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**Pre-Fixing the Colonial: Theory and Practice**

Edited by Marta Cariello, Luigi C. Cazzato and Luisa Pèrcopo



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## The Battle of the Prefixes

The limits of my language are the limit of my world  
Ludwig Wittgenstein

I am my language. Until I can take pride in my language, I cannot take pride in myself  
Gloria Anzaldúa

This issue of *Anglistica AION* is the final step in a process of cross-thinking around the prefixes “post” and “de” with reference to the colonial, a process that officially began in 2017 in Naples with an AISCLI (Associazione Italiana di Studi sulle Culture e Letterature di Lingua Inglese) Symposium titled “Postcolonial and Decolonial in Conversation”. At that time Olivia Rutazibwa (Portsmouth University) was invited to converse with Iain Chambers and a group of migrants and activists of Centro Sociale Autogestito Ex Canapificio of Caserta, a centre for grass-roots organization, which provides migrants with legal aid. The conversation continued in Bari in 2019 with the 8<sup>th</sup> AISCLI conference “Postcolonial/Decolonial. Unpacking the Prefix: Literatures and Cultures in English and Beyond”. This time we discussed with, among others, Madina Tlostanova (Linköping University), Paola Zaccaria (University of Bari), and musicians Karima 2G and Nabil Salameh.

Historically, the colonial has been escorted by a long list of prefixes. Alongside ‘post’ and ‘de’, one can find “un-colonial”<sup>1</sup>, “trans-colonial”<sup>2</sup>, intra-colonial, inter-colonial, semi-colonial, non-colonial, and, of course, anti-colonial and neo-colonial. The postcolonial perspectives (mostly related to British colonialism) adopted by Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1978), Gayatri C. Spivak (“Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 1988) and Homi Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*, 1994) as well as the decolonial perspectives (mostly related to Spanish colonialism) adopted by Aníbal Quijano (“Colonialidad y modernidad/racionalidad”, 1991), Enrique Dussel (1492: *El encubrimiento del Otro. Hacia el origen of the “mito de la modernidad”*, 1992) and Walter Dignolo (*The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, & Colonization*, 1995) are closely linked. Perhaps, we may add that the postcolonial perspectives tend to mostly stem from the realm of the cultural whilst the decolonial ones mostly from the realm of the sociological. Be as it may, they are definitely connected thanks to the common anti-colonial genealogy that reaches back to works such as *Contrapunteo cubano del tabaco y el azúcar* (1940) by Fernando Ortiz Fernández, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950) by Aimé Césaire, and *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs* (1952) by Ibrahim Frantz Fanon, all of which represent a radical departure from established Western canons of thinking.

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<sup>1</sup> See John Baldacchino, “Resemblance, Choice, and the Hidden: Mediterranean Aesthetics and the Political ‘Logics’ of an Uncolonial Subjective Economy”, in Yasser Elhariry and Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, eds., *Critically Mediterranean: Temporalities, Aesthetics, and Deployments of a Sea in Crisis* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018).

<sup>2</sup> See Olivia C. Harrison, “Etel Adnan’s Transcolonial Mediterranean”, in Elhariry and Talbayev, eds., *Critically Mediterranean*.

Despite its widespread use, the term ‘postcolonial’ has been a disputed significant since its inception: indeed, an intense and prolonged debate emerged at least as far back as the early 1990s.<sup>3</sup> Both the fortune and misfortune of the term ‘postcolonial’ might be ascribed to the fact that it was born amidst many other ‘posts’: postmodernism, poststructuralism, posthumanism, postsocialism, and so on. However, if the postmodern and the postcolonial have been debated as potentially suspicious expressions because we are not out of modernity or colonialism yet, postmodernity and postcoloniality designate two different modes of cutting the canvas of modernity: if deconstruction is mostly associated with the former, decolonization is commonly associated with the latter. So, ‘post’ unavoidably meets ‘de’. Ngugi wa Thiong’o, among many others, reminds us that the postcolonial has always been problematic both in terms of periodization and in terms of conceptualization. However, whatever questions the term raises, for him it has one constant: “the ‘post’ expresses a relation to coloniality, in fact, it absorbs the colonial into itself”.<sup>4</sup> As Bill Ashcroft reminds us, it is a relationship embodied and highlighted by the hyphen itself: post(-)colonial.<sup>5</sup> For both scholars, then, ‘post’ indicates the absorption of the colonial into the postcolonial. In so doing, as Ngugi reiterates, “it simultaneously assumes a relationship to something else, something that is neither colonial nor postcolonial”.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps here, Ngugi is implicitly referring to Aníbal Quijano’s idea of “decoloniality”?<sup>7</sup>

The ideology of colonialism has fuelled a long war on the rest of the planet for the last five centuries. The colonial past, its racism, the division of the world among imperial powers are never simply ‘out there or back then’. It is constitutive of the present and goes beyond matters of power and race since it also involves gender, religion, environmental issues, among many others. It involves the several intersected hierarchies contrived by the history of colonialism;<sup>8</sup> In short, it involves the big question of epistemology: how we come to know what we know. If there is a divergence between postcolonial and decolonial thinking (without presupposing any respective homogeneity), it might lie in the very way they counter the colonial while relating to Western epistemology:

- the postcolonial resituates the position of the non-Western Other in order to *rethink* the Occident and its relation to the non-Occident;<sup>9</sup>
- the decolonial resituates the position of the non-Western Other in order to *delink* it from the Occident and its hegemony.<sup>10</sup>

Without taking for granted that there is a homogeneous Occident, by the latter we mean the ‘non-colonial’ par excellence: Capitalist Modernity. Whereas within the postcolonial frameworks it might be impossible to cancel the complexity of Western inheritance(s) – one can only re-cast it in a frame that

<sup>3</sup> See, among many others: Stuart Hall, “When was the Postcolonial? Thinking at the Limit”, in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, eds., *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London: Routledge, 1996), Anne McClintock, “The Angel of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term ‘Post-Colonialism’”, *Social Text*, 31/32 (1992), 84-98, Ella Shohat, “Notes on the Post-Colonial”, *Social Text*, 31/32, 1992, 99-113, Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory: Classes, Nations, Literatures* (New York: Verso, 1992), Arif Dirlik, “The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism”, *Critical Inquiry*, 20.2 (1994), 328-356.

<sup>4</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Globalectics: Theory and Politics of Knowing* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2012), 51.

<sup>5</sup> Bill Ashcroft, “On the Hyphen in ‘Postcolonial’”, *New Literatures Review*, 32 (1996), 23-31.

<sup>6</sup> Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Globalectics*, 51.

<sup>7</sup> See Anibal Quijano, “Colonialidad y modernidad racionalidad”, *Perú Indígena*, 13.29, 1992.

<sup>8</sup> As to the intersection of race, class, gender and sexuality and the relative decolonial proposal of “deep coalitions”, see María Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism”, *Hypatia*, 25.4 (2010) and “The Coloniality of Gender”, in Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, *Globalization and the Decolonial Option*.

<sup>9</sup> See Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (London: Vintage, 1993).

<sup>10</sup> See Quijano, “Colonialidad y modernidad racionalidad”.



exceeds its origins – from the decolonial perspectives, the cancellation of the link to Western epistemology is not only possible but necessary. This is the reason why the postcolonial should be decolonised as well. Indeed, it is generally agreed that the postcolonial pairs are: Foucault/Said, Derrida/Spivak, Lacan/Bhabha. On the contrary, the decolonial option, as it has been renamed by Mignolo and Escobar,<sup>11</sup> demands the use of ‘external’ sources (Gandhi, Rigoberta Menchu, Gloria Anzaldúa, the Zapatistas Movement...), ones that dwell outside the West, on its “borders” (border thinking).<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, in countering the colonial, both the postcolonial and the decolonial endeavour to think ‘without’ the temporal framework of Hegelian/Marxian historicism<sup>13</sup> and ‘within’ the huge spatial framework that are the so-called ‘global borders’, configured as such since the conquest of America.<sup>14</sup>

As it is, beyond any nominalist issue, both “post” and “de” refer not to ‘pastness’ (the closure of an age) but to ‘beyondness’ (the opening of an age). According to this latter stance, then, postcoloniality and decoloniality, for that matter, are not an achieved condition at all, on the contrary, “an ‘anticipatory’ discourse, looking forward to a better and as yet unrealized world”.<sup>15</sup> To this extent, we think that the postcolonial option overlaps with the decolonial one. Above all, if, as Chambers puts it, postcolonial means the revaluation of the present that arrives from extra-European time and space, which radically undoes the securities of European time and space, “this revaluation – he concludes – in play since first contact five centuries ago, is the critical heart of a ‘decolonised postcolonial’ criticism”.<sup>16</sup> In this perspective, everything is in need of being decolonised, the postcolonial included. The decolonial as well needs some rethinking. Given it was born out of the disillusionment of the decolonization rhetoric at the time of the fall of the Berlin wall and it is predominantly focused on issues of race and capitalism in history, it has remained somehow unaware of more contemporary and pressing issues such as those linked to gender, the environment, unsettlement and defuturing.

Both a closeness and a possible synergy between the decolonial and the postcolonial are badly needed today, overwhelmed as we are by new waves of colonialisms, racisms, fascisms, both here in Italy and in so many more places around the world: from the global Black Lives Movements to our local recent debate on Montanelli’s involvement in Italian colonialism. This closeness and synergy are badly needed to fight the colonial matrix of power, which is still consuming the planet as has been since the foundation of modernity, whose dark, hidden, repressed side was and still is coloniality. The right utterance truly is ‘modernity/coloniality’, which, once unpacked, clearly reveals how there is no

<sup>11</sup> Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>12</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 2000).

<sup>13</sup> See Enrique Dussel, *1492 El encubrimiento del otro - hacia el origen del mito de la modernidad* (La Paz: Plural, 1994), Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: Minnesota U.P., 1996), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1999), Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton U.P., 2000).

<sup>14</sup> See Quijano, “Colonialidad y modernidad racionalidad”, Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double-Consciousness* (London and New York, Verso, 1993), Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: Michigan U.P., 1995), Hall, “When Was ‘the Post-Colonial’?”.

<sup>15</sup> Patrick Williams, “‘Outlines of a Better World’: Rerouting Postcolonialism”, in Janet Wilson, Cristina Șandru and Sarah Lawson Welsh, eds, *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millenium* (London and New York: Routledge 2010), 93.

<sup>16</sup> Iain Chambers, *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities* (London: Rowman & Littlefield 2017), 17, our emphasis.

modernity without coloniality. Only in this way can we view racism not as pathological but as physiological, i.e., structurally embedded in the very fabric of (the Eurocentric project of) modernity.

Finally, such closeness and synergy are badly needed to sustain a decolonizing agenda in a world where the only suitable prefix should be the alpha privative ‘a’: an a-colonial world, or, better yet, a world where no prefix is needed at all, because there will be no more words like colonialism or coloniality. Until then, our motto will have to be to ‘always decolonize’ since if we do not choose decoloniality we will never halt the ‘brutality’ of modernity and we will never attain an accomplished a-colonial world.

The articles included in this issue of *Anglistica* explore the articulations of postcolonial and decolonial practices, working with theoretical, literary, visual and linguistic texts, and reflecting therefore not only on the debates surrounding coloniality and its prefixes, but also on the politics of aesthetics and different forms of ARTivism.

The two opening articles are theoretical reflections that, we think, interact with each other addressing with very different voices the question of decoloniality, activism, and intellectual practice. Walter Mignolo traces the meaning of coloniality/decoloniality and offers a wide reflection on the *pensamiento otro* and its practices within and without the academia. The essay is a grand picture of the decolonial option starting from its originator, Aníbal Quijano, up to the de-Westernization phase at the beginning of the 21st century. Mignolo tries to answer one of the questions posed by the call for this issue: “How can we articulate another thinking entirely, pre-fixed, post-fixed, but certainly not fixed”? He does so by recalling the genealogy of the decolonial option (the dependency theory debate in South America in the sixties and the decolonizing process of the Bandung Conference of 1955) and its affirmation after the end of the Cold War thanks to Quijano’s concepts of ‘coloniality’ and ‘delinking’. What Mignolo highlights here is that after Quijano the decolonial thinkers extended the domain of decoloniality from epistemology to aesthesis, that is to say, from knowing to sensing/believing. Above all, Mignolo stubbornly strives to contrive a theoretical pattern that meticulously describes the historical process of modernity/coloniality (constitution/destitution dimensions) and the political project of decoloniality (reconstitution), both at the level of the ‘terms’ of the enunciation (actors, institutions, languages) and at the level of the ‘content’ of the enunciation (or the enunciated created by discourses, theories, artistic products...). What is interesting for us is that these processes also concern those thinking, writing and living in the European South, i.e. in decolonial terms, in the space of (internal) imperial difference. Finally, predicting the possible criticism of deeming such a project naïve or unachievable, Mignolo makes clear that it cannot be a state-led ‘pre-fixed’ project but one “led by the emerging global political society”, and as such surely not ‘fixed’.

In parallel but also fluidly expanding routes of postcoloniality and decoloniality, Paola Zaccaria weaves a map of interconnected artistic and ARTivist textualities, feminist decolonial practices, postcolonial literary texts and discourses. Zaccaria addresses two fundamental questions: how do “postcolonial” and “decolonial” scholars and artists decolonize their gaze in what she calls “the age of TransMediterrAtlantic flows”? And, furthermore, how to be aware of the dynamics of segregation, discrimination and racism intrinsic to contemporary governmental policies? In other words, where and – especially – how does the articulation of cultural practices work to decolonize not only the hegemonic discourse, but also our own gaze, as scholars and thinkers, working within – much more than without –

hegemonic institutions and languages? The map Zaccaria offers is intricate and poetic, militant and contemporary, yet rooted in a “personal postcolonial-decolonial feminist *camino*” that she offers to the reader as an invitation to share the journey, and which we gladly accept and treasure.

Turning to a very specific grounding of the theoretical debate to the South of Italy, Carmine Conelli’s contribution is a wide-ranging review of the history of the ‘*questione meridionale*’, the late birth of the ‘*questione settentrionale*’ and the main reactions to the otherization of the Italian South at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. He achieves this through a verification of the postcolonial and decolonial perspectives as tools to place the Italian South in the broader context of the global south, starting with Gramsci’s ground-breaking notion of subalternity. At the same time, his audacious attempt is also to choose the Italian South as a useful point of observation, on the one hand, for ‘decolonizing’ the postcolonial stance and pushing it out of the customary (Anglophone and Francophone) archives; and, on the other, for remarking how some decolonial thinkers sometimes underestimate the inner coloniality that has marked European history, which for this reason is not as homogeneous as it is supposed to be.

Reflecting as well on locations and on the space and time of theory, so to speak, Filippo Silvestri’s article is dedicated to the evaluation of Mignolo’s theoretical work from a philosophical and semiological standpoint. Above all, it is aimed at highlighting Mignolo’s effort to distance himself from a European tradition of thought or to delink from it, by denaturalising or de-stituting (to put it with the Argentinian scholar) the supposed centrality of modern Western thought. Mignolo’s decolonial project, or option, focuses on some *loci enunciationis*, which are South American in the first place and reach back to *pachakuti*, i.e., the upsetting of time and space due to the conquest of America. All of this should contribute to the re-constitution of a pluriversal perspective (‘diversality’), respectful of every single culture existing in the world. The very question of cultural difference, and the fundamental – therefore – interaction with the widely debated field of anthropology is tackled by Marina De Chiara, whose article proposes a fundamental dialogue between James Clifford’s insistence on the colonial nature of modernity, and the theoretical insights of decolonial thought. Clifford calls for the urgency that not only postcolonial and cultural studies, but also anthropology address and include notions such as decolonization and globalization, in order to comprehend modernity and its configurations.

Turning to the literary voice and reading it as a key to reflecting on and developing the theoretical debate, Angelo Monaco’s essay is a reading of Arundhati Roy’s novel *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* through the decolonial category of transmodernity. That is to say understanding an anglophone novel from a geo-political perspective grounded in South America. This being said, Monaco’s essay seriously tackles the questions of prefixes, shifting from the rigid ‘post’ and ‘de’ to the fluid ‘trans’, as he claims. While doing so, he also juxtaposes Dussel’s decolonial stance and Spivak’s postcolonial one, seeing the two scholars as converging on the fact that liberation requires an endeavour based in reframing the global imperialist perspectives through Levinas’s ethics of alterity. To Monaco, Roy’s novel is evocative of Dussel’s transmodern stance since it tries to maintain a dialogue between self and other, man and nature, coloniser and colonised, centre and periphery, history and mythology. Therefore, if according to the Argentinian philosopher a transmodern ethics calls for a liberation project based on the reason of the other, be it human or non-human, so does Roy’s novel. In its fluid format, encompassing liquid novelistic techniques (omniscient and multifocal narrative perspectives), characters with fluid identities (the transgender vulnerable community called ‘*hijra*’ would become a metonymic signifier for contemporary India itself), and environmental issues (aspirin given to cows to increase the production of milk), the

novel is read as a significant manifestation of the transmodern project, especially with reference to the word ‘*azadi*’ (‘freedom’) through which Roy ventriloquises the Kashmiri cause.

Mara Mattosco and Juan Velasquez Atehortúa Velasquez, in turn, propose an exploration of the notion of presentism, in order to address the issue of temporality, and in particular of defuturing and the (connected) erasure of the past that is projected upon colonized and postcolonial subjects. The analysis involves two types of textualities; postcolonial literature on one hand (through the works of Adichie, Coetzee and Rossouw) and media ethnography (through the case-study of Swedish media reports on anti-immigrant violence). Mattosco and Velasquez work across disciplines, reflecting not only on the relevance of the construction of temporalities in both postcolonial discourse and in decolonial thinking and practices, but also on the interconnectedness of ethics and aesthetics, of contemporary migrations and narratives of time, identity, and power relation.

Lorena Carbonara and Alessandra Rizzo’s joint effort is one of the contributions dedicated to language analysis and the decolonial option. Drawing on Maldonado-Torres’s ten theses, the two authors propose a stimulating exploration of Yasmine Fedda’s collective project *Queens of Syria* as a decolonial performance disarticulating the colonial matrix entrenched in the discourses on the ‘migratory situation’, specifically on female refugees’ situation. What is interesting here is that the migrant-performers are already considered decolonial subjects in that the very performance itself gives a way to migrants, while talking back, to emerge as agents of decolonial change. Moreover, the second part of the essay focuses on the study of the English subtitles (through specific and well-known functional and pragmatical linguistic models), conceived as an ‘activist’ decolonial device capable of countering the hegemonic language through lexical choices and grammatical constructions, which posit the refugees as possessing their own ‘local grammar’. Elvira Pulitano’s essay also addresses the issue of migration, discussing the on-line multimedia project Archivio delle memorie migranti (AMM) as a virtual storytelling space in which migrants and refugees in contemporary Italy exercise agency and resistance despite their disenfranchisement as political subjects. Her analysis of some of their self-narrations reveal them as powerful examples of “digital ARTivism” as enacted in the practice of contemporary Chicanx and Latinx cultural producers. Through a digital storytelling mode, AMM aims at facilitating the development of transnational migrants’ activist consciousness, which she successfully argues aligns AMM, and the Italian border archive, with the decolonizing epistemological reorientation that has begun to undo the Western project of coloniality/modernity.

In Pierpaolo Martino’s contribution we move to London where Linton Kwesi Johnson’s dub poetry stands as a space of resistance to the structures enforced by what Aníbal Quijano describes as “the coloniality of power”. By mixing Caribbean dialect and the rhythms of reggae, London is portrayed in his poems as a site of conflict between those who perform and those who try to resist discrimination. His artistic/critical language overcomes theory (and prefixes), sustains the performativity of his poetry and asks its readers/listeners to perform themselves that same resistance required to preserve and assert their own difference.

Shifting, again, to a different time and space, Paola Della Valle’s essay looks at the trivialization of the existence of Pacific Islanders exposed in travel books and fiction on the ‘South Seas’ from the late 18th century to the present, focusing, in particular, on the representations of Polynesian women as sexually saturated figures, in which exoticism and eroticism overlap. Her revealing close analysis of Sia Figiel’s latest novel *Freelove* (2016) through the “decolonial turn” advocated by Maria Lugones,

exposes the rejection of the hierarchical dichotomies and categorial logic sustaining Western epistemes and affirms the “fractured locus” through which multiple ontological presuppositions coexist. Also in the light of Lugones’ reflections on the colonality of gender, Fabio Luppi’s contribution focuses on the binary opposition of traditional gendered representations of colony and colonizer in Irish drama before and after independence. Looking into works by W.B. Yeats, J.M. Synge, O’Casey and Teresa Deevy, among others, the article investigates the construction of gender roles and the challenges emerging in Irish playwrights to the traditional image of women, in particular in relation to religion and politics.

Rosita Maglie brings us back to the issue of migrations and the relation between language and subjectivity, proposing a study of multimodal narratives of migrants in English as featured in the United Nations Migration Agency’s online platform “I am a migrant” (IAAM), and looking into the potential of resistance and decolonial discursive practices emerging from the linguistic and visual choices of the migrants. In this perspective, issues of subjectivity, agency and the definition of humanity itself are discussed, addressing the essentially exclusionary politics at the core of the governance of contemporary migrations, but also detecting the possibility of tearing down those very excluding walls. Finally, through their contribution on language and, more specifically, ELF, Annarita Taronna and Laura Centonze explore the decolonial practices carried out by migrants in intercultural encounters. Theirs is a well-supported wider reflection on the use of ELF as a translingual practice and a decolonial option in migratory contexts. Drawing on a corpus-based approach, the essay shows how the use of code-switching consciously made by migrants becomes a way for co-constructing meaning and identity in multicultural contexts.



#eastwest by Maupal, 2016 (Bari). Photo by Luigi Cazzato, courtesy of the author



The Way We Were.  
Or What Decoloniality Today Is All About<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** My aim in this essay, in response to *Anglistica AION*'s call for papers, is to outline the meaning and significance of coloniality/decoloniality after Anibal Quijano's seminal work, which today has many followers and is the focus of a new book series published by Duke University Press.<sup>2</sup>

Keywords: *colonial matrix of power, global coloniality, decoloniality, Westernization, de-Westernization*

## 1. On the Politics of Decolonial Thinking

To address the general spirit animating this special issue, I will take up some of the reflections made during my intervention at the 13th Rhodes Forum in 2015. The panel that prompted these reflections was titled "The World Beyond Global Disorder".<sup>3</sup> Panelists were asked to address the following two questions:

- 1) What are the reasons for or underlying causes of the prevailing chaos in today world disorder? What are the main contributing factors, and what are the major social or political agents contributing to the disorder?
- 2) How can we overcome the present disorder? Are there alternatives to the present chaos? How can we find pathways pointing in the direction of a more just and sustainable world order?

Back then, I argued that that the underlying causes of the prevailing chaos are, on the one hand, the persistence of global coloniality and, on the other, the fact that since approximately the year 2000 we have been witnessing the economic and political reemergence of cultures and civilizations that have historically been undermined by global coloniality. In this essay, I intend to push further on this general answer to the above two questions. Proceeding by way of these questions will allow me to outline the meaning and significance of modernity/coloniality and to anchor my reflections in current issues being debated in the academic as well as the public sphere.

I will then connect these questions with the closing sentence in *AION*'s call for papers: "How can we articulate another thinking entirely, pre-fixed, post-fixed, but certainly not fixed?" The 'we' in this question encompasses, in my understanding, the general community of Western/Southern Europe and, more specifically, Southern Italy, where the journal is published. To this extent, it recalls Antonio Gramsci's legacy around the 'Southern Question' particularly his observation that "la borghesia settentrionale ha soggiogato l'Italia meridionale e le isole e le ha ridotte a colonie di sfruttamento; il

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to express my thanks to Luigi Cazzato for email conversations about the topic of my essays and for his generous reading and suggestions to improve the final version.

<sup>2</sup> Walter D. Mignolo and Catherine E. Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke U.P., 2018).

<sup>3</sup> "Global Coloniality and the World (Dis)order: Decoloniality After Decolonization and Dewesternization After the Cold War", October 2015. Revised versions were published in Fred Dallmayr and Edward Demenchonok, eds., *A World Beyond Global Disorder: The Courage to Hope* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2019), 39-60, and in Bernard Reiter ed., *Constructing the Pluriverse: The Geopolitics of Knowledge* (Durham, NC: Duke U.P., 2018), 90-116.

proletario settentrionale, emancipando se stesso dalla schiavitù capitalistica, emanciperà le masse contadine meridionali asservite alla banca e all'industrialismo parassitario del Settentrione".<sup>4</sup>

It is obvious that I am not in a position to address the leading question of this issue from the geopolitical and body-political (emotions, beliefs, non-rational presuppositions) *locus enunciationis*<sup>5</sup> that prompted it. What I will do instead – appropriately, I think – is to focus this essay on some of the specific core issues of decolonial thinking as I conceive and practice them, following Quijano's introduction of the seminal concept of 'coloniality' into contemporary political and theoretical debates. To do so, I need to first facilitate an entry to the topic for readers not familiar or less familiar with the vocabulary I am using here – and, above all, with its geopolitical and body-political breath. Briefly stated: a) coloniality, after Quijano, is the darker side of modernity (hence, we write modernity/coloniality); b) coloniality does not equal colonialism; and c) coloniality is a concept, in the specific sense stated in a), which emerged out of the South American Andes.

Prior to Quijano's work, the Peruvian intellectual and activist José Carlos Mariátegui (1894-1930) had raised questions of racism, land possession, and colonialism, which Quijano reworked under the headings of modernity, coloniality, and decoloniality. Interestingly, Mariátegui and Gramsci (1891-1937) were contemporaries. While the latter was addressing the Southern Question, the former was addressing the Andean Question.<sup>6</sup> In addition to Mariátegui's legacy, the other major trajectory preceding Quijano's work involves the debates on dependency – generally known as dependency theory – that circulated in 'Latin' South America in the sixties.<sup>7</sup> I am providing this information in order to demonstrate that concepts (such as coloniality, democracy, capitalism, history, etc.) do not fall from the sky, impregnating universal minds, but rather emerge from the needs of local histories and subjective/emotional configurations. The geo-body politics of sensing, knowing, and believing is of the essence in decolonial thinking. A brief contextualization of the historical coordinates and emotional atmosphere of my 'we' is therefore in order.

Dependency theory debates were common across and beyond South America in the sixties. These debates mainly took place in Spanish and Portuguese, with a few translations available in English. Beyond the 'Latin' circuit, Guyanese scholar, intellectual, and activist Walter Rodney (1942-1980) published his landmark book *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* in 1972.<sup>8</sup> Guyana is a country in South America between Suriname and Venezuela, where the official language is English – it is in 'Anglo' South America, in other words. There were intersections between the discourse of Latin and Anglo America. Rodney quoted Celso Furtado, a key Brazilian scholar and intellectual whose book *Development and Underdevelopment* was published in English in 1964. Rodney also referenced the

<sup>4</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *La questione meridionale*, ed. by Franco De Felice and Valentino Parlato (Roma: Editori Riuniti, 2005), 83. "The Northern bourgeoisie has subjugated the South of Italy and the Islands, and reduced them to exploitable colonies; by emancipating itself from capitalist slavery, the Northern proletariat will emancipate the Southern peasant masses enslaved to the banks and the parasitic industry of the North" (Gramsci, "Some Aspects of the Southern Question", 1926, <https://cpb-us-e1.wpmucdn.com/blogs.uoregon.edu/dist/f/6855/files/2014/03/gramsci-southern-question1926-2jf8c5x.pdf>, accessed 2 November 2020).

<sup>5</sup> The location of the enunciation is a complex of language, actors, body, memories, and the cultural niches prompting the enunciative act. See my essay "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thoughts and Decolonial Freedom", *Theory, Culture and Society*, 26.7-8 (2009), 159-181.

<sup>6</sup> See my essay "Mariátegui and Gramsci in 'Latin' America: Between Revolution and Decoloniality", in Neelam Srivastava and Baidik Bhattacharya, eds., *The Postcolonial Gramsci* (London: Routledge, 2011), 191-220.

<sup>7</sup> The quotation marks mean that 'Latin' America is just the part of the continent that is controlled by people of Latin descent, as 'Anglo' America is controlled by the people of Anglo descent. But the population of the continent is not restricted to Latinxs and Anglos. Haiti, for example, was taken up by people of African, not Latin, descent, of course. See Walter D. Mignolo, *La idea di America Latina: Geostoria di una teoria decoloniale*, trans. by E. C. Vian (Milano: Mimesis, 2012).

<sup>8</sup> Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (Washington D.C.: Howard U.P., 1974).



book that popularized Latin American debates in the US: Andre Gunder Frank's *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (1967).<sup>9</sup>

Rodney would no doubt have been aware of a movement in the English Caribbean known as the New World Group, which formed in 1962 in Rodney's hometown of Georgetown, the capital of Guyana.<sup>10</sup> The New World Group's debates were similar to the dependency debates in Latin America. The local histories, however, were different. The British and French histories of the Caribbean are grounded in the Middle Passage, the slave trade and plantation economy, and British and French colonialism. Latin America, by contrast, is rooted in the history of Spanish and Portuguese colonialism in the Andes and Mexico and the history of the plantation economy in continental (Brazil) and insular (Dominican Republic, Puerto Rico, and Cuba) Caribbean. The linguistic and cultural divisions between Latin America and the French, Dutch, and British Caribbean correspond to the linguistic and cultural divisions that exist in Europe between the Iberian Peninsula (Spain and Portugal) and two of the three countries constituting 'the heart of Europe', in Hegel's metaphor: England and France (Germany being the third). The heart of Europe was located, by Hegel, in the North-West.<sup>11</sup> Hegel, and before him Kant, established the Northern image of the South of Europe missing the train of the Enlightenment.<sup>12</sup> Hence, the Southern Question becomes a continental question, as can be seen in the administration of the European Union. While dependency debates in Latin America and the British and French Caribbean (the New World Group) focused on their respective local histories of slave trade and Northern European colonialisms, Rodney's enunciation, grounded in Anglo America and the Caribbean, tackled, instead, the colonial entanglement of Europe with Africa. All of this was happening in Latin America and the Caribbean while struggles for decolonial liberation were forging ahead in South and South East Asia and Africa. The Bandung Conference of 1955 was the signpost of such struggles, which I will come back to later.

For his part, Quijano was certainly aware of the decolonization struggles in Asia and Africa, while in Latin America the debates on dependency were contemporaneous with the first year of the Cuban Revolution (1959). He may also have been aware – though I did not find any specific references to it in his work of the Caribbean New World Group. The point, however, is that two ghosts were traveling the world in the sixties and early seventies: one was the debate, in Latin America, on whether political,

<sup>9</sup> See James L. Dietz, "Dependency Theory: A Review Article", *Journal of Economic Issues*, 14.3 (1980), 751-758. In counterpoint, see Fernando Henrique Cardoso, "The Consumption of Dependency Theory in the United States", *Latin American Research Review*, 12.3 (1977), 7-24.

<sup>10</sup> Igel Westmaas, "'A Field of Ideas': The New World Group, the Caribbean and Guyana of the 1960s", *Stobroek News*, June 26, 2011, [www.stobroeknews.com/2011/06/26/features/%E2%80%98a-field-of-ideas%E2%80%99-the-new-world-group-the-caribbean-and-guyana-of-the-1960s/](http://www.stobroeknews.com/2011/06/26/features/%E2%80%98a-field-of-ideas%E2%80%99-the-new-world-group-the-caribbean-and-guyana-of-the-1960s/), accessed 2 November 2020.

<sup>11</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Lesson in the Philosophy of History* [1837], trans. by Ruben Alvarado (London: WordBridge Publishing, 2011), 73-90.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, the 'South of Europe' was already mapped by Immanuel Kant in the section 4 of *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and the Sublime* [1867] (Berkeley: California U.P., 2004), 97-116. Since the eighteenth century the intramural imperial difference was established in the act of degrading the South of Europe. Luigi Cazzato calls this act 'meridionism' (see his *Sguardo inglese e Mediterraneo italiano: alle radici del meridionismo*, Milano: Mimesis, 2017). Meridionism was established at the same time Orientalism was: the making of the second wave of the colonial difference. The first wave was Occidentalism, the degrading of the Americas and the West of Africa, taken as supplier of 'human resources', that is, enslaved human beings. Gramsci's Southern Question has a history that, at his time, became the *national* internal colonial difference: The North of Italy 'enjoys' which was in the continental South of Europe (imperial difference) has the privileges of the North of Europe although being in its South. There were also 'defenders' of the South in the North. One of them was Oswald Spengler who contrasted the Faustian North with the Apollinean South, highlighting the Renaissance's 'fullness of light' the Mediterranean clarity of atmosphere, and the slow pace of life (Oswald Spengler, *The Decline of the West* [1918], trans. by Charles Francis Atkinson, New York: Vintage, 2006, 123). Franco Cassano has taken issue in his *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean* (trans. by Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme. New York: Fordham University Press, 2011). For a recent revisiting of the Northern imagination of the South, see also Luigi Cazzato, "Mediterranean: Coloniality, Migration and Decolonial Practices", *Politics. Rivista di Studi Politici*, 1, 2016, 1-17; Roberto Dainotto, "South by Chance: Southern Questions in the Global South", *The Global South*, 11.2 (2017), 39-53.

economic, and epistemic dependency would allow underdeveloped countries to develop; the other was the debate around whether decolonization, in Asia and Africa, would create the conditions for development. At the beginning of the nineties, Quijano reframed development in terms of modernity and underdevelopment in terms of coloniality. The implication was that coloniality, being the darker side of modernity, would not allow underdeveloped countries to develop, because development needed underdevelopment for its very enactment.<sup>13</sup> This situation was not a contradiction but a systemic build-up. Quijano's coloniality of power analytics made it possible to understand why it was the case, how it worked, and who (actors and institutions) was managing both the promises of development (the rhetoric of modernity) and the perpetuation of underdevelopment (coloniality). Arguing in this way was already a decolonial act.

As soon as coloniality becomes a point of reflection, decolonial thinking is enacted, for the simple reason that coloniality is a decolonial concept. Why is it a decolonial concept? When Quijano coined the phrase 'coloniality and modernity/rationality' in his classic article (1992), he was thinking decolonially.<sup>14</sup> That means that, even if he was trained in sociology and self-trained in Marxism, the concept of coloniality came from neither sociology nor Marxism but from what at that moment, the end of the Cold War, Quijano termed 'decolonization'. He conceived that delinking ('extricating oneself' was his expression) from coloniality and engaging in 'epistemic reconstitution' was the decolonial horizon opening up at the end of the Cold War and the insolvencies of nation-state building after decolonization during the Cold War. Consequently, the wording in the title of his foundational article, 'coloniality and modernity/rationality', exposed the fact that there was something missing in the 'constitution' of (Western) modernity/rationality, two concepts that had emerged in Europe in response to European emotional and rational needs. Coloniality was hidden in the celebration of modernity/rationality; it was its darker side, and the side upon which the idea of Western modernity was and could be built. To bring coloniality to light, Quijano thought that an-other way of thinking, an-other mindset, was necessary. In order to take up the task of epistemic reconstitution, such a mindset would have to be decolonial, meaning that it would have to decolonially reconstitute what modernity/coloniality had destituted. This is relevant to any decolonial project of reconstitution. Quijano did not use the word 'aesthesis', only 'epistemic'. But subjectivity was a crucial dimension in the unfolding of the coloniality of power. Therefore, honoring Quijano's careful attention to subjectivity, I expanded epistemic reconstitution to epistemic/aesthetic reconstitution and will proceed with this expanded formulation in mind.<sup>15</sup>

## 2. The Colonial Matrix of Power: The Historical Foundation of Western Civilization

### 2.1. Coloniality

Let me make more explicit what I mean, after Quijano, by 'coloniality'. Coloniality is shorthand for the 'coloniality of power', and both are stand-ins for the 'colonial matrix power', or the CMP. The use of one term or the other depends on how much detail we want to invoke with the expression when using

<sup>13</sup> Interestingly enough, similar issues were debated in Italy in the early seventies. See Luciano Ferrari Bravo and Alessandro Serafini, *Stato e sottosviluppo: il caso del Mezzogiorno italiano* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1972). However, this debate was taking place in the formation of the intramural imperial/colonial difference: e.g., the North of Europe devaluing the South (destitution, see below), while the underdevelopment question in South America was debated in the history of the extramural colonial difference. I explored this issue in my article on Mariátegui and Gramsci, see footnote 6.

<sup>14</sup> Aníbal Quijano, "Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality", in Walter D. Mignolo and Arturo Escobar, eds., *Globalization and the Decolonial Option* (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), 22-32.

<sup>15</sup> See my essay "Reconstitución epistémica/estésica: La aesthesis decolonial una década después", *Calle 14: Revista de Investigación en el campo del arte*, 14.25 (2019), [www.revistas.udistrital.edu.co/index.php/c14/article/view/14132](http://www.revistas.udistrital.edu.co/index.php/c14/article/view/14132), accessed 2 November 2020, translated in *Echo: Rivista interdisciplinare di comunicazione*, 1 (2019), 229-242, with an introduction by Luigi Cazzato, 224-228.

it. Two or three years before the publication of “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality” – the launching pad for what would become a communal project, extending far beyond Quijano himself – he was involved, so to speak, in the weaving of the article’s key concepts. In 1989, Quijano published a lengthy essay titled “Paradoxes of Modernity in Latin America”, in which the word ‘coloniality’ does not appear, but whose argument is a map of what was to come.<sup>16</sup> The paradox of modernity turned out to be that modernity cannot be detached from coloniality. Although coloniality was not yet in Quijano’s vocabulary, this essay prepared the terrain for the formula ‘coloniality and modernity/rationality’, which was later on condensed into modernity/coloniality.

Up to this point, the generalized and accepted idea was that colonialism was basically over and so modernity was the open road toward the future: “from now on it is modernity all the way down” was one of the era’s triumphal expressions, next to the celebration of the end of history. In Latin America (which, remember, does not include Guyana and Belize), independences were achieved in the nineteenth century. In South and South East Asia and Africa, independences were achieved in the second half of the twentieth century. These independences were collectively called decolonization.

After Quijano, colonialism and coloniality took on different meanings. Colonialism refers to the historical event of Western European colonialism from 1500 to 2000, approximately, while coloniality refers to the underlying logic of all Western projects of colonialism (Spanish, Portuguese, Dutch, French, and English, as well as German and Italian; although these last two colonial projects were less expansive than the previous five, the logic of coloniality still undergirded their domestic and foreign policies). During the period 1500-2000, two crucial events took place in addition to the independences in the Americas (which included the US) between 1776 and 1900, *mutatis mutandis*, all of which were initiated, carried out, and achieved by people of European descent. The first distinctive event was the Haitian Revolution in 1804. People of African descent were not supposed to take freedom into their own hands: they were expected to wait to receive their liberty from their European masters, yet they did precisely the opposite. The second event was the Russian Revolution, both its initiation in 1917 and its conclusion in 1989, the same year that Quijano published “Paradoxes of Modernity”.

As I have mentioned, Quijano was trained in sociology but was a Marxist by conviction. Mariátegui was too, and indeed, although dependency theory emerged from liberal thinking in the former colonies,<sup>17</sup> it was Marxism that animated the dependency thinkers of the sixties.<sup>18</sup> More specifically, Mariátegui was a Third World Marxist, in the terminology of the Cold War, although he lived before the Three Worlds conceptual partition. He was also a Marxist in a region where 60% of the population was indigenous. In such a context, only being blinded by theory could prevent one from seeing racism and colonialism and understanding that there was a link between them. Mariátegui, like Gramsci, did not fit in with the Communist Party dogma. They were both party outcasts. Quijano’s argument, too, introduced a radical shift away from historical materialism: without ignoring the economy (not just the capitalist economy but the larger economic sphere, of which capitalism is but one manifestation, albeit the hegemonic one), Quijano focused on the relevance of knowledge and subjectivity. After all, the economy, capitalist or otherwise, is not something that runs on batteries. Economies are run by actors, who at the same time are shaped by the economy they run, as well as by institutions. And they are not run blindly but epistemically (knowledge) and aesthetically (emotions, beliefs, non-rational presuppositions). How, indeed, could knowledge and subjectivity be absent from the shock-finding on the part of the colonizers that an entire continent and the millions of people living on it were not

<sup>16</sup> Aníbal Quijano, “Paradoxes of Modernity in Latin America”, *International Journal of Politics, Culture, and Society*, 3.2 (Winter 1989), 147-177.

<sup>17</sup> See Joseph L. Love, “Raúl Prebisch and the Origins of the Doctrine of Unequal Exchange”, *Latin American Research Review*, 15.3 (1980), 45-72.

<sup>18</sup> See Ronald H. Chilcote, “Issues of Theory in Dependency and Marxism”, *Latin American Perspectives*, 8.3 (1981), 3-16.

accounted for in the Bible, a finding that brought about a new type of economy (later identified as capitalist) marked by the combined effect of the appropriation of land, the exploitation of labor, mass slavery, and racism? And what of the profound changes in the subjectivities of indigenous peoples, enslaved Africans, and Europeans, whether directly involved in the New World or accessing information via publication or hearsay?

Quijano outlined four domains in which the coloniality of power, in general, operates, as well as the domains associated with the rhetoric of modernity, which I explain. His outline consists of the interactions between three aligned aspects of power – domination/exploitation/conflict – activated in the control of “four basic areas of human existence: sex, labor, collective authority and subjectivity/intersubjectivity, their resources and products”.<sup>19</sup> Based on this foundational outline, I will elaborate on the coloniality of power, shorthand for the colonial matrix (pattern, model, structure) of power, or the CMP, in its constitutive domains, levels, and flows.

Before going into that, though, I would like to provide an expanded version of three aspects of power outlined by Quijano. These three aspects operate simultaneously in distinct dimensions. In other words, the triad domination/exploitation/conflict operates simultaneously with constitution/destitution/reconstitution and with modernity/coloniality/decoloniality, such that:

- 1) constitution (domination)/destitution (exploitation)/restitution (conflict);
- 2) modernity (domination/constitution)/coloniality (exploitation/destitution)/decoloniality (conflict/reconstitution).

In everyday life, in domestic and inter-state relations, these faces of power operate simultaneously, but in the analytic of the CMP, depending on the argument, one of the three faces is always more relevant than the others, yet none of them could be understood in isolation. The three faces are manifested in the flows that interrelate the domains and the levels of the CMP. Let us look at these domains, levels, and flows, then, keeping in mind the three faces of power interrelating them.

## 2.2. *The Colonial Matrix of Power*

The CMP is a complex structure of management, regulation, and control composed of domains, levels, and flows. Like ‘the unconscious’ in Freud or ‘surplus value’ in Marx, the CMP is a theoretical concept that helps make visible what is invisible to the naked (or, rather, the non-theoretical) eye. Unlike Freud’s unconscious or Marx’s surplus value, though, the CMP is a concept created in the Third World, and in the South American Andes specifically, in the intellectual atmosphere that I have outlined above. It is not a concept created in the atmosphere of Europe or the US academy, for the simple reason that coloniality was not an issue in those contexts – modernity was. The CMP is neither a North Atlantic nor an academic concept. It was born out of theoretical-political struggles in South America, at the intersection between the academic and the public spheres. Driven by local critics of development, the CMP bears the impulse of liberation theology and emerged out of the limits of dependency theory in the seventies. These, as discussed, were also the years of the struggle for decolonization in Asia and Africa.

In order to understand the CMP, it must first be understood that, for us, Quijano’s followers, coloniality is constitutive and not derivative of modernity. For this reason, we write modernity/coloniality. The slash (/) that divides and unites modernity from and with coloniality means that there is no modernity without coloniality. Highlighting ‘global coloniality’ means that global modernity is only half of the story, the visible half. The other half – the hidden half – is global coloniality. Allow me to briefly explain with the help of three figures the simultaneous movement of constitution/destitution and the energies

<sup>19</sup> Aníbal Quijano, “Colonialidad del poder, globalización y democracia”, *Revista de Ciencias Sociales de la Universidad Autónoma de Nuevo León*, 4 (2000), 58-89.

(subjectivities) of dissent that this movement generates. The dissent generates various personal emotions and collective sentiments: fear, anger, destabilization, protest, and submission. The outcomes of the emotions and sentiments generated by modernity/coloniality and, consequently, by domination and exploitation are manifold. Two such outcomes are decolonization during the Cold War and decoloniality and de-Westernization after the Cold War.

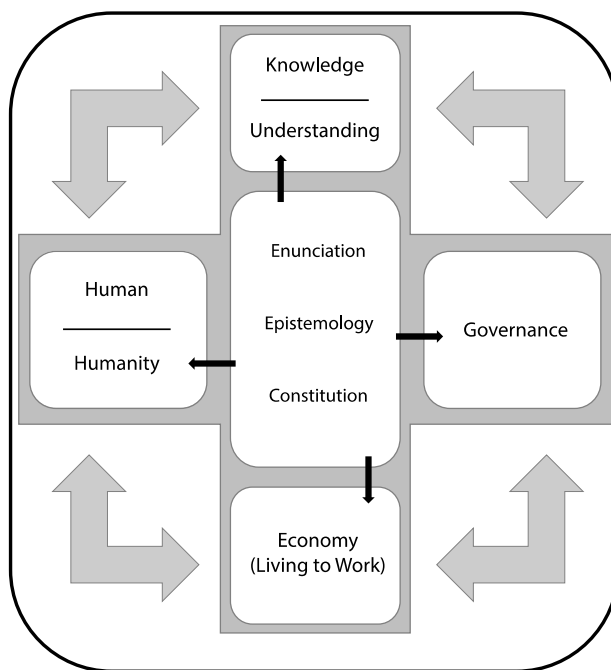


Fig. 1

Let us start with the four domains shown in Figure 1. These four domains are at the level of the ‘content’ of the conversations within the CMP: what is enunciated and where debates unfold. As we will see below, there is another level, the level of the enunciation, where the ‘terms’ of the conversations within the domains are regulated. The relationships between these levels are indicated by the arrows moving from the center, the enunciation, to the domains, the enunciated. The four domains shown here are Knowledge/Understanding, Governance, Economy, and Human/Humanity. These four domains, a reformulation of Quijano’s ‘fundamental areas of existence’, are identified through the analytic of the rhetoric of modernity. In other words, the domains do not exist outside the rhetoric of modernity (discourses, narratives, images) that frames the four basic ‘modern’ areas of human experience. Each domain is not a unified area but a variety of narratives, discourses, images, institutions, actors, and the public sphere. For example, the domain of Knowledge/Understanding comprises the areas of theology, the natural and human sciences, the arts, philosophy, aesthetics, the professional schools (law, engineering, medicine), and so on. The domain of Governance comprises all the institutions and actors regulating the state, which in the CMP encompasses the monarchic states of the Renaissance, and their extension to the colonies, and the nation-states formed from the nineteenth century onward, which also

expanded into the colonial spheres. Economy covers, as of 1500, mercantilism, industrial capitalism, financial capitalism, and cognitive capitalism, while Human/Humanity consists of the characterization of actors ruling and ruled by the CMP. What I have just briefly described are the ‘constitutive’ domains of the CMP: these domains regulate the spheres of domination legitimized by the rhetoric of modernity. The constitution of the domain of Knowledge/Understanding, for example, is concurrent with the destitution of those languages and modes of knowing and understanding deemed unfit for the idea of modernity. The same logic of coloniality (dstitution) takes places in the constitution of the other three domains.

The constitution of the CMP is the underlying structure of Western Civilization, and Western Civilization is the outcome of historical narratives that established that the European Renaissance should be dated between 1300 and 1600. The last hundred years within this period correspond to the invention and colonization of America since 1500. As the dates indicate, the idea of Western Civilization originated in Europe itself at the same time that Europe was constituted as a geopolitical entity through its expansion to the rest of the planet. The period 1500-2000 is the period of the Westernization of the world.<sup>20</sup>

The domains of the CMP – the level of the enunciated – are established by the visible rhetoric of modernity in all its forms: discourses, narratives, scientific theories, philosophical arguments, artistic events, political debates, economic analysis, etc. But how is the level of the enunciation set up? Basically, by three components: actors, institutions, and languages. The basic foundational institutions of the CMP were the Church, universities, banks, museums, states (theological-monarchic and secular nation-states), and, more recently, the IMF, the World Bank, and the UN, as well as many others in between. The actors founding and running such institutions are actors who, by different means, occupy a social and professional position that legitimizes and authorizes them to found and run institutions. Institutional governance is filtered by knowledge regulations and by belonging to a relevant social class. Languages are concomitant with actors and institutions. Actors born and trained in Bolivia, China, or North Africa, for instance, are not suited to run Western institutions, unless perhaps exceptionally. For this reason, languages are the fundamental component of the CMP’s enunciation, which permeates all the four domains. Today, the control of meaning (languages) and the control of money (the dollar) are parallel processes, and both are being contested. The languages of the enunciation are the six modern vernacular languages derived from Greek and Latin: Italian, Spanish, and Portuguese (predominant during the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century European expansion) and French, English, and German (predominant since the Enlightenment). The language constitution of the CMP works simultaneously to destitute all other languages from the domains and, even more so, from the level of the enunciation. The official language of the UN is English, as is that of the Security Council, although two of its members, Russia and China, do not belong to the Greco-Roman language genealogy.

What holds the domains together and connects the enunciation (the control and regulations) with the enunciated (the regulated)? And why is it important to ask this question? The CMP is held together by *flows* that emanate outward from the enunciation (the terms of the conversation, the rhetoric of modernity), interconnecting all the domains and connecting the domains with actors and institutions, in the major languages of the European idea of modernity. These flows are indicated by all the arrows that connect the domains with one another and the level of the enunciation with all the domains. Inevitably, the matter of subjectivity and subject formation emerges. The CMP is involved in the creation of particular persons/subjects and institutions, but the CMP also takes on a life of its own, shaping and contorting the subjectivity (the reasoning and emotioning) of the person managing it. Because of

<sup>20</sup> See Serge Latouche, *L’occidentalization du monde: Essays sur la signification, la portée et les limites de l’uniformisation planétaire* (Paris: La découverte, 1989). For Latouche, however, Westernization starts by the middle of the seventeenth century – that is, one and a half centuries after the foundation of the CMP and the idea of Western Civilization.



coloniality, controlling the terms of the enunciation (that is, controlling knowledge) is necessary for controlling the domains, and controlling the domains means managing the people whose lives are shaped by them. The rhetoric of modernity hides this connection. That is why it took such a long time to discern coloniality beneath the shiny veneer of modernity and why the role of the expert has become so important nowadays: experts are experts in one domain, or a set of aspects in that domain, but ignore its connections with the other domains and with the enunciation. Decolonially speaking, and in the analytic of the CMP, no single domain could be properly understood without looking at its connection with the other domains and with the enunciation. The Economy domain depends on Governance, is configured by racial and sexual relations, is framed by Knowledge/Understanding, and is regulated by the enunciation.

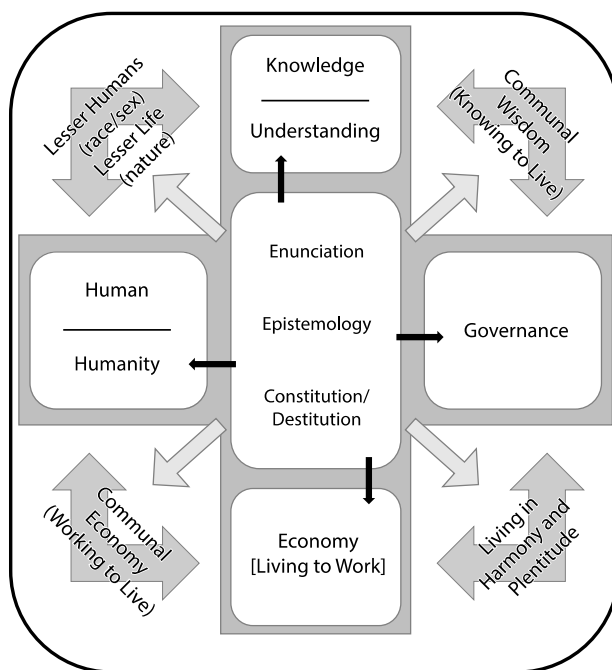


Fig. 2

Figure 1 will be better understood if we look at it in tandem with Figure 2, which shows the simultaneous movement of constitution/destitution. Starting from the upper right corner, we can explore the destitution of communal wisdom, knowing to live, and knowledge in non-European languages and institutions, as well as the relevance of orality. By this I mean that while orality is destituted in the imaginary of the CMP, it is erased neither from the people speaking destituted languages (Urdu, Russian, Arabic, Aymara, etc.) nor from the praxis of living of the people speaking destituting languages (e.g., modern European imperial languages). Experientially, orality is destituted but cannot be killed, even when a destituted language is expressed in aural and visual expressions, be it in a non-Latin alphabet (i.e., the Arabic alphabet) or in Mandarin characters. And this is to say nothing of the categorization of ‘minor’ languages like Swahili, Wolof, Aymara, or Burmese, which alone has around 30 million native

speakers. Destitution operates at both levels of the CMP, the enunciated and the enunciation. What is destituted is so by a devaluation of the content of a given culture or civilization, together with a devaluation of its apparatus of enunciation: its knowledge, modes of knowing, and, in general, praxis of living. The fact that scholarship is internationally mainly transacted in English is a case in point. If you do science in Arabic or Mandarin, your work is limited to the respective region, yet much of the scientific community operates in those two languages. Scholars and scientists whose native language and medium of education was Mandarin or Arabic, for example, have to write in English in order to enter the global debate. No scholar or scientist who was born and educated in Germany, France, or England has to write in Mandarin or Arabic to participate in global scholarly or scientific conversations.

The lower right corner shows the destitution of living in harmony and plenitude, which today is being revived through concepts such as ‘Ubuntu’ a Bantu term that gained currency in Africa; ‘Mino Bimaadiziwin’ for First Nations; and ‘Anishnabeg’ or ‘Sumak Kawsay’, a Kichwa (note: not Kechwa) term used in Latin America. Although not indicated in that corner, for simplification purposes, the destitution of cultural praxes of living took many forms. In this simplified version, we shall consider three types of destitution. The destitution of the cultural praxis of living of the Ottoman Sultanate, for example, was substituted by the Republic of Turkey – no settlers had to be expelled. Meanwhile, the British destituted the governance of the Mughal Sultanate and transformed the British East India Company into the British Raj (meaning British Rule). Finally, in the sixteenth century, the Aztecs, Incas, and Mayas saw their governance dismantled and totally replaced by Spanish Viceroyalties. What survived was the praxis of living, cosmological and cultural, of the people, which in Nahuatl was referred as ‘Macehualtin’ and in the Mayan area as ‘Memba Unicoob’. Distinct types of destitution generate distinct types of responses and, in particular, distinct types of epistemic and aesthetic reconstitutions, as we will see in Figure 3.

But before taking the next step, let us complete our quick tour of the two CMP corners of destitution. The lower left corner indicates the destitution of communal economies – not to be confused with the ‘common’ which belongs to the sphere of the constituted, as the ‘common’ remains within the same enunciative logic, with the content changed to fit within the frame of Western Civilization. The key factor in this destitution has been, since 1500, the relative and increasing conversion of living to work (‘living labor’ in Marx) to working to live: forced slavery and waged work. In the upper left corner, we encounter the sphere of destitution that infiltrates all the other spheres. It is here that the control of the enunciated Human/Humanity matches the control of the enunciation, where the criteria for the Human are established and managed in order to destitute ‘lesser’ humans based on their racial and sexual differentiation from the ‘normality’ of Christian and white heteronormativity.

Figure 3 sketches the movement of restitution. Restituting something that has been destituted would be meaningless if the restitution operated in the same epistemic and aesthetic frame in which the destitution was implemented in the first place. Instead, restitution means that the subjectivity, and therefore the sensing and emotioning, of the actors effecting the restitution know how to question the knowledge and subjectivities of the actors who implemented the destitution. Restitution therefore requires epistemic (knowledge) and aesthetic (sensing, believing, emotioning) reconstitution. I foresee at this moment that the next few decades, and perhaps the entire twenty-first century, will be dominated by three trajectories interwoven with three radical mutations of the CMP. These mutations, discussed below, justify a common saying nowadays: “We cannot understand the present with the categories and frame of mind with which we understood the past”. Simply put: “We, on the planet, are living and experiencing a change of epoch and no longer an epoch of changes”.<sup>21</sup> The analytic of the CMP will

<sup>21</sup> I owe this expression to Brazilian intellectual and activist José de Souza Silva. See [www.icci.nativeweb.org/boletin/25/souza.html](http://www.icci.nativeweb.org/boletin/25/souza.html), accessed 2 November 2020.



help us find a way toward understanding, and understanding lies at the helm of epistemic and aesthetic reconstitution.

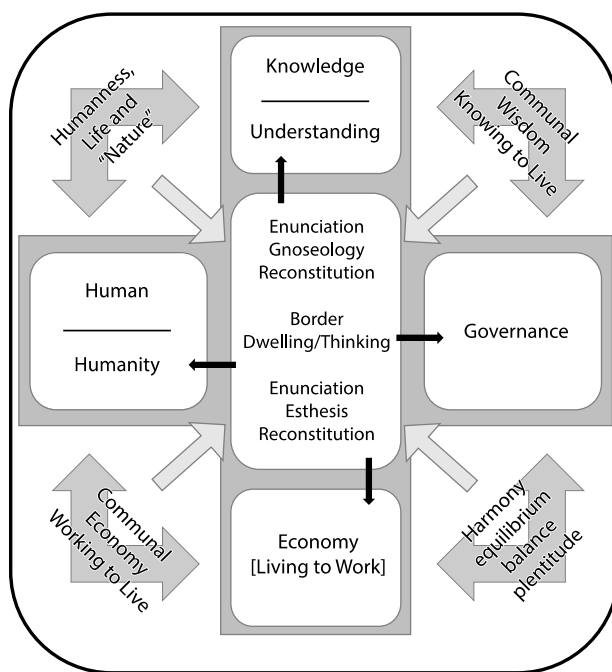


Fig. 3

In Figure 3, the arrows change directions. In Figure 2, they indicated the creation of *exteriority by destitution*. Exteriority means that there is no existing (ontic) outside to be simply named or represented. Western epistemology schooled us to believe that what is represented is what it is, and not just what is represented by someone, for some reason, in some place, at a given time, etc. Exteriority is created by the enunciation. In that sense, it is not ontic but onto-logical – literally a discourse that creates images of reality. Therefore, the outside invented by destitution is the exteriority (‘the other’ in common parlance), whose function is to secure *interiority* in the managerial regulations and control of the enunciation. Accordingly, interiority, too, is not an ontic inside but the inside created in the constitution of the CMP. Interiority is also onto-logical. As a consequence, the inversion of the arrows’ directionality indicates the movement of epistemic and aesthetic reconstitution. ‘Inversion’ here does not mean dichotomous opposition, which is the logic of modernity/coloniality. It is instead the logic of conflictive co-existence. This means that the movement of epistemic (knowledge) and aesthetic (sensing, believing, emotioning) reconstitutions will not eliminate, in one week or a year, the movements of constitution/destitution – particularly not at this very moment, when the control, regulation, and management of the CMP is under dispute and the West (i.e., the North Atlantic) is losing the privilege of being its sole manager. Unilateralism is already mutating into multilateralism and universality into pluriversality. These mutations are not linear ‘transitions’ but complex heterogenous-structural movements among and between de-Westernization (the dispute over the management and control of the

CMP, involving mainly China, Russia, and Iran at present), re-Westernization (the efforts of the US since 2008 to maintain the privileges it obtained during 500 years of Westernization), and decoloniality (the movement of delinking from the CMP and of epistemic disobedience, leading to epistemic and aesthetic reconstitutions). These three trajectories emerged, *mutatis mutandis*, at the close of the long period of Westernization that started with Christian global designs and closed with the failure of neo-liberal global designs.

Let me elaborate on this point. Figure 3 only shows the second trajectory, from universality to pluriversality. This is the decolonial trajectory of epistemic and aesthetic reconstitution. The decolonial trajectory is at once analytical of CMP and enacting, in the same movement, decolonial praxical thinking. The latter is praxical because it is not just thinking; it involves both thinking and praxically working, within the very act of thinking and building narratives and arguments, toward the restitution of communal wisdom and economy for living in harmony with the living earth and balance and plenitude among all. Equally, decolonial praxical thinking works toward the restitution of the humanness and life energy that were destituted by the onto-logical invention of Human/Humanity and Nature. The destitution rendered humanness merely ‘human resources’, next to ‘natural resources’, with all the attendant consequences that today we on the planet are experiencing: a global disorder situation that cannot be improved by the constituting/destituting subjectivity, mentality, and imaginary of the actors and institutions that created the CMP and that are working hard, for whatever reason, to maintain the modern narratives of progress, growth, and development, blind to all that coloniality engenders. The modern/colonial narrative of the ‘Anthropocene’ is the latest in the rhetoric of modernity’s concealment of the logic of coloniality.

You may think that the goals of decolonial praxical thinking are romantic or unattainable. If so, you may perhaps be thinking that decoloniality aims at replacing the inter-state system now governed by the dispute over the control and management of the CMP between de-Westernization and re-Westernization, a dispute with large implications for the financial, military, mainstream mass media, and corporate spheres regulated by the IMF and the World Bank. You may even imagine that it will participate in ASEAN and have a say in Security Council meetings at the UN. Imagining that decoloniality would intervene at this level would be deceiving yourself. Now, you could react to this statement by asking: What, then, is decoloniality good for? And the answer is that decoloniality works toward epistemic and aesthetic reconstitution in the sphere of the emerging global political society, acknowledging that the inter-state disputes currently underway have as one of their major consequences the relegation of the nation – that is, the people – to a position of secondary relevance. Why is such an immaterial project pertinent? Because, on the one hand, and as I have mentioned already, the problems associated with the foundation, mutation, management, control, and dispute of the CMP cannot be properly addressed by maintaining the same frame of mind that created these problems. And, on the other hand, since this frame of mind is embedded in the enunciation, epistemic and aesthetic reconstitutions cannot be advanced without decolonial delinking and epistemic disobedience.

Another feature to be noted in Figure 3 relates to the simultaneity between the movement of reconstitution and that of constitution/destitution. The point is that while the former operates via a territorial epistemology to preserve the CMP’s interiority, the movements of reconstitution imply, of necessity, border epistemology. The force and potential of border epistemology (border thinking) consist in the possibility and capability of living and thinking in a way that is grounded in the languages, memories, and praxis of living that have been destituted – of having learned the gist of territorial epistemology without inhabiting it. Border thinking involves awareness of, on the one hand, the emotional (aesthesis) and rational (epistemic) impact that colonial wounds inflict on a person and, on the other hand, how the CMP works – through the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality – to legitimize colonial differences and retain the emotional and rational ‘truth’ of territorial epistemology. What is at work here is a double-inflicted wound (emotional and rational, aesthetic and

epistemic) that assumes many different forms of colonial difference (racism, sexism, religious differences; underdeveloped, traditional, uncivilized). Furthermore, the double-inflicted wound operates at two levels simultaneously: geopolitically and body-politically. You are destituted twice: once because of your skin color, your gender and sexual preferences, your religion, your nationality, your language; and again, because you belong to an underdeveloped country, to the Third World, to the South, or to the East.

But there is one more layer to be considered here, not indicated in Figure 3: the setting up of imperial differences. Briefly stated, colonial differences were bestowed on people and regions affected by settler colonialism, while imperial differences are bestowed on states that did not experience settler colonialism, that refuse to comply with the rules of Westernization – China, Russia, Turkey (a former Sultanate), Iran (the former Persian Safavid Sultanate) – and that therefore are labeled authoritarian, non-democratic, religious fundamentalist, and the like. Nevertheless, the nationals of states degraded by imperial differences are still subjected to colonial differences, as can be seen when the question of passports is at stake.

I mentioned above that Figure 3 only outlines the decolonial, and not the de-Western, horizon at which the power differential in inter-state relations can be contemplated. It would take more space than it is allowed to insert and comment on a fourth figure. Therefore, I will merely highlight here the main features of de-Westernization's disruption and disputation of the control and management of the CMP. First of all, it is obvious to everyone that the economic mode of accumulation and inequality known as capitalism is a global phenomenon. In that sense, it is hegemonic. If the capitalist economy is hegemonic, this means that the West (the North Atlantic, the EU, and the US) has lost the civilizational hegemony that it maintained for about 250 years (1750-2000), which was preceded by 250 years (1500-1750) of the formation and consolidation of the CMP.

Secondly and subsequently, the already conflictive multipolar world order in which we all live – permanent war in the Middle East, trade wars with China, tensions created by sanctions, the failure of globalism and the rise of national fundamentalisms, the increasing number of suicides and drug addicts in developed countries, despair and turmoil in underdeveloped countries, and so on – implies that while the capitalist economy may be hegemonic, the political and military world order is not. Multipolarity arises from inter-state political disobedience toward the regulations instantiated by the CMP and the unipolarity established by the Westernization of the world in all the four domains: Knowledge, Governance, Economy, and Humanity. Racism works across colonial and imperial differences; it is not a privileged feature of the former but an equally vital factor of the latter. It so happens, then, that the disobedient states driving de-Westernization are neither emotionally nor rationally Western Christian, nor are they aligned to secular whiteness.

Thirdly and finally, epistemic disobedience aimed at overcoming the regulation of imperial differences leads to delinking from Western regulations but not from the CMP itself. This is crucial: de-Westernization *does not question* the CMP; it simply *disputes* its control and management. This approach requires a distinctive type of epistemic and aesthetic reconstitution. Its most remarkable quality is this: the recovery and affirmation of a civilizational praxis of living that during the constitution/destitution of the CMP those destituted by imperial differences were told to despise and reject in favor of the triumphal march of modernity and universal history. The recovery and affirmation of civilizational dignity is a trademark of the de-Westernizing epistemic and aesthetic reconstitution, both in the sphere of the state and, to a lesser degree, in the sphere of civil society. There are today many instances of cultural de-Westernization, particularly in curatorial and museum practices, which I do not have space to go into in detail here but which I have explored elsewhere.<sup>22</sup> You may think that this

<sup>22</sup> On these points see my essays "Re-emerging, Decentering and Delinking: Shifting the Geographies of Knowing, Sensing and Believing", *Ibraaz: Contemporary Visual Culture in North Africa and the Middle East* (May 2013), [www.ibraaz.org/essays/59/](http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/59/),

approach is not right, that it does not solve the problems of global warming, corruption, the making of terrorism and hybrid wars, or you may think that it is a much-needed disruption of Western hegemony. Whatever you and I may think about de-Westernization, however, we would have to agree that, like it or not, it is irreversible and, moreover, that it brings with it epistemic and aesthetic reconstitution through the *state* apparatus primarily.

Decoloniality, in my argument, and following Quijano, cannot be a state-led project. It has to be a project led by the emerging global political society. And this project is already underway, although not always invoking decoloniality, which it does not have to do. We need only look at the organizations, research, and activities unveiling the fictions of sexual and racial regulations; the artistic endeavors all over the world addressing through art the injustices legitimized by the imaginary of Western modernity; the organizations, activities, and discourses under the label of ‘communitarian feminism’ in Central and South America; the 25-year experience of the Zapatistas’ theoretical revolution and its historical, political, and ethical consequences; the decolonial politics of scholarship advanced by indigenous scholars and activists in the Americas and Aotearoa (New Zealand) in Africa and amid the African diaspora; the growing claims to decolonize the university and the curriculum in South Africa as well as elsewhere; the countless protests to stop extractivism and transgenic poisoning and protect the earth’s territorialities from devastating and blind industrialization; etc. Wherever we look in the world, people are standing up, delinking from what they/we are expected to think and do, and taking their/our destiny into their/our own hands.

### 3. Summary

I hope I have been able to merge the two main questions framing this paper: the call for an explanation of the current world disorder and *Anglistica AION*’s invitation to articulate an-other way of thinking that is pre-fixed, post-fixed, and at the same time not fixed. I said at the beginning of my argument that I am not qualified to address *Anglistica AION*’s query from the same emotional and epistemic position from which it has been formulated. What I succinctly did instead, I hope clearly enough, was to provide an overview of decolonial thinking as it is practiced by many followers of Aníbal Quijano’s seminal work, myself among them. I do not have much to say about decoloniality in general beyond this framework, and not much to say either about post- or pre-fixes. I invite the reader to make up their own mind on these points, and I am persuaded that they will do so.

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accessed 2 November 2020, and “Enacting the Archives, Decentring the Muses: The Museum of Islamic Art in Doha and the Asian Civilization Museum in Singapore”, *Ibraaz* (November 2013), [www.ibraaz.org/essays/77](http://www.ibraaz.org/essays/77), accessed 2 November 2020.

## The TransMediterranAtlantic Decolonial Turn. Can Imagination Un/Wall Geo-political and Disciplinary Boundaries?

**Abstract:** The essay aims at de/clining and at the same time questioning the methodology of de/linking, des/prenderse, dis/connecting from the politics, aesthesis, and geo-psycho-corpo-graphies of modern/imperial powers and epistemologies still at work. The inspirational writings, performances and actions nurturing the critical, poetical, political and ethical perspective I here define “other than TransAtlantic archaeology of coloniality” – a Southern archaeology contemplating the ‘transmediterraneanization’ of the Atlantic and of the postcolonial and the decolonial routes – come from the encounters with non-nationalistic intellectuals, activists and diasporic talents expressing transgressive visions of the state of things in their po(li)et(h)ical works and epistemologies (ref.: the colonialidad/modernidad school; the philosophy of consciousness filtered through Maria Lugones’ gendered decolonial lens; African and Afro-diasporic post-colonial forerunners; Gloria Anzaldúa’s elaboration of border thinking/crossing and its development into the decolonial space of *conocimiento* she calls ‘nepantla’, 2002). As a component of the activist cultural and aesthetic research project *UN/WALLING THE MEDITERRANEAN - S/MURARE IL MEDITERRANEO. Local, national and trans-border ARTivist practices for a poetics and politics of hospitality and mobility* (Bari Univ., 2009-today) predicated by decolonial thinking, in this paper I speak from a Southern Mediterranean geo-corpo-graphical peninsular perspective and history in order to develop a Southern border critical thinking delinked from the normativity of geo-political, hetero-normative and ‘modern’ disciplinary boundaries.

Keywords: *un/walling geo-political and art boundaries, TransMediterrAtlantic, gnoseological turn, southern decolonizing imagination and imaginaries, imagination and disciplinarity, ARTivism, geocorpographies, conocimiento versus knowledge, border aesthesis, poli(e)t(h)ics, crisis of disciplinarity*

Je vais aborder la vaste question de la décolonisation des savoirs sous un angle précis, celui de l’imaginaire. Car décoloniser les sciences humaines, l’histoire entre autres, c’est aussi indéniablement, décoloniser l’imaginaire.

Claude Bourguignon Rougier, *Chaos et colonialité de l’imaginaire*

### 1. Introduction

*UN/WALLING THE MEDITERRANEAN/S/MURARE IL MEDITERRANEO: Local, national and trans-border ARTivist practices for a poetics and politics of hospitality and mobility* is a research project conceived by myself and started in Bari in 2009 with a team of scholars, PhD researchers and cultural/political activists.<sup>1</sup> Informed by postcolonial epistemologies, its activist, cultural, epistemological, geo-political and aesthetic components stem primarily from the reconsideration of historical phenomena and cultural genealogies in the light of the *colonialidad/modernidad* solicitations. It equally emerges from the interaction with new imaginative works that demand the elaboration of new spaces-gazes-thinking-and-feelings by establishing a call-and-response movement across borders, as well as across all sorts of anthropological, cultural, gender, and aesthetic differences. Postcolonial

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<sup>1</sup> The Un/Walling the Mediterranean project is today composed by activist national and international researchers from Bari, Montpellier-France, Chicago-US, Rio de Janeiro-Brasil, Naples-Caserta, L’Aquila, Johannesburg-South Africa, Debrecen-Hungary, Palermo, Rende-Calabria, Innsbruck-Austria, <http://smuraremediterraneo.wordpress.com>. Accessed 9 November 2020.

epistemologies are involved in considering, for example, geopolitical, creative and disciplinary boundaries, including new ‘types of limits’ that have stemmed from globalization, such as the three conceptualized by Olivier J. Walther and Denis Retaillé as “the confines, the threshold and the horizon, which result from the divergence, convergence or intersection of flows”.<sup>2</sup>

The most inspirational analysis in the development of our collective research project came especially from Walter D. Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova’s essay on border critical thinking and from Mignolo’s works on subalternity and aesthetics.<sup>3</sup> But the real turn occurred for me when I entered my personal postcolonial-decolonial feminist *camino*, mapped on the creative and theoretical works on border and de-bordering by chicano/a authors, and when I encountered the border critical thinking disseminated in the *mestizas’* gendered, transcultural and diasporic theories and poetics.<sup>4</sup>

The two questions I want to answer in this paper are: how do ‘postcolonial’ and ‘decolonial’ scholars, interpreters, theoreticians and artists avoid still having a colonial, racialized and hegemonic gaze when entering the (subject of) social and human co-existing in the age of TransMediterraneanAtlantic (TMA) flows? How to always be aware of the dynamics of segregation, discrimination and racism still at work in contemporary ‘democratic’ governmental policies that determine societal class dynamics? This is a kind of apartheid demarcation that delimits any sort of peripheries: from the ‘reservation spaces’, often ghettos for the ‘not admitted insiders’, to the national/global economic bounties, to the detention camps for ‘outsiders to be checked’, to the underworld of the social/class/gender and race demarcations in the not yet decolonized policies of the nation-states.<sup>5</sup> The still surviving methodologies of coloniality were uncovered by Mediterranean, Eastern and Atlantic postcolonial thinking through notions such as the Foucaultian notions of biopolitical surveillance, disciplinary apparatus, disciplinary institutions, biopower, panopticism, etc. Around the 1980s, the local and transnational postcolonial thinking and the new decolonial epistemologies interacted with Foucault’s works as well as with Gramscian and Indian subaltern analysis. They engaged with the geo-philosophical perspectives elaborated from 1975 to 1989 by Gilles Deleuze e Felix Guattari and, at the same time, resumed the readings on the psychic effects induced by the violence of coloniality developed by the Afro-Caribbeans, the African activists, exiles, and thinkers of Franz Fanon’s generation<sup>6</sup> in the Fifties and Sixties, also inspired by the creole,

<sup>2</sup> Olivier J. Walther and Denis Retaillé, “Rethinking Borders in a Mobile World: An Alternative Model”, in Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary and Frédéric Giraut, eds., *Borderities and the Politics of Contemporary Mobile Borders* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 191-203.

<sup>3</sup> Walter D. Mignolo and Madina V. Tlostanova, “Theorizing from the Borders: Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9.2 (2006), 205-221; Walter D. Mignolo, “On Subalterns and Other Agencies”, *Postcolonial Studies*, 8.4 (2005), 381-407; Walter D. Mignolo, “Reconstitución epistémica/estética: la aesthesis decolonial una década después”, *Calle 14: Revista de investigación en el campo del arte*, 14.25 (2019), 14-32. “Ricostruzione epistemico-estetica: l’aesthesis decoloniale un decennio dopo” [2019], trans. by Nicola Nesta, with an Introduction by Luigi Cazzato in *Echo*, 1 (November 2019), 229-242.

<sup>4</sup> The critical perspectives of the coalition of women of colour with different origins who talked to each other in *Haciendo Caras* (Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., *Making Face, Making Soul. HACIENDO CARAS: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Color*, San Francisco: Aunt Lute Press, 1990) helped to develop decolonial materialist feminist praxes, knowledges and methodologies, imaginary modalities and activist aesthetics introduced in previous works by Maria Lugones and Gloria Anzaldúa.

<sup>5</sup> Miguel Mellino, in his new book *Governare la crisi dei rifugiati. Sovranismo, neoliberalismo, razzismo e accoglienza in Europa* (Roma: DeriveApprodi, 2019), retrieves Balibar’s prophetic observation in 2004 – Europe should beware of building a European apartheid dispositif – and argues that part of the European supremacist migration policies and massmedia have contributed to passing onto the general public the fake opinion that there is a direct link between racism and migration, so that racism is experienced by great part of the population as something which is not endogenous to our non-decolonized cultures, but a consequence of migration. The so-called refugee crisis is, according to Mellino, the crisis of Europe that needs a new grammar of rights.

<sup>6</sup> In “Subaltern and Other Agencies”, Mignolo explains the centrality of the *damné* category for decolonial scholars such as Maldonado-Torres and himself: the *damné* – the wretched, the dispossessed – brings onto the scene the ‘coloniality of being’ (Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being”, *Cultural Studies*, 21.2 (2007)). In Mignolo’s view: “The *damné* is a category that described all those whose dignity has been and continues to be stripped away by the logic of coloniality; that is, the



mestizo/a, feminist, diaporic, anthropological, postcolonial and afrocentric criticism of ‘universal’ thinking.

The TMA activist researchers consider themselves inheritors of the archives of *conocimiento*<sup>7</sup> that teach to learn beyond the Western framework, contributing to the relentless process of devising new ideas and the perspectives structured on the grammar of transculturation, contact zones, creolization, multi-focusing, in-between condition, diaspora, feminist and mestiza views, colonialidad/modernidad/racionalidad, decolonial thinking, border thinking, the colonial matrix of power, geo-body-politics of knowledge, borderization, epistemic shift, epistemic delinking.

The “Un/Walling the Mediterranean/S/murare il Mediterraneo” group’s decade-long work, still in progress, aims at developing an activist research methodology delinked from the Westernized-only disciplinary regimes and theories. This approach resulted in the researchers-un/wallers experimenting with the hypothesis of a Southern un-disciplinary critical border thinking/acting/imagining. The seeds of such a work, which sprouted a long time ago, are still nourishing the greatly diversified Mediterranean histories born out of the cultural differences coming from ancient, past and present colonial adventures, early twentieth century forced migrations and neo-colonial subjugations, as well as the never erased marks of Mediterranean colonialisms in its past extensions towards the Americas and Africa.

Conscious that boundaries and borders are symbolic artifacts still essential to the contemporary territorial alphabet as they “help to understand and define spatial discontinuities”,<sup>8</sup> and as members of a cultural, local and transnational network of activist researchers who are politically and epistemologically situated in a trans-border dimension, with the aim of delinking our position from “the historic construction of a bounded form of thinking (spatially) within the Western world, according to a model that was disseminated worldwide through colonization”,<sup>9</sup> we deem it unavoidable to develop theoretical and analytical elaborations informed by cultural, postcolonial and decolonial perspectives.

Moreover, being witnesses to the contemporary historical dramatic events that are greatly undermined by policies intentionally articulated around the concept of the defence of the borders, and keeping as our focus the geo-political paradigm of territorial belonging/non-belonging, as un/wallers we became aware that in order to contrast the ideology of boundaries built for the security of ‘national’ borders, it was imperative to delink our studies from the Western traditional architecture of disciplinary boundaries. Our activist research contemplates a different idea of space and of co-habitation on the planet, a ‘other than’<sup>10</sup> nationalist geo-politics, a trans-border politics and poetics of reciprocal hospitality which considers free mobility a planetary right, and the physical/symbolic lines, limits, borders and boundaries an invention “linked to the process of sedentary settling”.<sup>11</sup>

Within these formations, given the un/wallers Southern Mediterranean activist positionality, and according to the de/colonial procedures, it clearly appeared that not only our work needed to “de-

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de-humanisation and devaluation of human beings and human lives which does not correspond to the criteria of humanity established by the rhetoric of modernity” (Mignolo, “Subaltern and Other Agencies”, 388).

<sup>7</sup> The term ‘conocimiento’, instead of ‘knowledge’, is privileged by Gloria Anzaldúa and the reasons become clear in her last published essay, “and now let us shift ... the path of conocimiento ... inner work, public acts” (Gloria E. Anzaldúa and Analouise Keating, eds., *This Bridge We Call Home*, New York: Routledge, 2002, 540-578) where the word ‘conocimiento’ recurs 35 times and the word ‘deconocimiento’ 15 times. ‘Conocimiento’ is a modality of knowing and acting which decolonizes the classifications and contents of ‘modern’ knowledges; it is consciousness plus *saber*; it is the path towards change; it is cognition through all senses and it comes from listening to one’s body, spirituality and consciousness.

<sup>8</sup> From the abstract to the essay by Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary, “Boundaries and Borders”, in John Agnew, et al., eds., *Handbook of Political Geography* (Hoboken, N.J.: Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, 2017), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> The ‘other than’ expression is a less reductionist and more complexifying term than the ‘counter-’ or ‘a-’ prefixes stating a simply oppositional stance. I thank Silvana Carotenuto for suggesting this non-oppositional and yet efficacious delinking terminology in her contribution to the 8th AISCLI conference “Postcolonial/Decolonial. Unpacking the Prefix: Literatures and Cultures in English and Beyond” (University of Bari, 21-22 February 2019).

<sup>11</sup> Amilhat Szary, “Boundaries and Borders”, 1.

universalise categories of thought in order to diversify theoretical concepts and to relocate them in the horizon of modern/colonial local histories”,<sup>12</sup> but it had also to be bathed into TransMediterranean Atlantic pluri-versal waters/theories/methodologies/imaginaries. The colonialidad/modernidad theories and perspectives coming from the Atlantic had to be turned in/to an OTHER Southern Mediterranean story uncovering the Afro-European-Asian connections, thus delinking them from the North Eurocentric Transatlantic views.

In my case, the inspirational writings, performances, encounters for my ‘other than’ TransAtlantic archaeology of coloniality – a Southern archaeology contemplating the transmediterraneanization of the Atlantic and of the postcolonial and the decolonial routes – were the result of the encounter with intellectuals and creative talents expressing transgressive visions of the state of things in their po(li)et(h)ical philosophies: the Afro-Caribbean Frantz Fanon, Édouard Glissant, Dionne Brand, Stuart Hall, Audre Lorde; the Asian scholars living and teaching in the United States, such as Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak and the Subaltern Studies school; the Mestiza, politically and poetically visionary works by the paramount border crosser Gloria Anzaldúa, my *magistra* and *compañera* in feminist delinking visions; the philosophy of consciousness filtered through María Lugones’ gendered decolonial lens; the circle of chicanos/as and Hispanic American revolutionary intellectuals and ARTivists that have de-bordered poetical, political and disciplinary territories and imaginaries: writers and activists Chela Sandoval, Norma Alarcón, Alfred Arteaga; the Mexican American performer, writer, activist Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the Cuban American writer, performer, transdisciplinary artist Coco Fusco, whose interactive installations disrupt colonialistic representations of gender, race, cultural belonging and power; African postcolonial forerunners such as Aimé Césaire, and later on, the poems, novels and books on African intellectual history by Valentin-Yves Mudimbe and other African writers; the North-African Mediterranean writers, militants and film makers, among whom beloved Assia Djebar has pride of place.<sup>13</sup>

Djebar is and has been the beacon for diverse generations of Mediterranean North African and exile women writers. To them she disclosed the idea that writing, especially in Islamic as well as in still colonized and patriarchal worlds, is an act of transgressing and resisting, and that writing memories of the colonial ‘self-becoming otherwise’ is an act of feminism and anti-patriarchal representation.<sup>14</sup> She offered precious insights into the coloniality of language to postcolonial theoreticians and po(li)et(h)ical workers since the Sixties, when she went deep down the exploration of the feelings and linguistic ruptures inside both postcolonial and emigrated/exile subjects and writers. She even studied classical Arabic to try to recover the languages that inhabited her<sup>15</sup>, and went through a long literary silence in the Seventies, probably due to the painful awareness that she was never going to be an arabophone writer.

As to the inspirational works dealing with the Atlantic history of slave trade, my heart was entrapped by Toni Morrison’s poli(e)t(h)ics and literary masterpieces, based on her disruption of the colonizer’s (hi)story of enslavement combined with the rupture of the traditional separation of literary genres as well as with the delinking from the partition between different art codifications. In this way, Morrison introduced jamming practices in literature: transmedial methodologies, poetry, music, history, orality, imaginary worlds are the skeleton of her written texts.

<sup>12</sup> Mignolo, “On Subalterns and Other Agencies”, 382.

<sup>13</sup> Pseudonym for Fatima-Zehra Imalayen, born in Algeria, collaborating with the anti-colonial Algerian liberation front and with Fanon’s newspaper.

<sup>14</sup> Abdelkader Cheref, *Gender and Identity in North Africa: Postcolonialism and Feminism in Maghrebi Women’s Literature* (New York: Tauris Academic Studies, 2010).

<sup>15</sup> About these feeling of cultural dispossession, later on, when she went back to literature after the cinema experience, Djebar wrote two superb books: *Le blanc de l’Algérie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1995) and *Ces voix qui m’assiègent* (Paris: Albin Michel, 1999), where we touch the pain of her recognition that she was not going to become an Arabic-language writer.



By making these ‘outsiders’ to my own cultural location talk to each other, not only through my personal library, but also by fostering a cultural engagement among the positions that reverberated in my conversation with other local and transnational activist researchers, I learnt to ‘de-universalise’ concepts and adopt a geo-critical stance of proximity. Such a position involved paying more attention to de-nationalized and de-territorialized spaces, floating in the new languages and arising from the contact with old and new migrations, as well as in old and new creative border aesthetics.<sup>16</sup> TMA’s methodology is thus based on developing a Southern border critical thinking delinked from Westernized ‘modern’ geo-political, hetero-normative and disciplinary boundaries. At the same time, the decolonial TMA Turn pays great attention to the role of imagination in the delinking process: imagination is considered in itself a methodology to escape from old and new forms of coloniality.<sup>17</sup>

## 2. Un/walling Disciplinary and Art Boundaries

To dismantle the geo-politics of bordering the world in the name of nation, race, culture, religion and class boundaries, the activist researcher has to transpass the disciplinary demarcations and turn the interactions between different fields of knowledge and creative languages into resources. The bathing of the Atlantic decolonial thinking in the Mediterranean waters was not sufficient in my methodological positionality as an impure Mediterranean peninsular ‘americanist’ and ‘culturalist’, I felt the necessity to work out a Southern TransMediterraneanAtlantic Decolonial Turn. This step required the unearthing of the presence of old and ‘modern’ Mediterranean colonial cultures within the commonly defined ‘Transatlantic Studies’ concerned with the colonial processes.<sup>18</sup> To do this, I had to take into account not only the political and historical narrations concerning the encounters and clashes of cultures determined by the European colonial and enslavement institutions, but also the works and workings of the ‘other than colonial’ imagination in the past as well as in the contemporary ‘border art’. In the Hispanic pluricultural activist-aesthetic circles, this particular type of art is also called *ARTivism*, to signify aesthetic, political and cultural (no)border tactics developed to contest and delegitimise contemporary border regimes.<sup>19</sup>

In her essay based on the analysis of contemporary art works produced along the wall built by the Israelis around the West Bank, Anne-Laure Milhat Szary writes that since border crossings implies an “active resistance process”, the notion of border art, “through its very special relation to place, questions spatial processes through the viscosity of matter in movement”.<sup>20</sup> That is why, as an activist researcher working with the help of poetical, political, aesthetic, ARTivistic paradigms and performances, I hope that the TransMediterraneanAtlantic elaboration of a Southern border critical thinking/knowledge applied to the analysis of ARTivistic border productions, can “contribute, on one hand, to the debates on the

<sup>16</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, “Reconstitución epistémica/estética”.

<sup>17</sup> Caroline Alphin et al., “Critiquing Resilience: Interview with Julian Reid”, *Spectra*, 6.2 (2018), 5-19.

<sup>18</sup> Paola Zaccaria, “Mediterranean and Transatlantic ARTivism: Counter-Acting Neo-Colonialisms in the Public Sphere”, *International Journal of Cross-Cultural Studies and Environmental Communication*, 1 (2014), 41-51, Paola Zaccaria, “TransMediterranean Embodied Archives”, *JOMEC Journal*, 8 (2015).

<sup>19</sup> *ARTivism* is a name for contemporary highly performative and socialized visual and verbal works usually accessible in public spaces. On activism, see Claudia Attimonelli, “Il senso migrante della fotografia in JR e Banksy”, in Luigi Cazzato and Filippo Silvestri, eds., *S/Murare il Mediterraneo. Pensieri critici e attivismo al tempo delle migrazioni* (Lecce: Pensa, 2016), 145-165, Stéphanie Lemoine and Samir Ouardi S., eds., *Artivisme: art, action politique et résistance culturelle* (Paris: Alternatives, 2010), Paola Zaccaria, “Mediterraneo liquido. Per un pensiero critico decoloniale”, in Luigi Cazzato and Filippo Silvestri, eds., *S/Murare il Mediterraneo. Pensieri critici e attivismo al tempo delle migrazioni* (Lecce: Pensa, 2016), 21-44, Paola Zaccaria, “A Breach in the Wall: ARTivist No-Border Atlases of Mobility”, *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 26.3 (2017), 37-53, Paola Zaccaria, “Pratiche artistiche transmediali ispirate (dagli) archivi della migrazione in America: le cartografie no border di JR ad Ellis Island”, *Scritture Migranti*, 11 (2017), 171-197.

<sup>20</sup> Anne-Laure Amilhat Szary, “Boundaries and Borders”; “L’artiste passe-muraille? La résistance au passage du mur entre Israël et la Cisjordanie/The artist walking through walls? Resistance and barrier crossings between Israel and the West Bank” (abstract).

performative power of border devices, and on the other, to the elaboration of the analysis of what is at stake in the relationship between in situ art works and movement”.<sup>21</sup>

Actually, Southern critical thinking requires from the critical thinker/activist/artist a triple co(n)-structural delinking from colonial practices: it entails the un/walling of geo-political, disciplinary and imagination/reality distinctions. To dismantle the contemporary re-bordering of the nation-state walls<sup>22</sup> re-instated thanks to the issues of disciplinarity and defence of state sovereignty, a decolonial, other-than nationalistic Southern view needs to dis-engage from the still capitalistic and military politics by activating a conversation between ‘the politics’ and ‘the poetics’. This means envisioning a poli(e)t(h)ics<sup>23</sup> in order to re-store voice and body to the innovative proposals of social harmony and co-existence coming both from the past, unlistened to poli(e)t(h)ics proposals, and from the contemporary works of imagination. The not so much utopianist Southern critical decolonial de-bordering proposal is to re-circulate po(li)et(h)ical – a term which could be even more complexified by including also the aesthetic level of this process of rethinking the politics: poli(aesthe)tics<sup>24</sup> – performances inside the re-articulation of nonviolent co-habiting togetherness.

### 3. Decolonizing Imaginaries: The Crisis of Disciplinarity

Coming to the complex issue of the decolonization of knowledges through the imaginary, I share Claude Bourguignon Rougier’s view that “décoloniser les sciences humaines, l’histoire entre autres, c’est aussi indéniablement, décoloniser l’imaginaire”,<sup>25</sup> and agree with historian Serge Gruzinski who, in his ground-breaking book,<sup>26</sup> exposes the reasons why the colonization of the imaginary was one of the founding boundary markers of coloniality policies. In this article, I will refer to “colonizing imaginaries” in a broader sense. In deeming knowledge as an instrument moulded by colonial powers to shape and colonize mindsets opposed to imagination, I propose to delink this knowledge from the new boundaries intended to strengthen national borders and expel anyone labelled foreigner, different and hence destabilizing: I propose instead to become a facilitator in the circulation of dissident bodies and imaginaries as they emerge from past and new utopianist archives.

‘Utopia’ is a term commonly given to de-centered, non-normative views by the still colonial logos that have determined oppressive methodologies of gender, class, race oppression. Utopia is the imaginative and imaginary cartography of places with no borders, no reservations, no boundaries and checkpoints. Utopia is the drawing of imaginary maps being conscious that utopian architectures are not always unfeasible constructions.<sup>27</sup> We thus come to the central question at stake: can imagination and consequently its artistic transcriptions (films, visual art, literature, music, etc.) un/wall the geo-political, disciplinary and art/media boundaries? Indeed, quite a large number of our team’s works move from a transdisciplinary discussion of ARTivistic narratives and representations related to the ongoing process of mobility and extraterritoriality that instantiate new geo-corpo-graphies of resistance through a very

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Zaccaria, “TransMediterraneanAtlantic Embodied Archives”.

<sup>23</sup> This is a term that offers trans-bordering representations arising from what conservative ideologies would rather call ‘dream’ and/or ‘utopia’, not because the poetical productions portray what it is impossible to attain, but because that kind of poetics is non-aligned with the global neo-colonialisms.

<sup>24</sup> On the necessary interlocution-conversation-convergence between politics and poetics, see my essay in Lara Carbonara, ed., *Erranze senza ritorni. Su diaspora, mari e migrazioni* (Bari: Progedit, 2017) and Paola Zaccaria, *La lingua che ospita. Poetiche, politiche traduzioni* (Roma: Meltemi, 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Rougier Bourguignon, “Chaos and Coloniality of the Imagination”. Paper presented on 29 April at a meeting of experts organised by UNESCO on the “Elaboration of a Glossary of Decolonial Concepts, Paradigms and Categorisations Applied to Africa”, in Kigali, Rwanda, 29 April-2 May 2019.

<sup>26</sup> Serge Gruzinski, *La colonisation de l’imaginaire, Sociétés indigènes et occidentalisation dans le Mexique espagnol, XVIe-XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988).

<sup>27</sup> Zaccaria, *La lingua che ospita*.

often trans-medial, cross-cultural embodied poetics that is at once plurilingual, plurisensorial, pluricoded and plurilingual.<sup>28</sup>

From a TMA stance, imagination is at the foundation of both the migrant's activist drive to escape a destiny designed by new colonial powers, and of any artistic drive leading to creative performances. The colonization of the imagination and of the artistic imaginary has been at the foundation of ancient, modern and contemporary subjugation of the 'other than myself' thinking/*conocimiento* – as is the case, for example, of the gender and race imaginary. As we know the colonial 'conquest' meant the destruction of the natives' images being substituted by 'modern', mostly Christian ones. To decolonize the imagination of colonized spaces and persons implies thus to decolonize the history of representations-narrations by re-circulating and questioning the ancient signs of the imagination survived into our times: "Décoloniser l'écriture de l'histoire, c'est identifier l'imaginaire qui a été le terreau des histoires coloniales pour ainsi libérer l'imagination historique indispensable à la mise en récit propre à cette discipline".<sup>29</sup>

At this stage, as an un/waller, I look on transborder mobility as the (em)bodi(ment) of narration encompassing the resistance and imaginative rebellion that is exploding inside border ARTivism, inside the new conception of the language as a place to be shared and a border to be crossed, shaped in multi-situated ethnographies,<sup>30</sup> in pluri-lingualism, translanguaging, postcolonial and decolonial literary genealogies and futuristic envisionings. That is why I consider and propose ARTivism as a Southern TMA decolonial geo-corpo-aesthesis.<sup>31</sup>

In her beautiful essay "Bodies Across. Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Diana Abu Jaber",<sup>32</sup> Marta Cariello analyses the written bodies of women "sitting on the edge" of the nation, sitting "on the curb", as Assia Djebar writes in *Ces voix qui m'assiègent*, in "a space for the dislocated subjects of the post-colonial world".<sup>33</sup> Through her postcolonial/decolonial, feminist reading, Cariello focuses on a geocorpography of TransMediterranean dislocations, colonizations and decolonizations inscribed on the bodies of women in movement across "borders and identities, (across) uncertain, stolen and disillusioning ground, the subtraction of a homeland and its material sites".<sup>34</sup> In this way, she shows the "tropes of a literature of dislocations, of an interrupted memory of colonization and decolonization that calls for a deeply inscribed anatomy of the body. In other words, the written body comes to perform a 'sign of history',<sup>35</sup> it proposes irreducible differences and produces narrating complexities that undermine the ubiquitous, unilateral Western discourse on female Arab bodies and their relation to sexuality and sexual politics".<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. Delinking Imagination: Writing Old and New Colonialisms Back

Lo estético nos impregna, está en todo lo que hacemos. Liberar la aesthesis de la estética des-cubre la geopolítica del sentir, pensar, hacer, crear y la extrae también del imaginario abstracto del sujeto moderno,

<sup>28</sup> Zaccaria, "A Breach in the Wall".

<sup>29</sup> Rougier Bourguignon, *Chaos et colonialité*, 2019.

<sup>30</sup> See Maria Livia Alga, *Etnografía "terróna" de sujetos excéntricos* (Barcellona: Ediciones Bellaterra, 2018).

<sup>31</sup> On body, creativity and locus see Anzaldúa's sixth and seventh chapters in *Borderlands/La frontera. The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987), Mignolo, "Reconstitución epistémica/estética", John Turturro, *Passione*, the movie (2010). The latter beautifully stages – through a script made only of songs – Naples as a 'terróna' (Alga, *Etnografía "terróna"*), 'bastard', brown geo-corpo-graphy.

<sup>32</sup> Marta Cariello, "Bodies Across: Ahdaf Soueif, Fadia Faqir, Diana Abu Jaber", in Layla Al Maleh, ed., *Arab Voices in Diaspora* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), 313-338.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 314.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Homi Bhabha, "Frontlines/Borderposts", in Angelika Bammer, ed., *Displacements: Cultural Identities in Question* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana U.P., 1994), 269. This note is included in Cariello's essay.

<sup>36</sup> Cariello, *Bodies Across*, 314.

despegado de las energías geopolíticas gestionadas por la MCP.<sup>37</sup>

Delinking once colonized natives and today's residents as well as contemporary dislocated subjects from the concept of belonging, and translating the experiences of silenced, marked bodies into postcolonial, futuristic narrations, unveils the idea that imagination is a decolonial performance. The portraiture of Africa as the most weak and poor continent and the stigma inscribed in the past on Africans as commodities, to be constrictively moved from one place to another by hegemonic European powers, re-surfaces in contemporary European border policies. The methodologies of oppression enacted in rejecting the African migrants as persons without rights to be blocked at the frontiers together with the powerless, class-discriminated persons from the lowest class coming from the South of the world, function in a similar way.

As activist researchers geographically thinking from a geo-corpo-graphical Euro-Mediterranean Southern peninsular positionality that is encrusted with a complex background of colonizations extending to Asia and the Middle East, mingled with various layers of extra-European and non-European dominions, we are faced with many questions, starting from one of the subterranean main points of this essay: what does it mean to decolonize? The act of opening up the modernidad/colonialidad methodology of de/linking, des/prenderse, dis-connecting from the geo-political-corpo-graphies of modern/imperial powers and epistemologies still at work, so as to contaminate the delinking methodology with the specificities of the Mediterranean Southern critical thinking and history, raises other issues:

- How should the dissident Mediterranean peninsular Europeans working from a 'no-border wall' activist and ARTivist perspective, position themselves in the decolonial *pensamiento* to explore the multiple horizons opened up by the decolonial perspective?

- How should they figure out their own cultural, individual and collective stance in the light of decolonial epistemology and in consideration of the new colonizations and resistances to coloniality embodied in the politics and poetics of global mobility?

When I started examining migration and creative protest works and their relation to walls, borders, and sites of border crossings in the Mediterranean region, as a woman activist, scholar and teacher, who since the last decade of the XX century has been inspired by written and visual chicano/a works on the border, I felt the need to deal also with the following issue: what do ARTivist strategies of resistance to the erection of walls along the Mexico-US 'liquid' borders of the Rio Grande and Gulf of Mexico<sup>38</sup> have in common with similar strategies at work in the Mediterranean? And how might these strategies of resistance contribute to contrast European immigration policies becoming more and more obsessed with frontiers and border walls?

These questions, arising from a postcolonial, decolonial, Southern Mediterranean European perspective, turned into: how can one 'read' the strategies of the 'walling up' in the migratory movements East to West, and South to North? How could 'the wall', figuratively and materially, disrupt the colonialist glorifying transatlantic history of commerce, migration and success in the contemporary slave narratives of migration towards the global New Worlds? In *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty*, Wendy Brown asks the basic geo-political questions: why erect walls now, given the growing global connectedness?<sup>39</sup> To what extent do new material and technological walls support the image-ideology of statehood, and to what extent do they reinforce reactionary national imaginaries? Brown argues that the wall functions as a kind of theatrical stage aimed at giving citizens an image of power, order and national self-determination.

<sup>37</sup> Mignolo, "Reconstitución epistémica/estética", 26.

<sup>38</sup> *Altar: Cruzando Fronteras, Building Bridges* (2009), a documentary filmed and edited by myself and Daniele Basilio, contextualizes many ARTivistic works of Mexican-American border culture in Texas and California.

<sup>39</sup> Wendy Brown, *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* (New York: Zone Books, 2010).

For me, another subject of inquiry is: can ARTivism promote innovation in immigration policies, innovation in how/what wall-divided communities (that is, both those stopping at the closed gates at the arrival, and the “residents” inside the gates) think about the history they shared in the past and are sharing right now?

My own contribution to the project has greatly focused on how ARTivism – which combines the activist’s responsibility and commitment to justice with politically engaged artistic creativity – in Mexican-American border culture and art (re)presents counter-narratives to the colonial accounts of arrival and settlement that engage many layers of colonization and cultural entanglements, all of which bear both Mediterranean, Transatlantic and Native traces. Additionally, in proposing counter-narratives, or counter-cartocorpographies, to colonial border ideology, to the notion of the border as an index of conquest, appropriation, and belonging, the TMA work-in progress wants to contribute to new representations of human and cultural geography. To be more explicit: from a broader, global and trans-historical perspective, the project wants to promote the imagining and visualizing of the map of TransMediterranean, trans-cultural, inter-cultural ‘geographies of contact’,<sup>40</sup> i.e. the geo-corpographies contributing to “Atlases of emotions”.<sup>41</sup> By locally and site-specifically re-thinking the concepts of nationalism and citizenship, cultural identity, belonging and transculturality, location and locality<sup>42</sup> in the light of what decolonial epistemologies unveil about the deceptions of the Western narratives of modernity/rationality, the project takes on the responsibility of re-thinking the tools of analysis, including Cultural and Postcolonial Studies theories, indebted as we are to them for being at the foundation of our fracture or *desprendimiento* from Western and un-decolonized ‘rules of analysis’/disciplinarity and white, hegemonic ‘geo-political’ design of modernity.

Taking a detour, let us go back to the question of how activist researchers could position themselves in the decolonial *pensamiento*. Our geographical position classifies us as Western scholars. However, we surely are not entirely Western (to name just a few ‘impure’ genealogies: the Greek, the Phoenicians, Byzantines, Ottoman and Arabic dominions; in South of Italy, the French and Spanish ‘modern’ dominions have marked places, bodies, thinking, imagining). As peninsulars, we have inherited ‘modern’ cultural archives but live surrounded by Southern Mediterranean archeo-logies of the past colonial times. This complexity testifies to both oppressions/conflicts/oppositional thinking, and the construction of inter-crossing trajectories shaping transcultural transcontinental confluences. As Mediterranean peninsular Europeans, we feel that we should think of ourselves as part of ‘the other Europe’ inside the western ‘democratic Europe’. In the ‘other Europe’ I also include the South of Spain – so close to, so mixed up with North Africa and with the populations and cultures that have headed toward Southern Europe through the Mediterranean from Morocco, Algeria and Tunisia; the Greek populations – they too are considered ‘impure’ because of their proximity to the Asian Middle Eastern influences; and, of course ourselves, the peninsulars of the Southern Mediterranean Italy, named and represented as the ‘terroni’ of Southern Europe, being so close to Africa.

As Southern Mediterraneans contaminated by African, Asian and European cultures bathed by the Mediterranean Sea, we cannot passively apply the postcolonial and decolonial options. We have instead to contribute to the decolonial pluri-versal epistemologies, or gnoseology (the term Mignolo nowadays prefers to ‘epistemology’), in order to open up the (hi)story, consciousness and corpo-graphic traces and imprints of Southern Mediterranean critical border thinking and its talking back to the ideology based on the idea of a universality of concepts.

In his last essay, Mignolo declares his debt to the African intellectual Valentine Mudimbe for his decolonial shift from epistemology to gnoseology. A debt underlined in the quotation from Mudimbe

<sup>40</sup> I developed and explored the concept of *Mediterranean Atlanticism* in Zaccaria, “Mediterranean and Transatlantic Artivism”.

<sup>41</sup> Giuliana Bruno, *Atlas of Emotion: Journeys in Art, Architecture, and Film* (New York and London: Verso Books, 2002).

<sup>42</sup> Doreen B. Massey, *Space, Place, and Gender* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994).



chosen as epigraph: “Specifically, *gnosis* means seeking to know, inquiry, methods of knowing, investigation, and even acquaintance with someone. [...] *Gnosis* is, consequently, different from *doxa* or opinion, and, on the other hand, cannot be confused with *episteme*, understood as both science and general intellectual configuration”.<sup>43</sup> In Mignolo’s view, Mudimbe recovered “del olvido el concepto de *gnosis* y le dio un nuevo significado. Lo utilizó para nombrar la praxis del pensar en África, borrada por el vocabulario eurocentrado de misioneros, antropólogos, historiadores, periodistas, economistas, politólogos, filosofía, arte, etc”.<sup>44</sup>

In rescuing Mudimbe’s terminological shift, Mignolo introduces “*gnoseología* en el vocabulario decolonial”, a word which I feel is close to the pre-columbian *teoría del conocimiento*, which embraces general knowledge, but is also close to *el sentir*, whereas epistemology has to do with scientific knowledge. What I find interesting in his essay is not only the widening of the decolonial perspectives to African and Afro-descendant thinking, theories and narrations, but also, thanks to the African modalities of being-thinking, the opening up of the decolonial methodology of delinking from the Western concept of knowledge as a rational act. *Gnosis* is more than simply knowledge and it encloses the process of “seeking to know”,<sup>45</sup> which implies the desire to investigate, to get acquainted with someone or something which is different. *Gnosis* and *aesthesis* are thus not simply mental processes (*saber*), but they are imbricated in feeling (*sentir*), memories and past histories. The link *saber-sentir* is a powerful tool to *desprenderse* from coloniality and from the epistemic/aesthetic duality: decoloniality discards all hierarchies among knowledge, feeling, thinking, creating and desiring: “Lo estético nos impregna, está en todo lo que hacemos. Liberar la *aesthesis* de la estética descubre la geopolítica del sentir, pensar, hacer, crear y la extrae también del imaginario abstracto del sujeto moderno, despegado de las energías geopolíticas gestionadas por la MCP [Colonial Matrix of Power]. Nos lleva a descolonizar el concepto”.<sup>46</sup>

The TransMediterranean Southern Border Critical thinking is building a bridge between the Latin praxis of engagement, in drawing a *gnoseology* leading to the project of delinking from the colonial matrix of power, and the work in progress of the ‘Others of Europe’ aimed at elaborating intersectional and pluriversal strategies of delinking from the colonial matrix of power. The ‘Others of Europe’ is a decolonial portraiture-narration for both the people who were and are part of European histories -but whose lives and impure, subaltern cultures and thinking were/are obscured and delegitimized by the official powers- and for the newcomers to Europe from non-European places/cultures, who were and are socially and imaginatively seen by the normative European views of governance and governability as outsiders, uncultured, different, and hence dangerous.

Activist researchers pay great attention to non-eurocentric geo-poli(e)t(h)ics. Here ‘non-eurocentric’ hints are not to non Europeans, but to European or non-European productions and performances which have enacted the gesture of critiquing eurocentrism in all the regions touched by coloniality and have substituted cartographies of appropriation with geo-corpo-graphies of mobility and crossing. This is the reason why Mediterranean stories should not be delinked from Transatlantic or Eastern stories; this is why thinking and creating should be inscribed in a dimension of flows: the liquidity of *linguae francae* languages and of spaces touched by waters. TMA methodologies aim at creating conditions of co-living outside the rhetorics of re-Westernized beliefs taken for universal, such as the contemporary Western resurgence of sovereignty – uncaring for social equity and justice – as the universal model of ‘democracy’. Water, maps, roads, voyage: word-images on the move that give birth to new meanings,

<sup>43</sup> Valentin-Yves Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa: Gnosis, Philosophy and the Order of Knowledge* (Bloomington: Indiana U.P., 1988), ix.

<sup>44</sup> Mignolo, “Reconstitución epistémica/estética”, 41.

<sup>45</sup> Mudimbe, *The Invention of Africa*.

<sup>46</sup> Mignolo, “Reconstitución epistémica/estética”, 13.

knowledges and a new consciousness that peoples in mobility acquire through the movement-change resulting from the process of uprooting themselves from land routes and re-routing along watery courses.

Once we know that delinking methodologies cannot be universal, which cultural formations/archives can the Southern Mediterranean peninsular subjects, who are looking for epistemological non-eurocentric and non-universality-based orders, refer to? How to envision praxes of living that allow for co-existing alter/natives? Presently, thanks also to the interaction I had with other scholars both at the 2019 AISCLI conference and at the “Un/walling the Mediterranean” highly interactive symposium on “Migration and Transmediterranean Cultural Archives” (Bari, Nov. 2016)<sup>47</sup>, I am experimenting the interlacement of two methodologies:

a) thinking-interpreting beyond the categories of Western ‘civilization’ by learning from non-European cultures and traditions, silenced, disavowed and delegitimized by the rhetoric of modernity and the strategies of coloniality;

b) going back to and allow myself to be inspired by the forms of resistance and creativity that are offered by the non-official archives of Mediterranean subaltern, ‘bastard’, inferiorized counter-narratives that did not discard or repress the multifarious cultural and social complexity of the ‘other than’ side of modernity.

The Southern peninsular activists of the “Un/walling the Mediterranean” project have had to confront themselves with these issues since they took into account the role that ships with Mediterranean crews had in colonial days. Sailing from the Mediterranean South through the Middle Passage, they stopped along the African “fortresses of no return” to embark cargoes of people taken as commodities to the new world. Something must have occurred in this passage, in the transborder cultural formation named colonization; something must have occurred later on, at the time of, for example, the Italian emigration to the Americas; something needed to be unearthed about the kind of trade called up until the postcolonial age “Transatlantic”, a definition that seems to refer essentially to the Northern Europe colonialization of the New World.

When visioned through decolonial eyes, “Transatlantic” appeared as a historicizing ‘label’ that did not go deep down the slave routes and the slavery system. Moreover, within that configuration, “Transatlantic” has submerged the complex web of relations, histories, people, geo-corpo-graphies<sup>48</sup> of mobility and of colonial trades which departed from the Mediterranean harbours. What went unsaid in the official narrations of the Mediterranean empires, beyond European borders, was that the ships departing from Portugal, Spain and the South of Europe did not only share a common Latin origin. They were also marked, among other cultural inter-connections with the signs of Northern African and Middle Eastern contaminations popping up in the language inflections, in the architecture of the ‘old cities’ and in the visual arts.

It was within this cultural frame that the TransMediterraneanAtlantic decolonial turn was carried out by ‘terrone’ researchers living along the Southern European Mediterranean coasts: by acknowledging the necessity of re-signifying the colonial narrative of the Europe-Africa-America triangulation, they consequently dismantled the normative, hyper North-centered, imperialistic mainstream history of colonization. This shift brought about the widening of the horizons, unveiling both the connections and

<sup>47</sup> Part of the materials debated in the symposium were published in Marta Cariello and Luigi Cazzato, eds., “Migrazioni e archivi culturali TransMediterranei”, *de genere. Journal of Literary, Postcolonial and Gender Studies. Rivista di studi letterari, postcoloniali e di genere* (2018), with an Introduction by Cariello and Cazzato, components of the “Unwalling the Mediterranean” project.

<sup>48</sup> “In coining the term geocorpography [...], I wanted to bring into focus the impossibility of disarticulating the body from its geopolitical locus, and to materialise the multiple significations that accrue from this understanding of the geo-political nexus (Joseph Pugliese, “Geocorpographies of Torture”, *Australian Critical Race and Whiteness Studies Association Journal*, 3.1 (2007), 1-18, see also Joseph Pugliese, “Embodied Archives”, *JASAL*, 11.1 (2011), special issue: *Archive Madness*). In my personal use of the term, the component *graphia* in the concept of geo-corpo-graphy embraces both the meaning of ‘narration/history/time’ and of ‘map-design/space’.

the differences in colonial times and consequently offering the opportunity of including the successive “dispersions” and diasporas of individuals and populations coming to the New World from Southern European areas in the counter-colonial history of ‘modernity’. Their migratory voyage was inspired by those dreams and fantasies about the New World, which, as far as the Southern Italian terroni’s dream go, Emanuele Crialese’s movie *The Golden Door/Nuovo Mondo* (2006) has captured in a great visual narration.

## 5. The Decolonial Role of Imagination

Imagination, and border aesthetic creativity, has become for me the locus, the elected horizon/atmosphere/hemisphere from where, or rather inside which, I interpellate and discuss the crisis of Western policies, inscribed in the global (re)westernization, and the crisis of disciplinary knowledges.

TMA’s ‘decolonial turn’ takes into account the decolonial role of imagination, and looks at imagination as a methodology, a strategy and the first activator of escape from new forms of coloniality.<sup>49</sup> Imagination is at the foundation of all creative works and acts. It is the engine giving shape to ARTivistic public performances. Imagination is behind and within. It shines through contemporary works of art, expressed through different media and channels, that disseminate political, social, critical, counter-hegemonic views of the world through creative narrations, descriptions, representations, performances, music, art works. ARTivism enacts a shared Southern TMA decolonial geocorpography inhabited by dis-appropriative, delocalized languages capable of initiating transborder, plurilinguistic conversations.

The resistance enacted by the actors of contemporary diasporas, solicited as they are by the prefiguration of a better life, speaks for the power of imagination. Imagination and artistic creativity have a great role in the resignification of one’s own story in relation to the (hi)stories of others. Contemporary ARTivist works have a great role in developing a decolonial consciousness. Once the Southern border critical thinker acknowledges that a TMA decolonial turn is already taking place in the artivistic pieces of art exposed in different urban public spaces touched by (in)migration and e(x)migration, these can be considered manifestoes of decolonial thinking and decolonial acting. Attempting to establish connections between Mediterranean ARTivism becomes her/his method of thinking. By opening up to different languages – different not only because expressed in music or visual art or photography or written textualities but because these multifarious expressions give voice to and shape different cultural perspectives and visions coming from inside the European Mediterranean area, ARTivists talk back, interact and let themselves be contaminated by – while contaminating – perspectives and visions coming from the diverse cultures of the Mediterranean, as well as from the TMA traffic of human beings that bring to our coasts those peoples whose ancestors suffered from the slave trade, its violence and its subjugation.

Clearly, this translocal encounter through art creates new trans-border and no-border geo-corpographical cartographies which are at the same time aesthetical, sentimental and political in that they display translocal networkings of people and cultures that concur to the construction of transborder archives of revolutionary decoloniality. All of this has the effect of contributing to the rupture of the compartmentalization of languages and disciplines: they are acts of un/walling performed through/across travelling languages that bring about ruptures and innovations, excision and resignification.

<sup>49</sup> See Alphin et al., “Interview with Julian Reid”.



## 6. Imagination and disciplinarity

Working at enabling a decolonial shift from a peninsular unwalling *conocimiento* implies experimenting a counter-methodology. This can nevertheless be used as a tool in facilitating conversations among different theories, texts, ways of thinking and writing in order to research, write, teach and act in an open-ended, non-sectorialized way. Since I wished this ever-changing construction to be anarchic in its procedures, in exploring TMA's decolonial turn I had to embark on the process of questioning borders, creativity and activism; ARTivism and activism; border art and border thinking; wallings and unwallings. I hence devised a cross-disciplinary, undisciplined methodology, along the path of which, I realized I had to be always aware of how neo-colonial, no-transpassing geo-policies are strictly related to the academic request for disciplinarity. The geopolitics of borders and checkpoints, admission and rejection have informed, have given form and power to academic rules as well as to the normative prescription of the neat separation and sectorialization of the various disciplines, languages, theories. The still-alive colonial design of appropriation, property, defence of the conquered (home)land inscribed in the geopolitics of sovereignty (dominion-control) and in the no-border transpassing rules, informs the unspoken design of the academic defenders of the boundaries between disciplines. The defence of one's own academic field of studies' borders can thus be read as an arm to defend one's own territory of knowledge/power in the academic realm. At the same time, disciplinarity is the other face of the methodologies of appropriation and defence borderization of conquered, colonized territories where the West is used to exercise its ideas and politics of modernity and rationality.

Colonization and what survived of it in coloniality, as for example the idea that the academy is the space-place of knowledge/power imbricated in the mantra of discipline/disciplinarity, implies both the institution of practices hostile to criss-crossings, tranborderization, translation, transposition, transmediation, conversations, coalitions, hospitality, and, of course the resistance to the mingling of disciplinary languages. In the literary field, for example, there are still resistances towards the narrativization of 'specific' languages, as is the case of the "scientific" language contaminated by a narrative, auto-expository style; or the intertwining of different cultural practices, or, ultimately, works of imaginative eclecticism gained through the association with extra-territorial views and analysis: "I like to move through literary spaces and into new spaces, and engage with different communities" – explains Julian Reid, officially a professor and scholar of the discipline 'International relations' – "...That's what I find exciting about reading, getting out from the inside, and into new places and new spaces. I'm not interested in that territoriality of writing that is so typical of the academy".<sup>50</sup>

While working at the translation, documentation, video-making, interviewing, investigation about/on/along border critical thinking inscribed by different cultures in different languages/codifications/epistemologies, I became aware of the fecundity of establishing interconnections between geo-political narratives and geo-corpo-graphical inscriptions and felt I was finally close to the understanding and practice of the delinking option. At the same time, I realized that imagination and the constellations of 'imaginativity' could be the breeding ground for a decolonial turn in Western and Westernized thinking/doing. Through the interpolation of translocal, transnational, transcultural, transborder 'ideative', imaginative, powerful, generative aesthetic constructions in the academic and political discourses, the languages-textualities-acts of imagination can open a great rupture in the alliance of the disciplinary knowledge with global non-decolonized powers.

If the modernidad/colonialidad school has offered new horizons, new words, new analytical tools, new ideas to read, deconstruct, write, and react to Western *saber*/power not only in our research, but also in our role as workers in both the educational system and the public domain, the emergency and centrality of this century-old transnational migration – accomplished through the perilous voyages

<sup>50</sup> Caroline Alphin et al., "Critiquing Resilience: Interview with Julian Reid", 4.

starting from African or Middle-Eastern territories and having as unavoidable landmark the crossings of seas and consequently of the ‘Western’ European borders – requests a further movement, a further viewpoint. We are solicited to deal with postcolonial issues and postcolonial populations whose governments have not delinked from coloniality; whose people are in a state of mobility, heading not towards the new world of the modernidad/colonialidad order, but towards the old world, the place where colonial power was conceived with the aim of occupying the natives’ territories: Europe. The place that has not yet dismantled or at least critically analyzed the imperial, hegemonic drive and the oppression procedures. Europe, the place imposing on the ex-colonies new forms of colonization: exploitative liberalism, global capitalism, support to never-ending old and new conflicts, control on non-Christian, non-‘modern’ populations and their territories.

In the investigation-interpellation-interpolation on/about the Southern Mediterranean decolonial turn, imagination – or the nourishment of aesthetic creativity – has become central in our readings, writings, confrontations. Thus, we came to realize that a meaningful turn had already marked the workings of the transdisciplinary set of tools and perspectives we had been using to approach different kinds of knowledges and consciousness. Having gone through the voices, signs, traces, theories of postcoloniality, deconstruction, bio-power, gender studies, decoloniality, I myself have entered the space of decolonial delinking from the Euro-American hegemonic imprinting and branding of the “new world” today presented as the model for a planetary order of things.

In bringing these TransMediterranean currents and currency of thought on the scene, I look for the opportunity to produce a space of interlaced engagement that shares and evokes multiple resonances and conceptual terms/images/imaginaries for building decolonial worlds of *convivencia* and *conocimiento*.

## Displacing Postcolonial and Decolonial Studies. On the *Coloniality* of the Southern Italian Archive

**Abstract:** Since Italian unification in 1861, the Italian South has been persistently marginalized from the national narrative of progress and development. The aim of this article is to verify the validity of decolonial and postcolonial tools to deconstruct the Eurocentric premises of the discourse on southern backwardness. In this regard, I aim at exposing the coloniality of the longstanding concepts of ‘southern question’ and ‘southernism’. Then, I offer a critique of three different epistemological reactions (*Southern thought*, neo-Bourbon movement, *Meridiana*) born in the 1990s as a reaction against the exacerbation of the dualist interpretation of the Southern Question. Finally, I propose a Gramscian-decolonial method to pursue the decolonization of the southern Italian archive. The adoption of the Italian South as a privileged point of observation provides here an interesting move to displace both postcolonial studies and decolonial studies.

Keywords: *southern question, southernism, postcolonial studies, decolonial studies, coloniality, Gramsci*

### 1. Introduction

In recent decades, the circulation of postcolonial and decolonial studies in the humanities and social sciences have contributed to a disruption of the universality of the Western European narrative of modernity and progress. For both fields of study, colonialism has been constitutive for the Western way of understanding the world; modern Europe, in this regard, owes its cultural, economic, geopolitical, and epistemological centrality to the colonial experience. Nevertheless, while postcolonial studies have generally dated the beginning of colonial modernity to somewhere between the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with primary reference to the British and French colonies in Asia and Africa, decolonial studies have set it back as far as the fifteenth century, i.e. to the conquest of the Americas.<sup>1</sup>

In this paper, I elect to avoid the diatribe that has arisen between postcolonial and decolonial studies.<sup>2</sup> Rather, ignoring the widespread tendency to think of decolonial and postcolonial studies as opposing fields of study, I have found it productive for the purposes of this article to consider the idea that the two may be viewed as complementary tools for understanding power relations in the modern world. I would thus take into account Madina Tlostanova’s position, for whom postcoloniality is a condition, and decoloniality an option. According to Tlostanova, if the former reflects a “certain human existential situation which we often have no power of choosing”, the latter is “a political, ethical, and epistemic positionality and an entry point into agency”.<sup>3</sup> In other words, in describing colonial continuity after the end of the historical experience of colonialism, postcoloniality would seem akin to Aníbal Quijano’s

<sup>1</sup> Enrique Dussel, “Europe, Modernity and Eurocentrism”, *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1.3 (2000), 465-478.

<sup>2</sup> In recent years, a huge debate has concerned the different potentialities of postcolonial and decolonial studies in the pursuit of the decolonization of knowledge. According to Grosfoguel, while decolonial studies are born in close connection with the World-System Theory by Immanuel Wallerstein and by taking seriously in consideration the epistemic insights of thinkers from the Global South, relationship with postmodernism and poststructuralism critique reproduces the impossibility of their advancing beyond the Eurocentric foundation of the Western canon. It is worth mentioning this view even though I do not completely agree with the author. See Ramón Grosfoguel, “Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies and Paradigms of Political-Economy: Transmodernity, Decolonial Thinking, and Global Coloniality”, *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1.1 (2011).

<sup>3</sup> Madina Tlostanova, “The Postcolonial Condition, the Decolonial Option and the Postsocialist Intervention”, in Monika Albrecht, ed., *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Neocolonial Present* (London: Routledge, 2019), 165.

idea of a coloniality of power that permeates the realms of knowledge and being.<sup>4</sup> On the other hand, pursuing the decolonial option means ‘delinking’ global knowledge from the Western colonial Eurocentric model that still pervades it.<sup>5</sup> In fact, if there is one certainty following the postcolonial and decolonial turn taken by the humanities, it is that it would be naïve to ignore, erase, or negate the constitutive impact that the historical experience of colonialism has had and continues to have on our epistemological categories of knowing, naming, and ordering society.<sup>6</sup>

This article aims to verify the validity of the premises of decolonial and postcolonial studies for a territory on the periphery of modern Europe that is not formally considered a former European imperial colony: the Italian *Mezzogiorno*, the South of Italy. What I argue here is the urgency of ‘defamiliarizing’<sup>7</sup> ourselves from the traditional way of understanding the South by giving serious consideration to a dialogue with other ‘epistemologies of the South’.<sup>8</sup> Such an approach would follow in the footsteps of the authors of *Postcolonial Italy*, an intellectual project addressing the postcolonial condition in Italy today – including racialization and gendering processes – in the light of the legacy of colonialism, emigration, and global migrations.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, it would also answer the early invitation by Pasquale Verdicchio<sup>10</sup> to adopt a postcolonial approach to the study of Southern Italian history and society; an invitation that, with a few worthy exceptions,<sup>11</sup> has been largely ignored in the Italian social sciences. In this regard, the work of Antonio Gramsci, a cornerstone both for the study of the southern question, and for the development of postcolonial studies,<sup>12</sup> is a common denominator for the construction of my argument. Also, in this article, I will ask how the common ground to be found between decolonial and postcolonial studies can be used to understand the archive of the southern question in Italy.

To do so, I have divided my essay into three sections. The first distinguishes between the concepts of *questione meridionale* (southern question) and *meridionalismo* (southernism) and tackles the birth of the latter in the aftermath of unification as a discourse on Southern Italian backwardness. In the second section, I intend to analyse the 1990s as the moment in which the discourse on ‘southernism’ has collapsed as a result of the electoral rise of the Northern League party. I aim to do so by analysing three epistemological options born in reaction to its exacerbation of dualist and racist discourse on the South. In the third and last section, I propose a Gramscian-decolonial method for exposing and delinking the highly Eurocentric premises that lurk beneath the southern question.

## 2. *Questione Meridionale, Meridionalismo* or Domestic Colonialism?

In his essay *Una breve storia dell'Italia meridionale*, Piero Bevilacqua brilliantly argues that

la rappresentazione dell'Italia meridionale in età contemporanea ha finito spesso col ridursi a una sorta di non storia: la frustrante vicenda di ciò che essa non aveva potuto essere, il mero risultato di uno squilibrio

<sup>4</sup> Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism and Latin America”, *Nepantla: Views from the South*, 1.3 (2000), 533-580.

<sup>5</sup> See Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking”, *Cultural Studies*, 21.2 (2007), 449-514.

<sup>6</sup> See Gennaro Ascione, “Decolonizing the ‘Global’: The Coloniality of Method and the Problem of the Unit of Analysis”, *Cultural Sociology*, 10.3 (2016), 317-334.

<sup>7</sup> I borrow this definition from Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui’s Sociology of image. See Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Sociología de la imagen. Miradas chi'xi desde la historia andina* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2015), 21.

<sup>8</sup> Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South: Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> Cristina Lombardi-Diop and Caterina Romeo, eds., *Postcolonial Italy: Challenging National Homogeneity* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012). Among the essays of the collection, Roberto Derobertis’ contribution, concerning a postcolonial perspective on Carlo Levi’s *Christ Stopped at Eboli* (157-171), highlights the relation of colonialism, migration and southern question in tracing a genealogy of postcolonial Italy.

<sup>10</sup> Pasquale Verdicchio, “The Preclusion of Postcolonial Discourse in Southern Italy”, in Beverly Allen and Mary Russo, eds., *Revisioning Italy: National Identity and Global Culture* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997).

<sup>11</sup> See Orizzonti Meridiani, ed., *Briganti o emigranti. Sud e movimenti tra conricerca e studi subalterni* (Verona: Ombre corte, 2014), Luigi Cazzato, *Sguardo inglese e mediterraneo italiano. Alle radici del meridionalismo* (Milan: Mimesis, 2017), Francescomaria Tedesco, *Mediterraneismo. Il pensiero antimeridiano* (Milan: Meltemi, 2017), 77-117.

<sup>12</sup> See Baidik Bhattacharya and Neelam Srivastava, eds., *The Postcolonial Gramsci* (London: Routledge, 2012).

costante e inalterato nel tempo e perciò quasi un derivato, un residuo della storia degli altri, incarnata dalle realtà più avanzate dello sviluppo economico, vale a dire dal Nord.<sup>13</sup>

Another prominent historian of the Italian South, Salvatore Lupo, proposes a difference between the ‘southern question’ and ‘southernism’, whereby the two words, often used as synonyms, describe, respectively, a debate focused on the idea of radical alterity between North and South in the case of the former; and a project aimed at either eliminating dualism, or mitigating its negative effects in the South’s favour, in the case of the latter.<sup>14</sup> Looking at it through this lens, I agree with the author when he affirms that the southern question has had the effect of obscuring southernism, the reason for this perhaps residing in the appeal that the dualistic interpretation of the two Italies has had within the fabric of Italian society. Indeed, since Italian unification in 1861, the *Mezzogiorno* has been persistently pushed to the margins of the Italian national narrative on progress and modernity. Described from a northern viewpoint, the South has come to constitute an archive<sup>15</sup> of representations and stereotypes, embodying all the negative characteristics arising from its binary juxtaposition with the developed and advanced regions of the North. Though I cannot in this article address the long history of the construction of the otherization of southern culture, it is nonetheless worthwhile to at least sketch out the fundamental steps in this historical process.

In the opinion of many historians, the starting point dates to the end of the eighteenth century, when in the mind of many Europeans, Southern Italy was already seen as a ‘paradise inhabited by devils’. It was a definition that exalted the contrasting images of the beautiful natural environment, climate, and fertility of the South on the one hand, and the terrible vices of the impoverished people who lived there on the other.<sup>16</sup> As Michele Nani has shown, southern alterity was not imposed by means of a linear process, but ‘traveled’ through the interaction of several agents, including Neapolitan élites, in a continuous circulation of stereotypes.<sup>17</sup> The birth of the southern question within this process is usually associated with Italian unification in 1861. Marta Petrusiewicz, however, has argued that the South emerges as a construction when the birth of the southern question is dated to 1848 and the settlement of liberal exiles in England and Piedmont following the uprisings against the Bourbon monarchy.<sup>18</sup> The nationalist patriots in question used a consistent ‘orientalistic’ cultural archive of representations and prejudices about the South in supporting their demands for the unification of Italy.<sup>19</sup> In 1861, the annexation of the South to the new-born Italian state and the war against brigandage, a massive peasant insurgency that had arisen in the southern countryside, made it possible to recompose their long series of essentialist pronouncements on the South into a brand of racial discourse that, in most cases, identified

<sup>13</sup> “[T]he representation of southern Italy in the contemporary age has often ended up being reduced to a sort of non-history: ... the mere result of a constant and unaltered imbalance over time, and therefore almost a remnant of the history of others, embodied by the most advanced realities of economic development, namely the North”. Piero Bevilacqua, *Breve storia dell’Italia meridionale* [1993], trans. by the present author (Rome: Donzelli, 2005), 8.

<sup>14</sup> Salvatore Lupo, *La questione. Come liberare la storia del Mezzogiorno dagli stereotipi* (Rome: Donzelli, 2015), xviii.

<sup>15</sup> I mean here the ‘archive’ in its figurative dimension, based on Foucault’s well-known expression as “the law of what can be said”. In this sense, the archive represents a cultural artefact of production of facts, narrative and identity. See Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge and Other Discourses on Language* [1969], trans. by A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 129; Carolyn Hamilton et al., eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2002).

<sup>16</sup> Benedetto Croce, *Un paradiso abitato da diavoli* (Milan: Adelphi, 2006).

<sup>17</sup> Michele Nani, *Ai confini della nazione. Stampa e razzismo nell’Italia di fine Ottocento* (Rome: Carocci, 2006).

<sup>18</sup> Marta Petrusiewicz, *Come il Meridione divenne una questione. Rappresentazioni del Sud prima e dopo il Quarantotto* (Soveria Mannelli: Rubbettino, 1998).

<sup>19</sup> The exiles developed an anti-southern stance that was articulated on two fronts: the first aimed at delegitimizing the Bourbon governmental system, while the latter was directed at the core of the southern subalterns’ ancestral traditions, considered too backward to desire unification and progress. See, from different perspectives, Antonino De Francesco, *La palla al piede. Storia del pregiudizio antimeridionale* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2012); Petrusiewicz, *Come il Meridione divenne una questione*; Nelson C. Moe, *The View from Vesuvius: Italian Culture and the Southern Question* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002).

the modern and civil Northern Italy with Europe, and the backward and savage Southern Italy with Africa.<sup>20</sup>

Unlike the southern question, the birth of southernism is conventionally dated to 1875, the year of the publication of the *Southern Letters* by positivist intellectual and conservative member of the Historical Right Pasquale Villari. It is impossible to separate the debate on the southern question from the historical causes that originated its birth. At the beginning of the 1870s, in fact, conservative politicians looked at the *Mezzogiorno* with concern, as the electoral success of the left was growing in the southern regions, and the internal menace of political eversion – both by groups of anarchists, and by the last surviving cells of brigands in the southern mountains – fostered echoes of the Paris Commune in the Italian state. Intellectuals such as Villari and his scholars Franchetti and Sonnino wanted to bring to the attention of public opinion – and Italian conservatives specifically – what they called the ‘social question’ in Southern Italy. Thus, rather than viewing it unpretentiously as merely a project in the South’s favour, one might explain the birth of the southern question as an ideological ‘dispositif’ aimed at the accumulation of documentary evidence of the region’s backwardness, characterized by a specific ‘will to know’.<sup>21</sup> Here, southernism could be interpreted in the same manner as Said’s Orientalism,<sup>22</sup> namely, as a branch of the social sciences that seeks to explain the South from an established place within the academic and social fabric. In this way, the South has literally become a career, whereby the behavior of Southernists is characterized by a constant generation of truths about the region. Similarly to Saidian Orientalism, southernism has enabled Italian culture to manage and even produce an ideological South. This attitude in the social sciences has rapidly naturalized a dualistic understanding of both the North-South divide, and the *Mezzogiorno* itself, presenting the latter as a homogenous bloc of territories sharing the characteristics of backwardness and underdevelopment.

At the end of the century, the racial corollary of this dualist theorem was pushed to extremes – with the blessing of the Socialist Party – by the explicitly racist theories of positivist anthropology as espoused by Lombroso and Niceforo.<sup>23</sup> Counter to this racist ideology, Antonio Gramsci, in his famous definition of the southern question, highlighted the relationships of power that set northern industrialists and southern landowners against country workers and peasants, giving birth to a revolutionary interpretation of the southern problem.<sup>24</sup> We will discuss the innovativeness of the Gramscian proposal again in the third section of this essay.

In the meantime, I think it is appropriate to mention the role southernism played in imparting ideological cohesion during the post-war period. After World War II, the Southern population and territories became an object of economic intervention. During the 1960s, a new phase of State intervention witnessed the founding of the *Cassa per il Mezzogiorno*, with the dual aim of engaging in direct public investment in southern industry, while integrating and functionally controlling the mobility of southern populations in fulfilment of northern industrial needs.<sup>25</sup> While southernists who engaged in

<sup>20</sup> The identification of Southern Italy as Africa and as non-European is expressed overtly in the words written to Cavour by Luigi Carlo Farini, Chief Administrator of the South in the first months of Piedmontese control there: “But my friend, what lands are these, Molise and the South! What barbarism! This is not Italy! This is Africa: compared to these peasants, the Bedouins are the pinnacle of civilization. And what misdeeds!” (cit. in Moe, 165).

<sup>21</sup> Alfredo Capone, “L’età liberale”, in Giuseppe Galasso and Rosario Romeo, eds., *Storia del Mezzogiorno. Volume XII. Il Mezzogiorno nell’Italia unita* (Naples: Edizioni del Sole, 1991).

<sup>22</sup> Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* [1978] (London: Penguin, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> See the construction of the southern inferior race at the end of nineteenth century in Vito Teti, *La razza maledetta. Origini del pregiudizio antimeridionale* (Roma: Ilmanifestolibri, 2011) and Aliza Wong, *Race and Nation in Liberal Italy, 1861-1911. Meridionalism, Empire, Diaspora* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2006).

<sup>24</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Antonio Gramsci: Pre-Prison Writings*, ed. by Richard Bellamy (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1994), 263-264.

<sup>25</sup> Luciano Ferrari Bravo and Alessandro Serafini, *Stato e sottosviluppo. Il caso del Mezzogiorno italiano* [1972] (Verona: Ombre corte, 2012).



political economy made their expertise available toward the development of the southern regions,<sup>26</sup> in the northern industrialized cities, the massive emigration of peasants for employment in lesser factory jobs was received by local populations with overt racial behaviour.<sup>27</sup> In other words, the southernist discourse inextricably bound the destiny of the South to development in the north.

### 3. The Rise of the *Lega Nord* and the Collapse of Southernism

At the beginning of the 1990s, the rise of the Northern League party in Italy in the wake of the *tangentopoli* political crisis exacerbated the prevailing anti-southern stance. Politicians of the *Lega Nord* (Northern League) claimed the existence of a *northern question*, whose principles could be summarized in its portrayal of the South as a *ball and chain* for northern productivity and development, and its separatist claim for independence for the region of Padania. The further demonization of the southerners in Italian society had consequences in both the historiographical, and philosophical debates on the *Mezzogiorno*. In this paragraph, I will analyse three epistemological positions born in the 1990s in answer to the continuous deprecation of southern culture, society, and identity by the Northern League: the idea of ‘southern thought’ as coined by the sociologist Franco Cassano; the claims of certain Neoborbonic groups and associations; and the historiographical project of the academic journal *Meridiana*. It is very difficult to identify the characteristics these proposals for rethinking the Italian south might have in common. While neither *southern thought*, nor *Meridiana*, born of an effort on the part of the southern academicians to engage with the southern problem, have crossed the walls of universities, the Neoborbonic claims represent a set of non-scientific, extra-academic divulgations by journalists that have, through written publications and social media, been very popular in southern society. Despite strong differences, all reject the discourse on southern backwardness and hence represent three different manifestations of the collapse of the *meridionalismo*.

In 1996, the ground-breaking essay *Pensiero meridiano (Southern Thought)*, 2012 by the sociologist Franco Cassano was published as an explicit reaction to the continuous delegitimization of southern culture.<sup>28</sup> Cassano’s intention is revealed in the prologue: “the strongest motivation for reclaiming the value of the South came from a rebellion against its representations by dominant culture and the inadvertent forms of racism found in many of its variants, even those that are beyond suspicion of being so and politically correct”.<sup>29</sup> The interesting theoretical move by Cassano resides in his explicitly seeking a connection between the Italian South and the global South, one that criticizes the methodological nationalism implied in the traditional reading of the southern question. Cassano’s broader aim is a radical subversion of perspective: rather than be thought about by the North, the South must recover its autonomous point of view, “its ancient dignity as subject of thought, to interrupt a long sequence in which it has only been thought by others”.<sup>30</sup> How does the Apulian sociologist conceive this autonomous dimension of Southern thought? He proposes a reversal of various stigmas placed on the South by rethinking, for instance, the accusation of laziness towards southerners in terms of the importance to southern lifestyle of a modest pace, or by redefining familism as a manifestation of solidarity among the South’s nuclear villages. In my opinion, the limits of this line of thought stand in the fixed characters it assigns to the idea of South. Cassano subverts the negative traits of the traditional representation of the

<sup>26</sup> See Gerardo C. Nicoletta, “Laboratories for Economic Expertise. Lay Perspectives on Italian Disciplinary Economics”, in Jens Maesse et al. (eds.), *Power and Influence of Economists: Contributions to the Social Studies of Economics* (London: Routledge, 2021), 126-143.

<sup>27</sup> The theme of the racialization of southerners in the northern industrialized cities in the years of the economic miracle is recalled in Luchino Visconti’s masterpiece *Rocco and His Brothers* (1960). Among the most influential inquiries of that period, see also Goffredo Fofi, *L’immigrazione meridionale a Torino* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1976), Franco Alasia and Danilo Montaldi, *Milano, Corea. Inchiesta sugli immigrati* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1975).

<sup>28</sup> Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean* [1996], trans. by Norma Bouchard and Valerio Ferme (New York: Fordham U.P., 2012).

<sup>29</sup> Cassano, *Southern Thought*, xxxiii.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, xxxv.



South through an anti-modern stance that fails to escape the essentialist trap of identity, while also avoiding any actual reflection upon the established internal power relationships of Southern society.

The second reaction has been expressed by a constellation of writers, groups, and associations, together known as the neo-Bourbon (or Neoborbonic) movement. In the wake of the celebrations held for the 150th anniversary of Italian unification, a whole body of misleading, nostalgic, identitarian literature has proclaimed the magnificence of the former Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, an entity whose power and importance, in the opinion of these writers, was arrested only by the Piedmontese invasion and consequent Italian colonization of the South. In their opinion, the consequences have been the cultural and economic subalternization within the Italian social fabric of the entire *Mezzogiorno*. Mirroring the anti-Southern dualist narrative, this neo-Bourbon discourse, rather than acting as an alternative to it, shares its premises. I see two main dangers in inventing such a tradition:<sup>31</sup> a distorted use of public history, and a seizure of radical categories of thought in service of a resentful sovereign aspiration that pushes reflections on the Southern question toward yet another methodologic nationalist fallacy. If in the second case, the decontextualization of Gramsci's pre-prison writings on the *Mezzogiorno* as a domestic colony and the repression of brigandage can provide a fruitful example of such appropriation, in the former, the unsophisticated view promoted by neo-Bourbon writers draws upon nationalistic themes that blame very different historical events, characters, and ideologies for the problems of the South today. In this regard, the simplification of the relationships between conservative and progressive parties during the Risorgimento, all considered responsible for the colonization of the South, could be the first example of how this interpretation of history is misleading. Cavour and Garibaldi, Victor Emmanuel and Mazzini are considered, if indistinctly, enemies of southern identity. Another historiographical example is found in the representation of the brigandage insurgency. The complexity of the peasant revolt in the South in the aftermath of Italian unification is reduced to the idea that brigands are Southern national patriots, partisans of southern identity, and as such, fought courageously against the Piedmontese enemy. This view not only evades several important investigations on the theme of brigandage,<sup>32</sup> but also radically invents a southern national identity through a distortion of collective memory.

Finally, the rise, based on anti-southern claims, of the Northern League party in Italian politics has prompted a group of scholars to call into question both the Manichean vision of an Italy divided between North and South, and the representation of the South as a unified, backward bloc. Intellectuals from different disciplines, all associated with the journal *Meridiana*,<sup>33</sup> have deconstructed, de-ideologized, and criticized cultural representations and stereotypes inspired by misleading, abstract uniformities. This refutation of the thesis of southern backwardness in contrast to northern modernity on the part of the scholars of *Meridiana* consisted primarily in highlighting the Italian South as a non-homogenous location of modernity, having regional differences that have been underestimated – if not ignored – by the heretofore dominant dualistic approach. Simultaneously, in the Anglophone Italian studies departments, some scholars have borrowed a new idiom from Said's Orientalism to decode the role played by stereotypes and representations in shaping the image of the *Mezzogiorno* as inferior during the Italian nation-building process.<sup>34</sup> Although these efforts look at the question of Italian national

<sup>31</sup> I am referring here to the seminal work by Eric J. Hobsbawm and Terence O. Ranger, eds., *The Invention of a Tradition* [1983] (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2018).

<sup>32</sup> The massive insurgency of brigandage in post-unification Italy has not been systematically scrutinized until the 1960s, when Marxist authors came out with some important publications. Recently, the debate reopened by neo-Bourbon positions has aroused a new interest in the subject by scholars belonging to the *Meridiana* journal. Among the most important contributions, see Franco Molfese, *Storia del brigantaggio dopo l'unità* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 1964), Aldo de Jaco, *Il brigantaggio meridionale. Cronaca inedita dell'unità d'Italia* [1969] (Rome: Editori Riuniti, 2005), and the recent book by Carmine Pinto, *La guerra per il Mezzogiorno. Italiani, borbonici e briganti 1860-1870* (Bari-Rome: Laterza, 2019).

<sup>33</sup> "Presentazione", *Meridiana. Rivista di Storia e Scienze Sociali*, 1 (1987), 9-15.

<sup>34</sup> See Jane Schneider, ed., *Italy's Southern Question: Orientalism in one Country* (Oxford and New York: Berg, 1998), John Dickie, *Darkest Italy: The Nation and the Stereotypes of the Mezzogiorno, 1860-1900* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 1999), Moe, *The View from Vesuvius*.

identity with different eyes, underlining how the modern Italian identity has grown through the subalternization of southerners in the Italian social fabric, they do not completely grasp the domestic colonial fracture that in my opinion marks the Italian unification process.

#### 4. Unmaking the Southern Question: Towards a Gramscian-Decolonial Method

At this point, it appears that two questions arising from the foregoing paragraphs remain unresolved. First, is it possible to interpret the southern question without either subscribing to the Eurocentric narrative, or falling into the essentialist identity trap? And second, how might the Eurocentric premises of the southern question be exposed? In answer, the mobilization of a series of key concepts in postcolonial and decolonial theorization could offer a reading of the South as a racialized and subaltern internal entity in both the Italian, and the European imagination.

Gramsci's *questione meridionale*, a milestone in this process, has inspired a wide variety of global scholars interested in the potential of his interpretation.<sup>35</sup> As Iain Chambers has suggested, by exposing the open and dynamic aspects of culture through a redefinition of power relationships, Gramsci has additionally re-defined our understanding of political and cultural struggle – previously understood via the categories of modernity and backwardness – in terms of the critical coordinates of hegemony and subalternity.<sup>36</sup> In a famous passage from his *Prison Notebooks*, Gramsci described the relationships of power between the northern and southern regions of Italy using the metaphor of the North as an 'octopus' that enriched itself at the expense of the South.<sup>37</sup> According to Gramsci, a negative identity was imposed on the South through the machinery of imaginative geography in order to hide these asymmetrical relationships of power. To summarize, to unmask existing domestic colonial power relationships, it is necessary to take stock of that brand of public discourse which has constantly racialized the South. It should be noted, however, that despite its potential, the Gramscian intuition on domestic colonialism in Italy can be misunderstood in two different ways. We have already illustrated the seizure of his thought and decontextualization of his writings by neo-Bourbon writers. Furthermore, while the Gramscian shift in the interpretation of the Southern question has inspired a broad historiography on the South, fewer historians agree with the domestic colonial explanation, as a formal colony in the *Mezzogiorno* has never been established.

To avoid such a misinterpretation, the Gramscian model could interact here with the definition of coloniality proposed by Aníbal Quijano. Relating to the cultural logic of colonialism – and thus to the cultural heritage of colonialism after the end of its historical experience – the idea of coloniality of power could fulfil two functions. On the one hand, it could represent a concept less cumbersome than that of internal colonialism in its ability to explain the dynamics of north-south power relations in Italy. On the other, it could illustrate the genealogy of the epistemological categories utilized during the emergence and sedimentation of discourse on the southern question. In fact, Quijano thought that the two principal axes of the coloniality of power were the racial and Eurocentric dimensions of the perspective of knowledge that accompanied it. In particular, this model of knowledge, originating from the encounter between Europeans and Indians in the Americas during the colonial conquest, took on a binary and dualistic character in which the colonies formed a negative pole through which modernity and

<sup>35</sup> Among the most important publications: Stuart Hall, "Gramsci's relevance for study of race and ethnicity" (1986), reprinted in David Morley and Kuan-Hsing Chen, eds., *Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies* (London: Routledge, 1996), 411-441; Edward W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Knopf, 1993).

<sup>36</sup> Iain Chambers, ed., *Esercizi di potere. Gramsci, Said e il postcoloniale* (Rome: Meltemi, 2006), 8. This fundamental insight by Antonio Gramsci provided the Indian collective of Subaltern Studies with a new methodology for decolonizing the historiography of subaltern classes in colonial and postcolonial India. See Ranajit Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Colonial Insurgency in India* (New Delhi: Oxford U.P., 1983) and *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1998), Partha Chatterjee, *The Politics of the Governed: Reflections on Popular Politics in Most of the World* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2004).

<sup>37</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from Prison Notebooks*, ed. by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 71-72.

rationality, produced exclusively in Europe, were compelled to relate. As Quijano has shown, the intersubjective and cultural relations between Western Europe and the rest of the world were codified in a whole range of new categories: East-West, primitive-civilized, magical/mystical-scientific, irrational-rational, traditional-modern: non-European and European.<sup>38</sup>

In my opinion, the process of the otherization of southern culture that took place during the Italian nation-building process had colonial connotations; namely, it was conceived inside the same colonial culture that forged European modernity. Luigi Cazzato has noticed how coloniality not only affects the relationships between colonizer and colonized, but also pervades the relationships of power established inside the Western world itself. Pursuing the arguments of Walter Mignolo,<sup>39</sup> Manfred Pfister,<sup>40</sup> and Roberto Dainotto,<sup>41</sup> Cazzato draws a distinction between the colonial, and the imperial difference in the case of Mediterranean Europe.<sup>42</sup> The latter, specifically, works by applying some of the features of the colonial difference to regions, languages, people, and states that cannot be colonized. Both Pfister's idea of 'Meridionism', and Dainotto's concept of 'European southernism' exemplify imperial difference, while revealing another side of *Orientalism* in the construction of a modern European identity: that is, that during the 18th century, modern European identity was defined as such not only in relation to the East (as claimed by Edward Said) or the Americas (as claimed by decolonial studies), but also in relation to its own southern shore.

With this in mind, I would consider the process of Italian unification as reflecting a local translation of global colonial power and examine how the new-born Italian nation-state emerged as a Mediterranean frontier (both literally and metaphorically) between the 'West and the Rest',<sup>43</sup> such that its southern regions came to constitute a liminal space between Europe and the Orient or Africa. In other words, these years witnessed the birth of a domestic colonial archive. The discourse that presented the Manichean vision of a modern, civilized North, as part of the European constellation of modernity, and a backward and savage South, could only have emerged because the Italian and Neapolitan élites and intellectuals that led the unification process were part of a European constellation of European intellectuals whose vision of modernity was already inextricably linked to that of coloniality. These binary categories of representation are not, in fact, neutral; the identification of Europe and the West as historical constructs that operate as *silent referents*<sup>44</sup> within the modern concepts of progress, development, and freedom is due to the intimate associations ascertainable between the ideas of Europe, modernity, and colonialism.

## 5. Conclusion

By observing the representation of Southern Italy through the lens of postcolonial and decolonial theories, this article has aimed at showing how the discourse of modernity was imposed on the *Mezzogiorno* using categories similar to those employed by the West during its colonial expansion. I have also argued that the emergence and sedimentation of the archive of the southern question coincided with the trivialization, negation, and erasure of the European colonial experience from the Italian national process.

What I want to posit here is the possibility of opening up a decolonial space between the dualistic approach whose interpretation of the southern question is founded on the dichotomy of modernity-backwardness and the parochial neo-Bourbon narrative: a space of resistance, where we can analyse

<sup>38</sup> Quijano, *Coloniality of Power*, 542.

<sup>39</sup> Mignolo, *Delinking*, 474.

<sup>40</sup> Manfred Pfister, *The Fatal Gift of Beauty: The Italies of British Travellers* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996).

<sup>41</sup> Roberto Dainotto, *Europe (In Theory)* (Durham and London: Duke U.P., 2007).

<sup>42</sup> Cazzato, *Sguardo inglese*, 28-30.

<sup>43</sup> Stuart Hall, "The West and the Rest: Discourse and Power", in Stuart Hall et al., eds., *Modernity: An Introduction to Modern Societies* (Malden MA and Oxford: Blackwell, 1996).

<sup>44</sup> This idea is associated with the concept by Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* [2000] (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton U.P., 2008), 28.

how this domestic colonial archive – the first local Italian translation of the global colonial archive established by Western society with the conquest of the Americas – not only affects the archive of discourses, stereotypes, and representation of the South, but also has a material bearing on the lives of the people who live there.

Reopening the domestic colonial archive in Italy implies not only a challenge to mainstream social sciences, but also a displacement of the same decolonial and postcolonial studies. The adoption of the Italian South as a privileged point of observation could be an interesting move toward “decolonizing” postcolonial studies that, from inception, have been inflected by a near-exclusive emphasis on Anglophone and Francophone archives. Simultaneously, a focus on the subalternization of the Italian South could introduce an ‘internal’ variable into the discourse of imperial difference. This also means reducing the risks, sometimes present in some decolonial thinking, of ungenerously labelling all critical thought coming from Europe as Eurocentric, while ignoring several experiences of internal colonialism that have marked European history itself.<sup>45</sup> Finally, the challenge of Southern Italians today consists in escaping the inherent ‘Northernness’<sup>46</sup> of Eurocentric and historicist social sciences and establishing fruitful alliances with such thinkers of the “Global South” as are engaged in inventing new epistemologies of resistance and transformation from a southern vantage point.

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<sup>45</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, for instance, describes Antonio Gramsci as a ‘Eurocentric thinker’ while arguing against postcolonial studies’ relationship with Western critical theory and the post-modernist/structuralist canon. See Grosfoguel, *Decolonizing Post-Colonial Studies*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory: The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007).



## ‘Delinking’ and Other Essential Moments in Walter Mignolo’s Decolonial Proposal. A Philosophical Perspective

**Abstract:** Walter Mignolo’s studies cannot be reduced to one single field, characterised as they are by a strong semiotic, sociological and philosophical quality. In this study I have attempted to focus on their philosophical trait. Specifically, I have tried to measure how many and what are the essential margins that allow Mignolo’s thought to distance itself from the tradition of the European thought. Its geo-political connotation inscribes his research on a ‘pluriverse’ dimension, which is at the same time characterized by a certain body-politics in his understanding of human things.

**Keywords:** *decoloniality, postcolonial theory, body-politics, border studies, philosophy*

### 1. On the Concept of ‘Modernity’: A Denaturalizing Premise

Walter Mignolo’s philosophical project programmatically lies beyond any possible critical line drawn by the Frankfurt school and by Max Horkheimer in particular.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the issue is philosophically more complex, because Walter Mignolo’s studies go beyond the critical theory from the early version of the Frankfurt School to later poststructuralists (Derrida) and post-modernists (Jameson), all of these lacking a critical awareness of what ‘colonial wound’ meant and still means. In any case and to put us in the right order of ideas, Frantz Fanon and Gloria Anzaldúa can provide another departure point for a critique of Horkheimer’s original critical theory.

This being said, it may seem trivial in itself if we do not specifically measure ourselves with Walter Mignolo’s writing and research. Since the very beginning of his research, his project has been characterised by a double movement. On the one hand, Mignolo engages in a study with strong sociological and anthropological connotations that essentially puts Latin America at the centre of a deconstructive and destructuring discussion. In other words, Mignolo’s writing was and is a struggle for an epistemological and historical liberation aimed at restoring a truer face to a continent, the South American one, outside a dialectic projection whose coordinates are only European. On the other, in many moments of his most recent research, Mignolo has speculated from a political point of view, looking at the liberation of Latin America from the economic and capitalist shoals of a world that is foreign to this continent and that has seen its multiple soul humiliated and interrupted in its growth by the so-called *pachakuti*.<sup>2</sup> *Pachakuti* or, for want of a better translation, the upsetting of time and space, was brought about by the so-called ‘discovery of America’ and the contextual European ‘Renaissance’, which on that colonial foundation built its economic and intellectual leap.

The reasons that explain the decolonial turning point in Mignolo’s studies are different and yet one of the most important ones is the ‘de-naturalization’ of the concept of ‘modernity’. ‘Modernity’ cannot be judged in a universal historical sense, regardless of time and space, from the ‘loci of enunciations’ in

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<sup>1</sup> Even more in the contemporary philosophical strait, for Mignolo the initial comparison is between Alain Badiou, *Manifeste pour la philosophie* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1989) and Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987). As Mignolo states: “Now, Fanon and Anzaldúa can provide another departure point for taking Horkheimer’s original critical theory to the terrain of de-linking and to the decolonial shift”. Walter D. Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality and the Grammar of De-coloniality”, *Cultural Studies*, 21.2-3 (2007), 498.

<sup>2</sup> For a careful understanding of the term ‘pachakuti’, see Walter D. Mignolo, *L’idea di America latina* (Milano: Mimesis, 2013), 45.

which it was originally conceived. On this point, on this denaturalization of some concepts and the corresponding expressions, Mignolo’s commitment has to do with semiotic issues, because he primarily poses a terminological question: ‘the terms of the conversation’ as he claims, in order to restore a correct philological, historical and political dimension of the order of things. To summarize, a problem that has some Foucauldian traits, Mignolo uses the expression ‘linguaging’, to give meaning to a question that has its different semiotic variants, almost all political in nature.

A simple explanation of the term ‘linguaging’ is not easy, because rather than to a determined linguistic phenomenon, it refers to a semiotic dimension with strong pragmatic connotations, which in some way testifies to the existence of a semiotic common and frayed fault from which each defines the linguistic boundaries to which it decides to belong. In short, ‘linguaging’ occurs when there is the possibility of speaking English, French, Spanish, and maybe Nahuatl, with all the colonial nuances that certain semiotic mixtures entail within the framework of ‘mestizo’ and border considerations. This is another passage by Aníbal Quijano, endorsed by Mignolo: what should one look for, first of all, if one proposes a decolonial project? Quijano: “En primer término, la decolonización epistemológica, para dar paso luego a una nueva comunicación inter-cultural, a un intercambio de experiencias y de significaciones, como la base de otra racionalidad que pueda pretender, con legitimidad, a alguna universalidad”.<sup>3</sup> And again, and in a different perspective on the problem of “inhab[ing]t the language”, let us read the following passage by Gloria Anzaldúa, also endorsed by Mignolo in a semiotic perspective: “Images are more direct, more immediate than words, and closer to the unconscious. Picture language precedes thinking in words; the metaphorical mind precedes analytical consciousness”.<sup>4</sup>

To go back to an issue related to the so-called ‘modernity’, we know how on the basis of the lessons provided by Hegel and Schmidt<sup>5</sup> modernity itself was founded on three well-defined historical events, that is, the Renaissance, the Reformation and the discovery of the New World. Indeed, these should be the foundations to be *denaturalised* and *provincialized* in thinking ‘modernity’. Conversely, as a side of the same coin, ‘coloniality’ is a complex phenomenon, which is political, social, economic and above all philosophical in that it has to do with (the reproduction of) knowledge. Mignolo concludes: “From the Caribbean, you see that modernity not only needed coloniality but that coloniality was and continues to be constitutive of modernity”.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The Decolonization of Time (and Space)

In short, if we side with Mignolo in an order of considerations made of overturning historical plans, the discovery of America is but an invention, because it was a continent that has always been there since the dawn of time. The same idea of ‘Middle Ages’ would be an artificial construct, aimed at putting modern Renaissance man at the beginning of an era, according to an idea of ‘the end’ (Middle Ages) and the beginning of time (Renaissance), which is inscribed in European ‘colonial grammar’ thanks to an authentic ‘colonization of time’.

From a ‘spatial’ point of view, the issue is equally complex. To have an idea of what a colonization (exploitation) of space means, it would be enough here to consider coordinates such as the ‘old and new world’ or also ‘the internal and the external’, since it always concerns phenomena that are understood geographically as such, starting from a European colonial perspective. In short, according to Mignolo,

<sup>3</sup> Aníbal Quijano, “Modernidad, colonialidad y América Latina”, *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1.3 (2000), 447. Another constant reference point throughout his research is Enrique Dussel, *Filosofía de la liberación* (México: Editorial Ecol, 1977).

<sup>4</sup> Anzaldúa, *Borderland/La Frontera*, cit. in Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton U.P., 2000), 228.

<sup>5</sup> Georg W. Friedrich Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: Dover Publications, 1956); Carl Schmitt, *Le Nomos de la terre* [1950] (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2001).

<sup>6</sup> Mignolo, “Delinking”, 466.



statements like the following should be reversed to obtain a decolonial effect: “Let me repeat so the reader cannot be confused by old habit of thinking taking for granted that the West is a geography and not a language-memory conceptual apparatus then penetrated directly or indirectly billions of consciousness all over the world: in Greek, Latin and the six imperial modern/colonial European languages”.<sup>7</sup>

As for the ‘colonization of time’, let us think of the all-European vision artfully built to conquer and prey on the Amerindian populations as ‘primitive’, according to a determined ‘temporal before’ in the Renaissance perspective. A European and Christian perspective, founded on a Greek and Roman historical axis in which the Amerindian populations lack a ‘history’ because of the non-trivial fact that they do not have a writing system which is able to tell it.<sup>8</sup> This idea represents the core of Bartolomé de Las Casas’s thought, according to which primitives who inhabited the West Indies, lost as they are over time, are ‘barbaric’ because they do not avail of a writing system, they do not have a religion, nor can they rely on a system of sciences, precisely, engrained in Greek and Latin legacy.<sup>9</sup> This is obviously a discourse produced by the ‘rhetoric of modernity’, which draws a distinction between what is ‘science’ and what is simply ‘culture’, in any age, according to the different latitudes of the colonial extension of the issue. In short, from a decolonizing perspective, the very idea of ‘progress’ enrolls in a time horizon and asserts its temporal ‘differential’ at different times in European and world colonial history. According to Mignolo, this takes place thanks to a holy alliance of capitalism and Christianity. The system of alliances between capitalism, colonialism and Christianity is historically complex and capitalist and industrial revolution were not possible without a corresponding and founding coloniality.<sup>10</sup>

To sum up, the colonization of time and space takes place on two axes: a temporal one developing from the presumed end of an era, the Middle Ages and the corresponding recovery of a beauty that belongs to Greek and Roman classicism (the Renaissance); along with a geographical/spatial axis constituted by America as the land of overseas ‘barbarians’, a new space (compared to Europe) that is reduced to the unique logic of a European ‘same’. As Mignolo states: “The European Renaissance and New World were two fundamental anchors of the modern/colonial world held together by the complicity between the rhetoric of modernity and the logic of coloniality”.<sup>11</sup> Hence, in an intellectual and cultural sense, the project of a complete exploitation which is not only natural but also spiritual is interpreted differently in colonial America: appropriation of lands<sup>12</sup> and exploitation of work, governmental and authoritarian control, but above all control of gender and sexuality (the Christian family and its conduct, with all its sexual values). All of them contributed to the control over the ‘being’ of human beings, that it is to say, an articulated government of their subjectivity.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 509.

<sup>8</sup> Again, here we find a new circumstance of a semiotic order as discriminating in Mignolo’s philosophy.

<sup>9</sup> As an example, see Bartolomé de Las Casas, *Brevissima relazione della distruzione delle Indie* (San Domenico di Fiesole: Edizioni Cultura della Pace, 1999).

<sup>10</sup> Aníbal Quijano is once again the point of reference for Mignolo’s research. See, for example, Aníbal Quijano and Immanuel Wallerstein, “Americanness as a Concept, or the Americas in the Modern World-System”, *International Social Science Journal*, XLIV, 4 (1992), 549-557 and Aníbal Quijano, “Modernidad, colonialidad y América Latina”, *Neplanta: Views from South*, 1.3 (2000), 533-580.

<sup>11</sup> Mignolo, “Delinking”, 477.

<sup>12</sup> In this circumstance, which coincides with the colonial exploitation of the lands, according to Carl Schmitt the transition from the pre-global to the global era takes place. Schmitt, *Le Nomos de la terre*.

<sup>13</sup> Mignolo: “The control of subjectivity (the Christian faith, secular idea of subject and citizen) and knowledge (the principles of Theology structuring all forms of knowledge encompasses in the Trivium and the Quadrivium; secular philosophy and concept of Reason structuring the human and natural sciences and the practical knowledge of professional schools; e.g., Law and Medicine, in Kant’s contest of the faculties)”. Mignolo, “Delinking”, 478. The reference here to a colonial mix of cultures is once again to Enrique Dussel. In any case, see Aníbal “Modernidad, colonialidad y América Latina”.

### 3. For a Philosophy of History Liberation

In this light, a ‘philosophy of liberation’ (Enrique Dussel) could represent a possible solution for Mignolo. This philosophy of liberation is in turn possible only provided that it is filled with geopolitically determined contents: in other words, every time we speak, write, we make politics starting from the context in which the gesture of talking, writing, making politics takes place. Space and time (*loci enunciationis*) play a pivotal role in the determination of every single thing. If these epistemological and philological parameters are taken into account, then an ‘analytic’ political philosophy is possible, never allowing dialectical temptations of synthesis: ‘analysis vs. synthesis’, for a solution that corresponds to an openness of the sense of things towards “pluriversality”.<sup>14</sup>

In any case, we need to put aside the idea linked to the possibility of a historical macro narration of human things. We must therefore free ourselves from the idea of a unique and linear history. We must go beyond the semiotic dimensions traced by the hegemonic languages (English, German, French, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese), and their Greek and Roman foundations, because there are many ‘beginnings’ beyond Adam and Eve and Greek civilization: it is all about recovering them beyond the silence to which they were forced by the narration that culminates in an alleged modern turn. The Tupac Amaru uprising in Peru (1781), the Haitian revolution (1804), and the decolonization of Africa and Asia in the twentieth century are all examples that demonstrate that another world and another history are possible, because the beginning of human things is not unique and exclusive, and certainly a solution today can be found even without resorting to neoliberal or socialist/Marxist variables on the same ‘modern’ theme.

Mignolo’s distance from the Marxist tradition is not a trivial circumstance throughout his research; like the Foucauldian philosophy, such tradition is accused of a lack of analysis concerning the colonial aspects of capitalism.<sup>15</sup> It is worth providing an example of Mignolo’s observations on Marx, which are interesting and very frequent in his decolonial approach, regardless of the ideological dimension. He argues: “However, as a German Jew (his early writings were devoted to the Jewish question), Marx may have felt the racial differential inscribed in his body and his persona. He translated the racial differential that made the Jews the *damnés* within Europe into the subaltern position of the proletariat in class differential”.<sup>16</sup> And then, as if it were not enough, Mignolo explicitly writes that: “the emancipation of the proletariat in Europe (and the US) cannot be taken as a model-for-export ... In other words, the new and extended working class is not just oppressed because it is a working class but because the majority of the most exploited workers belong to the ‘wrong’ racial group”.<sup>17</sup>

The dynamics regulating the occurrence of events are not and cannot be traced back to a single historical philosophical logic of Hegelian matrix: to provide a classic example of Mignolo’s philosophy, the Haitian revolution was an unthinkable historical phenomenon if we accept certain European historiographic parameters as universal.<sup>18</sup> Or even let’s think of the rhetoric of ‘salvation’, as it was understood by the Spaniards during the conquest of the so-called new world, and how it was interpreted lived and touted in the ‘salvation / civilization / liberation’ trail in the last Iraqi campaigns or in Afghanistan with all the possible variations on the theme. This rhetoric is senseless, if it is applied to

<sup>14</sup> However far away in time and culturally ‘other’ than the discourse Mignolo tries to set, we are not far from him with an intention of openness like the one imagined by Herbert Marcuse, when at the time he contested from his point of view ‘the one-dimensional man’.

<sup>15</sup> To Karl Marx, Mignolo explicitly opposes Frantz Fanon.

<sup>16</sup> Mignolo, “Delinking”, 486.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid. Here the critical reference in the Marxist sense is to Paul Virno, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.

<sup>18</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1995).

phenomena that seem identical, but have been differently lived and propagated in different times of different histories.<sup>19</sup>

In order for us to be able to make decolonial considerations, first and foremost it is necessary to denaturalise the concept of ‘modernity’, by providing this presumed universality with a de-colonial project of liberation. Strictly speaking, an authentic political de-colonization and liberation occurred between 1947 and 1970 in Africa and Asia. Notwithstanding this historical decolonising process, a different de-colonization is still necessary, which is much more radical because it is practised in an epistemological and cultural sense, which Ramon Grosfoguel has described as a “second decolonization”;<sup>20</sup> this project has never materialised and would be determined every time at a spiritual level insofar as it is a matter of theoretically managing each subject of study with the disposition to unmask what is “the logic of the coloniality” that founded it. In a nutshell, Mignolo’s stance appears to be characterized by a specific radicality, if authentic examples of decolonializing thoughts are for him those clearly formulated, in the sixties and seventies, by radical Arab-Islamic thinkers (Sayyid Qutb, Ali Shariati, Ayatollah Komeini), by the philosophy of liberation in Latin America and by the indigenous intellectuals and activists in Latin America, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. In short, we should follow a trend of things that proceeds “from the Zapatistas to the World Social Forum to progressive Muslims intellectuals and Southern European critical voices toward a pluri-versal world. The struggle for epistemic de-coloniality lies, precisely, here”.<sup>21</sup>

To some extent, by continuing the project of a decolonization of knowledge, he goes beyond the same liberation program to which Dussel referred, because a true decolonization of knowledge implies such a broad horizon that we could speak about an “even larger project that encompasses both, as Fanon puts it, the colonized and the colonizer”.<sup>22</sup> Of course a truly decolonial project must abandon all forms of abstract universalism: Christianity, Liberalism, Marxism, and Islamism, if considered in a general sense without any further specification, respond to “the same fundamentalist and imperial logic”.<sup>23</sup> Fundamentalism is both Islamic and differently Christian (assuming that there is only one Christianity), it is as liberal as it is differently Marxist. This depends on when each judgment was applied unilaterally or as a universal project for the implementation of the various political structures, which would always be considered from a horizon that is certainly global but always also local. Moreover, the discussion is utterly political, as it concerns every possible alternative which is put forward with respect to the current politically determined state of affairs. It is not a matter of replacing a right-wing speech with a left-wing one, an ‘American’ with a ‘European’ one because it is more progressive. Making such hypotheses at the planetary level (in a universal and abstract way) does not make sense: each has its own specific ‘place of enunciation’, with all that this entails in pragmatic terms at the semiotic level and not only.<sup>24</sup> The *damnés* (Fanon) “as its central philosophical and political figure” play an important role: each their own *damnés*, depending on the times and spaces, the political places where this ‘damnation’ takes place.

#### 4. Struggles for Emancipation and Struggles for Liberation. The Power Differential

Given certain philosophical assumptions it is possible at this point to understand an important passage in Mignolo’s philosophy. Its decolonial project has no emancipatory objectives: it is not a struggle for

<sup>19</sup> Here Walter Mignolo’s references are classic in a decolonial sense: Aimé Césaire, *Discourse sur le colonialism* (New York, London: MR, 1972), Frantz Fanon, *Peau noire, masques blancs* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1952).

<sup>20</sup> Ramón Grosfoguel, “Developmentalism, Modernity and Dependency in Latin America”, *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1.2 (2000), 347-374.

<sup>21</sup> Mignolo, “Delinking”, 500.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 457.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 458.

<sup>24</sup> Susan George, *Another World Is Possible if...* (London: Verso, 2003).

the emancipation of a people or a region, because the very concept of ‘emancipation’ has a European history, which is closely linked to the Enlightenment and the Reformation, the latter being an emancipatory movement with respect to the Catholic Church. A whole philosophy of emancipation is historically based on a series of unavoidable passages that are also exclusively European. Mignolo often speaks of a shift from a divine to an earthly dimension in the foundation of human freedom. This shift on which we will come back ahead from “theo-politics” to “ego-politics”<sup>25</sup> leads to the liberal foundation of man through a sequence of constitutions up to the Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Napoleonic Code. All of them are conjugated with a “principle of freedom of will against historically preexisting law as the substantive basis of the state”<sup>26</sup> but also with all the modern and liberal, western and aggressive variants that this propaganda of freedom entails.

The emancipatory discourse in the course of western history has had its variants in both liberal and marxist traditions. Once again Enrique Dussel and his *Philosophy of Liberation* (1977) represent the turning point for Mignolo’s research: according to him, it is always a matter of fighting a struggle for ‘liberation’ which includes “the social movements of ‘national liberation’ in Africa and Asia, as well as in Latin America”.<sup>27</sup> When it comes to ‘emancipation’ things change, and its historical landmarks change too: the 1668 Glorious Revolution in England, the independence of the colonists in America from the emerging British Empire in 1776 and the French Revolution in 1789. To these three, in an obviously different variant, the Russian Revolution (1917) is to be added. So, it is a socialist or liberal perspective on a history that would otherwise develop in a decolonial sense, according to parameters that are not shared by Europe and North America.

In any case, this is not a trivial circumstance, as every project based on a desire to carry out an authentic ‘liberation’ has precise racial connotations according to Mignolo. In short, it should not be overlooked how the same struggle for a complete European emancipation took place at the expense of the freedom of entire continents and their populations (the ‘others’ of Europe). This historical process constitutes the backbone of the whole thought promoted by Mignolo: European modern age has their “darker side”,<sup>28</sup> that face which cannot and must not be shown because it is fierce and unrepresentable. The genocide of the Amerindian and African populations in the slave trade as well as the Asian colonization on a different side are what made a certain passage to Modernity, capitalism and the Industrial Revolution possible. The price of my emancipation as a westerner was, is and will be (if things do not change) the freedom of another: a mechanism that renews itself over time because the ‘colonial matrix’ of things is the same despite its different variations over time. This is probably the meaning of the recurring expression ‘power differential’ in Mignolo’s thought. In mechanics the ‘differential’ is a particular type of gear train that allows the simultaneous occurrence of different speeds in the motion of a rotating torque. In automobiles the ‘differential’, while transmitting motion to the drive wheels, makes them independent from each other, so that they can make a different number of turns in the corners. This is what happens in the colonial field where certain modern speeds have been possible, certain emancipations have become practicable, because the world has gone at different speeds and in curves the wheels of Europe and the United States have turned at a certain speed, because the movement has been slowed down or accelerated functionally (Africa, South America, the Middle East and so forth).

Compared to this state of affairs, there are no possible mediations for Mignolo: the project must be cultural and political and cannot go through adjustments. For all these reasons, his proposal remains ‘de-colonial’ and not ‘post-colonial’: he reminds us, that another time and another space are always possible

<sup>25</sup> Habermas: “The world of the divine was changed in the solitude of subjectivity into something posited by ourselves”. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Boston: MIT, 1987), 17.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Walter Mignolo’s reference point besides Enrique Dussel is Juan José Hernández Arregui, ed., *Nacionalismo y liberación* (Buenos Aires: Peña Lillo, 1969).

<sup>28</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, *The Darker Side of the Renaissance* (Ann Arbor: Michigan U.P., 2003).

compared to the colonial one imposed over the last five centuries. Moreover, for him, there are too many assonances between the ‘post-colonial’ and the ‘post-modern’: the political project that Mignolo has in mind cannot and must not remain in the western context to which the postmodern discourse (and to some extent the postcolonial) belong.<sup>29</sup>

## 5. What Does ‘Delinking’ Mean?

Be as it may, whether it is ‘liberation’ or ‘decolonization’, a ‘delinking’ from the colonial matrix of power or ‘desprendimiento’ (as Quijano would have it), must be carried out every time. Indeed, the concept of ‘delinking’ was first introduced by the Egyptian sociologist Amin:<sup>30</sup> his idea responded to a political and economic development traced in a wake of the Marxist reasoning, where the question for Mignolo (and Quijano) is not the content (either political or economic) but the terms of the conversation, i.e. an epistemic question. If you can achieve an authentic ‘delinking’ from a cultural matrix, then you can open the way towards a different ‘pluriversality as a universal project’, which is very close to an American-Latin idea of inter-culturality. In a nutshell, according to Mignolo delinking is “learning to unlearn”.<sup>31</sup> As Mignolo states: “Delinking from what? From the Totality of Western epistemology, grounded in Latin and Greek and expanded around the globe by means of the six imperial and vernacular European languages of modernity”.<sup>32</sup>

It is well worth making a clarification at this stage: the result of a possible ‘delinking’ from a dominant European and North American colonial culture does not lead to a ‘polycentric’ solution, but rather to a different way of conceiving the world because it is characterized at all times and space as a ‘pluriverse’: not so many different centres but a widespread ‘pluriversality’ starting from different *loci enunciationis*,<sup>33</sup> each of which with its own pragmatic diversity/alterity (in all these cases, Mignolo speaks of ‘diversality’). It is precisely this intercultural openness that can put aside a unique concept of modernity because it is “an essentially or exclusively European phenomenon”.<sup>34</sup> Modernity remains a phenomenon that is constituted in a necessary way starting from a non-European otherness and precisely this otherness represents its ultimate colonial content. “The myth of modernity is an irrational myth” because it is based on a ‘justification for genocidal violence’;<sup>35</sup> the ‘dark side’ of the modern world, its irrational, inhuman, ferocious aspect, ‘the horror of modernity’, consist precisely in the foundation of their modern emancipation on the blood of the others.

Beyond the Nazi concentration camps, the whole European and North American political project is based on the accomplishment of a perpetrated genocide which continues to be perpetrated in the name of the superiority of the western civilisation, which declares itself more civil with respect to the ‘primitive’ populations deserving a process of civilization, even at the cost of an authentic extermination.

<sup>29</sup> For a comparison of postcolonial (and non-decolonial) and postmodern stances, see Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Design*, 172-216.

<sup>30</sup> Samir Amin, *Delinking: Towards a Polycentric World* (London: Zed Books, 1985).

<sup>31</sup> Madina V. Tlostanova and Walter D. Mignolo, *Learning to Unlearn: Decolonial Reflections from Eurasia and the Americas* (Ohio: The Ohio State U.P., 2012).

<sup>32</sup> Mignolo, “Delinking”, 493.

<sup>33</sup> On the semiotic meaning of the expression Mignolo is explicit in his reference once again to Enrique Dussel, when he writes that Dussel was “shifting the attention from the enunciated to the very act of enunciation”. Mignolo, “Delinking”, 490. Indeed, as we have mentioned several times, there are many pages by Walter Mignolo with a semiotic flavor. Let us consider his philosophical debut only as an example, in Elizabeth Hill Boone and W. Mignolo, eds., *Writing without Words: Alternative Literacies in Mesoamerica & the Andes* (Durham-London: Duke U.P., 1994), and, again, Mignolo’s concluding *Afterword to Local Histories/Global Designs*, significantly titled “An Other language, an Other logic, an Other Thinking” (Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 313-338).

<sup>34</sup> Mignolo’s reference here is once again to Enrique Dussel, “World System and “Trans-Modernity”, *Neplanta: Views from South*, 2.3 (2002), 221-245.

<sup>35</sup> Mignolo, “Delinking”, 454.

The reference to what is ‘other’,<sup>36</sup> different, cannot be univocal, nevertheless, it is very common in Mignolo’s studies to refer to an almost mythical figure like the indigenous Waman Puma de Ayala.<sup>37</sup> Reductive as it might seem here, with his historiographic work Waman Puma de Ayala has represented for Mignolo the option for another world to be again possible, specifically another way of telling the story, of telling a truth, which is not Spanish, which is not ‘Spaniards’, but indigenous, independent and going back to *pachakuti*, before the ‘discovery of America’, before a ‘new world’ was discovered/invented by an ‘old’ one. The one promoted by Waman Puma de Ayala is a literary and historical example that responds to a ‘pluriverse’ logic of telling the story according to a model that corresponds to a *nueva corònica*. In short and bringing things to their extreme consequences for Mignolo, a possible decolonial overturning of the plans would be possible, if a comparison that would sound more or less like this were admitted, with all the distinctions that still need to be made: “Waman Puma and Quobna Ottobah anchored both the geo and body-politics of knowledge and they shall become for the decolonial shift what Plato and Aristotle were for the foundation of the theo- and ego-politics of knowledge”.<sup>38</sup>

## 6. Beyond the Theo-Logical Towards the Ego-Logical Politics of Knowledge and Understanding

Hence, the issues that have always been at the centre of Mignolo’s studies are of a philosophical nature: the path that was taken during the modern era in the political constitution of Europe first and then of the United States, as presumed hegemonic centres worldwide, went from a ‘theo-logical’ to an ‘ego-logical’ politics of knowledge and understanding (with respect to which Cervantes, Bacon, Shakespeare, Descartes represent for Mignolo as many representative moments of this passage). In this sense, a whole path within an emancipation of European and North American thought is necessary. This emancipation takes place in two different ways which are not necessarily in succession, nor do they necessarily have to be in close relationship: on the one hand, western European man emancipates himself from his state of nature and thus evolves in a civil sense (Rousseau); on the other, his process of emancipation takes place on a spiritual level at the moment of his contextual passage to an enlightened secular dimension, that is to say to an ego-logics and politics of knowledge and understanding, no longer linked to theology according to a typical movement from God to the Ego that took place at least in a certain part of the world.

It is obvious at this decolonial point of things that what we have just mentioned should be considered within the framework of anthropological and metaphysical studies that is, in a semiotic perspective (not by chance Mignolo speaks of a ‘grammar of de-coloniality’) which belongs to Greek, Latin and then Christian dynamics. Think about the ways in which an emancipation from a ‘state of nature’ can make sense for all those African and Amerindian populations with a ‘relationship with the same nature’ that

<sup>36</sup>One should not underestimate the fact that in this race for the decolonialization of thoughts, Emmanuel Levinas alone is saved (even if only to some extent) in Mignolo’s philosophical project in a European study landscape.

<sup>37</sup> Alongside the name of Waman Puma de Ayala (for a seminal study of the decolonial meaning of the work of Waman Puma de Ayala see Rolena Adorno, *Guaman: Writing and Resistance in Colonial Peru* (Austin: Texas U.P., 2000)), Mignolo in other circumstances refers to other totem poles of his decolonial literature such as Mahatma Gandhi and Frantz Fanon.

<sup>38</sup> Mignolo, “Delinking”, 469. From Wikipedia: “Ottobah Cugoano, also known as John Stuart (c. 1757 – after 1791), was an African abolitionist, anti-imperialist, and natural rights philosopher from Ghana who was active in England in the latter half of the eighteenth century. Captured in present-day Ghana and sold into slavery at the age of 13, he was shipped to Grenada in the Lesser Antilles, where he worked on a plantation. In 1772 he was purchased by an English merchant who took him to England, where he was taught to read and write, and was freed following the ruling in the *Somerset Case* (1772). Later working for artists Richard and Maria Cosway, he became acquainted with British political and cultural figures. He joined the *Sons of Africa*, African abolitionists in England.” Certainly, one of his most important works turns out to be his 1791 *Thoughts and Sentiments on the Evil of Slavery* (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).



must not be of emancipation and detachment but of constitutive foundation. On this point in particular, i.e., on the political issue according to which the relationship with Nature must not be a state from which one has to emancipate himself, Mignolo is utterly confident, and the reference is once again semiotic. Indeed, Mignolo endorses José Maria Arguedas, who wrote: “Palabras delò quechua contienen con una densidad incomparables la materia del hombre y de la naturaleza y el vinculo intenso que per fortuna aún existe entre lo uno y l’otro el indiígena està abrigado, consolado, iluminado, benedicto por la naturaleza: su odio y su amor, cuando son desencademados, se precipitan, por eso, with toda vesa materia, y tambien su lenguaje”.<sup>39</sup>

Mignolo goes further and does it in a philosophical sense, when he remembers how it is not only a theological or differently egological question at issue in the determination of relationships between people and populations. This applies not only from a linguistic (semiotic) point of view but also from a cybernetic perspective, where we find an open struggle between the preservation of the individual value of people and the growth of a thought that enhances what works in an overall sense (the social machine) and not in an individual/personal one. Mignolo argues: “Implemented in conjunction with imperial/global designs, the emancipating possibilities offered by cybernetics were used and applied ‘instrumentally’ in software and / or hardware, in the design of social and managerial of interpersonal systems. Thus, the corporate values and orientation of the university corresponds to the growing dominance of Organo-logy as overarching imperial metaphor”.<sup>40</sup> Basically, you have to work in depth every time in order to achieve a decolonial goal, which is “the unveiling of the geo- and biopolitical embodiment that has been concealed in modern epistemology from the Renaissance, under the name of God (Theo-logy), the Reason of the emancipated individual (Ego-logy), and the supremacy of the Organization (e.g., in the sense of cybernetics, kubernetes, knowledge of the organization and the organization of knowledge) over the individual (Organo-logy)”.<sup>41</sup>

We have said it and we repeat it now. Mignolo’s political project is complex and there are many risks which need to be considered: the temptation of a theoretical assimilation of some of his positions with other traditional ones in Europe are on the agenda. To give just one example, think of what Mignolo means by the expression ‘body politics’, an expression which should not be confused with Foucault’s ‘biopolitics’. According to Mignolo, ‘body politics’ in an epistemological sense is possible when such an attempt is not made to establish what the ‘biopolitical’ presuppositions are for a certain management of public health, but rather to what extent a historical truth is asserted in a racial way, despite the fact that it is the expression of a white, male, heterosexual and western mentality. The contact points with Foucault are then evident, as his points of divergence are. In short, Mignolo’s body politics has a very precise racial historical background, which Foucault’s ‘biopolitics’ does not have, a racial background that can be appreciated if you have the theoretical spirit to compare Kant’s *Kritik der reinen Vernunft* with a *Critique de la raison nègre* by Achille Mbembe,<sup>42</sup> just like Waman Puma de Ayala and Quobna Ottobah on the one side and Plato and Aristotle on the other: we keep on repeating that such an operation is evidently not simple. It goes without saying that the theoretical axis around which Mignolo’s political and philosophical confrontation with European philosophy moves is summarized in a “conflictive coexistence of the theo- and ego-politics of knowledge on the one hand and the geo (and body) on the other”<sup>43</sup> in an intercultural intertwining that cannot be dissolved because it is basically *mestizo* in a broad

<sup>39</sup> Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Design*, 224. José Maria Arguedas, *Tupac Amaru Kamaq Taytanchisman* (Lima: Edicionmes Salqantay, 1962), 5.

<sup>40</sup> Mignolo, “Delinking”, 509.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Achille Mbembe, *Critique de la raison nègre* (Paris: Éditions La Decouverte, 2013).

<sup>43</sup> Mignolo, “Delinking”, 465.

sense and according to different possible latitudes. In the end, much would consist in a modern, European and Western philosophical sense in a complex political recovery of the so-called ‘secondary qualities’ of man, otherwise excluded in a philosophy of human science that proceeds through too much essential traits.<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Again, and in a decolonial sense, Mignolo’s positions go from right to left, without any discrimination, if Samuel Huntington and Francis Fukuyama, such as David Harvey, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, are still involved in the same criticism in terms of a theo- and ego-politics of knowledge. See Samuel Huntington, *The Clash of Civilization and the Remaking of the World Order* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 1996), *Who Are We* (New York, London, Toronto, Sydney: Simon and Schuster Paperbacks, 2004), Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992), Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Impero* (Milano: Rizzoli, 2002). This lack of political awareness of their *loci enunciationis* is an accusation that Mignolo addresses to almost a whole century of European philosophy from Heidegger to Levinas, Derrida, to Žižek (Nelson Maldonado Torres, “The Topology of Being and the Geopolitics of Knowledge”, *City*, 8.1 (2004), 29-56. Conversely, Mignolo is careful as he points out his *locus enunciationis*, when he writes: “To universalize the Black or the Lesbian/Chicana experience would be to fall back into the same logic that caught Islamic fundamentalism”. Mignolo, “Delinking”, 497.

## Decolonizing the Indigenous. James Clifford's *Returns*

**Abstract:** In his Introduction to *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), James Clifford laments the absence, in Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies, of notions such as *decolonization* and *globalization*, indispensable epistemological tools for investigating our modern world reality. In linking decolonization and globalization with the question of *indigeneity*, and the figure of the 'native' and the 'wild man', Clifford presents his readers with the story of Ishi, *the last wild Indian*, 'discovered' in 1911 in a village in California and then exhibited in a museum until his death. The critical methodology adopted in this paper aims at generating a productive dialogue between Clifford's unflinching exposure of the colonial nature of modernity and its founding knowledges, anthropology included, and the theoretical insights of decolonial intellectuals of the 'Global South' such as Walter Dignolo, Madina Tlostanova, Anibal Quijano, Fernando Coronil, Catherine Walsh, to name just a few, who interpret the modern world order as sustained by the 'coloniality of power'.

Keywords: *postcolonial studies, decolonial turn, coloniality of power, indigeneity, culture and anthropological realism*

In his Introduction to *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (2013), the cultural anthropologist James Clifford laments the absence, in both Cultural Studies and Postcolonial Studies, of notions such as 'decolonization' and 'globalization' which are necessary keywords of critical theory today, as appropriate epistemological tools for a realistic account of the modern world-system. In linking decolonization and globalization together with the question of 'indigeneity', Clifford translates into new theoretical perspectives on current indigenous practices the decolonial questions raised by intellectuals such as Walter Dignolo, Madina Tlostanova, Anibal Quijano, Fernando Coronil and Catherine Walsh, to name just a few. They all conceive of modernity as colonial modernity, insisting on the notion of 'coloniality of power'.

Since the colonization of the Americas, modernity cannot be dissociated from colonialism and forced slavery, which are at the basis of modern capitalism, together with racism, an extremely effective tool for shaping the new socio-historical identities ('indios' or 'negroes', for instance) that were of immediate utility for the emerging European capitalism, and that are still at work in contemporary national narratives. In *Returns*, questions of indigeneity and cultural translation conjure up the colonial nature implicit in modern social sciences like anthropology itself. This is especially addressed in the conclusive part of this essay, attentive to how Clifford relates the story of Ishi, 'the last wild Indian', who was found in 1911 in a small California town and exhibited for five years in a museum, until his death.

To acknowledge modernity in terms of its colonial constitution, is to register with decolonial thinkers that the notion of a supposedly debased, wild, brute, uncivilised native is the direct consequence of that formidable power structure called racism. As remarked in the first part of this essay (by recalling some pivotal issues raised by decolonial thinkers such as Quijano, Dignolo, Tlostanova), such a systematic and hierarchical organisation of different ethnicities based on people's physical traits is imbricated in the modern discipline of anthropology. The fundamental scope of the latter was the observation and classification of other peoples and cultures from a supposedly superior point of view. So, in its 'colonial' constitution, the modern construction of the 'wild' represents a crucial *topos* for both decolonial thought and cultural anthropology. It is here that the very notion of realism, so central to the premises of anthropological description and analysis, turns out to be situated within the racially constructed enunciation framework that decolonial thinkers contest.

James Clifford, in the wake of Cultural Studies theorists whose thought has largely informed his research (Antonio Gramsci, Raymond Williams, Stuart Hall), insists that the notion of realism, far from granting the ultimate access to ‘truth’, is rather the product of hegemonic views at work in the world. Engaging in an interdisciplinary dialogue, this essay is essentially concerned with the decolonial quality of the epistemological enquiries that James Clifford has conducted, thus justifying the title “Decolonizing the Indigenous”. Attentive to the centrality of discursive formation in both Cultural Studies and Clifford’s work, I approach the question of how to narrate the ‘Other’ (the native, the indigenous, the ‘wild’). Through a decolonialising perspective, the essay addresses the fundamentally descriptive nature of anthropology, ultimately bordering on narratological, hence literary, questions. As Clifford has consistently demonstrated over decades of unceasing scholarly research, anthropology today can hardly survive as a viable form of intercultural analysis if it is not informed by decolonial practices of discourse.<sup>1</sup>

From his first works, James Clifford’s theoretical investigations have challenged different disciplines such as anthropology, ethnography, literature, social sciences, the figurative arts and visual culture, with the aim of interpreting historical reality as a complexity of particular contingencies; a sort of text to be interpreted through the lens of contextualization;<sup>2</sup> that is, investigating the different languages of Western knowledge. His critical reflections have cast doubts on the supposed scientific nature of ethnography and anthropology, to explain them above all as scriptural forms born in the wake of and along with European and Atlantic colonialism. From his famous 1986 collection, edited together with George Marcus, *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*, to his disruptive classic, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (1988), James Clifford has retraced the vicissitudes of the discipline of anthropology as having as its pet topic the Other, showing its affinities with narrative creativity. These two works are followed by the last of the trilogy, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (2013).

*Returns* comes symbolically at the end of a trajectory, where we find a scholar in the throes of a deep sense of disorientation: the West, as we knew it, is no longer the center of the world, and Eurocentrism is no longer the only perspective from which knowledge emanates. New York, which was, until a few decades ago, the symbol and heart of western modernity, is no longer the place from which the imposing power of the West radiates. As Clifford had recalled in *The Predicament of Culture* (1988), in the 1940s New York had been the magical place where the father of structural anthropology, Claude Lévi-Strauss, was amazed by its “unexpected juxtapositions” and “delightful inconsistencies”: for example, the surreal experience of sitting, in the Public Library, next to a Native American with his feather headdress and buckskin jacket, taking notes with a Parker pen.<sup>3</sup> Strange eruption of an alterity into a modern, homogeneous world, which winks at difference. New York at the time still seemed compact: its exogenousness pointed to the composite nature of an open city, one that adorned itself with what was unusual, the ideal place to ‘collect’ findings and symbols of otherness. But this sense of compactness has now been shattered.

Clifford himself traces his professional and personal path, in his Introduction to *Returns*, recounting in it the “bumps” and landslides that have in the meantime been recorded in global history and Eurocentric epistemology over a thirty-year period. The idea of a globalized world, for example, had initially envisaged a totalising, one-way scenario managed from a single center as the source of

<sup>1</sup> This insistence on narrativity, discourse and enunciatory location has been largely discussed by postcolonial theorists, too. On this matter, see Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> On this issue, see Viviana Gravano, “Il critico come etnografo? Il posizionamento nella scrittura da Santa Fe ad Hal Foster”, *Art’O*, 24 (Autumn-Winter 2007).

<sup>3</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1988), 237.

knowledge-power. Instead, subsequent critical thought has not considered globalization as a novelty at all, since it arises from remote interactions, stemming from cultural and commercial exchanges of transcontinental import, from old and new migrations of people who have always ignored borders and distances, from clashes and encounters of viewpoints and knowledge that cannot be reduced to a single perspective on reality.<sup>4</sup>

It was precisely on the entry of new terms related to the concept of globalization – such as ‘local’, ‘global’, ‘glocal’ – in the 1990s that Clifford held his seminars at the History of Consciousness department of the University of California, Santa Cruz. With *Returns* other notions are also imposed: together with the term ‘globalization’, there is an insistence on terms such as ‘decolonization’ and ‘indigeneity’, considered essential for a realistic recognition of the current world-system.

The two notions of decolonization and globalization which are indeed pervading new socio-cultural and literary enquiries found their inspiration in sociologists like Aníbal Quijano, Walter Dignolo, Madina Tlostanova, Fernando Coronil, Santiago Castro-Gómez, Boaventura de Sousa Santos, just to name a few, who remark on the colonial nature of the very notion of modernity, since the birth of the European notion of modernity dates back to the conquest of the Americas. Walter Dignolo and Madina Tlostanova have aptly suggested that in Europe modernity was associated to a sense of renewal and newness, as the term Renaissance testifies;<sup>5</sup> however, that same modernity was sustained, substantially, by the European colonization of an enormous, until then unknown territory, the Americas, and, symbolically, by the simultaneous colonization of time, which condemned the ‘non-modern’ to a long series of Middle Ages as the only temporality allowed to them, as opposed to the ‘luminous’, rational and progressive European trajectory, implied in the very idea of Renaissance.

This idea of a temporal classification and opposition is also central for the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano, who traces back to the 17th century the European edification of a system of colonial power, what Quijano defines as *patrón de poder*, ‘coloniality of power’, which is based on the hierarchical classification of people made possible by the invention of the racial system. With the colonization of the Americas, peoples as culturally different as the Aztecs, Maya, Incas, Quechua, etc., became just ‘indios’; in Africa, the Ashanti, Yoruba, Zulu, Congo, Baongo, etc., became just ‘negroes’. The classification of these new socio-historical identities was of immediate utility for the emerging European capitalism: the whites were the masters; the blacks were a free work force; the indios were home servants.<sup>6</sup> The colonial link between race and work, which is implicit in the ‘coloniality of power’, explains why colonialism is at the basis of capitalism, as the Venezuelan scholar Fernando Coronil insists, and not just some historical detail which happened overseas.<sup>7</sup> The coloniality of power has also informed modern Western knowledge and its disciplines: based on an evolutionist view of time and history, “non-Europeans occupied the lowest grade of an imaginary chain that goes from ‘primitive’ to ‘civilized’, from ‘irrational’ to ‘rational’, from ‘traditional’ to ‘modern’, from ‘magical-mythical’ to ‘scientific’”; the non-European could hardly aspire to become Europeanized or ‘modernized’.<sup>8</sup>

Indeed, one of the most famous European literary descriptions of an indigenous epitomizes the epistemological violence implicit in the coloniality of power. This is the description that Robinson

<sup>4</sup> On the mobile and migratory configurations of cultures, see Iain Chambers and Marta Cariello, *La questione mediterranea* (Milano: Mondadori, 2019).

<sup>5</sup> Walter Dignolo and Marina Tlostanova, “Theorizing from the Borders: Shifting to Geo- and Body-Politics of Knowledge”, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 9 (2006), 205-221.

<sup>6</sup> Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power and Eurocentrism in Latin America” (2000), *International Sociology*, 15.2 (2000), 215-232.

<sup>7</sup> Fernando Coronil, “Naturaleza del poscolonialismo: del eurocentrismo al globocentrismo”, in Edgardo Lander, ed., *La colonialidad del saber: Eurocentrismo y ciencias sociales. Perspectivas latinoamericanas* (Buenos Aires: CLACSO, 2000), 87-111.

<sup>8</sup> Quijano, “Coloniality of Power”, 225.

Crusoe (in Daniel Defoe's 1719 novel of the same name) gives of Friday, beginning with the portrayal of the young Indian as a boy with a well-knit physique, refined and robust features, in an attempt to make it understood that he is not an African but an Amerindian. However, he is still a 'wild', a 'cannibal', and as such has attributes indicative of the animalistic and brute inferiority of the native he has just encountered.<sup>9</sup> Friday is primitive, relegated to the dawn of an alleged temporal axis that leads from the primitive to the modern, albeit finding himself before Robinson in the same time fraction, in the mid 1600s. He is ignorant, though perfectly capable, with his knowledge and all his skills, of living freely in his territory; childlike, but the paternalism of the white, civilized, male, preferably English European will help him grow. He is unequivocally cannibal, and here the civilized Englishman will intervene to wean him from the horrible custom of eating human flesh. Linguistically he is handicapped, barely able to stammer a crude English after his more than ten years of living with Robinson. He is naked, a symptom of bestiality which in addition to the lack of values of civilized life also denotes a sexual promiscuity. He is by nature a slave, since the native can be easily expropriated from the territory where he has always lived freely. He is irrational, if not stupid: Robinson will catch Friday intent on begging the rifle not to kill him, having somehow mistaken it for a fearsome deity.

When on the threshold of the contemporary world Joseph Conrad in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) shows us the brute natives of the Congo river forests, that is the indigenous, he does so by asking himself about the practicability of those terms which were then the unshakable dogmas of the imperialist system. Primitive, cannibal, naked, slave, these are terms that, back then, should have aptly described the indigenous; yet, in Conrad's eyes referred to a single profound truth: expropriation, aggravated murder and heinous large-scale pillage, as Marlow comments in the opening pages of the novel.<sup>10</sup> In the dense fog that hangs over the steamer that goes upriver, there is the blurred vision of the European who proceeds in the lie of a great civilizing mission.

Questioning those very terms that had previously shaken Conrad's imperialistic certainties (brute, cannibal, inhuman) and investigating the kind of epistemological system that Western anthropology relies on (that is, its truth regime, as Michel Foucault would have it), Clifford resumed Conrad's uncertain prose, so clouded and hallucinated, to find, in *The Predicament of Culture*, the hesitation and authorial crisis that fills the diaries of the Polish anthropologist Malinowski, grappling with the natives of the Trobriand islands in the Pacific. It was that hesitation, for Clifford, which definitively belied the seeming scientific nature of anthropology to reveal its vulnerability. The perverse game, the tension between disputed forces, was exposed, and one could not ignore it. An anthropologist can only start from an intimate certainty of strength and epistemological mastery if he is to forge ahead in his job of writing about the other. At the cost of his capitulation. As Malinowski's diaries testify, in their ultimate bewilderment.

And since Clifford's anthropology posits itself above all as a reflection on the statute of anthropology as a discipline, that is as a meta-anthropological reflection, Malinowski's hesitation, in his diaries, becomes for Clifford a point of crucial importance for the notion of realism, and what realism means in the social sciences. In the famous *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (1986), Clifford, George Marcus, Paul Rabinow and other scholars look at ethnography primarily as a field in which social history, interpretive anthropology, travel writing, discourse theories and textual criticism intersect. The result is a profound awareness of the impossibility for the West to continue to portray non-Westerners in the name of an undisputed authority. Cultural representation revealed itself as a contingent and contestable process, subject to the rules of allegorical models and rhetorical tropes.

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<sup>9</sup> Daniel Defoe, *Robinson Crusoe* (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 202.

<sup>10</sup> Joseph Conrad, *Heart of Darkness* (London: Penguin Books, 1995), 20.



The epistemological and political crisis of anthropology consists precisely in this awareness.<sup>11</sup> Here the comment by scholar José David Saldívar on the idea of realism can be useful. Resuming Louis Althusser's elaborations on ideology, Saldívar comments that 'realism' is not a trusted mirror of the world, but instead is the hegemonic way in which ideology expresses reality:

the ideologically hegemonic way to conceive and express our relationship to the natural and social worlds around us. In other words ... realism functions ideologically: it offers itself as neutral reflection of the world when it is but one way to *conjure* the world.<sup>12</sup>

Given, therefore, the ideological nature of realism, Clifford's question is how to make this sense of reality specific in one's own writing, in one's own speech, in one's own demonstrating and narrating. But here the anthropologist feels he can offer only attempts and failures, certainly no effective models.<sup>13</sup>

In incorporating the challenge posed to the social sciences by the 'decolonial turn', Clifford registers a sort of suspension, an epistemological disorientation, a sense of narrative impossibility that emerges from the numerous declarations of incompleteness scattered throughout the pages of his book:

There is simply no place of historical hindsight from which to sort out and impose a unified functional structure on these discrepant stories. It's a tangled and unfinished historical reality that I find I can't represent in a seamless way ... I find myself imagining a tangle of historicities rather than a progressively aligned common History – however 'combined and uneven' its development ... My admittedly ad hoc, undertheorized solution is to always be juxtaposing histories – to always be working with more than one.<sup>14</sup>

Discrepant but interconnected historicities therefore do not make possible a single interpretation, an unequivocal narrative, but rather shatter the cognitive and organizational parameters necessary for reliable narration.

Clifford bears these reflections in mind in facing once again a figure dear to the anthropological discipline but also to a great deal of European and Eurocentric literature: that of the 'native', the wild. Here the native in question is the famous Ishi, the last 'wild man' discovered in 1911 in a village in California.

With Ishi emerges, as with so many 'wild men' who for centuries have crowded the pages of white knowledge, once again that aporia which for anthropology – colonial science – has remained unsolvable: the 'wild', who has always been the 'Other' object in contrast with the white observer/researcher of European ancestry, is one with the territory in which s/he is 'discovered'; s/he is native to this area; s/he is by no means 'other' with regard to it. He is the 'Alter/Native' whom the Chicana theorist Alicia Gaspar de Alba speaks of in stressing the paradox experienced by those who have been expropriated from their own territories. Gaspar de Alba uses this concept in particular referring to the U.S.-Mexican border and to the Chicano identity: in this specific case, she explains, what very clearly emerges is how

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<sup>11</sup> James Clifford et al., eds., *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography* (Berkeley: California U.P., 1986). The essays in this text were drawn from seminar discussions that took place in April 1984 in Santa Fe, New Mexico, at the SAR (School of American Research – today School of Advanced Research) Center, strictly limited to ten participants (a group of ethnographers, a literary critic and a historian of anthropology).

<sup>12</sup> José David Saldívar, *Trans-Americanities: Subaltern Modernities, Global Coloniality, and the Cultures of Greater Mexico* (Durham: Duke U.P., 2012), 101.

<sup>13</sup> James Clifford, *Returns: Becoming Indigenous in the Twenty-First Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 2013), 211.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 209-210.

the ‘Alter/Nativity’ of the Chicano identity involves being simultaneously ‘Other’ than and ‘Native’ to the U.S. Southwest.<sup>15</sup>

An anthropologist who calls into doubt and revises his conceptual foundations takes a stance of continuous and open dialogue with historicity. Edward Said spoke of ‘worldliness’, falling into the world and its circumstances.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, even the question posed by the issue of indigeneity draws with it questions of historicity such as that of decolonization and globalization: the consolidated epistemological terrain, writes Clifford, has become bumpy, full of pot-holes, tremors, interruptions, slipperiness, loss of meaning: as an anthropologist, Clifford confesses that the ground has been swiped from under his feet.

Writing, and even more writing about the other, as already emerged in *Writing Culture* and *The Predicament of Culture*, is shown inexorably to be a field of contention. Delicate balances between forces vie for the scriptural space. Just as Robinson Crusoe, in describing Friday, takes for granted his own cultural superiority, so anthropology starts from an alleged and undisputed epistemological superiority. It is the writing of the stronger that grants itself the right to speak about the weaker. Michel de Certeau (*The Writing of History*, 1977) made the same point about history and historiography, in suggesting that the discovery of America had made that territory an immense, empty white sheet on which Europeans could write their version of the world.

Clifford, in *Returns*, dwells several times on the complicity of anthropology with Western colonialism and with the irreversible expansion of the global capitalist system. Nor does he hesitate to report Claude Lévi-Strauss’ cutting edge:

Anthropology is not a dispassionate science like astronomy, which springs from the contemplation of things at a distance. It is the outcome of a historical process which has made the larger part of mankind subservient to the other, and during which millions of innocent human beings have had their resources plundered and their institutions and beliefs destroyed, whilst they themselves were ruthlessly killed, thrown into bondage, and contaminated by diseases they were unable to resist. Anthropology is the daughter of this era of violence: its capacity to assess more objectively the facts pertaining to the human condition reflects, on the epistemological level, a state of affairs in which one part of mankind treated the other as an object.<sup>17</sup>

To emphasize that here Lévi-Strauss refers to material and epistemological structures that have determined at least in the last three centuries European and North American anthropological research and its claim to objectivity, Clifford tries to clarify the very meaning of the verb he uses, ‘determined’, by echoing how Raymond Williams, in 1977, in *Marxism and Literature*, defined the term ‘determination’: the set of limits and constraints within which we find ourselves acting historically.<sup>18</sup>

In qualifying the anthropologist’s work with the definitive word with which Lévi-Strauss branded anthropological practice as a whole, Clifford turns his attention to Alfred Kroeber, a complex figure who emerges in the fourth chapter of *Returns*, with the hundred-page long tale of Ishi. Alfred Kroeber,

<sup>15</sup> Alicia Gaspar de Alba, *[Un]Framing the “Bad Woman”: Sor Juana, Malinche, Coyolxauhqui and Other Rebels with a Cause* (Austin: Texas U.P., 2014), xviii.

<sup>16</sup> Clifford resorts to the historicity of the anthropologist’s task, drawing on Gramsci’s phraseology as filtered through Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall. In this vein, Clifford welcomes the sense of the ‘conjunctural,’ which, instead of the linearity of time (intended as an arrow towards forward progress), exposes the density of the present, the density of time as a field of forces that contend for hegemony or subordination.

<sup>17</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, “The Scope of Anthropology”, *Current Anthropology*, 7.2 (1966), cit. in Clifford, *Returns*, 161.

<sup>18</sup> “a matter of pressures and limits, historical horizons within and against which people act with constrained freedom” (Ibid., 162). The idea of ‘determination’ (Williams) is simultaneously restated by Clifford as ‘articulation’, in Gramsci’s sense and in the revaluation made by Stuart Hall.

founder of the anthropology department at the world-famous University of Berkeley, California, in Clifford's words opposed but, at the same time, perpetuated the colonizer-colonized domain system.<sup>19</sup>

In 1911 Kroeber 'discovered' Ishi, the last *wild* Indian, in a small village in northern California, where Ishi had probably stopped on his way to a destination that remained forever unknown. Ishi was housed in the anthropological museum of San Francisco. He was dressed, fed, treated well and offered the chance to stay there as guardian of the museum. On Sundays, he put on a show for curious visitors: while sharpening flints to make arrow heads for his bow, he demonstrated how to fish with reed canes, though it seems he never wanted to take off his acquired clothes: 'playing' the part of what, in short, was a wild man living in a state of nature was tolerable only to a certain point. Ishi told many stories in his poorly deciphered language. He loved to tell stories. In the museum, he was shocked to see how many bones were kept. It must have seemed horrid and disrespectful to the human remains to whom ritual burial should be paid. Sometimes, Kroeber and his two friends, a doctor and an assistant anthropologist, prevailed on Ishi making him return to the places of his childhood and youth, places that were painful for him because linked to memories of being assaulted by whites who had certainly exterminated his and other communities. Ishi had to return to those places, and his white protectors, in those wild places, regained a certain childlike joyfulness in playing the game of living according to nature.<sup>20</sup>

Unfortunately, after only five years, in 1916, Ishi died of tuberculosis. Apparently up to the last few months, when he was visibly debilitated by the disease, he was asked to pose in photos that were to portray him, bare-chested, as a wild Indian, ready to shoot his bow. Kroeber was in Europe when Ishi died, and ordered from afar, heartbroken and angry, that no autopsy should be performed. However, he later authorized donating Ishi's brain to medicine, so that it could draw its 'scientific' conclusions on that rare *specimen*. Kroeber had contributed enormously to creating the famous anthropology department at the University of California at Berkeley, thanks to the grants of the Hearst family, whose enormous wealth was based precisely on land-grabbing territories from Native American communities to turn them into mines. Irony and contradictions of history's snarls.

Ishi's story was told, in 1961, in the book that Kroeber's second wife, Theodora Kroeber, wrote, her passionate classic *Ishi in Two Worlds*, which has since been compulsorily included in Californian secondary school curricula.

Ishi's story, as experienced by Alfred and Theodora Kroeber, would remain etched in their daughter, the then young writer Ursula Le Guin. Her novels – *The Word for World is Forest* (1976) and *Always Coming Home* (1985), to which Clifford devotes a detailed analysis – are dystopian visions inspired by feminism, ecology and pacifism, which, according to Clifford, continue to re-elaborate Ishi's story.<sup>21</sup>

Ishi's story did not end with his death. Clifford devotes a long discussion to the many studies, including films, which have succeeded one another on this story, providing very critical and harsh perspectives on Kroeber's ambiguous operation, in many ways qualifying it as colonial, in that Kroeber removed Ishi from his environment and his natural habits, relegated him to a museum, making him a sort of formidable museum artifact, gave his brain to medicine, in utter disregard of Ishi's horror towards the dissection of cadavers, an act that, for him, was a violation of their sacredness.

Lastly, the remains of Ishi have been re-exhumed, for a worthy burial in his place of origin by the indigenous communities, in the wake of the numerous repatriations of remains that from the 1990s to

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<sup>19</sup> "both resisted and perpetuated a dominant settler-colonial system" (Ibid.)

<sup>20</sup> Clifford describes this happiness among men alone with the term 'homosociality', used by Eve Sedgwick in her *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1985).

<sup>21</sup> On Ursula Le Guin, who died in 2018, a writer who always sought a new language for a feminist environmentalism, see Eleonora Federici, *Quando la fantascienza è donna: Dalle utopie femminili del secolo XIX all'età contemporanea* (Roma: Carocci, 2015), 96-113.

today are one of the symbolic demands most strongly advanced by indigenous peoples, for a just restitution together with their lands.

The request for stolen bones, objects of indigenous communities, exhibited in museums and other collections, is a claim to a past that serves indigenous communities to project themselves into a future. The indigenous communities, definitively considered to have disappeared or be destined to disappear in modernity (Ishi had been advertised as ‘the last wild Indian’), are making themselves felt even now, in the neoliberal globalized world, even claiming a market niche in the display and sale of ‘traditional’ products and handicrafts, a business that is fueling the economic power of those communities, which shrewdly exploit the so-called solidarity and ecological tourism sector.<sup>22</sup> The proliferation of cultural centers for the preservation of the ancient ‘traditions’ shrewdly sell and ‘produce’ the presumed authenticity which the engaged tourist or intellectual is looking for. From the icy lands of the Inuit communities of the Arctic, to the Native-American villages scattered everywhere in the United States, from the Lacandona forest in Chiapas and the Pacific Islands, from the Kanak in New Caledonia to the new Ladin mestizos, from the movements of the new Mayas to the Afro-Caribbean, the indigenous communities stage their ‘indigeneity’, with ‘performances’ of customs and behaviors that change according to whether the spectators are members of their own communities and family members, or are curious visitors and strangers, or representatives of the UN Council, or other dignitaries assigned to recognizing territorial and cultural rights. Returning to the past, staging the past and ancient traditions and languages, perhaps that have totally disappeared or have been abandoned over time, becomes a political and cultural strategy of survival and projection into the future. It is a process of ‘cultural invention’.

The past is a productive and generative reservoir in the present and for the future. There is no respect for that rational vision of linear, progressive development, which saw time as an arrow going from the past (what remains behind), towards a forward. And the native has not disappeared, as the white man wanted, but has survived in the present, also desiring the same commodities and comforts offered by economic well-being and technological progress. Facebook is an essential tool for many indigenous communities and movements; radio and internet programs recreate communities for those who have gone to live far away, even in other countries, after forced diasporas due to the lack of means of subsistence in their territories. Many have gone to live in the big cities, and from there live out their indigeneity, transforming themselves into new subjects that one scholar, with an unsettling oxymoron, has defined as ‘transnational indigenous’.

The capitalist world-system, Clifford explains, is immensely powerful, yet it cannot claim a totally global reach. Nor can we still speak plausibly of a division of the world into centers and peripheries. Even the great theorist of capitalism as a world-system, Immanuel Wallerstein, had to recognize (in *Decline of American Power*, 2003) that political-economic elements, which could be considered absolutely central to modernity in the last five centuries, are no longer so, given the importance gained by other contingencies of political struggle that lead to a different political-economic configuration of the world.<sup>23</sup>

A serious ‘decolonial turn’ in the social sciences means, therefore, as sociologist Catherine Walsh suggested, also exposing oneself to the challenge posed by other discernments and cognitions, commonly considered to be ‘non-knowledge’, while at the same time admitting the limits and tendentiousness of epistemological perspectives that have always reproduced Eurocentric coordinates,

<sup>22</sup> For an extensive discussion of indigeneity in the contemporary debate, see Eva Gerharz et al., eds., *Indigeneity on the Move: Varying Manifestations of a Contested Concept* (New York: Berghahn, 2018). On indigeneity in the US-Southwest, see Cherríe Moraga, *A Xicana Codex of Changing Consciousness: Writings 2000-2010* (Durham: Duke U.P., 2011).

<sup>23</sup> Clifford, *Returns*, 211.

complicit in a colonial modernity.<sup>24</sup> All this seems to be summed up in Clifford's comment on how we must necessarily admit that global power structures swipe the ground from under our feet.<sup>25</sup>

However, the ghost of an embarrassing question still remains: are anthropologists today still defensible figures within decolonial practices? Here I would conclude by quoting the Chicano theorist and performative artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña, who, in an interview, speaks of his project to exhibit certainly unusual and interesting specimens in Plexiglas showcases. These are not the classic 'monstrosities' that populated the European and American imagination with their circuses, museums, displays of creatures considered different from the model recognized as human.<sup>26</sup> This time what ends up under glass are specimens that have never been under observation. From the conversation between the artist and the curator Kaytie Johnson, for the genesis of their artistic project "El Border Curiosity Cabinet" (2002), Guillermo Gómez-Peña presents a *modus operandi* that is a sort of 'reverse anthropology' and in this reversal, which is unsettling and ironic, the artist proposes that specimens of 'authentic radical anthropologists' be exhibited. For example, Michael Taussig, or, why not, James Clifford himself:

Our *modus operandi* must be reverse anthropology. Yes – anthropologize Anglo tribes.... What about exhibiting in the opening a live 'chic New York curator' with his/her personal photo album containing staged images of cultural transvestitism.... I mean, photos of the curator on safari in the Third World in search of new talent and posing in local attire with the newly found primitives ... or, se me ocurre, having an 'authentic radical anthropologist' inside a Plexiglas box? Michael Taussig may do it. James Clifford might.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>24</sup> Catherine Walsh, "¿Son posibles unas ciencias sociales/culturales otras? Reflexiones entorno a las epistemologías decoloniales", *Nómadas*, 26 (2007), 102-113. The fundamentally colonial nature of the notion of modernity, which the Peruvian intellectual Aníbal Quijano defined as 'coloniality of power', was also expressed through its intellectual repertoires, disseminated through the disciplines taught in universities and other places of knowledge, such as schools, museums, libraries, the media, and so on.

<sup>25</sup> Clifford, *Returns*, 211-212.

<sup>26</sup> Museums, fairs, galleries, shows and exhibits can be considered a symptom of what Toni Bennett, in his study on the birth of the museum, inspired by Michel Foucault's thoughts on the surveillance and punishment power put in place by the social system, defines as 'exhibitionary complex'. See Marina De Chiara, *Oltre la gabbia: Ordine coloniale e arte di confine*, Second Edition (Milano: Meltemi, 2018), 52. Toni Bennett speaks of 'exhibitionary complex' in his *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London-New York: Routledge, 1995). On recent postcolonial museum theories and practices, see Iain Chambers et. al., eds., *The Ruined Archive* (Milan: Politecnico di Milano, 2014). The complex question of repatriating the remains of Native Americans and people of African descent still held in U.S. museums has been addressed in the webinar (co-sponsored by The Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research) "Reclaiming the Ancestors: Indigenous and Black Perspectives on Repatriation, Human Rights, and Justice", <https://vimeo.com/449844367>, accessed 2 September 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Kaytie Johnson, "Borderabilia: Imagining a New Way of Presenting Art", *LatinArt.com: an Online Journal of Art and Culture* (December 2004), <http://www.latinart.com/transcript.cfm?id=62>, accessed 10 November 2020.





## Arundhati Roy as a Transmodern Intellectual. Gender Troubles, Ethnic Conflicts and Vulnerable Ecology

**Abstract:** This article adopts a transmodern approach to Arundhati Roy's *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* and it contends that Roy's fusion of anti-global activism, typical of her non-fiction writings, and literary imagination, reminiscent of Indian epic texts, can provide an interesting instance of a transmodern intellectual perspective. In particular, by examining gender troubles, ethnic conflicts and vulnerable ecology, my article argues that Roy's second novel refracts the decolonial/postcolonial debate by means of a hybrid narrative form. This interplay between creative writing and intellectual activism can be said to chime with transmodern ethics in that it promotes attentiveness to the perspective of the most marginalised.

Keywords: *transmodernity, Arundhati Roy, gender, history, ecology*

The text is a limited field of possible constructions.  
Paul Ricœur, *From Text to Action*

### 1. Arundhati Roy between Intellectualism and Imagination

With the publication of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (2017), Indian novelist and essayist Arundhati Roy eventually returned to fiction writing after an interval of twenty years since the success of her debut novel, *The God of Small Things* (1997). And yet, between her Booker Prize-winning *opera prima* and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, Roy has engaged with some crucial questions related to the Indian subcontinent in a large number of essays, such as *The Cost of Living* (1999), *Power Politics* (2001), and *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom* (2011). The rise of nationalist propaganda, the persistence of ethnic conflicts, the climate of religious intolerance, the constant violation of human and civil rights, and the exploitation of the environment are among the issues that, according to the Indian author, require strong intellectual commitment. As in *The God of Small Things*, so in her second novel Roy addresses a plethora of socio-political matters which provide fodder for her fiction, thus linking her anti-global intellectualism to specific colonial legacies in the subcontinent. As Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas argues, the dialogism between creativity and ideology in Roy's macrotext can be read as "a fictionalization of the world and an active hermeneutical construction of history, with the aim of countering the narratives of power".<sup>1</sup> In other words, the juxtaposition of intellectual activism and literary imagination is a basic stylistic feature Roy resorts to in order to investigate how globalisation permeates our world, manifesting itself as haunting continuation of colonial power.

Along this premise, what I intend to show in my article is how Roy's fusion of intellectual and creative writing might be approached by interrogating the category of Transmodernity. With regard to the 'theory wars' dealing with the prefixes expressive of colonialism and its aftermath, this article argues that, by shifting from the rigid 'post' and 'de' to the fluid 'trans', a more liquid perspective can emerge. Coined by the Spanish philosopher Rosa María Rodríguez Magda in *La Sonrisa de Saturno*

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<sup>1</sup> Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas, "Committed Writing, Committed Writer?", in Ranjan Ghosh and Antonia Navarro-Tejero, eds., *Globalizing Dissent: Essays on Arundhati Roy* (London and New York: Routledge, 2009), 98.

(1989),<sup>2</sup> Transmodernity, in her own words, illustrates a mode of thinking that might reflect “our social reality, transborder, fluid, interconnected and unstable”.<sup>3</sup> Accordingly, Rodríguez Magda’s claims, which have further been investigated by the Argentinian philosopher Enrique Dussel and by the Belgian theologian Marc Luyckx Ghisi, among others, can be re-conceptualised, from a literary perspective, as illustrative of the tensions that characterise our contemporary moment, inasmuch that the transmodern paradigm can entail a decolonising epistemological approach that “allows us to imagine that which has been made absent and invisible”.<sup>4</sup> In this respect, I would like to read *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* as exemplificative of the transmodern aesthetics since Roy’s latest novel features a socially and ethnically varied cast of characters and a wide range of socio-cultural issues that connect the subcontinent to the rest of the world, making the narrative edge towards the transmodern paradigm where both mankind and environment are conceptualised as an “independent whole”.<sup>5</sup>

Because of how it exhibits that our world dwells “no longer in the *post* but in the *trans*”,<sup>6</sup> Roy’s writing can be said to inhabit then a hybrid unstable condition that encompasses a wide range of situations from anti-global protests to global terrorism, from human rights to ecological degradation. Owing to its generic instability and its intellectual exploration of interconnected themes that tie in with Transmodernity, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is presented as a rewriting of hegemonic discourse and is concerned with the effort of retrieving the voices of the most marginal, silenced under our ever-globalised society. Through the examination of gender troubles, ethnic conflicts and vulnerable ecology, this paper seeks to demonstrate how Roy’s writing can promote a transmodern respect for the ‘other’, attentive to both postcolonial localism and global coloniality. In what follows, I will first outline a definition of Transmodernity: by investigating its philosophical tenets, which strike their roots in Levinas’ philosophy of alterity, I will try to set up a dialogue with postcolonial theory, specifically with Gayatri Spivak’s concern with the subaltern condition. In addition, I will seek to envisage how the transmodern approach can be accommodated into literary representations. Then, I will look at the ways through which the themes chosen as subjects for my analysis chime, in some respects, with Transmodernity, as they tackle both the reality of the present and the legacy of the colonial past, while opening up to imagining a better future.

## 2. The Ethics of Transmodernity between Decolonial and Postcolonial

In *Understanding Postcolonialism*, Jane Hiddleton discusses the role of Emmanuel Levinas within postcolonial theory. Specifically, with regard to a cluster of issues such as identity formation and subalternity, Hiddleton claims that Levinas brings about an ethical dimension since “he writes against any conception of subjectivity as totalized, masterful and dominant over the other”.<sup>7</sup> While scrutinising such terms as ‘Totality’, ‘Being’, and ‘the Same’, Levinas criticises Western philosophy, eliciting an ethical awakening that he describes as “the call of the other”, which foregrounds a sense of responsibility for the oppressed and the discriminated. According to the French philosopher of Lithuanian origin, the relationship between self and other is an ethical one and, as he suggests:

<sup>2</sup> See Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, *La sonrisa de Saturno. Hacia una teoría transmoderna* (Barcelona: Anthropos, 1989).

<sup>3</sup> Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, “Globalization as Transmodern Totality”, <http://transmodern-theory.blogspot.it/2008/12/globalization-as-transmodern-totality.html/>, accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Susana Onega and Jean Michel Ganteau, “Introduction: Transcending the Postmodern”, in Susana Onega and Jean Michel Ganteau, eds., *Transcending the Postmodern: The Singular Response of Literature to the Transmodern Paradigm* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020), 13.

<sup>5</sup> Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, “Transmodernity: A New Paradigm”, <http://transmodern-theory.blogspot.com/>, accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Jane Hiddleton, *Understanding Postcolonialism* [2009] (New York: Routledge, 2014), 16.

Its responsibility for the other, the proximity of the neighbor, does not signify a submission to the non-ego; it means an openness in which being's essence is surpassed in inspiration. It is an openness of which respiration is a modality or a foretaste, or, more exactly, of which it retains the aftertaste.<sup>8</sup>

This excerpt encapsulates the tenets of Levinas' thought: the openness to the other implies an 'aftertaste', a continuation that carries the taste of cultural and historical contamination. Levinas' claims call for a certain intellectual openness towards the 'other', becoming the precondition of a relationality that rejects violent confrontation, in conformity with Irena Ateljevic's understanding of Transmodernity as "*global reconciliation* around a sustainable future"<sup>9</sup> where mutuality and global consciousness prevail. Drawing on Levinas' ideas, Dussel has proposed a theory based on an ethics of liberation that favours the construction of planetary humanism. Levinas' call of the other has had a significant impact on the Latin American philosopher who challenges the traditional vision of modernity inasmuch that it is imbued with Eurocentric and colonial thinking. In his words, "modernity justifies an irrational praxis of violence ... Modern civilization understands itself as most developed and superior, since it lacks awareness of its own ideological Eurocentrism".<sup>10</sup> Conversely, Dussel sets forth the category of Transmodernity, conveying a radical critique of modernity in light of the decolonial/postcolonial debate. For Dussel, the transmodern indicates a new essence which emerges from the transcendence of modernity, while affirming "the emancipative tendencies of the enlightenment and modernity within a new transmodernity".<sup>11</sup>

As already alluded to before, in a similar vein to Dussel's stance, Rodríguez Magda has used the term 'Transmodernidad' to describe the vacillation of our present age between the end of postmodernity and a prolongation of modernity. In her view, Transmodernity is a synthesis of the modern thesis and postmodern antithesis, since it "tends to preserve the defining impetus of the first yet is devoid of its underlying base: by integrating its negation the third moment reaches a type of specular closure",<sup>12</sup> thus bridging the gap between the search for unity of the former and the celebration of fragmentation of the latter. The prefix 'trans', Rodríguez Magda explains, "denotes dynamism, but also confusion, because it mixes planes, accumulates them, hybridizes them".<sup>13</sup> Transmodernity, in other words, prolongs modernity and presents itself as a synthesis of Hegel's dialectic understanding of history.

In Dussel's understanding of the term, Transmodernity, however, retains a stronger focus on colonial questions, as it subverts the timeline of Western history by incorporating it with other perspectives to put forward a more coherent account of world history. As he states:

The transmodern project achieves with modernity what it could not achieve by itself—a corealization of solidarity, which is analectic, analogic, syncretic, hybrid and mestizo, and which bonds center to periphery, woman to man, race to race, ethnic group to ethnic group, class to class, humanity to earth, and occidental to Third World cultures. This bonding occurs not via negation, but via a subsumption from the viewpoint of alterity.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>8</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence* [1974], trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Pittsburgh: Duquesne U.P., 2006), 115.

<sup>9</sup> Irena, Ateljevic, "Visions of Transmodernity: A New Renaissance of our Human History?", *Integral Review*, 9.2 (June 2013), 204.

<sup>10</sup> Enrique Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas: Eclipse of "the Other" and the Myth of Modernity* [1992], trans. by Michael D. Barber (New York: Continuum, 1995), 115.

<sup>11</sup> Enrique Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity: Apel, Ricoeur, Rorty, Taylor, and the Philosophy of Liberation*, trans. by Eduardo Mendieta (Atlantic Highland, NJ: Humanities Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, "Globalization as Transmodern Totality".

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas*, 138.

What Dussel might be invoking here is a pluralisation of the project of modernity, a contamination that includes and expands its scope rather than merely denouncing its limits. To do this, Dussel's project operates by illuminating certain local histories to create a larger puzzle that allows for a better understanding of the manifold dimensions of coloniality. For Dussel, Transmodernity is a transcending analectic moment emerging from modernity and postmodernity and it moves away from postcolonial theory, redolent of Eurocentric knowledge, since it tends to disclose new horizons of dialogues between cultures, without seeking to impose a dominant perspective. In certain respects, Roy's writings, and *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* in particular, display a large, inclusive portrait of human history, establishing solidarity and empathic connections among different layers of humanity, beyond the differences concerning gender, ethnicity and religion. By paying attention to the 'unconsoled', as Roy herself writes in the dedication of her second novel, the Indian author "seeks to bring that which remains outside the dialectic into visibility".<sup>15</sup> As Linda Alcoff argues, Dussel's analectic method allows us to see what is hidden beyond the risks of dialectical generalisations, while addressing "the specificity of group identities such as the indigenous, the poor, racialized peoples, women, religious minorities, and sexual minorities".<sup>16</sup>

The fact that Roy's novel contains the word 'ministry' already evokes an intellectual unravelling that combines religion with politics. Also, the narrative's engagement with a 'viewpoint of alterity', as Dussel calls it, echoes with Spivak's claims on the destructive effects of global capitalism. Indeed, for Spivak, knowledge and discourse are framed by an imperialist perspective that forecloses any possibility of authenticity: in her words, a form of "epistemic violence"<sup>17</sup> emerges in postcolonial subjects that yearn for a language of their own. In this perspective, violence can be said to permeate the construction of the postcolonial subjects, allowing for the emergence of the other's alterity as a form of resistance to the global discourse. As suggested before, Dussel's decolonising project of the Enlightenment can be juxtaposed with Spivak deconstructionist reading of Immanuel Kant's philosophy as "affirmative sabotage or resistant appropriation".<sup>18</sup> Thus, Dussel's decolonial project and Spivak's postcolonial critique somehow tend to converge on one point: a commitment to absolute liberation requires an endeavour grounded in reframing the global and imperialist perspectives, in an echo of Levinas's ethics of alterity.

For the purpose of this article, the question I want to posit is how such philosophical matters can be allocated in literary representations. According to Susana Onega, for instance, contemporary literature can be said to witness a paradigm shift towards Transmodernity by favouring a "transversal dialogue"<sup>19</sup> between centre and periphery which might "deconstruct the West/non-West binary and acquire the pluriversal and multiperspectival understanding of self and world".<sup>20</sup> Likewise, in *Transmodern Perspectives on Contemporary Literatures in English*, Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen and José María Yebra-Pertusa argue that Transmodernity can be employed as an 'umbrella term' to connote our present age since it can include "all that is virtual, transnational, transethnically cosmopolitan, glocal,

<sup>15</sup> Linda Martín Alcoff, "An Epistemology for the New Revolution", *Transmodernity. Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1.2 (2011), 72.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (London: Macmillan, 1988), 289. Here, Spivak discusses the concept of "epistemic violence" by connecting Michel Foucault's notion of the 'episteme' with Antonio Gramsci's exploration of 'contradictory consciousness' and the 'subaltern'. On this, see Anke Bartels, Lars Eckstein, Nicole Waller and Dirk Wiemann, *Postcolonial Literatures in English: An Introduction* (Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler, 2019), 153-154.

<sup>18</sup> Gayatri Spivak, *Education in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 2012), 4. Spivak proposes a reading strategy that she calls "ab-use" since it uses the European Enlightenment "from below" (3).

<sup>19</sup> Susana Onega, "Thinking English Literature and Criticism under the Transmodern Paradigm", *CounterText*, 3.3 (2017), 362.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

strategic, and transubiquitous”.<sup>21</sup> As evinced in these comments, Transmodernity offers a “move towards a new era of humanity”<sup>22</sup> where terrorism, climate change, social inequalities and economic gaps are intertwined. By giving voice to victimised and wounded subjects, Transmodernity recalls “a Levinasian ethics of alterity and of consolidating pluriversal knowledge as an alternative to the univocal and teleologically oriented knowledge provided by grand universal narratives”.<sup>23</sup> What these critical views share is the idea that contemporary literature transgresses social, gender, cultural, and religious borders, thus accommodating the main tenets of Transmodernity. The connections that Transmodernity establishes, therefore, can be said to trigger the resurrection of those ‘grand narratives’ whose disappearance has been notoriously associated, by scholars like Jean-François Lyotard, to postmodernism. However, the transmodern also transcends modernity, since it highlights the complexity of human experiences, by moving beyond boundaries and casting light on the perspectives of marginalised and vulnerable subjectivities. Thus, Dussel’s and the other afore-mentioned approaches inspired by the transmodern philosophic investigation and the sibling postcolonial critique of Western knowledge may provide conceptual tools for the analysis of contemporary narratives that allows for a dialogue among cultures, thereby placing individuals in their singularities.

With such issues in mind, in the following pages I would like to explore the characters, the themes and the narrative form of Roy’s *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* from a transmodern perspective. In particular, I wish to demonstrate how the Indian author’s fusion of literary imagination, which evokes the mythology-inspired style of *Bharati* fantasy,<sup>24</sup> and realist chronicle, a documentary form that recalls her non-fiction works, ties in with the idea of a transmodern literary work in that it addresses diversity, interconnection, and ethical attentiveness to otherness and difference. To some extent, Roy’s generic experimentation can be said to reflect “similar visions of the fluid, interconnected, unstable reality of selves and worlds in the transmodern era”<sup>25</sup> insomuch that it attempts to unravel gender issues, historical frictions and environmental concerns. I will specifically analyse three aspects of Roy’s latest novel which can exemplify the transmodern orientation of the narrative as it seeks to address the fragilities of our contemporary globalised world. Firstly, I will examine how gender borders are blurred in Anjum, one of the central characters of the story. Anjum’s transgender identity reflects the fluid and hybrid narrative form as it interweaves fantasy, mythology and history. This will then lead to an exploration of ethnic frictions, mainly the Kashmir conflict and the Iraqi war in 2004, which tend to privilege Roy’s intellectual language, thus reconstructing history from the perspective of the ‘other’. Finally, I will focus on the environmental crisis the novel hints at, arguing that a transmodern approach to literature also promotes attentiveness to the non-human.

### 3. Gender Troubles and Hybrid Narrative Form

*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* is structured in twelve chapters, introduced by a prologue, and it features two main narrative strands with two protagonists, Anjum and Tilo, and a wide range of secondary characters that contribute to make the narrative kaleidoscopic. The omniscient narrative viewpoint is often replaced by a multifocal perspective through which the other characters recount their stories, using letters, diaries, text-messages, songs, and poems to make the events more genuine

<sup>21</sup> Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen and José María Yebra-Pertusa, “Introduction”, in Jessica Aliaga-Lavrijsen and José María Yebra-Pertusa, eds., *Transmodern Perspectives on Contemporary Literatures in English* (London and New York: Routledge, 2019), 9.

<sup>22</sup> Ateljevic, “Visions of Transmodernity”, 201.

<sup>23</sup> Onega and Ganteau, “Introduction: Transcending the Postmodern”, 12.

<sup>24</sup> See Dawson E. Varughese, *Genre Fiction of New India: Post-millennial Receptions of “Weird” Narratives* (New York: Routledge, 2017). Here, Varughese employs the formula ‘*Bharati* Fantasy’ to describe a corpus of postmillennial Indian fiction that draws from various Hindu scriptures and epic texts “through retellings, interpretation and inspired versions of the ideas and characters present in the ‘original’ material” (32).

<sup>25</sup> Onega and Ganteau, “Introduction: Transcending the Postmodern”, 15.



and authentic. The narrative thematises the contradictions of the subcontinent, specifically the matter of the *hijra* communities (male-to-female transgender people), the rise of Hindu nationalism, the struggle for Kashmiri independence, the plight of caste discrimination, the impact of rapid industrialisation on the environment, and the disastrous effects of globalisation on society.

The first plotline revolves around Aftab, a baby boy born to a Muslim family in Delhi, in the wake of Partition. The infant, however, is a hermaphrodite because, as his mother Jahanara soon finds out, a “small unformed girl-part”<sup>26</sup> is nestled near the genitals. As Jahanara herself comments, her baby’s situation is a singular manifestation of fluidity which also transgresses linguistic barriers:

In Urdu, the only language she knew, *all* things, not just living things but all things – carpets, clothes, books, pens, musical instruments – had a gender. Everything was either masculine or feminine, man or woman. Everything except her baby. Yes of course she knew there was a word for those like him – *Hijra*. Two words actually, *Hijra* and *Kinnar*. But two words do not make a language. Was it possible to live outside language? Naturally this question did not address itself to her in words, or as a single lucid sentence. It addressed itself to her as a soundless, embryonic howl. (8; emphasis in the original)

What this quote paradoxically illustrates is the construction of gender in both life and language, stretching the linguistic power of designating identity to its limits. Aftab dwells on the threshold of language and the two words Jahanara evokes, *Hijra* and *Kinnar*, cannot contain the baby’s fluid identity: while the first term describes eunuchs and hermaphrodites, the second strikes its etymological roots into Hindu mythology. According to Hindu legends, *Kinnars* were singers belonging to the realm of the Gods, “horse-headed and half-human figures”<sup>27</sup> that used to live in the Himalayan region. These celestial creatures are symbolically embodied in the very etymology of the name Aftab, ‘sunlight’, while their trans-human nature seems to be refracted in Aftab’s fluid sexuality. As the narrative progresses, Aftab has surgery, becomes Anjum and joins a group of *hijras* living in a household, called the *Khwabgah* (‘House of Dreams’), located in the old part of Delhi. Aftab’s transitional status can be read as an emblem of the porous borders among languages and gender differences. As Anjum underlines in the Prologue, while musing on the name chosen, “I’m *mehfil*. I’m a gathering. Of everybody and nobody, of everything and nothing” (4; emphasis in the original). Interestingly, the word *mehfil*, that describes a ‘gathering’ mainly for praising someone with music and poetry, is semantically related to *anjuman*, ‘meeting’. Thus, the name Anjum reveals an overlap of traces, entailing a palimpsestic accumulation evocative of what Glen D. Kuecker sees as a “transmodern ontology” where “a way of being human that transcends the modern world-system and generates its own ways of seeing and thinking”<sup>28</sup> eventually emerges.

This dichotomy between male and female, human and god-like, reframes Roy’s interest in the exploration of the subaltern voices of the Indian subcontinent. Like in *The God of Small Things* where, through the tragic character of Velutha, the Indian author had represented the *dalits*, the lower Indian caste, so in her latest novel she provides *hijras* with voice and agency. Indeed, Roy’s preoccupation with marginal subjectivities finds a fertile environment also in her non-fiction writings. In *Power Politics*, for instance, Roy conveys a searing critique of those modern globalising forces that have turned Indian citizens into vulnerable individuals. The word ‘subaltern’ inevitably leads to Gayatri Spivak’s postcolonial conceptualisation, in her seminal essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1983), of the painful condition of the most marginalised subjects or “the silenced center”<sup>29</sup> as she calls them.

<sup>26</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* (London: Penguin, 2017), 7. All further references to this edition, with page numbers, are to be found in the body of the text.

<sup>27</sup> Dinesh Prasad Saklani, *Ancient Communities of the Himalaya* (New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company, 1998), 76.

<sup>28</sup> Glen D. Kuecker, “From the Alienation of Neoliberal Globalization to the Transmodern Ways of Being: Epistemic Change and the Collapse of the Modern World-System”, *Journal of Globalization Studies*, 5.1 (2014), 163.

<sup>29</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 283.



While expressing her doubts concerning the possibility of retrieving a “subaltern consciousness”,<sup>30</sup> Spivak acknowledges that, as subaltern, women are “even more deeply in shadow”,<sup>31</sup> thereby questioning the representative power of language.<sup>32</sup> By extension, Roy attempts to portray the marginalised, giving them agency and, then, going beyond the domain of the possibility. What Anjum’s character presents is a problematisation of India’s ‘true’ subaltern.<sup>33</sup> Her voice crosses the frontiers of gender, caste, religion and history, thus challenging the idea that only ‘experts’ can speak and allowing citizens the “rights to express dissent”.<sup>34</sup> With a name transcending human finitude and a transgender identity, Anjum challenges the representative limits of language, thus deviating from Western representations of Indian marginalised groups. In this regard, Roy’s ethical attention attracts all the social forms of exclusion, recalling Dussel’s stance of Transmodernity as being coterminous with “an *incorporative* solidarity”<sup>35</sup> which results from the inclusion of all the neglected and victimized voices. With its Levinasian emphasis on the recognition of otherness, Dussel’s transmodern project seeks to illuminate forms of alterity that emerge from the encounter between modernity and coloniality. As already argued before, one of the key aspects of Dussel’s philosophy is the so-called analectic method which, in the Argentinian philosopher’s own words, “refers to the real human fact by which every person, every group or people, is always situated ‘beyond’ (*ano-*) the horizon of totality”.<sup>36</sup> This analectic perspective is then beyond a totalitarian vision, allowing for a reconceptualization of the ‘other’.

Grappling with a transcultural perspective that moves beyond totalitarian dynamics is at the core of the novel, as Aftab’s parable illustrates. Interestingly, the feeling of spiritual transcendence that permeates Roy’s novel, also recalls Varughese’s category of ‘*Bharati Fantasy*’. As I have discussed elsewhere,<sup>37</sup> the narrative form of *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* blends some historical major watersheds with elements taken from the rich tradition of legends, myths and tales associated to the *topos* of *Bharat Mata* (‘Mother India’). The parable of Aftab/Anjum metaphorically blurs the borders between fantasy and history, indulging in nostalgic recollections of a lost world when *hijras* used to enjoy an important social and cultural status in India. Their songs were believed to bring luck and fertility, a relevant presence also manifested in two major Hindu epic texts, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*,<sup>38</sup> where mythological accounts record the god-like nature of these androgynous creatures. In Roy’s novel, the *hijra* community in the ‘House of the Dreams’ is then, in Varughese’s words, a ‘weird’ representation of otherness for the Western audience or, as I wish to demonstrate here, an instance of a transmodern perspective in that their presence installs a form of otherness marked by agency and potentiality. As the old guru of the ‘House of the Dreams’ explains, “[t]o be

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 287.

<sup>32</sup> In her essay, Spivak discusses Karl Marx’s notion of representation, distinguishing between the two German words, *veretren* (‘fill in’) and *darstellen* (‘depict’). On this point, see Stephen Morton, *Gayatri Spivak: Ethics, Subalternity and the Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2007).

<sup>33</sup> Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?”, 285.

<sup>34</sup> Arundhati Roy, *Power Politics* (Cambridge: South End Press, 2001), 76.

<sup>35</sup> Enrique Dussel, “Eurocentrism and Modernity”, *boundary 2*, 20.3 (Autumn 1993), 76.

<sup>36</sup> Enrique Dussel, *Philosophy of Liberation* [1985], trans. by Aquilina Martinez and Christine Markovsky (New York: Orbis Books, 2003), 158.

<sup>37</sup> Angelo Monaco, “Fantasy and History in Postcolonial India: the Case of Arundhati Roy’s Anti-Global Novel”, *From the European South: A Transdisciplinary Journal of Postcolonial Humanities*, 3 (2018): 55-70, <http://europeansouth.postcolonialitalia.it/journal/2018-3/5.Monaco.pdf>, accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>38</sup> The *Ramayana*, as the title suggests, narrates the life of Rama, a divine prince who fights against the demon king Ravana in order to rescue his wife. The poem, which contains about 24,000 lines, is considered the oldest Hindu epic text, dating back to the 6th century B.C. Together with the *Mahabharata*, 4th century B.C., it forms the core of the so-called *Itihasa*, the two major epic works of Hinduism written in Sanskrit. The *Mahabharata*, made of nearly 200,000 verses, has a very complex plot that joins wars, adventures and philosophical meditations.

present in history, even as nothing more than a chuckle, was a universe away from being absent from it, from being written out of it altogether” (51). This comment showcases Roy’s infusion of a subaltern subjectivity endowed with voice and agency, thus echoing Dussel’s words on the emancipation of the oppressed that “can only be finally achieved by reaching, on equal terms, to those beyond that system”.<sup>39</sup>

In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the *hijra* community acts as a symbol of vulnerability and otherness, a metonymic signifier for contemporary India itself, as the country seeks to confront the present disrupted by violence, intolerance and poverty. Beyond this metaphorical orientation of liberation, the fluid identities of the *hijras* also mirror the very complex and liquid narrative form of the novel. As I have pointed out before, the novel mixes history and mythology, thus displaying a narrative style that alternates historical realism with magic realism. The incorporation of letters, poems, diary pages, articles from newspapers and official documents is a metanarrative solution that alerts the reader to the generic hybridity of the story where authentic realities and imaginary situations coexist, a liminal form that resonates with Rodriguez Magda’s categorisation of Transmodern texts as “narratives of the limits”<sup>40</sup> since they address questions of rupture by exploring new territories. In addition, the novel privileges a multifocal perspective that continuously shifts the narrative perspective from third-person omniscient narrator to the first person. In this respect, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* works as a palimpsestic text, its overarching organisation showing interconnections and links, specifically related to manifestations of otherness and oppression, as in the cases of the ethnic conflicts staged in the novel.

#### 4. Ethnic Conflicts and Intellectual Activism: The Kashmir Conflict

The second narrative strand Roy’s second novel pivots around features a young woman, Tilo, and her three lovers: a Kashmiri freedom fighter and revolutionary hero, named Musa, with whom Tilo lives a romance; Naga, a left-wing corrupt journalist, whom Tilo eventually marries; and Biplab, a senior officer in the Indian Intelligence Bureau, who discloses most of the mysteries about Tilo’s story. This intricate storyline shifts the novel’s focus from allegory to historical document, zooming in on the tragic, bloody conflict between India and Kashmir. The region has been a disputed territory between India and Pakistan since the end of the British colonial rule in 1947, though the frictions in this contested territory pre-date Partition.<sup>41</sup> In the aftermath of the ceasefire established in July 1949, Pakistan retained control of the north-western area inhabited by a large Muslim community, while India controlled the south and east regions, thereby rejecting the local people’s demand for independence. According to the United Nations, the Indian government is still perpetrating human rights violations, excessive use of military force and sexual discrimination,<sup>42</sup> a concern that Roy herself has addressed in her writings.

<sup>39</sup> Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas*, 138.

<sup>40</sup> Rosa María Rodríguez Magda, “The Crossroads of Transmodernity”, [https://www.academia.edu/33683289/\\_The\\_Crossroads\\_of\\_Transmodernity/](https://www.academia.edu/33683289/_The_Crossroads_of_Transmodernity/), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>41</sup> The princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was established with the treaty of Amritsar (1846). The rise of a nationalist movement in the region started in the early 1930s when the religious fractures among Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus became stronger. In the wake of Partition, however, the Chinese government gradually took control of the eastern area of the region, following the 1962 Sino-Indian War. See Chitralkha Zutshi, ed., *Kashmir: History, Politics, Representation* (Cambridge, MA: Cambridge U.P., 2017).

<sup>42</sup> See “Report on the Situation of Human Rights in Kashmir: Developments in the Indian State of Jammu and Kashmir from June 2016 to April 2018, and General Human Rights Concerns in Azad Jammu and Kashmir and Gilgit-Baltistan”, <https://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Countries/TN/DevelopmentsInKashmirJune2016ToApril2018.pdf>, accessed 10 November 2020.

What I intend to show here, however, is how the ethnic frictions that animate Roy's second novel delineate a universalising project that juxtaposes different manifestations of vulnerability around the world. Already in Anjum's plotline, the collisions between Muslims and Hindus materialise in many forms. Against the backdrop of 'shining India', where "[s]kyscrapers and steel factories sprang up where forests used to be, rivers were sold and bottled in supermarkets, fish were tinned, mountains mined and turned into shining missiles" (98), religious tensions erupt in the country. This is suggested, for instance, in the story of Saddam Hussain, an outcast Anjum meets when she moves from the 'House of Dreams' to a graveyard, on the outskirts of Delhi, where she offers shelter to marginalised and wounded people. The man, whose real name is Dayachand, was born to a Hindu family belonging to the caste of the skinners and, in his youth, had witnessed his father's brutal assassination by some policemen and an exacerbated mob. This hideous fact leads Dayachand to take the name of Saddam Hussain when he sees the video of the former Iraqi president's execution and is impressed by "the courage and dignity of that man in the face of death" (90). As Dayachand claims, the decision of taking that name and becoming a Muslim is driven by his thirst for revenge, by his ambition of dying like a martyr and "pay a price" (91).

This emphasis on ethnic and religious differences, therefore, shows the mosaic-like articulation of the novel, which establishes connections among various stories of grief and trauma, from Iraq to India. Moreover, this episode also transcends the frontier between fact and storytelling. Dayachand, who has a little knowledge about the former Iraqi president, shows a fascination with the real Saddam Hussein because of the videos circulating on the Web where he is depicted as a stoic hero, while Anjum points out the huge mischief caused by his regime, concluding that "we Muslims are motherfuckers too, just like everyone else" (91). This quote reflects Roy's intellectual effort: by expressing her disagreement with feelings of religious intolerance, what the Indian author might be trying to convey here is the relevance of religious and ethnic conflicts if one wants to go beyond the rigid limits of a unilateral perspective. This pluriversal approach moves beyond the level of the local, creating connections among wounds: the allusion to Iraq indirectly evokes the American invasion of the Middle Eastern country, thus creating links with various forms of oppression. As Dussel puts it, the transmodern intellectual ought to promote a "*trans-modern pluriverse*"<sup>43</sup> which includes peripheral and oppressed identities, instead of an empty, undifferentiated unity. This stance percolates through *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, specifically in relation to the troublesome Kashmiri question, finding in the word *azadi* a linguistic vehicle of connection.

In *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom*, Roy had already engaged with the struggles in the contested Himalayan region. In the collection, Roy's essays side with the local population's demands for freedom. In "Azadi: The Only Thing Kashmiris Want", for instance, Roy employs the local word *azadi* ('freedom', from the Persian *Āzādī*) and denounces the Indian government's suppression of human rights. As Roy wonders, "[d]oes any government have the right to take away people's liberty with military force?"<sup>44</sup> This central question marks Roy's intellectual commitment to the Kashmiri cause, a struggle for which she has also risked imprisonment. The word '*azadi*' is, however, also conjured up in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, specifically in Chapter seven where Biplab reconstructs his friendship with Tilo in the throes of the chaos and protests involving the Himalayan valley.

In this chapter, Roy's experimentation with the narrative format reaches its most evident materialisation. Biplab's reconstruction of Tilo's story is interspersed with pages of the woman's diary in which, as the following quote shows, Tilo reports opinions and ideas of the Kashmiri population: "In Kashmir", a man explains, "when we wake up and say 'Good Morning' what we mean is 'Good

<sup>43</sup> Enrique Dussel, "A New Age in the History of Philosophy: The World Dialogue between Philosophical Traditions", *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, 35.5 (2009), 512.

<sup>44</sup> Arundhati Roy, "Azadi: The Only Thing Kashmiris Want", in Tariq Ali et al., eds., *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom* (London and New York: Verso, 2011), 71.

Mourning” (279). Tilo, who is an activist, a possible alter-ego of Roy herself, does highlight here how modernity, in Kashmir, emerges as a historical moment where the end of British colonialism leads to genocide and military occupation by new neocolonial forces. This is best illustrated, however, not in the depiction of conflicts and clashes but in a scene that portrays a funeral procession:

Seventeen-plus-one tin coffins wove through the streets, winking back at the winter sun. To someone looking down at the city from the ring of high mountains that surrounded it, the procession would have looked like a column of brown ants carrying seventeen-plus-one sugar crystals to their anthill to feed their queen. Perhaps to a student of history and human conflict, in relative terms that’s all the little procession really amounted to: a column of ants making off with some crumbs that had fallen from the high table. (325)

In line with the novel’s dedication, Roy chronicles the excesses of a long conflictual dispute, lending her chronicle of skirmishes and riots a lyrical tone. By comparing the local people mourning procession to insects swarming across the mountains, Roy’s figurative language creates the impression that nothing ‘new’ seems to happen in the valley. Also, Tilo’s reflections are ironically expressed in a style marked by unconventional narrative techniques, such as vocabulary entries or questionnaires. The tragic death of a man, named Mattoo, for instance, is conveyed with multiple-choice questions which possibly attempt to shock and displace the reader, like the following quote well illustrates:

Q1: Why was Mattoo shot?

- (a) Because he was a Hindu
- (b) Because he wanted Azadi
- (c) Because he won the Nobel Prize
- (d) None of the above
- (e) All of the above (279)

While reviewers have expressed harsh criticism with what they view as a disruption of the narrative form in favour of a high political activism infused in the story,<sup>45</sup> what I wish to underline here is that Roy’s intellectual force emerges as one characterised by black humour. Tilo’s revelations disclose a world where “[d]eath was everywhere. Death was everything” (314). The woman’s activism is a clear materialisation of the intellectual energy Roy’s novel is imbued with and this continual adherence to the issues of excluded, oppressed and marginalised people clearly recalls Dussel’s ethics of liberation and Spivak’s concern with the subaltern.

As the Argentinian philosopher claims, a transmodern ethics seeks to include the ‘other’, calling for a liberation project “based on the reason of the *Other*”.<sup>46</sup> Following Levinas, who does not reduce the ‘other’ to the ‘I’, because of the “strangeness of the Other, his irreducibility to the I”,<sup>47</sup> Dussel proposes an ethical mission opposed to the epistemic and military hegemony of the West, which aims, instead, at dispossessing the self of any concept of superiority, trying “to realize the new, what has not been foreseen by the totality, that which arises from freedom that is unconditioned, revolutionary,

<sup>45</sup> See, for instance, Parul Sehgal, “Arundhati Roy’s Fascinating Mess: Being an Activist and an Artist is Trickier than it Sounds”, *The Atlantic*, July/August 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/07/arundhati-roys-fascinating-mess/528684/> accessed 10 November 2020 or Eileen Battersby, “*The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* by Arundhati Roy Review: All too Obvious”, *The Irish Times*, 3 June 2017, <https://www.irishtimes.com/culture/books/the-ministry-of-utmost-happiness-by-arundhati-roy-review-all-too-obvious-1.3096344> accessed 10 November 2020. Battersby, in particular, claims that Roy’s “polemical instinct is far more developed than her art”.

<sup>46</sup> Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas*, 137.

<sup>47</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, *Totality and Infinity: An Essay on Exteriority* [1961], trans. by Alphonso Lingis (Kluwer: Academic Publishers, 1991), 43.

innovative”.<sup>48</sup> This position, then, goes beyond totality, transcending it. In addition, Dussel’s ethics entails the principle of liberation, seen as “the act of the oppressed by which they express or realize themselves”.<sup>49</sup> If the Levinasian ‘aftertaste’ implies a liberation path that establishes continuities between self and other, the word *azadi*, through which Roy ventriloquises the Kashmiri cause, is a significant manifestation of this project. While in the Kashmiri context, the Persian word *Azadi*, as Rakhshan Rizwan argues, evokes the local people’s activism against violence, eliciting “a desire for the restoration of the ‘*haq-e-khud-iradiat*’”<sup>50</sup> that corresponds to “the right to self-determination”<sup>51</sup>, in India it has also become the symbol of the fight for women’s emancipation. As a slogan, *azadi* becomes a vehicle allowing for the crossing of spatio-temporal borders, but also a performative act directed outside oneself, to the rest of the country and to the rest of the world. Roy then gives voice to the other, to the discriminated and the most vulnerable, thus transcending, in a transmodern sense, the boundary between victims and perpetrators in line with Dussel’s liberation project.

The destiny of the Kashmiri people is still highly debated, while the killing fields of the region are so huge that they can “dwarf those of Palestine and Tibet”.<sup>52</sup> In the light of this, a critical revision of the present situation requires the active involvement of the local population, a stance that Roy has attempted to unfold in both her non-fiction and narrative works. In *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness*, the Kashmir conflict is not merely described with a strong polemical edge; rather, the novel’s delving into the brutality of the tensions portrays the psychological impact they have on both sides. Take, for instance, the human parable of Biplab, the officer of the Indian Intelligence service who is responsible for the massacre of the Kashmiris. By the end of the novel, readers gradually find out that the character’s mental health begins to deteriorate, edging towards a serious form of depression. The man, who is the only character to be endowed with a first-person narrative perspective, is both a witness to and a perpetrator of evil, exhibiting an exposure to violence which ultimately seems to blur his mental sanity. As he declares, “[i]t worries me that I use the simple past” (189), a statement that discloses the traumatic effects of reporting death and havoc. Biplab’s final reflections address all the mistakes made, revealing a man who feels compassion and sorrow for Musa, the Kashmiri freedom-fighter he almost accidentally encounters by the end of the novel. Like a “nostalgic old fool”, living in a “kind of epochal sadness” (434), Biplab sees the future of the world as a place swelling with death and destruction, “inured to the sight of piled-up corpses” (430).

Biplab’s fractured self transcends the monolithic voice of modernity perceived as a violent eruption of war and destruction, highlighting the mental deterioration that such an engagement with violence can generate. From Iraq to Kashmir, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* establishes metaphorical connections of shared grief and oppression. Moreover, Roy’s critical vision of the geopolitical situation juxtaposes violence and hope, decay and compassion, trying to follow an ethics of liberation that, in Dussel’s words, “subverts the phenomenological order and pierces it to let in a metaphysical transcendence”.<sup>53</sup> Roy’s denunciation is also an attempt to cleave the psychological certainty of the mechanisms that govern capitalism, neocolonialism and globalisation, not only with regard to marginalised and oppressed subjects, but also in relation to the threat of present-day environmental apocalypse, thus embracing a planetary ethical perspective. Planetarity, as Spivak argues, is a future-

<sup>48</sup> Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas*, 160.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>50</sup> Rakhshan Rizwan, *Kashmiri Life Narratives: Human Rights, Pleasure and the Local Cosmopolitan* (New York and London: Routledge, 2020), 101.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Pankaj Mishra, “Introduction”, in Ali et al., eds., *Kashmir: The Case for Freedom*, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Dussel, *The Invention of the Americas*, 58.

oriented experience, an endeavour to go past superficial binary oppositions, “an experience of the impossible”<sup>54</sup> that invites us “to imagine ourselves as planetary creatures rather than global entities”.<sup>55</sup>

## 5. The Environmental Crisis between Apocalypse and Ethics

We now live in a historical moment of considerably growing awareness about the ecological crisis that is affecting our planet. In this respect, among the various domains the transmodern project deals with, the ecological question is a prominent one. The ethics of liberation promoted by transmodern intellectuals sees the human and the non-human as embedded within the same natural world, suggesting the idea of a harmonization between man and nature. Against this background, Marc Luyckx Ghisi has proposed a project of ‘genuine sustainability’ in which “we put up a stop to the current practices that do irremediable harm to Nature and we begin to heal and to clean our environment”.<sup>56</sup> Likewise, Dussel’s liberation project provides ample evidence of a certain ecological emphasis:

The overcoming of cynical management reason (planetary administration), of capitalism (as economic system), of liberalism (as political system), of Eurocentrism (as ideology), of machismo (in erotics), of the reign of the white race (in racism), of the destruction of nature (in ecology), and so on presumes the liberation of diverse types of the oppressed and/or excluded. It is in this sense that the ethics of liberation defines itself as transmodern (because the postmoderns are still Eurocentric).<sup>57</sup>

Dussel’s invocation of ecological concerns includes also the question of the environment, allowing for a transmodern liberation project that moves beyond a mere critique of the capitalist and ideological system of modernity. Ecological preoccupations recur also in Roy’s writings. Already in *The God of Small Things*, Roy adopts an ecocritical focus on the natural scenario of Kerala, south-west India, where the novel is set. This is how, for instance, Roy comments on climate changes and on human responsibilities:

Though it was December, it rained as though it was June. “Cyclonic disturbance”, the newspapers called it the next day. But by then nobody was in any condition to read the papers. Perhaps it was the rain that drove Vellya Paapen to the kitchen door. To a superstitious man, the relentlessness of that unseasonal downpour could have seemed like an omen from an angry god. To a drunk superstitious man, it could have seemed like the beginning of the end of the world. Which, in a way, it was.<sup>58</sup>

By resorting to the rhetoric of the apocalypse, Roy depicts the “cyclonic disturbance” causing harm and destruction. The Meenachal River, for example, along which the story unfolds, continuously floods, taking the life of human beings. If the basic motto of ecocriticism is “no social justice without environmental justice”,<sup>59</sup> Roy’s quest for environmental and social harmony is a crucial theme which the Indian author also addresses in her non-fictional works.

In *The Cost of Living*, Roy tackles the construction of a dam on the Narmada River, suggesting that the dam does not entail development, but dispossession, thus implying an experience “of suffering for

<sup>54</sup> Gayatri Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2003), 102.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 72.

<sup>56</sup> Marc Luyckx Ghisi, *Knowledge Society: A Breakthrough Toward Genuine Sustainability* (Cochin: Arunchala Press, 2009), 5.

<sup>57</sup> Enrique Dussel, “Beyond Eurocentrism: The World System and the Limits of Modernity”, in Fredric Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *The Cultures of Globalization* (Durham: Duke U.P., 1998), 19.

<sup>58</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The God of Small Things* (New York: Random House, 1997), 241.

<sup>59</sup> Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, “Green Postcolonialism”, *Interventions*, 9.1 (2007), 10.



those displaced”.<sup>60</sup> For Roy, the capitalist logic does not bring even development; rather, it implies forms of domination that produce disastrous consequences. “The story of the Narmada valley”, Roy writes, “is nothing less than the story of modern India. Like the tiger in the Belgrade Zoo during the NATO bombing, we’re beginning to eat our own limbs”.<sup>61</sup> These are the words that Roy uses in her condemnation of this project. As she explains, over 3,000 dams have been built in India in the aftermath of independence, a large investment that has been equated to the process of nation-building. And yet, this conspicuous and immensely expensive strategy has also displaced millions of people, above all those belonging to the lower castes of Indian society. Thus, when it is not war and violence to generate death, the “inflated rhetoric” of progress, as Roy calls Indian environmental policy, exposes the most vulnerable segments of the population to dispossession and poverty. Growing concerns over the delicate condition of modern India have also been expressed by Roy on the present covid-19 emergency that has revealed the country’s “brutal, structural, social and economic inequality”.<sup>62</sup>

Interestingly, Roy’s critique also deals with the ecological effects that unbridled capitalism has on the natural world. Specifically, in the essay titled “The End of Imagination”, Roy resorts to the convention of the “environmental apocalypse” that, as Greg Garrard explains, “is not about anticipating the end of the world, but about attempting to avert it by persuasive means”.<sup>63</sup> In her essay, Roy discusses the theme of nuclear testing, pointing out the possible risks of such a cataclysmic act: “[i]f there is a nuclear war, our foes will not be China or America or even each other. Our foe will be – the sky, the air, the land, the wind and water – will all turn against us. Their wrath will be terrible”.<sup>64</sup> Here, Roy is possibly issuing a warning against the threat of nuclear wars not only as a means for generating loss but also as a way for spoiling our natural world. Along this premise, *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* perfectly incarnates Roy’s apocalyptic rhetoric, showing a fascination with wounded and precarious ecology.

From the very initial pages, the reader of Roy’s second novel is confronted with a fragile natural environment. The *incipit* is a lyrical vignette where a scene of pastoral decay is portrayed. Set at the “magic hour”, hovering between day and night, this poetic prologue presents an old graveyard where “vultures died of diclofenac poisoning” (1; emphasis in the original) among Banyan trees. As the narrator explains, diclofenac is an aspirin<sup>65</sup> given to cows in order to increase the production of milk, a necessity associated with the demands of the constantly growing Indian population. By mixing irony and a highly poetic language, Roy warns the reader of what might happen if we do not try to change our anthropocentric behaviour, a tendency which Roy connects to unbridled capitalism.

Notably, the novel is centred on a range of environmental disasters that reveal Roy’s ecocritical concerns. As discussed at the beginning of this section, transmodern ethics shares a fascination with ecology which is seen as a necessary way for promoting inclusiveness and for contrasting economic imbalances. This ecological stance is clearly evident, for instance, when the narrator indulges in the paradoxical nature of India’s economic boom. As already alluded before, the policies that the Indian government proposes favour multinational companies, such as in the case of local farmers who become dispossessed of their lands which are instead given to petrochemical corporations (105) or when *adivasi* people are evicted from the forests in order to favour mining companies (421). As Spivak

<sup>60</sup> Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013), ix.

<sup>61</sup> Arundhati Roy, *The Cost of Living: The Greater Common Good and the End of the Imagination* (London: Flamingo, 1999), x.

<sup>62</sup> Arundhati Roy, “The Pandemic Is a Portal”, *The Financial Times*, 3 April 2020, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>, accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), 107-108.

<sup>64</sup> Roy, *The Cost of Living*, 46.

<sup>65</sup> I am using the word ‘aspirin’ as it appears in Roy’s novel though diclofenac is a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug and it does not share the same molecular formula as in aspirins.

notes, in a world dominated by the West imperial agenda, economic profit can only produce “the common thread of profound ecological loss, the loss of forest and river as foundation of life”.<sup>66</sup> In other words, a planetary ethics, in line with Dussel’s liberation project is a way to deconstruct the model of global exploitation. In this respect, a similar type of impingement is at work in Roy’s novel as it shows how anthropocentric behaviour generates loss and deterioration, as in the case of the 1984 Union Carbide Bhopal disaster. This gas leak, which caused the death of about one thousand people in Bhopal, central India, has produced “generations of deformed babies” and thousands of people “killed, maimed and blinded” (111).

Despite such an apocalyptic portrait, Roy eventually opens up to glimmers of hope: by the end of the novel, the garden yielding “beans, chillies, tomatoes and several kinds of gourds” (399), near the graveyard where Anjum and Tilo create their own community, provides a “temporary solace” (400) for the sense of grief the novel entails. Anjum and Tilo’s final choice of moving to a graveyard is the sign of a spiritual reunion with the natural world, Roy’s protagonists display an ethics of care and affect. Significantly, Anjum, who “lives like a tree” (3) in the graveyard, embodies Roy’s intellectual energy, entailing a transmodern sensibility that subverts capitalist and neo-colonialist modernity with an ecomorphic encounter with the natural world, attuned to the ‘unconsoled’, to whom the Indian writer has dedicated her novel.

## 6. Coda: Refracting the Transmodern

Postcolonial intellectuals, as Engin Isin contends, should be seen as “neither universal nor specific but transversal political subjects, always crossing borders and orders, constituting solidarities, networks, and connections”.<sup>67</sup> By choosing a *hijra*, those tormented by conflicts, and wounded ecology as her main narrative focuses, Roy expands and complicates the mainstream narrative of postcolonial India, privileging marginal voices which together patch up the fragments of a multifaceted and complex country. Through them, Roy articulates a feeling of transformative solidarity, an emotional contagion that is well expressed in the poem that appears by the end of the novel: “*How to tell a shattered story? By slowly becoming everybody. No. By slowly becoming everything*” (436; emphasis in the original). The shattered stories contained in *The Ministry of Utmost Happiness* resonate with the Indian author’s intellectual activism that readers may find in her non-fictional accounts. And yet, albeit the negative atmosphere that looms large in Roy’s macrotext, these lyrical lines are a kind of coda that orient readers across the fluid transmodern format of the novel. Whilst characters and nature seem to be engulfed by events and incidents and *dramatis personae* multiply, Roy’s style invites readers to reflect on the inequalities of our world, showing a transformative active function. The figural language of the novel is evocative of Dussel’s transmodern stance since it tries to maintain a dialogue between self and other, man and nature, coloniser and colonised, history and mythology, revealing a “rich thematic of the refraction of the center in or by the periphery”.<sup>68</sup> By promoting attention to individual singularities and global questions, Roy’s novel can be said to allow for “an increased demand for solidarity”<sup>69</sup> that Onega sees as a central concern in transmodern literary texts. The novel, to conclude, contributes to an epistemological thinking from the borders inasmuch that it elicits attentiveness to local singularities

<sup>66</sup> Gayatri Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard U.P., 1999), 380.

<sup>67</sup> Engin Isin, “Preface: Postcolonial Intellectuals *Universal, Specific or Transversal?*”, in Sandra Ponzanese and Adriano José Habed, eds., *Postcolonial Intellectuals in Europe: Critics, Artists, Movements, and Their Publics* (London and New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2018), xiv.

<sup>68</sup> Dussel, *The Underside of Modernity*, 137.

<sup>69</sup> Onega, “Thinking English Literature and Criticism under the Transmodern Paradigm”, 373.

and global issues, edging towards a Transmodern paradigm shift through which the decolonial/postcolonial debate is eventually refracted.



## Undoing Colonial Temporalities. Presentism and the Future of the Post/Past

**Abstract:** This paper aims to explore the notion of presentism as a way of looking at the fraught temporalities of the *post-/de-* ‘pre-fixing frontier’ in colonialism studies. Drawing on various interpretations of the concept, presentism can be said to manifest when societies become unable to imagine a future or a past, because of structured powers keen on preserving the *status quo*. Using a combination of data from media ethnography and literary criticism, we intend to assess the productivity of an updated notion of presentism for the ongoing debates on the colonality of power. Instances of arrested and recursive temporalities exemplified in recent Anglophone African novels as well as in Swedish media discourses on migration will serve as case studies. Issues of memory and denial, as well as the ideological claim that enduring phenomena such as immigration should be considered symptoms of a *contemporary* migratory crisis, will be at the centre of our investigation.

Keywords: *presentism, arrested temporalities, defuturing, colonality, post/de-colonial thought, migration*

Refugees gather like so much undecided pain  
to sit in an agonized waiting  
for something that may or may not  
come. This is the task.  
Chris Abani, *Refugees*

### 1. Introduction

Temporality is notoriously a defining question in the study of colonialism and its implications. Identifying one’s understanding of historical change has always been an inescapable concern for scholars dealing with the violent events and perduring consequences of colonization, with the hopes and ambiguities of anti-colonial struggles, and with the fraught situation we usually term *post-* (and sometimes *neo-*) colonial. The question is not only one of definitions and inevitably limiting linguistic formulae. In this sense, the complex distinctions between postcolonial and decolonial theories do not necessarily correspond to a neat divide in the understandings of time and ‘the times’.<sup>2</sup>

Many postcolonial scholars have criticized the idea of a linear and progressive temporality that is implicit in the prefix *post*, with its seemingly clear-cut tracing of a definite turning point in time, following which the colonial phenomenon should be taken as concluded.<sup>3</sup> Decolonial thinkers, on the other hand, have fiercely taken to the task the Western-centric idea of modernity itself in the form in

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<sup>1</sup> Sections 1, 2, 3 and 5 of this article have been written by Mara Mattoscio. Section 4 (including 4.1 and 4.2) is by Juan Velasquez Atehortúa.

<sup>2</sup> For a recent assessment of the debate opposing postcolonial and decolonial practices, see Madina Tlostanova, “The Postcolonial Condition, the Decolonial Option and the Post-socialist Intervention”, in Monica Albrecht, ed., *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Newcolonial Present* (London: Routledge, 2019), 165-178. Tlostanova argues in favour of a “deep coalition” between the two and advises to work “with decolonial concepts on a more general level” and with “postcolonial tools ... on applied and descriptive levels” (Ibid., 171).

<sup>3</sup> See Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Context* (New York: Routledge, 1995) and Annamaria Carusi, “Post, Post, and Post: or Where Is South African Literature in All This?”, in Ian Adam and Helen Tiffin, eds., *Past the Last Post: Theorizing Post-Colonialism and Post-Modernism* (Calgary: University of Calgary, 1990), 95-101.

which it is usually cast against a supposed ‘pre-modernity’ and backwardness of the rest of the world. In the colonial project, Europeans have long been “denying the coevalness of the colonized, refusing to recognize that everyone inhabits the same moment in time”,<sup>4</sup> so that the characterization of colonized people as living ‘belatedly’ or ‘behind times’ has been invoked to justify the violent conquest and subjugation of the desired territories. In the imperialist rhetoric, the Europeans’ ‘civilizing mission’ would have served to guide the colonized societies towards a modernity that they could never, in any case, completely attain.<sup>5</sup> Yet, as Walter Mignolo remarked, “modernity is not an ontological unfolding of history but the hegemonic narrative of Western civilization. So, there is no need to be modern. Even better, it is urgent to delink from the dream that if you are not modern, you are out of history”.<sup>6</sup> In other words, the whole idea of a chronological modernity that takes place at the apex of a progressive vectorial time is a corollary of that Western philosophy that posits the European subjects and their history as the centre of the universe, and everybody else as dependant on this vantage point.

In this light, the notions of history and historiography appear themselves fraught with ambiguities. In examining the self-division of the colonial subject and its desire for an unattainable catch-up with ‘modernity’, Dipesh Chakrabarty wrote for example that “a historical construction of temporality (medieval/modern, separated by historical time) ... is precisely the axis along which the colonial subject splits itself. Or to put it differently, this split *is* what is history; writing history is performing this split over and over again”.<sup>7</sup> Chakrabarty’s reflections on the “artifice of history” in connection to postcoloniality are integral to his critique of the metanarrative of the nation state, whose “theoretical subject can only be a hyperreal ‘Europe’, a ‘Europe’ constructed by the tales that both imperialism and nationalism have told the colonized”.<sup>8</sup>

Such radical critique of the Western-centric mindset that reads time as a triumphant linear progress from ‘cultural backwardness’ to ‘sophisticated modernity’ (further complicated, as we will see, by Chakrabarty’s and others’ call for a ‘deep time’) invites a thorough reconsideration of the notions of past, present, and future, as well as of the meaning of our ‘being-in-time’. We will attempt this with an analysis that starts from investigating the recurring theme of ‘arrested’ or frozen temporalities in some instances of recent Anglophone African literature, and then proceeds to illuminate the philosophical concept of ‘presentism’ in reference to (post)coloniality. Our exploration of the ‘defuturing’ mechanisms of the (global) postcolonial condition will be further illustrated through a case study coming from the Global North, i.e. the last three decades’ discourses on migration in Swedish media, in which the constant phenomenon of human mass movement is recast as a symptom of a *contemporary* migratory crisis. Applying our theoretical lens both to literary studies and media ethnography helps us to reflect on the pervasiveness and structural entrenchment of presentism in contemporary politics and imagination.

## 2. Disavowing the Past, Denying the Future: African Literature Raises the Alarm

Rehana Rossouw’s 2017 novel *New Times* concludes its opening paragraph with the remark that “when you are oppressed and going nowhere you never rush”.<sup>9</sup> In this fictional story centred around the young

<sup>4</sup> Jennifer Wenzel, “Past’s Futures, Future’s Pasts”, in Stef Craps et al., eds., “Memory Studies and the Anthropocene: A Roundtable”, *Memory Studies*, 11.4 (2018), 498-515, 504.

<sup>5</sup> Tlostanova pointed out that, in the human taxonomy organized around the Western scale of modernity, “some are assigned a status of the forever-catching-up agents [while] others are placed into the absolute otherness and withdrawn from history and modernity”, Tlostanova, “The Postcolonial Condition”, 171.

<sup>6</sup> Walter Mignolo, “Geopolitics of Sensing and Knowing: On (De)Coloniality, Border Thinking, and Epistemic Disobedience”, *Transversal – Unsettling Knowledges*, <https://transversal.at/transversal/0112/mignolo/en>, accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?”, *Representations*, 37, Special Issue: *Imperial Fantasies and Postcolonial Histories* (Winter 1992), 1-26, 13.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>9</sup> Rehana Rossouw, *New Times* (Johannesburg: Jacana Books, 2017), 1.



coloured journalist Ali – inspired by the real-life journalistic experiences of Rossouw herself – the disappointment with the betrayal of the anti-apartheid movement’s aspirations in the year following the first democratic elections in South Africa is articulated through an analysis of the waiting times imposed by those in power.<sup>10</sup> At an electoral meeting with former anti-apartheid activist Irfaan, Ali and the rest of the audience have to wait fifty-five minutes past the scheduled starting time before the politician actually arrives and starts speaking – something that induces the protagonist to observe how he seems to be “enjoying the fruits of liberation while the almost one million voters in the Western Cape who voted for the Movement last year wait patiently for their freedom”.<sup>11</sup> When Ali investigates the new government’s silent adoption of economic policies that privilege foreign capital and cut trade unions out of decision making, she is met with a resistance that translates into slow responses, delayed calls and postponed appointments. Her struggle with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (another instance in which the prefix *post* is applied to something which has not been really overcome) only starts to be relieved when she digs out of memory and into full speech the traces of the most violent episode she has witnessed during the anti-apartheid demonstrations, which were otherwise ‘arresting’ her in a frozen moment in time.<sup>12</sup> *The Democrat*, the actively anti-apartheid newspaper she has been working for under the regime, is shut down abruptly soon after the first democratic elections because of the financial problems caused by its many lawsuits. On the other hand, in the newsroom of the less radical *The New Times*, for which Ali now works, the impending Rugby World Cup takes absolute precedence over her coverage of cases of apartheid violence she hopes will feature in the hearings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. In this fictional yet historically grounded account of 1995 South Africa, the blood-ridden apartheid past is quickly being forgotten, and the dawn of the AIDS plague threatening the youth’s future is hastily dismissed in favour of more cheerful news. In other words, the country is confined in an all-encompassing present in which democratic political aspirations are quickly replaced by short-sighted electoral calculus, newly-arrived international tourists are suddenly preferred over habitual customers in restaurants, and the news of persisting racism is relegated to the magazines’ gossip columns.

Rossouw’s case is only one of a number of recent literary works from ‘postcolonial’ contexts alerting the readers to the disquieting pre-eminence of an asphyxiating present over a more extended and expansive temporality. In J. M. Coetzee’s *The Childhood of Jesus*, the first volume of a trilogy dramatizing the story of a migrant family through a paradoxical re-reading of the biblical hypotext, the protagonists Simòn and David have recently landed ashore after a mysterious sea crossing that hints to the passage from life to afterlife.<sup>13</sup> Having spent a few weeks in a dedicated refugee camp, they are finally allowed into the Relocation Centre of the city of Novilla, where they are given new names, assigned an official age based on their looks, and generally treated as if they were only now coming into existence at all. More disquieting still, they are asked to forget everything about their past and behave as if they had never had another life. “‘People here have washed themselves clean of old ties’”, says the clerk at the Relocation Centre. “‘You should be doing the same: letting go of old attachments, not pursuing them’”. She reaches down, ruffles the boy’s hair ... ‘Aren’t you washed clean yet?’”<sup>14</sup> Yet Simòn still retains, if not clear memories, at least shadows of memories of his past life and desires. In the same way, the child he accompanies keeps referencing other temporal experiences and possibilities, by

<sup>10</sup> In the context of the South African usage of the term, which indicates the specific hybrid identity resulting from the colonial encounter between Europeans and Africans, the protagonist’s ‘colouredness’ also has temporal implications: coloured people are bereft of either “precolonial or European past” and are thus completely grounded in contemporary South Africa. See Grant Farred, *Midfielder’s Moment: Coloured Literature and Culture in Contemporary South Africa*, (London: Routledge, 2019), 8.

<sup>11</sup> Rossouw, *New Times*, 161.

<sup>12</sup> See Mara Mattoscio, “Old News in the New Era: Temporal Misalignments and Wounded History in Rehana Rossouw’s *New Times*”, *Il Tolomeo*, 21 (2019), 267-282.

<sup>13</sup> See Ileana Dimitriu, “J.M. Coetzee’s *The Childhood of Jesus*: A Postmodern Allegory?”, *Current Writing: Text and Reception in Southern Africa*, 26.1 (2014), 70-81.

<sup>14</sup> John Maxwell Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus* (London: Vintage, 2013), 24.

pointing out that ‘David’ is not his real name (since he has not always been called that way), and that Spanish – the language they are all required to speak – is definitely not the only possible one, if he can learn, as he does, an ‘English song’ (in reality a misquoted version of Goethe’s “Erlkönig” in the original German).<sup>15</sup> In other words, in a world in which the past must be erased by law and a different future cannot be envisaged, the protagonists keep denouncing the absurdity of limiting life to its present arrangements: they repeatedly and tormentedly wonder whether “the price of forgetting may ... be too high”.<sup>16</sup>

If *The Childhood of Jesus* could be taken as a speculative, abstract allegory, the danger of an all-encompassing present hampering both historical change and the experience of different temporalities is given even more emphasis in a realist novel such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*. In this text, set in present-day Nigeria, Kambili and Jaja’s fundamentalist Catholic father forbids them from speaking to their animist grandfather for fear that they might learn the ancient myths and legends of the Igbo tradition. As in Coetzee’s novel, the possibilities of speaking one’s preferred language depend on the decisions of an unappealable power, which in this case is the Anglo-centric paternal authority, who associates the English language with righteousness, civilization and ‘modernity’. His ideal model, i.e. his successful and pro-Western father-in-law, insists that Kambili and Jaja call him “Grandfather, in English, rather than Papa-Nnukwu or Nna-Ochie”,<sup>17</sup> whereas his own animist father, who lives a simple life in a rural village, only speaks an archaic variety of Igbo. Fifteen-year-old Kambili and seventeen-year-old Jaja only ever hear a Catholic prayer performed in Igbo when they are allowed to spend a few days with their progressive Aunt Ifeoma and their cousin Amaka, who even refuses, to their uttermost surprise, to take on an English name for her confirmation, as required by the local missionary church.<sup>18</sup> The protagonists’ father, instead, has traced a rigid boundary between his desired lifestyle, made of strict Catholic orthodoxy plus modern technologies, and an ancestors’ culture he deems ‘heathen’ and immoral. As a consequence, besides forbidding them all knowledge of their ancestral background, he condemns his children to an inescapable present of fixed, strict, repetitive duties – a present that seems to spring up from no roots and to be heading towards no liveable future. This stifling and mechanical temporality is so limiting that Kambili “understands time only in and through the structured schedule her father has drawn up for her everyday activities; her life is so rigidly routinized that she is unable to react in any significant way to even the most meaningful events”.<sup>19</sup> That any attempt at changing this daily routine leads to severe psychophysical violence on the father’s part is no coincidence: in this enforced, inexorable present, any desire to reconnect with one’s past or imagine a more autonomous future must be harshly punished. And indeed, before accidentally getting the chance to enter into deeper contact with her grandfather and cousins, Kambili’s life is so inflexibly limited that she “does not know a possible world outside her home”.<sup>20</sup>

The three above-mentioned novels all come from African authors variously navigating the ambiguous realities of post- (or neo-) coloniality, either by being deeply immersed in their countries’ socio-political debate (the journalist Rossouw), or by looking at their places of origin from a broader international stage (the young literary star Adichie), or by transcending the specificities of their native

<sup>15</sup> See Jean-Michel Rabaté, “Pathos of the Future: Writing and Hospitality in *The Childhood of Jesus*”, in Anthony Uhlmann, Jennifer Rutherford, eds., *J.M. Coetzee’s The Childhood of Jesus: The Ethics of Ideas and Things* (London: Bloomsbury, 2017), 33-56.

<sup>16</sup> Coetzee, *The Childhood of Jesus*, 72. On the novel’s take on temporality, see also Mara Mattoscio, “Ecotones of Time and Space in Two Works by J. M. Coetzee and Igiaba Scego”, *Lingue e linguaggi*, 36 (2020), 173-187.

<sup>17</sup> Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (New York: Algonquin Books, 2003), 67.

<sup>18</sup> On the politics of language in Adichie’s novel, see Emma Dawson and Pierre Larrivée, “Attitudes to Language in Literary Sources: Beyond Post-Colonialism in Nigerian Literature”, *English Studies*, 91.8 (2010), 920-932.

<sup>19</sup> Manisha Basu, “Loving and Leaving: The Ethics of Postcolonial Pain in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*”, *Ariel: A Review of International English Literature*, 43.1 (2012), 67-86, 73.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

societies to look at universal dystopias and current global concerns (the literary champion Coetzee). It is thus interesting that, for all their stylistic and thematic differences, all the referenced works focus on a younger generation put in danger by the disavowal of history and the simultaneous denial of an autonomously chosen future. In so doing, the three novels equally signal an underestimated risk at stake for most contemporary postcolonial societies: these seem to be increasingly organized around a violent hegemony of the present. Their predicament could easily be defined as one of ‘cultural presentism’, i.e. a political and social arrangement in which the historical past is fundamentally disavowed and the future is either denied or downright stolen, while an oppressive present, built on violent power abuses, is cast as the sole existing horizon of life.

### 3. Presentism and the Coloniality of Power

The classic metaphysical definition of presentism is the thesis that “only present things exist”,<sup>21</sup> and more precisely that “nothing exists which is not present”.<sup>22</sup> According to this view, there is “no time except the present time” and “no propositions about any non-present times”.<sup>23</sup> In fact, according to Ned Markosian:

if we were to make an accurate list of all the things that exist—i.e. a list of all the things that our most unrestricted quantifiers range over—there would be not a single non-present object on the list. Thus, you and I and the Taj Mahal would be on the list, but neither Socrates nor any future grandchildren of mine would be included.<sup>24</sup>

Yet, the ability to conceive of different temporal dimensions and the necessity to understand change through a narrative perspective are crucial to human consciousness. To follow up on Markosian’s example, for as much as Socrates and our potential grandchildren might not be presently alive in flesh and bones, they are definitely existing in our memory or our expectations whenever we set our minds on them. More importantly, our ability to conjure them up in our thoughts means that they have a very powerful impact, respectively, on our philosophical understanding or worldview and on our affective experiences and aspirations. In other words, people and objects heading from the past or glimpsed in an imagined future strongly and effectively influence our actions and choices in our present life – something which has also, if paradoxically, been suggested by the different implications of the term *presentism* as employed by some literary critics. Hughes Grady and Terence Hawks, for example, have used a ‘presentist’ lens in Shakespeare studies in order to emphasize how classic masterpieces update their meanings in the present contexts,<sup>25</sup> while Elsa del Campo Ramírez pointed out how the cultural materialism from which literary presentism developed is “politically involved and actively committed to challenge the present through the dissident potential of past texts”, so that presentism itself might consequently “be injected with potential for ideological struggle”.<sup>26</sup> However, such understandings of literary presentism are grounded in a different definition of the word than that provided by classic metaphysical theory: rather than denying the existence of the past altogether, they propose to ‘update it’ by “focusing not on the context surrounding the *creation* of a text, but on that of its *reception*”.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Thomas M. Crisp, “Symposium: Defining Presentism. On Presentism and Triviality”, in Dean W. Zimmerman, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2004), 15.

<sup>22</sup> John Bigelow, “Presentism and Properties”, *Philosophical Perspectives*, 10 (1996), 35-52, 35.

<sup>23</sup> Ned Markosian, “A Defense of Presentism”, in Dean W. Zimmerman, ed., *Oxford Studies in Metaphysics*, 51.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>25</sup> Hugh Grady and Terence Hawkes, eds., *Presentist Shakespeares* (London: Routledge, 2007).

<sup>26</sup> Elsa del Campo Ramírez, *Paradigms of Postmodern Presentism: Towards the Chicana Decolonization of the Imaginary* (Madrid: PhD dissertation, 2018), 14.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 6. My emphasis.

On the other hand, the original and more widespread definition of the concept has implications that go well beyond the literary criticism debate, and rather encompass the whole phenomenological perception of life, i.e. the very significance of being alive in the world. To assume the angle of Markosian's paradox would mean to be constantly frozen in the moment with no chance to narrate oneself into existence. On the contrary, the ability to recognize as real past events and project equally real expectations in the future – a skill which humans share with many other species – is crucial to our experience of life. For Claire Colebrook, “to be able to say ‘I’ or ‘we’ is to be composed of an archive that, in turns, generates a horizon of the future. *To be is to be dispersed through time*, but not in a sequence of ‘a’ past being held over into the future but as a series of possible pasts of various amplitudes”.<sup>28</sup> In other words, it is human consciousness itself, for as subjective and fragmented as it might be, to be intimately connected with an idea of one's flowing in time, one's changing through a temporal journey. To be able to account for one's experiences through narratives – that is to say, to trace one's changes across time – is an essential ability through which humanity understands itself.

In the light of this discussion, it will be easy to see how the above-mentioned novels all call attention to a disquieting historical phenomenon of ‘arrested’ temporality. In South Africa, the anti-apartheid movement of the 1950s-1980s decades had imagined a future democratic government finally free from racial ideologies and willing to assume the poor majority's needs as the basis of its political action. And yet, as Rossouw brilliantly captured in *New Times*, “hundreds of thousands of people” had “died in the struggle like leaves dropping silently off trees; trampled into the mud when democracy arrived like a spring shower and we all went to dance in its sweetness”.<sup>29</sup> In the hastiness of change, the political agenda of the new government had quickly incorporated external pressures and aligned itself to the needs of the neo-colonial economic interest. The disenfranchised, the extremely poor and the sick – all disproportionately black – had thus literally lost their rights to their desired futures. It is a situation that Tony Fry calls “defuturing”, or “a condition of mind and action that materially erodes (un-measurably) planetary finite time, thus gathering and designating the negation of ‘the being of time’, which is equally the taking away of our future”.<sup>30</sup> In other words, defuturing can be understood as a discursive and affective process of dehumanization and unsettlement that results in being dispossessed of one's future. In a postcolonial condition in which coloniality has become a property of power itself,<sup>31</sup> the priority given to the privileged subjects' interests trumps any other narrative or imaginary. In being suddenly distanced from one's lived and inherited experiences of the past, one loses the affective archive able to open up one's visions of the future.

Interestingly, the tendency of many contemporary political agendas to deny most people their desired futures is complemented by the trend, both in former colonies and in former imperial centres, for public discourses to uphold generally threatening or downright apocalyptic versions of the future. In the Global North, these are often centred on the perceived threat of migrants' invasion, or alternatively on the expected consequences of the fossil fuel exploitation that has been characterizing the Anthropocene at least since the Industrial Revolution. In both cases, such arrested or catastrophic understandings of temporality depend on what decolonial theory identifies as the intrinsic coloniality of power. Thus, the new elite governments of the Global South, while officially heralding a celebration of ‘postcolonial changes’, generally discourage complex and non-rhetorical analyses of past imbalances, so as to obstruct the realization that their current politics live in a continuum with those imbalances. At the same time, in facing mass migration and climate change, the mainstream political discourse in the Global North casts

<sup>28</sup> Claire Colebrook, “The Intensity of the Archive”, in Stef Craps et al., “Memory Studies and the Anthropocene: A Roundtable”, *Memory Studies* 11.4 (2018), 498–515, 507. My emphasis.

<sup>29</sup> Rossouw, *New Times*, 239.

<sup>30</sup> Tony Fry, *Design as Politics* (Oxford, New York: Berg, 2011), 21.

<sup>31</sup> See Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Being: Contributions to the Development of a Concept”, *Cultural Studies*, 21.2-3 (March/May 2007), 240-270.

desertification and extreme poverty as an inevitable destiny of the Global South from which the North needs to steer away as quickly as possible, as if it held no responsibility in the history that caused this situation. In this regard, Jennifer Wenzel emphasized that:

such imagining is ideological because it obscures the unevenness that shapes the past, present, and projected future of climate injustice, where the effects of carbon emissions by the industrial north will be felt disproportionately by those in the Global South. Instead, in these future's pasts, the consequences of carbon accumulation in the future are imagined to look a lot like being on the wrong end of capital accumulation in the present, with little acknowledgement of the shared but uneven history that joins them. *Like so much else, the future will be unevenly distributed.*<sup>32</sup>

However, restoring attention towards the complex and overlapping depths of time might be a strategic way out from the pervading grip of cultural presentism. As Cecilia Åsberg and Christina Fredengren remarked, the Anthropocene “is ‘haunted’ by its exclusions” and particularly by the concerns of “deep time”,<sup>33</sup> which Chakrabarty made famous in the humanities as that history that goes well beyond the written historical records to include the geological, natural, genetic and cultural changes which (also) produced humanity over hundreds of thousands of years.<sup>34</sup> Furthermore, even if the futures we now imagine might be taken by presentists as projections of our present situation, the transformational potential of envisaging a different evolution beyond our here-and-now remains unchanged. It suffices to think of what Wenzel calls the “past’s futures”, or the many visions that were imagined at certain times through history and were never actualized. Even if these futures stayed virtual, to acknowledge, remember and re-enact them through narrative might mean to make sure that their alternative versions of society stay alive and help to orientate the actualized present towards a future that is at least partly inspired by them. As Wenzel points out, “past’s futures are salient because of their difference and distance from the present; the past’s *unrealized* visions of a liberated future serve as a utopian surplus and repository of aspirations for a disillusioned present”.<sup>35</sup>

The productive coexistence of different folds and embodiments of time is reclaimed and actualized through recorded and unrecorded strategies across the spectrum of the human experience. Madina Tlostanova, for example, called attention to the traditional Amerindian understanding of time as a way out of the ‘hegemony of modernity’ that freezes other temporal dimensions into irrelevance. Since in the Amerindian model “the past is in front of us, rather than behind”, it follows that:

people’s forgotten and discarded needs, wishes and longings, which would be inevitably linked to the local cosmologies, ethics and systems of knowledge [can be] seen not as the dead and museumized past, or as a conservative fundamentalist dystopia, but as a living and breathing present and a promise for the future.<sup>36</sup>

So, to go back to Adichie’s portrayal of a ‘presentist’ Nigerian household, when *Purple Hibiscus*’ protagonists Kambili and Jaja finally manage to have a meaningful contact with their paternal grandfather Papa-Nnukwu, they find out that his ‘heathen’ beliefs are actually a powerful oral archive of fascinating stories and characters. Attending a traditional *mmuo* masquerade in which the spirits of the Igbo tradition are supposed to be coming alive, they start to discover the richness of the culture they have been cut out of and to track down seeds of creative energy and autonomy they had never been

<sup>32</sup> Jennifer Wenzel, “Past’s Futures, Future’s Pasts”, 504. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>33</sup> Cecilia Åsberg and Christina Fredengren, “Checking in with Deep Time: Intragenerational Care in Registers of Feminist Posthumanities. The Case of Gästadsverken”, in Rodney Harrison and Colin Sterling, eds., *Deterritorializing the Future: Heritage in, of, and after the Anthropocene* (London: Open Humanities Press, 2020), 56-95, 69.

<sup>34</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses”, *Critical Inquiry*, 35.2 (2009), 197-222.

<sup>35</sup> Wenzel, “Past’s Futures, Future’s Pasts”, 503. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>36</sup> Madina Tlostanova, “On Decolonizing Design”, *Design Philosophy Papers*, 15.1 (2017), 51-61, 55.

allowed to grow until that moment. In much the same way, when *New Times*'s protagonist Ali gets stuck in the arrested temporality of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, it is only by acknowledging the traumatic experiences of her past that she manages to start imagining a fairer and freer future. She needs to remember the shock of the 12-year-old boy shot dead next to her in an anti-apartheid march and bleeding copiously on her lap, as well as to retrieve and hang on her wall the journal article she had once written on the event, before she is finally able to speak of her past and open a space for a consciously-grounded future. In *The Childhood of Jesus*, on the other hand, the protagonists' refusal to live by the principles of a hegemonic present and an uncontested *status quo* finally takes them to an adventurous escape into a "new life" in which, beyond all mocking biblical undertones, memories can still be retained and alternative presents can be continuously imagined.

#### 4. Migrants' Defuturing and Europe's Past's Futures

Our discussion of presentism, defuturing and alternative past's futures can be further illuminated by complementing these literary voices from the Global South with an analysis of the media discourse on migration in the Global North. Applying our theoretical lens both to literary studies and media ethnography helps us to expose the pervasiveness as well as the various declinations of presentism in contemporary politics and imagination. Sweden, a country once crucial in promoting the international boycott of the South African apartheid regime in the 1980s, has since acquired a more ambiguous position in the 'postcolonial' phase of democratic South Africa, when, as a compensation for its help during the Struggle, it was offered preferential and expensive economic deals that left the post-apartheid South African government drained of resources deemed key for the country's much needed social investments.<sup>37</sup> Sweden's ambiguous positioning with regards to the colonality of power is also apparent in its way of dealing with the current northbound migratory waves: as a country that in the last few decades went from being at the forefront of migrants' reception in the EU to rejecting most asylum seekers in recent years, it provides the best case study to understand how presentism is central to the unequal distribution of power and resources in the global world.<sup>38</sup> An ethnographic analysis of the news coverage of anti-immigrant violence during the last three migratory waves in Sweden brings to light the changing attitude that fostered the growth of racist political parties in the Swedish parliament and the consequent temporal dispossession suffered, but also actively resisted, by migrants.

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<sup>37</sup> See "South African Protest Against Gripen Purchase", *TT Nyheter* (November 21, 2001).

<sup>38</sup> On Sweden's unwillingness to acknowledge its historical racism (including its role in the transatlantic slave trade or the Holocaust) in its 'presentist' national self-image, see also Ylva Habel, with Adrian Groglopo, "Den svenska exceptionismen och medias rasism" [Swedish exceptionalism and media racism], in *En diagnos av rasism och demokrati i Sverige* [A diagnosis of racism and democracy in Sweden], (March 18, 2018), <https://www.antirasistiskaakademin.se/ylva-habel/>. Our translation if no other is stated.



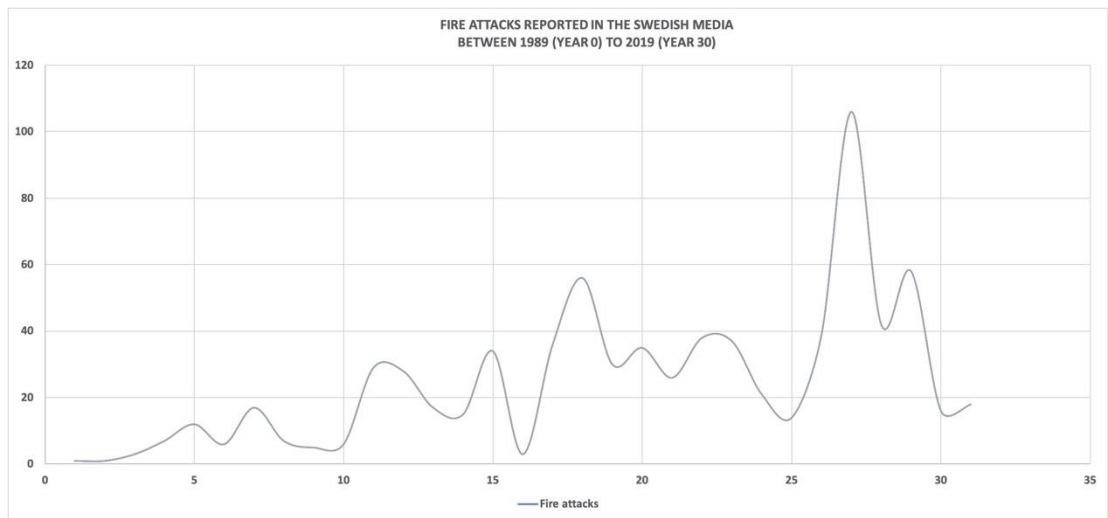


Fig. 1: Anti-immigrant fire attacks between 1989 and 2019 as reported in the Swedish mainstream press. Data retrieved through the database Mediearkivet at <http://web.retriever-info.com.ezproxy.ub.gu.se>. Image by the authors.

#### 4.1 Three Defuturing Waves for Refugees in Sweden

If one considers the last three decades of Swedish media reporting on anti-immigrant violence, a clear image appears of how the (constant) presence and social alienation of migrants in the country transformed from a minor political issue into one of the most heated battlefields in the public debate. The first wave of news reporting fires against refugee camps in Sweden, which appeared between 1990 and 1995, was matched by coverage of a serial killer who, equipped with a laser-sight rifle, was reported to be literally ‘hunting migrants’ at night during the fall of 1991 and into January 1992. *Lasermannen*, the Laser Man, finally injured 11 immigrants before being captured in June 1992 and prosecuted under the name of John Ausonius,<sup>39</sup> following a news coverage so imbued with fictional imaginaries that he was arrested with the help of an ‘offender profile’ inspired by the movie *The Silence of the Lambs*.<sup>40</sup> Commenting on these events, the comparative religion scholar Mattias Gardell wrote that “during this wave of violence, organized and disorganized racism lived in symbiosis with each other. Of those convicted for the attacks, a vanishing small portion was organized, the majority being ‘ordinary local people’”.<sup>41</sup>

Interestingly, the temporality of the Laser Man news had a long *durée*. His attacks all happened in the fall of 1991, but the surrounding myth was perpetuated through analyses, books, articles, plays, and documentaries, until another Laser Man appeared to continue his work as a ‘migrants terminator’. In his book *Lasermannen*, Gellert Tamas (himself hailing from a family of Hungarian refugees) provided an investigative reportage based on interviews with the racist serial killer, to describe both the man and “a story about Sweden” in which “the politico-ideological opportunity structure facilitated attempts to

<sup>39</sup> Monica Miller, “Figuring Blackness in a Place Without Race: Sweden, Recently”, *ELH*, 84.2 (2017), 377-397.

<sup>40</sup> Jan Lind, “Med hans hjälp får brottslingen ett ansikte” [Through his help the criminal is given a face], *Läkartidningen*, 94.45 (1997), 4028-4031.

<sup>41</sup> Mattias Gardell, “En ny våg av våld” [A new wave of violence], *Aftonbladet* (January 8, 2015). <https://www.aftonbladet.se/kultur/a/7ljzQv/en-ny-vag-av-vald>. Our translation if no other is stated.

murder migrants”.<sup>42</sup> Even the arrest of *Lasermannen* was taken as an indicator that, although the authorities were able to stop such snipers, this would hardly stop an army of angry “ordinary local people”. The liberal media approached the murderer’s racist motives as the ultimate rejection of an ‘imposed migration’, moving the focus of public discussion away from the racial, class and gender oppression that prompted migration and hindered integration in the first place. The violent scenario created by the fires and the anonymous snipers, made more ambiguous by the media’s attempts to find reasons for the murderers’ attacks, thus paved the way for a naturalization of nationalist and racist positions in the political establishment, which culminated with the emerging of Ny Demokrati [New Democracy], the first racist party to take a seat in the Swedish parliament.

In the meantime, the Swedish public television continued to show off a ‘liberal’ appearance through a couple of big productions on the issue of immigration entirely imbued with cultural presentism. The first one, written by Italian-Swedish writer Peter Birro and directed by Agneta Fagerström-Olsson, was the series *Hammarkullen* (1997), consisting of four episodes on life in one of Sweden’s multicultural suburbs and on its similarities with the increasingly segregated immigrant communities in the rest of Europe. On the one hand, an exotic image of these suburbs was promoted: “Hammarkullen has a positive vibe, here there is always something happening. However, it is not a settlement only typical of Gothenburg, but a suburb similar to any other outside Brussels or Paris”.<sup>43</sup> On the other hand, the show shocked the intelligentsia with its portrayal of racial inequalities in a multicultural suburb described as full of drama and misery, and in which stereotyped ‘modern’ blond Swedes were contrasted to ‘pre-modern’ black-haired immigrants. The sensationalist and fictitious characters of *Hammarkullen* sparked a wide debate demanding a state intervention to ‘integrate’ immigrants into the racial, capitalist and heteronormative culture of the nation. *Fittja Paradiso*, the next big production of SVT, programmed in the fall of 1999, attempted to provide a factual description of Fittja, then the most populated immigrant suburb in Botkyrka, as well as in metropolitan Stockholm and Sweden. The show, conducted by Janne Josefsson and including five other field reporters,<sup>44</sup> employed an exotic gaze to explore the landscape of social misery among migrants, to the point that its ‘findings’ were used as the basis for the biggest urban renewal program of that time, known as *Ytterstadssatsningen*, or the Metropolitan Initiative.

A ‘recursive mechanism’, as well as a similar set of ambiguities, characterized the coverage of the next big wave of refugees, which, originated by the Balkan war, arrived in Sweden around the year 2000 and, despite being generously welcomed by the government in power, was again accompanied by fire attacks against refugee camps. While the news on anti-immigrant violence reached the highest figures ever up to that moment, the media editorials and opinion pieces still lacked structural analysis and extensive reflections on the dehumanisation of refugees produced by such violence, and failed to expose the links between the attacks and the growth of Sverigedemokraterna [the Sweden Democrats], a new anti-immigrant political party which by 2006 had attracted two per cent of the electorate’s vote. Moreover, the coverage of a further sniper operating between 2007 and 2010 in Malmö, together with the sensationalist news on the police investigating him, acted as a boost in the consolidation of Sverigedemokraterna in the Swedish parliament’s 2010 general elections, with roughly six per cent of the electorate’s vote.

The news of racist fires that became dominant again in the context of the 2015 “refugee crisis” – with the maximum ceiling of arrivals doubled by the end of that year compared to the previous one of the 2006 election – are even more useful in showing the ‘arrested’ or ‘recursive’ temporalities of the Swedish political debate on migration. This time, the general society actively promoted the reception

<sup>42</sup> Diana Mulinari and Anders Neergaard, “Violence, Racism and the Political Arena: A Scandinavian Dilemma”, *NORA: Nordic Journal of Feminism and Gender Research*, 20.1 (2012), 12-18, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Elin Bäckström and Birgitta Svensson, “Spaning: Välkommen till förorten” [Scouting: Welcome to the Suburb], *Expressen* (November 7, 1997).

<sup>44</sup> Viktoria Mirén, “Janne Josefsson Moves to the Suburb: For a New Social Magazine”, *Aftonbladet* (August 17, 1999).

and support of refugees. Yet, a new wave of fires was widely reported, against the background of a much stronger presence of the SD party in parliament. This led the coverage of the attacks in corporate media to frame the widespread solidarity toward refugees as ‘naïve’, and the appearance of the new seasonal murderer (the protagonist of the 22 October 2015 Trollhättan school shooting) as ultimately ‘understandable’. In the same days when 21-year-old Anton Lundin Pettersson, equipped with a black Nazi helm, a Darth Vader mask, a cold-steel Viking sword and a combat knife, walked into the *Kronan* municipal school and stabbed teachers and schoolchildren based on their skin tone, Germany was closing its doors on refugees, thus pushing thousands to continue on to Sweden as their very last hope. With the EU unable to tackle the situation and the Swedish refugee-reception system collapsed, the editorials of the liberal press vocally demanded that the borders be closed, linking the new ‘emergency’ with the intense wave of fires and the Trollhättan massacre. Such media campaign was instrumental in the Swedish Prime Minister’s announcement of a set of very drastic decisions:

Sweden has taken the greatest responsibility in relation to our population, while other EU countries have done very little. Sweden needs some respite. As a consequence, our legislation will adapt to the EU’s minimum level of reception, in order to get refugees to apply to other countries.<sup>45</sup>

The closure had a great impact on the refugees’ hopes, expectations and imagined futures. Those who had managed to enter before the new restrictions were met with indefinite ‘waiting times’ that amounted to “a way to slow down, to defer, to deny future plans and to create disruption in the stages of the life cycle”.<sup>46</sup> In fact, as Shahram Khosravi remarked about the status of being kept “in circulation”, a life suspended in ‘waiting centres’ is “an indefinite position of *not becoming* in what is supposed to be a ‘normal life course.’ In the condition of circulation one never gets the chance to finish anything”.<sup>47</sup> On the other hand, those who were deported in the months to follow were literally robbed of their desired tomorrow by being “sent back in time [or] ‘back to square one’”.<sup>48</sup> More in general, however, it is striking to note how the recurrent phenomenon of informal migration – something which can be seen, in a deep-time perspective, as a veritable constant of human and non-human life – has each time been cast as a ‘current crisis’ or a ‘contemporary emergency’, and thus seen as in need of an (aggressive) resolution or termination rather than of a resorting to collective memories and imaginations.

#### 4.2 *Alternative ‘Past’s Futures’*

The responses of immigrants in Sweden to the violence described above were interestingly organized around a reclaiming of time. Right at the end of the first wave of anti-immigrant fires, the documentary film *30:e November*, in which the diasporic youth of Alby, next to Fittja, confront the violence of neo-Nazi gangs, literally invites the spectator to mark a date in time as the moment when the members of the local diaspora start raising their own voices.<sup>49</sup> At approximately the same time, the Alby-raised hip hop group called Latin Kings gave a sonic and poetic voice to the multicultural suburbs, showing “a socio-critical tone in their lyrics addressing issues such as the Laser Man, Ny Demokrati, and a ‘we’ against ‘them’ mentality”.<sup>50</sup> Most notably, the Latin Kings’ first album also marked the public acknowledgement of the multicultural urban jargon known as Rinkeby-Swedish, collectively adopted by the youths of the

<sup>45</sup> Karl Anders Lindahl, “Stefan Löfven om flyktingkrisen: ‘Sverige behöver ett andrum’” [Stefan Löfven on the refugee crisis: ‘Sweden needs a respite’], *Nyheter24* (November 24, 2015). <https://nyheter24.se/nyheter/politik/819404-lofven-flyktingar-flyktingkris-tut-stopp>.

<sup>46</sup> Shahram Khosravi, “Stolen Time”, *Radical Philosophy*, 2.03 (2018). <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/stolen-time>.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Daniel Fridell, *30:e november* [30th November] (Film Teknik AB, Stockholm, 1995).

<sup>50</sup> Susan Lindholm, “From Nueva Canción to Hip Hop: An Entangled History of Hip Hop In-Between Chile and Sweden”, *Scandia*, 83.1 (2017), 68-97, 85.

Rinkeby suburbs, north of Stockholm.<sup>51</sup> Though the language horrified the Swedish intelligentsia, who urged its extirpation through colonial-style institutional interventions in the suburban schools, it was successfully used by the Latin Kings as a spontaneous expression of the migrant communities' own hybrid culture.

Both the dispossession and the reclaiming of migrants' time became even more crucial in the anti-colonial responses to the second wave of fires and in the news that covered them. In this case, the investigations to catch the sniper in Malmö were progressing so slowly that the local diasporic communities started the search on their own. In October 2010, one month after the general elections, a Norwegian news channel was sent to the city to report on the spontaneous initiative, and portrayed the immigrant protagonists as essentially silly, as well as victims. The YouTube clip that resulted was titled *Laserturken*, or the 'Turkish Laser Man', with a pejorative naming that connected the protagonist, the Lebanon-born and Möllevången resident Fadi Mohamad, to racialized immigrants in general.<sup>52</sup> However, the members of the diaspora saw in the footage the birth of their own star, and happily circulated the clip for the way it dramatized a comic migrant hero engaged in a brutal hunt against the racist sniper. In the feature from the Norwegian television, Fadi announced in his hacking Rinkeby-Swedish that he would "cut his tongue. Cut his ears. I'm going to make a mess with him. After that, I'll give him to the police without a head. We will take everyone with the same last name. All of them are going to die".<sup>53</sup> Due to its stereotypical character that satisfied all the supposed attributes of a real *Turk*, Fadi's hilarious explanation become viral. However, the 300-member multicultural gang that joined him in his hunt prompted the police to create a special 50-officer SWAT unit that finally managed to seize Peter Mang, the sniper. The latter was later revealed to have read a biography of the first *Lasermannen*,<sup>54</sup> and to share his same racist motivations.<sup>55</sup> The novelty in the context of his own attacks was that this time the media's suspiciousness had seemed to be directed towards the victims themselves, to the point that many, as shown by Manal Masri's documentary on her younger brother (one of Mang's victims), had been forced to abandon Sweden after the events.<sup>56</sup> Chased away of their places of origins by (neo)colonial geopolitical imbalances and further brutalized by racist violence in their chosen arrival countries, Mang's victims were thus literally robbed of all the time they had invested in working, building networks, paying taxes, learning the local language and culture, falling in love and maybe having children, to be condemned to a "temporal dis-belonging",<sup>57</sup> their tomorrows suddenly displaced elsewhere.

The hunt conducted by *Laserturken* can be seen as part of a wider post-colonial response from the suburban population against the hegemony of cultural presentism in Sweden. For instance, the 2013 'car burnings' episodes that saw youths from the major Swedish cities riot against police brutality (similarly to the coeval events in France) were a protest against the apparently inescapable internal colonialism directed towards the immigrant population of such suburbs. Interestingly, when corporate media sent its reporters to the riot places, the youth once targeted by the urban initiative designed to extirpate Rinkeby-Swedish began to show their now unexpectedly confident and critical language. Mostly female youth and teenagers, they set up a staff of local chroniclers aimed at contesting the blameful reporting on their suburbs and started writing their own news in a social media project named *Megaphone*. Their role

<sup>51</sup> Christopher Stroud, "Rinkeby Swedish and Multilingualism in Language Ideological Debates: A Bourdieuean Perspective", *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 8.2 (2004), 196-214, 199.

<sup>52</sup> Tabakshi, "Laserturken (Original) - Full version", *Youtube* (October 27, 2010). <https://youtu.be/esVuKP7k974>

<sup>53</sup> Eigil Söderin, "Sanningen bakom Laserturken" [The truth behind the Turkish Laser Man], *ETC* (November 18, 2010).

<sup>54</sup> Miller, "Figuring Blackness".

<sup>55</sup> Mattias Gardell, *Raskrigaren: seriemördaren Peter Mangs* (Stockholm: Leopard förlag, 2015).

<sup>56</sup> Manal Masri, "Brev till en seriemördare" [Letter to a Serial Killer] (Triart Film: Malmö, 2017).

<sup>57</sup> Khosravi, "Stolen Time".

became essential when they reported the police storming a private flat and shooting an elderly man in the head:

In all dailies ... [there are] pictures of the balcony where he waves a knife. The ‘machete man’... this is a label created so that we the readers shall think: ‘oh, he sounds crazy, it is just as well that the police shot him’ ... [W]e make him a monster. Then he is not worth shit ... [M]achete sounds jungle. Sounds non-Swedish. Even better.<sup>58</sup>

The general coverage of the ‘preventive assassination’ of the elderly man, labelled “machete man” by the police, was contested by *Megaphone* through the man’s neighbours’ testimonies, something which led to the public demand of an independent investigation on the case. Despite the blame put on them by Jane Josefsson in *Uppdrag granskning* [Mission to Investigate], the Megaphone animators inspired youths in other suburbs to start similar structures as a way to struggle for the reactivation of the then-dismantled local welfare services.<sup>59</sup>

A bottom-up initiative showing the majority’s willingness to reclaim both political agency and its own time beyond neo-colonial structures can also be seen in the exceptionally generous reception of refugees advocated by most Swedes during the fall of 2015, notwithstanding the racist concerns voiced by the political right. The so-called ‘refugee crisis’ had come at a time when the self-proclaimed “world’s first feminist government” had just been elected in Sweden,<sup>60</sup> after an electoral campaign that had seen a feminist party, *Feminist Initiative* or *F!*, as the new political subject around which all other contenders had had to position themselves. Despite the growing recognition of the interconnectedness of anti-racist, de/post-colonial and feminist instances by Swedish scholars,<sup>61</sup> the new party’s invitation to “take racism out” and “let feminism in” the national parliament had been met in the media by an appropriation of the feminist discourse by even the most ambiguous parties, with a ‘pink-washing’ effect that had left the racist SD with a striking 13 per cent of the electorate’s vote. However, when the tragedy of the Syrian war and the refugees’ odyssey through the Middle East and Europe was first broadcast via smartphones by the migrants themselves, the Swedish public was ready to support those in need and virtually aligned itself with the instances of the international Refugees Welcome movement. Even when Germany went from showing solidarity to slamming its doors on refugees, and nationalist-ruled Denmark denied its support to those headed to Northern Europe, both the Swedish government and the grassroots organizations still took responsibility for the migrants arriving at the country’s doors – a moment marked by the Prime Minister Stefan Löfven’s famous statement that “My Europe does not build walls. We help each other when the need is greater”.<sup>62</sup>

We have already seen how the SD’s racist propaganda, by repeatedly associating the Trollhättan massacre with a supposed ‘emergency’ in the refugee reception system, later prompted the Swedish government to withdraw its commitment to the refugee’s cause. However, the ‘past’s future’ that was envisaged in the first, welcoming phase of the 2015 migratory wave still retains its aspirational value as a possible alternative version of today’s predicament. With thousands of people making themselves available for anything from helping migrants through the border with Denmark, to orienting them at train stations, to distributing food and blankets, while SJ, the national train company, offered to transport

<sup>58</sup> Carl Ulrich Schierup, Aleksandra Ålund & Lisa Kings, “Reading the Stockholm riots: A moment for Social Justice?”, *Race & Class*, 55.3 (2014), 1-21, 4.

<sup>59</sup> Kajsa Ekis Ekman, “Uppdrag granskning blir polisens megafon - Mission Investigation turns into megaphone for the Police”, *Aftonbladet* (May 15, 2014).

<sup>60</sup> Maya Salam, “This Is What a Feminist Country Looks Like”, *The New York Times* (March 8, 2019).

<sup>61</sup> Masoud Kamali, Adrian Groglopo, Marcus Lundgren & Simon Andersson, “Integrationens svarta bok – Agenda för jämlikhet och social sammanhållning” [The Black Book of Integration – Agenda for Equality and Social Cohesion], *SOU* (Stockholm: Fritzes, 2006).

<sup>62</sup> SVT, *Rapport 19.30* (September 6, 2015).

refugees for free, the solidarity earthquake pointed to a future of mutual commitment in which the privileged seemed ready to share their privileges and those on the move seemed able to open up their encounters towards alternative life paths with respect to past traumas. To paraphrase Donna Haraway, the majority of Swedes in those weeks seemed to be “making kin” with the newly-arrived by “staying with the trouble”.<sup>63</sup> Instead of discarding or disavowing this recent past’s future, such unrealized vision of commonality and free circulation of people can still serve as a “utopian surplus”<sup>64</sup> that may yet open the future in new ways.

## 5. Conclusion

Through case studies taken respectively from literature and media ethnography, we hope to have demonstrated that an asphyxiating confinement into an ‘arrested’ present dimension, accompanied by a dismissal of the complex past and a denial or uneven dispossession of the future, is a defining characteristic of the coloniality of power at play in both formerly-colonizing and formerly-colonized societies. Applying our theoretical lens to such seemingly distant fields as literary and media studies has helped us to highlight how pervasive and structurally entrenched ‘arrested temporalities’ are in global contemporary politics and imagination. In the light of our analysis, it seems crucial to us that a notion of cultural presentism, understood as an utter isolation of both individual subjects and communities from the flowing and alternative possibilities of time, be taken as central to understanding the constraints and implications of the perduring political colonialism of the present day.

Such a theoretical tool might prove equally useful in overcoming the blockages of the critical analyses that try to undermine the implications of these colonial shadows. If the *post* in the “postcolonial” alludes to a (delusional) closure of the colonial past or an entrance into a new temporal dimension (as well as, for other scholars, to a coexistence of the “colonial” and the “post”), the *de* of the “decolonial” thematises the necessity to invert and counter the mechanics of colonial violence. Both prefixes, however, are predicated upon the idea of one’s position with regards to the colonial *past*, while the future risks vanishing further in the process. But while our heads need to keep turning back and make sure our collective memories stay alive, a new focus on the future as the centre of post/decolonial studies seems urgent. As Chakrabarty remarked in his critique of the artifices of historiography, we urgently need to find some space for “other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of ‘tradition’ that ‘modernity’ creates”.<sup>65</sup> Reclaiming one’s futures – both present and past ones – might be crucial in the process of undoing colonial violence and triggering our arrested temporalities back into free flow.

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<sup>63</sup> Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham & London: Duke U.P., 2016).

<sup>64</sup> Wenzel, “Past’s Futures”, 503.

<sup>65</sup> Chakrabarty, “Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for ‘Indian’ Pasts?”, 23.



## Decolonial Thinking and Refugees' Stories. The *Queens of Syria* Documentary (2014)<sup>1</sup>

**Abstract:** As an important stimulus for the international mushrooming of artistic creativity in public spaces, counter narratives by displaced people are contributing to the reframing of the political and sociolinguistic contemporary framework, where migrant identities are fighting to gain a voice. A counter wave of audiovisual productions based on aesthetic discourse has emerged within territories that seem to be losing their humanity with respect to migration issues, and seem to publicly reinforce forms of spectacularisation. Against a backdrop of international political conflict, where migrants and dispossessed refugees are nameless and cannot speak, visual and performative arts have taken on a decisive role to give voice to unheard stories of migration. Drawing on recent research on narrative theory relating to translation and interpreting studies, this investigation scrutinises the documentary *Queens of Syria* (2014), where the English subtitles are explored as activist recipients of migrant narratives. These stories are contextualised within Nelson Maldonado-Torres's theses on coloniality and decoloniality (2016), and examined from a linguistic angle which applies the methods of Michael Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics and of the lexical semantic analysis as framed within Pamela Faber and Ricardo Mairal Usón's Lexical Grammar Model (1999). Results will testify to the linguistic and cultural function of the visual arts in their diffusion of ontological stories as both celebrating and challenging migrant identities, and also to the enacting role of language in meaning-transfer processes. The case under scrutiny will prove that the *Queens of Syria* subtitles, where the stories are captured and translated, may be looked at as decolonial devices, in which language use is strategically relevant and functional to the understanding of migrant narratives within a decolonial perspective.

Keywords: *decolonial, Queens of Syria, refugee, visual art, counter-narrative, translation*

I have a scream I want the world to hear, but I wonder if it will resonate.  
Refugee woman, *Queens of Syria*

### 1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of international political conflict in the context of contemporary migration across the Mediterranean, which continuously puts displaced people in the condition of being nameless and voiceless, visual and performative cultures are taking on a crucial role. As an important stimulus for the transnational proliferation of artistic creativity, counter narratives by migrant people are contributing to the reframing of the political and sociocultural frameworks, both in Europe and the Middle East. In particular, a counter wave of audiovisual artistic productions has emerged within territories, whose humanity is lost with respect to the 'migratory situation',<sup>2</sup> and where forms of media spectacularisation are fostered.

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<sup>1</sup> Lorena Carbonara and Alessandra Rizzo have contributed equally to the overall drafting of the paper and have conceived this research together. However, Lorena Carbonara is the author of paragraphs 1, 2 and 3, whereas Alessandra Rizzo is responsible for paragraphs 4, 5 and 6. Both of them have written the 'Introduction' and 'Concluding Remarks' sections of the article.

<sup>2</sup> We drew this term from Ruth Wodak who, in her 2016 talk "The Language of Walls" in Belgrade, declared that she does not like the word 'crisis' when talking about migration, as "politics is in crisis, not refugees", [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWa3T\\_6FNOQ](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aWa3T_6FNOQ), accessed 10 January 2020.

The *Queens of Syria* project, which was articulated in three important phases (a workshop in Jordan, a documentary and a UK touring play), from 2013 to 2016, is an ideal case study for the investigation of the modalities through which the 'migratory situation' can be portrayed in the creative cultural industry, where the spread of political participatory and activist movements is accelerating, along with the most extremist propaganda. Indeed, international public discourse about migration in the media constantly switches from the rhetoric of 'the threat' to that of 'human rights', while depicting migrants as a generic undifferentiated group of people.

Drawing on recent research on narrative theory,<sup>3</sup> this study focuses on the documentary *Queens of Syria* (2014), which is scrutinised from a linguistic angle based on a lexical semantic analysis that is rooted in Faber and Mairal Usón's Lexical Grammar Model,<sup>4</sup> and on Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics.<sup>5</sup> Such investigation is placed within Maldonado-Torres's theses on coloniality and decoloniality,<sup>6</sup> which represent the theoretical framework where the decolonial perspective adopted in this study is rooted. Results testify to the strategic linguistic and cultural function of aesthetic discourse, which celebrates and challenges migrant identities through the dissemination of individual and public stories.

More specifically, the English subtitles for *Queens of Syria* are the focus of the analysis, since they are conceived as 'activist' subtitles, depositaries of ontological truths, whose voluntarist production cooperates in giving voice to Syrian discourses and, in particular, to the discourse on Syria and its exiled inhabitants, while questioning hegemonic discourses. It is not by chance that the access to the refugees' narratives as performed in the documentary is guaranteed by the existence of subtitles which, as linguistic and cultural tools, permit stories of displacement to achieve transnational dissemination and digital popularity. In short, the *Queens of Syria* subtitles, viewed as containers of narratives and spaces of resistance and interventionism, are the core of the qualitative analysis.

The first part of the essay is widely theoretical, since it illustrates the topic from the perspective of narrative theory and decolonial studies, and introduces the *Queens of Syria* aesthetic project as part of the creative cultural industry world<sup>7</sup> at the level of niche production. The second part consists of a practical section aiming to demonstrate to what extent decolonial thinking can be deconstructed and (re)constructed through an in-depth scrutiny of language categories (i.e. lexical and grammatical sets of language), which, in the case in point, emerge within the space of subtitles.

## 2. Refugees' Stories as Counter Narratives: The *Queens of Syria* Project

The notion of narrative at the basis of this study draws on Mona Baker's sociological approach, which understands it as the unique way in which we make sense of the world and of our place within it, participating in the configuration of our reality.<sup>8</sup> Hence, individuals are seen in their relationship with the environment and with the stories that surround them, which mediate between them and their perception of reality. Narratives can render the world both in verbal and visual forms, which makes it possible to address the research focus on the visual dimension of narrative accounts.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>3</sup> See Mona Baker, "Translation as Re-narration" in Juliane House, ed., *Translation: A Multidisciplinary Approach* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014) and Mona Baker, *Translation and Conflict: A Narrative Account* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> Pamela Faber and Ricardo Mairal Usón, *Constructing a Lexicon of English Verbs* (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1999), 84.

<sup>5</sup> Michael A.K., Halliday, *Introduction to Functional Grammar* (London: Edward Arnold, 1994).

<sup>6</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, "Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality", [https://fondation-frantzfanon.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/maldonado-torres\\_outline\\_of\\_ten\\_theses-10.23.16.pdf](https://fondation-frantzfanon.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/maldonado-torres_outline_of_ten_theses-10.23.16.pdf), accessed 4 January 2020.

<sup>7</sup> Alessandra Rizzo, "The Role of the Creative Industries: Translating Identities on Stages and Visuals", *Translation Today*, 11.2 (2017), 1-34.

<sup>8</sup> Baker, "Translation as Re-narration".

<sup>9</sup> Gretchen Barbatsis, "Narrative Theory", in Kenneth L. Smith et al., eds., *Handbook of Visual Communication: Theory, Methods, and Media* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 330.

This approach sheds light upon the ways in which both institutions and individuals create and circulate stories about some aspects of the world, “complete with characters, settings, outcomes or projected outcomes, and plot”.<sup>10</sup> As Baker pointed out already in 2006,<sup>11</sup> there are four different narratives:

- 1) Ontological narratives, existing within a culture and transmitting also collective narratives to individuals, namely, the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves and our place in the world;
- 2) Public narratives, namely, narratives circulating around groups that can vary with time as public perceptions change;
- 3) Conceptual narratives, namely, disciplinary narratives which exist within a field of study;
- 4) Meta/Master narratives, namely, the narratives which can surpass geographical and temporal narratives.

In the case of the *Queens of Syria* narratives, the interplay is between ontological narratives belonging to a group of displaced Syrian women exiled in Jordan and public narratives circulating in Europe around/about the humanitarian refugee question in the context of a contemporary master narrative: the migration crisis. These narratives give voice to what is unheard – in this specific case, the women’s translated narratives – which, by taking inspiration from Euripides’s *The Trojan Women*, give origin to acts of ‘activism’. We maintain that translation, as well as art, can intervene to challenge preconceptions and stereotyped constructions of facts and events, becoming a form of activism. As Baker puts it, translation can be seen “as a form of (re-)narration that constructs rather than *represents* the events and characters it re-narrates in another language”.<sup>12</sup> Translation contributes to the transformation and circulation of narratives intervening in the processes of (re)narration that “essentially construct[s] the world for us” (Ibid.).

Emerging from the context of the civil war in Syria (started in 2011 and still going on today) and the subsequent mass migration of people from those territories (5,558,123 are the registered refugees in 2020 according to UNHCR),<sup>13</sup> the case study analysed here subverts prejudices about conservative Muslim women and refugees in general and helps us reconstruct the experience of the Syrian population by reversing anti-refugee narratives.

The Greek tragedy, which dates back to 410 BC, represents the first dramatisation of a war crime and its female victims (the fall of Troy determined the death of numerous people, and those who did not die were left in a condition of waiting for their fate among their enemies), and is intertwined with the real stories of the refugees. The project was conceived in 2013 with the grassroots initiative “The Syria Trojan Women Project” by Refuge Production,<sup>14</sup> a workshop/performance conducted by Omar Abusaada, which was held in Jordan and centred on the Arabic re-creation of Euripides’s *The Trojan Women*.

The fifty refugee women participating in the psycho-social project were helped to overcome the trauma of war and displacement, since they arrived in Jordan suffering from various forms of illness, among which depression, isolation, PTSD, etc. They were guided in a process of recovery with the help of storytelling and performance, and managed to gain a sense of self-confidence as well as increasing public interest in the refugee question, which was undervalued in terms of international communication

<sup>10</sup> Baker, “Translation as Re-narration”, 159.

<sup>11</sup> Baker, *Translation and Conflict*.

<sup>12</sup> Baker, “Translation as Re-narration”, 159.

<sup>13</sup> See the UNHCR website for more information and data about the conflict, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>, accessed 8 January 2020.

<sup>14</sup> It was founded in 2013 to help refugees in Jordan cope with PTSD through the therapy of participatory drama and in order to humanize the refugee crisis.

and mass media coverage. One of the women involved in the project, Faten, expresses her concern saying:

I would like to go to London to deliver the message about our life and the conditions in which we live. We want the whole world to hear that. I mean the whole world is not treating us as humans. Some people ran away from death only to meet death. Some drowned in the sea while they ran away from death. Some people were trying to cross illegally. They died on the borders.<sup>15</sup>

Reem follows her and claims:

It is not enough that you just see the things through the television, the radio, the social media. You need just to meet these people, speak with them, understand them. Then you can decide what's the wrong, what's the right.<sup>16</sup>

In 2014, filmmaker Yasmine Fedda, released her 70-minute documentary *Queens of Syria*,<sup>17</sup> following the story of these women forced into exile and called to perform the plight of women in war, being on stage for the very first time in their lives. In the synopsis of the project there is a clear reference to the power of narrative, since these women wove their own stories of loss, exile and suffering into the narrative of the Greek tragedy:

What followed was an extraordinary moment of cross-cultural contact across millennia, in which women born in 20th century Syria found a blazingly vivid mirror of their own experiences in the stories of a queen, princesses and ordinary women like them, uprooted, enslaved, and bereaved by the Trojan War.<sup>18</sup>

"It's old, but history repeats itself",<sup>19</sup> they affirm in the documentary trailer, where they stress the fact that the play talks about something real to them. Apart from allegiances and political opinions, the aim was to work together and get to know one another through the stories. As a result, everyone was transformed. The refugees were able to transform the painful experience of displacement into art, also through acts of translation; the directors and the other people involved in the project were able to come into real contact with the experience of migration.

By 2016, the conflict in Syria was reaching its sixth year and the number of displaced people was estimated by the UNHCR to be 4.8 million, and the majority was composed of women and children. Refuge Productions, the Young Vic<sup>20</sup> and Developing Artists,<sup>21</sup> assigned a new production of the play (performed by thirteen women) to Zoe Lafferty, which crossed the theatres of Oxford, Brighton, Liverpool, Leeds, Edinburgh, Durham, and London. What impressed the critics and the public, and brought widespread acclaim to the play, was the fact that the voices of ordinary refugee women, whose lives had been destroyed by the Syrian conflict, were to be heard by a wider audience eventually.

With the help of the British Council, the project also involved an educational part aimed at informing the British public about the refugee crisis and the situation in Syria. It included school visits, teaching

<sup>15</sup> See the fundraising video for the project. Transcribed verbatim, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?time\\_continue=193&v=dFUunYi5t2E&feature=emb\\_logo](https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=193&v=dFUunYi5t2E&feature=emb_logo), accessed 10 January 2020.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> The documentary won the Black Pearl Award for Best Director from the Arab World at the Abu Dhabi Film Festival, 2014, and received a special mention from the UNHCR at the 3rd edition of the Human Rights Film Festival in Tunis 2014 (Human Screen Festival 2014).

<sup>18</sup> See the description of the project on website of the artist, <https://yasminfedda.com/Queens-of-Syria>, accessed 8 January 2020.

<sup>19</sup> See the documentary trailer. Transcribed verbatim, [https://vimeo.com/86996865?utm\\_campaign=2617611&utm\\_source=affiliate&utm\\_channel=affiliate&cjevent=62b03c5733c511ea83cc01160a18050f](https://vimeo.com/86996865?utm_campaign=2617611&utm_source=affiliate&utm_channel=affiliate&cjevent=62b03c5733c511ea83cc01160a18050f), accessed 10 January 2020.

<sup>20</sup> This theatre produces classic, new plays and forgotten works, musicals and operas, touring in the UK and worldwide.

<sup>21</sup> It is a registered charity working to support the arts in post-conflict nations, and deprived communities.

packs, webcasts and discussions on this advocacy issue around the country, including a special session in the House of Parliament and a panel hosted by the Scottish government and Creative Scotland.

*Queens of Syria*, in all its three formats (workshop/documentary/play), can be considered a counter narration of the refugee women's situations seen, initially, as totally disempowered and passive and, subsequently, transformed into active communities performing happy memories and sad experiences. As we read in Fatima's words: "My participation in the play revitalised me. It gave me a sense of responsibility, I feel more optimistic now, it empowered me and made me feel stronger. It helped me overcome some of the issues resulting from our crisis".<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the master narrative in which both ontological and public narratives on migration are immersed, sees the contemporary mass displacement of people across the Mediterranean only as 'the' problem that politics has to solve. On the extremist political wings and in populist propaganda, migrants are depicted as a threat to the safety and sanity of Europeans, while most progressive groups support the idea that the welcoming of people in need is a duty and a responsibility that Europe has to face.

As Turkish feminist writer Elif Shafak points out, by expressing her concern about the lack of the 'emotional factor' in the mass and social media treatment of certain topics,

We have entered a new stage in world history in which collective sentiments guide and misguide politics more than ever before. And through social media and social networking, these sentiments are further amplified, polarized, and they travel around the world quite fast. Ours is the age of anxiety, anger, distrust, resentment and, I think, lots of fear. But here's the thing: even though there's plenty of research about economic factors, there are relatively few studies about emotional factors.<sup>23</sup>

Within this context, it emerges how Syrian voices have been suffocated for a long time and have been freed thanks to the growth of a series of counter narratives that tell stories (as facts, events, experiences) from the perspective of the migrant subject and in emotional terms. These stories and their new angles show that there are very different modalities by means of which it is possible to look at the question, and also that there are numerous nuances that go beyond the dynamics 'us VS them',<sup>24</sup> which is polluting the discourse on migration in media platforms and in everyday life settings.

Drawing on Stein and Stamselberg's 2014 work, Alessandra Rizzo and Karen Seago put emphasis on the proliferation of studies and practices that are meant to translate 'marginal voices' into art:

Recent research has highlighted the function of aesthetic discourse as a way of translating marginal voices and this interrogation of and engagement with borders, the centre and the periphery through art, has also attracted everyday citizens as never before. Of particular interest has been not the narration of why marginal realities exist or how immigration has taken place, but the representation of marginality in aesthetic forms in terms of how words and texts, images and visuals, within artistic platforms, are used in order to give shape and voice to marginal contexts.<sup>25</sup>

As a matter of fact, a number of artistic projects relating to theatre, films, web videos, documentaries, street art, etc., and depicting migrant people as subjects regaining their agency and power (Mazzara 2015), have been produced and also discussed in academic and public frameworks. Nonetheless, a lot has to be done especially as far as the relationship between the subject (migrant human beings) and the object (migration experiences) is concerned, considering the possible interference of persistent colonial

<sup>22</sup> See the project report, <https://www.developingartists.org.uk/queens-of-syria>, accessed 8 January 2020.

<sup>23</sup> See the conference video, [https://www.ted.com/talks/elif-shafak\\_the\\_revolutionary\\_power\\_of\\_diverse\\_thought/up-next](https://www.ted.com/talks/elif-shafak_the_revolutionary_power_of_diverse_thought/up-next), accessed 10 February 2019.

<sup>24</sup> See Teun Van Dijk, "Critical Discourse Analysis", in Deborah Schiffrin *et al.*, eds., *The Handbook of Discourse Analysis* (Hoboken: Wiley-Blackwell, 2015), 464-484.

<sup>25</sup> Alessandra Rizzo and Karen Seago, "Introduction", in Alessandra Rizzo and Karen Seago, eds., *The Aesthetics of Migration: Reversals of Marginality and the Socio-political Translation Turn*, *InVerbis* (special issue), 1 (Roma: Carocci, 2018), 8.

narratives. Thus, attention has recently shifted from the simple informative or spectacular narration of the migratory experience (in terms of facts and figures) to its representation through aesthetic and emotional forms. As stated in Rizzo and Seago's studies:

The concept 'migratory' within the context of aesthetic discourse from a political perspective is a leading term according to which migrants and migration – where migrants are the subjects, and migration represents both the performing act and the state of being or living in conditions of transition –, are inevitably a part of contemporary societies that significantly contributes to societal cultural transformations.<sup>26</sup>

Counter narratives are indeed allowing the emergence of migrant people, privately and collectively, as questioners of given narratives and promoters of social change. They are also fostering acts of intervention (also through procedures of translation), activism and 'artivism'. Given that the visual arts possess strategic linguistic and cultural functions for the dissemination of individual and public stories as both celebrating and challenging migrant identities, we maintain that they encourage processes of empowerment and acts of co-participation, while contributing to the dismantling of pre-conceptions.

### 3. A Decolonial Perspective on Refugees' Stories

As Maldonado-Torres claimed in his 2016 work on coloniality and decoloniality, we have moved beyond the dehumanisation that characterised colonial societies to a status in which the expression of hate and social phobias, and other forms of social, economic, and political control, are constantly increasing. The current debate about and around the migration 'situation'<sup>27</sup> is a case in point.

While the arts are showing new realities about migration by transforming the aesthetic discourse into a space where people can share a more human environment, and where they find it possible to produce acts of subversion, where counter-mapping and counter discourses destroy walls,<sup>28</sup> material and immaterial borders are being strengthened by political language and policies triggering people's extremist sentiments.

Since the Arab Spring, people in mass have migrated from Syria to destinations within the region and beyond its borders. The so-called 'refugee crisis' has continued to develop and is set in the larger context of mass migration across the Mediterranean. Major questions such as protection, hospitality and the impact of migrant people on the host neighbouring countries (Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, Iraq, Egypt) and on the other countries providing protection (Sweden, Germany, the UK and the U.S.) have been at issue,<sup>29</sup> with a tendency to forget about individual stories.

We are in particular witnessing, as claimed in Maldonado-Torres's decolonial perspective, the emergence of social groups that demand change, empowerment and co-participation and not only tolerance and inclusion:

After civil rights and decolonization struggles in the 20th century, liberal societies have continued building on the various lines of dehumanisation that were characteristic of their colonial and segregationist older versions by limiting equality to a formality that is most effectively used against groups that demand change, and by considering demands for empowerment and co-participation as calls for tolerance and inclusion.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> See footnote 2.

<sup>28</sup> Federica Mazzara, "Subverting the Narrative of the Lampedusa Borderscape", *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, 7.2 (2016), 135-147.

<sup>29</sup> Nicole Ostrand, "The Syrian Refugee Crisis: A Comparison of Responses by Germany, Sweden, the United Kingdom, and the United States", *Journal of Migration and Human Security*, 3.3 (2018), 255-279.

<sup>30</sup> Maldonado-Torres, "Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality", 4.



These groups are claiming the right to narrate, are claiming their humanity back, and are also daring to question both the colonial and postcolonial apparatus. Both postcolonialism and decoloniality have challenged the insularity of historical narratives and historiographical traditions coming from Europe.<sup>31</sup> However, as Maldonado-Torres puts it:

In decolonial artistic creation, the subject as agent of social change emerges as someone who can not only reflect about but also mould, shape, and reshape subjectivity, space, and time. Decolonial narrative is a powerful means to challenge the coloniality of time; decolonial visual art directly impacts the terrain of the coloniality of place and space...decolonial performance can be seen as a ritual or enactment of a body that claims a body, a time, and space.<sup>32</sup>

Indeed, the decolonial paradigm does not isolate knowledge and creation from action, but conjugates practice and creative expressions in the attempt to actually change the society. It is not thus a matter of criticising and overcoming coloniality to reach the postcolonial, but the necessity of moving away from any colonial approach, of dismantling old and abused narratives that are soaked in colonialism. Critical questions are at the basis of such transition that encourages communication within the field of migratory experiences:

The transition from the solitude of damnation to the possibility of communication passes through the formulation of critical questions. Decolonial critique finds its anchor in the open body. When the *damné* communicates the critical questions that are grounded on the lived experience of the open body we have the emergence of an-other speech and an-other way of thinking.<sup>33</sup>

We maintain, drawing on Maldonado-Torres' perspective, that the *damné* has been put in the condition of exploring narratives, appropriating means and sharing forms and modes of expression that can assist them in making and remaking themselves, their space and their sense of time. Displaced people, such as the Syrian refugee women performing their stories and the narratives of the Trojan women in *Queens of Syria*, have undertaken this mission and are able to fulfil four out of ten of Maldonado-Torres's theses.<sup>34</sup> The four theses that are here examined and taken into account for the analysis of the *Queens of Syria* subtitles are indicated in Table 1:

Thesis Seven Decoloniality involves a decolonial epistemic turn whereby the <i>damné</i> emerges as a questioner, thinker, theorist, writer, and communicator	Thesis Eight Decoloniality involves an aesthetic, erotic, and spiritual decolonial turn whereby the <i>damné</i> emerges as creator
Thesis Nine Decoloniality involves an activist decolonial turn whereby the <i>damné</i> emerges as an agent of social change	Thesis Ten Decoloniality is a collective project

Table 1: A selection of Maldonado-Torres's theses on decolonial thinking

<sup>31</sup> Gurinder K. Bhambra, "Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues", *Postcolonial Studies*, 17.2 (2014), 115.

<sup>32</sup> Maldonado-Torres, "Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality", 27.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>34</sup> Maldonado-Torres defines the necessity to articulate coloniality and decoloniality in ten summarising points as follows: "This outline of ten theses is part of an effort to offer an analytics of coloniality and decoloniality with the goal of identifying and clarifying the various layers, moments, and areas involved in the production of coloniality as well as in the consistent opposition to it" (2016), 2.

Starting from the assumption that the colonial matrix of power “is the inextricable combination of the rhetoric of modernity (progress, development, growth) and the logic of coloniality (poverty, misery, inequality)”,<sup>35</sup> individual and collective artistic productions of displaced people can be seen as an example of decolonial practice. In the case of the refugee women involved in the *Queens of Syria* multi-faceted project, the Syrian actresses have emerged as:

- 1) questioners, thinkers, theorists, writers, and communicators = they have questioned the stereotypes concerning their political status and gender, thought about and theorised their emotional conditions, wrote their stories and intertwined them with the Greek tragedy, and communicated all of this to a European audience using linguistic strategies (which will be analysed further on in this study) = thesis seven;
- 2) creators = their performance involves an aesthetic and spiritual decolonial turn, mixing times, genres and languages, and involving each woman physically and emotionally = thesis eight;
- 3) agents of social change = they actively work on how to inform the British and international audience in order to bring attention to the Syrian crisis = thesis nine;
- 4) a community, rather than single individuals = the project is the result of the international collaboration of various people and organisations = thesis ten.

*Queens of Syria* is, indeed, a collective project where the *damné* par excellence (the displaced, the refugee, the woman, the Arab woman, the Muslim woman) has the possibility of talking back. The ‘queens’ of Syria do it by using western narratives and disarticulating them through acts of powerful translation as (re)narration and co-creation, where resistance and interventionism are able to cohabit. By looking at *Queens of Syria* as a decolonial performance, we investigate it as a spiritual ritual played by marginalised identities who claim participation, not only inclusion, striving for empowerment, not only tolerance, through the use of their physicality and material language. “If you want people to understand you, you have to speak their language... Maybe this play will never save a life, or return people to their homes, but it is better to light a candle than live in darkness”, actress Reem affirms.<sup>36</sup>

#### 4. Decolonial Thinking in the Subtitling of the Visual Arts

In dictionary entries subtitles are described as the texts of dialogues, speeches, operas, etc., which are translated into another language and projected on the lower part of the screen. Subtitles are thus written translations of oral dialogues which appear in one or more lines placed at the bottom of films or video images. Apart from the technical dimension which encapsulates the process of subtitling, in the context of this study, subtitles are looked at as the recipients in which narrative accounts, or proper ontological stories, are located, and subtitling as one of the audiovisual translation modes that functions as a linguistic tool of semantic transfer from one language system into another language system in terms of activism, solidarity and mediation. Against this backdrop, the decolonial thinking from Maldonado-Torres’s perspective is set up as a recently grown and expanded instrument to investigate discourses on human rights and diverse forms of marginalisation from a qualitative research standpoint, thus, providing theoretical, methodological and epistemological ways with the scope of deconstructing stereotyped social issues. In the context of the visual arts (i.e., documentaries as the type under scrutiny), the act of subtitling marginalised narratives from a non-European language into English lingua franca has emerged as a practice that gives voice to minor subjectivities, while reversing conventional media

<sup>35</sup> Mignolo cit. in Gurinder K. Bhambra, “Postcolonial and Decolonial Dialogues”, 119.

<sup>36</sup> See Charlotte Eager, “A Modern Tragedy Told by the ‘Queens of Syria’”, *Financial Times*, 15 July 2016, <https://www.ft.com/content/4f6e3a0c-4948-11e6-b387-64ab0a67014c>, accessed 16 January 2020.

frameworks in which marginalised people are considered victims or terrorists (e.g., migrants and refugees being today among the most significant cases).

The qualitative analysis of the *Queens of Syria* subtitles aims to shed light on what the deconstructionist approach has chiefly attempted to fulfil in terms of offering the possibility of understanding people's feelings, emotions, and sensations. In the narratives of migration transferred through the visual arts forms and modes (e.g., documentaries, theatrical performances, museum exhibitions, etc.), the language covering the space of subtitles becomes a core element for the identity (re)configuration of migrants, that is, it enables a person to "reconstruct the social and cultural reality of the subjects through the meaning given in the interaction generated by one and another subject of the enunciation".<sup>37</sup> Within the framework of decoloniality, language is therefore growing as a constitutive element that contributes to the discovery of identities within their physical and mental spaces (i.e., narratives stemming from the creative acts of the Syrian actresses in the place of exile), historical time, while breaking with both the colonial logic and the logic that recognises decolonial subjectivities as dangerous hordes of people. Thus, the investigation into the lexical-semantic dimension and the properties of grammar in the language of migrant narratives favours the encounter with the real subject(s) of the narrative(s), where the narrativisation of their effective decolonial being and thinking occurs. Against the backdrop of English as lingua franca and a means of communication, and of translation as "a form of mediation with a complex relationship to other forms of mediation assumed to precede and directly inform it to varying degrees",<sup>38</sup> the focus of the practical section is not on a contrastive analysis between the original Arabic texts and its English translations, but on the linguistic dimension of narrativity that is brought into constructive action, and on how these narratives, blossomed within English subtitles, have an impact on the context of arrival. In the case under scrutiny, the Arabic stories are performed in English visual text types, which, as remarked above, are encapsulated within subtitles that have become instrumental in telling facts and actions relative to everyday realities in countries at war and settings of exile.

*Queens of Syria*, combined with the whole artistic project promoted by London Developing Artists, is a container of ontological stories which opens up new horizons to hear new voices that witness migrant experiences in the countries of departure and also in the contexts of arrival as the places of exile. It also allows a kind of evaluation of what these stories are able to transmit to an audience that needs to be stimulated to (re)think and (re)consider migration from the perspective of human rights. Based upon aesthetic discourse practices as subversive and counter arguing systems of dissemination of marginalised narratives, the migrant actresses (i.e., the 'queens' of Syria, who are also Syrian women who lived in Syria as wives, mothers, and daughters) are the characters who enact real stories in *Queens of Syria*. Their stories intersect with myths and testify to the Syrian-Trojan queens<sup>39</sup> as the decolonial subjects to whom Maldonado-Torres refers in his formulation of the theses that depict decoloniality as a model of enactment and power. The Syrian stories are spoken aloud by migrant characters who personify what, in migratory aesthetic discourse, is represented as a condition of subversion and power stemming from states of subalternity and marginalisation. This concept, widely developed in Federica Mazzara's reflections upon the social roles of migrants, points out that migrant people, from "imperceptible bodies",<sup>40</sup> have been transformed into "subjects of power, the power of subverting the narrative around their journey, their past and their desires for the future".<sup>41</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Míguez Passada and María Noel, "Discourses Analysis by a Decolonial Perspective", <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332180943>, accessed 13 December 2019.

<sup>38</sup> Mona Baker, *Translation and Conflict*, 186.

<sup>39</sup> Alessandra Rizzo, "Transcreating the Myth: 'Voiceless Voiced' Migrants in the Queens of Syria Project", in C. Spinzi *et al.*, eds., *Translation or Transcreation? Discourses, Texts and Visuals* (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2018), 150-179.

<sup>40</sup> Federica Mazzara, "Subverting the Narrative of the Lampedusa Borderscape", 135.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

We claim that the ontological aesthetic narratives produced by the Syrian women can be set within Maldonado-Torres' decolonial thinking, and we maintain that decoloniality is the scenario against which the 'queens' of Syria are plunged, and where they epitomise the figure of the *damné* – implying subversion and power – whose roles range from thinking, questioning, and theorising to acting for social change and for the creation of collective stimuli.

The narratives we are looking at are thus stories that frame migrant people as decolonial subjects within an enacting dimension, where the language employed for narrative purposes seeks to reinforce the role of aesthetic discourse as reversing standardising perspectives that are consolidated in conventional media within mainstream platforms. In this context, as already anticipated, subtitles acquire a strategic task that facilitates the dissemination of Arabic narratives of migration in English as a means of communication. This mechanism sheds light on the subtitle experience as an experience of exile and epistolarity, constitutively linked to the exchange of meanings "driven by distance, separation, absence, and loss, as well as the desire to bridge these multiple gaps".<sup>42</sup> As counter informative verbal texts, the *Queens of Syria* stories provide the public with authentic evidence which permits subtitles to be labelled as activist subtitles, that is, subtitles that are produced by "individuals or collectives highly engaged in political causes, with the objective of combating censorship and conformity by spreading certain narratives that counter-argue the truth reported by the powerful mass media".<sup>43</sup> These subtitles, which can be generated on a voluntary basis either by amateurs or professionals, have the advantage of producing counter discourses that circulate and permit subordinated social groups "to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs".<sup>44</sup> They are meant to perform a "practice that rebels against or resists legal media and translation frameworks".<sup>45</sup> Therefore, they function not only to subvert 'media regulation', but also to involve volunteer and activist procedures which strive to encourage minority documentaries and videos, while challenging hegemonic discourse.

The concept of 'narrative', which draws on Mona Baker's theorisation of narrative accounts from the perspective of translation and interpreting studies, is applied to migrant stories as considerably complex texts that aim to perform actions, express facts and permit identities to talk. At their heart are events and acts that have taken place in the real world, which the public will be able to evaluate, describe, and understand. As a rule of thumb, the growing production of stories disseminated within artistic settings, digital and non, are structured within the framework of a domain-specific language, where the argument structure of verbs is fundamental, and where the conceptual categories referring to the semantic verbal arguments of each lexical domain are contributing to creating specific text types. The acceptability and accessibility of these narratives depend on how narrated events and actions are lexicalised and expressed in language. This involves the configuration of semantic roles that can lead to the conceptualisation of migrant experiences through linguistic knowledge, since the narrative text and its lexicon are essential to unveiling which meanings the stories put emphasis on and seek to convey. To discover the meanings expressed in the stories, the linguistic unit that is taken into account is the verb. The verb constructs and determines the functioning of a sentence, on the one hand, and, shows which cognitive categories are activated in the narratives, on the other. Verbs produce performative acts and are strategic to identifying what lexical-semantic meanings prevail in migrant narratives.

## 5. Data and Methodology

<sup>42</sup> Hamid Naficy, "Epistolarity and Textualities in Accented Films", in Atom Egoyan and Ian Balfour, eds., *Subtitles: On the Foreignness of Film* (Cambridge, Mass., and London: The MIT Press, 2004), 134.

<sup>43</sup> Jorge Díaz Cintas, "Subtitling's a Carnival": New Practices in Cyberspace", *Journal of Specialised Translation*, 30.2 (2018), 134.

<sup>44</sup> Cit. in Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 134.

The corpus of this study consists of the transcription of the subtitles where the Syrian stories from *Queens of Syria* are rendered in English as the dominant language. The audiovisual script is the result of two processes of translation: the first one regards the production of an Arabic script on the basis of the Syrian women's interpretation of Euripides' Greek tragedy, whereas the second one entails the rendering of the Arabic stories into English, in visual written texts.

A key signal to the reinforcement of the subtitle framework in *Queen of Syria* as an enacting space of solidarity and collaboration is traceable in the presence of English as the dominant language which is forced to be spoken in a conversational way (i.e. the structure of English is often non-standardly conceived as far as the formulation of questions is concerned: "None of you saw that, right?"; "You felt you were treated unjustly?"; "Your husband refuses completely?"). The Syrian narratives gain power in the language of subtitles which offers an activist decolonial voice to the exiled women, while presenting lexical semantic choices and grammatical constructions as indispensable ingredients that posit the narratives themselves within the context of migrant text types that own their own potential "local grammar".<sup>46</sup> As special text types, the Syrian narratives and, in general, the stories disseminated through artistic platforms, are framed and constructed as stories that follow a determinate morpho-syntactic structure, on the one hand, and that are marked by lexical domains which feed counter discourse, on the other (i.e. "They had brought some corpses" [Subject-Actor; Past Perfect-Movement; Residue-Goal]; "they killed all the men" [Subject-Actor; Simple Past-Action; Residue-Goal]; "My name is Faten" [Subject-Identified; Simple Present-Existence; Residue-Identifying]; "He told her" [Subject-Sayer; Simple Past-Speech; Residue-Receiver]).

The whole corpus – which includes 5,598 words – contains 669 subtitles. Nevertheless, since this study focuses on migrant narratives and their dissemination across aesthetic platforms, the linguistic analysis has principally been focused upon the stories pronounced by the Syrian women, which have been extracted and isolated in order to form a sub-corpus. The sub-corpus has been subdivided into 51 stories, where the verbal category, as previously remarked, occupies a chief role as the most important lexical unit for the construction of sentences and argument structures that are placed in each narrative. Therefore, in assuming that the meanings of sentences are structured around verbs, it is implicitly declared that verbs "provide the relational and semantic framework" for the construction of sentences and represent "the most important lexical and syntactic category of a language".<sup>47</sup>

Attention is thus paid to predicative frames and their syntactic circulation, that is, verbs and their nominalisations or grammatical metaphors (i.e. the acts of 'telling', 'shouting', 'crying', 'shelling' as actions involving participants), which provide a predicative frame linking two or more semantic categories. The assumption is that verbs within the same lexical subdimension share similar syntactical constructions and, even more important, are combined with the same semantic types of argument. The language of these migrant stories presents some specific features, both lexical and semantic, which transform it into a type of sectorial language that is used for the fulfilment of specific objectives that characterise migratory aesthetics as visual textual genres. Predicative frames rather than concept frames – though semantically correlated – are thus descriptive of predicates that encode actions and events. They put emphasis on the participants and their actions in contrast to concept frames that activate categories depicted by nouns and nominal groups, consisting of relationships based on attributive-value exchanges. Thus, predicative frames encode actions and events and establish the relational context with the conceptual frames, thus, entangling participants, objects, means and effect.

<sup>46</sup> Catalina Jiménez Hurtado and Silvia Soler Gallego, "Museum Accessibility Through Translation: A Corpus Study of Pictorial Audio Description", in Jorge Díaz Cintas and Joselia Neves, eds., *Audiobook Translation Taking Stock* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015), 277-298.

<sup>47</sup> Faber and Mairal Usón, *Constructing a Lexicon of English Verbs*, 84.

Drawing on Faiber and Mairal's classification of 12 lexical domains rooted in the lexical semantic analysis within their Lexical Grammar Model,<sup>48</sup> and on Halliday's functional grammar<sup>49</sup> as the system for deconstructing clauses and expressing social reality, the scrutiny has taken into account the following lexical domains and their relative superordinates in order to classify the semantic function of the verbs in the *Queens of Syria's* narratives: EXISTENCE (be, happen), CHANGE (become, change), POSSESSION (have), SPEECH (say, talk), EMOTION (feel), ACTION (do, make), MENTAL PERCEPTION (know, think), MOVEMENT (move, go, come), PHYSICAL PERCEPTION (see, hear, taste, smell, touch), MANIPULATION (use), CONTACT/IMPACT (hit, break) and POSITION (put, be). Other smaller classes include LIGHT, SOUND, BODY FUNCTIONS, WEATHER, etc.

The composition of these stories consists of parts, each of which can be decomposed into a set of meaning clusters. These clusters are formed by their predicate-argument structures with their relevant lexical domains and the conceptual categories of their arguments. This subdivision relies on the Frame-Based Terminology (FBT) perspective<sup>50</sup> according to which terminological meanings are based on a cognitive approach to domain-specific languages. Knowledge is transferred at the level of words, then at the level of phrases and, to conclude, in the codification of the entire knowledge frame, which is the syntactical space where processes, actions and events are located in the context of migrant narratives. In the *Queens of Syria's* narratives of migration, the frames are thus identifiable with actions embedded in meanings, where facts and processes, which also involve participants, provide a predicative frame that links two or more semantic categories.

If the migrant stories as verbal texts are made of language as a set of culturally and functionally dependent items, it is possible to maintain that all contribute to the overall meaning and make the text function as a full system of communication. Within the communicative frame, language use is developed according to three metafunctions which come into being simultaneously. The Syrian women tell us actions and events, and transmit feelings and perceptions by activating certain processes via the experiential or ideational metafunction. They establish social relationships among the language users within the communicative context via the interpersonal metafunction, and they also arrange their stories as narrative texts or speech forms (screened oral dialogues and monologues reproduced within subtitles) via the textual metafunction.<sup>51</sup> In particular, these stories of migration are viewed as language documents having micro-objectives, namely, telling and denouncing events, actions and facts, and sharing everyday experiences and difficult moments that took place in the lives of the Syrian refugees.

## 6. Analysis

The analysis aims to demonstrate that all verbs within the same lexical domain share the same knowledge frame and have identical or similar syntactical projections, that is, lexical semantic types share the same argument and operate within the same syntactical context. Having said that, these narratives contain common arguments that are reinforced by lexico-semantic choices within the Lexico-Grammatical system. This system shows which functional elements exist in the narrative context, that is, how Transitivity, to put it in Halliday's terms, is developed within the stories, and how these are reflected within the morpho-syntactical organisation of the sentence, that is, how the Mood Block, to use Halliday's functional framework, is expressed.

<sup>48</sup> Faber and Mairal Usón, *Constructing a Lexicon of English Verbs*.

<sup>49</sup> Halliday M.A.K., *Introduction to Functional Grammar*.

<sup>50</sup> See Pamela Faber, *A Cognitive Linguistics: View of Terminology and Specialised Language* (Berlin & Boston: de Gruyter, 2012) and "Frames as a Framework for Terminology", in J. Kockaert Hendrik and Frieda Steurs, eds., *Handbook of Terminology* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2015), 14-33.

<sup>51</sup> Michael K. Halliday, *Introduction to Functional Grammar*.



Based on these assumptions, firstly, we have identified the most dominant lexical domains. Subsequently, we have selected the most representative lexical verbs in each lexical domain in terms of frequency. This has led us to consider verbs belonging to the same lexical domain in semantically-related relations according to their semantic roles and grammatical position. Verbs with the highest number of occurrences in the different lexical domains indicate the most dominant conceptual areas in the stories, thus, emphasising which experiences have been mostly activated through the selection of certain verbal groups. They also shed light on their relations with other verbal categories within sentences. To conclude, we have highlighted the grammatical projection of the semantically-related verbs within the same lexical domain, but also within lexically-related domains, where verbal meanings satisfy the same communicative purposes (i.e. verbs belonging to the ACTION and MOVEMENT lexical domains have been found to transmit similar meanings in terms of argument structures).

A general overview of the *Queens of Syria*'s narrative context shows how verbs and phrases belonging to specific lexical domains contribute to the construction of the Syrian women's identities. The dominant lexical domains activate argument frames which transmit interrelated meanings rooted in the Syrian refugees' cognitive structures (i.e. grieving for their dead husbands and children, grieving for the destruction of their homes and the cruel devastation of Syria). The narratives are divided into collective stories, where the chorus expresses the general sense of frustration and solitude due to forced exile and women's exploitation, and individual stories, where a refugee tells about her tragic events which, nevertheless, have been experienced by the rest of the women who play the role as actresses in the project. The verbs signaling the lexical-domain types, which create the argument structures of each narrative, determine meaning-making processes and activate frames based on Existence, Action and Movement, Mental Perception and Speech. The narrative context encapsulated within the English subtitles opens and closes with collective stories told by the female chorus (the act of speech dominates all narratives, since it implies speaking out, denouncing), where the five lexical domains interact by activating Action and Movement, Mental Perception, Speech and Existence domains. Here some examples: "Oh my sorrow! I am so unhappy. I have reached the end of my sorrow. I shall leave as my city turns to dust. Old legs, carry me as fast as you can. So that I can salute my wretched city" (the Chorus' opening narrative). As the reported passage spoken out by the chorus demonstrates, verbs such as 'is', 'reach' (a movement verb which contextually refers to a state of Mental Perception), 'leaves' (semantically-related to 'carry'), 'turns to' (semantically-related to 'is'), 'carry', 'salute' (an act of Speech), activate connections between the existence of the Syrian women (i.e. 'I am so unhappy', 'I have reached the end of my sorrow') and the existence of the Syrian city, whose destruction is source of deep pain (i.e. '... my city turns to dust', 'I can salute my wretched city'). The same intersection of argument structures is present at the end of the documentary when the chorus concludes by speaking out what is here reported through the use of verbs belonging to different lexical domains among which 'fall upon', 'cover', 'winging', 'seeing', 'lived', 'is', 'exist'. The whole passage says: "You will soon fall upon the dear earth into anonymity. You will cover the earth with your destruction. The dust is winging its way to the sky like smoke. It is forbidding me from seeing the house I lived in. The name of our land will pass into oblivion. Each one of us has lost what is dear to them. Miserable Troy exists no more" (the chorus' concluding passage).

The individual stories also play a fundamental role in the meaning-making processes activated by lexical domains that form argument structures. As Suad, one of the Syrian actresses, narrates to her public, the production of meanings through the experience of the Trojan women is not fictional but true and real. The war Syria experienced is real, and it is not only happening in the mythological Troy. In Suad's words: "This is real, we feel something from it. ... I mean we are talking about the play, but these things are real and exist. It's not just in Troy. This has happened for real. It's happened to us even. We are slowly going to learn...how to breathe correctly and to discover the area below the stomach". Suad introduces the argument frames of the individual existences of people forced to exile, humiliated and tortured, and, at the same time, refers to a country destroyed and abandoned by its native inhabitants

because of war. These cognitive frameworks are activated by verbs implying Existence and Mental Perception (i.e. 'is', 'are', 'exist', 'happened', 'feel', 'breathe'), Action and Movement (i.e. 'learn', 'discover'), against the backdrop of speech categories that permeate the entire work.

Another woman speaks of an incident in which fifteen masked and armed men burst into her home and threatened her at gunpoint. The problem was that her brother refused to join the men, so they wanted to change his opinion. The woman tells her personal story saying that later she heard her brother was found dead. The ontological story activates cognitive categories derived from the use of verbs stemming from diverse lexical domains (i.e. Action and Movement, Speech and Mental Perception) that produce argument frames based on destruction, murder and violation of family intimacy: "Fifteen armed masked men came in. You could only see their eyes. My brother opened the door. They had come in through the gate and through the main door. They told him to go with them. He asked 'where am I going?' They said 'come with us and don't say a word'. He got up and came into the house. He sat on the ground and started fixing his hair. They said 'come with us', pointing guns at him. He said 'shoot me here in my house, I am not going anywhere with you'. We started screaming. They said 'face the walls, all of you'. They pointed their guns at us. 'Whoever says a word, we'll shoot you'".

On a first level of analysis, we have obtained quantitative data, that is, 3,590 words out of 5,598 from the Syrian stories, that is, clauses and sentences pronounced by the 'queens' of Syria. At a first stage, we have indicated the number of verbs in the whole corpus (789 verbal categories), including modals, infinitives, gerunds, lexical verbs, with the exclusion of 'be' and 'have' as auxiliary verbs, as shown in Table 2.

Words in the corpus: 5,598
Words in the Syrian narratives as subcorpus: 3,590
Number of verbs in the narratives as subcorpus: 789

Table 2: Quantitative analysis of the corpus and sub-corpus

On a second level of analysis, we have identified the main lexical semantic domains. The identification of the lexical domains has put emphasis on five specific lexical domains, namely, the lexical domains representing EXISTENCE, ACTION, MENTAL PERCEPTION, MOVEMENT and SPEECH. They have shown to own the highest number of representative verbal occurrences, as indicated in Table 3. This second stage has been associated with the creation of a frequency list including the most representative verbs for each category of the five lexical domains taken into account, apart from the identification of the principal verbs of each lexical domain category.

LEXICAL DOMAINS	REPRESENTATIVE VERBS	FREQUENCY LIST of SEMANTIC RELATIONS
EXISTENCE (179 verbal occurrences)	Be (85%)	Semantic relations with Live (10), Exist (2), Happen (9).
ACTION (136 verbal occurrences)	Take (9%)	Semantic relations with Burn (6), Sign (6), Kill (5), Used to (5), Shoot (4), Salute (4), Experience (4), Do (4), Let (4).
MENTAL PERCEPTION (103 verbal occurrences)	Know (14%)	Semantic relations with Want (13) and Miss (13).

MOVEMENT (76 verbal occurrences)	Come (20%)	Semantic relations with Go (14), Leave (14), and Carry (4).
SPEECH (44 verbal occurrences)	Say (20%)	Semantic relation with Tell (8), Call (6), Talk (4).

Table 3: Identification of lexical domains, representative verbs and frequency list

The most representative verbs in each lexical domain have semantic relations with the other major and minor verbs (in terms of occurrences) in the same domain, thus, forming subdomains, and also in relation to the other domains. The lexical semantic relations of verbs are relevant to establish a connection between the diverse narratives, where different lexical domains emerge in order to create an argument structure for each lexical domain area which, in turn, is semantically connected with the argument structures of the other lexical domains prevailing in the 51 narratives.

The principal argument structure, as demonstrated in Table 3, revolves around the EXISTENCE lexical domain, whose most representative verb is 'Be', followed by 'Live', 'Exist' and 'Happen'. This implies that the actresses as performers of their stories aim to set up a relationship between two entities in terms of attribution or identification. This takes place between personal pronouns, proper names, abstract nouns, demonstrative pronouns (i.e., 'We', 'She', 'Rasha', 'My name', 'This'), and a quality, a thing, a person (i.e., 'unhappy', 'the queen', 'Faten'), where the process or verbal category (i.e. 'was', 'were', 'is'), functions to signal the existence of the relationship. Strictly speaking, there is no process in the normal sense of defining something that 'is happening', since there is one real participant in the world of experience, what is called Carrier in Systemic Functional Linguistics, whose purpose is to establish either an attributive relational circumstance, where the Carrier is the entity that carries the attribute, or an identifying relational circumstance, where the aim is to identify one entity in terms of another, which means that the Identified is equal to the Identifying (i.e. "those are seats here; they are children; they are asleep; these things are real and exist; she was the queen of Troy; this is Andromache; their real reason was a rivalry between them; they were two equal states; my name is Bushra; my name is Faten; I am Hecuba").

The argument structures of the ACTION and MOVEMENT lexical domains (the second and fourth ones) share similar meanings and mostly describe situations, events, physical actions, processes implying doing words, transitions, shifts, physical removal of things and persons. A case in point is the verb 'wipe out', which can also signify 'remove or eliminate (something) completely'. Moving from the definitions of the generic terms for the lexical domain of ACTION (do and make), it is possible to state that the variety of verbs included in this category is semantically related to the meanings of 'doing' and 'making' according to dictionary definitions (i.e. 'destroy', 'allot', 'pick out', 'kill', 'write', 'spend', 'commit', 'restore', 'pack', 'block', 'put', 'cover', 'get up', 'sleep', 'manage', 'buy', 'mess up', etc.). The same semantic relations, whose evidence is provided in Table 4, exist among verbs cohabiting in the lexical domain of MOVEMENT.

SEMANTIC RELATIONS
MOVE/GO/COME
Move: <i>go in a specified direction or manner; change position; change the place, position, or state of; change one's place of residence or work.</i>

<i>Go: move from one place to another; travel a specified distance; travel or move in order to engage in a specified activity.</i>
<i>Come: move or travel towards or into a place thought of as near or familiar to the speaker; arrive at a specified place.</i>
<i>Leave: go away from; go away from a place without taking (someone or something).</i>
<i>Carry: support and move (someone or something) from one place to another.</i>
<i>Raid: quickly and illicitly take something from (a place).</i>

Table 4: Examples of semantic relations within the MOVEMENT lexical domain processes

These verbs and their semantic relations construct the movement argument structures, whose lexical domain focuses on discursive strategies that highlight the position of migrant people as subjects forced to flee their country of origin, and who made the effort to cope with sufferings and humiliations derived from prevarication and abuse. As a result, verbs involving physical action and movement are used in order to offer a blazingly vivid mirror of the Syrian women’s experiences projected in the stories of a queen, of princesses and ordinary women who, like the Trojan women, are uprooted, enslaved, and bereaved. Action, transition and shifts emerge through the use of verbal constructions that entail dimensions of exile and torture: (“I shall leave as my city turns to dust; Old legs, carry me as fast as you can; They were forced from it; They left their city; She ran it; I used to run this place; The neighbourhood was being raided; We got in a car and left; We went from Bayyada; My brothers brought him home; He was shot in the mouth and thrown on the road”).

The MENTAL PERCEPTION and SPEECH lexical domains are the third and fifth domains which activate cognitive and verbal categories respectively. They have meanings in common, since they are constructed within cognitive and verbal semantic frameworks which navigate in the internal world of the mind, and a large number of them refer and describe processes of thinking, imagining, wanting. In this case, the Syrian women, in whose mind the mental process occurs, are not acting but are mainly undergoing the process of hearing, which implies that their voices are triggering the mental process of hearing. Mental Perception can be thus expressed through perceptive, emotive, cognitive and desiderative categories, such as in the lexical semantic relations of the verbs that are present in the Syrian stories (i.e. “We want the world to hear; For our struggles to be heard; I still don’t know the script well; I’m learning from what I hear; he who knew happiness; your soul yearns for a happy past; What can I dream about?; They don’t know pain; But those who knew happiness; I wanted to do; I want the world to hear our story”).

The fifth and last lexical domain, the SPEECH category, also known as verbal process in Halliday’s terms, is intermediate between mental and material processes, since the act of saying something is a physical action that also reflects mental operations. The Sayer (i.e. the Syrian woman and her relatives) addresses the Receiver (i.e. “My sister called me”), the second participant in the sentence to whom the actresses may be eager to say something. The Sayer can also involve another type of participant that may appear in the verbal process, the message itself (Verbiage), which is summarised in the form of a nominal group functioning as a participant, or which can include projected clauses such as “I want to say a poem; He said I should sign to say that...; He said ‘Sign!’”.

On a third and final level of analysis, we have demonstrated that lexical semantic relations can produce syntactical projections and formulations (active and passive structures, present, perfect and past tenses) recognisable within Mood and Transitivity systems, as Table 5 shows:

LEXICAL DOMAINS	VERBAL TEXT	MOOD BLOCK/ TRANSITIVITY
EXISTENCE	I am Hecuba I am nothing.	- Subject – Finite (Simple Present <i>-am; is</i> ).

	<p>I am like a flower...</p> <p>I am very ambitious.</p> <p>My name is Bushra.</p> <p>My name is Faten.</p> <p>My name is...</p> <p>My name is Hecuba.</p> <p>My name is Maysoon.</p> <p>My name is Ghayda.</p> <p>My name is Andromache.</p> <p>My name is Mayda.</p>	<p>- Carrier – Relational Pr. – Attribute/Identifying.</p>
MOVEMENT & ACTION	<p>They had come into our house.</p> <p>They had come into our house.</p> <p>The had come in through the gate.</p> <p>They had burnt down the whole city.</p> <p>Their city had been destroyed.</p> <p>my father had been arrested.</p> <p>My father and my two brothers had been killed.</p> <p>I had been sacked by the Greek spear.</p>	<p>- Subject – Finite (Past Perfect-<i>had</i>).</p> <p>- Actor – Material Pr. – Circumstance.</p>
MENTAL PERCEPTION	<p>I wanted the curtains to be my style.</p> <p>I miss my sheets and pillows.</p> <p>I miss my teddy bear that I put on my bed.</p> <p>I miss my curtains.</p> <p>I've missed you my dear one.</p> <p>I've missed your walls and doors.</p> <p>I've missed your every corner.</p> <p>I've missed your steps and standing by your windows.</p> <p>I miss lying on your floor.</p>	<p>- Subject – Finite (Past Simple; Simple Present; Present Perfect – <i>ed</i>; - <i>present</i> - 've).</p> <p>-Sensor – Mental Pr. – Phenomenon.</p>
SPEECH	<p>He said 'Sign!'</p> <p>I said I won't sign to anything I haven't seen.</p> <p>He said 'Sign!'</p> <p>He said I should sign to say that</p> <p>They said 'come with us and don't say a word'.</p> <p>They said 'come with us', pointing guns at him.</p>	<p>- Subject – Finite (Simple Past -<i>ed</i>).</p> <p>- Sayer (Projecting) – Verbal Pr.; Projected clause.</p>

	He said ‘shoot me here in my house, They said ‘face the walls, all of you’.	
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Table 5: Identification of syntactical projections and formulations (Mood) and functional categories (Transitivity)

## 7. Concluding Remarks

The conceptual categories that emerge in the ‘queens’ of Syria’s narratives are rooted in the semantic arguments expressed through the use of verbs. These semantic arguments construct the stories according to specific morpho-syntactic and lexical rules to such an extent that the reader may be inclined to the hypothesis that migrant stories have their own local grammar. The identification of the semantic arguments that predominate in the visual textual narratives has relied on Halliday’s systems of Mood and Transitivity, on the one hand, and Faber and Mairal Usón’s model of lexical semantic relations, on the other. The two methodological approaches have helped us demonstrate that a) the lexicon of a sentence represents the interface of the grammatical and conceptual component; b) the meanings of words reflect the deeper conceptual structures and the specific domain where they function; c) the verbal lexicon plays a fundamental role in the composition of the sentence as the way in which the speaker experiences the world. In brief, lexical meanings are the bases for knowledge representation, and the recognition of the cognitive areas involved in the lexical networks reveals what areas of experience are activated in the viewer’s or reader’s receptive contexts. Such grammar has provided sets of recurrent lexical patterns which are syntactically and semantically unvaried, and which also share the same communicative function. Thus, linguistic patterns vary according to text types and specialised situations. In fact, the Syrian narratives have shown to be characterised by a recurrent local grammar, where the syntactic projection of lexemes and their semantic roles, which indicate the perspective from which the event is portrayed and textualised, indicate that each linguistic pattern aims to shed light on a specific actor, goal and result.

Results have proved that certain narratives of migration diffused through the visual arts can be specific text types, whose prevailing lexical domains and their syntactic projections, can become indicative of a structure that aims to reinforce certain experiences. The semantic classes of verbs that have emerged in terms of occurrences representing the driving force in the narratives can be conceived as a whole of structured clusters of acts entailing the spheres of EXISTENCE, ACTION and MOVEMENT, on the one hand, and, of MENTAL PERCEPTION and SPEECH, on the other. Of the five emerging lexical domains, EXISTENCE has been the most important one, since the whole stories put in the mouth of the Syrian actresses have been constructed through existential categories, whose utterances or formulations perform relational acts. The analysis of Mood structures has shown how the Syrian women have meant to communicate in terms of interaction with the others. Considering that language use is based on the exchange of meanings, the Syrian actresses have told things according to a certain lexical and grammatical structure as functional to a) influencing the audience, b) providing information that people may not have and 3) explaining and clarifying attitudes with regard to the world the target audience may be unfamiliar with.

Against this backdrop, language becomes the instrument that reverses conditions of subalternity and provides decolonial subjects, such as the Syrian actresses in this study, with devices that contribute to giving access to their stories and make them subjects of power before an international audience. Indeed, the linguistic analysis has proved that the *Queens of Syria* subtitles, where the stories of the real people are captured and translated, can be looked at as decolonial devices, in which language use is strategically relevant and functional to the understanding of both private and public refugees’ stories.





Queens of Syria (British Council, 2016), cover  
[https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/queens\\_of\\_syria.pdf](https://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/queens_of_syria.pdf)



## Toward a New Poetics and Politics of Migration in Contemporary Italy. *The Archive of Migrant Memories as Digital ARTivism*

**Abstract:** This essay discusses the on-line multimedia project *Archivio delle memorie migranti* (AMM) as a virtual storytelling space in which migrants in contemporary Italy exercise agency and resistance despite their disenfranchisement as political subjects. Focusing on the section “Self-Representations,” I analyze some of the stories and narratives produced by migrants and refugees as powerful examples of “digital ARTivism” in the sense in which this practice has been enacted by contemporary Chicanx and Latinx cultural producers. Through a digital storytelling mode, AMM aims at facilitating the development of transnational migrants’ activist consciousness. Such methodology, I argue, aligns AMM and the Italian border archive with the decolonizing epistemological reorientation that has begun to undo the Western project of coloniality/modernity. As migrant and refugee stories migrate from the entangled structures of the web into the intimacy of our homes, we are called to reflect on the complexity of national identity and belonging. AMM’s stories and self-narrations enable a re-visioning of contemporary Italy as a possibility for transnational citizenship and peaceful co-existence.

Keywords: *digital ARTivism, migrant memories, delinking, decolonizing, transnational citizenship*

A world in which many worlds could co-exist can only be made by the shared work and common goals of those who inhabit, dwell in one of the many worlds co-existing in one world and where differences are not cast in terms of values of plus and minus degree of humanity.

Walter Mignolo, “Delinking”<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Introduction

In the era of transmediality, digital storytelling has become a powerful tool to empower migrants’ voices and visibility and build transnational, cross-cultural alliances that aim to dismantle the binary thinking inherited by the colonial framework of modernity and enact the possibility of alter/native knowledges and discourses. At a time when anti-immigrant rhetoric and xenophobia throughout Italy galvanize racist feelings with slogans such as *prima gli italiani* (Italians first) trumpeted by right wing political parties *Lega* (League) and *Fratelli d’Italia* (Brothers of Italy), alliances between citizens and migrants are key to affirm acts of resistance from below that might project us toward new practices of knowledge and territorial (re)mappings. The Archive of Migrant Memories (AMM) is a perfect example of what in this essay I call “digital ARTivism”<sup>2</sup> combining, as it does, creative forms of self-expression and memory-telling with a skillful use of multimedia language. As a community-building project, AMM lays the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Mignolo, “Delinking: The Rhetoric of Modernity, the Logic of Coloniality, and the Grammar of De-coloniality”, *Cultural Studies*, 21.2 (2007), 449-514, 499.

<sup>2</sup> My reformulation of digital ARTivism in this essay places the discourse surrounding the Italy/Lybian border in direct conversation with the US/Mexican one. In its early manifestations within the contemporary Chicanx artistic community, the neologism ARTivism refers to artistic works created with a strong political commitment to social justice. The term “digital activism” has been used by Chicanx scholars to describe “a convergence between ‘activism’ and digital ‘artistic’ production.” See Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre, “Chicana/oActivism: Judy Baca’s Digital Work with Youth of Color,” in Anna Everett, ed. *Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2008), 81.

foundations for a new border poetics and politics of migration in contemporary Italy by calling into questions practices of citizenship and belonging. As described in its website:

The *Archive of Migrant Memories* [Archivio delle memorie migranti] is both a real and virtual space for stories, self narratives, and dialogues between people wishing to share their experience of migration with others interested in learning about what they went through and their feelings and reflections. AMM is a “community of practice” composed of people pursuing common goals from a variety of perspectives. Their activities range from the collection of testimonies to the production of personal narratives and life histories, from participatory audio and video production to the development of teaching materials aimed at bringing the migrants’ real life experience into schools and making them available to anyone interested.<sup>3</sup>

Officially released in December 2011, AMM originated from the encounter between Italian scholars of colonial and postcolonial Africa, specializing in the area of the Horn of Africa, with a group of refugees and asylum seekers attending the Rome-based Italian language school *Asinitas*, and the various professional workers at the school itself.<sup>4</sup> Professor Alessandro Triulzi, AMM’s director and former history professor at the Università Orientale in Naples, describes the motivations behind the project. He writes: “For 40 years I tried to handle the intricacies of the oral/written mix surrounding Ethiopia’s western borderlands, till I came to realize that thousands of migrants arriving in my country were coming from my own areas of research in the Horn”.<sup>5</sup> In reaction to the Berlusconi’s government response and treatment of transnational migrants crossing the Mediterranean, and to counteract the media negative portrayals of their arrival, Triulzi joined a friend in Rome, who had started the *Asinitas* language school for recently-arrived Africans, in the hope to understand and explain both the reasons that forced them to leave their country and the predicament they would face upon arrival.<sup>6</sup> One of the key principles of *Asinitas*, whose name was inspired by “Giordano Bruno’s praise of donkey’s endurance and determination”,<sup>7</sup> is to use students’ own narratives, instead of textbooks, as the primary source of language learning. At the end of the year, the material gathered would become the required “reading” for the courses and a visible testimony to the kind of participatory pedagogy the school intends to promote. As Triulzi explains, “learning Italian was conceived as a necessary form of ‘survival’ for migrants who wanted to claim the memory and dignity of their migratory journey”.<sup>8</sup> *Asinitas*’ pedagogical model would be used by AMM once the migrants’ collective memories “migrated” to the on-line multi-media Archive creating a space of listening that in Judith Butler’s terms might be conceived of as “a highly transposable conception of political space”.<sup>9</sup> It is, as a matter of fact, the migrants’ presence, through their embodied voices/stories/narratives that makes AMM the site where migrants can exercise agency and action, resistance and rising up, despite their disenfranchisement as political subjects. As Butler states, “to be outside established and legitimate political structure is still to

<sup>3</sup> The Archive of Migrant Memories, [www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/en](http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/en), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Alessandro Triulzi, “Voci, racconti, testimonianze dall’Italia delle migrazioni. L’Archivio delle memorie migranti (AMM)”, in *Storia e futuro*, [www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/en/the-archive/research/](http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/en/the-archive/research/), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Alessandro Triulzi, “Empowering Migrant Voices and Agency in Postcolonial Italy”, *Critical Interventions: Journal of Art History and Culture*, 10.1 (2016), 58-70, 58.

<sup>6</sup> An abandoned warehouse belonging to the Tiburtina railway station in Rome, which had been occupied by irregular migrants since the late 1990s, provided the “early fieldwork” for the stories gathered at the *Asinitas* school. In 2006, the railroad re-appropriated the premises to start the renovation work and the migrants were forced to move out. As Triulzi put it, “the station’s grounds were sanitized, but not their memories.” Alessandro Triulzi, “Listening and Archiving Migrant Voices: How It All Began,” in Ulf Engel and Manuel João Ramos, eds., *African Dynamics in a Multipolar World: Respacing Africa* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2014), 64.

<sup>7</sup> Alessandro Triulzi, “Working with Migrants’ Memories in Italy: The Lampedusa Dump”, *Crossings: Journal of Migration & Culture*, 7.2 (2016), 149-163, 152.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 153.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, “Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street,” *European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies* (September 2011), [www.transversal.at/transversal/1011/butler/en](http://www.transversal.at/transversal/1011/butler/en), accessed 10 November 2020.

be saturated in power relations, and this saturation is the point of departure for a theory of the political that includes dominant and subjected forms, modes of inclusion and legitimation as well as modes of delegitimation and effacement”.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, Italian-Australian scholar Joseph Pugliese has used the concept of “shadow archive,” which he re-elaborates from visual culture theorist Alan Sekula, to discuss the subjugated knowledges and Arab past of Southern Italy and of his native Calabria in particular.<sup>11</sup> Reading bodies as living archives, Pugliese suggests, compels us to envision alternative epistemologies, epistemologies predicated “on relationality” that defy what he terms the “the techno-rationality” of official archives.<sup>12</sup> In such alternative epistemological spaces, even the most disenfranchised political subjects leave a trace.<sup>13</sup> The Archive of Migrant Memories (AMM) is the digital space that enables traces of resistance to manifest themselves in important ways, its goals and visions in line with similar decolonizing scholarly projects currently at work in contemporary Italy.

## 2. The Archive Between the Past and the Future

A work in progress, AMM is divided into four main sections (The Archive, Films, Schools, Projects) by juxtaposing images, sounds, and texts that allow viewers to experience the information on multiple levels. The website home page displays a powerful picture of Ethiopian-born filmmaker Dagmawi Yimer standing with his camera in front of the burned down building of the refugee detention center in Lampedusa. Two other persons accompany him. Although we cannot clearly see their faces, we conclude that they are part of Yimer’s film crew, as one of them is holding a notebook in his hands and the other one appears to be taking a picture or video with his cell phone. Having arrived in Lampedusa on a boat from Tripoli in the summer of 2006, Yimer spent some time on the island’s detention center. He would later attend the *Asinitas* language school in Rome and take classes in participatory videos. As a refugee, in 2010, Yimer would return to Lampedusa to meet the island’s inhabitants and shoot *Soltanto il mare* (*Nothing but the Sea*), which he co-directed with Giulio Cederna and Fabrizio Barraco.<sup>14</sup> The film, produced by AMM, is important in that it presents the migrant’s reverse gaze—from “speechless emissary,” to use Liisa Malkki’s characterization of refugees,<sup>15</sup> to active observer and subject of their own narrative. AMM’s website home page, along with the short narrative describing the multi-media project’s mission, which I have quoted above, effectively capture the new poetics of migration and resistance as they are currently articulated in contemporary Italy.

The “Archive” section of the website is divided into “Self-Representations,” “Interviews,” and “Research.”<sup>16</sup> As a “sharing” cultural practice, the Archive promotes the idea of a “living” memory along with the notion of memory preservation usually enacted in museum practices. In Triulzi’s terms, “AMM does not intend to have a dusty surface neither a character of impenetrability; on the contrary: we are convinced that it must reflect the open, gratuitous, and transparent character of the so-called *copyleft* applied to the most recent digital archives”.<sup>17</sup> At the same time, AMM remains sensitive to the

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Joseph Pugliese, “Embodied Archives”, *JASAL*, Special Issue: *Archive Madness*, 11.1 (2011), [www.openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/JASAL/article/view/9789/9678](http://www.openjournals.library.sydney.edu.au/index.php/JASAL/article/view/9789/9678), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Dagmawi Yimer, Giulio Cederna and Fabrizio Barraco, *Soltanto il mare* (*Nothing but the Sea*) 2011. Produced by Archivio Memorie Migranti, [www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/film/produzioni-amm/soltanto-il-mare/](http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/film/produzioni-amm/soltanto-il-mare/), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>15</sup> Liisa Malkki, “Speechless Emissaries: Refugees, Humanitarianism, and Dehistoricization.” *Cultural Anthropology*, 11.3 (1996), 377-404, 377.

<sup>16</sup> There is also a Focus section with special attention to Eritrea and Lampedusa (not available in the English version of the website). As not all the content of AMM has been translated into English, my analysis of some of the narratives in the Self-Representations section is based on the website’s Italian page, translated by the present author.

<sup>17</sup> Alessandro Triulzi, “Per un archivio delle memorie migranti”, *ZAPRUDER*, 28 (May-August 2012), 124, trans. by the present author.

importance of the material it has been collecting and to the necessity to safeguard and protect the privacy of some of its members. Explaining the motivations for calling the multi-media project an “archive,” a term that reminds us of closed, dusty buildings, Triulzi states that the project is, in fact, indebted to some of the international debates on postcolonial reconfiguration of the Archive, especially in the South African context.<sup>18</sup> In “Archive Fever,” a key essay included in the influential volume *Refiguring the Archive*, Derrida argues that remembering can never be separated from forgetting and that “this future-oriented structure of the archive is precisely what confronts us with a responsibility, an ethical and political responsibility.”<sup>19</sup> Such comments deeply resonate with Italy’s past, its present, and its future upon considering the collective amnesia about the country’s colonial past and the myth constructed around the image of *italiani brava gente* (Italians, decent people). The Archive, Triulzi explains, “intends to leave a trace”<sup>20</sup> in the consciousness of the Italian society not only of the migratory phenomenon that in the past few decades has brought thousands of individuals from the African continent to our shores, but also of those echoes of colonial superiority and racism that are now resurfacing in our contemporary policies, most notably in the denial to extend the civil and political rights of citizenry to children born of immigrant parents.<sup>21</sup> Reading the testimonies gathered in the Archive section of AMM inevitably lead viewers/readers to self-reflection and inspiration for activism. As witnesses to the migratory-related policies that bind Italy’s colonial past to its postcolonial present, it is our “ethical and political responsibility” to determine what kind of society we are going to build in the future.

### 3. Self Narrations, Multi-media Diaries, and Narrative Circles: Migrant Voices Speak

What exactly do migrant voices *tell us*, to those of us who care to listen?

In this section, I analyze some of the testimonies collected in AMM’s “Self-Representations” section: the *Cerchio narrativo rifugiati somali* (Somali Refugee Narrative Circle), *Parole per il cerchio* (Words for the Circle), and the first episode of the multi-media diary DiMMi, focusing on Africa. Both in oral and written forms, these testimonies offer power examples of migrants’ agency and restore dignity to their lives. The *telling* enables migrants to rearticulate their original journeys and reorder the migratory experience in an act of forceful contestation of state-demarcated borders and policies of inclusion/exclusion.<sup>22</sup> Stories, migrants’ stories, but also reflections, narratives, and shared experiences are AMM’s foundational principle. They create that “listening space” that in Triulzi’s view becomes “memory action,” or “a space in which narrated and shared memories become circular, reciprocal, narratable.”<sup>23</sup> Even though the stories presented in the AMM’s Archive do not contain details related to the process of the self-narrations as it was first developed at the *Asinitas* school,<sup>24</sup> by reading the

<sup>18</sup> Alessandro Triulzi, “Per un archivio delle memorie migranti”, in Marco Carsetti e Alessandro Triulzi, eds., *Come un uomo sulla terra* (Roma: Infinito edizioni, 2009), 18-19.

<sup>19</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Archive Fever”, in Carolyn Hamilton et al., eds., *Refiguring the Archive* (London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 2002), 46.

<sup>20</sup> Triulzi, “Per un archivio,” in Carsetti e Triulzi, eds., *Come un uomo sulla terra*, 18, trans. by the present author.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid. For a visual critical intervention on the citizenship debate in Italy, see the documentary *18: Ius soli: il diritto di essere italiani* (2012) by Afro-Italian filmmaker Fred Kuwornu.

<sup>22</sup> Other acts of self-representations in the Archive section include stories by Yimer and Gabriel Tsegai; backstage dialogues from the film C.A.R. A. Italia, directed by Yimer and produced by AMM; a letter written by the brother of one of the victims of the October 3, 2013 Lampedusa tragedy; a diary written by Hassan Ahmed, a Somali who returns to his native country after 27 years; and the story of Hawani Debbea, an Oromo woman who escaped from Ethiopia after the Derg seized power in 1974. Yimer’s “From Addis Ababa to Lampedusa: Story of a Journey” details his voyage from Ethiopia to Italy in spring-summer 2006.

<sup>23</sup> Triulzi, “Empowering,” 62.

<sup>24</sup> See Gianluca Gatta, “Il caffè e la scuola: la pratica dell’insegnamento dell’italiano di Asinitas”, chapter 5 in *Luoghi migranti fra clandestinità e spazi pubblici* (Cosenza: Pellegrini, 2012, Kindle Edition). Additional self-reflections on the experience of the



excerpts available in the Italian version of the website, readers can feel the empowering aspect of the storytelling experience and are humbled by the dignity of the telling.

In *Cerchio narrativo rifugiati somali* (Cn/1-9), we find the first format of collective self-narration conducted at the *Asinitas* school between January and June 2008. Among the participants were a group of Somali asylum seekers recently arrived in Italy, a cultural mediator, who occasionally served as interpreter, and some of the AMM members, including Professor Triulzi, Marco Carsetti, Dagmawi Yimer, and Sintayehu Eshete. Two Italian female writers of Somali origins, Igiaba Scego and Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, were invited to offer their personal reflections on the activities of the circle while also serving in the role of mediators during the self-narrations.<sup>25</sup> Reading through the words of the narrative circle, we *listen to* the heartfelt testimonies that migrants offer against the official narrative of irregularity or *clandestinità*. The circle recreates an atmosphere of familiarity and the protagonists are invited to tell their migratory experience by reflecting on specific themes: reasons for leaving, conditions in their home countries, reflections on the difference between *house* and *home*, friendship/alliances made along the journey, names or loss thereof, mother, and death/remembering. The stories that unfold articulate powerful narratives of lives lived fully and abruptly interrupted by the experience of migration. They function as a powerful counter-discourse to media reporting too often reduced to mere images of invasion and illegality.

Reflecting on the experience as a participant in the narrative circle,” Scego references her friend, African philosopher Filomeno Lopez, who locates the “treasures” of African cultures in the complex art of “Palabre,” “the living world of storytellers” who at the nocturnal village gatherings alternate dialogues and songs while sitting around a campfire.<sup>26</sup> She remembers her nomad mother, who told her stories about these narrative circles where the discourse went “from fairytales with cruel hyenas to high politics.”<sup>27</sup> Such form, Scego further explains, “connects us to ancestral moments of our own humanity,” a knowledge-building process at risk of getting lost in/through the migratory experience and assimilation in the country of arrival.<sup>28</sup> By participating in the narrative circle, Scego learns that “listening is the greatest gift that they [the students] are giving me/us. They give us stories that we are listening to. It’s not granted. It is a great lesson, what they are giving us: learning how to listen anew.”<sup>29</sup>

When asked to share memories about the journey, Dag (Yimer) tells the circle that he did not say goodbye to his father, as he would have not believed what he was about to do. He also tells us of putting three books in his suitcase including an English-Oromo dictionary and grammar. This is ironic, as he himself acknowledges the inutility of those texts traveling, as he would have, through Amharic countries.<sup>30</sup> His story reminds me of the moment when I found myself face to face with the abandoned relic boats in Lampedusa, contemplating an empty suitcase. *What exactly do migrants bring on such journeys?* I wondered. How can the intimate details of their life prior to migration enter the public realm so that those of us on the other side of the border may begin to look at the migratory phenomenon as a complex, human experience implicating a wide range of actors and motifs? Perhaps what I was really

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narrative circles can be found in the on-line Italian magazine *Lo straniero*, [www.migrazioniafrica.blogspot.com/2009/05/materiali-sul-cerchio-narrativo-dalla.html](http://www.migrazioniafrica.blogspot.com/2009/05/materiali-sul-cerchio-narrativo-dalla.html), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>25</sup> Cerchio narrativo rifugiati somali—Cn/1-9, [www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/cerchio-narrativo-rifugiati-somali-cn-1-9/](http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/cerchio-narrativo-rifugiati-somali-cn-1-9/), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Igiaba Scego, “Diario di bordo,” *Lo straniero* 107 (May 2009), trans. by the present author, [www.migrazioniafrica.blogspot.com/2009/05/diario-di-bordo-igiaba-scego-nel-2008.html](http://www.migrazioniafrica.blogspot.com/2009/05/diario-di-bordo-igiaba-scego-nel-2008.html), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Cerchio narrativo rifugiati somali CN/2, [www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/cerchio-narrativo-rifugiati-somali-cn-1-9/](http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/cerchio-narrativo-rifugiati-somali-cn-1-9/), accessed 10 November 2020.

looking for, on that day in Lampedusa, was a way to learn how “to listen,” to understand the stories told through the objects abandoned on the boats.<sup>31</sup>

In the sixth narrative circle (CN/6), Scego comments on the loss of names for immigrants arriving in Italy or for their children born there. In her case, Igiaba Ali Omar Scego became Igiaba Scego, which is “a little strange,” she notes.<sup>32</sup> Her comments prompt students to reflect on the origin and meaning of their own names in an empowering act of self-definition and identity reclamation. In the space of the narrative circle, they get rid of the label *migrant/ clandestine/irregular* and reclaim their humanity through the meaning of their full names. Equally empowering are the self-narrations around the term dying/remembering in the ninth narrative circle (CN/9). A. tells us that in Muslim cultures, the burial ceremony must take place immediately. This is usually followed by the *rus* (the remembrance ritual) a year later. When Sandro (Carsetti) asks if the *rus* can take place in the absence of a body, adding that in some cultures this is not possible, the conversation shifts to the deaths in Europe, and in the Mediterranean in particular, and how the very culture of death has changed in Africa as a result of the changing economy. Whereas death in the past triggered fear and sadness, these days people take it for granted, seeing it more like an opportunity to be fed at a banquet.<sup>33</sup> As I. states, “I don’t know if people continue to wish that somebody dies in order to eat. We don’t know what will happen”.<sup>34</sup> Such uncertainty about the future connects the life in the original homeland to the life in Italy and makes the audience reflect on the migrant’s condition of “double absence,” as articulated by sociologist Abdelmalek Sayad.<sup>35</sup>

Reading through AMM’s self-reflections, we witness the interweaving of migrants’ (*il*)legal status with aspects of their intimate lives. Their narratives become a window or rather a mirror through which Italian citizens may reflect on their own sense of identity as a nation with a troubled colonial past and with even more uncertain stance toward its postcolonial present and future. Within this context, the migrants’ collective memory becomes our memory, one that entails, as Triulzi notes, “a potential re-reading of the national culture in its past, present, and future dimensions”.<sup>36</sup>

In the current discourse surrounding citizen media, the reconfiguration of the concept of citizenship to describe various practices of belonging, identification, and struggles has emerged as one of the most critical topics. As argued in Mona Baker and Bolette B. Blaagaard’s study, the citizen in citizen media often transcends the concept of the nation-state confined by a passport or an identity card and focuses instead on individuals “stranded between nation-states” and often forced to live in “a landscape of liminality”.<sup>37</sup> Terms such as media citizenship and cultural citizenship are now widely used, often in tension with the concept of legal citizenship bounded to the sovereignty of states. The experience of the narrative circles archived in AMM presents readers/viewers with a timely opportunity to expand the idea of legal citizenship in contemporary Italy and reflect on the differentiated meanings that such a complex concept entails, including, perhaps, the idea of an “activist citizenship” in which the claim for

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<sup>31</sup> I discuss Lampedusa’s “boat cemeteries” and my research experience on the island in a chapter of my work in progress tentatively titled *Mediterranean ARTivim: Art, Activism, and Migration in Europe*. For a recently published critical study on media representations and art practices in the Mediterranean and specifically around the island of Lampedusa, see Federica Mazzara, *Reframing Migration: Lampedusa, Border Spectacle, and Aesthetics of Subversion* (New York: Peter Lang, 2019).

<sup>32</sup> Cerchio narrativo rifugiati somali CN/6 (Il nome), [www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/cerchio-narrativo-rifugiati-somali-cn-1-9/](http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/cerchio-narrativo-rifugiati-somali-cn-1-9/), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Cerchio narrative rifugiati somali CN/9 (Morire/ricordare), [www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/cerchio-narrativo-rifugiati-somali-cn-1-9/](http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/cerchio-narrativo-rifugiati-somali-cn-1-9/), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Sayad Abdelmalek, *The Suffering of the Immigrant* (Malden: Polity, 2004).

<sup>36</sup> Triulzi, “Per un archivio” (2012), 124, trans. by the present author.

<sup>37</sup> Mona Baker and Bolette B. Blaagaard, “Reconceptualizing Citizen Media: A Preliminary Charting of a Complex Domain”, in Mona Baker and Bolette B. Blaagaard, eds., *Citizen Media and Public Spaces: Diverse Expressions of Citizenship and Dissent* (London and New York: Routledge, 2016), 13.

rights and justice replaces the Arendian principle of “the right to have rights”.<sup>38</sup> According to Isin Engin, “Time and again, we see that subjects that are not citizens *act* as citizens. They constitute themselves as those with ‘the right to claim rights’”.<sup>39</sup> New sites of contestation, belonging, and identification are a tangible sign of the way in which citizenship is changing in the contemporary age of mobility and migration, calling into question the notion of citizenship as a fixed status of the body politics and opening its boundaries to a new vocabulary and new expressive modes.<sup>40</sup> In Italy, where citizenship is still defined by *ius sanguinis*, therefore by a notion of citizenship as “status”,<sup>41</sup> migrants’ role in subverting such definition is taking place in/through various “sites,” and all the more significant, perhaps, through various “actors”.<sup>42</sup> As Triulzi notes, “not only are migrants and asylum seekers in Italy today claiming rights and citizenship; they are asking *us* to give citizenship, and therefore dignity, to their story, a story of marginalization and emigration, of diaspora and exile, which is part of the daily living, which is the living history of the society we live in”.<sup>43</sup>

In the section *Parole per il cerchio* (Pcn/1-5) (“Words for the Circles”), Ali Farah reports on some of the keywords used in the narrative circles as a stimulus for the self-narrations, adding that in most cases the discussion begins with students recognizing the impossibility to fully translate such words into Italian. The case of *home* is quite illuminating as it offers further reflections on citizenship and belonging mentioned above. Students begin by thinking of the distinction, in English, between *house* and *home*, a distinction that recalls a similar differentiation, in Somali, between the words *guri* and *daar*, albeit with different nuances. Ali Farah states: “In English house and home are not the same thing: home is the intimacy, the abode, the place of the soul,” to which H. replies: “You can change your *house* . . . but it is difficult to move your *home*”.<sup>44</sup> In the stories of the narrative circle related to the same theme, the participants, thinking about what constitutes *home*, share memories of books, those repositories of knowledge, which hold the key to the future.<sup>45</sup> Forced by circumstance beyond their control to abandon their books (and their education) they rediscover, at the *Asinitas* school, the sense of empowerment that knowledge brings. We can understand why I., then, says that the school “feels almost like home”. “At the school, you are encouraged, motivated, literally: your soul is being built” he adds.<sup>46</sup> It’s a beautiful expression that of “building your soul,” as Ali Farah also notes. “Perhaps,” she states, “the soul is indeed our first home, the place where we need learn to co-habit with ourselves”.<sup>47</sup> Soul-building toward a more tolerant and less racist society is unquestionably what Italy needs to avoid that the “wars” described by migrants, when telling the reasons for leaving their country, reach us in our *houses* under the form of an open conflict between citizens and migrants, those who rightfully belong and those who should be

<sup>38</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt, 1968), 296.

<sup>39</sup> Isin Engin, “Citizenship in Flux: The Figure of the Activist Citizen,” *Subjectivity*, 29 (2009), 367-388, 371.

<sup>40</sup> A growing body of scholarship on migrant resistance movements has brought attention to the implications of these struggles for the notion of citizenship and borders. See among others Imogen Tyler and Katarzyna Marciniak, eds. *Protesting Citizenship: Migrant Activisms* (London & New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>41</sup> Engin, “Citizenship in Flux,” 369.

<sup>42</sup> Echoing Pierre Bourdieu, Engin, argues that “the ‘sites’ of citizenship are fields of contestations around which certain issues, interests, stakes, as well as themes, concepts and objects assemble.” Such terminology, he goes on to explain, moves us toward a notion of citizenship not so much defined by fixed categories (such as states, nations, cities, sexualities, etc.) but by “fluid and dynamic entities” whose boundaries are always shifting. Engin, “Citizenship in Flux,” 370.

<sup>43</sup> Triulzi, “Per un archivio” (2012), 120, trans. by the present author.

<sup>44</sup> Cristina Ali Farah, “Parole per il cerchio (Pcn/1-5)”, [www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/parole-per-il-cerchio-pcn-1-5/](http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/parole-per-il-cerchio-pcn-1-5/), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>45</sup> “Cerchio narrativo rifugiati somali- CN/4 (Casa, House/Home)”.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Farah, “Parole per il cerchio (Pcn/1-5)”.

excluded, deported, or left to die at sea. As Triulzi states, “the message of the circle is that we must somehow create a circle among ourselves to avoid being encircled from the outside”.<sup>48</sup>

In a country in which migrants are primarily confined and defined by their condition of *illegality*, their bodies spectacularized by border policies and a media apparatus that continues to spin the narrative of “threat” or “invasion,” the possibility of these subjects to become active participants of their narrative might appear unthinkable. Yet, cultural practices such as the ones enacted by the narratives of AMM are a hopeful sign of change in an Italy which, despite a provincial thinking that affirms otherwise, is already a transnational and multicultural reality. In *Luoghi migranti: fra clandestinità e spazi pubblici*, Gianluca Gatta takes us on a journey through the various “thirds places” or *luoghi terzi*, a term he borrows from sociologist Ray Oldenburg, where migrants are significantly contributing to public debates.<sup>49</sup> A café in Lampedusa, the Rome Termini railway station and its surroundings, the Asinitas language school in Rome, to mention just a few cases he discusses, are all *third places*, places in which migrants have the opportunity to meet and interrelate in a wide range of conversations and social interactions, re-creating their *clandestinità*, both in the juridical-administrative sense of the term and in the meaning that permeates the national imaginary, and powerfully “breaking” into the “public sphere”.<sup>50</sup> The *Archive of Migrant Memories* (AMM) constitutes a further example of migrants’ “breaking” into the public discourse surrounding migrations, their stories and memories providing the foundations of their newly found *homes*. By sharing the stories of their migratory experience, they affirm a presence beyond the mere materiality of their bodies. They “break” into the political realm and public imaginary as dignified *storied* subjects asking to be heard and treated as such.

The stories collected in *DiMMi in The Archive of Migrant Memories* (AMM) add the power of the spoken word to the migrant’s testimonies. The word *DiMMi*, the Italian acronymous for *diari multimediali migranti* (multimedial diaries by migrants), is also the Italian for “tell me,” a clear indication of the emphasis placed on the shared act of storytelling. As stated in the AMM description, “Self-representations, mostly in writing but with words that are often supplemented with images, signs and audiovisual material, their aim is to rearticulate the turning points and crossings of the authors’ lives and journeys and to share their experience with others”.<sup>51</sup> The migrants’ multimedial diaries are part of a project supported by the Tuscany region whose goal was to create a special section at the National Diary Archive, housed in the townhall of Pieve Santo Stefano, a little village in the Tuscan and Emilian Apennines.<sup>52</sup> Originating from the autobiographical tales of the 2017 edition of *DiMMi* competition, the migrant stories were published the following year in the volume *Parole oltre le frontiere* (*Words Beyond Borders*).<sup>53</sup> Thanks to the collaboration with Bologna Neu Radio (<https://www.neuradio.it/>) and NEU DRAMA, AMM offers the stories of Azzurra, Dominique Boa, Judith, and Ibrahim Khakeek Jalloh both in audio version and through a powerful 25-minute dramatic performance first directed by Andrea Biagiotti at the teatro comunale di Pieve Santo Stefano in 2019.<sup>54</sup>

In “Certi sogni non possono avverarsi mai” (“Some Dreams will never be able to come true”), we meet Azzurra, a nineteen-year-old Nigerian, *othered* by birth as a result of her albinism. Similar to twins

<sup>48</sup> Triulzi, “Il cerchio e la scuola”, *Lo straniero*, n. 107 (Maggio 2009), trans. by the present author, [www.migrazioniafrica.blogspot.com/2009/05/il-cerchio-e-la-scuola-alessandro.html](http://www.migrazioniafrica.blogspot.com/2009/05/il-cerchio-e-la-scuola-alessandro.html), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Gatta, *Luoghi Migranti*, 70, trans. by the present author.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid. First coined by the German philosopher Jurgen Habermas, the concept of public sphere, has been expanded beyond the bourgeois society of XVII-XIX century Europe to include other discursive genres and marginalized areas. For further discussion, see Paolo Jedlowski and Olimpia Affuso, eds., *La sfera pubblica: il concetto e i suoi luoghi* (Cosenza: Pellegrini, 2010).

<sup>51</sup> [www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/the-migrants-memories-archive/self-representations/?lang=en](http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/the-migrants-memories-archive/self-representations/?lang=en), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>52</sup> [www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/projects/dimmi-diari-multimediali-migranti/?lang=en](http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/projects/dimmi-diari-multimediali-migranti/?lang=en), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Alessandro Triulzi, Patrizia Di Luca, Natalia Cangi, eds., *Parole oltre le frontiere* (Milano: Terre di Mezzo, 2018).

<sup>54</sup> [www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/the-migrants-memories-archive/self-representations/?lang=en](http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/the-migrants-memories-archive/self-representations/?lang=en), accessed 10 November 2020.

in traditional Nigerian Ibo culture, albinos in Azzurra's community are believed to be affected by a terrible disease and killed. As a result, when Azzurra was 7 years old, her family had to move to another part of Nigeria. Azzurra considers herself a "survivor" of albinism, not a victim. Along with albinism, she would also develop vision problems, another handicap that would make her subject to bullying and hatred. Azzurra's story of growing up in Nigeria details the struggle between the heart and the mind. The heart causing her so much pain suggesting that she should give up; the mind telling her to continue to fight and be strong. Azzurra's albinism is an apt metaphor for the many forms of discrimination immigrants experience once they arrive in Italy. If in Nigeria, it was the condition of Azzurra's skin that set her apart from her peers, in her country of arrival, it will be her immigrant status to cause rejection and humiliation. Despite the many adversities, she remains defiant and determined to keep fighting. She states: "Some dreams will never be able to come true and for some of us the act of dreaming is a forbidden act. But even though the struggles and the challenges are always part of my life, I have never given up hope. I have never stopped fighting my battles in order to win them".<sup>55</sup> Whereas the title of her story suggests defeat and hopelessness, her voice powerfully affirms resistance and survival.

In "Sogni Spezzati" ("Broken Dreams"), Dominique Boa, born in the Ivory Coast, asks when African children will be finally free from slavery. Connecting past and present, his monologue addresses directly Africa, "the cradle of civilization . . . repository of natural resources with the potential to feed the entire world".<sup>56</sup> Who's responsible for such an unequal global economic system that forces so many African youth to migrate, Dominique asks? The histories of colonialism and neo-colonialism are woven in Dominique's dramatic monologue raising the questions that most Italian citizens prefer to ignore—the root causes of contemporary migrations out of Africa within the global economic landscape. He evokes the first generation of African leaders at independence--Sekou Touré, Patrice Lumumba, Nkwame Nkrumah, Thomas Sankara, Nelson Mandela and Muammar Mohammed Gaddafi, visionary leaders who dared to dream of an independent and self-determining pan-African continent. With their active agenda for social reforms, they would become threatening and dangerous figures to the ex colonial rulers determined to control Africa's destiny. Most of them would be assassinated by their former colonial masters or their agents. Yet, Dominique concludes, their blood was not shed in vain, their legacy still alive in the consciousness of many African youth.

In "Mi chiamo Judith" ("My Name is Judith"), Cameroon-born Judith tells us of her dream of becoming a stylist, a dream broken by the the prejudice of immigration. She tells us how immigration does not kill only the body but also the psyche. In Judith's case, immigration caused the end of her marriage leaving her to raise four children alone: a single immigrant mother living in a nation that refuses to recognize her children, born within the borders of its territory, as Italian citizens.

In "La testimonianza" ("The testimony"), Ibrahim born in Liberia during the last civil war, tells of his migration across the desert, of his detention in Libyan prisons and kidnapping by the armed group Asma Boys, and of his final journey across the sea to arrive in Italy. Ibrahim's story is dramatized in such a way that we hear him on the run, scared, his story ending with the sound of the crashing waves of the sea.

Like the other stories in AMM's Self Narrations, the diaries in *DiMMi* present the first-person accounts of men and women living real life experiences, re-signifying the word *migrant*, a word that, by the end of their telling, acquires a whole new meaning. In AMM's vision, after listening to the dramatization of Azzurra's, Dominique's, Judith's, and Ibrahim's stories, viewers will begin to see not only their struggles but also their hope; not only the tragedies of migration, but also the challenges and

<sup>55</sup> Parole oltre le frontiere. Storie. migranti #1 Africa--Diritti di memoria, trans. by the present author, [www.mixcloud.com/neu\\_radio/parole-oltre-le-frontiere-storie-migranti-1-africa-diritti-di-memoria/](http://www.mixcloud.com/neu_radio/parole-oltre-le-frontiere-storie-migranti-1-africa-diritti-di-memoria/), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>56</sup> [www.mixcloud.com/neu\\_radio/parole-oltre-le-frontiere-storie-migranti-1-africa-diritti-di-memoria/](http://www.mixcloud.com/neu_radio/parole-oltre-le-frontiere-storie-migranti-1-africa-diritti-di-memoria/), accessed 10 November 2020.



rewards of integration in a society that is already a multicultural reality. It is only through the interactive process of telling and listening, the DiMMi diaries suggest, that we can set the foundations for the development of a truly multicultural, interconnected society.

One of the key arguments in the current debates on citizen media is the ways in which unaffiliated individuals and collectives reclaim public and digital spaces performing citizenship acts aimed at a significant transformation of themselves and their communities. As conceptualized by Baker and Blaagaard,

The concept of citizen media encompasses the physical artefacts, digital content, practices, performative interventions, and discursive formation of affective sociality produced by unaffiliated *citizens* as they act in public spaces(s) to effect aesthetic or socio-political change or express personal desires and aspirations, without the involvement of a third party or benefactor. It also comprises the sets of values and agendas that influence and drive the practices and discourses through which individuals and collectivities position themselves within and in relation to society and participate in the creation of diverse publics.<sup>57</sup>

As unaffiliated individuals, the transnational network of volunteers, social workers, academics, and migrants that collaborate to AMM are a grassroots organization that do not follow the agendas of a corporate structure or political party. They operate instead from within the moral basis of what Karina Horsti terms “cosmopolitan solidarity”<sup>58</sup> across spatial and communal boundaries and across generations. Over the years AMM members have joined forces with various educational projects and organizations, such as the Mutti Prize for migrant cinema and ICSBA (Central Institute for Audiovisuals of the Ministry of Culture in Rome) in a spirit of “joint agency” and a “renewed effort at art advocacy and in accompanying and empowering transnational migrants arriving, crossing, or staying on in present-day Italy”.<sup>59</sup> They have promoted outreach activities in Italy’s primary and secondary schools with the goal of “build[ing] bridges for dialogue between different worlds”.<sup>60</sup> Overall, AMM’s network of initiatives (see the Projects section) has been enacting a political praxis aimed at forging a powerful counter-narrative to the dominant national discourse on migration, a discourse increasingly permeated by ignorance and racism. As Triulzi states,

Building the AMM along with the subjects and actors of migrations, along with the network of volunteers and operators on the ground is, in fact, both pedagogical praxis and welcoming; it is bearing witness and allowing to bear witness; it is restoring the voice to those who do not or do not believe they have a voice by allowing that same voice to be expressed and recognized; it is leaving a trace of *themselves* in a multicultural *us* that is painfully, in spite of everything, taking shape in our country.<sup>61</sup>

#### 4. The Archive as “Delinking” Methodology

Throughout the years, AMM has been sending a message of cross-cultural collaboration and connection across differences to challenge oppressive modes of thinking and empower migrant voices. AMM is the

<sup>57</sup> Baker and Blaagaard, “Reconceptualizing Citizen Media”, 16.

<sup>58</sup> Karina Horsti, “Temporality in Cosmopolitan Solidarity: Archival Activism and Participatory Documentary Film as Mediated Witnessing of Suffering at Europe’s Borders”, *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 22.2 (2019), 231-244, 232.

<sup>59</sup> Triulzi, “Empowering,” 69. For further information on the projects in which AMM has been involved, see the section “Progetti” on the website’s Italian version.

<sup>60</sup> Archive of Migrant Memories--Schools, <http://www.archiviomemoriemigranti.net/en/schools/>, accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Triulzi, “Per un archivio,” 19-20, emphasis and trans. by the present author.



digital “third place” conceptualized by Gatta that aims to produce a mode of consciousness similar to the decolonial performativity enacted by ARTivist cultural producers within the US/Mexico border. As a work of “digital ARTivism,” AMM “delinks,” in Walter Mignolo’s use of the term, Western and European theoretical walls by re-orienting us toward “other principles of knowledges and understanding and, consequently, other politics, other ethics.”<sup>62</sup> In a chapter included in *Learning Race and Ethnicity: Youth and Digital Media* (2008), Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre discuss the work of Chicana public artist Judith Baca with the youth in the Los Angeles area as “a movement that advances the expression of a mode of liberatory consciousnesses,”<sup>63</sup> the mestiza consciousness theorized by Gloria Anzaldúa. In 1996, Baca founded the César Chávez digital mural lab located in the Social and Public Art Resource Center (SPARC) in Venice, California, to help empower Chicana/o/x and Latina/o/x youth to reclaim their stories through art and digital production. According to Sandoval and Latorre, “Baca’s working relationship with these young people can be regarded as a collaboration between intellectual and artistic equals, at the same time as it can be defined as a mentor-mentee type of association.”<sup>64</sup> While operating in a significantly different cultural and geo-political context, the goals and aspirations of AMM share interesting parallels to Baca’s project of youth empowerment. Through participatory videos and digital storytelling, AMM aims at facilitating the development of migrants and refugees’ activist consciousness. Through the network of outside activities and various cultural projects, including the collaboration with local schools, AMM is committed to advance a pedagogy of multiculturalism and tolerance, leading toward cultivating the form of *pluri-versality* Mignolo has been passionately advocating for in his work.<sup>65</sup> Italy’s future, and that of the entire Europe, depend upon it.

AMM’s “delinking” orientation can be further contextualized within current academic debates in Italy aimed at remapping cartographies of knowledges while bridging disciplines and geopolitical diaspora spaces. A group of scholars from the University of Bari “Aldo Moro,” led by Paola Zaccaria, have been using ARTivist thinking and poetics to discuss Mediterranean and Transatlantic connections, what Zaccaria has termed a “TransMediterrAtlantic consciousness.”<sup>66</sup> Titled “Un/Walling the Mediterranean: Local, National and Trans-border Artist Practices for a Poetics and Politics of Hospitality and Mobility,” this interdisciplinary project aims at decolonizing knowledge and consciousness and delegitimizing contemporary border regimes still grounded on the quintessentially Western construction of the nation-state.<sup>67</sup> Inspired by the border critical thinking of Mignolo and other Latin American scholars of *modernidad/colonialidad* and filtered through the theoretical articulations of Chicano/a/x studies, the “un/wallers” work toward new epistemological cartographies in which “an other thinking”<sup>68</sup> is not only possible but utterly desirable.<sup>69</sup>

Almost two decades ago, Gloria Anzaldúa laid out the parameters of ARTivist poetics that are now influencing Trans-MediterrAtlantic ARTivism. Theorizing from the border, which she defined as a

<sup>62</sup> Mignolo, “Delinking,” 453.

<sup>63</sup> Chela Sandoval and Guisela Latorre, “Chicana/o Activism,” 82.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>65</sup> Mignolo, “On Pluriversity,” [www.convivialism.org/?p=199](http://www.convivialism.org/?p=199), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>66</sup> Paola Zaccaria, “Gli archivi incarnati del TransMediterrAtlantic,” *From the European South*, 1 (2016), 239, [www.europeansouth.postcolonialitalia.it](http://www.europeansouth.postcolonialitalia.it), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>67</sup> For major details on the project, see “s/murare il mediterraneo,” [www.smuraremediterraneo.wordpress.com/](http://www.smuraremediterraneo.wordpress.com/), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>68</sup> Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton U.P., 2000), 66.

<sup>69</sup> Crucial to the research team’s methodology, as a University located in the Southern region of Apulia, is the affirmation of a “Southern critical thinking” that acknowledges the historical roots of the Mediterranean extending back to Arab, Norman-Swedish, and Greek foundations, “delinking itself” from both the Renaissance and Risorgimental history. Zaccaria, “Gli archivi incarnati,” 243-45.

“Nepantla state” (Nepantla is the Náhuatl word referring to an “in-between state”),<sup>70</sup> Anzaldúa reclaimed her identity as a mestiza living in the US/Mexican borderlands. She writes: “The border is the locus of resistance, of rupture, implosion and explosion, and of putting together the fragments and creating a new assemblage. Border artists cambian el punto de referencia”.<sup>71</sup> The interaction between border poetics and ARTivism is tantamount to such epistemological ruptures. The artist from the border moves along multiple routes, including linguistic code switching, forging art that crosses genre, media, and discourses. It is an art that conveys a powerful political message. In the US/Mexican context, it challenges the imperialism of the United States, and, by affirming a mestizo/a culture, it resists assimilation by both the US and/or Mexico; in the Mediterranean, it challenges and subverts EU borderization policies and strongly rejects the racialized violence of national sovereignty. As stated by Zaccaria, “The un/wallers, just like the activists, know that whenever ‘cultured bodies’ cross borders across marine routes, they leave behind remains, imprints, even wisps of dreams”.<sup>72</sup> The migrants whose stories are collected in AMM are those “cultured bodies” who have crossed borders and navigated sea routes carrying along dreams and visions for a better future. Conjugating political-cultural analysis with creativity, AMM uses a diverse range of media to tell a counter narrative aimed at fracturing the geographies of power governing irregular migrations in the Mediterranean and opening “breaches in the walls/borders/nationalisms”<sup>73</sup> that offer hope for a future of hospitality and mobility in contemporary Italy and Europe at large.

If ARTivism “speaks through all kinds of media,” as Zaccaria reminds us,<sup>74</sup> ARTivists must be aware of their positionality and of the limitations of cyberspace in creating a truly egalitarian society.<sup>75</sup> Members of AMM are adamant in pointing out that the main goal of encouraging migrants to use digital storytelling is to create that “listening space” through which their stories can arrive in our home not as representation of ethnic alterity but as a reflection of our own identity in a country that is slowly and painfully coming to terms with its changed national character. As “social enablers”,<sup>76</sup> they acknowledge the distance (literal and figurative) separating their experience, as Italian citizens, from the experience of the migrants whom they are trying to empower. Yet, they see hope in the digital potentialities of the web and its ability to break down walls and barriers. On this point, Zaccaria notes:

Yes, there is an enormous material, geopolitical and experiential gulf between the privileged positions of activist researches, of activists’ performative politics, and the actual, perilous journeys of transnational crossers who continue to physically throw their bodies across state lines. But the ‘gesture’ itself, that of fracturing the geography of power and the border that demarcates it, is inscribing a geo-corpography of knowledge and of space that is bringing about a revolutionary strategy: a disruption and fracturing of the border paradigm, in both its historical and contemporary applications.<sup>77</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Gloria Anzaldúa, “Border Arte: *Nepantla, el lugar de la Frontera*”, in AnaLouise Keating, ed., *The Gloria Anzaldúa Reader* (Durham and London: Duke U.P., 2009), 180.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

<sup>72</sup> Paola Zaccaria, “A Breach in the Wall: Artist no-border Atlases of Mobility,” *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, 26.1 (2017), 37-53, 40.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>74</sup> Zaccaria, “A Breach in the Wall”, 47.

<sup>75</sup> Whether or not digital media actually achieve such egalitarian goals has been a matter of contested debates. In Baca’s case, Sandoval and Latorre write: “Conscious of digital media’s liberatory potential as well as its persisting exclusion, Judith Baca’s activism provides real-world and on-the-ground strategies for youth of color to enact empowerment through digital technology.” Sandoval and Latorre, “Chicano/a Activism”, 83.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 84.

<sup>77</sup> Zaccaria, “A Breach in the Wall,” 49-50.

The Archive of Migrant Memories is that “geo-corpography of knowledge”<sup>78</sup> and space connecting Africa to Europe via the Mediterranean by building alliances that defy borders, ethnicities, and all forms of political inclusion and exclusion.

## 5. Conclusion

The Archive of Migrant Memories offers powerful examples of how works of cultural production can result into productive ARTivist resistance practice. By adopting participatory methods, migrants’ storytelling generates a new, interactive mode of communication so that “migrant memories” become part of the collective heritage of an ever-changing Italian society. If death and tragedy are frequent images associated with the Mediterranean today, this multimedia project clearly testify that the Mediterranean is very much alive in generating ideas, building cross-cultural alliances and promoting forms of what Gianluca Solera terms “citizen activism”<sup>79</sup> that call for ruptures and re-arrangements of the current socio-economic and political order. Whereas the narrative of the so-call clash of civilizations has, at least since 9/11, focused on the difference between Christians and Muslims, it is imperative, Solera argues, that we recognize that “the source of the problem was not and is not a clash of identities, but the clash of opportunities, the clash between those who have them and those who have not.”<sup>80</sup> AMM’s ARTivists practices are crucial in re-orienting such a discourse. Through different media and from a wide spectrum of positionalities, AMM’s project promotes the vision of the Mediterranean as a “new frontier of transnational citizenship”<sup>81</sup> with open possibilities for shared development, cultural respect, and peaceful co-existence.

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<sup>78</sup> Zaccaria, *TransMediterrAtlantic*, 6.

<sup>79</sup> Gianluca Solera, *Citizen Activism and Mediterranean Identity: Beyond Eurocentrism* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017).

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 113.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.



## “inna Landan tiddey”. ‘De-colonising’ London in Linton Kwesi Johnson’s Dub Poetry

**Abstract:** One of the basic assumptions of Decolonialism is that the “coloniality of power” does not end with Colonialism and that the Modern capitalist World-system imposes a racial/ethnic classification of people around the world as a basis of its power structures. Linton Kwesi Johnson’s dub poetry stands as a space of resistance to these very structures; mixing Caribbean dialect and the rhythms of reggae it speaks to the heart of the British experience of inner-city (Brixton based) black youth. In such poems as ‘Inglan is a Bitch’ (1980), ‘Mekin Histri’ (1984) and ‘New Craas Massakah’ (1984) London is portrayed as a site of conflict between those who perform and those who try to resist discrimination. Johnson’s is an artistic/critical language overcoming theory (and prefixes), a poetry to be performed and not just read, which asks its readers/listeners to perform themselves the resistance required to preserve and assert their own difference.

Keywords: *Linton Kwesi Johnson, dub poetry, London, bass, decolonialism*

One of the basic assumptions of Decolonialism is that the “coloniality of power”<sup>1</sup> does not end with colonialism and that the capitalist world order implies a ‘racial’ classification of persons around the globe as a basis of its power structures. In this sense, if on the one side the effort of decolonial thinkers, such as Walter Dignolo, is to help people understand how “the colonial matrix of power (CMP) was constituted, managed, and transformed from its historical foundation in the sixteenth century to the present”, on the other, they help us grasp how the very idea of “decoloniality undoes, disobeys, and delinks from this matrix; constructing paths and praxis toward an otherwise of thinking, sensing, believing, doing, and living”<sup>2</sup>. In our view Linton Kwesi Johnson’s dub poetry stands as an embodiment of this “otherwise”, counterpointing modernity and its power structures. Johnson’s poetry stands as a space of resistance – as a critical “interruption”<sup>3</sup> – in relation to these very structures; mixing different forms of Jamaican and English creole with the rhythms of reggae and dub, it speaks to the heart of the British experience of inner-city (Brixton based) black youth. In his poems the metropolis is portrayed as a site of conflict between those who enact and those who try to resist<sup>4</sup> discrimination; in this perspective, the whole body of his work stands as an attempt to ‘de-colonise’<sup>5</sup> London and give voice to its black communities.

In a pioneering 1986 study Christian Habekost, defines dub poetry “a social, revolutionary art form where a radical voice shouts of the struggle of the oppressed all around the world”.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, Dub

<sup>1</sup> Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America”, *Nepantla: Views from South*, 1.3 (2000), 533-580.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Dignolo and Catherine Walsh, *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (London and Durham: Duke U.P., 2018), 4.

<sup>3</sup> Iain Chambers, *Postcolonial Interruptions: Unauthorised Modernities* (London and New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017).

<sup>4</sup> For Duncombe, cultural resistance provides a *free space* for developing ideas and practices: “Freed from the limits and constraints of the dominant culture, you can experiment with new ways of seeing and being and develop tools and resources for resistance. And as culture is usually something shared, it becomes a focal point around which to build a community”. Johnson’s poetry offers in this sense a new way of seeing and (listening to) the city which he will share with a whole community. Stephen Duncombe, “Introduction”, in Stephen Duncombe, ed., *The Cultural Resistance Reader* (London: Verso, 2002), 5-6.

<sup>5</sup> As we will see Johnson’s pioneering efforts and committed art project towards more recent cultural practices. A few years ago, a London-based network called *Decoloniality London* was created. As we read in their site the network is “committed to replacing the modern/colonial world system with justice; creating both physical and intellectual spaces to facilitate the production, collation, dissemination and application of decolonial thought and praxis” (<https://www.decolonialitylondon.org>, accessed 22 May 2020).

<sup>6</sup> Christian Habekost, *Dub Poetry: 19 Poets from England and Jamaica* (Neustadt: Publishers Michael Swinn, 1986), 17. See also Christian Habekost, *Verbal Riddim: The Politics and Aesthetics of African-Caribbean Dub Poetry* (Amsterdam and Atlanta: Rodopi, 1993).

poets seem to endorse the same function of griots, acting as memory banks and critical voices capable of awakening people’s consciousness in relation to such issues as racism and social injustice.

As London performer and musicologist David Toop observes, the griot is indeed:

a professional singer ... who combines the functions of living history book and newspaper with vocal and instrumental virtuosity ... although they are popularly known as praise singers, griots might combine appreciation of a rich employer with gossip and satire or turn their vocal expertise into an attack on the politically powerful or the financially stingy.<sup>7</sup>

One of dub poetry’s main features is its dialogical relationship with music and more specifically with reggae – which, developed out of ska, and rocksteady in mid-Sixties Jamaica. The term dub poetry refers, indeed, to the vital link between a specific form of oral poetry and one of reggae’s most fascinating early Seventies developments: dub. Toop himself, in *Ocean of Sound*, defines dub “a long echo delay, looping through time”.<sup>8</sup> Dub indeed implies the process of:

Stripping a vocal from its backing track and then manipulating the instrumental arrangement with techniques and effects; drop-out, extreme equalisation, long delay, short delay, space echo, reverb, flange, phase, noise gates, echo feedback, shotgun snare drums, rubber bass, zipping highs, cavernous lows. The effects are there for enhancement, but for a dubmaster they can displace, time shift the beat, heighten a mood, suspend a moment.<sup>9</sup>

Dub offers short different sonic perspectives (on) and multiple incarnations of popular reggae tunes; as Toop puts it “when you double, or dub, you replicate, reinvent, make one of many versions”<sup>10</sup> in a process which problematizes the very notion of ‘original-ity’ and authorship. In his monumental study on reggae, entitled *Bass Culture*, Bradley notes how dub also implies an “astonishing capacity for recycling. It involves taking either the recent or ancient past [...] and refashioning it to fit the contemporary requirements of the present”.<sup>11</sup> One of these requirements was providing poets and toasters such as I Roy, U Roy and Big Youth with backdrops, with sonic canvases (which could even coincide with a ‘simple’ drum and bass line) on which they could enunciate their verses during a sound system performance. These toasters – with their powerful lines and their peculiar ‘vocal grain’<sup>12</sup> – became highly influential artists for dub poets such as Oku Onuora, Michael Smith, and Linton Kwesi Johnson himself. If dub implies a process of refashioning/rewriting, which transforms the sonic perspective of a musical picture, then metropolitan dub poetry stands as an attempt to remix, to remap the postmodern city – in Johnson’s case, London – in terms of the voices of its black people, shaping what Gilroy calls “an alternative public sphere”.<sup>13</sup> What happens in Johnson’s poetry is basically a process of sonic inversion, in which marginal voices come in the foreground and mainstream voices and contexts are placed in the background.

LKJ was born in 1952 in Chapelton, a small rural town in Jamaica, where he spent his early childhood immersed in oral narratives. The poet remembers how in those early years he got most of his folk culture from his grandmother:

<sup>7</sup> David Toop, *The Rap Attack: African Jive to New York Hip Hop* (London: Pluto, 1984), 31-32. On dub poetry in relation to African orality and on the griot, see Pierpaolo Martino, “Transnational Metamorphoses of African Orality: L. K. Johnson’s Dub Poetry”, *Journal des Africanistes*, 80 (2010), 193-204.

<sup>8</sup> David Toop, *Ocean of Sound: Aether Talk, Ambient Sounds and Imaginary Worlds* (London: Serpent’s Tail, 1995), 115.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 116. On dub, see also David Maskowitz, *Caribbean Popular Music: An Encyclopedia of Reggae, Mento, Ska, Rocksteady and Dancehall* (Abingdon: Greenwood Press, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>11</sup> Lloyd Bradley, *Bass Culture: When Reggae Was King* (London: Penguin, 2001), 310.

<sup>12</sup> Roland Barthes, “The Grain of the Voice”, in Stephen Heath, ed., *Image, Music, Text* (London: Fontana, 1977), 179-189.

<sup>13</sup> Paul Gilroy, *There Ain’t No Black in the Union Jack*, Second edition (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), 304.



In the kind of environment we lived in there was no entertainment. No radio, no television, no books in the house. I didn't grow up with books. The only book we had in the house was the Bible. And so for entertainment, my grandmother, especially on a full moon night, would tell us stories, duppy stories, and she would make us guess riddles and that sort of thing and that was our entertainment.<sup>14</sup>

In 1963 Johnson moved to Britain to join his mother who had emigrated to London two years before, went to Tulse Hill Comprehensive in Lambeth and studied Sociology at Goldsmiths College. While he was still at school, he joined the Black Panthers, which were influenced by black resistance in America, and which made him aware of black people's subaltern condition in Britain; he helped to organize a poetry workshop within the movement and developed his work with Rasta Love, a group of poets and musicians, with whom Johnson would “improvise on different kinds of drums and [...] make up words to go along with the rhythms”.<sup>15</sup> These were also the years in which the poet embraced the “influences and energies of the streets – especially the social events, parties, sound systems, reggae records, toasters and DJs beloved of Brixton's young people”<sup>16</sup>.

Joining the (Brixton-based) Panthers Johnson had the chance to encounter the works of Eric Williams, C.L. R. James and most importantly W.E.B. DuBois, author of *The Souls of Black Folks*<sup>17</sup> which inspired him to start writing his own works and in particular his poetry. In these years LKJ – as the poet then dubbed himself – became also involved in the Caribbean Artists Movement (CAM) – which grew out of a small informal meeting of West Indians intellectuals in Edward Kamau Brathwaite's basement flat in London in 1966. The seminal debates that took place within the movement on the very shape and meaning of the “artistic production among members of the Caribbean exile community in Britain”<sup>18</sup> will involve key intellectuals such as Andrew Salkey, Stuart Hall and John La Rose. La Rose – who in 1966 founded New Beacon Books, the first Caribbean publishing house in England – became a key figure for LKJ, introducing him to the works of Aimé Césaire. As James notes, when as an organisation CAM ended in 1972, it not only “had made a major impact on the emergence of a Caribbean cultural identity, [but also] changed attitudes within the host community”.<sup>19</sup>

The driving spirit of CAM was undoubtedly Brathwaite, who like LKJ conducted a personal life suspended between different cultures and continents. Brathwaite who was born in 1930 in Barbados, won a scholarship that took him to England to read History at Cambridge's Pembroke College. In England Brathwaite felt “neglected and misunderstood”<sup>20</sup> writing poems that got rejected by the Cambridge literary magazines; but after graduation he moved to Ghana for a long job experience. Here he attained the “awareness and understanding of community, of cultural wholeness, of the place of the individual within the tribe, in society”.<sup>21</sup> When he went back to the Caribbean, he discovered how he had never really left Africa: “that it was still Africa; Africa in the Caribbean”;<sup>22</sup> in a way, LKJ developed a similar perception of the vital presence of Caribbean culture in his London community.

Johnson acknowledges the centrality of Brathwaite's work in breaking the poetic conventions, which were in part the heritage of British colonial education. LKJ notes how in his poetry Brathwaite incorporated “the rhythms of Caribbean speech [...] blues rhythms, calypso rhythms and so on”, in a sense what Johnson had been doing with “reggae poetry is to consolidate that revolution that was started

<sup>14</sup> Roxy Harris and Sarah White, *Changing Britannia: Life Experience with Britain* (London and Port of Spain: New Beacon, 1999), 52.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>16</sup> John McLeod, *Postcolonial London: Rewriting the Metropolis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 131.

<sup>17</sup> William Edward Burghart DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folks: Essays and Sketches* (London: Longmans, Green, 1965).

<sup>18</sup> Ashley Dawson, *Mongrel Nation: Diasporic Culture and the Making of Postcolonial Britain* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 73.

<sup>19</sup> Louis James, “The Caribbean Artist Movement”, in Bill Schwarz, ed., *West Indians Intellectuals in Britain* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 2010), 210.

<sup>20</sup> Mervyn Morris, “Overlapping Journeys: The Arrivants”, in Stuart Brown, ed., *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite* (Bridgend Wales: Seren, 1995), 117-31, 117.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 118.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

by Brathwaite in terms of the language and in terms of the aesthetics”.<sup>23</sup> Brathwaite, nourished indeed his pages not only of poetry from other poets but also, and most importantly, of timbres, melodies and rhythms coming from at least two continents, namely Africa and America, trying to convey the sense of the fascinating dialectic which connects Caribbean music and Afro-American expressions such as jazz and blues.

Brathwaite became in this sense a major source of inspiration for Johnson because he managed to subvert “the whole canon of English poetry. There were elements of jazz, you could hear the drums and the language of West Indian folk tales”.<sup>24</sup> In his 1984 study *History of the Voice* – in which he introduced his theory of a Caribbean “nation language”<sup>25</sup> – Brathwaite himself made reference to Johnson’s important work; besides, in 1981 the two had been the protagonists of a special event at London’s Institute for Contemporary Arts for the series ICA Talks, entitled *Linton Kwesi Johnson and Edward Brathwaite. Poet as Historical Witness*.<sup>26</sup> In this occasion, both alternated their observations on migration with powerful performances of their poems. Their *last meeting* also took place through poetry, when in February 2020 in order to pay a personal tribute to his ‘Maestro’ – who died on 4 February – LKJ recorded a dub rendition of Brathwaite’s poem “Negus” with producer Dennis Bowell.

In short, the poetic revolution started in the mid-seventies by Johnson himself introduced an inventiveness at the level of speech and rhythm which powerfully connects it with Brathwaite. It is important, however, to point to some differences: in *The Arrivants*<sup>27</sup> trilogy Brathwaite narrates the Caribbean experience, through the creation of powerful links with an African past, that is pointing to the presence of that past, even at the level of style, through a creative combination of English, Caribbean patois and African languages (and myths). Johnson’s exile to London had its proper soundtrack; Johnson’s migration took place in the same historical moment in which reggae and more specifically Bob Marley – who recorded in London his masterpiece *Exodus* – migrated to England<sup>28</sup> and conquered it. In this sense, if in Brathwaite’s poems one can listen to the rhythms of the African drum<sup>29</sup> in Johnson’s one is immediately immersed into the grain and the vibrations of reggae’s key musical voice, namely the bass.

Johnson celebrates the reggae bass in a poem entitled ‘Bass Culture’ in which musical sounds become social voices, powerful and disturbing voices which the poet contrasts with those of white repressive culture, that would like to silence them:

muzik of blood  
black reared  
pain reared  
heart geared

<sup>23</sup> Jason Gross, “Interview with Linton Kwesi Johnson”, *Perfect Sound Forever* (1/1997), [www.furious.com/perfect/lkj.html](http://www.furious.com/perfect/lkj.html), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>24</sup> Nicholas Wroe, “I Did My Own Thing” (Interview with Linton Kwesi Johnson), *The Guardian* (8 March 2008), [www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/08/featuresreviews.guardianreview11](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2008/mar/08/featuresreviews.guardianreview11), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>25</sup> “Nation language is the language which is influenced very strongly by the African model, the African aspect of our New World/Caribbean heritage. English it may be in terms of some of its lexical features. But in its contours, its rhythm and timbre, its sounds explosions, it is not English, even though the words, as you hear them, might be English to a greater or lesser degree”. Kamau Brathwaite, *History of the Voice* (London and Port of Spain: New Beacon, 1984), 13.

<sup>26</sup> The interview is accessible through the British Library Sound Archive, [www.sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/ICA-talks/024M-C0095X0002XX-0100V0](http://www.sounds.bl.uk/Arts-literature-and-performance/ICA-talks/024M-C0095X0002XX-0100V0), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>27</sup> Kamau Brathwaite, *The Arrivants: A New World Trilogy* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1973). *The Arrivants* includes the three collections of poems *Rights of Passage* (1967), *Masks* (1968) and *Islands* (1969); as Brown perfectly summarizes the theme of the trilogy, “is that of re-birth, re-discovery, reclamation of identity for West Indian people through an examination of their roots in the African past. In all his work [...] Brathwaite explores the ways in which an acceptance of those roots will begin to heal the negative self-images established by the experience of middle-passage, plantation and colonial life”. Stewart Brown, “Introduction”, in Stewart Brown, ed., *The Art of Kamau Brathwaite* (Bridgend Wales: Seren, 1995), 9-10.

<sup>28</sup> Marley’s song, “Punky Reggae Party”, tells the story of the emergence of a fecund dialogue involving two forms of music giving voice to the dispossessed, namely punk and reggae.

<sup>29</sup> See the poem “The Making of the Drum” included in *Masks*.

all tensed up  
in the bubble an the bounce  
an the leap an the weight-drop

it is the beat of the heart  
this pulsing of blood  
that is a bubblin bass  
a bad bad beat  
pushin gainst the wall  
whey bar black blood

an is a whole heappa  
passion a gather  
like a frightful form  
like a righteous harm  
giving off wild like is madness ...<sup>30</sup>

As MacPhee brilliantly observes here “the pumping bass is both the music that encodes the memories of oppression and resistance that sustain community, and the pulse of the heart that sustains each individual life and its social conditions of possibility”.<sup>31</sup> Hitchcock – who like MacPhee acknowledges the centrality, within Johnson’s work of the dialectic individual-community – notes, besides, how ‘Bass Culture’ also seems to literally stage what he refers to in terms of “(sub)cultural (sub)version of dub”, in this sense, the title puns on bass as being both the instrument of the beat and as being somehow obnoxious or repulsive:

it is a poem about dread, both as threat and as cultural identity (“dread people”); the violence it registers has everything to do with the tropical storm it imitates and the history of oppression it records and from which it learns; the voice is both musical as it follows the bass line, and noisy, as it makes a thunder crack (“SCATTA-MATTA-SHATTA-SHACK”) a slogan of defiance; the voice is specific about its own musical moment (“an di beat will shi!/as di culture altah/when oppression scatta”) which will pass according to a particular historical situation; in acknowledging the power of the voice (partially indicated in the dedication to Mr. Talk-Over, “Big Yout”) it makes no claims as to its originality but instead emphasizes a shared sense of “latent powa” as a bloodline of history, a “muzik of blood”; and the dread is a threat because it challenges the norm (“the false fold”) in its language, its riddim, and, of course, in its title.<sup>32</sup>

In is interesting to see how, more recently, Louisa Layne has focused on Johnson’s bass as a powerful ‘instrument’ to face the legacy of racism that structures, as Hitchcock suggests, England’s national selfhood:

[Johnson’s] poetry can, in many ways, be said to aspire towards to the strong visceral effects of bass. By mimicking the violent and powerful bodily effects of dub music through his use of diction, capitalization, and line breaks, he attempts to use poetry to shock, move, and shake the reader to a state of heightened political consciousness.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>30</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren: Selected Poems* (London: Penguin, 2002), 14.

<sup>31</sup> Graham MacPhee, *Postwar British Literature and Postcolonial Studies* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U.P., 2011), 136.

<sup>32</sup> Peter Hitchcock, “It Dread inna Ingran. Linton Kwesi Johnson, Dread and Dub Identity”, *Postmodern Culture*, 4.1 (September, 1993), [www.pomoculture.org/2013/09/25/it-dread-inna-ingran-linton-kwesi-johnson-dread-and-dub-identity/](http://www.pomoculture.org/2013/09/25/it-dread-inna-ingran-linton-kwesi-johnson-dread-and-dub-identity/), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>33</sup> Louisa Layne, “Reading ‘Bass Culture’: Linton Kwesi Johnson’s Politics of Rhythm and Bass”, *Postcolonial Writers Make Worlds* (2017), [www.writersmakeworlds.com/essay-johnson-bass-culture/](http://www.writersmakeworlds.com/essay-johnson-bass-culture/), accessed 10 November 2020.

In this sense, Layne offers a very fascinating analysis of another poem included in the *Bass Culture* album, namely ‘Reggae Sounds’ and in particular of its fifth stanza which provides an example of “Johnson’s interest in how bass and rhythm itself can reflect history and society in a way that makes it political”:<sup>34</sup>

Shock-black bubble-doun-beat bouncing  
rock-wise tumble-doun sound music;  
foot-drop, find drum blood story,  
bass history is a-moving  
is a-hurting black story.<sup>35</sup>

As Layne notes, “the first line repeats the labial plosive sound ‘b’ six times and creates an impression of the low tones of bass. The emphasis on the particularity of how bass sounds evolves into a claim about ‘a hurting black story’. Meanwhile, the juxtaposition of ‘drum’ and ‘blood story’, separated by just a comma, marks the close proximity of the musical and the political in the poem”.<sup>36</sup> And yet what seems absolutely striking is that, in the album version, the very last line of the stanza stages the bass both verbally and musically, indeed the (song’s) bass line and the verse de-fining the “bass hist’ry” become one, the two languages the verbal and the musical tell simultaneously the same story.

In an interview published on *Spin* magazine in 1985 Johnson affirmed: “I don’t write music but I begin with the bass. You know the bass line in reggae gives you the melody. It is not simply the rhythm instrument: it’s a melodic instrument. So when I’m writing my poems I always have a bass line going in the back of my head. It’s simply a matter of bringing out the line itself and working it”.<sup>37</sup> In this sense, in order to work on new ideas Johnson plays the bass himself while for concerts with the band and for his albums he relies on professional bass players (such as bassist and producer Dennis Bowell). Bass becomes, in short, the very soul of his verses and the protagonist of his concerts.

It is important to stress how in dub poetry performers may decide to perform with their ensembles providing the soundscape, the beats onto which the poet can enunciate their verses or they may choose to perform a cappella, that is in a solo voice performance. LKJ is familiar with both forms, even if in a recent conversation with Paul Gilroy at Oxford University<sup>38</sup> has confessed he prefers playing solo sets. What, however, seems absolutely striking about Johnson’s performances is the capacity of the artist to translate his voice into an instrument providing the beat and the melody of all reggae and dubs tunes; that is, the voice becomes the bass and vice versa.

Dub and reggae’s tendency to privilege the bass as possibly the most relevant instrument in the band has its political implications. Mainstream popular music tends, indeed, to confine the bass to its function of accompanying instrument turning it in a subaltern instrument to be perceived – along with the drums – ‘below’ the level of the singer’s voice. As Tagg<sup>39</sup> and Frith<sup>40</sup> have proved, songs present an inner social complexity. Pop songs are, generally, produced and organized according to straight hierarchical principles; in this sense, dub and reggae’s tendency to give prominence to the bass represent an attempt to subvert pop industry’s imperatives.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, 17.

<sup>36</sup> Louisa, Layne “Reading ‘Bass Culture’”.

<sup>37</sup> Roger Steffens, “The Fire This Time”, *Spin*, 4 (August 1985), 56.

<sup>38</sup> “Great Writers Inspire at Home: Linton Kwesi Johnson and Paul Gilroy”, [www.writersmakeworlds.com/video-linton-kwesi-johnson-paul-gilroy/](http://www.writersmakeworlds.com/video-linton-kwesi-johnson-paul-gilroy/), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>39</sup> Philip Tagg, “Music in Mass Media Studies: Reading Sounds for Example”, *Popular Music Research* 2, 103-115.

<sup>40</sup> Simon Frith, *Performing Rites* (Oxford and New York: Oxford U.P., 2002).

<sup>41</sup> In terms of sonic perspective, bass and drums are, especially in dub, in the foreground while the melody is in the background. On this aspect see Theo van Leeuwen, *Speech, Music, Sound* (London: Macmillan, 1999) who, using Tagg (1990) as a point of departure, discusses another genre of black music namely drum’n’bass which – privileging bass and drums [...] accompaniment over melody, reverses “the traditional pattern of European Music”, but also of traditional British/American Rock’n’roll where

In 2012 *The Wire* magazine dedicated a special issue to the bass, entitling it “Low End Theories”: in one of the articles included, Joe Muggs approaches the bass through a (critical) language which interestingly seems to be interrogated and almost deconstructed by its object of enquiry:

Bass leads us in. It’s the reverberating throb from the underground or loft; the first clue, the ravesignal number one – sensed not with the ears but with the entire body – that tells us we’re in the right place (or the wrong place). It’s the most powerful and direct signal of the antisocial and hyper-social, marking locations, crating zones of safety and danger, and we react to it with pre-modern excitement and apprehension as we first unconsciously sense it, then think we sense it, then pick up the rhythm.<sup>42</sup>

Then making reference to the experience of listening to bass in subcultural contexts (as London’s Dmz club or Jah Shaka’s hall in Stockwell) through powerful sound systems he adds:

When you are surrounded by ... sounds bigger than you, you are embraced in a safe space, but filled with a will to action. Learning through acclimatisation and repetition how to act in that space ... is learning to be a part of the subcultural machine. But although bass defines the subcultural space, and although you can be inside it or outside, the boundaries are ever sharp the space is always porous and never quite congruent with the other physical and cultural spaces with which it overlaps and coexists.<sup>43</sup>

LKJ’s is voice as bass, it implies vibration, immersion; it gives voice to an urban “bass culture” which cannot be confined that is imprisoned in limited, restrictive spaces. If the voice of the bass is a metropolitan one, which connects – in such genres as reggae, dub, dubstep and drum’n’bass – underground and marginal spaces and existences, then the grain of Johnson’s voice becomes metaphor and vehicle of a ‘language’ which speaks directly to the body, working as a sonic bridge connecting different urban bodies.

The fluid dimension of Johnson’s voice also defines his very language, which exceeds any standardised form, to stand as a key aspect of Johnson’s process of dubbing the city, creating a dissonant and yet vivid soundtrack to the lives of second-generation Caribbean immigrants.

In the 1975 collection of poems *Dread, Beat and Blood*, Johnson himself – quoted in the introduction written by CAM’s Andrew Sulky – confesses how at the core of his writing and performing there is “a tension between Jamaican Creole and Jamaican English and between those and English English” and explains how

All that, really is the consequence of having been brought up in a colonial society and then coming over here to live and go to school in England soon afterwards. The tension builds up. You can see it in the writing. You can hear it. And something else: my poems may look sort of flat on the page. Well, that is because they’re actually oral poems, as such. They were definitely written to be read aloud, in the community.<sup>44</sup>

Here Johnson not only insists on the dialogicity at the core of his urban language, but also points to the relevance of the modality in which his words are transcribed on the page. According to Morris, LKJ’s spelling represents “a guide to the Creole pronunciation”, indeed “in first encountering the Linton Johnson poems in *Inglan Is a Bitch* the reader is required to sound syllable by syllable the words which look unfamiliar. But Johnson’s approach is fairly consistent [...] if you are not a Creole speaker and you want to say the poem, his spelling helps you get the word-sounds right”.<sup>45</sup> In a way, Johnson not only wants the poem to look like a poem on the page, he wants it also to ‘sound’; when the reader is looking

“singers or solo instruments ... scream and shout to be heard across the din” (21-22). Interestingly punk, even though sharing reggae’s oppositional stance privileges high over bass frequencies.

<sup>42</sup> Joe Muggs, “Meditate on Bass Weight”, *The Wire*, 341 (July 2012), 33.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Dread Beat and Blood* (London: Bogle. L’Ouverture), 8.

<sup>45</sup> Mervyn Morris, “Printing the Performance”, in *Is English We Speaking and Other Essays* (Kingston: Ian Randle Publishers, 1999), 47.

at the ‘transcription’ on the book, she is in a sense invited to speak the word (and not to leave it in her head).

In 2002 Johnson was the first black poet and the second living poet<sup>46</sup> to see his poems published in Penguin Modern Classics under the title *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*. Johnson’s disruptive access into the publishing establishment was a “noisy”<sup>47</sup> one: people who have no familiarity with his performances are disturbed by a language which is ‘english’ without being English, and in which London is, as we will see, powerfully translated into “Landan”, an alternative, musical, even dissonant city which exceeds the conventional representations of the cultural establishment.

As Dick Hebdige writes in the introductory notes to his cult essay *Cut’n’Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music*:

African, Afro-American and Caribbean music is based on quite different principles from the European classical music. The collective voice is given precedence over the individual voice of the artist or he composer. Rhythm and percussion play a much more central role. In the end there is a link in thee non-European musics with public life, with speech, with the textures and the grain of the living human voice.<sup>48</sup>

In Johnson’s music the voice of the individual artist becomes, as we have seen, that of the collectivity; LKJ himself in a seminal article written for *Race and Class* in 1976 wrote:

The musician, singer and Dub-lyricist are mostly ‘sufferers’. Through music, song and poetry they give spiritual expression to their own inner beings, to their own experience. But in so doing they are also giving spiritual expression to the collective experience of sufferation that is shared by all sufferers.<sup>49</sup>

If a poet has learned, according to Voloshinov,<sup>50</sup> to give a meaning and an intonation to his enunciations, throughout his life, listening to the world around him, then Johnson’s poems represent “mobile homes”<sup>51</sup> in which we can hear the voices and echoes of both poet and people. In this sense, Johnson’s voice and poetry offer his community a shared language enunciated, as Hitchcock notes, through a shared cultural practice, through which the poet can comment on social injustice racial discrimination, asking for an active/committed reaction from the community, that is from people who have suffered racist attacks and injuries of different kinds. Indeed, in such poems as “Inglan Is a Bitch” (1980), “Mekin Histri” (1984) and “New Craas Massakah” (1984) London is portrayed as a site of conflict between those who perform and those who try to resist racism and discrimination.

“Inglan Is a Bitch” – which is significantly included in the 1980 *Bass Culture* album and which, according to Dhondy, can be considered “the first working-class hymn of the black community”<sup>52</sup> – records the experiences of an adult migrant who, after working in hotels and in the Underground, discovers that London is not the land of opportunity it seems:

wen mi jus come to Landan toun,  
mi use to work pan di andahgroun  
but workin pan di andahgroun  
yu dont get fi know your way aroun

<sup>46</sup> During his lifetime Johnson has received several awards and honors for his poetical work; in 2012 he was awarded the Golden PEN Award for a “Lifetime’s Distinguished Service to Literature”.

<sup>47</sup> Carolyn Cooper, *Noises in the Blood: Orality, Gender and the Vulgar Body of Jamaican Popular Culture* (London and Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

<sup>48</sup> Dick Hebdige, *Cut’n’Mix: Culture, Identity and Caribbean Music* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990), 11.

<sup>49</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, “Jamaican Rebel Music”, *Race and Class*, 17.4, 397-412, 399.

<sup>50</sup> Valentin Voloshinov, “Discourse in Life and Discourse in Poetry: Questions of Sociological Poetics”, in Ann Shukamn, ed., *Bakhtin School Papers* (Oxford: RPT Publications, 1983), 5-30.

<sup>51</sup> Iain Chambers, *Migrancy, Culture, Identity* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

<sup>52</sup> Farrukh Dhondy, “Introduction”, in Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Inglan Is a Bitch* (London: Race Today Publications, 1980), 5.



Inglan is a bitch  
 dere’s no escapin it  
 Inglan is a bitch  
 dere’s no runin whe fram it

mi get a likkle jab in a big otell  
 an awftah a while, mi woz doin quite well  
 dem staat mi awf as a dish-washah  
 but wen mi tek a stack, mi noh tun clack-watchah!

Inglan is a bitch  
 dere’s no escapin it  
 Inglan is a bitch  
 noh baddah try fi hide fram it

wen dem gi you di likkle wage packit  
 fus dem rab it wid dem big tax rackit  
 yu haffi struggle fi mek enz meet  
 an wen yu goh a yu bed yu jus cant sleep ...<sup>53</sup>

The major mode of the reggae track adds an ironic touch to a poem, which, as we anticipated, gives voice to the protagonist’s bitter disappointment. In this sense, “Inglan Is a Bitch” problematizes the mythical London prized by the generation to whom Johnson’s parents belonged, and which is rendered by the term “Landan toun”. The verbal narrative of “Inglan Is a Bitch” ends with the line “is whe wi a goh about it?”, which is given dramatic effect in the studio recording; interestingly, Johnson “recites the poem accompanied only by bass and drums while the words “bout it?” are made to echo. At this moment, the voice of Brixton’s youth seems to break into the migrant persona asking for a defiant and unbending response to the city’s discriminatory condition”.<sup>54</sup> Johnson’s “Wi” is really the “I” as “We”, singularity necessarily becoming plurality. As Dawson puts it, the poem shows how:

Black Britons faced discrimination at virtually every turn. Perhaps most importantly, the poem shows, they were usually the last to be hired and the first to be fired from jobs. Yet, despite these obstacles to belonging, “Inglan is a Bitch” concludes on a note of collective solidarity and optimism about the possibility for effecting change.<sup>55</sup>

In the following collection *Mekin Histri* (1984) the poet, seems to project us towards this very idea of change, answering to these very voices – those of Brixton youth – recording the names of those murdered by racists and celebrates those communities who courageously resisted state-endorsed violence; in this way, he remaps once again London in terms of the people, spaces and events of its black communities. The Brixton riots of 1981, which here Johnson celebrates, were really an historical occasion; the riots, as we will see, had indeed the effect of making the British state sit up and take note of the fact that black people had some power and when you have some power ‘they’ make concessions. As LKJ himself would often observe, if today there are some black people in the media and in the government, it is a direct consequence of these actions.

In this sense, Johnson’s 1980s poems stand as literary attempts to portray black British communities in the very process of *Making History*. In the ‘title-track’ the poet – telling his version of history – is indeed writing a different history of Britain, one ‘written’ by blacks themselves:

<sup>53</sup> Kwesi Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, 39.

<sup>54</sup> McLeod, *Postcolonial London*, 133.

<sup>55</sup> Ashley Dawson, *The Routledge Concise History of Twentieth Century English Literature* (London and New York: Routledge 2013), 160.

now tell mi someting  
mistah govahment man  
tell mi someting

how lang yu really feel  
yu coulda keep wi andah heel  
wen di trute done reveal  
bout how yu grab an steal  
bout how yu mek yu crooked deal  
mek yu crooked deal?

well down in Soutall  
where Peach did get fall  
di Asians dem faam-up a human wall  
gense di fashist an dem police sheil  
an dem show dat di Asians gat plenty zeal  
gat plenty zeal  
gat plenty zeal

It is noh mistri  
wi mekin histri  
it is noh mistri  
wi winnin victri ...<sup>56</sup>

Interestingly, here LKJ’s dub poetry connects different communities, Asians, Africans, Caribbeans, who become a single, powerful oppositional force; in an older poem entitled “It Dread inna Ingran” Johnson invites all blacks to stand firm in England and face reality, namely Thatcher’s racist politics. The poem stages – through an African call and response pattern, which powerfully emerges in the recorded version – a peaceful street protest in which the poet and his people speak in defence of George Lindo a (Bradford) Jamaican worker unjustly accused of armed robbery and then imprisoned:

dem frame-up George Lindo  
up in Bradford Toun  
but de Bradford Blacks  
dem a rally round ...

Maggi Tatcha on di go  
wid a racist show  
but a she haffi go  
kaw,  
rite now,  
African  
Asian  
West Indian  
an Black British  
stan firm inna Ingran  
inna disya time yah.  
far noh mattah wat dey say,  
come wat may,  
we are here to stay  
inna Ingran  
inna disya time yah...

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<sup>56</sup> Kwesi Johnson, *Mi Revalueshanary Fren*, 64.

George Lindo  
 him is a working man  
 George Lindo  
 im is a family man  
 George Lindo  
 him neva do no wrang [...]

George Lindo  
 dem haffi let him go  
 George Lindo  
 dem bettah free him now!<sup>57</sup>

In the darker, somehow disturbing poem entitled “New Craas Massakah” (1984) Johnson makes reference to the racially motivated arson attack at Y. Ruddock’s birthday party in which fourteen young blacks died. This tragic event represented a watershed in the history of black London, indeed it saw the emergence of the “New Cross massacre action committee”, which was a broad-based organization of activists from different areas of England who, on the second of March 1981, organized a memorable event, mobilizing nearly 20,000 people marching from New Cross to Hyde Park to protest the murders and the way the police<sup>58</sup> had been dealing with it. It also handed in a formal letter of protest to Number 10 Downing Street. As Johnson has recently noted:

It was a watershed moment because it made the British establishment take note of the fact that we had black power and we could mobilize that power and it was during that Thatcherite period that they began to speed on the process whereby a black middle class could emerge. Because before the 1980s black people had been one the periphery of British society, we were marginalized. We come into the Mother country and were treated like fucking third class citizens you know what I mean? We were marginalized. And by the end of Thatcherite period a black middle class began to emerge and by the end of the 20th century we were closer to the center than the periphery.<sup>59</sup>

In short, in the early Eighties, Johnson’s poetry became the expression of a politics of resistance whose results were, as he affirms here, the birth of a black middle-class, through a process, which consisted not in avoiding ‘the enemy’ – that is, racist Britain – but in facing and, in a way, inhabiting it, rechannelling its energies; transforming, in this way, the very physiognomy of British society. Yet, as we will see, in the Brexit-era this very transformation was to be confronted with a dramatic resurgence of conservatism.

In “New Craas Massakah” Johnson interestingly plays with the imagery of fire, the racists’ act causes the “*red wid wage*” of the whole of black Britain. The poet’s words ask, in short, for action, that is reaction to that very violence; indeed, as Sandhu observes “Johnson’s characters don’t button their lips or turn the other cheek when faced with hostility or aggression [...] Johnson’s solution is direct and forceful fighting fire with fire”.<sup>60</sup>

first di comin  
 an di goin  
 in an out af di pawty

<sup>57</sup> Linton Kwesi Johnson, *Dread, Beat and Blood* (Island, 1978), LP.

<sup>58</sup> Several LKJ’s poems focus on the conflict between members of the Black community and the police; “Sonny’s Lettah” (1979) deals the Sus(picion) Law allowing the police to arrest a disproportionate number of black youths.

<sup>59</sup> Joe Lowndes, “Linton Kwesi Johnson and Black British Struggle”, *Africa Is a Country* (26 May 2017), [www.africasacountry.com/2017/05/linton-kwesi-johnson-and-black-british-struggle](http://www.africasacountry.com/2017/05/linton-kwesi-johnson-and-black-british-struggle), accessed 10 November 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Sakdev Sandhu, *London Calling: How Black and Asian Writers Imagined a City* (London: Harper Perennial, 2003), 357.

di dubbin  
 an di rubbin  
 an di rackin to di riddim [...]

den di crash  
 an di bang  
 an di flames staat fi trang ...

aldow plenty people woz surprised  
 fi know seh dem kine a ting deh  
 couda happen to wi  
 inna disya Great Britn  
 inna Landan tiddey  
 and a few get frightn  
 and a few get subdue  
 almost evrybody ad to symphahtise  
 wid di love wans of di inju an di ded  
 far disya massakah mek wi come fi realise  
 it coul be mi  
 it could be yu  
 ar wan a fi wi pickney dem  
 who fell victim to di terah by nite ...

but stap  
 yu noh remembah  
 how di whole a black Britn did rack wid rage  
 how di whole a black Britn tun a fiery red  
 nat di callous red af di killah's eyes  
 but red wid rage like the flames af di fyah.<sup>61</sup>

Besides the powerful imagery connected with fire, one of the most effective visual and sonic images created by Johnson in the poem – namely, “inna Landan tiddey” – seems to problematize our very conception of the city in spatial, temporal and political terms. What is London today? We might answer that in 1984 as in (Brexit year) 2020 one should be capable of being at once inside and outside the city, to live the inside as a permeable, open space, through a critical perspective embracing the very notion of outsideness.

In a recent *Guardian* interview LKJ has noted how today not only in London but in Britain “we are living through a time of reaction; the rise of Conservative populism”; for the poet “racism is very much part of the cultural DNA of this country, and most probably has been so from imperial times”; in this sense, against the myth of black people’s reluctance to fit in with British society he remembers how “they wanted desperately to integrate. But they wouldn’t allow us”.<sup>62</sup> Of course, in the Brexit-era things will progressively get more complicated.

Johnson’s bass stories can, in this perspective, help us ‘de-colonising’ London not just as a physical but as a mental space. It’s a lower London, rethought and rewritten from below which composes a sort of bass history. As we have seen, dub is on open space which conceives no borders. Bass itself questions the very idea of borders and of polarity; bass, again, implies vibrating, with and ‘through’ others, it turns singularity, the single isolated voice into chorality, collectivity. The oppositional fight-back stance – which seems to be the only ‘solution’ suggested by Johnson in his poems – leaves room, in this sense,

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 54-55.

<sup>62</sup> Decca Aitkenhaed, “Linton Kewsi Johnson: ‘It Was a Myth that Immigrants Didn’t to Fit into British. They Wouldn’t Allow Us’”, *The Guardian* (27 April 2018), [www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/27/linton-kwesi-johnson-brixton-windrush-myth-immigrants-didnt-want-fit-british-society-we-werent-allowed](http://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/apr/27/linton-kwesi-johnson-brixton-windrush-myth-immigrants-didnt-want-fit-british-society-we-werent-allowed), accessed 10 November 2020.

to a more complex strategy in which the ‘answer’, is offered by Johnson’s language itself, that is by his poetry, conceived – in our hard, divisive times – as a threshold in which self and other, inside and outside can constantly redefine themselves.

In this sense, it is the very modality of the enunciation which becomes a critical ‘space’ in Johnson’s work. His dub poetry represents an artistic language, a critical language overcoming theory (and, in a sense, prefixes), a poetry addressing the body, to be performed and not just read, asking its readers/listeners to perform themselves, as musicians, the resistance required to preserve and critically assert their own difference.





## Decolonising Knowledge and Gender in the Pacific. Sia Figiel's Insider View of Samoan Women in *Freelove*

**Abstract:** The trivialization of Pacific Islanders' existence, exposed in travel books and fiction on the 'South Seas' from the late 18<sup>th</sup> century to the present, includes a view of Polynesian women as sexually saturated figures, in which exoticism and eroticism overlap. The theories of anthropologists, synthesized in the Mead-Freeman controversy on female sexuality in Samoa, reflect an instrumental use of indigenous cultures to demonstrate preconceptual hypotheses. Samoan writer Sia Figiel has been one of the first Pacific Islands women to offer an insider representation of Pacific femininity. Her works reflect the "decolonial turn" advocated by Maria Lugones to reject the hierarchical dichotomies and categorial logic of the Western episteme and affirm that "fractured locus" which allows multiple ontological presuppositions. Her latest novel *Freelove* (2016), analysed in this article, is centred on the coming of age of a Samoan girl in the 1980s and offers an unprecedented viewpoint on Samoan female sexuality, from an indigenous perspective.

Keywords: *Sia Figiel, Freelove, decolonial theory, gender, Pacific literature, Samoa*

Representations of Polynesian women as erotic projections of Western men's desires can be found in innumerable sources – travel writings, novels, visual texts, films – from the eighteenth century up to the present.<sup>1</sup> Among the very first testimonies are the visual and textual materials of Cook's three voyages,<sup>2</sup> which include many images of Polynesian women gazing alluringly at the viewer and exposing their breasts despite being draped, as explained by Margaret Jolly. The texts accompanying these illustrations often convey the writer's sense of sexual excitation, while he describes beautiful female bodies with perfect proportions, seductive eyes sparkling with fire, and behaviours marked by "a charming frankness".<sup>3</sup> A similar representation is also found in the so-called "South Seas idyll" or "romance", which became popular in 19<sup>th</sup>-century fiction, featuring an exotic kind of femininity sexually captivating and spontaneously offering itself to virile European and American colonists or voyagers: a "sexually saturated figure".<sup>4</sup> Herman Melville's *Typee: A Peep at Polynesian Life* (1846) and its sequel *Omoo: A Narrative of Adventures in the South Seas* (1847) are exemplars of this genre together with Pierre Loti's *Le Mariage de Loti* (1880). In early 20<sup>th</sup> century, a journalist and symbol of the liberated European woman of the 1890s, Beatrice Grimshaw, could not abstain from the same eroticisation of Polynesian women in her travel book *In the Strange South Seas* (1907), where photographs and texts "collude to create, yet again, an image of exotic Polynesian beauty".<sup>5</sup> The languidness of women is associated with the luxuriant nature of their islands. Both appear as lush, fertile, spontaneous and free. While Grimshaw does not completely disempower all women, as appears in her depiction of older Polynesian women of high rank, she tends however to romanticise these figures too, by evoking with

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<sup>1</sup> Margaret Jolly, "From Point Venus to Bali Ha'i: Eroticism and exoticism in Representations of the Pacific", in L. Manderson and M. Jolly, eds., *Sites of Desire, Economies of Pleasure: Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific* (Chicago and London: Chicago U.P., 1997), 99-122.

<sup>2</sup> James Cook's three voyages took place in the following periods: 1768-71, 1772-75 and 1776-80.

<sup>3</sup> Jolly, "From Point Venus to Bali Ha'i", 100-101. Jolly is quoting the words of George Forster, who travelled with his father, the German naturalist Johann Reinhold Forster, on Cook's second voyage.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 99 (both quotations).

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 106.

nostalgia their faded beauty and past romances.<sup>6</sup> This romantic view clashes with the undesirable heritage left by Western men in Polynesia: a multitude of illegitimate children of mixed ancestry, venereal diseases and the attendant infertility, exploitation of land and sea, and pollution of the environment. The trope of Polynesia as a sexual and natural paradise for Westerners is also later used by Hollywood in such films as *The Mutiny of the Bounty* (1962), directed by Lewis Milestone and featuring Marlon Brando. The cinematic adaptation of a Broadway musical of the 1950s, *South Pacific* (1958), directed by Joshua Logan, also develops a modernised but equally inauthentic view of a spectacular and generic Pacific.<sup>7</sup>

Margaret Jolly argues that there are “manifestations of connections between bodily revelation and imperial might in the Pacific”, positing “a close connection between eroticism, exoticism and political and military colonisation”.<sup>8</sup> Teresia Teaiwa also considers the relation between the two bikinis, the daring new swimsuit of 1946 and the atoll after which it was named (where the Americans dropped 25 nuclear bombs between 1946 and 1958), pointing out that:

the bikini bathing suit is testament to the recurring trivialization of Pacific Islanders’ experience and existence. By drawing the attention to a sexualised and supposedly depoliticised female body, the bikini distracts from the colonial and highly political origins of its name.<sup>9</sup>

Samoan women also became the object of anthropological research, epitomised by the ‘Mead-Freeman controversy’. American anthropologist Margaret Mead undertook fieldwork in American Samoa in the 1920s to demonstrate that socialization not genetic heredity was the primary determinant of human behaviour. As Michelle Keown summarises, in Mead’s bestselling *Coming of Age in Samoa* (1928), resulting from this experience, the anthropologist argued that:

the “general casualness” of Samoan society, where “love and hate, jealousy and revenge, sorrow and bereavement, are all matters of weeks” and where casual pre-marital sex is accepted and encouraged as a “natural pleasurable” activity (1943: 162), ensured that Samoan adolescents experienced none of the transitional difficulties which American teenagers endured as they emerged into adulthood.<sup>10</sup>

This ‘Orientalist’ vision of Pacific Islands life, which praises the casualness and freedom of Samoan sexuality as opposed to the complex and inhibitory sophistication of Western morality, conceals criticism of the ‘sexophobic’ American society of the 1920s rather than providing a real insight into Samoan customary practices towards sex and marriage. As Jolly underlines, in Polynesian cultures sexuality “was not so much ‘free’ as celebrated and sacralised”,<sup>11</sup> an aspect that was completely misread by Mead and manipulated by Western travellers and colonists. Mead’s study was also discredited in the 1980s by New Zealand anthropologist Derek Freeman, who rejected all the claims made by his American colleague, included the idea of Samoan society as a sexually permissive one. He presented an image of Samoans as competitive and aggressive, inclined to crime, assault and rape. In his view, children are subject to strict discipline and severe punishments. Adolescents are often affected by tension and psychological turbulence, which leads to a high rate of juvenile criminality. Pre-marital sex and

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 108.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>9</sup> Teresia Teaiwa, “bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans”, *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6.1 (Spring 1994), 87-109, 87.

<sup>10</sup> Michelle Keown, *Pacific Islands Writing* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2007), 49. The quotations are from: Margaret Mead, *Coming of Age in Samoa* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1943 [1928]).

<sup>11</sup> Jolly, “From Point Venus to Bali Ha’i”, 100.

adultery are also considered serious offences to morals and sanctioned.<sup>12</sup> Mead's and Freeman's theories are so excessive and distant from one another that they both arouse a certain degree of suspicion about their credibility.

A number of indigenous writers have critically engaged with Pacific anthropological discourse, among whom Samoan Albert Wendt and Sia Figiel. Wendt's novel *The Mango's Kiss* (2003), for example, features an American anthropologist, Freemeade, whose name condenses those of his two real colleagues. Ironically, while the Mead-Freeman controversy focused essentially on heterosexuality, in Wendt's story Freemeade is a homosexual who has affairs with local fa'afafine (trans-sexuals). Fa'afafine (also spelt fa'afafige) are regarded as a third gender in Samoan culture, since they embody both masculine and feminine gender traits.<sup>13</sup> They are also called the "two-spirited" and considered blessed children at birth. By introducing fa'afafine in his story Wendt overcomes Western binary gender roles, satirizes the Mead-Freeman controversy and provides an insider view of Samoan culture. In her first novel *Where We Once Belonged* (1996), Figiel, too, ridicules the Mead-Freeman controversy. The (in)famous anthropological debate is synthetized in the account of a schoolgirl and reduced to a petty argument on whether Samoan girls 'do' it a lot or not.<sup>14</sup> Figiel also offers a serious commentary on Mead's conclusions, depicting a contrasting image of Samoan adolescence as a traumatic 'coming of age', in which female chastity is highly valued and enforced through punishment and the threat of public humiliation.<sup>15</sup> In the novel, the missionaries' teachings appear as a major influence on Samoan views on sexuality, especially for women. However, Figiel celebrates "female friendship, teenage camaraderie and the folk humour associated with the Western Samoan oral tradition",<sup>16</sup> debunking Freeman's work as well.<sup>17</sup>

Sia Figiel's last novel *Freelove* (2016) continues on this subject, but while *Where We Once Belonged* still seems to act as a response to previous external views on Samoa – those of Western anthropologists, missionaries, and writers – in *Freelove* Figiel has found her own centre and an indigenous perspective, from which the narrative arises. *Freelove* deals with issues such as knowledge and education, sexuality and gender roles, not just in reaction to Western thinking or values but rather from an autochthonous viewpoint, based on indigenous criteria. The novel engages in a search for complexity grounded in a "non-modern", rather than "pre-modern" perspective, in Maria Lugones' words,<sup>18</sup> that is, a different way "of organising the social, the cosmological, the ecological, the economic and the spiritual", and also the sexual. As Simanu-Klutz writes in the introductory pages, the novel is "unconventional and unsettling" and "portrays the Samoan experience with honesty. A welcome shift that depicts young islanders coming into their own without the hangovers of postcoloniality."<sup>19</sup>

*Freelove* is a love story, but also a "story of intellectual and sexual awakening", as Figiel has commented in an interview.<sup>20</sup> The protagonist, Inosia Alofafua Afatasi, is a seventeen-and-a-half-year-old girl, living in a small village not too far from the Samoan capital, Apia, in 1985. Inosia, abbreviated as Sia, belongs to a traditional extended family including many siblings and relatives. She has grown up with a strict Christian indoctrination, as most Samoans, but is also a fan of transgressive Madonna as

<sup>12</sup> Fabio Dei, "Il problema della realtà etnografica. La controversia Mead-Freeman", *L'Uomo. Società, tradizione, sviluppo*, 4.2 (1991), 209-234, 214-15.

<sup>13</sup> Keown, *Pacific Islands Writing*, 49-50.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>15</sup> Michelle Keown, "'Gauguin Is Dead': Sia Figiel and the Representation of the Polynesian Female Body", *SPAN* 48/49 (April and October 1999), 91-107, 99.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 100-101.

<sup>17</sup> As to Samoan adolescents in Figiel's novels, see also Juniper Ellis, "Moving the Centre: An Interview with Sia Figiel", *World Literature Written in English*, 37.1-2 (1998), 69-79, 75-76.

<sup>18</sup> Maria Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism", *Hypatia*, 25.4 (Fall 2010), 742-759, 734.

<sup>19</sup> Fata Simanu-Klutz, "More Praise for Freelove from across Oceania", in Sia Figiel, *Freelove* (Honolulu: Lo'ih Press, 2016).

<sup>20</sup> Vilsoni Hereniko, "An Interview with Sia Figiel by Vilsoni Hereniko", in Sia Figiel, *Freelove*, 220-239, 220.

well as Whitney Houston, Chaka Khan, and Paul Young, whose songs she listens to together with Samoan latest hits. There are only three television sets in the whole village, but it is through TV series like *Dallas*, *Love Boat* and *Fantasy Land* that she can first see love enacted. Movies such as *Grease* and *The Return of the Dragon* also contribute to her imagery about love, which is therefore external and imported: it has been colonized by Western (especially American) mass media. Sia's favourite series is however *Star Trek*, with its emphasis on space as the last frontier and the missions of the starship Enterprise "to seek out new life and new civilisations, to boldly go where no man has gone before".<sup>21</sup> The *Star Trek* imagery becomes a further source of metaphors and parallels in the book for Sia's personal future voyage of discovery of new worlds and possibilities. Even so, from the very beginning, Sia notices that in the projected future of the American TV series there are no women in decision-making positions and imagines an indigenised alternative: "with Samoan *girls* and *women* as captains navigating beyond the Milky Way Galaxy as they might have done on canoes in ancient and future times".<sup>22</sup>

Most of the book is centred around one single special day at the end of the schoolyear, on which Sia accepts Mr Ioage<sup>23</sup> Viliamu's offer of a lift to Apia, where she is going to run an errand for her mother. Ioage is her science and maths teacher, twelve years her senior. In the course of this day her initiation into sex and the mystery of love will occur. Despite the student-teacher scandal it might entail and the fact that, being the pastor's son, Ioage is virtually a 'spiritual brother' to Sia, their physical, intellectual and spiritual union is deep. It invests all of their beings: bodies and emotions, mind and knowledge, sense of belonging and cultural background, needs of the present and expectations for the future. Sia is Ioage's most brilliant student, a girl with brains, the winner of all the maths competitions in the country. Ioage, on the other hand, is a challenging teacher and uncommon scholar, with an excellent curriculum of international studies and a sound preparation in both Western science and indigenous experiential knowledge. His teaching is set at the interface between two different ontological visions and epistemic systems, and this constitutes Sia's most precious inheritance from high school. Ioage encourages his students to trace parallels between the Western scientific paradigm and Samoan patrimony of observational science, covering different disciplines and fields such as astronomy, biology, natural science, ecology, nautical charts and techniques:

His radical approach to teaching excited us about condensation and precipitation. Metamorphosis and symbiosis, in ways that made us not only understand such processes or relationships or chain reactions, but to know [*sic*] that our people understood the same, in their own language, which made Science and Mathematics so much more personal and intimate not to mention alive.<sup>24</sup>

He teaches both in Samoan and English, because concepts need to be expressed in the language in which they were born. As Ellis suggests, this is "living science, embodied, felt, aware, self-observed science".<sup>25</sup> An example is when he insists on an ecological approach to the environment, whose main principles are inherent in Samoan mythological narrative:

After all, *he is Mr Viliamu*. The most magical thing to ever happen to me since I started high school. Someone who had sparked in me an interest in my surrounding, my environment and my ecosystem. Someone who had impressed on me the tremendous importance of respecting our lands, our seas, and our skies. Who reminded us daily that we, as Samoans and as human beings have a responsibility to nature. To respect it. To honor it and to take care of it. After all, he said, Nature sustains us.

<sup>21</sup> Sia Figiel, *Freelove*, 22.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> In the novel the name is also spelled Ioane.

<sup>24</sup> Figiel, *Freelove*, 69.

<sup>25</sup> Juniper Ellis, "Oceanian Knowing ad Decolonial Love in Sia Figiel's *Freelove*", in Matthew Hayward and Maebh Long, eds., *New Oceania: Modernisms and Modernities in the Pacific* (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2020), 210-226, 213.

Our Oceanic people have known this truth since *Fatu ma le Eleele*, the original man and woman who were made by *Taga'alomalagi*. And how they practiced and witnessed scientific concepts and processes but had their own way of calling them. Which is why he insisted on teaching us in both English and Samoan. So that the concepts and processes our ancestors practiced, that we now teach in a classroom as Science, are never to be forgotten.<sup>26</sup>

Ioage's method is "mind-blowing" for an intellectually gifted girl like Sia, who comes to realise that she has mostly been taught *palagi* (white) knowledge at school: "Outside Knowledge. Foreign knowledge. Which implies somehow that it is superior to our own ways of understanding this precious planet".<sup>27</sup> Ioage wants to recover the "collective memory"<sup>28</sup> that was silenced during colonization and arouse the students' interest starting from the world around them. Unlike the tyrannical English literature teacher, who refers to imagery unknown to students, Ioage's *modus operandi* "won their heart":<sup>29</sup>

How do you expect us to be excited about flowers that grew in a landscape none of us have ever been to?  
And why should such flowers be exalted?  
Glorified?  
And the authors of such poems glorified along with them?  
As if our local flowers and storytellers were unworthy of the same praise and attention.<sup>30</sup>

Nevertheless, few lines above, while Sia is thinking about Mr Viliamu, her mind "wandered (lonely as a cloud, that floats high o'er vales and hills)",<sup>31</sup> an ironic reference to Wordsworth's famous poem and the subliminal effects of the colonization of knowledge.

As Juniper Ellis claims, in *Freelove* Figiel "establishes the priority, in time, space and episteme, of decolonial conceptions of mathematics and science".<sup>32</sup> Through Ioage and Sia, Figiel puts into action the "epistemic disobedience" advocated by Walter Dignolo, which allows "delinking (epistemically and politically) from the web of imperial knowledge".<sup>33</sup> Ioage teaches Sia to recover indigenous repressed knowledge. He prepares her to understand and face the outer world without losing her own cultural identity. He encourages her to travel and study abroad without undervaluing an indigenous perspective but, rather, to investigate possible parallels between Western and ancestral knowledge. He also emphasises the importance to come back and bring the fruits of experience to Samoa, as he did before her. At the end of the novel Sia is admitted to a Californian university to study astronomy and physics, and "to further understand how our ancestors were able to calculate everything in time before compasses and other technology".<sup>34</sup> After obtaining her bachelor's degree with merit, she will be granted a full scholarship for graduate studies in her latest intellectual passion: plasma science and thermonuclear fusion, whereby energy is generated in the stars and sun. In this way, as Ellis suggests, she carries forth her own ancestral genealogy: her middle name – which means loving unconditionally and freely in Samoan – is also the name of her ancestor Alofafua, "who adored and had sex with the sun, leading to an 'almost celestial aura' still visible around the women of her line",<sup>35</sup> like Sia's mother and grandmother.

<sup>26</sup> Figiel, *Freelove*, 55-56.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 56, both quotations.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>32</sup> Ellis, "Oceanian Knowing and Decolonial Love in Sia Figiel's *Freelove*", 212.

<sup>33</sup> Walter D. Mignolo, "Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and De-Colonial Freedom", *Theory, Culture & Society*, 26 (7-8) 2009, 1-23, 20 (both quotations).

<sup>34</sup> Figiel, *Freelove*, 210.

<sup>35</sup> Ellis, "Oceanian Knowing and Decolonial Love in Sia Figiel's *Freelove*", 215. The inner quotation is from Figiel, *Freelove*, 49.

On the day of her sex initiation Sia is wearing a pair of skinny jeans and the *Madonna The Virgin Tour 1985* T-Shirt. The song line “Like a virgin touched for the very first time” resounds in her and the reader’s minds. But Sia and Ioage’s intercourse is not a Hollywood idealised love scene at all. Figiel describes, quite realistically, the physical and intellectual pleasure of the couple also recording their embarrassment, fears and surprise at what is an unexpected event for both. Following the rituality of tradition, Ioage practices a private version of the Samoan public deflowering ceremony, which was supposed to prepare the virgins to their first sexual act. But during penetration, when Sia laments pain, he immediately stops, which leads to other ways and games to make the intercourse natural and enjoyable for both, until penetration is possible. The scene, which occupies most of the book, takes place against a lush natural background, a wood near a lake where the couple will later take a swim. This does not make the scene a pastoral idyll, as in South Seas romances. Sia and Ioage appear as supportive and compatible beings, giving each other physical pleasure and listening to one another’s needs in the light of mutual respect. There is no sign of gender predominance or superiority but a sense of equality and complementariness.

The couple also engages in a voyage of discovery of the other and discusses a variety of topics, such as new scientific theories, customary practices and habits, religious and social preconceptions on sex, the view of love and marriage in Samoan tradition, and their future expectations. In this witty conversation between two brilliant minds, many Western stereotypes are dismantled. An example regards Polynesian women’s hair. According to the Western stereotype, Polynesian women wore their long black hair loose on their shoulders. Ioage has very long hair, too, arranged in a bun, unlike most of today’s Samoan men, who have short hair. He explains that in pre-contact times it was men (not women) who wore long hair:

Before the missionaries arrived, Samoan men wore their hair long, which as you know is now the opposite to what we have. Ironically, long hair on women is what the world thinks of when they wish to picture or imagine a Samoan girl nowadays. But in the old days, it was a women’s fashion or style to have *her* hair shaved with only a curl behind her left ear to signify her virginal taupou status.<sup>36</sup>

Another debunked myth is that sexual life in Samoa was free and casual. This idea is juxtaposed to the evidence of a society based on subsistence economy and strict clan alliances, where most marriages, especially for the upper classes, were and still are arranged:

Romantic love is a purely American Hollywood illusion. Our people believed in something more long lasting. Something that wasn’t just instant gratification ... Marriage is arranged for us with women we don’t even know, but we do it because it’s our duty.<sup>37</sup>

Nevertheless, the intensity of sexual pleasure and the search for reciprocal satisfaction is something inherent in Samoan traditional culture. Sexuality, as previously mentioned, was celebrated as sacred because it genealogically connected individuals to the gods. It was a vital force that contributed to creating harmony within a married couple and alliances between families through marriages, as Ioage explains to Sia:

There are even ancient cultures who devoted huge portions of their lives to nurturing the principles of pleasure and of how sexual gratification and most importantly, sexual satisfaction led ultimately to harmony in every other aspect of a person’s life. Our people also believed in this same principle and did not view sex

<sup>36</sup> Figiel, *Freelove*, 152. *Taupou* means ‘sacred’.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 89 and 94.



with disdain but rather with respect as a force of connecting and bringing families into alliances that would foster stronger bonds of peace and harmony so that those virtues are passed onto the next generation.<sup>38</sup>

Ellis reports that Figiel's view is based on twenty years of research into ancestral conceptions and practices of sexuality, in order "to surpass imported missionary understandings of gender and sexuality",<sup>39</sup> which however had an enormous impact on Samoan people. Sia herself is utterly dumbfounded after her carnal knowledge of Ioage, because in her extended family sex was stigmatised and considered a taboo subject. Her total naïveté about sex and ignorance of her own body, originating in the community's demonization of sexuality, demonstrate the pervasive influence of missionary teachings, which created, in Ellis's words "internal fear, social judgement, and severe restrictions around sexuality".<sup>40</sup> Sia later admits that her initial pain during their intercourse might have been a phantom of her mind:

I wondered to myself whether the pain I felt was real or whether I had imagined it. After all, we were told very early on, as soon as we were visited by the Moon [menstrual cycle] that sex was something bad and dirty and nasty and that no good girl would want to be engaged in it until she was properly married in a ceremony that involved not only our immediate family that we live with but our extended families who live in other villages and in other outer islands not to mention our own village and that only sluts and whores enjoyed it, not good girls.<sup>41</sup>

Through Ioage and Sia's wide-ranging dialogues on that special day, Figiel unveils the heavy burden of Christianity on Samoan culture and customary practices, proving Mead's hypothesis totally wrong. Freeman's opposite (and exaggerated) theory, on the contrary, totally missed the reasons of the firm discipline exercised by families on youngsters. Figiel's debunking of Mead's and Freeman's 'Orientalism' was analysed by Sadiya Abubakar in relation to *Where We Once Belonged*. Her arguments can however be enlarged to *Freelove* as well.<sup>42</sup> Abubakar maintains that both Mead and Freeman made overgeneralisations on Samoans' dispositions. Their respective researches were conducted only on one specific area and regarded a limited number of people: Mead was on Ta'u, one of the most rugged and remote islands in today's American Samoa; Freeman worked on Upolu, a bigger and much more populated island in Western Samoa, where the capital is. Their results were however extended to all Samoans, not taking into account geographical and social diversity, and homogenising the entire population. Social differences (lifestyles and mentality) are instead underlined by Figiel, especially those between Sia's villagers, with their restricted views, and the capital's residents, as appears in the Apia library episode in *Freelove*. In this scene a girl, annoyed for waiting too long to access the restroom occupied by Sia, addresses her with the nasty remark: "Bloody kuabacks. You never seen a mirror before or what?"<sup>43</sup> Also, the novel opens with Sia leaving her home with a *lavalava* wrapped around her hips,<sup>44</sup> which she takes off as soon as she is far from her relatives' gaze to replace it with a pair of skinny jeans: "Uncle Fa'avevesi, my mother's brother had banned us from wearing jeans. According to him, only girls and Women of the Night [prostitutes] wore them".<sup>45</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>39</sup> Ellis, "Oceanian Knowing and Decolonial Love in Sia Figiel's *Freelove*", 212.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Figiel, *Freelove*, 123-24.

<sup>42</sup> Sadiya Abubakar, "The Samoan Side: How Sia Figiel Debunks Orientalism in *Where We Once Belonged*", *International Journal of Asia Pacific Studies*, 14.2 (July 2018), 105-120.

<sup>43</sup> Figiel, *Freelove*, 59. *Kua* means 'back' in Samoan. *Kuabacks* is therefore derogatory for people coming from the backcountry and being backward.

<sup>44</sup> *Lavalava*: a single rectangular cloth worn as a skirt and used both by men and women.

<sup>45</sup> Figiel, *Freelove*, 28.

Beside the influence of missionary teachings, however, the strict view on sex and morals can be read in traditional terms as a form of social control. Figiel pinpoints the responsibility of the individual towards the *aiga* (extended family), which is a customary trait of Samoan clan-based society. The family is a protective and normative structure. Family's love is "an invisible blanket that made us feel safe and warm on a cold, cold night",<sup>46</sup> but needs to be honoured and respected. As an individual you don't only represent yourself but your family too. This is why adult family members keep a close watch over children and adolescents. In this context, a sinful behaviour of the individual brings shame to the whole family group. As Abubakar underlines:

Due to the closely-knit type of family system in Samoa, every member of the *aiga* (family or relatives) is responsible for correcting and shaping the affairs of the other, especially for the younger ones, the adolescent ... So, love is shown to a child not through freedom but through taming; ... Anything that brings pride to the family is, on the one hand, encouraged by the parents, and on the other hand, anything that causes shame is highly discouraged and shun away. Right from a tender age, fear of sinning and crime is instilled in children to drive them far away from doing it.<sup>47</sup>

This is the reason why Ioage and Sia are star-crossed lovers. Their relationship, which continues secretly when Sia is abroad through an intense epistolary exchange, seems hopeless because it would be considered incestuous by the community insofar as they are 'spiritual brother and sister': both families would be offended by such a union. Moreover, in America Sia discovers she is pregnant. It is not a surprise, because she refused to use contraception and insisted that she wanted a baby from Ioage, who was conversely reluctant. The reaction of her sister, who is giving her hospitality, is hostile. To defend the honour of the family she kicks Sia out of her house. Sia will decide to give her baby daughter for adoption to a childless couple of close friends, following a typical Polynesian customary practice.<sup>48</sup>

In *Freelove* Figiel puts into action a process of resistance to the coloniality of knowledge and gender. Coloniality is the inheritance that Western powers left in their ex-colonies: what remains in a post-colonial country after its political independence. It results from denying the possibility of existence of other worlds with different ontological presuppositions.<sup>49</sup> Coloniality is "constitutive of modernity"<sup>50</sup> and modernity recognises the non-modern only in a hierarchical relation, in which the non-modern is subordinated to the modern. However, as argued by Lugones, the modern system of power did not meet an empty world of empty minds but "it encountered complex cultural, political, economic, and religious beings: selves in complex relations to the cosmos, to other selves, to generation, to the earth, to living beings, to the inorganic".<sup>51</sup> Colonial difference has created a "fractured locus"<sup>52</sup> and it is within this fracture that the decolonial process should take place: in the articulation of oppressing/resisting forces.

*Freelove* is a novel that courageously carries out a decolonial liberatory process of knowledge and gender production. The recovery of repressed indigenous knowledge is an act of freedom from the "colonisation of memory and thus of people's senses of self".<sup>53</sup> However, the book also takes into account the complexity of a post-colonial country, encompassed within the hybrid framework left by

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 112.

<sup>47</sup> Abubakar, "The Samoan Side", 112-113.

<sup>48</sup> The practice of adoption, especially to close relatives, was quite widespread in traditional Polynesian families. It increased the flexibility of the kinship system by accruing additional parents to a child (and vice versa) rather than replacing the child's biological parents. Siblings and cousins frequently adopted one another's children, and grandparents sometimes adopted their own grandchildren. Children were thus able to move freely among all of these families and households. See [www.britannica.com/place/Polynesia/Kinship-and-social-hierarchy](http://www.britannica.com/place/Polynesia/Kinship-and-social-hierarchy), accessed 22 November 2020.

<sup>49</sup> Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism", 749.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Lugones, "Toward a Decolonial Feminism", 747.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 748.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 745.

colonialism, where opposing and resisting understandings sometimes compete, sometimes overlap. As a woman, Sia is at the intersection of all these contrasting forces, in terms of knowledge and gender, and all the more affected by them. The gender norming introduced by colonisation and Christianity imposes dichotomies rather than complementarity. A figure rooted in Samoan culture like the fa'afafine (the two-spirited) would be seen in a totally different way from a Western perspective, as Cha, Sia's friend and fa'afafine, explains:

How she detested for instance being told by outsiders that her mother dressed her as a girl when she was a child because there were no girls in her household to do family chores which is why she was what she was, a fa'afafine. And I could still remember her indignant voice of protest ... How preposterous! How utterly offensive to assume that I am what I am because of the chores I do and the clothes I was dressed in! Not only is this offensive to me personally but to our entire culture as Samoans, Sia!<sup>54</sup>

If, in this case, Samoan and Western perspectives diverge, they seem to overlap in the strict attitude towards sexuality. This is actually untrue, since the reasons behind such apparently similar approach are different. In her choice not to follow either customary or Christian rules, Sia challenges both of them. As Ellis effectively articulates: "By attending to the vastness of nativeness, Figiel challenges existing understandings internal and external to Samoa."<sup>55</sup> The character of Sia resists coloniality and remoulds nativeness in new forms.

The future destiny of the couple is not mentioned and is outside the pages of the book. Sia and Ioage's bond seems to have become increasingly profound and even grounded in myth. In the letters concluding the novel they call each other not by their Christian names but Day (for Sia) and Night (for Ioage), like the original ancestors of humankind, as if they were natural and complementary (not opposing or dichotomous) forces, interconnected and attracting each other, fleeing any coloniality of gender. They make "the whole greater than the gathered parts",<sup>56</sup> as in the ancient Chinese philosophy of Ying and Yang, and challenge old and new impositions. Their love seems so strong as to challenge any conventional rules or morality. Having done pre-marital sex and being pregnant, Sia could be considered a 'woman of the night', according to the strict views of the community. The pun made by Ioage reverses this view: indeed, she is the "Woman of the Night" (as he calls himself), namely, his partner.<sup>57</sup>

At the end of the novel the title *Freelove* sounds distant from what a reader could have imagined at first sight. It does not mean sexual liberation in the sense of the late-60s-Western feminism or the casual sexuality supposed by Mead's theory. Conversely, it alludes to the possibility of loving according to a vision – ontological, epistemological and cultural – different from the norm: being free to find one's way in love, a decolonised way rooted in non-Western assumptions but also able to confront the limits of customary laws.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>54</sup> Figiel, *Freelove*, 32-33.

<sup>55</sup> Ellis, "Oceanian Knowing and Decolonial Love in Sia Figiel's *Freelove*", 211.

<sup>56</sup> Figiel, *Freelove*, 128.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

<sup>58</sup> For an exploration of Figiel's speaking-out novels and her attack on both false Western representations and post-independence patriarchal structures of power, see also: Raylene Ramsay, "Indigenous Women Writers in the Pacific: Déwé Gorodé, Sia Figiel, Patricia Grace: Writing Violence as Counter Violence and the Role of Local Context", *Postcolonial Text*, 7.1 (2012), 1-18.



## The (De-)Coloniality of Gender in Irish Plays from the Beginning of the Twentieth Century to the Late Thirties

**Abstract:** The present paper focuses on Irish drama written and staged before and after independence from the perspective of the binary opposition of traditional gendered representations of colony and colonizer. From A. Gregory and W.B. Yeats's *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902), Synge's *Playboy of the Western World* (1907) and O'Casey's *Dublin Trilogy* (1923-26) to Teresa Deevy's *The King of Spain's Daughter* (1935) and *Katie Roche* (1936), and Seán Ó Faoláin's *She Had to Do Something* (1937), the paper underscores how these plays present women who only apparently contradict traditional and externally imposed strictures. In the light of Maria Lugones' theories on the coloniality of gender – as regards the intersection between gender, race and sexuality – the paper investigates the extent to which Irish playwrights challenged the traditional image of women and the role religion, politics and the examples of other European countries had in helping, or hindering, the construction of gendered representation.

Keywords: *Irish drama, Maria Lugones, decoloniality, gender representation*

With regard to the binary opposition of traditional gendered representations of colony and colonizer, Ireland is a particular case. In the collective imagination there is tendency to see Ireland, the former colony, as a female entity, and England, the colonizer, as male. The Irish race was seen as female, which in a hierarchically structured society signifies inferiority. Conversely, the Anglo-Saxon race was represented as dominant and male: “The Irish were depicted as genetically feminine and so, on the reigning patriarchal logic, congenitally attuned to obeying the will of masculine race like the Anglo-Saxons, provided it was robustly asserted”.<sup>1</sup> This concept harks back to Matthew Arnold's *On the Study of Celtic Literature* that saw Celtic peoples typically “as feminine, irrational, impractical and childlike”.<sup>2</sup> Yet when seen from a broader historical perspective, Richard Kearney suggests that within the cultural construct of subalternity, the depiction of Ireland as a woman might be philologically incorrect.<sup>3</sup> Kearney argues that Ireland started to be represented as a woman only *after* colonization by the English. As a woman, Ireland could not be a liberating figure in a patriarchal – or rather, male chauvinist – society, and even less so in Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century, where nations were setting up military figures as models of their increasingly war-driven power. For the majority of Irish women, over time this also led to the projection / introjection of an image of passive Irishness, “purely ornamental, a rhetorical element rather than an existing reality. National Sybil or fictional queen”.<sup>4</sup>

Unlike certain other colonial societies – e.g., in Africa or North America<sup>5</sup> – the hierarchical distinction between men and women had been part of Irish society before colonization by the English. Ireland was part of that European cultural system that most decolonial literature sees as equivalent to

<sup>1</sup> Joseph Valente, *The Myth of Manliness in Irish National Culture, 1880-1922* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2010), 12.

<sup>2</sup> David Cairns and Shaun Richard, “Reading a Riot: The ‘Reading Formation of Synge’s Abbey Audience’”, *Literature and History*, 12.2 (Autumn 1987), 222.

<sup>3</sup> Richard Kearney, *Myth and Motherland: A Field Day Pamphlet. Number 5* (Field Day Theatre Co, 1984).

<sup>4</sup> Wanda Balzano, “Irishness – Feminist and Post-Colonial”, in Iain Chambers and Lidia Curti, eds., *The Post-Colonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons* (London: Routledge, 1996), 93.

<sup>5</sup> As Maria Lugones points out citing intellectuals such as Oyéronké Oyewùmí and Paula Gunn Allen. See Maria Lugones, “Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System”, *Hypatia*, 22.1, *Writing against Heterosexism* (Winter 2007), 186-209.

the colonial power. Consequently, the adjective ‘European’ cannot in this specific case be read as synonymous with colonial when discussing the dynamics at play with regard to concepts of gender and coloniality. Notwithstanding this distinctive characteristic, Ireland deserves to be included in any theoretical debate on the coloniality of gender.

After independence, both the newborn Irish State and the Catholic Church, somewhat paradoxically, exploited this political metaphor by adapting and reinforcing such colonial gender representation – the living legacy of colonialism – in the form of social discrimination. As Maria Lugones states (albeit with reference to other colonial experiences),

the gender system [the colonizers] introduced [and exploited] was one thoroughly informed through the coloniality of power. Understanding the place of gender in precolonial societies is also essential to understanding the extent and importance of the gender system in disintegrating communal relations, egalitarian relations, ritual thinking, collective decision making and authority, and economies.<sup>6</sup>

Lugones also comments on the relational process through which gender becomes racialized and a marker of humanity for the colonizer. As for Ireland, this argument is perhaps valid if considered with reference to the aforementioned representation of the nation as a woman, particularly after colonization. Yet, in some ways, the status of Ireland was privileged when compared to that of other colonies. After all, the Irish could not be racialized in quite the same ways as other colonized peoples outside Europe. For Ireland the trinity of “race, religion, and class” is not completely appropriate, as the controversial concept of “race” must be at least substituted with that of “ethnicity” (where “race” is defined and determined by physical / phenotypic characteristics, whilst “ethnicity” refers to a person's culture, religion, language, nationality, or place of origin, etc.). As the Irish could not be racialized but “ethnicized”, consequently the position of Irish women was not comparable to that of other colonized – non-European – women.

However, the paradigm of subalternity is evidently applicable to Irish women. The so-called ‘invention’ of both concepts of race and gender helped construct the basis for hierarchic distinctions – and consequently, subalternity – within a nation:

Colonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers. Thus, it introduced many genders and gender itself as a colonial concept and mode of organization of relations of production, property relations, of cosmologies and ways of knowing.<sup>7</sup>

Though the position of Celtic women may have changed, particularly under the influence of Roman law and culture (an imperialistic and patriarchal society which saw the man as the absolute head of the household), in seventh-century Ireland a system of sophisticated laws called the Laws of the Fenechus – more popularly known as the Brehon Laws (definitively suppressed with the massive English colonial conquests of the sixteenth/seventeenth century) – held sway. In this dispensation, Irish women were given extensive rights, including the right to own land and to retain ownership after marriage:

Women were protected by law against sexual harassment; against discrimination; against rape; they had the right of divorce on equal terms from their husbands, with equitable separation laws, and could demand part of their husband's property in a divorce settlement; they had the right of inheritance of personal property and land and the right of sickness benefits when ill or hospitalized.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 201-202.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 186.

<sup>8</sup> Peter Tremayne, *Our Lady of Darkness (Sister Fidelma Mysteries Book 10): An Unputdownable Historical Mystery of High-stakes Suspense* (London: Hachette, 2010), 10.



Women's active role in ancient rural Ireland is well documented in the *Cáin Lánamna* (*The Law of Couples*), an Old Irish text dated c. 700. It is

arguably the most important source of information concerning women and the household economy in early Ireland. The text describes all the recognized marriages and unions, both legal and illegal, and provides information regarding the allocation of property in the event of a divorce. The text was heavily glossed over a period of several centuries and provides insights into changes in the Irish legal system.<sup>9</sup>

According to this document, it was normal for a farmer's wife to "be involved in the major tasks of the farm, such as ploughing (ar), reaping (búain), looking after livestock in enclosures (croud), and fattening pigs (méthad). Literary sources likewise assume that it is regular for a husband and his wife (perhaps with older children) to be working together in the fields".<sup>10</sup> However, as occurred elsewhere, Christian Ireland became essentially patriarchal. In such a context, the Christianization of the island deeply affected the construction of a subaltern representation of women.

Early literature provided a certain corrective: "although early Irish society was male-dominated, women had a prominent role in literature".<sup>11</sup> In ancient Irish mythology, male characters were heroes, while the central female characters were supernatural creatures or even goddesses and thus exerted an important influence. With the Christianization of the island these women were transposed into pseudo-historical queens, tribal ancestors, fairies and saints, but they often lost many of their original characteristics as they did not conform to the Christian image of what was feminine. The case of one of these mythological characters, the Morrigan, is emblematic, being a figure that became particularly problematic. The Morrigan's traditional attributes relating to war, sex and fertility had to change, given the influence of two distinct forces of domination, namely the religious and the political. The former was imbued by the new Christian idea of womanhood with its taboos involving sexual activity; the latter sprang from a colonial rule that had also introduced the metaphorical representation of the nation as a woman, purposely intended to exploit ethnicity and gender with regard to subalternity. As coloniality needed to neutralize all political and pro-independence allegories, the Morrigan had to be divested of her military and political power.<sup>12</sup>

The Irish national theatre – as a mirror to the nation<sup>13</sup> – reflected the image of Irish femininity inherited from this complex situation. Overall, Irish women – both in the colonial and in the post-colonial gendered society – were continually associated with a subaltern status. This holds true for the gendered representation of the nation as a woman in the years of W.B. Yeats and Augusta Gregory for the apparently modern depiction of gendered roles in J.M. Synge and Sean O'Casey, and even up to the 1930s with the 1937 Constitution relegating women to the roles of mother and wife. Paradoxically, therefore, this tendency became stronger after independence.

W.B. Yeats and Lady Gregory had originally exploited this gendered metaphor in their play *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (first performed in 1902). Here we have a traditional image of Ireland as a "poor old woman", who seeks refuge in the Gillane family cottage in County Mayo and asks for help in standing up to the "strangers in the house", namely, the colonial usurpers. In its discussion of the position of women in Irish society, the play is famously emblematic. First, and most obviously, because it concerns

<sup>9</sup> Charlene M. Eska, ed., *Cáin Lánamna: An Old Irish Tract on Marriage and Divorce Law* (Leiden & Boston: Brill, 2009).

<sup>10</sup> Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish Farming: A Study Based Mainly on the Law-Texts of the 7th and 8th Centuries AD* (Dublin: School of Celtic Studies, Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997), 449.

<sup>11</sup> Rosalind Clark, *The Great Queens: Irish Goddesses from the Morrigan to Cathleen ni Houlihan* (Colin Smythe: Gerrards Cross, 1991), 2.

<sup>12</sup> See Clark, *Great Queens*.

<sup>13</sup> Christopher Murray significantly entitles his book on the Irish theatre *Twentieth Century Irish Drama: Mirror up to Nation* (Manchester and New York: Manchester U.P., 1997).

the representation of the nation as a single female entity. Secondly, as Cathy Leeney<sup>14</sup> has remarked, because critics have generally paid so much attention to the main characters of the play – Cathleen and the male protagonists – whilst overlooking the other female characters and how they behave. The latter have a marginal position in society and generally passively accept its gendered hierarchical roles. This is a constant element that tends to diminish or ignore women as actors in the social and political life. A third aspect worth underlining is that for decades the play was mainly attributed to Yeats, relegating Lady Gregory to a minor role. The play was indeed a collaborative effort, and Lady Gregory contributed significantly to the dialogues. In the earliest surviving draft, Gregory added in the margins of the passages she had written: “All this mine alone”<sup>15</sup> – maybe a sign of her distress at the lack of personal recognition.<sup>16</sup> These apparently minor coincidences are useful examples of how Irish women – both as fictional characters and historical figures – have been constantly neglected, and (until all too recently) relegated to minor roles.

As outlined above, the cultural construct of the concepts of femininity and masculinity – seen as integral to a socio-historical process – has been exploited as a metaphor for political and social hegemonic roles: “Nation was to be male-identified and women’s rights were to bow to its priority”.<sup>17</sup> Yet, many Irish plays staged between 1902 and the outbreak of the Second World War ostensibly depicted a reversal of gender roles in which men were feminized and women masculinized, thus seemingly contradicting the European classification of women as inferior to men. While the aforementioned *Cathleen ni Houlihan* (1902) – as indeed Yeats’s earlier work *The Countess Kathleen* (1892) – provided two female representations of the cultural and political image of the nation respectively, as well as the social and political dominance of the Anglo-Irish Ascendancy, later works staged at the Abbey Theatre presented strong female characters naturalistically. Among them was Synge’s *Playboy of the Western World* (1907), where Pegeen Mike, the lively sharp-tongued female protagonist, is portrayed as a determined young woman. She knows how to deal both with her first fiancée, Shawn Keogh, who is much too God-fearing, and with Christy, hitherto much too shy and, as his father later says, inadequate. She also stands up to her father, forcing him to consent to her marriage to Christy, a criminal who has killed his own father. The same play features another strong character, who, unlike Pegeen, has the chance to stand “apart from her entire community, both geographically and morally”:<sup>18</sup> Widow Quinn. She is the typical Syngean outsider, being someone who has nothing to lose and free from social constraints (her husband and children are dead).

Some years later, Sean O’Casey also presented women as pivotal characters in his plays. In *The Shadow of a Gunman* (1923) Minnie Powell sacrifices her life to save the person she mistakenly considers an IRA gunman, while in *Juno and the Paycock* (1924) Juno Boyle – a hard-working responsible mother and wife – finally decides to leave her husband and to take care of her unmarried pregnant daughter. In *The Plough and the Stars* (1926), rather than one strong female character like Juno, O’Casey shows various women motivated by fierce determination.

And yet even in Synge and O’Casey, the way these central female characters are presented reveals that they are not quite comparable to men. It seems that the playwrights’ own ideals have little to do with equal rights or female emancipation. The female protagonists are, in fact, bound to a traditional image of their own sex. Both Pegeen Mike and Juno Boyle dream of a traditional family life, where, as

<sup>14</sup> Cathy Leeney, “Women and Irish Theatre Before 1960”, in Nicholas Grene and Chris Morash, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modern Irish Theatre* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2016), 267-285.

<sup>15</sup> Nicholas Grene, *The Politics of Irish Drama: Plays in Context from Boucicault to Friel* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1999), 64.

<sup>16</sup> See also Cathy Leeney, *Irish Women Playwrights, 1900-1939: Gender & Violence on Stage* (New York: Peter Lang, 2010).

<sup>17</sup> Leeney, “Women and Irish Theatre”, 274.

<sup>18</sup> Gail Finney, *Women in Modern Drama: Freud, Feminism, and European Theatre at the Turn of the Century* (Ithaca and London: Cornell U.P., 1991), 118-119.

wives and mothers, they would be protected by a strong male presence. Minnie Powell mistakenly believes that the soldiers will treat her better if she is caught simply because she is a woman (here O'Casey plays on the gendered cliché of violence and aggressiveness as male prerogatives: if violence is directed at men in war, it is normal; if directed at women it is immoral). In the end women are portrayed as mothers and wives forced to fulfill other roles by the tumultuous historical events. True, Synge challenges the social habits of bourgeois life and often depicts his (male and female) protagonists as outsiders and tramps. Yet, his focus on women, whether seen as strong-minded or rebellious, is often a means to an end: these heterodox anarchic female characters are a pretext to uncover and even explode bigoted and conformist views of Irish life. There is thus no real support for women's independence and emancipation. As O'Casey's *Dublin Trilogy* is set in crucial periods of recent Irish history, his political commitment is more marked, but his focus is on the failure of male authority, reflected in the militarization of society, rather than condemning gender inequality as such. As Fanon observes, "militarization and the centralization of authority in a country automatically entail a resurgence of the authority of the father",<sup>19</sup> an authority that O'Casey – like many other contemporary Irish writers – describes as discredited and inadequate.<sup>20</sup>

Thus, both Synge and O'Casey ignore the real crux of the matter, which is that women in Ireland were "doubly othered, or, in post-colonial terms, were 'other of the ex-other', as Ailbhe Smyth succinctly describes it".<sup>21</sup> Conversely, this issue was perfectly clear to the many women who directly fought for independence, and who perceived how their position was much more complex than that of their male comrades. As Constance Markievitz wrote, referring to her female friends and activists, "the first step on the road to freedom is to realize ourselves as Irishwomen – not only as Irish or merely as women, but as Irishwomen doubly enslaved, and with a double battle to fight".<sup>22</sup>

After independence, women were to condemn, and fight against, oppressive and (neo-)colonial power relations that reflected those that had underpinned the earlier colonial rule. Indeed, the strategy that was eventually adopted as part of the political agenda of the Irish Free State, and subsequently of the Republic of Ireland, was to recover what was felt to be a denied masculinity. The Irish male in a post-colonial context could not continue to be identified with feminine attributes: "agricultural rather than industrial, militarily defensive and neutral rather than imperial and proactive, the martyr rather than the victor".<sup>23</sup> Ireland had to reconstruct male dominance through the values of an Irishness that was seen as male, white, Catholic, settled and heterosexual, obviously to the detriment of non-conformity, otherness and what was female.

Many women had actively and effectively participated in the battles for independence in organizations such as *Cumann na mBan*, the *Irish Women Worker's Union* and the *Irish Citizen Army* (that eventually formed the *Cumann na dTeachtaire* – the *League of Women Delegates*). Yet things gradually stalled after independence. In an electoral address of 1943, Hanna Sheehy Skeffington – an independent candidate in the general election of that year – openly criticized how Irish women's expectations had been betrayed: "Under the 1916 Proclamation, Irishwomen were given equal citizenship, equal rights and equal opportunities. Subsequent constitutions have filched these or smothered them in mere 'empty formulae'".<sup>24</sup> Sadly, in 1937 "the new Irish constitution [gave] a 'special place' to the church and also to women. The special place for the church was at the head of Irish society.

<sup>19</sup> Franz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (London: Pluto Press, 2008), 109.

<sup>20</sup> See Fabio Luppi, *Fathers and Sons at the Abbey Theatre (1904-1938): A New Perspective on the Study of Irish Drama* (Boca Raton: BrownWalker Press, 2018).

<sup>21</sup> Ailbhe Smyth, "The Floozie in the Jacuzzi", *Irish Review*, 6 (1989), 10, cit. in Leeney, "Women and Irish Theatre", 274.

<sup>22</sup> Cit. in Leeney, "Women and Irish Theatre", 270.

<sup>23</sup> Brian Singleton, *Masculinities and the Contemporary Irish Theatre* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 8.

<sup>24</sup> Cit. in Bryan Fanning, *Histories of the Irish Future* (London & New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), 167.

The special place for women was in the home. This meant that women were expected to have a life outside the home only while waiting to get married”.<sup>25</sup> Moreover,

laws based on the premise that women’s rights were inferior to those of men survived in, and indeed even appeared on, the statute books. Despite the constitutional adulation of marriage and motherhood, the legislature preferred to keep women in the home by foul rather than fair means. Contraception was effectively illegal. The economically powerless homemaker was denied access to free legal aid. No financial aid was available as of right to unmarried mothers, deserted wives or prisoners’ wives, even when they were fulfilling their “duties” in the home. The battered wife and mother could not exclude her violent husband from the home (which was almost invariably his) except by resort to the most cumbersome procedures. If she fled the home, her husband had a right to damages from anyone who enticed her away, or who harboured her or committed adultery with her.<sup>26</sup>

Indeed, until the 1990s divorce was illegal, homosexuality criminalized, contraception strictly controlled, and abortion outlawed except when the life of the mother was under threat. The new State and the Catholic Church mimicked / mirrored the old colonial yoke and imposed the religious imperative of regulation of and control over sexual life to promote a supposed civilization / Christianization of society.

The consequences of the new Irish state adopting this binary trap of colonial and post-colonial trivializing dichotomies (to the detriment of the subaltern – a category which included women), disappointed expectations for female emancipation. The social recognition that had been fostered during the years preceding independence and reflected in plays that featured resolute and strong female characters, came to naught.<sup>27</sup> It is thus constructive to read Irish plays in the light of Maria Lugones’ theories on the coloniality of gender, that is, from the perspective of the intersection between gender, class, race and sexuality.<sup>28</sup> This counters the ‘normalizing idea’ that women can be defined in relation to men, i.e., by those who constitute the norm. And if men are the norm, then women are automatically relegated to the subaltern along with any other deviance from it.

Moreover, in the years preceding and during the Second World War, Ireland maintained its neutrality and followed isolationist, nationalist and conservative policies (a tendency already enacted by the Éamon De Valera government). The fact that these policies continued to be followed after the war years, contributed to the isolation of Irish women, and was an obstacle on the path towards gender equality and women’s emancipation. The distance between Ireland and the rest of Europe made it difficult for Irish society to experience those instances of progress and modernity that encouraged feminists abroad in their fight for emancipation. This somber scenario is evident if analyzed with regard to several plays staged in the 1930s, a significant moment in Irish history because it saw on the one hand the promulgation of the constitution of the Irish Republic and, on the other, the aforementioned adoption of isolationist policies. Teresa Deevy’s *The King of Spain’s Daughter* (1935) and *Katie Roche* (1936) and Seán O’Faolain’s *She Had to Do Something* (1937) partly challenge and go beyond the traditional representation of women. Yet, although seemingly at odds with the policies that saw women relegated solely to the domestic sphere, these plays underline the negative, subaltern prospects for Irish women in the new – albeit decolonized – state.

Sean Ó Faoláin’s *She Had to Do Something* is a reflection on small-town Irish life, and pokes fun at Catholic prudery with its depiction of a provincial priest, Canon Kane, who criticizes plans to have a

<sup>25</sup> Horgan Goretti, “Changing Women’s Lives in Ireland”, *The International Socialism Journal*, 91 (Summer 2001), <http://pubs.socialistreviewindex.org.uk/isj91/horgan.htm>, accessed 25 November 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Yvonne Scannell, “The Constitution and the Role of Women”, in Alan Hayes and Diane Urquhart, eds, *The Irish Women’s History Reader* (London: Routledge, 1988), 73.

<sup>27</sup> Such as J.M. Synge’s *In the Shadow of the Glen* (1903) and Padraic Colum’s *The Land* (1905).

<sup>28</sup> See Lugones, *Heterosexualism*.

Russian ballet troupe perform locally as he considers the whole thing immoral. At Mass he gives a sermon warning his parishioners not to attend what he calls an indecent exhibition, and in so doing risks ruining the fortunes of both the Russian dancers and Maxine Arnold – the wife of Patrick Arnold, a musician who is the parish organist – who first had the idea of inviting the Russian troupe to town. Mrs Arnold is thought to be a Protestant French woman – though at the end of the play her husband reveals that she is a Catholic – who wants to make provincial life livelier with artistic, though often naïve bizarre performances. The playwright is not always one-sided in his criticism. To this effect, we need only quote Mrs Arnold condemning the boredom of Irish provincial life: “I love Ireland. But nothing ever happens”. Her criticism of a static society, is, however, followed by a much more controversial and less acceptable opinion: “When the Black and Tans were here and we were all murdering one another, I was *so* contented. But since. I go on and on like that (indicating a level line with her hand)”.<sup>29</sup>

That the Canon exerts such a strong authority over the community – an authority that goes far beyond simple religious precepts touching on public, moral and social spheres – is clear when he speaks of, and to, Mrs Arnold: “Mrs Arnold is not yet within the body of the Catholic Church – but if she were [...] (To Madame) you should come to me and consult me before you start any more of your crazy schemes”.<sup>30</sup> His words reveal the power that priests held in their communities: they acted as censors in both private and public life. Mrs Arnold strongly opposes the priest, although like her antagonist, she is depicted in a way that occasionally verges on the caricature. Nonetheless, she fights to change Irish habits, siding with the needs of the new generation against the conservatism of the older one. She complains about the dullness of Irish life, wants to do away with the monotony of her town, and is also not afraid to contradict the priest both in matters of sexual behaviour and education. In this, Mrs Arnold unmasks the colonial mechanisms that govern everyday life through the control of the bodies and subjectivities (and sexuality) of the subaltern / colonized. She tells the priest:

You are like the curate from Tramore when I was down by the sea last summer, he asked my maid, ‘Have you a boy?’ She said, ‘I have no boy’. He said ‘I will [*sic*] kill you if I catch you with a boy’. *Sacré nom de pip*, how can she get married if she does not have a boy? Can she marry her grandmother?<sup>31</sup>

Mrs Arnold is worried about her daughter Julie’s chances in life, believing that one day her child will probably feel the urge to leave Ireland and find a better life somewhere else.<sup>32</sup> At the end of the play, the Canon scores a personal victory in preventing the performance of the Russian ballet and sending the dancers back to Dublin, but Mrs Arnold also has a fair measure of success by managing to guarantee an increase in salary for her husband, and offering this extra money to her daughter. Julie will go to France and Switzerland to lead a different life from the one she would have had in Ireland. The sad conclusion of the play is that the only way to live a decent life in an Ireland under such a strong Catholic yoke is through hypocrisy and deceit. At the end of *She Had to Do Something* Mrs Arnold scolds her daughter in front of the Canon, denouncing the fact that in Ireland “there are canons to the right of you and canons to the left of you. And you must sit in the middle while they volley and folly and whatever it is. It pleases them and it is good for you”.<sup>33</sup> She has to pretend that she agrees with the Canon even if she does not – and just as she has deceived the curate by pretending to be a Protestant, in the last lines of the play the audience finds out that she has also been pretending to be Mr Arnold’s wife. In fact, they never actually married – a further non-compliance with Catholic morality.

<sup>29</sup> Seán O’Faoláin, *She Had to Do Something* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1938), 36.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 43.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.



This non-compliance calls into question the image of the colonial bourgeois modern man who, as Lugones explains, was supposed to be heterosexual, Christian, a being of mind and reason, and an agent and example of civilization. However, bourgeois women were not just “understood as his complement,” but were considered as functional to the reproduction of the species and especially of a pure race “through [their] sexual purity, passivity, and being home-bound in the service of the white, European, bourgeois man”.<sup>34</sup> The Irish Catholic authority reproduced this distinction in the Irish Free State and in the Republic of Ireland, denying the role women had had in previous years.

In his play O’Faoláin implies that the only way that Mrs Arnold can resist Catholic hegemony is through an unsatisfactory, and even dishonest, compromise, while for her daughter the only chance to be free as a woman is to leave Ireland altogether. She also ironically mentions another option for her daughter. This implies, however, the same crucial factor of having to leave the community: “Why don’t you find me a young handsome fair-haired blue-eyed Catholic man with a private income and a knowledge of languages and an artistic temperament and a crease in his trousers and a nice smile, and I would not mind if he had not travelled – and my daughter would gladly marry him”.<sup>35</sup> It is useful to refer here to Maria Lugones’ observations about communities, with her appropriation (and subsequent denial) of Marilyn Friedman’s concepts of ‘community of place’ (in terms of family, neighbourhood, church and nation) and ‘community of choice’. According to Lugones, such a distinction does not really hold if we accept that within a community people are capable of dissent, and above all can reproduce forms of resistance. She rejects the idea of a passively received ‘community of place’ that does not include the chance to dissent and resist. Significantly in *She Had to Do Something*, possible room for manoeuvre is given to a woman, who, being a somewhat hybrid character, does not conform to the idea of the pure nation. What Ó Faoláin argues here is that such options (dissenting and resisting) are only available because the female protagonist pretends to be Protestant and is French, that is to say, outside the Irish Catholic community, or outside that specific ‘community of place’. Mrs Arnold’s special status allows her to escape the community’s strict rules; rules that apparently cannot be questioned from within, but only from outside the Irish context. This opposition between what can / cannot be done also sounds as a warning against growing Irish provincialism and political autarky. Mrs Arnold is thus worried (and rightly so) about her daughter’s chances of pursuing her own goals in life in such a ‘community of place’ where she would not enjoy the same chance of dissent as her mother. Irish society, and the state of autarky into which the country was slowly and consciously sinking, removes any prospect of rebellion. In the end, it is a colonial strategy that Mrs Arnold cannot effectively oppose: a strategy that nourishes an incapacity to fully read and respond to hegemonic understandings / colonial understandings / racist, gendered understandings. It prevents people from reacting and dissenting.

In the same period a talented woman playwright contributed significantly to productions at the Abbey Theatre until she was effectively silenced in 1937. In that year, Teresa Deevy’s *Wife to James Whelan* was turned down, and although her later play *Holiday House* (1939) was accepted by the Abbey, it was never staged. From then on, she wrote almost exclusively for the radio. In many ways, her personal experience is revelatory of the general condition to which women were destined in Irish society.

In Deevy’s hitherto neglected, but recently revived play *Katie Roche*,<sup>36</sup> the title character is a girl who has been abandoned by her father because she is illegitimate. The play depicts a stern mysterious character, a tramp called Reuben (“a man of the road”<sup>37</sup>), a sort of wise old man and Christian ascetic, who appears once in each act. In Act Two he admonishes Katie, and in the final act he even hits her with his stick in front of her husband (Stanislaus) to force her to adopt what he considers the behaviour that

<sup>34</sup> Maria Lugones, “Toward a Decolonial Feminism”, *Hypatia*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (Fall 2010), 743.

<sup>35</sup> O’Faoláin, *She Had to Do Something*, 41.

<sup>36</sup> Teresa Deevy, *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed, Volume One: Temporal Powers, Katie Roche, Wife to James Whelan*, edited by Jonathan Bank, John P. Harrington, and Christopher Morash (New York: Mint Theatre Company, 2011).

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.



befits a wife, i.e., a wife according to a restrictive Catholic idea of a woman's role in a conservative patriarchal society. Reuben is not just a tramp, however. Halfway through the second act he reveals his true identity: he is Katie's father.

Being so much older than his wife, Katie's husband himself can be seen more as a father than a husband. At the beginning of the play we are even told that Stanislaus was in love with Katie's mother and that he proposed to her but was refused.<sup>38</sup> When Katie reproaches her husband ("do you put a good value on me at all of late?"<sup>39</sup>) Stanislaus replies condescendingly, "I can't delay. There's a good child". Katie tries to react to this distortion of reality: "Child! I am your wife that you married", and in so doing she reveals not only the damage done by marriages between people of different generations, but also the patronizing attitude of a supposed figure of authority who does not respect his wife – evidently seen as a subaltern – and treats her like a child. Here it is evident that the colonial racialized subaltern, described and governed in terms of nature, childhood or even animality, has been appropriated to represent a post-colonial gendered subaltern. Katie, however, clearly challenges the structure of a patriarchal society and the subordinate position of women who have inherited the 'burden of difference' that was attributed to the colonized before independence.

The two male characters in the play represent a discredited and contradictory idea of manliness and fatherhood: Reuben is both a strict man and an irresponsible father, while Stanislaus is ill at ease in his role as husband, and thus unsure of how he should deal with his young wife. At the beginning of the play he does not criticize her behaviour as Reuben does, and it is Reuben who blames him for this. Reuben, a figure of paternal authority, encourages Stanislaus to act according to an idea of gender as a means of imposing traditional (modern/colonial) power, even suggesting that Stanislaus should beat his own wife: "I'd give her a flogging"<sup>40</sup>. When at the end of the play Stanislaus sees that his dominant position is questioned, he decides that they should leave town in order to start a new life abroad where his wife's attempts at independence will be silenced by isolation in an unfamiliar place. For Katie, this final decision means being subjected to a restrictive life with a man who has a bigoted idea of a woman's role. Unlike the perspectives that are open to Mrs Arnold's daughter in escaping from Ireland – and going abroad where her independence will not be considered deviant – Katie is taken away to break down her resistance to the traditional gendered customs and conventions imposed in the new Ireland.

A further dichotomy implicit in Maria Lugones' theory of the coloniality of gender can be applied to this story: if colonial rule means "only the civilized are men or women", then, semantically speaking, the consequence is that there are no colonized women. The colonized was characterized as having a sex, but not a gender. Katie Roche tries to adopt and exploit this syllogism when she quarrels with Reuben for the first time. She points out that she knows (or at least suspects) that her father was a member of the Protestant Ascendancy, a class that descended from the colonizers. She tells Reuben: "[D]idn't I know always I came from great people?"<sup>41</sup>. This is meant to frustrate Reuben's attempt to put into practice that coloniality of power inscribed in the gendered hierarchical roles imposed on the subaltern. As we see, however, Katie's attempt to reverse her subordinate position is unsuccessful. This situation also shows how the assumption that to be Irish is to be one of the colonised is not correct. As *Katie Roche* clearly demonstrates, people might identify themselves as Irish yet as belonging to the colonial side of the binary. This further complexity inscribed in the colonial and peculiar history of Ireland surely complicates the attempt to draw a clear univocal image of Irish society.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 63.

Similarly, Deevy's *The King of Spain's Daughter* (1935)<sup>42</sup> presents a female character as a rebel, a woman who feels she is being forced into restrictive roles. She longs for emancipation and independence and for a gender role that is different to the one her community prescribes. Her father – who beats her for the most insignificant reasons such as giving him his dinner late – is a typically violent man in a violent bigoted society.

The young protagonist, Annie Kinsella, flirts with various young men – and her behaviour is seen as scandalous in the community (“Philanderin’ with the kind of him – that’s all she’s fit for – or with any boy she can lay hold of”<sup>43</sup>) – and wants to have a different life from that of a wife or a factory worker. She fights against brutality and sexual repression. In the end, however, we see her about to marry a man who appears to be as violent as her own father. Describing the man who has proposed to her, Annie concludes the play thus: “I think he is a man that – supposin’ he was jealous – might cut your throat”.<sup>44</sup> With these words, she appears to believe that such a man is the archetype of the real male, thus abandoning her own ideas of an independent life and conforming to the precepts of society. The depiction of an apparently strong independent female protagonist opposed to her father’s brutal ways and an oppressive world fosters expectations that remain frustrated. Rather than a revolutionary uplifting finale, the play arrives at another disappointing conclusion. The fact that women are also depicted as bigoted and traditionalist, and indeed, see their independence as a threat to the *status quo*, reveals the process of cultural regression of the country: “Mrs Marks’s complicity with patriarchal chauvinism and the axiomatic truth of the role of dutiful Wife is symptomatic of the general acceptance by most Irish women of Catholic gender ideology and its institutionalization in the Constitution”.<sup>45</sup>

In Deevy’s plays, two women are presented as different models within society. Once again, this is a society in which violence is a constant attribute of patriarchy: both Reuben and Annie’s father beat their daughters. As we have seen, even Jim, Annie’s wooer, is described as a man who might “cut your throat”. It is evident that repressive violent dominance has shifted from what it was under colonial rule to a male authority that cannot tolerate a woman’s sexual freedom. The new post-colonial regime exploits the old colonial hierarchical and dichotomic structures that control lives, sexualities, bodies and spiritualities. This new rule is encapsulated in Jim’s reminder to Annie: “Jim: (in fury) If your father heard you were at the crossroad last night – or if the priest heard tell of it – dancin’ on the board, an’ restin’ in the ditch with you cheek agen mine and your body pressed to me”.<sup>46</sup>

If read metaphorically and politically, the two father figures in these plays – Peter Kinsella and Reuben Fitzsimon – symbolize the old colonial rule succinctly. On the other hand, both Jim and Stanislaus might have reversed the process of exploiting women (Ireland) and finally enact gender (and political) equality. Unfortunately, they conform to the old system and offer themselves up to pre-existing patriarchal hierarchies. They do not take their wife/lover’s part, but collude with the old structures of colonial power.<sup>47</sup>

In this gendered society, both Deevy and Ó Faoláin apparently overcome the distinction between Lugones’ opposition of ‘community of place’ vs. ‘community of choice’.<sup>48</sup> Yet Katie Roche’s husband

<sup>42</sup> Teresa Deevy, *Teresa Deevy Reclaimed, Volume Two: In Search of Valours, The King of Spain's Daughter, Holiday House, Dignity, Strange Birth, Light Falling, Within a Marble City, Going beyond Alma's Glory, In the Cellar of My Friend, One Look and What It Led to*, edited by Jonathan Bank, John P. Harrington and Christopher Morash (New York: Mint Theatre Company, 2017).

<sup>43</sup> Deevy, *King*, 18.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

<sup>45</sup> Paul Murphy, *Hegemony and Fantasy in Irish Drama 1899-1949* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 182.

<sup>46</sup> Deevy, *King*, 24.

<sup>47</sup> See what Lugones (“Heterosexualism and the Colonial”, 196-198) says about the case of the African people of the Yoruba and the inferiorization of women.

<sup>48</sup> See Maria Lugones, *Peregrinajes/Pilgrimages: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Press, 2003), 183-205.

realizes that he has to take his wife away from their own community, as city life implies the dangerous chance to dissent and consider emancipation as an option. Physical removal is the sole method of escaping any changes in society, now that the city can no longer guarantee a ‘pure’ identity. In *The King of Spain’s Daughter*, on the other hand, Annie does not seem to act upon her own diversity. It is as if the values expressed by her ‘community of place’ cannot be challenged, as if society does not really offer people who want to dissent the means to put their dissent into practice. The same thing happens in *She Had to Do Something*.

Lugones talks about communities and their relationship with liberatory change, and in this she refers to Shohat and Stam’s idea of polycentric multiculturalism – which to some extent recalls the ideas expressed by Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger in their seminal *The Invention of Tradition*. From this perspective, a tradition (and consequently a culture) is never pure; it is always made up of influences, exchanges and borrowings from different cultures. As these differences cannot easily come from the outside if a nation is intent on pursuing isolation, then, according to Lugones, a community of place might well find resistant practices within itself. The idea of identity, and of space / community as a static fixed concept (i.e., homogenous, and not, as is natural, ‘impure’) can be a dangerous one. Yet this was the idea that had also been expressed by the colonial power with its consequent binary oppositions, and which was unfortunately reproduced in the new Irish society even though diversity should have been the rule after centuries of subservience. It is no coincidence that Ó Faoláin saw that the chance to overcome obscurantist policies was to look to differences and influences from abroad (a French woman organizing a Russian ballet, perhaps), though the fact that this is accomplished in a fairly ludicrous way indicates that he was well aware of the fact that change and resistance (and also differences) might well be found within society itself.

If the construction of space constantly shifts under the opposing tensions of domination and resistance to domination, communities should not be seen as fragmented, which leads to binary oppositions, but as ‘impure’. For the women in these three plays, being part of a community means facing and resisting certain social roles imposed by a new authority that is now not the colonial power, but the new state and the Church. In the end, Ó Faoláin seems to suggest that the only chance for her protagonist to abandon a society that marginalizes differences is through deceit or emigration. In *Katie Roche* Deevy describes with disillusionment a world in which the imposition of male authority cannot be questioned and where an ideal impure society that the city can represent is not at hand. With *The King of Spain’s Daughter*, the apparent nonconformist and resistant behaviour of the female protagonist is seen as untenable within her community. Circumstances are against her, and Annie might well wonder how she can escape her fate: “where would I ever find a way out of here?”<sup>49</sup> Her idea of emigrating to London (“I dunno could I ever get into service in a place in London?”<sup>50</sup>) in order to escape her subordination to men remains a mere hypothesis without any realistic resolution.

Unlike Yeats and Gregory who at least proposed a positive image of women – albeit seen more as rhetorical than real figures – and Synge’s attempt to put forward an improbable idealistic alternative to the traditional societal structure, these three later plays and their deflating finales are a more realistic depiction of the Irish political and social condition in the years following independence, civil war and partition. Taken together, they condemn the unsatisfactory response of the new republic in fulfilling aspirations for a new liberal society where women might finally be rid of the colonial/modern gender system.

<sup>49</sup> Deevy, *King*, 24.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem.



## A Decolonizing Discourse of Migration on the Web

**Abstract:** The discourse regarding migration, taken from the United Nations Migration Agency's online platform "I am a migrant" (IAAM) can be considered a major resource to support the promotion of human rights. It emerges as a site of cosmo-political encounters, connectivity, and conviviality, where subjectivities are recognized, respected and re-humanized. Specifically, this study investigates the discursive and multimodal narratives of migrants in English, and the photos of themselves provided to IAAM, considering whether this type of discourse may be viewed as an act of the decolonial linguistic knocking-down of the walls of inclusion/exclusion that regulate and govern today's migration. Within this discourse, it also detects an attitude of existence of / resistance against the hegemonic discourse of Western politics and media, and an ability to put forward a new definition of humanity on the basis of the practices of the migrant, in order to finally satisfy everybody's understandable and legitimate freedom of movement.

**Keywords:** *decolonization and human rights, corpus-assisted discourse studies, multimodal discourse analysis, biographies, pictures*

### 1. Introduction

The present study aims to address language issues related to migration in a decolonial interpretative key. The debate on decoloniality is well established in other disciplines (e.g., ethnic, gender and area studies), yet it has not fully taken root in language studies, other than teaching English as a lingua franca. For this reason, the study also aims to explore a wide range of possibilities for relating decolonial thinking to discourse studies in order for both to benefit from this relation: discourse studies can take advantage of the decolonial perspective; conversely, decoloniality itself can acquire a new conceptual vigor by examining research on discourse analysis.

Due to the focus of this study, which revolves around the discourse of migration, literature in the field of decolonization and human rights is examined;<sup>1</sup> migrants are approached as people who have survived coloniality, and who still deserve recognition of their natural human rights and civil liberties. Extensive press coverage of the present-day local/global political arena on migration misinterprets and misrepresents migrants, e.g., their right to a better life and their freedom of movement. For instance, the hegemonic political discourse in the news originating from countries that, while most priding themselves on their commitment to equality, human rights, and democracy (e.g. Western countries), are the very ones that adopt a closed-door policy for migrants (i.e. refusal of entry, detention, and return) in order to prevent them from accessing equality, human rights, and democracy.<sup>2</sup> This is a recurring theme in

<sup>1</sup> Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism* [1956], trans. by Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2000), Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961], trans. by Richard Wilcox (New York: Grove Press, 2004), Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* [1952], trans. by Richard Wilcox (New York: Grove Press 2008), Walter Dignolo, "Who Speaks for the 'Human' in Human Rights?", *Human Rights in Latin American and Iberian Cultures*, 5.1 (2009), 7-24, Walter Dignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham: Duke U.P., 2011), Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Righting Wrongs", in Aakash Singh Rathore and Alex Cistelecan, eds., *Wronging Rights? Philosophical Challenges for Human Rights* (New Delhi/London: Routledge, 2011), 78-103, and Nelson Madonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Human Rights", *Revista Crítica de Ciências Sociais*, 114 (2017), 117-136.

<sup>2</sup> Luigi Cazzato, "Shades of Feeling: Human Rights, decoloniality and Palestine", *From the European South*, 2 (2017), 55-70.

Western modernity, which when successful in hiding its historical “colonial matrix of power”<sup>3</sup> (CMP), is unable to hide its constitutive contradictions, which still thrive in today’s society.

Conversely, in line with the objective stated by Catherine E. Walsh and Walter D. Mignolo,<sup>4</sup> this study chooses to focus on the emerging theme of relationality. According to these scholars, relationality embodies various concepts and practices of decoloniality which, coming from different local histories, geopolitical locations, and from those who have undergone – and continue to undergo – colonial differences, “contest the totalizing claims and political-epistemic violence of modernity”.<sup>5</sup> With this in mind, this work enters into relation with migration issues, with the subjectivities, struggles, and worldviews of migrants, and provides an example of the practice of decolonial resistance to Western thought, and as a form of “re-existence” aimed at “redefining and re-signifying [migrants’] life in conditions of dignity”.<sup>6</sup> Precisely, through their own faces and words, it makes migrants’ subjectivities much more visible thanks to the multimodal analysis of their photographs and stories, collected from all over the world and made available online at *iamamigrant.com* (IAAM).<sup>7</sup>

These micro-narratives by/on migrants together with their pictures appear to use what Maldonado-Torres<sup>8</sup> defines as a “counter” discourse that seeks to dismantle coloniality in order to shed light on the creative energy of migrants’ events and processes and foster a more just and equal society.<sup>9</sup> In addition, these first-person narratives and self-portraits of/by migrants from all over the globe may be considered part of the project of pluri- and intersubjectivity<sup>10</sup> because they do not purport to provide a definitive answer to the acknowledgement of their free movement around the globe. However, they are practices of decoloniality which, by entering into conversation with one another, build understandings that interrupt, that crack “the modern/colonial/capitalist/heteropatriarchal matrices of power”,<sup>11</sup> and that at the same time, heal the colonial wounds that have been inflicted upon each of them. In so doing, the conceptualizations and actionings of decoloniality become “multiple, contextual, and relational”,<sup>12</sup> more broadly, encompassing all of us who – even though we have not experienced and suffered decolonial difference – “struggle from and within modernity/coloniality’s borders and cracks, to build a radically distinct world”.<sup>13</sup>

Making migrants’ subjectivities visible through the multimodal analysis of their voices/thoughts and gazes/faces, this study thus partakes in this communal project of building another world, contributing not only to undoing, disobeying and delinking from the CMP but also to constructing a praxis toward an alternative approach to the migration issue. In order to do so, the study is organized as follows: the following sections provide a review of the literature, focusing on: (1) decolonization and human rights, (2) corpus-assisted discourse studies (CADS), and (3) multimodal discourse analysis (MDA). In the following sections there is a description of the data, which includes a corpus of 732 texts written on/by migrants and 732 pictures of migrants, collected from the IAAM online platform. With the hypothesis in mind, a selection of texts and images occurring with the highest frequency values are discussed in order to uncover the various ways in which migrants speak of / describe themselves and give their own

<sup>3</sup> Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality”, *Cultural Studies*, 21.2-3 (2007), 168-178.

<sup>4</sup> Catherine E. Walsh and Walter Mignolo, “Introduction”, in Catherine E. Walsh and Walter Mignolo, eds., *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis* (Durham: Duke U.P., 2018), 1-12.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Migration Agency’s Online Platform (date of launch: July 21, 2015). *I Am a Migrant*, <<http://iamamigrant.org/>>, 1 May 2019.

<sup>8</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, *Outline of Ten Theses on Coloniality and Decoloniality* (Paris: Frantz Fanon Foundation, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> Walter Mignolo, *Local Histories, Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton U.P., 2000).

<sup>10</sup> Walsh and Mignolo, *Introduction*, 3.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 5.



side of the story on the issue of migration. The enquiry on the decolonizing discourse of migration comes to a conclusion by providing a general account of the benefit of relating decolonial thinking to discourse studies, for only thanks to a mutual flow and exchange of conceptual and methodological tools, ways of theorizing and studying phenomena (e.g. societal, cultural, and linguistic) can we at long last build a radically distinct world and foster the much-needed change for the acknowledgement of human rights without discrimination.

## 2. Pluriversal Perspectives on Migrants and Their Human Rights: The Contribution of Decolonization, CADS and MDA

Drawing from a new perspective on humanity was essential for this study, and recent literature in the study of decolonization and human rights has contributed significantly to putting a whole new perspective on the analysis of the discourse of migration as addressed through the interpretative lens of CADS and MDA. Particularly, the decolonial turn<sup>14</sup> proved essential to challenging the hegemonic Western concept of the human, which thinks of “humanity in terms of degrees – that one can be more or less human”,<sup>15</sup> and then to advance “a new definition of humanity on the basis of the practices of the colonized”<sup>16</sup> who here becomes the migrant. For example, Western countries use real and metaphorical barbed wires to distinguish humans (the good) from the non-human (the evil or the *damnés*<sup>17</sup>), and accordingly, to guarantee the former the right to mobility and to shut the latter inside detention centers.

Damnation itself is the starting point where Fanon discerns the possibility for a new concept of the human. In fact, Fanon, together with Césaire, are considered by Maldonado-Torres<sup>18</sup> as key leaders in introducing a decolonial turn which, unlike the perspective of the CMP, affirms the humanity of the colonized, who emerge, thanks to this turn, as questioners and agents of their own destiny. Fanon and Césaire’s words of great encouragement for “a new start”, a “new way of thinking” and the concept of a “new man”<sup>19</sup> and new woman prove to be still valid today: “Let us decide not to imitate Europe and let us tense our muscles and our brains in a new direction. Let us endeavor to invent a man [and a woman] in full, something which Europe has been incapable of achieving”,<sup>20</sup> and “So we need to have the patience to take up the task anew; the strength to redo that which has been undone; the strength to invent instead of following; the strength to ‘invent’ our path and to clear it of ready-made forms, those petrified forms that obstruct it”.<sup>21</sup>

Césaire and Fanon’s call for concrete forms of engagement for the decolonization of the concept of the human also emerges in the recent works by Mignolo and Spivak. Their common concern focuses on the question: “who speaks for the human in human rights?”.<sup>22</sup> In response to this question, Spivak calls

<sup>14</sup> See Luciana Ballestrin, “América Latina e o giro decolonial”, *Revista Brasileira de Ciência Política*, 11 (2013), 89-117, Santiago Castro-Gómez and Ramón Grosfoguel, *El giro decolonial: reflexiones para una diversidad epistémica más allá del capitalismo global* (Bogotá, Col.: Universidad Javeriana y Siglo del Hombre Editores, 2007), Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Césaire’s Gift and the Decolonial Turn”, *Radical Philosophy Review*, 9.2 (2006), 111-137; Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “La descolonización y el giro des-colonial”, *Comentario internacional: Revista del centro Andino de estudios internacionales*, 7 (2006-2007), 66-78, Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Thinking through the Decolonial Turn: Post-continental Interventions in Theory, Philosophy, and Critique - An Introduction”, *Transmodernity: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World*, 1.2 (2011), 1-15 and Maldonado-Torres, “The Decolonial Turn”, in Juan Poblete, ed., *New Approaches to Latin American Studies: Nelson Culture and Power* (London: Routledge, 2017), 111-127.

<sup>15</sup> Nelson Maldonado-Torres, “Transdisciplinarietà y decolonialidad”, *Quaderna*, 3 (2015).

<sup>16</sup> Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Human Rights”, 118.

<sup>17</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*.

<sup>18</sup> Maldonado-Torres, “On the Coloniality of Human Rights”, 118.

<sup>19</sup> Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 239

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 236

<sup>21</sup> Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, 104.

<sup>22</sup> Mignolo, “Who Speaks for the ‘Human’ in Human Rights?”.

for good education courses for children to be delivered in poor rural areas in the Global South,<sup>23</sup> so that children themselves can learn and engage in defining and affirming their humanity and their rights. What is more, Mignolo calls for “de-colonial thinking” that far from longing to have “the last word about what human is,” does not feel any need “for someone specific to talk about the human, because human is what we are talking about”.<sup>24</sup> Echoing Césaire and Fanon’s words, Spivak and Mignolo assert that human rights need more than philosophical debates to formulate a concept of the human on which the human rights of the damned may be based. Furthermore, what they ask those who have suffered – or still suffer from – the colonial difference is to be/become key representatives of this de-colonial thinking and formulate their own view of the human.

The difference between Spivak and Mignolo, on the one hand, and Césaire and Fanon, on the other, lies in the fertile ground where decolonization should germinate, for the former, in the creation of a new educational framework, and for the latter, across and outside universities (e.g., in social, artistic, and intellectual movements). A line of continuity between these two ideas can be envisaged in how Boaventura de Sousa<sup>25</sup> sees decolonial thinking as acting at large beyond disciplinary divisions and the strictures of method. Contributing to this disciplinary openness and methodological germination is critical for the advancement of decolonization and for the emergence of a human rights discourse produced by those who experience colonization, and based on their struggles in affirming their humanity.

This study fits well into this conceptual framework since it uses the testimonies of migrants taken from the online platform IAAM and explores them through pluriversal perspectives and instruments. Specifically, the IAAM corpus formed by the migrants’ narratives and by photos of themselves, is investigated through a CADS approach,<sup>26</sup> as far as the textual component is concerned, and through an MDA approach<sup>27</sup> with regard to the visual component, so that “the analysis and interpretation of language use is contextualized in conjunction with other semiotic resources, which are simultaneously used for the construction of meaning”.<sup>28</sup>

The CADS approach has already been used to investigate the discourse of migration. The literature encompasses mainly studies which analyse migrants’ representation in the British and Italian press.<sup>29</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Spivak, “Righting Wrongs”, 82.

<sup>24</sup> Mignolo “Who Speaks for the ‘Human’ in Human Rights?”, 3.

<sup>25</sup> Also see Santos Boaventura de Sousa, “The University in the Twenty First Century: Towards a Democratic and Emancipatory University Reform”, *Eurozine* (July 2010), <https://www.eurozine.com/the-university-in-the-twenty-first-century/>, accessed 25 November 2020.

<sup>26</sup> Alan Partington, “Corpora and Discourse, A Most Congruous Beast”, in Alan Partington, John Morley and Louann Haarman, eds., *Corpora and Discourse* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2004), 11-20; Alan Partington, “The Armchair and the Machine: Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies”, in Carol Taylor Torsello, Katherine Ackerley and Erik Castello, eds., *Corpora for University Language Teachers* (Bern: Peter Lang), 189-213; and Alan Partington, Alison Duguid and Charlotte Taylor, *Patterns and Meanings in Discourse: Theory and Practice in Corpus-Assisted Discourse Studies (CADS)* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins).

<sup>27</sup> David Machin and Andrea Mayr, *How to Do Critical Discourse Analysis: A Multimodal Introduction* (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2012) and Per Ledin and David Machin, *Doing Visual Analysis: From Theory to Practice* (Los Angeles: Publications, 2018).

<sup>28</sup> Kay L. O’Halloran, ed., *Multimodal Discourse Analysis* (London: Continuum, 2004).

<sup>29</sup> Paul Baker, *Discourses of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK Press, 1996-2006*: Full Research Report, ESRC End of Award Report, RES-000-22-1381 (Swindon: ESRC, 2007); Paul Baker et al., “A Useful Methodological Synergy? Combining Critical Discourse Analysis and Corpus Linguistics to Examine Discourses of Refugees and Asylum Seekers in the UK Press”, *Discourse and Society*, 19.3 (2008), 273-306; Paul Baker, Costas Gabrielatos and Tony McEnery, *Discourse Analysis and Media Attitudes: The Representation of Islam in the British Press* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 2013); John Morley and Charlotte Taylor, “Us and Them: How Immigrants are Constructed in British and Italian Newspapers”, in Paul Bayley and Geoffrey Williams, eds., *European Identity: What the Media Say* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2012), 190-223; Sebastian M. Rasinger, “‘Lithuanian Migrants Send Crime Rocketing’: Representations of ‘New’ Migrants in Regional Print Media”, *Media, Culture & Society*, 32.6 (2010), 1021-1030; Charlotte Taylor, “The Representation of Immigrants in the Italian Press”, *CirCap Occasional Papers* 21 (Siena: University of Siena, 2009); Charlotte Taylor, “Investigating the Representation of Migrants in the UK and Italian Press”, *International Journal of Corpus Linguistics*, 19.3 (2014), 368-400; and Paolo Orrù, *Un discorso sulle migrazioni nell’Italia contemporanea* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2017).

What emerges from these works is that the hegemonic discourse of the media attaches labels to migrants of their being violent, desperate, and illiterate. In reaction to this emerging migrant-phobic discourse, Maglie<sup>30</sup> launched a new line of research that opens up towards the potential decolonization of language/thought hierarchies originating from migrants themselves. She compiled corpora made up of alternative discourses found in glossaries, charters and blogs available on the web, and, using a CADS approach, detected a prejudice-free terminology contributing to the respect, protection, and fulfilment of migrants' human rights.<sup>31</sup> For instance, when analysing migrants' representation in the corpora, Maglie identified the category of self-representation, i.e. a category which provides opportunities for migrants to speak for themselves, to tell their own stories in public.<sup>32</sup>

This line of research emerges again in Maglie and Orrù<sup>33</sup>, a cross-linguistic CADS and MDA study which addresses both migrants' narratives in English and Italian, and their pictures made available on the IAAM platform. Moving beyond the hegemonic power of the press as well as the unimodality of texts, their study brings together texts, images, and graphic elements to claim that migrants can have their own space of knowledge production, a *new* space where they take the forefront, speak for themselves, choose how to frame their story in its own unique way, and actively contribute with their own individual stories and a picture of themselves as positive, strong, productive, and proactive individuals, with their projects, values, feelings, and willingness to be part of the host society.

The present study draws on the abovementioned paper but focuses only on migrants' biographies written in English and on their pictures taken from the IAAM website. CADS and MDA approaches are used in combination to study both the textual as well as the visual choices made by the migrants, in order to facilitate an understanding of how and why those communicative choices were made over others and of "what possible ideological goals they might serve".<sup>34</sup> The repeated sequences of language and visual features detected and analyzed through MDA and CADS are interpreted here as ideological pointers to decolonial thinking, contributing to the construction of migrants as individuals and active members of collective social groups. Both biographies and pictures thus become a new social practice designed to call into question the Eurocentric-related dominant paradigm and its hegemony on institutional and public discourse about migration.

### 3. The IAAM Corpus: From Words to Images

The IAAM corpus is made up of 732 texts written on/by migrants (247,973 running words) and 732 pictures of migrants. It is divided into six sub-corpora, each of them corresponding more or less to a continent: Asia and the Middle East [305 texts (90,599 running words) and 305 pictures]; Africa [194 texts (77,957 running words) and 194 pictures]; Europe [96 texts (28,986 running words) and 96 pictures]; Balkans and Eastern Europe [72 texts (26,935 running words) and 72 pictures]; the Americas [59 texts (21,873 running words) and 59 pictures]; and Australia [six texts (1,623 running words) and six pictures]. The hypothesized common reason for migration justifies such a corpus division. Due to word limit constraints, the analysis focuses on the larger sub-corpora. Thus, the sub-corpora from Australia and the Americas are not included in the investigation reported in this study.

<sup>30</sup> Rosita B. Maglie, "Speaking of Migrants: Glimpses of a New Discourse on the Web", in Luigi Cazzato and Filippo Silvestri, eds., *S/Murare il Mediterraneo. Un/walling the Mediterranean: Pensieri critici e attivismo al tempo delle migrazioni* (Lecce-Brescia: Pensa Multimedia, 2016), 105-126.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 105.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 123.

<sup>33</sup> Rosita B. Maglie and Paolo Orrù, "The New Migration Discourse: How Migrants Are Depicted on the Web", *I-Land Journal: Identity, Language and Diversity*, 2 (2019), 77-93.

<sup>34</sup> Machin and Mayr, *A Multimodal Introduction*, 5.

Each of the remaining four sub-corpora are firstly approached by looking at their wordlist sorted according to frequency, because the analysis addresses specific words with the highest frequency values. Next, the concordance strings containing the most frequent words allow for the detection of statistically significant collocations, clusters, and patterns, which are instrumental here for uncovering the various ways in which migrants from four different areas of the world speak of themselves and give their own side of the story on the migration issue. Personal pronouns referring to migrants who write in the first-person appear to be in the nominative (*I*) and in the oblique forms (*me*), and together with possessive adjectives (*my*) are the most recurrent words in the four sub-corpora. These stories also revolve around other human beings and places. In fact, *people* and *family*, *home* and *country* are the next most frequently used words present in the four sub-corpora. The results on how *home/country*, *people*, and *I* behave in context are reported and discussed in the following section.

In addition, for each text, the four sub-corpora include a photograph of the migrant who is both/either the main character, and/or the author of the text. The visual analysis of the photos focuses on understanding how migrants visually describe themselves, and what kind of messages they would like to communicate and impart to modern society.<sup>35</sup> With this in mind, each subcorpus is addressed by looking at its image listed according to frequency, because this investigation concentrates on the photographs which contain elements that occur with the highest frequency values. Close-ups of faces – half-length and full-length portraits – are the most frequent communicative choices exercised by migrants throughout the four sub-corpora. Subsequently, they are shown to be looking directly at the viewer/reader, and they are smiling in the majority of cases. Other recurrent elements (e.g. actions, people, settings) frame each visual text present in the four sub-corpora. In fact, when together with other *people*, they would much prefer to be photographed together with their family and friends, and in settings that show their new/old *home* and *country*.

The fact that the same words and the same visual features occur with similar frequency throughout the four sub-corpora suggests the following research hypothesis: if words and images closely cooperate with each other to put migrants' subjectivity on a pedestal, the decolonizing discourse of migration, which ensues from them, will possess the decolonial features of relationality and of re-existence. In other words, it will connect and bring together – as both pluri- and intersubjectivities – different subjectivities, narratives, voices, thoughts, and faces to re-define and re-signify the migrants' lives in a condition of dignity and respect.

### 3. *I Am a Migrant through Words and Images*

Space does not permit a detailed language discussion of all the strings of words related to *I*, *me*, and *my* identified by the Wordsmith corpus software<sup>36</sup>, occurring with statistically significant frequency in the four sub-corpora. Thus, in the case of *I*, the focus is on groups of three-word clusters, which are then examined in their discourse contexts through concordance listings, to determine the discourse functions associated with each of the groups in the IAAM corpus. The fact that *I want(ed) to* ranks either first or second in three of the four sub-corpora, except for the Africa sub-corpus, and that *I don't/didn't* is placed first, second and/or third in four of the sub-corpora, except for the Europe sub-corpus, explains the reason why this study analyzes only these four groups of clusters.

*I* (N=3,629 in the Asia and Middle East sub-corpus) is investigated when followed by *want(ed)* and *don't* and *didn't*. With reference to *I want(ed) to*, the strong wish to do and have something collocates the migration experience of Asian and Middle-Eastern people in two temporal slots: before and after the

<sup>35</sup> Due to page restrictions, the author postpones in-depth discussion of the visual data of the IAAM corpus in a future dedicated paper.

<sup>36</sup> Mike Scott, *Wordsmith Tools* (Stroud: Lexical Analysis Software, 2018).

journey. When they speak of themselves in the past tense, what *they wanted* is not only *to secure a future for [themselves] and their children (I decided to leave because I wanted to save my life and my family)* but also be useful contributors to building a just society:

- (1) *I wanted to work, have a successful career and be an active member of society.*
- (2) *We have a whole cultural structure to differentiate us but I wanted to find what can bring us together.*
- (3) *I wanted to help but not by carrying weapons or killing people.*
- (4) *I wanted to show them that I am exactly like them.*

Old dreams continue to be the same when they arrive in the host country (*All I want is to protect my children, this is why we left; I want to be independent; I want to be/become a(n) interpreter/doctor/musician/carpenter; I want to learn everything/many languages/math*s). In addition, they write that *they want to share this [practical/professional] knowledge with everybody (I want to share our [Syrian] food and our culture with the [German] people; I want to grow and empower myself to be able to empower others; and I want to feel useful for the society I live in)*. They demonstrate a firm commitment to human rights (*I want to use human rights as my avenue; I can finally be in Senegal again, I want to actively engage in helping the poorest people of my community; I want to continue to be that bridge where migrants contribute to the development of their host and home countries*).

The clusters *I didn't/don't* within past and present negative statements are aimed at giving further details about their condition before and after the migration journeys. Before their leave, they *didn't* have either a job or much money, they *didn't* have either a visa or a proper ID. Leaving home was not in their plans (e.g. *I didn't plan to come to Hungary*), but they did so in order to avoid circumstances beyond their control (*I didn't want to kill anybody from any side; I came from a corrupted country where I didn't enjoy too much freedom*). Now that they are abroad, they seem lost (they *don't* know which country they would call home; they *don't* speak the language; they *don't* know how to integrate into Emirati Society); what they *don't* want is either *to beg anyone or to depend on others to support [their] family*. Their struggles for respect and dignity appear both in sentences like the following: *I don't want to be seen only as a refugee or a migrant; I don't want to sit around doing nothing*; and in their comment on Western hegemonic thinking: *I don't make distinctions, for me these are all human beings; I don't understand, we were not criminals!*

*I* (N=3,563 in the Africa sub-corpus) starts to be analyzed in negative sentences set in the past. In addition to that detected previously in the Asia and Middle East sub-corpus, *I didn't* concerns here their psychological distress felt during their journey and once they arrived in the host country: *I didn't know who I was anymore; I didn't know where I was going or if I would be welcomed*. Now that they are in a new country, they are able to recover quickly from the unpleasant past events and state as follows: *I don't have much time to think and stress about all the things I miss; I don't see it [leaving] as a failure, but as a stepping stone*.

When *I want(ed)* is analyzed looking at its context, migrants continue to talk about their dreams, which here becomes a request for recognition of their human and social dignity: *I had dreams – I wanted to become “someone”; the first thing I wanted to do was to reclaim my name and get my ID*. What they want readers to learn from their stories and dreams is, as already stated for Asian and Middle-Eastern migrants, their fight for equality: *Instead of saying, “we are refugees,” I want us to say, “we are the same as the others.”*

*I* (N=1,332) in the Europe sub-corpus tells unsurprisingly another story. They wanted their dreams about living/studying/working abroad to be fulfilled and they moved easily (*when I decided that I wanted to move here, it was pretty easy*). However, when in the host country, they want to do their best as the African, Asian and Middle-Eastern migrants want to; *I want to work in the migration sector, and fight for the rights of the LGBTQ community, and I want to specialize in North-American literature*. Frankly,



in comparison with the migrants analyzed above, their condition is – as one of them defines – “luxurious”, *because I didn't feel that I was left out of anything and I wasn't fleeing war or conflict*. However, when in the host country, they face and feel something that could more or less resemble African, and Asian and Middle-Eastern migrants. They encounter intolerance (*I don't like that people are scared of differences; I don't think it means people in the host nation can criticize my country of origin*). They cherish their tradition and compatriots (*I don't forget my roots; I don't miss places, I miss people*). In addition, they want to return home (*I really like it here, but I don't think I'll stay forever*).

The first personal pronoun (IN= 1,239) in the Balkans and East Europe sub-corpus does not highlight notable changes compared to what was seen before. Indeed, even if they *didn't know what to expect*, they leave the country in order to improve their living condition (*I wanted to learn in order to find a different job*). In the new country, they *don't consider themselves a victim* and what they really want for their family is *to do well, feel safe and cared*.

The ways migrants choose to be portrayed visually in the IAAM platform is not neutral. They choose a certain set of representational strategies<sup>37</sup> to participate in the “social world”<sup>38</sup> so that the common viewer can see the other side of the coin: no longer migrants as being all the same<sup>39</sup> as often happens in the press, but as *I*-individuals. Four women from the four sub-corpora smile and keep their gaze fixed on the viewer. They act the same, but they are different in their somatic features as well as in their traditional attire. Their difference enters into relationality with one another and with the viewer as a form of re-existence.



Fig 1-4 Migrants from Africa, Asia and Middle East, the Balkans and Eastern Europe, and Europe subcorpora respectively (source: <https://iamamigrant.org/>).

### 3.1 I Am a Migrant *Together with People in Words and Images*

In the Asia and Middle East sub-corpus, *people* (N=421) refers either to migrants' compatriots left behind in the country of origin or to new individuals met in the host country. For the former they feel longing (*To be honest, I do miss the people back home*) and to the latter they are grateful (*I like Budapest. The people are nice; [...] in Greece, the people are nice and friendly; In Croatia [...] the people are very friendly and gentle*). Talking about their compatriots provides them with the opportunity to describe their harsh living conditions (*I worry about what is going on there [Afghanistan] still. People are killed every day*).

When talking about people in general terms, other than those they have really met, migrants refer to the binary vision of humanity, typical of the hegemonic modern Western thought, and place it in doubt with a question: *why is it good for people from Europe to move within Europe, but bad when people from Middle East or Asia look for jobs in Europe?* They answer firstly by explaining what migration is (*it consists of normal people, some are good and some are bad [...] they are bad not because they are*

<sup>37</sup> Norman Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research* (London: Routledge, 2003), 145.

<sup>38</sup> Machin and Mayr, *A Multimodal Introduction*, 77.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 100.



from a specific place). Then, they state their commitment to changing people's mentality: *I hope to make a difference in people's lives and help them understand that human rights are not a luxury, but vital to being human.*

When the word *people* is preceded by numbers (13 to 4,000), they describe their own experience of crossing the sea by boat (*We were suddenly 45 people boarding the boat*) and their idea of dying at sea and of saving others (*And if I die and those 20 people are still alive, that's great; I felt that I cannot let the other 20 people drown and just save my own life*).

In the Africa sub-corpus *people* (N=410) is also used with numbers (10 to 200,000) and continues to relate to Africans' travel either by boat (*It was 4 am on the day the smugglers loaded 300 people onto the boat*) or by car (*We were 40 people from all over the region crammed in one car*).

What differs here from the abovementioned occurrences of *people* found in the Asia and Middle East sub-corpus is a greater focus on diversity. On the one hand, in derogatory remarks, it can promote a bad attitude towards people who are different (*comparing black people to monkeys; The fear of the unknown and ignorance of people not wanting to know is what leads to racism*). On the other hand, African people encourage cultural diversity, not division and opposition (*My hope for the world is that different people with different experiences can move around and meet one another; We should be happy to meet people from diverse backgrounds; and seize the opportunity to develop, learn and get new perspectives*).

They think the movement of *people* is a fact of life, they consider migration a way to give people the freedom to go to places where their lives can be improved, and believe in the idea of global citizenship where people are allowed to live beyond their borders. In reality, they live and tell another sad story about people who, during the journey, fell off the car; others broke their arms or legs, others died, but the driver never stopped for them. Their condition in their countries is even more dramatic: *people being killed, and people having to eat leaves, and people in prison in Libya that can't get out because they have no money.*

The Europe sub-corpus contains a vision of *people* (N=213) which decolonizes the Eurocentric tendency of much of today's society. Indeed, *people with a migrational background* are seen as those who have a lot to give to society, the state and the economy. Therefore, they deserve full European hospitality: *it is important that when new people arrive, they open their heart and feel welcome by the locals.*

Speaking of *people* (N=156), the Balkans and Eastern Europe sub-corpus follows the same reasoning. For the integration to work, on one hand, *people of the host society have to tolerate you [the migrants] and have the desire to help you integrate*. On the other, *people [migrants] need to feel welcome or to be seen as having the rights to be there, without this bargaining – "you learn our language, you dance our dances, then you are welcome."*

The way migrants choose to speak in photos when they are with other people revolves around the topics of education (Fig. 5-6) and multiculturalism (Fig. 7-8). The first two images portray a smiling mom with her kids. Both stay one step behind (fig. 5) or to the side (fig. 6) of their kids meaning that their kids are the most important thing in their life. Going to school represented here by the girl who is doing her homework and by the boy who is proudly showing his backpack is an important investment for their future. The other two pictures exemplify the theme of relationality: two couples made up of people coming from different parts of the world are together and love each other.



Fig 5-8 Migrants from Africa, Asia and Middle East, the Balkans and Eastern Europe, and Europe subcorpora respectively (source: <https://iamamigrant.org/>).

### 3.2 I Am a Migrant *between Home and Country* in Words and Images

The words indicating a place (i.e., *home* and *country*) are the last instances that this study investigates due to their high occurrence both in the textual, and the visual part of the four sub-corpora. Due to the fact that their order of appearance in the word lists of each sub-corpora does not coincide, even though both words are near the top of the frequency list, the study opts to analyze only the most frequent word of the two. Thus, *home* is investigated in the Asia and the Middle East and in the Africa sub-corpora, and *country* in the Europe and the Balkans and Eastern Europe sub-corpora.

African people use the word *home* (N=299) more than *country* (N=266) in their travel stories. They define it (*home* to me (N=7), and *home* is where (N=6), placing possessive adjectives before it: *my* (N=35), *our* (N=6), and *your* (N=6) as well as verbs mainly indicating a forward —*left* (N=10) – and a backward – *go back* (N=11) – movement. The definition of home mirrors their existence divided into two worlds: on the one hand, the home where they were born and, on the other, the home where they live (*Home* to me is Tunisia and Malta as well). This duality emerges in another sentence: *I faced two options – stay home [Sierra Leone] where a dire future awaited me, or move thousands of miles away [the US].* However, the number of homes tends to rise: *I consider Egypt, the UK and South Africa to be my home*, as proof that they are citizens of the world, longing for their home country nevertheless. In fact, most of the occurrences of *my home* center around the topic of homesickness: *Looking back on life in my home country, I miss everything.* The personal adjectives *our* and *your* + *home* touch on the subject of leaving together with their own family (*my family and I left our home country Egypt to move to Tirana*) or, speaking in general, on what causes leaving your country: *Leaving your home country is a struggle for most people.* Indeed, their great dream is one day to go back home:

- (5) *When I go back home, I want to continue painting.*
- (6) *I would like to go back home and open a large sewing shop.*
- (7) *I'd love to go back home one day and help my community.*

*Home* (N=251 occurring more frequently than *country* N=237) for Asiatic and Middle-Eastern people is naturally their *home country* (N=17) but also the host country where they *feel at home* (N=7). In addition to this, when the word is used in the context, what emerges is that they see their stay abroad transient since their objective is to go [back] home (N=45). The stories about their home countries are a mixture of love and excitement (*I love my home country and I am extremely excited to share its traditions and history with the world*), as well as hindrance (*Leaving your home country is a very hard decision*) and despair (*Without a home country, you truly feel like you are nothing*).

The host country evokes conflicting emotions that can be defined as peace (*I feel at home, especially in Brussels*) and despair (*Sometimes I don't feel at home here. There are racist views*). Integration sometimes does not work (*neither Belgium nor Turkey is really home for me. I feel that in Belgium*

*people consider me a foreigner and in Turkey, they tend to see me as a tourist*). After they have been forced to leave their home and have made them believed to be ineligible to have one, migrants' strength and resilience overwhelmingly manifests themselves in this more comprehensive definition of home:

- (8) *Home for me is where I can be who I am and pursue the plans and the goals I have without fearing for my life. A place where I can feel secure mentally, physically, and economically. A place where I can go back to whenever I want without anyone questioning why I should be able to go back there. Home is where I can pursue my mission.*

As one might easily imagine, the context of occurrences of *country* (N=112 occurring more frequently than *home* N=97) in the Europe sub-corpus appears different from that reported above in the previous sub-corpora. Even though both the reasons for their departure (e.g. study, work, and business) and the feelings when living abroad (e.g. nostalgia, appreciation, and love for their *home country*) may be similar to those detected previously, being abroad for European migrants is *by choice*, i.e. they are never forced to leave their home, they do it easily and *moving to a new country is never felt to be stressful*.

Occurrences of great value for the sake of this study are those where *country* describes what migration is and means for them (9-10), and advises both migrants on what they should do in order to *benefit from living in a different country* (11-12) and those living in the host countries on how they should welcome migrants (13-14).

- (9) *Migration cannot mean to move to another country to just become exactly like the people who are already there.*  
 (10) *It [migration] can give new energy and a new rhythm to a country.*  
 (11) *My advice to those who choose to migrate is to learn the language of your destination country first.*  
 (12) *My advice to everyone moving to a new country: observe what is going on, be open-minded, ask questions, be curious ...*  
 (13) *My advice to someone living in a country that hosts migrants is to put yourself in their shoes.*  
 (14) *My advice to people in the UK is to keep an open mind and identify with the migrants in our country, with a view to maintaining a culturally rich society.*

*Country* (N=91 occurring more frequently than *home* N=71) in the Balkans and Eastern Europe sub-corpus refers both to the home and the host country. Towards both of them they experience the same feelings of love (about the new country they write: *I love the country and respect its people; I fell in love with the country*, and about their country of origin they write: *I love my home country; Romania is and will remain my country*).

When they concentrate on their place of origin, they exhibit conflicting emotions: misunderstanding, when they think of their choice to leave (*they feel that you do not love your country as much as you should anymore*); homesickness, when they miss their home (*I missed my country of the Czech Republic terribly*), and pride, when thinking their place of birth is a very *underrated country*, and then they mention its history (*"the suburbs of the Albanian cities grew dramatically in the '90s"*), and its aesthetic beauty (*"I love the sea in Estonia"*).

When they talk about the host country, they exhibit other conflicting emotions: fear, when they are afraid that *one day there might not be a country they can call theirs*; guilt, when they feel they did something wrong by *entering the country*; difficulty, when they refer to the local language (*I found being in a new country without the language really difficult*), on the one hand, and relaxation when stating that *being in a free country calms them down*, and gratitude when talking about the support they have received (*the German citizens gave me so much for my country, my people and children*), on the other.

However, in their travel stories, they more often than not feel the need to explain the reasons behind their decision to leave (*I was forced to leave home and I choose a country where I could live a good life*

and study; he left his country in order to find a safer place to pursue his career and settle down; the country that I left because of the conflict).

In addition to this, they show they have a political vision in terms of their contribution to the new country (*and since so many people are leaving the country, you [Western country] need immigrants to keep the economy going*); in terms of their actionings (*being a good and a loyal citizen of the country one chooses to reside in; we need to leave a positive mark on the country that hosts us; learning the local language [...] the first step that all migrants should undertake in their new country*), and in terms of reception and integration policies (*I find that when people are accepted as they are it encourages them to embrace the culture of the host country; Those in the host country should try not to put migrants into a box, because they are all different people*). The new meaning they give to the word *country* (*My first country is my kids*) and to the expression *leaving a country* (*The decision to leave the geographical borders of my country did not cost me much, when your home is the world, you never actually “leave”*) may be considered an incredible life lesson.

The background of the photos projects a prevailing set of cultural values which entails the centrality of the family as well as the defense of indigenous culture (fig. 9) and religious faith (fig. 10), on the one hand, and the awareness of oneself as an autonomous individual within modern civilization, on the other (fig 11-12).



Fig 9-12 Migrants from Africa, Asia and Middle East, the Balkans and Eastern Europe, and Europe subcorpora respectively (source: <https://iamamigrant.org/>).

#### 4. Concluding Remarks

The relation between decolonial thinking and discourse studies has proved not only possible but also highly beneficial. On one hand, the use of CADS and MDA, which pay attention directly and exclusively to real instances of language related to modern issues, has offered major potential for innovative conceptualization to decolonization itself. On the other, CADS and MDA approaches have gained better insights into language issues by using the decolonial interpretative key. Both discourse analysis and decolonialization are essential in order to produce knowledge, and their relationship is particularly relevant to this study because they work hand in hand to overcome the colonality of Eurocentric and modern knowledge, which is responsible for dividing the world into two zones separated by the barbed wire of damnation: the former, a zone of salvation,<sup>40</sup> exclusive privilege of the civilized, and the latter, populated by the damned, the migrants, whose existence is seen as problematic and dangerous. The analysis of the discourse of migration from a decolonial perspective has challenged this hegemonic Western knowledge and has offered new knowledge which comes from migrants themselves who, through their stories and pictures, have redefined and re-signified their lives in a condition of dignity. Far from providing a definite solution to the free movement of people, migrants' counter discourse in observance of the principles of relationality<sup>41</sup> becomes part of the project of pluri- and intersubjectivity.

<sup>40</sup> Maldonado-Torres, "On the Coloniality of Human Rights", 123.

<sup>41</sup> Walsh and Mignolo, *Introduction*, 1.

decoloniality.<sup>42</sup> Their stories and images – ideological pointers to decolonial thinking – interrupt “the modern/colonial/capitalistic/heteropatriarchal matrices of power”<sup>43</sup> with alternative practices and forms of engagement. Since they are “multiple, contextual, and relational,”<sup>44</sup> they enter into conversation with one another, build understandings, and heal the colonial wounds in favor of a praxis moving towards an alternative manner of addressing the migration issue, a pre-requisite to fostering a much-needed change for the recognition of human rights, thus building a radically distinct world without walls of separation. In conclusion, the added value of decolonial thinking that emerges from this study is extremely important in order to re-think and re-define humanity on the basis of the practices of migrants, of their life choice – be it free or obliged – to live abroad, and of their contribution to the growth of the host country.

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 4.





## English as a Lingua Franca. The Decolonial Option in Migratory Contexts

**Abstract:** The aim of the present paper is to explore decolonial practices carried out by migrants in intercultural encounters. Drawing on a corpus-based approach, the study explores the use of code-switching made by migrants and underlines how this is not an automatic process that takes place within the conversational setting but rather represents a conscious “decolonial option”, a way for co-constructing meaning and identity in multicultural contexts.

Keywords: *ELF, code-switching, decolonial, identity, corpus linguistics*

### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

The cultural turn in linguistic studies, begun in the 1980s, has led to a shift of focus from merely linguistic issues – centered on the study of words and/or texts – to the idea of language intended as an essential part of a broader cultural, literary, historical and ethical-anthropological system. For the specific purposes of this research, the present contribution will lead to a deepening of the nature and role of the English language in its move from hegemonic to contact language decreeing the end of monolingualism and the purist idea of language as an ideological construction, historically rooted and marked by the nation-state borders. These considerations will also allow us to observe the formation of new geo-localities contaminated by multiple global cultural flows and to embrace new practices of linguistic and cultural crossover towards a decolonial horizon.

The common ground between linguistic and cultural reflections provided here is the deconstruction of the traditional knowledge of language as a social projection of territorial unity and to the development of the alternative epistemological paradigm based on English as a contact language and a translingual practice. The importance of rethinking such concepts as language, territory, unity, and English, among the others, coincides with the challenging possibility to articulate new visions as advocated by several linguists and decolonial thinkers in the last decades. Among the promoters of this rethinking, attention will be paid to socio-linguists Vertovec,<sup>2</sup> Blommaert and Rampton,<sup>3</sup> Tsuda,<sup>4</sup> ELF scholars Guido,<sup>5</sup> Seidlhofer,<sup>6</sup> Meierkord<sup>7</sup> and Cogo,<sup>8</sup> as well as decolonial linguists Pennycook,<sup>9</sup> Canagarajah,<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>1</sup>Although this research was jointly conducted by both authors, Annarita Taronna is responsible for Sections 1, 2.1 and 2.2; Laura Centonze for Sections 2.3, 3, and 4; the Conclusions section was jointly written.

<sup>2</sup>Steven Vertovec, “Super-diversity and Its Implications”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies*, 29.6 (2007), 1024-1054.

<sup>3</sup>Jan Blommaert and Ben Rampton, “Language and Superdiversity”, *Diversities*, 13 (2011), 1-20.

<sup>4</sup>Yukio Tsuda, “English Hegemony and English Divide”, *China Media Research*, 4.1 (2008), 47-55.

<sup>5</sup>Maria Grazia Guido, *English as a Lingua Franca in Cross-cultural Immigration Domains* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008).

<sup>6</sup>Barbara Seidlhofer, “Research Perspectives on Teaching English as a Lingua Franca”, *Annual Review of Applied Linguistics*, 24 (2011), 209-239; Barbara Seidlhofer, *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

<sup>7</sup>Christiane Meierkord, “Syntactic Variation in Interactions across International Englishes”, *English World-Wide*, 25.1 (2004), 109-132.

<sup>8</sup>Alessia Cogo, “Accommodating Difference in ELF Conversations: A Study of Pragmatic Strategies”, in Anna Mauranen and Elina Ranta, eds., *English as a Lingua Franca: Studies and Findings* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 254-273.

<sup>9</sup>Alastair Pennycook, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>10</sup>Suresh Canagarajah, *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999); Suresh Canagarajah, *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations* (New York: Routledge, 2013).

Kumaravadivelu;<sup>11</sup> Motha;<sup>12</sup> Phillipson,<sup>13</sup> Fiol-Matta,<sup>14</sup> Macedo<sup>15</sup> whose studies, though from different disciplinary perspectives, make explicit various recommendations for investigating the complex relationship between colonialism, power and the English language. Attention will be drawn to their theoretical reflections in order to discuss the content of a selection of semi-structured interviews between asylum seekers and intercultural mediators who use English as the Lingua Franca for mutual understanding. More specifically, such interdisciplinary theoretical framework will support the analysis of some of the most relevant excerpts taken from the *English as a Lingua Franca in Migration Domains* corpus (henceforth the ELF MiDo corpus)<sup>16</sup> with the attempt to demonstrate that a pragmatics of decoloniality may be emerging within a new *linguascape*. On this background, uncommon language combinations occur on a significant scale due to mobility, migration and displacement and trace the manner in which English can be used as a form of translingual practice beyond the borders of the speakers' mother tongues and homelands. This move may also situate its speakers in a condition of experiencing English in a decolonial dimension. To this end, some concrete examples of the use of code-switching as a decolonial option in ELF domains will be provided and discussed.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Retracing the Rhetoric of Naturalization and of English Language Supremacy

Retracing the main dynamics through which the process of colonization and the most recent globalization trends have led to the hegemony of the English language helps to problematize the dissemination of the myth of English and the rhetoric of naturalization. Among these is the diffusion of a model based on a culture of "monoglot standardization", which Silverstein defines as the constitutive base of a linguistic community that influences the structure of different communities of speakers.<sup>17</sup> Drawing on a purist idea of language, this cultural model exerts its influence within a linguistic community that is linked to the idea that there is a rule that allows an individual to use his/her own language for denotative purposes, by reproducing a natural social and linguistic order.<sup>18</sup> More specifically, such standardization is consolidated as a hegemonic colonial process through different phases and methods: it emerges as a process of social codification and reflects the functional usefulness of language as a means of representation or denotation; the social processes that regulate communication and are activated for the purposes of standardization are presented as naturalized when the search for a "common agreement" is activated within the denotative value of the words that become shared by an even larger group of people. Finally, the cultural model of monoglot standardization, by imposing itself

<sup>11</sup> B. Kumaravadivelu, "The Decolonial Option in English Teaching: Can the Subaltern Act?", *TESOL Quarterly*, 50.1 (2016), 66-85.

<sup>12</sup> Suhanthie Motha, *Race, Empire, and English Language Teaching: Creating Responsible and Ethical Anti-racist Practice* (New York: Teachers College Press, 2014).

<sup>13</sup> Robert Phillipson, "Linguistic Imperialism and Linguicism", *Linguistic Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992), 50-57; Robert Phillipson, "The Linguistic Imperialism of Neoliberal Empire", *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 5.1 (2008), 1-43.

<sup>14</sup> Licia Fiol-Matta, "Teaching in (Puerto Rican) Tongues: A Report from the Space in-between", *Women's Studies Quarterly*, 24.3-4 (1996), 69-76.

<sup>15</sup> Donaldo Macedo, "The Colonialism of the English Only Movement", *Educational Researcher* 29.3 (2000), 15-24; Donaldo Macedo, "Imperialist Desires in English-only Language Policy", *The CATESOL Journal* 29.1 (2017), 81-110.

<sup>16</sup> Laura Centonze, "Illocutionary Force and Perlocutionary Effect Recognition in the (Semi-)automated Pragmatic Annotation of ELF Spoken Discourse", *IPERSTORIA*, 11 (2018), 133-144; Laura Centonze, *Assessing the Feasibility of (Semi)automated Pragmatic Annotation in ELF Domains*, Doctoral Thesis (University of Vienna / Università del Salento, 2019).

<sup>17</sup> Michael Silverstein, "Monoglot 'Standard' in America: Standardization and Metaphors of Linguistic Hegemony", in Donald Brenneis and Ronald K.S. Macaulay, eds., *The Matrix of Language: Contemporary Linguistic Anthropology* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1996), 284.

<sup>18</sup> Bent Preisler, "Functions and Forms of English in a European EFL Country", in Tony Bex and Richard J. Watts, eds., *Standard English: The Widening Debate* (London-New York: Routledge, 1999), 239-267.

as a natural process, brings out parallel social phenomena in an exercise of authority that affects the future of language.

In investigating these domains, several linguists have detailed the establishment of a global narrative of English language supremacy and hegemony<sup>19</sup> and consistently point to the need for fundamental changes in the global discourse of English, one that denaturalizes the privileged, superior status it has been imbued with.<sup>20</sup> The process of changing and demystifying such a narrative of supremacy has also critically undermined the positivist label of English as a neutral and objective language<sup>21</sup> as well as the rhetoric of standardization in the form of the naturalization of language. This latter has consolidated two dichotomous value models: possessing the standard (*possession-of-standard*) gives the individual a high social and cultural status; not having the standard (*lack-of-standard*) becomes a negative indicator of the social and cultural status of the speaker.<sup>22</sup> In both cases, however, pursuing a model based on a standard language becomes unsuccessful when it must be taken into account that the purist idea of language is only an ideological construct historically marked by stories of colonization, diasporas, forced migration, nationalism, abuse and sometimes even fanaticism. In this context, along with Widdowson,<sup>23</sup> influential linguists have started to question what standard English is or, more precisely, what “proper English” is:

We can talk about proper English in terms of conformity to encoding convention. But this is not the only answer. We can also think of words being in their proper place with reference to their communicative purpose. Here we are concerned not with the internal relationship of words as encoded forms, but with the external relationship of words with the context of their actual occurrence, and propriety is not now a matter of their correctness of form in a sentence, but of their appropriateness of function in an utterance.<sup>24</sup>

“Proper English” therefore refers to a form of English taken as a model of correctness and appropriateness for successful communication. For these reasons, every linguistic variety born in time as an alternative to the standard English model has been defined in terms of broken English, globish, or English with an accent.<sup>25</sup> These expressions are used to underline that the emerging varieties of English spoken throughout the world can affect the purest variety of English that belonged to the so-called natives by right. As a result, albeit dismissive, these labels bring to the center of the linguistic debate another implication deriving from the diffusion of the myth of the English language and of the rhetoric of naturalization and colonization: the re-reading of the concepts of nativeness and native speaker. Traditionally, the ideology that underlies the nativeness model reproduces a series of myths according to which the variety of English – but we might say, of any language in general – spoken by a native is a model of preferable and desirable correctness.

On this issue, the overcoming of the ideological implications developed by the concept of nativeness and the category of native speaker, as well as that of the mother tongue, takes place thanks to the

<sup>19</sup> Julian Edge, “Imperial Troopers and Servants of the Lord: A Vision of TESOL for the 21st Century”, *TESOL Quarterly* 37.4 (2003), 701-709, Nelson Flores, “Silencing the Subaltern: Nation-state/colonial Governmentality and Bilingual Education in the United States”, *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies* 10.4 (2013a), 263-287. See Macedo, “The Colonialism of the English-only Movement”, 15-24 and Macedo, “Imperialist Desires in English-only Language Policy”, 81-110.

<sup>20</sup> Canagarajah, *Resisting Linguistic Imperialism in English Teaching*, Kumaravadivelu, “The Decolonial Option in English Teaching: Can the Subaltern Act?”, 66-85, Angel Lin and Allan Luke, “Coloniality, Postcoloniality, and TESOL. Can a Spider Weave Its Way Out of the Web that it Is Being Woven into Just as It Weaves?”, *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 3.2-3 (2006), 65-73, Alain Pennycook, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism* and Robert Phillipson, “The Linguistic Imperialism of Neoliberal Empire”, *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 5.1 (2008), 1-43.

<sup>21</sup> David Crystal, *English as a Global Language* (Cambridge: Cambridge U.P., 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Annarita Taronna, *Black Englishes. Pratiche linguistiche transfrontaliere Italia-USA* (Verona: Ombre Corte, 2016).

<sup>23</sup> Henry Widdowson, *Defining Issues in English Language Teaching* (Oxford: Oxford U.P., 2003).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 27.

<sup>25</sup> Taronna, *Black Englishes*.

contribution – among the others – of Bourdieu and his idea of the ‘legitimate speaker’ that would replace, at least apparently, a more discriminating and ambiguous terminology such as that of native or non-native speaker or mother tongue.<sup>26</sup> For Bourdieu, legitimacy derives from the symbolic power attributed to the form of capital and is the result of a disregard of power and the view that individuals are given the time and space to talk. In the light of the composite contemporary geo-linguistic scenario characterized by the constant evolution of the linguistic models that speakers can use, it would be of little use to speak of “proper English” or to replicate a hierarchy of English defined as more or less valid, given the heterogeneity of its domains. In the light of the dynamics that has led to the diffusion of English at an international level, one might perhaps agree with Rajagopalan when he provocatively affirms that “English has no native speakers”, sanctioning, to some extent, the transfer of ownership of English from its (former) native speakers to new speakers.<sup>27</sup>

Today, the plurality of languages, and thus a reconsideration of concepts such as language, belonging, contact, nation, identity and community is more visible largely due to migration and mobility. The experience of migration (whether voluntary or involuntary) dislocates people as well as languages, and only the acceptance of language plurality, polyphony of stories, linguistic habits, and cultures, will facilitate hospitality and translation. In contemporary scenarios, this is particularly easy to observe when taking into consideration the interactions between the newly arrived migrants who have crossed the Mediterranean and the mediators who work in the contact zones (e.g. ferries, camps, conflict zones, reception and detention centers, etc.) since they resort to a common communicative practice that holds in its interstices the double threshold of a contagious and unexpected hospitality in a new language. In their interactions, an unprecedented vision of language and language contact is unfolded with different linguistic and cultural heritages, thus problematizing the traditional understanding of language as a social projection of territorial unity held together by shared behavioral norms, beliefs and values. Indeed, this old view of language originated at a time when society consisted of human populations confined within geographical boundaries and structured by local imaginings of their social identity. Since then, the increasing mobility of people has created what Jacquemet identifies as the “transidiomatic practices of de-territorialized speakers” occurring in such open spaces and ensembles of contact zones as those crossed by most of the interviewed migrants found along the transatlantic and Afro-Mediterranean routes.<sup>28</sup>

From this renewed language perspective, the voices of the migrants who have reached our Mediterranean coasts are represented as de-territorialized social identities taking shape around a sentiment of belonging that can no longer be identified with a purely territorial dimension, and finds its expression in the mixed idioms of translingualism. However, the most important social implication of this language process is not the dissolution of identities, cultures or nation states in a global environment, but the question of how such groups of people, as those selected for this study, think about their multiple voices, shape transidiomatic practices and recombinant identities. To this end, we resort to Pratt’s “linguistics of contact”<sup>29</sup> as the epistemological lens through which we can interpret the “randomness and disorder of the flows of people, knowledge, texts and objects across social and geographical space, in the boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, and in fragmentation, indeterminacy and ambivalence”.<sup>30</sup> Within this framework, we propose to examine the migrants-mediators’ interactions as instances of de-

<sup>26</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. by Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard U.P., 1991).

<sup>27</sup> Kanavillil Rajagopalan, “The Concept of ‘World English’ and its Implications for ELT”, *ELT Journal*, 58.2 (2004), 11.

<sup>28</sup> Marco Jacquemet, “Transidiomatic Practices: Language and Power in the Age of Globalization”, *Language and Communication*, 25 (2005), 257-277.

<sup>29</sup> Mary Louise Pratt, “Linguistic Utopias”, in Nigel Fabb et al., eds., *The Linguistics of Writing* (Manchester: Manchester U.P., 1987), 48-66 and Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone”, *Modern Language Association: Profession* (1991), 33-40.

<sup>30</sup> Ben Rampton, “Speech Community”, in Jef Verschueren et al., eds., *Handbook of Pragmatics* (Amsterdam/New York: John Benjamins, 1998), 125.

territorialized and multilingual forms of communication, in other words, “transidiomatic practices”<sup>31</sup> which resort to ELF in the context of migration in order to negotiate rather than to prescribe the linguistic norms, agency, locality and context of the speaker during interaction. Only an awareness of the need for alternative methods and re-readings opposing the monolithic and hegemonic vision of English language use can lead to the affirmation of the interdisciplinary and intercultural space that Ortiz defined as “transculturation”, namely a zone in which different languages and cultures converge syncretically, without hierarchies or censorship.<sup>32</sup>

## 2.2. Towards a New Paradigm: English as a Translingual Practice and a Decolonial Option

The rethinking of the nature and role of English as a hegemonic language as introduced in the previous section can be traced back starting from the contributions by the socio-linguists Vertovec,<sup>33</sup> Blommaert and Rampton<sup>34</sup> who coined the term “superdiversity” to define the complexity generated by the migratory experience in the United Kingdom starting from the 1990s, and to highlight the change of migratory models:

[superdiversity] is a notion intended to underline a level and kind of complexity surpassing anything the country has previously experienced. Such a condition is distinguished by a dynamic interplay of variables among an increased number of new, small and scattered, multiple- origin, transnationally connected, socio-economically differentiated and legally stratified immigrants who have arrived over the last decade.<sup>35</sup>

The paradigm of superdiversity is also an epistemological one, considering that the emerging phenomena of social contact and diversification generated by globalization, mobility and migration also encouraged the proposal of new concepts, replacing that of “speech community”. One example is the term “supergroups” to define de-territorialised and transidiomatic communities of speakers that move within the new scenario of superdiversity.<sup>36</sup> These supergroups –an example of which may be the one that includes migrants and intercultural mediators who reciprocally resort to ELF in their conversations as a translingual practice– represent new social and linguistic groups that problematize the relationship between the notions of “linguistic community” (intended as a form of cultural development) and “nation-state” (intended as a political institution).

Against this background, this research proposes here the possibility of developing an ELF communication that can be recognized and even shared by both migrants and intercultural mediators. With this purpose, it might be worth specifying that “ELF” is a term including “the conventional notion of ‘fossilized interlanguages’, as well as of those varieties of English defined as pidgin and creole”, as

<sup>31</sup> Marco Jacquemet, “Transidiomatic Practices: Language and Power in the Age of Globalization”, *Language and Communication* 25 (2005), 257-277. His concept of idiomatic practices is particularly relevant to fleshing out the experience of cultural globalization, and the sociolinguistic disorder it entails, which cannot be understood solely through a dystopic vision of linguistic catastrophe, but demands that we also take into account the recombinant qualities of language mixing, hybridization and creolization.

<sup>32</sup> Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (1947) (Durham and London: Duke U.P., 1995).

<sup>33</sup> Steven Vertovec, “Super-diversity and Its Implications”, *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 29.6 (2007), 1024-1054.

<sup>34</sup> Jan Blommaert and Ben Rampton, “Language and Superdiversity”, *Diversities* 13 (2011), 1-20.

<sup>35</sup> Steven Vertovec, “Super-diversity and Its Implications”, 1024.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 1024-1054; Blommaert and Rampton, “Language and Superdiversity”, 1-20.



stated by Guido,<sup>37</sup> Seidlhofer,<sup>38</sup> Meierkord,<sup>39</sup> Cogo.<sup>40</sup> To Guido this awareness can guarantee communicative success that is essential to specialist interaction domains such as those related to intercultural mediators interacting with migrants.<sup>41</sup> In cases like this, the dialogic co-construction of an ELF discourse that is accessible and acceptable for the migrants may be obtained through linguistic and extra-linguistic strategies, which intercultural mediators can adopt during their interviews with migrants, not only for communicative purposes, but also to “accommodate” the migrant in the new country as shown in the next section. More specifically, Meierkord identifies a series of language features generated in the contact zones that can be summarized as: total correspondence to the rules of L1 English varieties;<sup>42</sup> transfer phenomena, development models and nativized forms; simplification, regularization and levelling processes. Simplification is but one of the language accommodation strategies adopted to ease communication or to enhance understanding.<sup>43</sup> Among others, it might be worth mentioning morphological adaptation through the use of simple grammar structures, lexical repetition for the sake of clarity and unambiguous messages,<sup>44</sup> reassuring tone of voice and pronunciation, slower elocution and length of both utterances and pauses.<sup>45</sup> However, accommodation strategies also include extra-linguistic components such as body language (e.g. smiling eyes, body positioning, gestures, facial expressions) and behavior – for example when ignoring (standard-violating) “mistakes” and redundancy. Hesitations and silences are often used strategically, too, as they are helpful when amending, clarifying or contextualizing a misunderstanding, according to what Firth defines as “let-it-pass” and “make-it-normal” principles.<sup>46</sup>

Both linguistic and extra-linguistic strategies may shape a sort of pragmatics of decoloniality<sup>47</sup> to enhance the role of ELF in contact zones as a collaborative negotiation practice that does not necessarily imply the vision of contact as a harmonic, neutral or apolitical zone. Contact zones as border zones are places where it is possible to experiment with both a dynamic and cultural exchange and the power asymmetries that make the interacting subjects’ experiences conflictual and even painful. The use of English as a translingual practice and decolonial option in migratory settings also reminds us of another recent theoretical paradigm elaborated by Japanese sociologist Yukio Tsuda: he describes global society as a hierarchically structured one, on top of which are L1 English speakers followed by L2 speakers, and speakers of English as a foreign language; the bottom includes those speakers who do not have any command of the language.<sup>48</sup> In particular, to contrast the threat represented by the sole use of English as a hegemonic language, Tsuda proposes a model defined as “the ecology of languages”<sup>49</sup> that calls for an

<sup>37</sup> Guido, *English as a Lingua Franca in Cross-cultural Immigration Domains*, 24.

<sup>38</sup> Seidlhofer, “Research Perspectives on Teaching English as a Lingua Franca”, 209-239, and Seidlhofer, *Understanding English as a Lingua Franca*.

<sup>39</sup> Christiane Meierkord, “Syntactic Variation in Interactions across International Englishes”, *English World-Wide*, 25.1 (2004), 109-132.

<sup>40</sup> Cogo, “Accommodating Difference in ELF Conversations: A Study of Pragmatic Strategies”, 254-273.

<sup>41</sup> Guido, *English as a Lingua Franca in Cross-cultural Immigration Domains*, 26.

<sup>42</sup> Christiane Meierkord, “Syntactic Variation in Interactions across International Englishes”, 128.

<sup>43</sup> Cogo, “Accommodating Difference in ELF Conversations”, 254.

<sup>44</sup> Anna Mauranen, “Hybrid Voices: English as the Lingua Franca of Academics”, in Kjersti Flottum et al., eds., *Language and Discipline Perspectives on Academic Discourse* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2007), 244-259.

<sup>45</sup> Mette Rudvin and Cinzia Spinzi, eds., *Mediazione linguistica e interpretariato. Regolamentazione, problematiche presenti e prospettive future in ambito giuridico* (Bologna: Clueb, 2013), 135-152.

<sup>46</sup> Alan Firth, “The Discursive Accomplishment of Normality: On ‘Lingua Franca’ English and Conversation Analysis”, *Journal of Pragmatics*, 26 (1996), 237-259.

<sup>47</sup> A pragmatics of decoloniality is proposed here by Taronna as an echo of “the grammar of decoloniality” envisioned by those scholars (Mignolo 2011; Kumaravadivelu, 2016; Veronelli, 2016) who have advised an ideological recuperation of indigenous, alternative, and local knowledges to produce more empowering English learning conditions. For references see note 54.

<sup>48</sup> Yulio Tsuda, “English Hegemony and English Divide”, 47-55.

<sup>49</sup> The expression was first used by Ernst Haugen in 1972 and was borrowed by Yukio Tsuda thirty years later. More specifically, the paradigm of language ecology is identified with the following features: respect for human rights, equality of communication



education to multilingualism through efficient and democratic strategies. Such strategies may be the above-mentioned ones of accommodation, aimed at spreading the use of English as a Lingua Franca without necessarily neutralizing the presence of other languages and cultures, providing speakers with an awareness of equality in communication, language rights, cultural and linguistic pluralism. The linguistic reflections proposed so far encourage an innovative theoretical and methodological approach, including analyses concerning the plurality and pluri-centrism that characterize English nowadays, in the growing and complex polyhedral nature of its contexts of use. As a consequence, we are guided to perceive and recognize the creative power of the new linguistic models born around English – a language that is becoming less and less monolithic and more adaptable for negotiation, as outlined by the decolonial linguist Pennycook who, in defining the new varieties of English as “plurilithic Englishes”, tries to systematize and problematize the principles and conditions that might shape these new variations of English (i.e. “Englishes”).<sup>50</sup> In particular, we accept Pennycook’s invitation to free ourselves from the academic obsession with reproducing circles, tubes and boxes – which has been done by linguists such as Kachru and McArthur for a long time.

All these theoretical assumptions seem to be evolving towards what decolonial linguist Canagarajah defines as “translingual practice”: one that, while recognizing norms and conventions established by dominant institutions and social groups within given contexts, is more closely focused on the fact that speakers can negotiate such norms according to their own repertoires and translingual practices.<sup>51</sup> In this perspective, since languages are not necessarily in conflict with each other but desirably complete each other, their interrelation has to be tied in more dynamic terms – abandoning the duality intrinsic in labels such as mono/multi, mono/pluri and mono/poly. The hybrid, permeable and translingual nature of ELF is experienced in the first person by numerous intercultural mediators and migrants, as shown in the empirical section of this study. The analysis of the excerpts in the next section foregrounds the emergence of experiential implications in the use of ELF in language mediation practices, but it also refers to a more specifically linguistic level that helps to re-think the concept of English itself as a Lingua Franca and contact practice. According to Canagarajah, English as a translingual and decolonial option needs to be regarded as a variety in its own right, moving and transforming along with the migration flows of subjects transiting through border zones and who, while interacting with language mediators, resort to personal English varieties.<sup>52</sup> Some of the excerpts also seem to echo Canagarajah’s motto according to which “we are all translinguals” in contact zones and we speak a flexible, contingent, unstable bridge language, suited to the cooperative co-construction of meaning, leading to successful intercultural communication.<sup>53</sup> A consequence stemming from this practice is not only the sense of ease and familiarity that the migrants may feel towards the Lingua Franca during the interviews, but also the creation of hybrid and inclusive language formulas for contact with other languages, reflecting both the re-territorialization needs and the will of the speakers.

Such considerations almost inevitably remind us of the various recommendations for reconciling the complex relationship between colonialism and the use of English, and for building openings for decolonial options.<sup>54</sup> In the words of Phillipson, decolonizing the English language requires us – in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s words,<sup>55</sup> to “decolonize our minds” in order to collectively identify its hegemonic

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rights, multilingualism, linguistic and cultural preservation, protection of national sovereignty, the stimulation of foreign-language learning (Tsuda, 2008).

<sup>50</sup> Pennycook, *English and the Discourses of Colonialism*, 194.

<sup>51</sup> Canagarajah, *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>54</sup> Kumaravadivelu, “The Decolonial Option in English Teaching”, 66-85; Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options* (Durham, NC: Duke U.P., 2011); and Gabriela A. Veronelli, “A Coalitional Approach to Theorizing Decolonial Communication”, *Hypatia*, 31.2 (2016), 404-420.

<sup>55</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *Decolonizing the Mind* (London: James Currey, 1986).

impositions and to respond justly.<sup>56</sup> Such foundational re-conceptualizations are central to designing such practices as language mediation in migratory contexts which present decolonial options, of which the prioritizing of “critical intercultural dialogues and local-to-local connections” is “imperative”.<sup>57</sup> In line with these re-conceptualizations, the use of ELF as a translingual and a decolonial option also reflects both Kumaravadivelu<sup>58</sup> and Flores and Rosa’s<sup>59</sup> model known as a “postmethod” which seeks to present an alternative to the dominant model of the standard and proper English. Indeed, ELF can share as follows some of the characteristics distinctive of the postmethod model: the parameters of particularity, practicality and possibility, the local context and repertoire, the objective of empowering speakers to practice the communicative forms of the intercultural dialogues and local-to-local connections that shape their lives as post-colonial, migrant, translingual or de-territorialized subjects.<sup>60</sup> Finally, the importance of thinking from the decolonial perspective emerges as an important theoretical and spatial site to begin conceptualizing new creative linguistic and cultural possibilities.

### 2.3. Code-Switching in ELF Settings

Code-switching (henceforth CS) represents a very important factor within any communicative event and, most of all, among people who can master different languages at different levels: ELF itself, as Klimpfinger states, “per definition involves typically three languages: the speaker’s first language and English”.<sup>61</sup> Despite its pivotal role, little attention has been paid to the use of CS on the part of multilingual couples, and the few studies dealing with this have concentrated on the analysis of exchanges in informal contexts of interaction. Mauranen sheds light on the functions served by CS in ELF encounters and points to two main roles played by CS, i.e. (1) displaying social and interactive properties of the communicative event, thanks to which CS helps the speaker emphasize certain aspects which s/he believes to be important, and (2) characterizing the cognitive process which is taking place in the conversation (“cognitive slips”).<sup>62</sup> Among the very first scholars dealing with ELF couples is Pietikäinen who identifies six main functions carried out by CS in ELF exchanges, i.e. (1) demonstrating use of a language, (2) automatic code-switching, (3) replacing or clarifying unfamiliarities, (4) replacing non-translatables, (5) specifying addressees, and (6) emphasizing the message.<sup>63</sup> The analysis of CS in ELF couples is later further investigated again by Pietikäinen,<sup>64</sup> with an analysis of interactions between couples using English as their lingua franca highlights how speakers and, more specifically, ELF couples tend to automatically switch from a language to another without even being aware of it according to a process that she defines “subconscious switches of language”;<sup>65</sup> she also notices how CS actually facilitates the construction of meaning without preventing the interlocutor from understanding the

<sup>56</sup> Robert Phillipson, “The Linguistic Imperialism”, 39.

<sup>57</sup> Gabriela A. Veronelli, “A Coalitional Approach to Theorizing Decolonial Communication”, *Hypatia*, 31.2 (2016), 404-420.

<sup>58</sup> Kumaravadivelu, “The Postmethod Condition: (E)merging Strategies for Second/Foreign Language Teaching”, *TESOL Quarterly*, 28.1 (1994), 27-48, and B. Kumaravadivelu, *Beyond Methods: Macrostrategies for Language Teaching* (Hartford, CT: Yale U.P., 2003).

<sup>59</sup> Nelson Flores and Jonathan Rosa, “Undoing Appropriateness: Raciolinguistic Ideologies and Language Diversity in Education”, *Harvard Educational Review*, 85 (2015), 149-71.

<sup>60</sup> Kumaravadivelu, *Beyond Methods*, 544.

<sup>61</sup> Theresa Klimpfinger, “‘She’s Mixing the two Languages Together’. Forms and Functions of Code-switching in English as a Lingua Franca”, in Anna Mauranen and Elina Ranta, eds., *English as a Lingua Franca: Studies and Findings* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 348-371.

<sup>62</sup> Anna Mauranen, “Lingua Franca Discourse in Academic Contexts: Shaped by Complexity”, in John Flowerdew, ed., *Discourse in Context: Contemporary Applied Linguistics* 3 (London: Continuum, 2013), 225-245.

<sup>63</sup> Kaisa S. Pietikäinen, *English as a Lingua Franca Couples in Interview: Code-switching Stimuli* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Newcastle University MA thesis, 2012).

<sup>64</sup> Kaisa S. Pietikäinen, “ELF Couples and Automatic Code-switching”, *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 3.1 (2014), 1-26.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 9.

conversational content and thus recognizes that in the future CS may become automatic to some extent by virtue of a “linguistic relaxedness” principle.

In the light of the above-mentioned studies, the present paper attempts to demonstrate that unlike the automatic component which has emerged from previous studies, CS in multicultural encounters may rather represent – with reference to our study corpus – a decolonial option, a self-conscious way of (co-)constructing meaning and identity in migration encounters – as Myers-Scotton had already emphasized, a marked set of code choices which are made in order to index Rights and Obligations (ROs) with respect to a given community code.<sup>66</sup> The migrant, within this framework, appears to “challenge” an already-existing normative community code in favor of new ROs.

### 3. Data Collection and Methodology

The corpus that has been taken as a reference point for the present study is the English as a Lingua Franca in Migration Domains corpus (henceforth the ELF MiDo corpus),<sup>67</sup> a selection of 10 semi-structured interviews (approximately 45 minutes each) between asylum seekers and intercultural mediators in both institutional and non-institutional encounters. The content of the interviews mainly focuses on positive as well as negative aspects of the migrant’s experience upon arrival in Italy, on the migrant’s journey across the Mediterranean and any unpleasant episodes which they might have come across. The interviews, which were conducted within the activities of the local CIR (*Consiglio Italiano per i Rifugiati*, Italian Council for Refugees, Lecce, Italy), were characterized by the use of English as a common language, i.e. a lingua franca for mutual understanding among people belonging to different lingua-cultural backgrounds.<sup>68</sup> Migrants came from Mali, Libya and Ghana, with only a couple of them coming from Pakistan. Their backgrounds were rather diversified, with some of them escaping difficult situations and war in their home country and some others crossing Italy in order to reach countries like Germany. Their reasons for addressing CIR were mainly related to their search for job opportunities either in Lecce or in the neighborhood, their requests for asylum, permit to stay and family reunion. The following table contains a breakdown of the study corpus accompanied by some relevant information concerning the topic of the conversations as well as the speakers’ origin:

	No. words	Speaker’s origin	Topic
#1	2,803	Mali	culture; job opportunities; migration
#2	3,055	Ghana	migration; permit to stay; family
#3	2,841	Ghana	family; leisure activities; money
#4	3,989	Mali	hardship of life; problems; migration
#5	3,277	Mali	school; family reunification
#6	2,456	Ghana	home country; host country; culture
#7	3,466	Ghana	money; family; children

<sup>66</sup> Carol Myers-Scotton, “A Theoretical Introduction to the Markedness Model”, in Carol Myers-Scotton, ed., *Codes and Consequences: Choosing Linguistic Varieties* (New York and Oxford: Oxford U.P., 1998).

<sup>67</sup> Centonze, *Assessing the Feasibility of (Semi-)Automated Pragmatic Annotation in ELF Domains*.

<sup>68</sup> Barbara Seidlhofer, “Closing a Conceptual Gap: The Case for a Description of English as a Lingua Franca”, *International Journal of Applied Linguistics*, 11 (2001), 133-158.

#8	2,279	Mali	everyday life; family; home country
#9	4,765	Mali	family; children; home country; reunification
#10	3,971	Ghana	culture and traditions; home vs. host country
Tot.	32,902		

Table 1. Breakdown of the ELF MiDo corpus.<sup>69</sup>

Given the highly-sensitive data collected for research reasons, all interviews were first anonymized and then transcribed. The transcription of the exchanges was carried out following Jefferson's glossary of transcript symbols,<sup>70</sup> which represented a preliminary phase prior to the annotation process; this final step concerning the pragmatic annotation turned out to be crucial for the analysis of speech acts in multicultural settings (which represented the object of another study):<sup>71</sup> as will be seen in the examples illustrated in Section 4, after a preliminary transcription phase following Jefferson's indications, the ELF MiDo corpus was also pragmatically annotated by means of a semi-automated software tool, i.e. the *Dialogue Annotation Research Tool* (DART)<sup>72</sup> in order for the corpus to be easily interrogated and made accessible in a digital format. Although the present study does not focus on speech acts in ELF encounters but rather aims at identifying CS as a decolonizing practice in ELF environments, it is possible to observe excerpts of the pragmatically-annotated conversational turns in Section 4. The digitalization of the corpus allowed us to identify CS patterns for decolonizing practices in ELF encounters, where ELF and, in a much broader sense, English was not used as a hegemonic language but rather appears to be a means for shaping one's own identity within the conversational turns. The following section aims at providing examples for this specific function attributed to CS in ELF interactions. In addition to this, in the excerpts of the interviews which constitute the object of our study we shall see the extent to which exchanges between migrants and asylum seekers do not encourage monolingual usage but rather tend to favor the use of "translingual practices", in Canagarajah's terms,<sup>73</sup> at different interactional levels.

#### 4. Decolonizing Strategies in ELF Encounters: Code-Switching Findings

As the object of the present analysis is the exploration of CS as a decolonial option in ELF domains, instances of CS were isolated and sorted out following the categories of CS function highlighted by Mauranen.<sup>74</sup> It goes without saying that instances for CS across the study corpus display lower figures with respect to other discourse elements and phenomena; however, as Rastier states, a corpus is not

<sup>69</sup> Centonze, "Illocutionary Force and Perlocutionary Effect Recognition in the (Semi-)Automated Pragmatic Annotation of ELF Spoken Discourse", 133-144.

<sup>70</sup> Gail Jefferson, "Glossary of Transcript Symbols with an Introduction", in Gene H. Lerner, ed., *Conversation Analysis: Studies from the First Generation* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 2004), 13-31.

<sup>71</sup> Centonze, "Illocutionary Force and Perlocutionary Effect Recognition in the (Semi-)Automated Pragmatic Annotation of ELF Spoken Discourse", 133-144.

<sup>72</sup> Martin Weisser, *DART-Dialogue Annotation Research Tool*, 32bit Windows (2015), [http://martinweisser.org/ling\\_soft.html#DART](http://martinweisser.org/ling_soft.html#DART), accessed 25 November 2020.

<sup>73</sup> Canagarajah, *Translingual Practice: Global Englishes and Cosmopolitan Relations*.

<sup>74</sup> Mauranen, "Lingua Franca Discourse in Academic Contexts: Shaped by Complexity", 225-245.

representative of the language but it has to be seen in relation to the aims for which it is explored.<sup>75</sup> The following Table 2 summarizes the distribution of CS across the study corpus and classifies them according to the functions highlighted Pietikäinen.<sup>76</sup>

CS in the ELF MiDo Corpus (38 instances)					
#1 demonstrating use of a language	0	#3 replacing or clarifying unfamiliarities	1	#5 specifying addressees	0
#2 automatic CS	0	#4 replacing non-translatables	0	#6 emphasizing the message	37

Table 2. Instances of CS in the study corpus.

In the analysis which was carried out in ten selected interviews the most recurrent pattern in the narration of the traumatic events on the part of the asylum seeker was CS with the function of emphasizing the message (#6, 37 instances found), followed by only one instance of CS used for replacing or clarifying unfamiliarities (#3). The sole instance of CS clarifying unfamiliarities can be observed below, where there is a misunderstanding between what is conceptualized as *pommes* (English: apples; Italian: *mele*), *pommes de terre* in French (English: potatoes; Italian: *patate*), and *pommes* in Italian (English: chips; Italian: *patatine*). The migrant resorts to a CS strategy in order to make the concept more accessible to the Italian intercultural mediator who might get the wrong end of the stick. The choices operated are represented below:

```
<frag n="492" sp-act="refer" mode="partial-decl">
in i east wid de pan de de bread <punc type="stop" />
</frag>
</turn>
<turn n="298" speaker="b">
<yes n="494" sp-act="acknowledge">
yeah <pause />
</yes>
<frag n="495" sp-act="acknowledge" mode="awareness">
and den i know <pause /> ?? <pause /> ?? pomme<pause /> i mean i like pomme in my country no pommes yeah
</frag>
</turn>
<turn n="299" speaker="a">
<frag n="496" sp-act="reqInfo" mode="query">
potatoes <punc type="query" />
</frag>
</turn>
```

In these turns, the migrant is talking about cooking traditions in both home and host countries. In order to clarify and disambiguate the meaning of the word *pomme* which the intercultural mediator could misunderstand in his/her native language (Italian), the intercultural mediator resorts to ELF in order to explain the type of *pommes* which s/he likes (“I like *pomme* in my country”) and, by providing the

<sup>75</sup> François Rastier, “Enjeux épistémologiques de la Linguistique de Corpus”, *Texto!* (2004), [http://www.revuetexto.net/Inedits/Rastier/Rastier\\_Enjeux.html](http://www.revuetexto.net/Inedits/Rastier/Rastier_Enjeux.html), accessed 25 November 2020.

<sup>76</sup> Pietikäinen, *English as a Lingua Franca Couples in Interview: Code-switching Stimuli*.

expression “in my country” s/he disambiguates – or at least s/he makes an attempt to – the semantic meaning of the term *pomme*.

The CS in the exchange provided below represents an interesting example, in that it also incorporates the “iconic” properties of the turn itself: namely, the Italian-English CS in the example below is intended to convey a sense of temporal and spatial displacement on the part of the migrant and, at the same time, aims at clarifying a previous misunderstanding related to the reasons why the migrant is escaping from his/her home country. The *adesso*/there opposition emphasizes the sense of displacement and confusion concerning a situation which is 1) from a temporal point of view, very close (and this is highlighted by the adverb *adesso*) but, at the same time, 2) from a spatial point of view, very far (dere... problem dere). The sense of displacement and worry which is present in these turns is backed up by the sentence following this passage (“...e: i go dere maybe somebody kill me”).

```
<turn n="60" speaker="a">
ok <overlap type="stop" />
because you dont have the documents <punc type="stop" />
</turn>
<turn n="61" speaker="b">
no not de problem document but i have problem dere<pause />adesso problem dere<pause />e: i go dere maybe
somebody kill me <punc type="stop"/>
</turn>
<turn n="62" speaker="a">
ah ok <punc type="stop" />
</turn>
<turn n="63" speaker="b">
yes <punc type="stop" />
</turn>
```

The following instance illustrates the subsequent interaction between the migrant and the intercultural mediator, always relating to the disambiguation of *pomme*. Here the use of CS becomes evident and eventually makes it clear to the intercultural mediator what the term *pomme* actually refers to – *mela* (apple) rather than *potatoes*. In particular, CS here is used to provide some direct correspondence between the Italian term *mela* and the English term *apple*.

```
<turn n="300" speaker="b">
<no n="497" sp-act="answer-negate">
no
</no>
<frag n="498" sp-act="elab-state" mode="decl">
mela <punc type="stop" />
</frag>
</turn>
<turn n="302" speaker="b">
<yes n="501" sp-act="confirm-acknowledge">
<overlap type="end" /> si mela <pause /> yeah
</yes>
</turn>
<turn n="307" speaker="a">
<frag n="509" sp-act="confirm-state" mode="decl">
mela pomme is apple <overlap type="start" /> in english <punc type="stop" />
</frag>
```



Other less widespread translingual practices in ELF in migration encounters are represented by repetitions and paraphrases in dialogues. These both appear to be a linguistic strategy in order to clarify or disambiguate any context in which either the intercultural mediator or the migrant do not seem to fully understand what is taking place:

```
<frag n="50" sp-act="state" polarity="negative" topic="time" mode="decl">
you a <pause /> you as a black man in libia you are not safe <pause /> even when you sleep inside dey can come
anytime <punc type="stop" />
</frag>
</turn>
<turn n="34" speaker="a">
<frag n="51" sp-act="" polarity="positive" mode="disflu">
<overlap type="start" /> and
</frag>
</turn>
<turn n="35" speaker="b">
<frag n="52" sp-act="state" polarity="positive" topic="direction" mode="decl">
<overlap type="end" /> dey can take you away <punc type="stop" />
</frag>
</turn>
<turn n="36" speaker="a">
<frag n="53" sp-act="echo" polarity="positive" topic="direction">
<overlap type="start" /> dey can take you away
</frag>
</turn>
<turn n="37" speaker="b">
<decl n="54" sp-act="expressPossibility" polarity="positive" mode="poss3">
and they could do
</decl>
<q-wh n="55" sp-act="reqConfirm" polarity="positive" mode="exclaim-partial-query">
<overlap type="start" /> what <punc type="query" />
</q-wh>
</turn>
<turn n="38" speaker="a">
<frag n="56" sp-act="confirm-state" polarity="positive" mode="reason-decl">
<overlap type="end" /> dey can take you dey can take you to prison because youre a black man <punc type="stop" />
</frag>
```

In the excerpt provided above, the subject of the dialogue exchanges is the reason why the migrant ran away from his/her own home country. What is taking place here is a repetition of turns in order to emphasize the fear that the migrant has and the extent to which the situation which s/he experienced in his/her country was very dangerous and risky (e.g. “dey can take you away ... dey can take you away”); moreover, the “dey can take you away” paraphrase is further re-used and expanded in the last turn of the selected exchanges above, which includes the motivations and the stigmatization of the migrant’s condition so that it becomes even clearer to the intercultural mediator (“dey can take you dey can take you to prison because youre a black man”). Hence, repetition here, drawing on Lichtkoppler, combines

the double function of “utterance-developing repetition” as well as ensuring accuracy of understanding.<sup>77</sup>

The last extract of the ones provided throughout the present contribution offers an instance of paraphrase:

```
<frag n="26" sp-act="" polarity="positive" topic="day" mode="report-reason-preference2">
i really enjoyed being in libia because i was every day <unclear /> you cant do whatever you like as you <unclear
/>
</frag>
</turn>
<turn n="18" speaker="a">
<decl n="27" sp-act="reqInfo" polarity="positive" mode="preference2-query">
<vocal type="laugh" /> why couldnt you do what you like <punc type="query" />
</decl>
</turn>
<frag n="26" sp-act="" polarity="positive" topic="day" mode="report-reason-preference2">
i really enjoyed being in libia because i was every day <unclear /> you cant do whatever you like as you <unclear
/>
</frag>
</turn>
<turn n="18" speaker="a">
<decl n="27" sp-act="reqInfo" polarity="positive" mode="preference2-query">
<vocal type="laugh" />why couldnt you do what you like<punc type="query" />
</decl>
</turn>
<turn n="19" speaker="b">
<frag n="28" sp-act="answer-state" polarity="negative" topic="problem-location" mode="report-correct-decl">
becau you know a in libia theres no freedom in libia <pause /> ?: even in dat country dere was problem in dat
country during di regime of geddafi <pause /> during di regime of geddafi i was in libia <punc type="stop" />
</frag>
</turn>
<turn n="20" speaker="a">
<dm n="29" sp-act="acknowledge" mode="tag">
ok <punc type="stop" />
</dm>
</turn>
<turn n="21" speaker="b">
<frag n="30" sp-act="state" polarity="negative" topic="problem" mode="report-correct-preference2-decl">
and dere was war dere was problem i was in libia even <unclear /> black <unclear /> black man you are not free in
libia to do whatever you want to <punc type="stop" />
</frag>
```

More specifically, the excerpt above has to do with the explanation of the reasons for leaving the home country on the part of the migrant. After an initial and rather quick conclusion (i really enjoyed being in libia because i was every day <unclear /> you cant do whatever you like as you <unclear /></frag>), the intercultural mediator asks for more details about the migrant’s statement (“why couldnt you do what you like”) and the answer provided by the migrant is a clarification of the situation by resorting to paraphrase strategies (“becau you know a in libia theres no freedom in libia <pause /> even in dat country dere was problem in dat country during di regime of geddafi <pause /> during di regime of geddafi i

<sup>77</sup> Julia Lichtkoppler, “‘Male. Male.’ – ‘Male?’ – The Sex Is Male. The Role of Repetitions in English as a Lingua Franca Conversations”, *Vienna English Working Papers* 16.1 (2007), 39-65.

was in libia”): at the beginning, the statement is rather general (“becau you know a in libia theres no freedom in libia”), then the migrant specifies, by means of a paraphrase why there is no freedom in Libya (“even in dat country dere was problem in dat country during di regime of geddafi”) and then moves on to create a connection between the lack of freedom in Libya and why this affects him (“during di regime of geddafi i was in libia”). Paraphrasing in the example provided above serves more than a simple need in the exchange, as it is not just a way for explaining the actual situation of the migrant in his/her home country, but is also aimed at revealing more information about the personal status of the migrant him/herself and putting emphasis on the personal and identity dimensions of the migrant’s story.

By considering the excerpts illustrated below which consider face-to-face interactions between asylum seekers and intercultural mediators, one could say that the use of ELF within such social practices and, more specifically, the use of CS, repetition and paraphrase in order to talk about personal experience in migration contexts may still be considered one of the most recurrent features within decolonizing contexts. Here, English eventually no longer appears as a monolithic tool for self-identification but rather becomes a “virtual language”, in Seidlhofer and Widdowson’s words, or “meaning potential”, which “... serves the variable and ever-changing communicative needs of language users”.<sup>78</sup> In the very specific case of the examples taken from the MiDo corpus, ELF acquires the function of decolonizing tool, a set of pragma-linguistic choices which, in the very case of CS, allows for contamination between the different lingua-cultural backgrounds of the speakers involved in the communicative event. Hence, as meaning potential the use of ELF which is negotiated and constructed in the conversational exchanges by means of accommodation strategies does not appear to be an incorrect or inappropriate choice, but rather represents the starting point for a re-consideration of the dynamics for language processes. Drawing on Flores and Rosa,<sup>79</sup> one could argue once again that with respect to the excerpts analyzed in this study, the local character of the conversation exchanges is actually re-considered as fertile ground for new decolonized forms of identity and meaning, thus dismantling the misconception which classifies certain pragma-linguistic choices as more appropriate than others. If we adopt terminology, one could say that ELF actually plays the privileged role of “border language”<sup>80</sup> casting doubt on colonized constructions and ideologies.

## 5. Concluding Remarks

By means of the case studies illustrated here, the present contribution has attempted to provide a starting point for a wider reflection on language and, more specifically, ELF use as a translingual practice and a decolonial option in migratory contexts. The intercultural encounters engendered by migration flows and marked by the use of ELF have cast doubt on issues of appropriateness and correctness in favor of a decolonized space, in which biased and “raciolinguistic” ideologies<sup>81</sup> are put aside and identities are re-developed and re-shaped accordingly. In the configuration of this decolonized linguascape, the migrants and the mediators interactions embrace the local connection that turns to be a situational context in which each of the interactive parts bring their own socio-cultural backgrounds and influence the ultimate purpose of the speech event. Such socio-cultural backgrounds and repertoires are reflected in the translingual use of ELF and, with regards to the instances analyzed in the present study, repetition, CS and paraphrase appear to be among the commonest expedients for the construction of accommodation strategies in the discourses of decoloniality. It follows that ELF encourages the *mis-en-scène* of self-interpretation concerning one’s own linguistic and cultural identity, and promotes counter-

<sup>78</sup> Barbara Seidlhofer and Henry G. Widdowson, “Competence, Capability and Virtual Language”, *Lingue e Linguaggi*, 24 (2017), 23-36.

<sup>79</sup> Flores and Rosa, “Undoing Appropriateness”, 149-71.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

discourses aimed at disrupting misconceptions. This reflection could be of course extended to further domains - e.g. the pedagogical field, in which students belonging to different linguacultural backgrounds come into contact and racist phenomena put at serious risk any attempt for integration. Developing a decolonial counter-discourse of acceptance and accommodation - one which is not only linguistic but first and foremost cultural - would definitely be possible if we encourage and provide “border language” practices where possible. Furthermore, the use of a corpus-linguistic approach for the analysis of the data would be revealing for future investigation carried out both quantitatively and qualitatively: the digitalization of the dataset and its implementation would allow us to draw more general conclusions about emerging patterns in multicultural encounters; it would also represent a very useful means for the training of intercultural mediators by providing guidelines for interaction in cross-cultural domains in order to avoid the consolidation of prejudiced practices.

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Filippo Menozzi, *World Literature, Non-Synchronism and the Politics of Time*  
(Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 213 pp., ISBN 978-3-030-41697-3

Reviewed by Lellida Marinelli

Filippo Menozzi's *World Literature, Non-Synchronism and the Politics of Time* is part of the series New Comparisons in World Literature edited by Pablo Mukherjee and Neil Lazarus which publishes works aimed at understanding how literature reflects and represents new modes of existence created by globalization. Menozzi's aim is to present non-synchronism as a critical tool to read literary works and as a means to redefine and therefore change the perception of the narratives of the peripheries of world economy.

As the author points out, the work is grounded in Warwick Research Collective's definition of "world literature", by which it is meant not a creation of a specific canon or a way of reading texts, but rather a way of seeing literature as the "register" of what happens in a globalized world where the hegemonic mode of capitalist production has defined modernity as a "historical regime" (5). Modernity, thus, is not represented by the "West" but is a product of global capitalism. Within this context, Menozzi introduces the key concept of non-synchronism, first expressed by German philosopher Ernst Bloch in the essay "Nonsynchronism and the Obligation to Its Dialectics", written in 1932. Bloch's observation of Germany in the 1930s as an incompletely capitalist society, in which, besides, non-timely myths of Golden Ages and of the past survived, led him to interpret this situation as a possible explanation of the rise of fascism in Europe. In Menozzi's view, "Bloch's essay can be read as a plea to consider the importance of these non-synchronic elements and to re-channel them into a conscious class struggle able to subvert both fascism and capitalism" (15). Menozzi re-functionalises the significance of non-synchronous elements, which can be channelled into class struggle to subvert both fascism and capitalism. As a critical concept, non-synchronism calls forth other notions which are not strictly literary, and, after analyzing novels where "the representational space acts as a conjuncture of uneven temporalities" (36), the concluding chapter fittingly touches on the differences with anachronism, unequal development, *longue durée*, *kairos* as well as with the Trotskyian concept of permanent revolution.

On the basis of these core ideas, non-synchronism can then be understood as a frame which unveils the unevenness of the hegemonic homogenizing tendency of capitalism at the periphery of the world-system. Menozzi observes how contemporary political rhetoric across the world has used narratives of returning to a better past as a form of political mobilisation, which he calls cultural contemporary nostalgia: a recycling of symbols and maxims of the past which feeds upon the perception of an unstable present. But there can be other implications of the 'return to the past': Menozzi's main argument is that the "appearance of non-contemporaneous elements in the present should not be dismissed as nostalgic survival or retrospective longing, a mere sign of obscurantism and regression.... the emergence of non-contemporaneous remnants – the conjuncture of diverging temporalities in the present ... – testifies to the way in which the global expansion of capitalism has redefined the very concept and experience of time" (4). This is especially true of the novels chosen as case studies, in which the "idioms of nostalgia" (4) – the residual elements that have escaped, so to speak, the forces

of economic production – reveal the uneven dynamics of capitalism and testify that “in peripheral zones of global capitalism, the temporal consciousness of the present is inhabited by multiple layers and strata” (4). Against the general notion of a single modernity, multiple perceptions of time may indeed be signals of the discontinuous condition of modernity as theorised by Henri Lefebvre. However, world literature, in the sense Menozzi clarifies at the outset – a sense divergent from Damrosch’s view of world literature as referring to books actively circulating beyond their original national boundaries – has a systemic perspective which does not lose focus on totality. Literature becomes the archive of social, political and, interestingly, spatio-temporal dimensions of the periphery rather than the centre of the system. Such a perspective, according to Menozzi, allows commensurability and is an alternative to the acknowledgment of rupture and difference adopted by most post-colonial theory. At the same time, it recognises the differences and does not oversimplify the condition of peripheral literary products as merely derivative. In Menozzi’s words: “the idea of a singular modernity feeding into the discourse of world literature offers a productive tool for assembling, connecting and transmitting different historical experiences” (11).

The view of world-literature as a register, as the Warwick Research Collective has emphasized, points to the fact that fictional texts always convey multiple layers and strata and, at the same time, are products existing in a historical reality. In discussing non-synchronism from a literary point of view, Menozzi engages with the notion of peripheral modernism as defined by the WRC and Benita Parry. The aesthetic forms of peripheral modernism “express historical, economic and social unevenness through the combination of differing formal strategies and elements” (33) and question the perception and experience of time in world-literary works. Within this perspective, the use of literary devices that manipulate time are not mere experiments with form, as in modernist aesthetics, but they rather acquire a deeper historical and political significance. Menozzi explains how peripheral modernism serves him as epistemological ground for his notion of non-synchronous aesthetic in order to overcome a stance of rupture and disjuncture and to state the dialectical relationship between what he calls “archaic forms” (34) and modernity. It is important to mention that non-synchronism is concerned with the intersection of both stylistic devices and thematic concerns in order to provide a deeper understanding of the rift between the local and the systemic.

Menozzi dedicates one chapter to each of the five contemporary novels he analyses: *Nampally Road* by Meena Alexander (1991), *The Gypsy Goddess* by Meena Kandasamy (2014), M. G. Vassanji’s *The Gunny Sack* (1989), Toyin Falola’s memoir *Counting the Tiger’s Teeth* (2014), and *Green Lion* by Henrietta Rose-Innes (2015). In Menozzi’s reading these texts are examples of what he terms non-synchronous aesthetic. The author productively places the narrative elements related to time, such as prolepsis, digression and embedded narratives, within the broader context of global capitalism, at the forefront of which the peripheries stand out. For each novel the focus is on elements that involve temporality in different ways. Menozzi lucidly analyses how nostalgic returns of the past have a contrasting value (“Dislocating Time: *Nampally Road* and the Politics of Non-Synchronism”, 47-73), or how reframing temporality uncovers “the material conditions of peripherality, which are at the heart of world literature as a paradigm” (107) (“Beyond Diaspora and Nostalgia: M. G. Vassanji’s *Asynchronous Images*”, 103-131). Or, for example in *The Gypsy Goddess* by Meena Kandasamy – a novel on the Kilvenmani massacre of agricultural workers on strike in south India in 1968 – Menozzi analyses the tension between the narrator’s will to report more than one story and the necessity to



write one, single story to provide a reliable truth. About the novel, he also observes that rather than being divided into chapters and following chronological linearity, it is divided into “grounds”, as in archaeological excavations, and constructed by using a stratigraphic process. In Menozzi’s interpretation, Kandasamy’s use and critique of metafiction, which questions the fictional representation of history, overcomes the postmodern limitation of being a “mere play with textuality” (88). Menozzi lucidly shows how literary forms can express the “combination and togetherness of these different strata of time” (79) and how techniques, rather than being mere ends in themselves, can be used as critical tools for writing.

Another interesting narratological element singled out by Menozzi is peripeteia in *Counting the Tiger’s Teeth* by Toyin Falola, a memoir which tellingly does not follow chronological order and overtly criticizes historical narratives. Menozzi interprets Falola’s recurrent use of peripeteia as a means to construe tension between diegesis and the time of remembering framed by the memoir, as well as a means to intersect the narration of the Agbekoya rebellion and a mythical Yoruba past. The chapter dedicated to Henrietta Rose-Innes’s *Green Lion* (161-190), instead, expands on issues of world-ecology. As Menozzi explains, the novel can be read as an account of the “sixth extinction” of the age of “Capitalocene”, a concept he draws from Jason W. Moore. He discusses how the failure of the conservation of a species illustrates the “temporality of capital accumulation” (166). The choice of this last novel is interesting as it demonstrates how non-synchronism can also be found in texts dealing with the tight implications of world economy with ecology at different levels of meaning. Such forms, according to Menozzi, manifest the militant need to recover a “non-alienated relationship between humans and nature” (166).

What seems most intriguing and adds value to the research on world literature is the way Menozzi draws concepts from philosophy and history to read literary expression. This book is clearly positioned at the heart of current theory and provides a critical understanding of how literary works can become militant spaces denouncing the unevenness of capitalism through a reworking of time in fiction.



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Margherita Laera, *Theatre and Translation* (Red Globe Press, 2019),  
104 pp., ISBN 978-1-137-61161-1

*Reviewed by Carmela Esposito*

All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts.  
William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

Life and Theatre do not just co-exist. The former is simply not possible without the latter. In a constant exercise of mirroring, nurturing and harbouring each other, all that is 'represented' is always true, and although all that is 'staged' may be fictional, it is by no means false. As James Joyce once put it, "drama arises spontaneously out of life and is coeval with it" ("Drama and Life", 1900), implying how the underlying whimsicalities of humanity's circumstances and vicissitudes necessarily blur the lines between life and *mise-en-scène*. What often fails to be acknowledged is how those mechanisms of intersection allow us, in the words of Jerzy Marian Grotowski, "to cross the frontiers between you and me" ("Holiday", 1972-73). To transcend the notion of the single 'self', to fully embrace 'otherness' and to trade 'individuality' with 'plurality' are indeed the sort of negotiations that are at the basis of the translation process. Thus, theatre and translation as arts of widespread domain share a language that is somewhat 'habitable', and continuously evolving, moving with the times, exhibiting and emphasising cultural diversities and similarities.

Margherita Laera is a multiple award winning, Senior Lecturer in Drama and Theatre at the University of Kent in Canterbury, where she is co-director of the European Theatre Research Network. "Theatre And" is a Macmillan International series edited by Jen Harvie and Dan Rebellato, which presents an innovative yet readily accessible multi-disciplinary approach to theatre scholarship. Laera covers the subject splendidly, crafting a well-structured, sharp study that not once shies away from discussing the complexities of the latest critical thought and debate, hence making *Theatre and Translation* one of the many flagships in the collection at present.

The book, which epitomizes a study on theatrical translation as well as a more theoretical reflection on the similarities between theatre and translation, is conceptually sectioned into three parts, namely: "What? Defining Translation", "How? The Practice and Politics of Translation" and "Why? The Case for more Translations". Featuring a brief but enlightening foreword by Caridad Svich, Laera's keen assertions are made in almost a storytelling style, without compromising academic rigour. In the preface, while recognising her position as "a white, middle-class European and a full-time member of staff at a British university" (7) the author also openly describes her sensibility as that of "a feminist scholar, a practising theatre translator, and an Italian migrant who writes and lives her daily life in a language/culture other than her native one and has consequently developed a mixed identity" (8). The recurring metaphors of the actor/translator who is faced with the challenges of speaking/performing *for/on behalf* of others, establish the foundations and the thought-provoking leitmotif of the book,

which leaves us with a compelling sense of urgency to act and defeat the domesticating tendencies in modern theatre translation.

Drawing from accurately up-to-date theoretical frameworks, Laera addresses and reassesses the cognisance of literal equivalence by analysing the paradoxes and conundrums of translating even the simplest of expressions. For instance, offering a “cup of tea”, as comforting as it may sound to British people, “does not map on to other language/culture combinations” (13) as tea could easily be associated with symbols of colonialism and exploitation in a different context, such as India, where it was “introduced as a crop by British colonialists” (14). Thereupon, Laera references her own personal experience, giving a further example of a different point of view: “my Southern Italian granny would never have dreamt of offering me tea (an entirely alien drink to her)” (15).

The first section is impregnated with the notion that “all theatre is a process of translation” (19) and Laera promptly provides evidence to this argument by investigating Jacques Lecoq’s actor training exercises through ‘mimodynamic processes’ so that actors could “learn how to instinctively ‘be’ a concept, colour, poem or painting rather than to describe them” (22) and “to be like translators so transparent and exact that they would be able to embody the so called ‘spirit of the original’” (*ibid*). Translation-inspired exercises are at the core of theatre practitioner Augusto Boal’s philosophy as well, who conversely believes that stripping meaning down to its ‘essence’ is not necessarily the only way to convey accessibility to everyone. As “the word spoken is never the word heard” (24), multilingualism and translation can admittedly empower audiences by turning spectators into ‘spect-actors’. By lucidly examining the power differentials ‘at play’ in the 2016 exchange programme of the Royal Shakespeare Company with China, Laera addresses Edward Said’s postcolonial theories and proceeds to denounce the conservative dynamics of inward-looking taste that locks up cultural borders and endorses the appetite for Anglo-American cultural products. To expand audience horizons means “giving up a portion of one’s soft power [...] provincializing the west” (41). The illuminating analysis continues by questioning the concept of ‘performability’ which Susan Bassnett affirmed to be “undefinable and therefore to be dropped in order to avoid marginalizing translators any further” (48). Ergo, the main contention of the second section is to illustrate how ‘performability’ is merely an excuse to prevent innovation by “fuelling a wholesale eradication of otherness from the target text” (49). With a lucid presentation of Lawrence Venuti’s critique of ethnocentrism in translation, Laera makes the fair point that foreignization techniques may represent a valid alternative to domesticating techniques in order to make the other visible, and abolish cultural favouritism, which conceals the fact that “fluency and readability boost sales while busting difference” (50).

Citing Marvin Carlson’s classification of the relationships between the culturally familiar and the culturally foreign, Laera fittingly traces a comparison between plays and people via the representation of reciprocal hospitality: “through theatre translation we receive the stories of others in our home, welcoming them as their hosts, and on the other hand we inhabit them, becoming guests” (55). Since identity is not to be perceived as fixed, but rather in a constant flux, “heterogeneous, porous and open”, theatre demands to be reconfigured as a “permanent border zone” (59). For this reason, Laera brings forward two paradigms: the model of cosmopolitanism, which upholds the irrelevance of nationalism that prevents us from “embracing a universal global culture” (61), and the model of creolization, a decolonising method which “refers to a specific phenomenon of cultural hybridization” (64). If theatre translation is concerned with the integration of identity and alterity, Laera argues that translators

should explore its ethics and contest stagnant conventions, if the aim is a change of mind-sets. Incidentally, the author's research project "Translating Theatre" ([www.translatingtheatre.com](http://www.translatingtheatre.com)) is an attempt to do just that; while encouraging intercultural dialogue and shaking monolingual imperatives, it functioned as a theatrical counter-narrative to "highlight other than silence linguistic and cultural difference without falling into the traps of assimilation or exoticization" (69). The project took place in the summer of 2016, when a team of scholar-translators, directors and performers came together to translate and perform in English three continental plays by writers with a migrant background and written in Polish, Spanish and French. The approach was undoubtedly vibrant with political nuances, as Laera first started planning it when the idea of a Brexit referendum was still a floating rumour. The third and last section of the book encompasses three major cases for more theatre translations: to expose audiences to the stories of others, to offer visibility/audibility to those who are rarely seen/heard, and to extend access to the theatre. Granting that "culturally distant others are here to stay" (74), the western theatre needs more translations to defeat the "insular and autarchic understanding of identity" (*Ibid*). Turning a blind eye to "so much variety already at home" (77) might lead to the dangers of ending up 'performing race' other than 'humanity'. Yet, widening access and inclusivity practices do not exclusively concern multicultural endeavours, as they pertain to different marginalised communities alike. In 2017 at the London National Theatre a set of pioneering captioning glasses "pledged to improve the experience of D/deaf spectators and hard of hearing spectators" (79).

It can be concluded that Laera's acute reflections offer a powerful take on an area full of academic potential. The last pages of *Theatre and Translation* culminate in a plethora of direct questions left unanswered, emblematically so. Scrutinising our own morals, inquiries such as "How will you be a good host, and a good guest? And how will you *speak with*, not only *for them*?" (80) linger in our minds and evoke possible answers. The theatrical encounter should not obliterate diversity, but celebrate it, and translation should act as a tool to avoid the 'luxury of neutrality' and claim its utter right to be and manifest itself for what it is: fluid, disjointed, fragmented, impure, and proud nonetheless.





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*Transcodificazioni* (2005). *American Solitudes. Individual, National, Transnational* (co-authored with G. Mariani and D. Izzo, 2007). Part of her writing and public activities are available on: [uniba-it.academia.edu/PaolaZaccaria](http://uniba-it.academia.edu/PaolaZaccaria).