

Sweetly dancing: an intercultural dialogue on the epistemic revolution of nonviolent insurgency

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ABSTRACT

Our article takes the form of a conversation, in which we interrogate the potential of a selected group of cultural artefacts, i.e. novels, paintings, documentaries, photographs, and movies, produced in two distinct cultural and geopolitical (diasporic) areas – Arab and African – with the intention to complicate crucial notions such as human rights, the Global South, and insurgency.

We discuss theoretical works on creolization, postcoloniality, everyday politics, together with contemporary creative works, with the aim to offer an intercultural dialogue on the epistemic revolution produced by a Southern nonviolent insurgency. We claim that the (diasporic) artists-activists discussed in this article provide readers with examples of forms of insurgency that are minor, ordinary, apparently quiet and unassuming, yet ultimately encroaching, as those theorized by Asef Bayat, Leela Gandhi and Judith Butler. Hence, the South emerges from their works as an in-between site of concrete action and transformation, which is inextricably bound to the North, rather than separate or in opposition. Similarly, the Mediterranean area appears to be a rich “contact zone” (Pratt 1991), but also a site fraught with tensions, urgently asking that we take charge of them.

Giovanna and Lisa: Last year at the University of Trento we organized a series of seminars entitled *Per una cittadinanza condivisa (For a Shared Citizenship)*, the gist of whose reflections is well captured in Riccarda Chisté’s watercolour *Narrazioni mediterranee*. The bright light at the centre of the stormy waters aptly refers to William Turner’s *The Slavership* (1840) to indicate a clear comparison between the Atlantic slave trade and the present catastrophe in the Mediterranean. A significant difference, however, is emphasized by the replacement of Turner’s slavership in the foreground and drowning black body in the corner with the watercolour’s travelling books scattered throughout the space like flying birds. The watercolour focuses on which narratives cross the Mediterranean today, which capture its multiple opposing discourses, which survive and resist the violence of the powers dominating the crossing, and how they relate to each other to form constituencies, albeit temporarily as their travelling character indicates. Rather than representing the master-slave binary that yields so much violence and suffering, the watercolour captures the spaces that this tension between opposites opens up.

We wish to proceed in the form of a conversation between the two of us, with the aim to foreground the plurality of voices that we think need to remain in the foreground of intercultural discourse. We wish to demonstrate that some narratives, told through creative stories, docu-

mentaries, photographs, songs and dances, help us complicate some crucial notions that are at the centre of the present issue of *From the European South*: human rights, the Global South, and insurgency. Such creative works further allow us to manifest and raise awareness regarding the contradictions, paradoxes, and tensions unleashed by globalization in the Mediterranean area. We see this simultaneously as a crucial “contact zone” (Pratt 1991) and as a site fraught with tensions and ruptures – “frictions” generated by the “cruelty” of the process of domination which are nevertheless capable of producing a vital “creativity” and birthing a process of creolization capable of turning vulnerability into agency (Braithwaite 1971, 21-2). We make recourse to activist artists and militant theorists from various locations in the so-called South who produce such creolizing force – indeed a politics which is a Glissantian poetics of relation: “we stay with poetry [...]. We cry our cry of poetry. Our boats are open, and we sail them for everyone” (Glissant 1996, 9) – and promise to dismantle the violence of domination without replacing one form of domination with another. Instead, we argue, they deliver the promise of nonviolent revolution, as defined by Leela Gandhi and Judith Butler.



Riccarda Chisté, *Narrazioni mediterranee* (2015).

In 2015, the *Ethical Journalism Network* released the report *Moving Stories*, an international review of how media cover migration in the EU and in 14 other countries around the globe. The report shows a growing tendency among journalists writing on migration to follow political forces, their rise in political hate-speech, and their often-distorted rendition of migratory facts and numbers. According to the Director of the Network, Aidan White, the public would therefore be in deep need of more complex, careful, and sensitive representations of

migrant stories in context; the media, says White, should learn to “tell the full story.” We wish here to explore the implications of embracing White’s proposition. What makes a story or report about migration “full” rather than lacking? We understand that a “full” narration grasps not only the centre and the margins but also the spaces in between and, in so doing, it displaces the centre-periphery paradigm, the us/them dichotomy. This displacement, we argue, is empowering and liberating, because it nourishes visions of a shared world.

By foregrounding multiplicity and the in-between spaces that relations open up, *Narrazioni mediterranee* conveys also the gist of our present conversation, aimed to identify and engage oppositional discourses that do not rely on identity politics nor on systemic ideologies, in the attempt to tell “the full story” or at least a good portion of it. For this reason, we are reflecting upon forms of resistance that are minor, ordinary, and temporarily relational, and that, we argue, express radical oppositional forces and revolutionary epistemic change, perhaps in ways that are not immediately intelligible and understood as such in the so-called North-West. By contrapuntally comparing notes between us, we wish to force our conversational reflection to regard simultaneously two different cultural and geopolitical (diasporic) areas, Arab and African. We also wish to deploy different interpretive tools that contemplate the issue of insurgencies in Europe from “a percolating South,” as Annalisa Oboe calls it, which questions the nation through its diffusion around the planet, and forces revisions of the human, the humanities and human rights.

Lisa: The watercolour breaks the dichotomous representation of the master and the slave, of the Atlantic Ocean and its Middle Passage as being distinct from today’s Mediterranean border crossings. Chisté’s artistic revision brings the two seas into collision. The narratives of the survivors, who mourn the deaths they witnessed along the journey and recount stories of forced marches across the desert and captivity in the barracoons of Lybia, prove that slavery persists today. This is why we should conceive the two seas in close contact rather than separate. The photographer Narciso Contreras, among others, has intensely documented the current Mediterranean slave trade in “Lybia: A Human Marketplace.” The black bodies captured by his camera are clearly contemporary slaves, who suffer violence and starvation before being sold to pitiless traders that embark them on overcrowded rubber boats and barges. Hence, the Mediterranean Sea today has turned not only into a new marketplace for human trafficking but also into a new battlefield, as Gianfranco Rosi’s documentary *Fuocoammare* (2016) incontrovertibly shows. Conditions below the decks, in particular, are squalid and of indescribable horror, with survivors living side by side with amassed dead bodies. The Mediterranean is the front line of this undeclared war that provokes numberless victims. Accordingly, throughout the documentary, an apparently unbridgeable rift separates the everyday calmness of the islanders in Lampedusa from the horror experienced at sea by the migrants, whose bodies bear the dreadful marks of their previous fight for survival through

the desert and in the detention camps. Although the carefree adventures of the young protagonist, on the one hand, and the bleak conditions of the migrants on sinking boats, on the other, are poles apart, the tiny geographical space of the island brings them together, and Lampedusa becomes the microcosm of the entire Mediterranean catastrophe.

What is it, I ask, that makes those lives so distant from one another despite their geographical proximity? How can we surpass this gulf or rather, as aptly put by Luigi Cazzato and Filippo Silverstri in *S/Murare il Mediterraneo* (2016), how can we un-wall a sea that is no longer liquid? Do you find the theories of creolization of any help in this case?

Giovanna: Creolization, or rather the constant process of creolizing, remains central to my intellectual and militant understanding of the world I inhabit. What still gives me hope even in the midst of contemporary brutal violence is the creation of new spaces in which opposites can coexist, where separation can be simultaneous with fusion. Rosi's docufiction undeniably moves in this direction, and so does Emanuele Crialesi's narrative in his film *Terraferma* (2011), as pointedly argued by Annalisa Oboe in her essay "Convivial Crossings in the European South: New Italian Representations" (2016), in which she provides a definition of the Mediterranean as a possible shared space of encounter between Italians and Africans, through different forms of exclusion. This perspective was also taken by the pioneering *Orizzonti mediterranei* (2014) by Maria Grazia Lo Cicero and Pina Mandolfo, a docufilm that breaks a fundamental silence about the migration of women by foregrounding the specific sexual violence they are subjected to during the crossing. It focuses on the in-between space where the silence about rape is broken: hands are holding each other while the telling begins to unfold – the hands of a woman volunteer supporting the hands of a woman who begins to narrate the violence she has suffered. In this in-between space a touching narration unfolds, made of words, sighs, silences, smiles, fragments of trust, splinters of fear – a hopeful beginning, only a beginning.

The irresolvable contradiction of feminist truth imbues this documentary and, I suggest, it is this double-speaking that may fruitfully displace violent paradigms. What is crucial is that at the centre of feminist thinking is the change of the power structure, not its replacement. Feminism does not want to take over power; it rather invokes the demise of power altogether. The enemy of feminism is not men or other individuals; it is patriarchy, sexism. As a cultural revolution, feminism is utterly radical. As a social revolution, feminism is always paradoxical. I like this epistemic framing, because it accepts the undefinable space in between, instead of trying to bridge the gap between two opposites. It is a different form of dialectics, one that does not pursue the *Aufhebung*, but instead accepts the ongoing flow – what Kamau Brathwaite (1984) calls "tidalectics" – which moves back and forth like the waves of the sea, produces change through repetition, contradiction, fragments like poetry, instead of seeking one final linear single resolution. Hands hold each other in *Orizzonti mediterranei* to find life even there

where the humiliation and abjection is so intimate and deep that no words can utter it. Hands hold each other to find the strength to hold babies that only hate brought into this world. Hands hold each other to perform a feminist double speaking that may find, through unresolvable contradictions, ways to relate and go on living.

I like your idea of geographically connecting also the Atlantic and the Mediterranean, while keeping their distinct histories intact. The myth of the Pillars of Hercules is of course doubly interesting from my feminist perspective: a demigod himself, Hercules went beyond the known world not only by opening up a space in which the waters of the Atlantic and the Mediterranean would blend, but also by cutting the mountain range that had previously joined Africa and Europe. His fusion cost a separation. I am pursuing narrations that inhabit the borderland between myth and reality, human and god, and that originate in this liminal paradoxical space, where the mountain is split and the waters are joined – a rift between two continents and a merge of two seas at the same time. In other words, I am pursuing the articulation, rather than the dissolution of double binds, with the aim to embrace non-totalizing knowledges, the will to disrespectfully disobey rules and break silence in order to speak, poetically and translationally, the aporetic, feminist truth to power that calls for changing the pluralized and assimilating powers of globalization.

I do not certainly have a solid answer to your pregnant queries, but I must believe in the impossible dream that creolizing agency paves the way to a peaceful sharing of the planet. I am referring to creolizing as a verb to emphasize the need for an ongoing process, for everyday actions that join people through their differences and are capable of liberating freedom and beauty, as invoked by Édouard Glissant. It is crucial to embrace the change in our representation of Self and Other that Glissant articulates with his insistence on a difference which reveals itself as such, not in opposition to sameness, with his emphasis on the constructive function of difference, on the worth of errancy, on the positive value of opacity. The fundamental concepts of his Caribbean poetics of relation empower us to envision diversity as a uniting force in the name of common goals, goods, solidarities, rather than as a divisive influence that threatens identity.

Confronted as a citizen with the challenges posed to Europe by contemporary migrations, often I find it empowering to reach for concepts, discourses, theories and practices that have been elaborated within African-American and African-Caribbean literatures. The chromatic racism developed within the institution of plantation slavery is spreading widely around Europe today and joining the historical racisms against Jews, Muslims, and any neighbouring other in the numerous nationalist ghettos of the continent, fertilized by sexist and homophobic cultures similarly expressed locally in numerous languages and repeated internationally in English. We desperately need to use any means that increase our awareness of the racialization of a society that is progressively becoming more violent and hateful. Centuries of Caribbean and African-American resistance to this type of racism provide a fruitful cultural

legacy, nourished by the critical elaborations on race developed within African Studies and related disciplines produced by Caribbean and African-American intellectuals, artists, and scholars. Brathwaite's tidalectics and W.E.B. Dubois's twoness are of course fundamental concepts at the heart of my reasoning. And so are the pioneering works of Zora Neale Hurston and Una Marson.

As I claim that it is empowering to draw from other cultures for tackling the present crisis, I am of course referring to the fundamental Saidian concept of worldliness as the labour that marks radical democracy as well as democratic humanism, the labour that makes sense of my own being in the world as a citizen and an intellectual. The task that Antonio Gramsci ascribes to the organic intellectual is crucial here, and I invoke it without apologies in my own feminist terms: as a woman who undertakes the intellectual responsibility to rethink herself as a gendered subject in the world and to deconstruct the normative genderization that is imposed upon all subjects in this world. Gramsci also allows me to recast representational politics – that is, a foregrounding of practice that a theoretical critique of representation may overshadow. From a feminist perspective, I focus on the deconstruction of the philosophical frame of the Self and the Other, and I understand that this mission is similarly galvanized by Glissant's poetics, as mentioned above, and by Edward Said's conceptualization of representation as contrapuntal. The opening up of a relational space in which the self always implies the other and both are validated through mutual recognition is pointedly illustrated by R. Radhakrishnan, when he states that, for Said, "representations are worldly, historical, secular performances that cannot pre-know their own truth" (2012, 98). It is through representations of ourselves that we get to know both ourselves and the world. Judith Butler puts this very clearly, in *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex*, when she declares that the relation between speech and bodily acts is "a chiasmus," because there is always a dimension of the body that language cannot represent and therefore performativity is "not just about speech acts" (1993, 12). In my understanding, it is on this ground that later on, in *Frames of War*, she expands this view to state that in the body we may "encounter a range of perspectives that may or may not be our own" (2010, 57). Here, she reiterates that "the norms of gender through which I come to understand myself or my survivability are not made by me alone. I am already in the hands of the other when I try to take stock of who I am. I am already up against a world I never chose when I exercise my agency." This is why some bodies are more precarious than others. And yet, it is also by virtue of the body's capacity to breathe itself into words, Butler clarifies, that the body can appeal to an other (2010, 61). This way, the body can live through the violence it opposes, and it can do so because it can breathe. Butler says that it is so, because the body can produce poetry: "As a network of transitive affects, the poems – their writing and their dissemination – are critical acts of resistance, insurgent interpretations, incendiary acts that somehow, incredibly, live through the violence they oppose, even if we do not yet know in what ways such lives will survive" (2010, 62).

Slave narratives, Phillis Wheatley's amazing poetry, Toni Morrison's neo-slave narratives, Michelle Cliff's representation of the lives of resistant, excluded and ostracized identities, show me that it is possible to express effective insurgency and opposition even to the most cruel and brutal violence, and even under conditions of total subalternity. Yes, as Spivak implies, the Subaltern can speak; and the Dominant must learn to listen and to speak the Subaltern's language! Is there a comparable resource within the Arab world that you can equally draw from, in order to empower the idea of the need for a worldly resistant representation? Is there a specific knowledge that you find empowering as a citizen, not just as a scholar?

Lisa: I think that Gramsci's notion of the organic intellectual is a crucial legacy, especially when we turn our attention to the Arab world, where the chasm between the intellectual elites and their society is perhaps greater than elsewhere. Intellectuals in various Arab countries must often choose between two opposite directions: either becoming the supporters of authority and of oppressive regimes, thus gradually suppressing the radical beliefs and desires that had initially animated them, or being cracked down by such powers. The Tunisian novel *The Italian* by Shukri al-Mabkhout (2015), which was awarded the 2015 International Prize for Arabic Fiction, is a clear case in point. The novel chronicles the life of Abdel Nasser (nicknamed 'the Italian' due to his physical beauty), a left-wing student at the University of Tunis, and the mechanisms of control and censorship that will gradually, yet inevitably, suffocate his insurgent spirit. The novel is set in 1987 and follows the troubled and crucial political transition from Habib Bourguiba, the first President of the independent Tunisian nation, to Zine El Abidine Ben Ali. The novel indirectly raises questions relating to freedom, dignity, and human rights – the set of principles that animated the 2011 Tunisian Revolution. In a mode that is widespread in the Arab world today, its historical allusions evoke contemporary issues. Also Leyla Bouzid's film *As I Open My Eyes* (2015) addresses similar concerns, although through a different medium and from an alternative, this time gendered, perspective. The film is set in Tunis, in the summer of 2010, a few months before the uprisings erupt. It chronicles the everyday life of Farah, a teenage singer who expresses her indignation by means of her lyrics, which are simultaneously insurgent and mellow. She will encounter brutal oppression but will keep faith in the possibilities offered by art to contrast injustice and cruelty through non-violent acts of defiance. Her difficult yet gradual return to singing after a long period of silence speaks of her ineradicable resilience, while the film's poignant music functions as a lived hymn to liberty. I find Bouzid's film, and especially Farah's uncompromising chant and performance, inspiring as a scholar and empowering as a female citizen. They are the concrete enactment of what Asef Bayat calls "the art of presence" in *Life as Politics* (2010). He refers to the diverse ways, albeit not necessarily audible and visible by prevailing Western modes of perception, through which ordinary people – i.e. the urban dispossessed, the youth, Muslim women, and other

subaltern constituencies – refuse to abandon the socio-political arena and perform acts of microresistance (Certeau 1987) that are oppositional, action-oriented, and most of the time effective. In order to produce transformation within a society that is *per se* already on the move and changing, these minor constituencies carve out spaces where they can perform “disjointed yet parallel practices” (Bayat 2010, 4) of dissent to assert their (collective) presence and encroach the powerful. To quote Bayat: “Theirs was not a politics of protest, but of practice, a politics of redress through direct action” (2010, 19).

In his book, Bayat draws an interesting link between subaltern groups in the Middle East and international migrants in the so-called West, arguing that their struggles are somehow similar, for they generate the extension of limited national laws by means of their concrete action and their actual presence within the country of immigration. Do you find in your references a concept comparable to Bayat’s “art of presence” and his politics of “redress through direct action” that you deem equally poignant? Would you agree with Bayat that we need “fresh perspectives to observe, a novel vocabulary to speak, and new analytical tools to make sense of specific regional realities” (2010, 5)?

Giovanna: Absolutely. While I am claiming that the education I draw from other contexts is an empowering tool for dealing politically with my own present context, I am not forgetting that texts themselves are always in the world and therefore my knowledge constantly requires cultural translation. Said aptly argues that we need to engage a labour that is a constant act of negotiation and intimate, cultural translation (see his *Beginnings: Intention and Method*, 1975). Yet he also states (in *The World, the Text, and the Critic*, via a compelling comparison of the Bible and the Koran as texts that express both the absolute divine word and the materiality of their human historicity), that criticism too is a worldly practice. Therefore I take responsibility for assuming with Said that one idea in history is always one among many that interact within a power field of various and changing forces. Therefore, the deployment of my own academic expertise in African-American and African-Caribbean literatures to cope with the current racist racialization of Europe becomes a worldly sharing of my knowledge. Nevertheless, the comparative work always entails maximum care, since a light handling of the exercise of cultural translation might result in assimilation and lack of understanding. This need for attention is foregrounded by the recent, increased forging of the Italian language on American English performed by Italian speakers in order to manage the racialization of social tensions through the Americanized discourse imposed by the globalization of culture. I am thinking, for example, of how Italians swiftly avoided the term ‘negro’ to favour the term ‘nero’ as immigrants from Africa started coming to our country and of how increasingly, more recently, the term ‘Africano’ is used. This usage reflects a literal translation into Italian of the history of racist naming in American English, a context of kidnapping, deportation, and enslavement dependent on the colour of the skin, which made it quickly impossible for Africans to trace their exact place of

origin. On the contrary, in the context of the present immigration and flight from African countries to Europe, it is possible to know whether a person is Nigerian, Ghanaian, Somalian, or Gambian. As a result, I think that adopting in Italian the vocabulary that four centuries of slavery imposes in the American context is at best a mindless import of racist lexicon, at worst a conscious import of further racism. This is why careful, deep cultural translation is required, if we wish to fill the gaps in understanding introduced by globalized discourse through such lexical-conceptual loans. I see the urge to engage race critical studies in Italian, too, and apply its elaborations to our representations of racialized identities. One example comes to my mind: the current exhibition on ‘African’ Art at the massive sails of the Gehry building in Paris. The adjective African, in my opinion, should refer either literally to the whole continent or figuratively to the empowerment of the people in the Americas whose ancestors were named negroes and enslaved because of their African origin. As interesting as the works at the Louis Vuitton Foundation are, why call African Art the art of 15 contemporary Sub-Saharan artists and three generations of South African artists? This naming shows that little has changed yet in terms of the decolonization of our minds and use of language since the Modernists’ desire to possess the ‘primitive’ continent that Europe had seized. We certainly need “a politics of redress” as the one praised within Bayat’s “art of presence.”

I am asking whether you share a similar concern for the risk of facile assimilation through comparison in your experience within Arab cultures. Is a similar intersection also problematic in the contexts you are most familiar with? Is the travelling of concepts equally risky?

Lisa: Yes, I share your concern. For this reason, I find it crucial to define precisely the context in which a book has been written or a language is being spoken. This is not a marginal aspect, either with regard to cultural artefacts or to social phenomena. The phrase “Arab Spring,” for instance, has been used to refer to the insurgent waves that have stormed Tunisia, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain, Yemen... Yet, this all-encompassing expression does not pay justice to the particularities of each single situation and the specific claims that the different people were uttering in the various streets and *midan* of Arab cities, nor to the different trajectories that these insurgencies took once the fuse was ignited. Although throughout the Arab world people in the streets called out for justice, dignity, liberty, and participation, it is important to note that the forms these claims took differed dramatically from one place to the other. As the photographs by Mia Gröndahl in *Tahrir Square* (2011) clearly show, millions of Egyptians gathered in the heart of Cairo in a spirit that was peaceful, inclusive, creative, and proud; they were divided by gendered, generational, social, cultural, and religious differences, yet they were all determined to achieve one common goal: the fall of the regime. *Cairo: My City, Our Revolution* (2012) by novelist-activist Ahdaf Soueif, also mentioned in Marta Cariello’s article in this issue, underlines the primacy of action over pure artistic contemplation and the importance of the communal during the eighteen days of the revolution. As she explains in her Preface: “This

story is told in my chosen order, but it is very much the story of *our* revolution” (2012, xiii; italics in the original). Accordingly, the story of her Cairo, *their* revolution reads as “an intervention, rather than just a record” (Soueif 2012, xiv); throughout the book, the still, dull Nile is set in close proximity and yet in clear opposition to a mass of people that is heterogeneous, rising, and fully committed to achieve one common goal: the downfall of the regime.

Their bodies, in particular, become the canvas on which they express their dissent, as if oppression was primarily an experience of the flesh. The man photographed on page 16 of Gröndahl’s book, for instance, compares subjection to an unbearable physical ache. Three billboards cover his head, chest, and hand; they communicate the same message through variation: “Leave... my head hurts, leave... my voice is hoarse, leave... my arm aches” (Gröndahl 2011, 16).

I imagine that equally significant examples of the use of the body, and of performance more generally, may be found within the African and Caribbean diasporas. Within the Arab diaspora, I find Wissam Al-Jazairy’s *Dancing in Front of the Tank*, a painting that was completed during the Syrian revolution, exemplary. The shapes of three ballerinas are quickly sketched on the canvas; their ghostly bodies move lightly yet defiantly in front of a massive tank. Have people in Africa and the Caribbean developed similar kinds of bodily performance and operative art to speak truth to power and express their dissent? Can you also think of performances that express insurgency through a gentle dance? What specificities and commonalities can be identified?

Giovanna: Undoubtedly the body is at the centre of African-American and Caribbean expression, and dance plays a crucial role. Your specific remarks bring to my mind the powerful images of William Kentridge’s video “More Sweetly Play the Dance” (2015). I have watched it recently in Paris at the exhibit mentioned above, and cannot forget the impact of the war dance sublimely performed on pointe shoes by Dada Masilo dressed in a military uniform, holding a machine gun and moving at the sound of *The Internationale*. The idea of a sweet revolution, of nonviolent agency has already been invoked in your previous remarks about Bouzid’s film, which you described as insurgent and mellow. I like that.

In my understanding, Kentridge’s video on a revolution played more sweetly perfectly captures the value I assign to Michelle Cliff’s narratives about revolution in the Caribbean and armed antislavery revolution in the USA. Cliff always pays attention to what has been missing in history; her telling is always a deep revision of the given paradigm. I am thinking in particular of *Free Enterprise* (1993), the story of two women who joined John Brown’s armed insurrection against slavery. I have interpreted this as a story of resistance that revises the common idea of resistance itself, because it is built on solidarity and mercy, in a paper I have recently shared in a workshop on Displacement at Brown University. Mary Ellen and Annie paradoxically take on arms and at the same time embrace nonviolence in that they represent singularities who

share their in-betweenness rather than their sameness. I have argued that in this text Cliff shows how to form a hospital community ruled by the politics of friendship invoked by Leela Gandhi in her theory of nonviolence. They embody a community that is hospitable to new arrivals because it is always to come, never self-identical, and open to the agency of different forms of anticolonial alliances (Gandhi 2006, 20-31). They express solidarity in ways that do not pursue identitarian sameness, as invoked by Butler in “Merely Cultural” (1998), where she seeks a cultural production capable of turning conflict into positive politics. They are warriors but their war dance is performed on pointe shoes – it is gentle and sweet, yet powerful.

I would add that Cliff encapsulates a sweet war dance also in *No Telephone to Heaven* (1987), where Clare expresses resistance, in private as well as in public: “Résistez. What else was there?” (Cliff 1987, 113). Clare’s intersectional and plural identity is a fluid ongoing transformation; she does not migrate from one place to the other and settles, but rather keeps moving from country to country and yet keeps remembering and returning to her own Jamaica. She is always plural: at the beginning of the story, she is introduced as “[a] light-skinned woman, daughter of landowners, native-born, slaves, emigrées, Carib, Ashanti, English” (Cliff 1987, 5); in the middle of the text, “[s]he is white. Black. Female. Lover. Beloved. Daughter. Traveler. Friend. Scholar. Terrorist. Farmer” (Cliff 1987, 91). Throughout the various transformations in her life, Clare remains located in between, but – as the principal of the London school tells her father – “in our system” we have “no place for in-betweens” (Cliff 1987, 99). Clare is thus a marginalized protagonist, a “sistah outsider” to borrow Audre Lorde’s phrase (Lorde 1984). Located in-between identity and difference, she always, uncompromisingly, identifies with difference, never with identity. Thus, she is a radical force of cultural change, of epistemic insurgency, and she is capable of articulating complex, contradictory, even preposterous and surprising singularities. Not accidentally, her best friend, Harry/Harriet, raped as a little boy by a white soldier, is another in-between character. Both Clare and Harriet are creole, and live between languages, races, genders, and nations. In the end, both return to Jamaica, where Clare claims the black identity she was taught to despise, and Harry claims her own femininity. Both redefine themselves against their biological grounding. Their identitarian insurrections are textually produced – performed. Their mutual affectionate relationship is sealed by their in-betweenness. Their solidarity is expressed through their feminist queer positioning.

Clare occupies the middle space which Robert Young’s fertile reading of Homi Bhabha helps me reiterate as the space of cultural translation in which the migrant transforms the hosting culture. Young’s specification is fundamental in pointing out that, for Bhabha, “culture opens up a space for difference, which enables us to experience forms of alterity rather than become fixed in oppositional bunkers,” also because cultures are always “open systems” (2017, 192). I would recommend embracing this definition of culture as an in-between space in which there are possibilities of transformation, because embodied experiences are never assimilated into a totality, but are allowed to express instead their agency through relation –

sometimes even the unexpected, surprising relation between war and on pointe dance. I must believe this is so in the face of the insane violence that is devastating our planet. I must believe that culture may counter war. I must believe that it is still important to teach a child to use words instead of fists, that it is possible to make peace instead of war. I find this belief, this resilience, this hope against hope, expressed even with joy in many African-American and Caribbean authors. The opening of Cliff's story about guerrilla fight is exemplary of this empowering definition of culture. The first chapter of *No Telephone to Heaven* is entitled "Ruininate" and the bottom of the page offers the explanation that this is "a distinctive Jamaican term" that describes "lands which were once cleared for agricultural purposes and have now lapsed back" (Cliff 1987, 1). The growth of bush and forest, of tall vegetation points to more than survival; it indicates continuous resistance by a plurality of agents (wood, grass, plants) as everyday change, because revolution must be ongoing, as Lorde emphasizes when she reminds us it cannot be a one-time event. A "ruinate" is produced by collective, collaborative agency, not domination. It is transformative, surviving agency from the bottom up. And Cliff presents the land's return to wilderness after domestication/colonization as distinctly Jamaican. To provide a rough answer to your question, I read in Cliff's sweet and brutal revolution as much Jamaican specificity as a potentially shareable commonality. There is some Jamaica that I can bring home and be empowered by.

Lisa: I think it is now clear why our compass tends to be turned towards the South, which is obviously not a singular entity but rather a mixture of contrapuntal experiences, distinct claims, unconventional forms of insurgency that are ordinary, minor, apparently quiet and unassuming, yet ultimately encroaching. In the South, we have found both inspiration and hope together with a non-violent form of insurgency. A strenuous faith in the potential of art to inspire and produce change and the inextricability of poetics and politics are also drops falling from a "percolating" South. I think that Franco Cassano's reflections are now crucial for continuing our conversation, especially when he argues the following:

As time goes by, the identification seems irreversible: in the public opinion of Western countries, the word "South" has become synonymous with backwardness, hunger, ethnic atrocities, refugees, and mass Exodus – images of pain and poverty. The South is the disease of the world, the part without hope which will be able to smile again only when (and if) it becomes North itself, a quiet province of the northwestern world, an overdue and failed replica of the western form of life. The pain that the developed world feels for the South, its television participation in the problems of the South and its philanthropic campaigns, do little else but perpetuate a sentiment of superiority. (Cooke et al. 2008, 368)

I believe – and I too would refer to Oboe's essay (2016) to support my claim – that we should stop envisioning and broadcasting the South as a disease that only the North may be able to cure and start looking instead at the fresh perspectives that a "percolating South" may offer us. In addition to a shift in how we perceive and orient ourselves toward the South, it seems to me that our conversation, and our studies more in general, prove that there are

crucial concerns – freedom, dignity, human rights – that belong to neither the South nor the North. Therefore, these are not the monopoly of one specific culture or region of the world, but rather concerns that are shared across the globe. The inflection of these concerns, however, may change according to the specific context in which they are discussed and performed, and to the actual material and ideological constraints that operate in those contexts. I want to underline, as a sort of conclusion, the validity and dignity of any form of insurgency, even the least visible and audible, and emphasize the fact that freedom, justice, and dignity are universal human needs and rights. Indeed, as Soueif writes:

We were never alone; the feelings, the prayers, the messages that came pouring into Egypt from every place on earth during those eighteen days of Tahrir lodged in our minds and in our hearts and affirmed every minute what we knew already: that the freedom we sought was the freedom the people of the world wanted, for us and for themselves. And what has been happening across the planet since has confirmed and reconfirmed our belief. The first placards raised in Wisconsin, the street signs invented in the City of London, the words we hear from Tokyo to Wall Street, the chants in Oakland, California – all echo the call from Tahrir and Tunis: the people demand the fall of this – entire – regime. (2012, 118)

I believe with Soueif that what really counts is neither the South nor the North conceived as separate entities but rather the relation between the two. Once in relation, both of these entities merge without losing their singularity and uniqueness; they become creolized by effect of their mutual contact and interaction. They gain from each other's difference. This is a lesson I have myself learnt from the Caribbean authors you are so familiar with. Let me thus return to our beginning and to the idea of the Mediterranean waters that blend with the Atlantic waters, in that liminal space that is the Pillars of Hercules, a geographical limit that is also a contact zone. I think that the Islamic concept of *barzakh* – describing simultaneously the metaphysical convergence of this life and the hereafter and the physical proximity of two bodies of water (one salty and the other sweet) that pass loosely through each other yet remain distinct – resonates with this idea.

Giovanna: Yes, let us reiterate the importance not only of representing the South as a plurality instead of a totality – as many Souths that may or may not occasionally assemble together to form a political constituency. Let us also recap the need of focusing on the in-betweenness, conceived not as the encounter between the One and the Other, but as the generation of subjectivities grounded in difference – as the encounter between the Different with the Different. This shared space includes the South/North in-betweenness, where the South and the North are completely blurred. Like you, I am more interested in the relation North/South than in the South itself, wherever that may be, since 'the South' is as slippery a notion as 'the East', grounded in the Western construction of Orientalism. I am weary of a similarly culturally constructed Southernism, so to speak, that creates the South.

The in-between space between East and West, North and South, is the space of cultural translation where subjects are hybrid, contaminated, and relational. In feminist terms, this is

the location of a subject defined upon its own difference, a great potential according to Rosi Braidotti, who claims this epistemic revolution as a fertile ground for envisioning a posthumanism where difference is no longer in the margins but vitally central and constitutive of oneness. This epistemic insurgency, I claim, feeds hope even against hope. Because it does not replace the One with the Other, one form of domination with another, feminist insurgency configures a world without domination. It does away with power altogether; it does not want to replace power with another power, men with women, but wishes to do away with patriarchy. The commonsensical simplicity of bell hooks's words in *Feminism is for Everybody: Passionate Politics* (2000) enhance the deeply revolutionary value of this vision. Each of the following proclamations finely articulated by hooks resonates with its full radical edge: wherever there is domination, love is lacking; patriarchy is a form of domination; the problem of feminism is not men but sexism; feminism is a movement to end sexism; when sexism ends, feminism will happily die; feminism is a movement for social justice and, as such, it must recognize all forms of dominations; feminist sisterhood cannot be invoked or assumed ideologically: it materializes only when women do not use other forms of domination, such as class and race, to oppress other women.

I draw the most compelling theoretical substantiation for my argument from Leela Gandhi and Judith Butler, who in different but complementary ways help me believe that a paradigmatically nonviolent form of resistance and insurrection is a possible dream.

On the one hand, Gandhi's philosophical articulation of radical democracy is a call for becoming less in order to relate to each other as ordinary people, and accepting imperfection in order to counter the totalitarian, colonial, and liberal frame of domination. Centred on the Derridean notion of hospitality, Gandhi's politics of friendship yields a sociality within which guest-friends are never known in advance. This radical relational subjectivity acts under conditions of unconstituted subjecthood, which requires countercultural revolutionary practices and inventive ethical enterprises (2006, 9). Gandhi's fierce activism takes the risk of affective incongruous relations among subjects who pursue self-ruination. Her politics is thus necessarily also a poetics: it does not repress desire and imagination in order to pursue cognition and justice (2006, 142-176).

On the other hand, Butler shows how precarity and vulnerability may become agency, and may express new forms of democracy and solidarity through spontaneous public gathering of bodies that show their capacity to act without deliberating in advance their force for resistance. She invokes "a practice of contestation" within which each political position discloses its own "self-difference" and does not pursue identitarian assimilation (Butler 2015, 37). She is looking for a cultural frame that is capable of turning conflict into positive politics and an ethos that has the force to affirm mutual, reciprocal dependency. I understand the resistance of the vulnerable to be a form of critique performed by bodily encounters, which claim recognition within the public sphere and, in the process, also reconstitute it. What is more

important is that such encounters, Butler argues, operate successfully only under principles of nonviolence. Precisely within the nonviolent paradigm that Leela Gandhi so finely articulates, relations are no longer configured as being between Self and Other. Rather, relations are exchanges among singularities who seek inclusiveness through affects, are performed under conditions of equality, are ruled by a politics of friendship, and are linked together by non-biological affiliations.

Gandhi and Butler offer conceptualizations that from different angles but with a shared purpose challenge forms of subjecthood, both individual and national, based on the masculinist grounding of domination and exclusion. Their alternative subjecthood, on the contrary, requires joining the cultural and the social performed by a poetical politics and a political poetics that speaks in multiple languages, inhabits borders, and does not categorize people according to abstract taxonomies. Their relational, non-normative heuristic epistemology entails anarchism, civil disobedience, and no-saying. In her 2016 “Lectio magistralis” delivered at the Italian Parliament, Gandhi argues that this entails imperfection, the staging of contradictory, nonviolent militancy, and the will to practice ‘becoming less’. She emphasizes that nonviolent practices are always a work in progress, incomplete, but – she forcefully asserts – in order to block the continuation of war and the perpetration of colonialism, the pursuit of an embodied and horizontal, rather than vertical and metaphysical, infinity is absolutely required. It is within this worldly frame that I locate nonviolent feminist insurgency.

Allow me to return to Cliff’s *No Telephone to Heaven* to substantiate this point and conclude. There are many descriptions of brutal violence in the text that are hard to read and compose Clare’s life as a series of narrative fragments. When Clare and Harriet return to Jamaica and join the guerrilla warfare, however, violence gives in to affects and we encounter revolutionary fighters who are more loaded with sweetness than with guns, who may be performing Dada Masilo’s sweet dance. Harry/Harriet appears to Clare “loaded with armaments,” and defines himself as “a fairy guerrilla” (Cliff 1987, 130). He appears as a small female supernatural being, and Clare utters the words ‘I love you’ for the first time in her life: “Harry you make me want to love you” (1987, 130). Their friendship turns them into lovers: they “could swim as girlfriends” and make love, “Touching gently, kissing, tongues entwined, coming to, laughing” (1987, 130). Happily, fondly, and perfectly, they share their queer in-betweenness, and do not find each other a “stranger” (1987, 131). Their love dance is sweet. They squeeze hands and worry about each other’s safety, when, “as silent as the Maroons,” they “gather their weapons” and “set off into bush” (1987, 206) to prepare their guerrilla act against the Hollywoodization of Jamaican history.

Sadly Cliff in 1987 did not allow the nonviolent insurgency of Clare and Harriet to triumph. They are killed in the revolutionary action. The text confirms that there is no place for their in-betweenness, their strangeness, their sweet, fairy war dancing, not in Jamaica, not yet. This tragic conclusion is anticipated earlier in the narrative by the following exchange between Clare

and Harriet:

“No, I don’t find you strange. No stranger... no stranger than I find myself. For we are neither one thing nor the other.”

“At the moment darling only at the moment.”

“What do you mean?”

“I mean the time will come for both of us to choose. For we will have to make the choice. Cast our lot. Cyaan live split. Not in this world.” (1987, 131)

Today however, as we are writing this piece, we can see Gandhi’s and Butler’s non-violent revolutions taking shape. Wuilly Arteaga is playing his violin in Caracas from a hospital room after being wounded by the soldiers attempting to crush an anti-Maduro revolt on July 22 (BBC News 2017). He is promising to be back in the streets tomorrow to play again. He is playing a very sweet revolution, which is also extremely powerful and radical. He is playing the national anthem back to the regime. This young violinist’s micro-resistance, his “art of presence” (Bayat) is giving us hope that minor voices are “never alone” (Soueif 2012, 118), as the people who assembled in Tahrir Square, Soueif reassures us, never felt (2012, 118). These minor voices give us hope that today there is more room on our planet for “split” people, for sistah outsiders, than there was in Harry/Harriet’s and Clare’s Jamaica. In various places, we occasionally see the recurrence of insurgencies performed through sweet dancing that challenge violent powers; in the midst of the human catastrophe of the migrants and refugees, we sporadically spot solidarity and accomplishment; among diffused wars, we surprisingly find contained conflicts. Whenever these hopeful episodes manifest themselves, the figuration of a more widely shared planet feels more plausible, and a more “full story” (White 2013-2017) is being told.

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