original meaning of Phaedra's name, which derives from the Greek word φαειρός (phaidrós), which signifies 'bright'.

I grew up in Pompeii, and I remember the classical visual representations of Phaedra as the liar, the selfish lover, the immoderate and deviant, deranged and portrayed on her deathbed, or as a tormented figure of remorse – a trend that has continued in the work of many visual artists from past to present.

In Lynn Book's multi-faceted work on Phaedra, instead, we have a breath of fresh air, actually, 8 breaths of fresh air, such as the 8 poems or escapes. Why 8? Is it by chance that, in numerology, 8 is the number of *building* or *construction* and in some theories, also the number of *destruction*? Here it seems fitting as there is both a deconstruction and a re-construction at work.

If we read the video as a book, the book of Phaedra's escapes, then, this book is framed by "Phaedra" at the beginning and "Escapes" at the end. The first page deconstructs and dissects the words that constitute Phaedra's very name, even with humor (see, for instance, the new possible words followed by explanations: "drepaah" if she were Indian; "Rap head" if she was urban youth). At the end, the word "escapes" is dissected and analyzed in its manifold synonyms, related adjectives, and usages to create alphabets of alternative bodies and alternative stories that are left open to future possibilities.

It is in this context of dismemberment and re-creation that I see *Escapes*. For instance, the virgin/whore dichotomy is deconstructed in favor of a new female sexual determination and agency. To me, one of the relevant traces of this video, among many, is the feminist struggle to redefine sexuality and desire from the varied perspectives of women's experiences. In many religious traditions and mythologies, women's sexual capacity is considered so powerful that it could distract men and undermine social order. Of course to me this resonates very much with the goal of enacting Phaedra's 'escapes' today. I like the use of the plural in the title because the use of plural recalls Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray's pre-Oedipal and pre-fallic stage of psychosexual development of *jouissance* and multiple female desire that explore the immense bodily territories which, in Phaedra's case as in other women's, have been kept under seal.

On the screen, thanks also to the suggestive vision and careful video editing of Brenton Richardson, we see traces of Phaedra's exile and escape, of her confinement and her rebellion, through her body – her body as language that is dissected and exploded. Her body – the body of language (her written and oral language) is fragmented, and uneven, refusing to be objectified as a linear whole, as the 'Phaedra package' handed down to us. As it loses linearity on the screen, Phaedra's body acquires the sound of an interrupted voice that stammers, that is divided, repeated, contracted and expanded. Language, vision, and sound converge to reveal and connect the visual fragments with fragments of memories. Language plays a prominent role here, in what we hear and what we see. At one point the disintegration and dissection are so extreme that Phaedra becomes a series of numbers or a formula, breaking into a whisper. To me if, on the one hand, this disintegration expresses resistance to patriarchal classification, on the other hand it also speaks of the threat of dissolution of language and identity for Phaedra in those patriarchal texts that condemn her for expressing her sexual desire. After all, the threat of dissolution of language is also a real concern of migrants who survive in diasporic identities. Identity and language are intimately connected. Lynn Book, with the assistance of Shawn Decker (Chicago sound and media artist) and Bren-

ton Richardson (video editor), through words and images and sounds has been able to thread the fine line between these forms of dissolution.

Ultimately, *Escapes* tells us of an excessive passion, or “a passion with too many *sss*”, that has been sounded by voice and wind instruments and told as part of a “twisted story” – “twisted” not in the sense of “perverse” but in the sense of re-interpreted. The excessive “s”, the twisted letter par excellence, becomes a symbol of rebellion that is centrally experienced throughout the video, for instance, as *sense, sex, space, speech, sound, fish, suck, spin, force, fish, voice, humans, survive*. The ‘s’ is also a symbol of silence, as Phaedra, in Lynn Book’s video, survives, *escapes*, breaks the silence, speaks through the silences.

Phaedra escapes from her classical portrayal as deviant and becomes wild in the sense dictated by nature, as free and fluid as the forest or the ocean, ready to be new and return, as a ghost or revenant that does not stay put, that does not politely wait in its assigned place. Beyond the pleasure principle, in the *fort/da* game exemplified by walking feet in the video, Phaedra’s body moves and moves us, in the creative urge to find self-expression, to return and survive in the pages and skin of a video *book* – as well as in the mind and body of Lynn Book.