



# Teaching Subjectivity

Travelling Selves for Feminist Pedagogy

A book series by ATHENA

Edited by Silvia Caporale Bizzini and Melita Richter Malabotta



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Silvia Caporale Bizzini & Melita Richter Malabotta

**Teaching Subjectivity.  
Travelling Selves for Feminist Pedagogy**

Teaching with Gender. European Women's Studies in  
International and Interdisciplinary Classrooms.

A book series by ATHENA

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<b>Foreword</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>7</b>
<i>Silvia Caporale-Bizzini, Anabela Galhardo Couto, Biljana Kašić, Linda Lund, Elena Pulcini, Melita Richter Malabotta, and Eva Skærbæk</i>	
<b>Part I: Travelling Selves: Towards a Relational Subject</b>	
<b>CONTAMINATION AND VULNERABILITY:</b>	
<b>THE SELF IN THE GLOBAL AGE</b>	<b>15</b>
<i>Elena Pulcini (University of Florence)</i>	
The fertility of the negative and the contaminated subject	15
The experience of loss and the consciousness of vulnerability	18
Global vulnerability as the condition for a relational Self	22
The challenge of difference: Accepting contamination	25
Implications for teaching	29
<b>MY DEPENDENCY AND OTHER SELVES</b>	<b>33</b>
<i>Linda Lund Pedersen (University of Copenhagen)</i>	
Born out of bravado	34
The move beyond an antagonistic relationship	40
Love/Relationship	43
Implications for teaching	44
<b>LEAVING HOME? THE ‘WORLDS’ OF KNOWLEDGE, LOVE AND POWER</b>	<b>47</b>
<i>Eva Skærbæk (Østfold University College)</i>	
Personal travelling	49
Personal myths	50
Independent or/and dependent	52
A Doll’s House. A short abstract.	53
Love and ethics	54
The norm of knowledge and sexuality	58
Embodiment and recognition	60
The point and responsibility of writing	61
Implications for teaching	62

<b>Part II: Travelling Selves: Voices, Interpolations, Claims</b>	
<b>ON COUNTER-NARRATIVES, NOSTALGIA AND RISKS</b>	<b>67</b>
<i>Biljana Kašić (Center for Women's Studies Zagreb and University of Zadar)</i>	
Reminiscences and feminist multitudes	67
Places of crossing/walking	70
Crossroads and/or location	72
On nostalgia and placement	75
Places and (re)placement	77
Speaking/Naming	79
Meetings and imaginary places	80
Implications for teaching	81
<b>IN SEARCH OF THE “THIRD SPACE”</b>	<b>85</b>
<i>Melita Richter Malabotta (University of Trieste)</i>	
Multicultural experience and personal layers of memory	85
The meaning of displacement	89
Reflexive nostalgia	90
Imaginary dialogue or a walk with Eva	92
The “third space” on the horizon or exercising heterotopia?	98
Implications for teaching	101
<b>I REMEMBER, THEREFORE I WRITE: THE VOICES</b>	
<b>OF CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN CANADIAN WOMEN WRITERS</b>	<b>105</b>
<i>Silvia Caporale-Bizzini (University of Alicante)</i>	
Narratives of remembering	107
The definition of a “third space”	116
Implications for teaching	117
<b>TRAVELLING THROUGH WORDS: REINVENTING A HERITAGE OF THE</b>	
<b>IMAGINARY AND OF THE AFFECTIONS</b>	<b>121</b>
<i>Anabela Galhardo Couto (Open University of Lisbon - IADE)</i>	
From relativism to a sense of belonging: the reinvention of a past	121
The convent as a place for the development of female authorship in Portugal	123
Literary production: The autobiographic narrative	126
Travelling through words: Contrasting confinement and freedom	130
Radical exposure of the self	132
A rhetoric of joy	134
Implications for teaching	137
<b>INDEX OF AUTHORS</b>	<b>141</b>
<b>LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS</b>	<b>152</b>

## Foreword

The book we are presenting to readers is the result of the collaborative effort of seven scholars, all of whom are members of the Travelling Selves group within a larger project entitled *Travelling Concepts in Feminist Pedagogy: European Perspectives*. The project has been developed by ATHENA3 – the Advanced Thematic Network in European Women’s Studies.

The articles in this collection originate from diverse modes of thinking discursive practices that, at the same time, interrelate with the various life experiences and academic interests of the authors.

One of the aims of *Teaching Subjectivity. Travelling Selves for Feminist Pedagogy* is to highlight the conceptual travel around the meanings of Self/ves by promoting knowledge of the paradigms and mechanisms that determine gender relationships in diverse fields as well as the deconstruction of such paradigms and mechanisms.

The book is meant to become a useful educational tool in Women’s Studies in an international and multicultural context. It aspires to enable students from different cultural backgrounds to reflect on differences and likeness and to consider some important issues of our time, including migration, identity construction, vulnerability and contamination, dependency and interdependency, the relationship with the Other, women’s writing, writing from exile, feminist empowering, loss, and the meaning of the third space. The complexity of the issues addressed in this collection allows teachers and students to consider various theoretical viewpoints and develop new teaching and learning skills within an interdisciplinary and intercultural context. The book can be effectively used in multicultural classrooms where students of different cultural origins and ethnic backgrounds learn together. The core concepts examined in the book can be placed at the centre of critical discourse within a broader political process.

We envision the book being used in contexts where gender difference is perceived as a productive arena for further inquiry and as a learning resource. The book may be used in high school multicultural classes, in the graduate and postgraduate courses of Gender Studies and Women’s Studies Departments at universities, in courses on gender differences offered by Women’s Centres and International Women’s Houses, in institutions where debating groups and thematic seminars are organised, in international summer schools, and in the

broader educational field, including adult education, lifelong-learning, and in courses for immigrants.

During these last two years, our group of Travelling Selves met several times in various European countries. Members of the group had the opportunity to present their work in stimulating interdisciplinary and intercultural classes on several occasions, including the teaching experience in “Feminisms in a Transnational Perspective. Rethinking North and South in Post-Coloniality”, the Postgraduate Course at the Interuniversity Centre in Dubrovnik, Croatia, the collaborative teaching in the international seminar in Gender Studies “Travelling Concepts” in Trento, Italy, and the discussion groups and seminars held at the Centre for Women Studies in Zagreb, Croatia.

**On behalf of the authors, we express our thanks to ATHENA3, the Advanced Thematic Network in European Women’s Studies without whose support this publication would not have been possible.**



## INTRODUCTION

*Silvia Caporale-Bizzini, Anabela Galhardo Couto, Biljana Kašić, Linda Lund, Elena Pulcini, Melita Richter Malabotta, and Eva Skærbæk*

This collection of essays looks specifically at the topic of “travelling selves” as a complex model of self-location and within a theoretical frame that, in feminist epistemology, embraces an understanding of the issues at stake from a multiplicity of authorial standpoints. The theoretical frame is materialised in a common project of research. The last two years of intense discussions, meetings, exchange, analysis and comparisons within the Athena project have transformed us from Teachers who work in academic institutions and civil society, into Learners. We have learned so much from the mutual exchange of our own personalised cross histories and life narratives. Our inner differences have become so productive that we experience them as an act of empowerment of our group “Travelling Selves”. This is the process that we aim to develop in classes where students actively participate in the learning process, bringing with them their life experiences and their personal perceptions of time and history. Along with the teachers, they become the backbone of the educational process in the context of feminist pedagogy. As Andrea Petö and Berteke Waaldijk state: “We think it is important to point out that empowering students in the classroom will also help them to create their own voices vis-à-vis the ‘grand narratives’ of European History.”<sup>1</sup>

As authors, we note the starting points of our various journeys, originating within different disciplines; our aim is to give meaning, complexity and faceting to a wide range of concepts. The idea of the “travelling self (selves)” that underlies the book moves from a nodal point that regards as crucial the process of constructing women’s “nomadic” identities informed by geographical and cultural dislocation, cultural or transcultural hybridity, history, loss, memory, contamination, dependence and interdependence and their effect on the subject’s perception of the Real.

The volume, as well as each individual article, may become teaching material in the field of Women’s Studies in an international and multicultural context. Indeed, the collection can be used to enable students from diverse

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<sup>1</sup> Teaching with Memories: European Women’s Histories in International and Interdisciplinary Classrooms, ed. Andrea Petö, Berteke Waaldijk (Galway: Women Studies Centre, National University of Ireland, 2006), 27.

educational and cultural backgrounds to reflect on differences and likeness and face important contemporary issues in the making of women's history and culture in the European context. The book fulfils the demand within academia to link conceptual works and the teaching of life practices and theories, and vice versa.

The authors use as a starting point the link between concepts and daily life, between the abstract and the concrete: autobiography becomes either a starting point of investigation or a field force of analysis ... or both. For this reason, the first question we pose is "Where is one's place?" The answer this collection aims at giving focuses on the study of the anthropology of the "travelling self (selves)" and how this is represented through writing personal narratives – or through an autobiographical approach that leads to a wider and more theoretical development of the issues within their multiple and complex manifestations.

Migration and geographical and inner/psychological displacement are incompatible with a fixed identity; they have to do with the emergence of a non-territorial body which demonstrates "the fallibility of politically endorsed identities and resists classification along the one-dimensional lines of nationality, ethnicity, gender and class".<sup>2</sup> This applies both at the epistemological level (what is the Self's place?) and in terms of space/time (what is our place today as subjects in a global society where borders are being lost?). The notion of dislocation that underlies the essays of this collection is related to the material as well as psychological experiences of emigration, adjustment, assimilation, mourning, and vulnerability. It consequently gives deep insights into the notion of interdependence, seen as a journey towards the other. Political meaning-making and identity construction are extremely important to an understanding of how the Self moves from the inner sphere to the public one, searching for recognition and autonomy while developing an awareness of dependence and vulnerability. Within this frame of thought, writing on the experience of ontological "travelling" and "dislocation" is also understood as political narrative (belonging to the realm of the "polis", the public voice).

We believe that the text responds to bell hooks's idea of a transgressive pedagogy<sup>3</sup> insofar as it breaks down the dichotomy of western epistemology by exploring from different perspectives and disciplines the concept of

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<sup>2</sup> Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the nation* (Princeton University press, Princeton and Oxford, 2001). 158.

<sup>3</sup> See bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the practice of freedom* (London: Routledge, 1996). bell hooks, *Teaching Community. A Pedagogy of Hope* (New York: Routledge, 2003).

‘interdependency’ as a key notion. The idea of interdependency as developed in the book, that is to say, as a new condition of humanity, has to be taught to students, so that they may understand contemporary reality and its complexity and avoid the growing sensations of fear, violence and anxiety in the global age. As Rabinowitz and Smith state: “Our students can only make a political commentary on a literary text if they understand the codes and conventions that text invokes....”<sup>4</sup> The essays of the collection and their autobiographical approach are related to teaching as they bridge our personal narratives with the narratives we teach. At the same time, we assume our experiences and these other women’s experiences in a symbolic way, in order to construct new identities and new imaginaries that bring together theory and praxis.

The collection is organised in two parts, preceded by an Introduction. The first part, “Travelling Selves: Towards a Relational Subject”, analyses instances and theories of a “mobile” self that is understood as interrelational and problematises in contemporary critical terms the relation of dependency on the “other”. The second, “Travelling Selves: Voices, Interpolations, Claims”, looks at how contemporary critical standpoints materialise in the works and voices of feminist thinkers and writers from a wide range of locations, giving voice to an intellectual journey through time and space.

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The essays of the first part of the collection are mainly theoretical; we can say that they establish a frame for the essays comprising the second part. Elena Pulcini proposes a reformulation of the possible groundwork of the subject in the global age. She considers two fundamental notions – *vulnerability and contamination* – concepts that she reads *in a positive light*. Recently, the notion of *vulnerability* has been studied by Judith Butler (2005),<sup>5</sup> who contests the idea of an autonomous and self-centred subject. Having been inspired by Emmanuel Lévinas, she refers to a vulnerable subject: that is to say, to a subject that recognises herself/himself as bound to and dependent upon the other; namely a *relational subject*. Butler (2004)<sup>6</sup> also seems to suggest that the global age, because it is based on *interdependence* (of lives and events), provides the

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<sup>4</sup> Meter J. Rabinowitz & Michael Smith, *Authorizing Readers: Resistance and Respect in the Teaching of Literature* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1998), 32.

<sup>5</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (Fordham University Press, 2005).

<sup>6</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life* (London: Verso, 2004).

objective conditions for creating vulnerable subjects. While sharing these premises, Elena Pulcini proposes the addition of two fundamental aspects to the concept of vulnerability: the first consists of underlining the central importance of the *emotional* moment in the forming of the subject. The second seeks to develop the idea of relationship using the concept of *contamination*: starting from this viewpoint, Pulcini not only deals with the central role of relationships and bonds, but she also highlights the problem of *relating with the other in his/her diversity*. This is a crucial problem of the global age, as it produces contaminations, hybridisations, and the proximity of “difference” (whether ethnic, religious or cultural) and shatters all illusions, associated to modernity, of the subject’s *immunity*. The *contaminated subject* not only recognises himself/herself as constitutionally bound to the other, but also he/she exposes himself/herself to the *contamination of relationships*, to the *challenge of difference* (that plays the role of the Freudian “uncanny”) and, in so doing, he/she puts his/her very identity at stake. If we take vulnerability and contamination as the basis of the global Self, we may consider the subject as aware of his/her own fragility and will to change.

Linda Lund’s essay examines her own belonging to different contexts (academic, personal, social, political...) while dealing with dependency as a core notion for her “travelling self”. The author explores the spaces between the “selves” by inquiring into our dependency on the other. The main concern in her essay is how to love the other without cannibalising him/her. She frames her discourse within Luce Irigaray’s plea for sincerely listening to the other while realising that this attitude can become an enormous endeavour and/or transform into a blind alley. Lund suggests that a possible way to solve this dilemma is to be open towards the other and be ready to start a journey where you can lose yourself by merging with the other. This travelling subject, that is to say Linda, has then to go through many paths, languages, bodies, nationalities, countries, habits, classes to never find, or have the willpower to find, a place called home.

Eva Skærbæk bases her essay on the idea that ‘the personal is the political’. The starting point is the idea that power relations within families should be a matter of public concern as they form a crucial part of how power is socially created, distributed, maintained and changed. By defining ethics as a set of values that adhere to each of us from birth and affect our identity and our ways of being and acting publicly and privately, the author seeks to expand

political theory by including the analyses of everyday life practises as a source of central values and as a metaphorically-experiential grounding for political meaning-making and identity construction. In her contribution, the author traces connections between areas and domains normally treated separately; she does so firstly by presenting Maria Lugones's 'world travelling' to introduce her reading of *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen. Secondly the author critically reflects, through the lenses of her own life, on the gender polarity between independence and dependence in which she has been raised. Employing personal and religious myths, she argues that the responsibility of women and men in academia is to bridge the personal and the political by linking daily life practises with theories, and vice versa.

The essays that compose the second part of the collection merge theory and practice by reading personal events and literary pieces. Biljana Kašić problematises women's narratives and sense of feminist engagement from a very specific and sensitive angle, namely from the perspective of loss and mourning. More precisely, the essay endeavours to call upon memory in order to re-activate the voices of some outstanding feminists from the former Yugoslav region with whose losses the author has lived – she writes about it both as her own inner journey of grieving and as a public act of feminist responsibility. The question Kašić poses is how one should deal with the vulnerable self and human vulnerability itself by addressing the loss of two close feminists who created a variety of feminist places, while in the matter of self, continuing to be consistent, responsive and hopeful? Confronting the problem of recollecting the meaning of women's lives and narratives through an openness to another way of knowing, the author intends, in a Butlerian sense, to explore how one's own epistemological certainties can make "travelling selves" capable for this. Therefore, a particular effort is made to situate these human dilemmas that tie and affirm coherences and the 'displacement' of feminist bonding and mourning, past and present, anxiety, loss and refusal of acceptance, memory, ruptures and valuing women's life narratives in a respectful and transgressive manner. Biljana Kašić bears witness to the singularity of her friendship with two particular feminists from former Yugoslavia by expressing not only her relation to them but above all by exposing their uniqueness as examples for her concept of responsibility. In searching for ways of honouring those friendships in the wake of their passing, she expresses a particular aspect of the task of mourning as a trace for feminist autobiography that (re)constitutes meaning

only through resonance with them and through the importance of the remembrance of them(selves).

Melita Richter explores the meaning of the notion of the Travelling Self through her own personal experience of migration and mobility through space and time; she links it to the narratives of other women's experiences of migration and the process of dislocation. While recuperating from the shadow of fragmented layers of memory(ies), Richter notices how a forgotten sphere of a daily border crossing of cultural and linguistic patterns already emerges during her childhood, in her birthplace, Zagreb, and in the family environment. The author is certain that there is no travel without going beyond the borders and that the experience of being able to cross the inner borders of different cultural segments represents a normal part of everyday life; she feels reinforced in her multicultural being and in her openness toward the Other. That is why her real displacement does not occur on the migration path, but later in a kind of landslide which brutally deprived the author of the framework of her identity references. It happened when the war in Yugoslavia began and the partition of the country led to unutterable brutality, crime, and ethnic cleansing... It was at this point that Richter's multicultural Self started to float without points of reference. At this point in her essay, Melita Richter questions the modes of integration and/or assimilation of the immigrant subject in the host societies through an *imaginary dialogue* with Eva Hoffman – a Pole who emigrated to Canada and the United States as a teenager – who wrote about the psychological aspects of integration in a new cultural environment in her book *Lost in Translation*. By recollecting her own memories and with the help of shared narratives, Richter recognises many traits of her own life experience. By keeping in mind that every identity and each life is understood only in terms of her larger history – focusing particularly on the concepts of border crossing and the diasporic experience, on cultural memory and on the meaning of citizenship – the author tries to define a possible framework for her “third space” by rethinking her own position as a Travelling Self and an openness to the liberating possibilities of *living Elsewhere*.

Silvia Caporale, in autobiographical terms, stresses how as a “travelling subject” or a subject dislocated from her emotional roots, the inner quest becomes a way of coming to terms with a set of norms that belongs to a reality defined by “different” standards from those of the subject's original one. As in the theory of the Panoptic, the “outsider” is subject to scrutiny and is the object

of curiosity. It is a gaze that, consciously and/or unconsciously, does not define the subject as *another*, but as *other*. In her essay, and by going through memoirs and narratives written by immigrant women to Canada (of the first and second generation), the author states that in such a complex and bewildering personal context, memory as healing becomes an essential part of everyday life. Auto-biographical memory is necessary as a strategy of resistance as it works both as a way of retrieving memories and reconstructing wounded parts of one's self. Language is then an important part of the displaced subject as she lives in-between languages and interprets, at the same time, various semiotic codes, linguistic as well as cultural. Interpretation becomes a way of life, and it is ever present in the individual's daily experience; these daily acts of interpretation characterise a process of acculturation that develops into an "I" that together with autobiographical memories re/defines a person's identity while bridging her past, her present and project her on to the future.

Anabela Galhardo Couto explores the metaphor of the journey and the concept of "displaced subjects", in a set of texts by Portuguese writers composed in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Following a feminist line of critical and historical recovery of past literary works, in articulation with the works developed, amongst other authors, by Luisa Muraro or Mercedes Allendes Salazar on feminine mystical writing, she proposes a journey to the Portuguese feminine literary production of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. These texts are autobiographic narratives, written by nuns in an important moment of the flourishing of feminine writing in Portugal, which, thanks to a specific set of historical circumstances, coincided with the development of conventual literature. These writers offer extremely intense inner travels in their texts. Despite being subject to a strict set of literary and religious conventions, in these autobiographic texts creative freedom, the crossing of borders, the radical exposure of the self and the search for another language that escapes the institutional discourse stand out. As subjects opened to otherness, these writers reach a radical experience and exposure of their "travelling selves". Intensifying their senses, they search for a discourse that can say the unspoken, the excess, love, desire. Some concepts of current feminist criticism, such as the concept of vulnerability explored by Judith Butler or H  l  ne Cixoux's notion of "writing through the body", inspire, in an indirect manner, a positive reading of these accounts of personal and radical experiences. The perspective of the analysis tries to bring together the author (and her need for a plenitude experience) and

the subjects revealed in the autobiographic texts, in a journey through time and in a gesture that seeks to reconstruct memories and fictionalise a heritage of the imaginary and of the affections.

Finally, our collection of essays suggests many points of contact among the topics addressed; the different angles from which the authors develop their analysis is the result of their complex and multiple identity formation, a process that is also instrumental in building up an interdisciplinary dialogue on the issues at stake. The diversity of the complex links that define the notion of “travelling selves” reflects its intercultural meaning, which is crucial for a better understanding of the process of constructing women’s nomadic identity.

The richness and diversity of approaches to theoretical concepts inter-related with life experiences and the authors’ autobiographical narratives suggest the possibility of an extensive use of the book within feminist pedagogy. We consider that the volume would be of interest to the many feminist scholars researching and teaching in the area of philosophy, literary studies, social and immigration studies and interculturality. Likewise, the volume would be of interest to individuals working in the more general fields of feminist theory, sociology and cultural studies. Each contributing author, at the end of her essay, suggests some possible pedagogical guidelines concerning the use of the material in an academic or broader educational context.



## Part I: Travelling Selves: Towards A Relational Subject

### CONTAMINATION AND VULNERABILITY: THE SELF IN THE GLOBAL AGE

*Elena Pulcini (University of Florence)*

#### *The fertility of the negative and the contaminated subject*

My research has always revolved around the topic of the subject. Initially, my reflection began by criticising the modern *sovereign subject*: that is, the subject as an autonomous and self-sufficient, logocentric entity, enclosed within a logic of identity.<sup>1</sup>

A clear manifestation of this are the two hegemonic figures of modernity – the liberal tradition’s *homo oeconomicus* and the *subject as a conscience* devised by Descartes – both based on dualism and opposing positive (reason, thought, freedom, male) and negative poles (passions, body, need, female). In other words, the sovereign subject is based on excluding what is each time considered “other” from the subject itself. As a consequence, it is essentially unilateral.

It is a *topos* well known to contemporary feminism which, despite immense differences, has tried to rethink the subject by taking criticism of the modern paradigm as its starting point. From Carol Gilligan’s ethics of care to the Italian theory of difference,<sup>2</sup> from Jessica Benjamin and Nancy Chodorow’s psychoanalytical reflections to Judith Butler’s more recent reflections on the topic of responsibility, the idea has emerged of a subject that takes leave of the modern Self’s unilateralism by reintegrating the excluded, repressed, undervalued poles (whether they are difference, the body, the unconscious or care). In other words, what has long been considered “other” loses its negative connotation and becomes an element constituting the Self. It brings about a profound change in its structure of sense, extending its boundaries and opening up new potential.

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Elena Pulcini, *Il potere di unire. Femminile, desiderio, cura* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003); idem, *L'individuo senza passioni. Individualismo moderno e perdita del legame sociale* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005). Among my texts in English, cf. Elena Pulcini, *Modernity, Love and Hidden Inequality*, in ‘EUI Working Papers’ (Badia fiesolana, Florence: Istituto Universitario Europeo, 2000); idem, “European Feminine Identity and the Idea of Passion in Politics”, in *Thinking Differently. A European Women’s Studies Reader*, ed. Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti (London: Zed Books, 2002), 97-109; idem, “Responsibility and Care in the Global Age”, in Eva Skaerbaek, Dasa Duhaček, Elena Pulcini, Melita Richter, *Common Passion, Different Voices. Reflections on Citizenship and Intersubjectivity*, (York: Raw Nerve Books, 2006b), 26-35, 63-66, 82-83.

<sup>2</sup> In particular Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives: storytelling and selfhood* (London: Routledge, 2000).

While sharing this perspective, I have come up with an idea that could be defined as the *fertility of the negative*. By reinstating its dark areas, the Self apparently loses power, autonomy and certainties, but acquires the ability to finally face up to that *otherness* constitutive of its deepest, most inalienable humus.

We do not have to renounce the idea of the subject and decree its death, as a certain post-modern *vulgata* would have us do. Nor should we replace it with the idea of intersubjectivity.<sup>3</sup> Rather we need to rethink it without presupposing its sovereignty. In other words, the subject is such due to its acceptance of the challenge stemming from the unshakeable materiality of the body, from the fracture of difference, from the obscurity of the unconscious. It is such because it is open to a process of *distortion* that prevents the identity from being recomposed, and causes its deposition from the sovereign position that modernity had bestowed upon it. So what I would like to do is also oppose the pathologies that were inevitably triggered by a subject that retains itself sovereign and absolute; that is, oppose the resulting dominion, the obsession with acquisition, the purely instrumental and utilitarian attitude, and above all, the narcissistic drift of the modern subject.<sup>4</sup>

In this sense, I have been given precious input from the line of reflection, from the *Collège de Sociologie* to Derrida, proposing the deconstruction of some key notions of Western and modern thought from the inside, and a rethink of the very basis of their foundations. So, from this critical/deconstructivist starting point, I have tried to put forward the notion of a *contaminated subject*, inspired by the reflection of Georges Bataille.<sup>5</sup> He configures, through the notion of “*blessure*” (wound), the image of a subject cut through by a permanent and constitutive *wound*, exposing it to contagion from otherness. As a result, he argues against all illusions of the Self’s separateness or self-sufficiency. “‘One-self’,” Bataille says, “is not the subject isolating itself from the world, but a place of communication, of fusion of the subject and the object.”<sup>6</sup>

Therefore, we must bid farewell to what has been defined as modernity’s *immunitary paradigm*<sup>7</sup> in order to rethink the subject outside the logic of

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<sup>3</sup> Here I am referring to the concept present in Habermas’s thinking.

<sup>4</sup> Elena Pulcini, *Il potere di unire. Femminile, desiderio, cura* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003); idem, *L’individuo senza passioni. Individualismo moderno e perdita del legame sociale* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2005).

<sup>5</sup> A recurring theme in Georges Bataille’s reflection.

<sup>6</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 9.

<sup>7</sup> Roberto Esposito, *Immunitas* (Turin: Einaudi, 2002).

conscience and identity. In my view, the dethroning process resulting from the Self's recognition of an otherness that constitutes itself from within, or rather of an otherness disputing it from within, preventing the closure of its identity, is the necessary presupposition to outlining a different image of the subject. No longer atomistic, but open to the other, the subject is "affected" by the other, and willing, to use Jean-Luc Nancy's words, to share, *partager* its very existence.<sup>8</sup>

However, I must immediately clarify that to speak of contamination does not mean merely to speak of a subject being *in relationship* with the other. A large part of feminist thought has quite rightly put forward the idea of a subject *in relationship* to others, in opposition to the self-centred and "logocentric" subject of Western modernity. But to use the term contamination is to place the stress on the fact that the relationship should not be understood as the reciprocal interaction between two sovereign and autonomous subjects, but as something *that constantly brings identity under discussion*. Contamination means "hosting" the other inside oneself and therefore being capable of recognising the other insofar as the Self accepts otherness, *différence* within itself.

Italian feminism has placed great emphasis on the idea of difference, but I have often had the impression that the idea of difference – above all if understood as sexual difference – could risk once again proposing the dualisms upon which Western thought is based. For me "difference" is what does not allow itself to be denied or assimilated since it acts, in Blanchot's words, as a "principle of internal dispute", disputing all the subject's presumptions of self-sufficiency.<sup>9</sup> Difference is what acts, to use a Freudian term, as the "uncanny"; as the internal dissonance that prevents the subject from encasing itself in its identity, and that brings its convictions about its identity under permanent debate.

Therefore, the contaminated subject is that which not only has a constitutive relationship with the other, but that which lets itself be destabilised by the other and by the relationship insofar as, by recognising its internal difference, it never corresponds to itself, nor does it encase itself in a rigid, clear-cut identity. On the contrary, it is exposed to the other in that it holds *traces of others* in itself.

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<sup>8</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *Being Singular Plural* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Maurice Blanchot, *The Unavowable Community* (New York: Station Hill Press, 1988).

### *The experience of loss and the consciousness of vulnerability*

A thinker who places particular emphasis on this need is Judith Butler in her recent reflections on ethics. Taking inspiration from Lévinas, Butler puts forward a radical rethink of the very idea of the subject, based on the death of the sovereign subject: “But this death, if it is a death, is only the death of a certain kind of subject, one that was never possible to begin with, the death of a fantasy of impossible mastery, and so a loss of what one never had. In other words, it is a necessary grief.”<sup>10</sup> That is, we do not have to decree the death of the subject *tout court*, but of the subject *as a conscience*, founded on claims of mastery and coherence, perfectly transparent to itself and capable of accounting for itself, enclosed in the egoic presumption that it controls its own existence. Therefore, we “need to mourn” before we can possibly think of another structure of the Self: a Self aware of its constitutive dependence,<sup>11</sup> of the unshakeable bond that links it to the other in a relationship of reciprocal interdependence.

In this sense we can talk of a reciprocal *recognition*. Not by chance has the theme of recognition, as set out by Hegel, been brought up again recently as part of the criticism of the liberal *homo oeconomicus* paradigm. This has been done by a series of authors who tend to underline and bring out the intrinsically relational and social nature of a subject that needs to be recognised by the other to obtain confirmation of its own dignity and identity.<sup>12</sup>

Therefore, this topic is highly important for rethinking the subject in relational terms. So long as it is not seen, Butler tells us while proposing a post-Hegelian view, as the recognition between two static and definitive identities, but between subjects-in-the-making, capable of putting themselves at stake, involved in a reciprocal exchange that produces a displacement in their identity: “When we recognize another, or when we ask for recognition for ourselves, we are not asking for an Other to see us as we are, as we already are, as we have always been, as we were constituted prior to the encounter itself. Instead, in the asking, in the petition, we have already become something new, since we are constituted by virtue of the address.” Hence, to ask for or to give recognition is to “solicit a becoming, to instigate a transformation, to petition the future

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<sup>10</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 65.

<sup>11</sup> On the importance of the concept of “dependence” in forming the Self, cf. the essay by Linda Lund in this volume. On the subject’s need to combine dependence and independence, cf. the essay by Eva Skaerbaek.

<sup>12</sup> Axel Honneth, *Struggle for Recognition: the moral grammar of social conflicts*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1995); Paul Ricoeur, *The Course of Recognition* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2005).

always in relation to the Other. It is also to stake one's own being, and one's own persistence in one's own being, in the struggle for recognition."<sup>13</sup>

This means that relations are not configured as a symmetrical relationship between two pre-constituted free and acting subjects, but as an "impingement" instigated by the other, an impingement that inaugurates the subject at the very moment in which its identity is expropriated, in which it is violated, causing its decentralisation, its wound: "the *primat* or impress of the Other is primary, inaugurative, and there is no formation of a "me" outside of this originally passive impingement [...]."<sup>14</sup> Therefore, we must not simply counterpoise the idea of relationality with autonomy or sovereignty, but underline the effect of destabilisation and dispossession that relations with the other and dependence on the other produce in the subject, consigning it to a condition of *vulnerability*.

In both her texts, Butler comes back to this concept, originated by Lévinas, several times.<sup>15</sup> And I believe that in it we can grasp an affinity with my concept of contamination.

In other words, the Self is not formed without this original impingement, or violation, by the other. It calls upon me through the powerful compulsion of the Face, forcing me to recognise my condition of original non-freedom. Thus, it blocks the narcissistic and immunitary drifts of a subject that considers itself autonomous and self-sufficient. Vulnerability is a primary, original situation. So much so that Butler sees it as the sign of being *human*, of the constitutive and inescapable fragility of the human condition.<sup>16</sup> It is therefore something that we cannot avoid, something that "one cannot will away without ceasing to be human",<sup>17</sup> whose origins we cannot trace, because it is coeval to the very origin of life, preceding the formation of the subject.<sup>18</sup> "That we are impinged upon primarily and against our will is the sign of a

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<sup>13</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: the powers of mourning and violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2004); on the topic cf. also idem, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>15</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Otherwise than Being or Beyond Essence*, (The Hague; London: Nijhoff, 1981).

<sup>16</sup> "...but there is a more general conception of the human with which I am trying to work here, one in which we are, from the start, given over to the other [...], given over to some set of primary others", Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: the powers of mourning and violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2004), 31.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 31: "Although I am insisting on referring to a common human vulnerability, one that emerges with life itself, I also insist that we cannot recover the source of this vulnerability: it precedes the formation of 'I'".

vulnerability and a beholdenness that we cannot will away.”<sup>19</sup> Even when this vulnerability becomes intolerable, when we are brutally reminded of it by being wounded and offended, we must avert every attempt to repress it or react to it violently, because this is where, we could say, the truth of being and the subject resides: the truth of relationships and the bond of reciprocity. Indeed, it is precisely when it reappears due to a failure, a defeat and the consequent pain, that vulnerability can become a resource: an ethical resource wherein the very source of responsibility lies.

At this point I am not interested in following Butler in her undoubtedly interesting ethical proposal founded on the nexus between vulnerability and responsibility.<sup>20</sup> What interests me is underlining her proposal to *put the idea of vulnerability in a positive light* so as to make it the foundation of a relational subject.

However, at this point a problem arises which could be formulated as follows: what is it that allows the subject to regain *perception* of its vulnerability? If it is true that the subject, since modernity, has considered itself sovereign and self-sufficient, consequently exposing itself to a narcissistic drift, which resources may we make use of to produce that necessary break so that we may overcome the paradigm of conscience and identity? In other words, there must be something – a fact, an event, an experience – that allows us to psychically regain access to the acknowledgement of our constitutive fragility, producing that wound, in the Self’s enclosed and narcissistic body, that opens the boundaries of identity and exposes it to the other.

The response suggested by Butler, prompted mainly by her reflections on the present day, consists of her invitation to make the most of what we could sum up as *the experience of loss*.<sup>21</sup> When we lose something that is vital for us, through the death of loved ones for example, or lose our sense of security or the protection of the community in which we live, we experience grief, we sustain damage that breaks the autarchic illusion. “It tears us from ourselves” to reveal “something about who we are [...], something that delineates the ties we have to others, that shows us that these ties constitute what we are, ties or

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<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005), 100; cf. also idem, *Precarious Life: the powers of mourning and violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2004), 45: “What is prematurely, or belatedly, called the ‘I’ is, at the outset, enthralled, even if it is to a violence, an abandonment, a mechanism...”

<sup>20</sup> Cf. above all Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005). I dealt with the topic of responsibility in the global age in Elena Pulcini, “Responsibility and Care in the Global Age”, *op.cit.*

<sup>21</sup> On the importance of experiencing loss (and mourning), cf. the essay by Biljana Kasic in this volume.

bonds that compose us.”<sup>22</sup> In other words, *the experience of loss and failure* can produce the narcissistic wound that permits the reawakening, in the Self, of the consciousness of one’s own vulnerability and constitutive dependence.

Now, the example at the basis of Butler’s reflection is anything but coincidental: it is that highly significant symbolic event, the September 11 attack on the Twin Towers; a “global” event par excellence, in which the physical collapse of the towers seemed to correspond to a collapse in conscience,<sup>23</sup> now bereft of the certainties of its sovereign position. With the “wound” inflicted on the body of the sovereign country *par excellence* and, in so doing, on the whole of the West, September 11 produced the end of all illusions of immunity and the traumatic revelation of a vulnerability that can no longer be denied.

It is unfortunately true, Butler observes, that the responses (of the Americans above all) to this event were inspired by the desire for repression and retaliation, resulting in dominion and violence; but it is also true that this event can be seen as a chance to reawaken consciences thanks to the ensuing perception of our human fragility and the precariousness of life. In other words, the shock produced by loss, failure and grief can permit us, so long as we accept the resulting destabilisation, to rediscover the intrinsic sociality of the human condition: in which we are all dependent on each other, exposed to the risk of relationships, united by a tie that connects our lives in a reciprocal and indissoluble bond: “Perhaps we can say that grief contains the possibility of apprehending a mode of dispossession that is fundamental to who I am. This possibility does not dispute the fact of my autonomy, but it does qualify that claim through recourse to the fundamental sociality of embodied life, the ways in which we are, from the start and by virtue of being a bodily being, already given over, beyond ourselves, implicated in lives that are not our own.”<sup>24</sup>

Hence, vulnerability is a resource, an “extraordinary resource” that the Self must grasp and make the most of in order to regain its *relational* nature and the *sense* of its being in the world.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: the powers of mourning and violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2004), 22.

<sup>23</sup> Or rather, *Western* conscience.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 28.

<sup>25</sup> “To foreclose that vulnerability, to banish it, to make ourselves secure at the expense of every other human consideration is to eradicate one of the most important resources from which we must take our bearings and find our way.” *Ibid.*, 30.

## *Global vulnerability as the condition for a relational Self*

Now, starting from Butler's reflections, I would like to further develop this line of interpretation by setting out a general thesis: that it is the global age that creates the objective conditions for this Self-awareness.

First of all, because the principal and novel characteristic of the global age resides, as is often repeated, in the phenomenon of *interdependence*: the interdependence of events and lives, as a result of which everything that happens at the "local" level can, potentially at least, have repercussions at the "global" level, thus affecting the whole of humankind. September 11, which Butler is not alone in finding exemplary, is only the tip of the iceberg in this new condition from which no one can escape in order to take refuge in the reassuring position of the *spectator* who observes events from the outside. The erosion of territorial borders induced by economic and technological globalisation means that today we are all, despite ourselves, potential *actors* in events, since at all times and in all places the lives of every one of us can be involved in matters that apparently do not concern us, and potential *victims* of phenomena that we are not able to control. Unfortunately, many examples of this can be had from the disturbing succession of what have been defined "global risks":<sup>26</sup> from nuclear power to global warming, from the recurrent explosion of lethal viruses (SARS, BSE) to environmental catastrophes, and the current financial crisis producing knock-on effects on a planetary scale, revealing the impotence of traditional control policies. The "network" metaphor that often recurs in contemporary reflection doubtlessly turns out to be effective in describing this condition of interdependence, of common exposure to challenges that we cannot manage, yet neither can avoid. Due to the "time-space compression",<sup>27</sup> due to the enormous development of information and communication technology annihilating distance and accelerating time, the world has paradoxically become at once boundless yet closed, lacking limits yet incredibly small and shrunken.

As Bauman says, we are like passengers on a pilotless plane, at the mercy of the insecurity and anguish caused by our perception of losing control over what happens.<sup>28</sup> Insecurity, fear and disorientation, has become our existential condition, to which we respond by taking apathetic refuge in the dimension

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<sup>26</sup> Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society: towards a new modernity*, trans. Mark Ritter (London: Sage, 1992).

<sup>27</sup> David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989).

<sup>28</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *In Search of Politics* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1999).



of the *here and now*, in turn symptom of a disconcerting loss of future. Thus, we are in the presence of radical social changes that are becoming a real and proper anthropological mutation: the modern image of an autonomous Self, sovereign and dominator, is crumbling in the face of a condition of universal impotence and vulnerability. Every day we are exposed to experiences of loss and failure. And, nevertheless, nestling here is a potential resource. For the first time we have the possibility of transforming a negative situation into a precious opportunity since we are able, to use Bataille's words, to *grasp the chance*: that is, to *recognise* the truth of this condition and to inaugurate new possibilities.

By making vulnerability a generalised dimension extended to the whole of humankind, the global age allows us first of all to reverse the repression process begun by the *hubris* of the modern Self. Secondly, it allows us to grasp the opportunity to change direction. Indeed, the subject is now in the position to regain, together with the awareness of its own fragility and neediness, the perception of the bond that unites it indissolubly to other lives and other destinies.

But all this means underlining a particular dimension of the subject that has been for the most part ignored or undervalued by the Western and modern tradition: that is, the *emotional dimension*, which, in my previous reflections, I had pinpointed as the sphere *par excellence* in which to base the idea of a *contaminated subject*.<sup>29</sup> The emotions are the unmistakable manifestation of a *wound* inflicted on the closed and compact body of identity; that is, they are the expression of moments of self-dispossession, of the subject's being unseated from its sovereign position and from its illusion of holding rational control over events. This by no means signifies that they are blind and irrational forces capable only of obscuring or distorting our comprehension of things and our actions. On the contrary, the emotions have their own particular "intelligence", as purported recently by Martha Nussbaum. They possess their own cognitive and evaluative function, essentially "reveal[ing] us as vulnerable to events that we do not control".<sup>30</sup> And, I must add at once, they hold great value for us.

Thus, when we experience loss and failure, the Self's scaffolding gives way, inevitably it falls due to an emotional shock that exposes us to something unexpected and unforeseen, upsetting our certainties and revealing their preca-

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<sup>29</sup> Elena Pulcini, *The Contaminated Subject: Passions, Power and Care* (2006a), <http://www.travellingconcepts.net> (March 10, 2006)

<sup>30</sup> Martha Nussbaum, *Upheavals of Thought: the intelligence of emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 12.

riousness. Emotions, says Nussbaum once again, “involve acknowledgement of neediness and lack of self-sufficiency”;<sup>31</sup> they are the eloquent symptom of our “neediness”. Nevertheless, just like all symptoms, we could say, they are the expression of a *sense* that cannot be ignored or repressed. On the contrary, it needs to be deciphered and made the most of, since this is where lies the profound, though often inconvenient and unutterable, truth of our human condition.

Thus, the vulnerable subject is the one capable of *rediscovering contact with its own emotions*, of listening to them and making the most of them; seeing them as an unignorable message that can act as a prelude to a change in the direction of our actions.

Of course, this operation is anything but easy. First of all, because the enormity of the global challenges and the consequential sense of impotence drives the subject to put up defences and to repress so as to preserve the psyche from intolerable truths – as often happens, for example, in the face of the possibility of a nuclear holocaust or the probable devastating consequences of environmental risks – prompting attitudes of *denial* and apathetical indifference. Second, because where, on the other hand, *pathos* forcefully reappears, like in the case of a terrorist attack, it mainly takes on negative connotations: of fear, anger, hatred towards the other, who hence becomes the enemy to demonise and exorcise, as has been the exact case since September 11.

Thus, it is not just a matter of regaining contact with our emotions, but of managing them, directing them in a selective manner: opposing fear with solidarity, hatred with compassion, anger with hospitality, the desire for power with brotherhood; that is, reactivating the emotional dynamic that allows us to *fight passions with passions*.<sup>32</sup> We can react to the experience of loss and failure with violence, fomented by destructive passions, and with the desire to annihilate those considered responsible; but we can also react by reawakening what elsewhere I have called *community passions*, inspired by the desire for belonging and reciprocity.

We have seen that the global age poses the objective conditions for this conversion insofar as it makes us *all equal in our weakness and vulnerability*. And therefore it provides the premises for individuals to recognise that they are members of a common humankind: bound one to the other by sharing the same challenges and the same destiny.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Here I propose a correction to Hirschmann's thesis (Albert O. Hirschmann, *The Passions and the Interests*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), in which passions are fought with interests.

### *The challenge of difference: Accepting contamination*

Therefore, the notion of vulnerability seems to be an effective foundation, through the destabilising power of the negative, for thinking of a relational subject; a subject aware of the fact that the world is essentially, to use Jean-Luc Nancy's words, co-existence, "being-with" (*être avec*).<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, the global age places before us a further challenge, for which the awareness of vulnerability is not a sufficient answer. I am alluding to the challenge that comes from the *other*, and in particular the other meant as *he who is different*: a challenge that makes it necessary for us to go back to the idea of contamination. One of the novel effects of globalisation is to produce, through great migratory flows, a mixture of cultures and races, religions and languages. By breaking down previous state and territorial borders, this gives rise to increasingly multicultural societies on a planetary scale. Not by chance has "multiculturalism" become a watchword for our times; a concept that without doubt appears eloquent and fertile where it can bring out, in descriptive terms at least, the problematic nature of different people living together.

Indeed, we are well aware that many of the conflicts across the planet today originate due to the difficulty of multicultural co-existence, since this mobility makes regressive forms of *pathos* explode, often resulting in the unexpected revival of archaic forms of atrocity and violence previously thought outmoded, a thing of the past. In this connection, we speak of *identity conflicts*,<sup>34</sup> because what is at stake is the very identity (cultural, ethnic, national or religious) of those who feel excluded and humiliated by a social context subordinating them to a hegemonic identity.

In the West above all, today the problem consists of the fact that *the other* is he who crosses our borders to become a close, internal presence, with whom we come into contact day in, day out. The other, the stranger (whether *émigré*, refugee or illegal immigrant) is now among us, he lives in our cities, he crosses our roads. The other can no longer be relegated to the outside, as the global age coincides with the disappearance of that separate and reassuring "elsewhere" to which we can confine those who threaten (or rather, who we believe to threaten) social cohesion. And neither does he come then go; on the contrary, he can increasingly be defined as Simmel's figure of the "stranger

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<sup>33</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *op. cit.*

<sup>34</sup> Giacomo Marramao, *Passaggio a Occidente* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 2003); Amartya K. Sen, *Identity and Violence: the illusion of destiny* (London: Allen Lane, 2006).

within”: “the person who comes today and stays tomorrow”, as Simmel puts it;<sup>35</sup> and who consequently cannot be expelled or assimilated as he has decided to endeavour to keep his own culture and tradition.

Thus, with his unavoidable proximity, the figure of the other is a perturbing presence challenging the Self’s claim to immunity. And as a consequence he becomes the subject of negative projections by a Self that becomes entrenched in defending its identity by “inventing” an enemy to make a “scapegoat” for its own insecurity and fears. Therefore, this projective trend does not only concern single multicultural situations, but seems to affect the whole globe, where the tendency to identify the other as the enemy seems to be becoming increasingly pervasive and to be taking on increasingly bitter tones, so as to legitimise not only disastrous preventive wars, but also the success of misleading formulae such as the “clash of civilisations”.<sup>36</sup> Not by chance is the strategy undertaken in this sense to rekindle those dynamics of de-humanisation that have always legitimised violence against the other, but that today take on “horrorific” forms of brutality against the defenceless,<sup>37</sup> unveiling the deformed and atrocious face of Western democracies. Suffice it to think of Abu Ghraib and the repulsive image of the American woman soldier smiling, indifferent and self-satisfied, as she slams her foot down on a pile of the inert bodies of Iraqi prisoners.

The *other* is still, or I should say today more than ever, as Gayatri C. Spivak reminds us, someone who is not wholly human and as a consequence is deprived of his status of subject;<sup>38</sup> authorising all ideologies and practices preaching annihilation and humiliation.

The process of constructing and dehumanising the other, with the evident goal of exclusion and dominion, is constant and has been recouped in the global age in the more or less disguised forms of the defence of freedom, rights and democracy. Though leaving aside extreme forms of violence and abuse of power, this process is nevertheless evident in a highly emblematic case, that is, the French debate on the right of Muslim women to wear the veil. Hiding beneath the pretext of laicity and freeing women from the oppression of the religious and traditional patriarchy, Spivak says, is the imperialist gaze

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<sup>35</sup> Georg Simmel, “The Stranger” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, trans., ed. and intro. Kurt H. Wolff (New York: The Free Press, 1950), 402.

<sup>36</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996).

<sup>37</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Horrorism* (New York; Chichester: Columbia University Press, 2009).

<sup>38</sup> Gayatri C. Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999); idem, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003).

(the “imperial I-eye”) of a West that makes women the stake in a “clash of civilisations” aimed at reclaiming its own identity and values. And, we could add, this is becoming increasingly the case the more this identity and these values quaver in the face of the contaminations produced by global society.

So, first we need to unmask the deceit, at times concealed behind even the best of intentions, to prompt a process of (self-)criticism and deconstruction that shatters all claims to absolutisation and identity autarchy. In this sense, it is not sufficient to appeal to liberal tolerance, and even less so to compassion and goodwill, since the intrinsic risk of this type of attitude is to keep the subalternity of whomever concerned intact; and therefore it is to deny the other, however unconsciously and unintentionally, of the status of subject.

Therefore, the only possible response is to shatter the illusion of immunity through continual criticism and deconstruction of one’s own identity: that is, to *accept contamination*; or rather to see contamination itself as a possible “resource” in order to bring one’s own identity under discussion and overcome the Self/other dualism.<sup>39</sup> Paradoxically, what avails us of this chance in the global age are those very same processes producing negative outcomes: that is, the other’s proximity in space. If it is true that the other’s becoming internal is what intensifies conflict and violence, it is also true that this very fact is what gives us the possibility to change the relationship with the other. However, this can only be so long as we are willing to recognise it as a *difference*, that is, as a presence representing a diversity at once impossible to avoid and to assimilate. In other words, the fact that the other becomes internal, that I find myself day in, day out in the presence of his Face, as Lévinas would say, comes to be the factor of challenge and resistance that we can respond to with violence, but that we can also react to by opening ourselves up to the contamination of his presence, exposing ourselves to the risk of contact or contagion.

What is needed in this case too is *recognition*: to recognise the other as the *figure incarnate of a difference* which radically questions not just the Self’s autonomy, but also the roots of its identity.

I would like to immediately underline that this does not mean accepting *just any* difference; because there are differences that attract me and differences that I do not accept, that make me feel uneasy. Accepting (and making the most of) contamination does not mean denying this unease, which can on

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<sup>39</sup> Here I find a deep affinity with the “plural I” concept proposed in this volume by Melita Richter and the “dislocated”/floating Self” proposed by Silvia Caporale.

the contrary *perturb* me, make me question my identity. Therefore, we must not recoil from the unease that we feel when faced with situations that we cannot manage to accept; we need to recognise our ambivalences towards the challenge posed to us by the other. Only a hypocritical and superficial tolerance can deny the fact that at times the other's difference makes me feel uneasy, it exposes me to situations that for me are unacceptable: like seeing an Indian woman submitting to the despotic authority of her husband, or an Islamic woman covered by a *burka* and condemned to exclusion from all social life, or an African woman undergoing infibulation.

Difference is always perturbing, and it becomes even more so when it rattles the very roots of the values and principles that we are deeply attached to. So, in these cases, it is legitimate to defend our values and principles, appealing, why not, to what we consider our better Western inheritance (rights, freedom, responsibility). However, in order for this to happen, we need to be aware of the *relative and contingent* nature of our identity. In other words, the problem is not denying ourselves in order to welcome the other, but accepting the inevitable face-to-face deriving from *really* coming into contact with the other.

To go back to the topic of passions, we must listen to that bundle of emotions that emerge from encountering difference in order to try to understand it and understand its sense. Because, I must repeat, the emotions *do* reveal sense. Often prevailing is the prejudice that they are totalitarian and unchangeable, almost a sort of natural destiny that we cannot change; on the contrary, the emotions presuppose cognitive processes and evaluation, which we can modify and make change direction the moment in which we are able to give them a sense.

We need to exit the sterile alternative between refusal and tolerance, in order to accept the *risk of the relationship* with the other, putting our own passions and convictions at stake. What is important is that the *contingent* character of our identity remains steady by recognising our own *difference within*; considering identity (our own identity) something that is constantly fluctuating and developing: which means exposed to novelty, to the unknown, to the feeling of bewilderment we get when we venture into new territories. This means that, in this case too, *recognition* cannot be seen as the reciprocal confirmation of rigid and definitive identities, but as a trend open to reciprocal transformation, requiring us to put up and deal with the *pathos* and unease that inevitably pertain to the relationship between different people.

Therefore, if we are to think of a relational subject, we cannot consider a *vulnerable subject* alone, that is, a subject capable of breaking free from its atomist chrysalis to open up to the other as a constitutive element of a Self dethroned from its sovereign position. It also means thinking of a *contaminated subject*, that is, a subject capable of hosting and recognising difference, of putting its own identity at stake and opening up to the possibility of change. We have seen that, starting from vulnerability and contamination, the global age poses the objective conditions for rethinking the subject, insofar as it produces not just the *interdependence of events and lives*, but also the *coexistence of different peoples* at planetary level. It is up to us, women and men of the world-society, to grasp this opportunity!

### ***Implications for teaching***

What implications does my reflection have in terms of teaching and ways of living? I truly believe that it has many. There is no doubt that my reflection unfolds essentially through concepts. I have been accustomed to this by philosophy; and, to some extent at least, this has raised some doubts among my women friends in the “Selves” group who would perhaps have preferred a more narrative and personalised style. Yet – I feel obliged to underline – for me concepts are not abstract and inert constructs, they throb with life, they sum up my experiences and I consider them vital for analysing reality and even transforming it.

After this premise, I will try to stress at least three aspects that are relevant in terms of teaching and life experience. First of all, the critique of the idea of the subject that I propose here, opposing the sovereign subject with a *vulnerable* and *contaminated* one, can have a fundamental pedagogical impact on the teaching of philosophy. Feminist thinking has denounced the unilateralism of the modern concept of the subject inspiring the whole of Western philosophy from several points of view. What I am attempting to do is come up with *alternative images* to allow philosophy students to bring out what philosophical thought has hidden or underestimated: that is, the fact that the subject is always, by its very constitution, *in a relationship with the other*. Furthermore, through the idea of vulnerability and contamination, I want to underline not only the condition of dependency imbuing all of our lives and actions, but the need to expose ourselves to meeting the other and the

possibility that the other will destabilise and transform us. Thus, it is a matter of prompting students (and the young generations in general) to consider in a positive light what Western philosophical thought has for the most part considered negative: dependence, fragility, the Self's openness to change and the uncertainty of relationships with the other.

Secondly, the stress I placed on the transformations produced by globalisation may have an important impact not only on the sphere of philosophical teaching, but also on sociology and anthropology. I believe that feminist thought has not yet devoted enough attention to this aspect, which is fundamental in order to understand the radical novelties of our times. Learning to *understand the present* not only means learning to recognise the unprecedented challenges of the present, but also to know how to face up to them and to build alternative scenarios so that thought is always intrinsically connected to practice. Only by diagnosing the present day can we think of (and act to produce) *a better future*. The global age is an age of uncertainty and fear that can generate immunitary reactions of closure, violence and exclusion. But if our teaching aims to make uncertainty and fragility a value, these negative aspects can become a positive resource for acting in the world. If it is true that one of the greatest challenges of our times is the presence of *diversity* in our daily lives, making the most of contamination means transforming the negative into a resource for a sustainable cohabitation; it means opposing the conflict and violence that we see crossing the planet everyday, the ability to recognise the other in his difference and to accept that we are transformed by the other, so as to put our own identity at stake and imagine a world as a *cosmopolis of differences*.

Thirdly, the importance that I attribute to the emotional life provides the presupposition for building what I would like to define a *paideia of feeling*. I think that one of the pathologies of our times lies in the very loss of our ability to feel, which translates first and foremost into a sort of *indifference* towards the other. Contemporary reflection on this factor by the mainstreams of the various disciplines to me seems particularly lacking; even psychology, often dominated by a cognitive approach, does not seem to have grasped the importance of this aspect. Without doubt though, some voices of feminist thought have underlined the importance of the emotions. However, what I propose here is not just to recognise the emotions' decisive function (in constructing the Self and in relations with the other), and hence to educate us to a reawakening of our



emotions; it is also to conceive the possibility of *educating*, and as a consequence of *transforming, the emotions themselves*. Today acting as a counterweight to indifference towards the other is a tendency towards self-defence, which transforms into negative emotions like anger, resentment and contempt (suffice it to think of the return of racism to Western democracies). If we are to break this double-edged tendency towards indifference and violence, we need to regain trust in the possibility to convert negative passions into positive ones, such as compassion, empathy and solidarity.

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## MY DEPENDENCY AND OTHER SELVES

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(...) by accepting that the subject is not the whole, that the subject represents only one part of reality and of truth, that the other is forever a *not I, nor me, nor mine*, and not a: *not yet I, not yet mine* to integrate into me or into us.<sup>1</sup>

*Love never dwells*<sup>2</sup>

The Belgium / French philosopher Luce Irigaray's plea is to sincerely listen to the other and thereby make an effort to limit the subject, the omnipotence of a single subject – a subject which has for too long considered itself to be the only one to inhabit this world – in order to make space for the other subject. I think this is an enormous effort, but I think as an exercise, to make the attempt to listen to the other as the radical other and respect the other, is a fruitful and respectful way to meet the other, to install two subjects which can share a common ground to speak and listen, to touch and be touched. Love is *to will* the other person. In *the will* I am taking a daring and trustful step towards the world and the other. I become vulnerable in my openness to the other and thus I am the other to me. As a woman my subject is rarely/newly known. Often I see myself being the model of the otherness<sup>3</sup> but simultaneously I am thereby also privileged in my situated perspective. I recognise my corporeal enmeshment with my culture(s), by kinship. Through my training in philosophy I have realised/felt my own embodiment as a woman or the other in philosophy both through the texts/canons in the curricula but also in the sociality within the philosophy department. My counterpart had/has made me aware of my otherness/corporeality in the institution of philosophy, but other in the meaning of the negative.<sup>4</sup> I see the risk in this departure because of its being two-fold. Firstly, how to install the female subjectivity in the patriarchal structure,

<sup>1</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West – From Singularity to Community* (New Delhi: New Age Books, 2002), 127.

<sup>2</sup> Søren Kierkegaard, *Works of Love*, trans. Howard V. Hong and Adna H. Hong (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995) Vol.16.

<sup>3</sup> Beauvoir's model of the other as the second to the male subjectivity. Cf. Simone de Beauvoir, *Le Deuxième sexe*. Vol. 1-2. (Paris: Éditions Gallimard, [1949] 1976). Vol 1. 17.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. G.W.F Hegel, *Phänomenologie des Geistes*. Werke 3. (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Taschenbuch Verlag, Wissenschaft, [1832-1845]1996).

secondly how to respect and love the other. To be open towards the other also brings me on a journey, the other moves me, sometimes I lose myself because of the other's effect on me and I have to discover my loss or the seduction of the other. My travels bristle in many directions and go through many paths, languages, bodies, nationalities, countries, habits, class. My travels can even contradict each other. I have learnt to embrace and love my rootlessness, which has brought me the most fruitful and anxious insights. A rootlessness that also has brought me to travel through classes, from being the first family member to graduate from high school and later to obtain a degree in Philosophy. The travelling from one class to the other has not been a part of my feminist consciousness (I mean here consciousness in the sense of awareness) since it was aroused only later.<sup>5</sup>

### *Born out of bravado*

My move from one class to another was initially a common journey with my mother. She became pregnant with me at the age of 16; at that time she was still in elementary school. My grandmother was from the countryside and had served since she was seven year of age as a maid on annual contracts at the neighbouring farms and later in the capital. My mother grew up in a traditional working-class family in a rural area with a father who worked full-time out of the house and a mother who worked first half time but later full-time in the public sector as a caretaker. In Denmark abortion on demand was legalised in June 1973 – until the twelfth week of pregnancy. My mother was beyond this point when my presence in her womb was discovered in 1977 – she was already in week sixteen. The first symptoms of her pregnancy were diagnosed as stomach-ache by the family doctor (later, he turned out to be against abortion on demand). Despite the belated recognition of pregnancy my mother insisted on an abortion or, as she has explained to me, “she was furious at the family doctor for telling her, when it was too late, that she was pregnant”. Nonetheless a similar drama took place at the abortion clinic, but this time the problem was a doctor who blamed her for being too late, and for being too young to be a mother and sloppy about caring about the time limit for an abortion. She was now eighteen weeks pregnant. Once more the doctors offended my mother

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<sup>5</sup> Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen and Monica Rudberg, *Moderne Jenter,- Tre generasjoner på vei. Modern Girls - Three generations*. (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2006).

and she left the abortion clinic saying that *it is my child*. Her sentiments after these experiences were that she encountered prejudice from both doctors and midwives during her pregnancy so early in life – the contempt shown towards her pregnancy by the professionals was consistent. The ideas concerning who is able to be a good mother kept haunting her; they made her determined to become involved in various parent committees when I was at kindergarten and at school, in order to prove her ability to be a complete mom. She folded and prepared my clothes for me every day on a chair in the living room. In the kitchen, two pieces of freshly baked bread were prepared with spreading or there was a warm portion of porridge with a teaspoon of butter in the middle. She recently told me how differently she feels now as a mother who is a peer of other parents at the school my sister (born in 1996) attends; now she is just one amongst other parents. The year I started high school she graduated as an educator, but before she could even begin higher education she had to attend ground school again, finishing the last years of school (in the English system, secondary school). We attended ground school together, though at different locations in the city.

The ideas that one could break out of the working class and that there even existed such social classes divided by education and wealth, were not clear to me; nor, I think, were they clear to my mother.<sup>6</sup> We did these things because we could do them; they were not outlined or listed as requirements in the different brochures and information on studies of educational institutions. I had later to learn, as I entered university, that there are indeed some qualifications and requirements – ones that are not mentioned among the formal demands addressed to prospective students. I was studying hard from the very first day at university but I was not successful at the beginning. It took me quite a while to understand how there could be such differences among students in terms of their accomplishment and in terms of the amount of attention paid to some and not to others by the teaching staff. The language they were speaking was not a language I knew. Slowly I adapted myself to the university language, which I paid for with the end of a relationship and of friendships with people from my home town. I felt a gap was opening in front of me – between family and my university. I had learnt a new language but not how to translate this new language – I was lost in translation and classes.<sup>7</sup> This

<sup>6</sup> Beverly Skeggs, *Class, Self, Culture* (London: Routledge, 2004).

<sup>7</sup> See Melita Richter Malabotta's chapter "In Search of the Third Space" in this volume for further consideration on the loss of self in language and translation.

is no longer a loss but an impetus for journeys and travelling. The travelling is to never find, or have the will to find, a place called home. The restlessness of my life has been a terrifying self-insight, which I have been negotiating and continue to negotiate with myself. The question of normality and living a conventional life<sup>8</sup> is a visitor in my thoughts, not a regular visitor, but one who regularly questions my nomadic lifestyle. The answer I can give, at present, is nothing, because the road, the way, is my way of doing things, of doing my life. I am a very dependent person. The other and being with others are what make me move, both in my everyday life but absolutely also in my academic life. When I am writing about dependency I do not think of it as being in opposition to, for instance, Eva Skærbæk when she says about her life project that “I *never* wanted to be economically *dependent* on a man”. Dependency is the acknowledgement of my neediness for the other.<sup>9</sup> One important choice I made early on in life was to never live alone; I need the other to make noise. My emphasis on dependency is very much contrary to the context and political environment that I am living in. Though it is a trivial statement to say that without the other I will/would not exist, it is a fact that we cannot forget it because it is from the other that my life is brought into existence and into this world, or as Hannah Arendt wrote: “No human life, not even the life of the hermit in nature’s wilderness, is possible without a world which directly or indirectly testifies to the presence of other human beings.”<sup>10</sup>

I understand my position in philosophy, or more broadly in academia, to paraphrase Edmund Husserl, as a perpetual beginning. It makes me keep my wonder and contemplation; it is my way of living and doing sciences. I consider my studies and my life to be completely interwoven – I can hardly separate the two faculties. My studies and my life are my her-story, which has manifested itself in ruptures and raptures on both sides of the coin. My point of departure is above all my dependency on the other; thus, my aim in this article is to scrutinise the issue of intersubjectivity.

I find Irigaray’s philosophy of sexual difference as an ethics useful since she, in a (radical) way, poses the question about the other and difference, asking how it is possible to coexist with the other. I also think that the ethical aspect of her theory is important when facing questions of coexistence.

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<sup>8</sup> Here the conventional life is understood as life in one location.

<sup>9</sup> Eva Skærbæk, *Common Passion, Different Voices: Reflections on Citizenship and Intersubjectivity*, ed. Eva Skærbæk, Dasa Duhaček, Elena Pulcini, Melita Richter (York: Raw Nerve Books, 2006), 50 emphasis added.

<sup>10</sup>Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958), 22.

And lastly I find her theory important because of her insistence on situatedness; that I am always embedded in the world and the issues I discuss. The category of self or selves is a leaking concept; I am never in full possession or fully aware of myself.<sup>11</sup> I spill over to the other, I am touched upon by the other and certainly also touching the other. The categories that we live by are the problem makers, in the sense of their insufficiency – they cannot follow the lives we live. That is to say, it is not a problem of the life we live that we cannot find adequate concepts to grasp the holes from where life exceeds the concepts – as in my case of feeling lost between the way of doing academic life and the life I left behind. The self is therefore a travelling concept since it changes meaning in different locations and disciplines.<sup>12</sup> Mieke Bal states quite accurately what it means for the self to travel intellectually and the gains and risks of its doing so: “Hazardous, exciting and tiring, travel is needed if you are to achieve the gain of new experience.”<sup>13</sup> I would like to add that travelling is a joint affair with other selves – from the very inception of your coming into this world.

To return to my initial concern; it involves a rethinking of the self and the other in terms of how they are related. In the question of sexual difference Irigaray has discharged the patriarchal way of thinking the relation between the self and the other, which always ends up with the self-same (masculine) rather than establishing the relation to the other as other. The self-same is the mode of the cannibal; he eats you to make you fully his flesh. On a more cautious mode of thinking the self-same has to be understood itself in terms of being neutral in the matter of its sexuality (and power). This asserted neutrality is amnesiac of the fundamental premise that we are always sexed – and have been since the moment we were born into this world.<sup>14</sup> It is only in death that we are all neutral.<sup>15</sup> This forgetfulness of my sex and my belonging was (perhaps) an advantage for my entrance into a very male-dominated Philosophy department, originally to become a philosophy scholar.

On the other hand, as the repression of the feminine might suppose, it is women alone who form the figure of the other, albeit women are not

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<sup>11</sup> Margrit Shildrich, *Leaky Bodies and Boundaries – feminism, Postfeminism and (bio) Ethics* (London: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>12</sup> Meike Bal, *Travelling Concepts – in the Humanities* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2002).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> In her later work she continues to rethink the term neutrality, and as I will make clear later in this text at the level of the collective/societal (...) a society in neutral mode loses sight of the line separating life from death. Although life, obviously, is always sexed, death on the contrary no longer makes this distinction. Luce Irigaray, *Democracy begins between two* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 37

<sup>15</sup> Elizabeth Grosz, *Sexual Subversions: Three French Feminists* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1989)

automatically the other within the frame of patriarchal culture, because a relationship between men is also a patriarchal relationship in sameness and likeness. The philosophy department was a paradigmatic example of this fact. This means the others are variations of this sameness of self; whether it is a man or woman – the relation is within the sameness of the self.<sup>16</sup>

The creation of identity and subjectivity will be the key concept answering these questions, which means that I will elaborate on the relationship between the two subjects to understand dependency – to one and the other – especially in light of making the other. So, in the meeting with the other we discover ourselves. The other is the one who is not me; this division between me and the other is crucial to the understanding of otherness. Xenophobia is a confusion of limits between me and the other. The xenophobic person is unable to see the other as other, but is concerned with creating the other in his own image, to make the other identical with himself. This inability to understand the other in terms of the others' premises can lead to severe consequences, with the main goal being to eradicate the other's otherness or simply the other. This is the unhappy ending of a comprehension of otherness in the vein of sameness; on the other hand, to understand the other as radically other to me, means to understand the other in her or his otherness. For Irigaray, to open up and (re-)cognise the radical otherness of the other is a significant ethical endeavour. The former demands from the other to be like me, if the person wishes to share a communal space with me. This demand for likeness and similarity in reality relates to an unreachable (and undesirable) position for the other – the other will always be the other.

In present-day's free-market economic society, however, women only exist as the other to the man. This does not mean, for Irigaray, that "woman" was invented by man, but rather that she, as the radical *other*, does not *yet* exist. The real other to the man is not a part of our society. Woman has not yet become a woman.<sup>17</sup>

One of the most salient points made by Irigaray is her determination to rule out a certain way of thinking about the other as negativity. In the relationship between the same and the other, we do not have one positive and one negative (as in the traditional, patriarchal thinking about man and woman), but rather two 'positives'. The other cannot be understood as inferior – as the exception to the norm.

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<sup>16</sup> Compare with Kierkegaard's double-bound relationship in the self, which is first settled in the relation to the other and god.

<sup>17</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman*, transl. by Gillian C. Gill (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985)



The question becomes a question of recognising the limits to one's self.<sup>18</sup> This means that the other is not what is limiting us as such, but *through* the other we recognise our own limitations. How to love the other without cannibalising the other, or how to let the other be the other subject for one's self as a subject becomes the question for the first person (I/we).

By having a relation to the other that is not based on the appropriation of the other, or on cannibalising the other by making it the same, but rather on respecting the otherness of the other, we at the same time recognise limits to ourselves. This limitation, however, must not be understood as a lack, as something negative (as in Freudian castration). Rather, it is this very limitation (which is sexual difference) that ensures a living relationship to the world. When we appropriate the other, it is also a killing of the other. As Irigaray puts it: "We want to have the entire world in our head, sometimes the entire world in our heart. We do not see that this gesture transforms the life of the world into something finished, dead, because the world thus loses its own life, a life always foreign to us, exterior to us, other than us."<sup>19</sup>

The otherness of the other in contrast creates the mystery that makes the appreciation of art, nature and beauty possible in the first place – and also that which makes love possible. Irigaray suggests that we should break with the idea of a univocal meaning (master signifier). The two lips are that which is open and closed at the same time (*l'entrouvert*<sup>20</sup>) – an example of elusive borders. And the mucous (*le muqueux*) also suggests that which is not stable, that which is neither totally fluid nor totally solid – that is, the non-fixed, non-erected.<sup>21</sup> This suggests a sort of neither-nor-position, where the feminine (as understood through the female anatomy) is that which is neither completely closed nor complete solid, neither completely open nor completely liquid. This in-between-position is a central metaphor for Irigaray, which is understood both as specifically feminine and as the salvation for both sexes.<sup>22</sup> This is sexual difference and not the phallus as suggested by the Lacanian school.

The feminine opens up the possibility of a new masculine – which is not one, but makes the two in relation with the feminine. This critique's spear-head strikes, on a more general level within Philosophy, the conflation in mo-

<sup>18</sup> Cf. Lilian Munk Rösing, *Kønnets katekismus*, (Frederiksberg: Roskilde Universitetsforlag, 2005),: 35-36

<sup>19</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West - From Singularity to Community* (New Delhi: New Age Books, 2002), 121-122

<sup>20</sup> When it is meant in the context of the female morphology, it is always used as *entrouvert*, just enough open that it is not closed – rather than *Ouvert* meaning open.

<sup>21</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), 23-4

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 13

modern philosophy between rationality and masculinity and reflects on the two concepts separately. As Rosi Braidotti has noted: “The sheer importance of the ethical issue in the work of some male philosophers is an offshoot of the crisis of the rational subject that has shaken the phallogocentric system to its very foundation. The question of alterity, of otherness, is receiving renewed attention precisely because of the problematisation of the structures of subjectivity in modern thought.”<sup>23</sup>

The challenge for Irigaray then is to reveal a symbolic order that differs from the phallogocentric. The work on the other will lead us to rethink the position of the other in relation to what already exists in the symbolic order and to de-centre the masculine subject, so that it will be possible to constitute a relation between the two subjectivities on the ruins of the impossibility of one subjectivity (Masculine).<sup>24</sup> “A world that must be *created* or *re-created* so that man and woman may once again or at last live together, meet, and sometimes inhabit the same place.”<sup>25</sup> The critical point of Irigaray’s theory is how to know the difference or how to create *representations* of the other, who is conventionally known through the masculine perspective.

### *The move beyond an antagonistic relationship*

The Irigarayan position criticises above all the endeavours of western philosophy to render a univocal meaning as its eminent enterprise. To understand the impossibility of understanding the other fully, to accept that not everything is within our reach, and to step back and let the other be other – all of these can be a difficult exercise for the Western mind. It calls for philosophy’s first motivation, namely to be curious and wonder and not to force what is not me to take shape according to my will, and to understand it in a certain way. To meet the other is to wonder (*admirer*), keeping Descartes’ first passion in mind, and not only at our initial meeting but also in the meetings after the first meeting. It keeps the relation to the other vivid and fecund and maintains life and a sight of the divine. Based on Irigaray’s writing I can conclude that an ambiguity in meanings is a creative place, it can never be locked – thus, seeking for a univocal meaning of the other only disturbs and disrupts the self’s way of

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<sup>23</sup> Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: -Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 125.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 130

<sup>25</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), 17, emphasis added.

thinking. Linking this to my own way of doing my life – the lost is translated – to a creative place for living and travelling.

To formulate a theory of the sexual other that respects both genders, it is important to abandon the antagonistic relationship between them, the Hegelian dialectic between master and slave. Even if such a theory following Hegel could be understood as a sort of women's emancipation – since the very idea behind the master-slave dialectics is to show the master's dependency on the slave (a master cannot be a master without a slave), and how the slave as a consequence of this ultimately becomes the master – this would only mean upholding the power structure and power relations as such. What Irigaray aims at is an alternative way of relating to the other, a way that is not antagonistic, but rather based on an (other) ethical approach.<sup>26</sup> Irigaray says that although Hegel is a thinker whom we cannot ignore in our attempt to find a possible way to approach the other, nevertheless his suggestions only lead us to an understanding of yet another aporia. Even so, through the Hegelian dialectic we can sense the contours of feminine ethical values – against the background of masculine cultural values.

That is the way of the Hegelian dialectic, a method unsurpassed in a sense, but one that lets its own aporia appear in the impossibility of discovering or constructing modalities of spirit that respect feminine ethical values and masculine cultural values.<sup>27</sup>

So the feminine ethical values are already there. The ethics is the openness that the feminine represents and the inclusion of the other, whereas the current masculine stance means the self-same and the exclusion of the other.

The openness of the feminine is also what makes it vulnerable, if it is not met with an equal openness (or *wonder* as we shall see in the section on Love/Relationship).

The feminine suffers from being unrecognised or invisible in a masculine-dominated culture, which is represented through the one. Hegel's dialectic recognises, at least, the being of two, but with its merging into one as the absolute aim – or its completion. The ethical claim understood as feminine values is that the feminine opens up the possibility of two subjectivities. This frames the

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<sup>26</sup> This does not mean that Irigaray necessarily rejects Hegelian theory as a theory about how things are in a patriarchal society. However, she does refuse to understand it as the only model for the relationship between the sexes.

<sup>27</sup> Luce Irigaray, *Between East and West - From Singularity to Community* (New Delhi: New Age Books, 2002), 13

ground for an ethics, because an ethics is only needed when it can be recognised that the subject is more than one – that the other is radically different from the I/us. Ethics is the way of coexistence between at least two.<sup>28</sup>

This ethical approach to otherness also means understanding difference as something productive, as fecundity. Rather than understanding the other as a threat, or difference as something to be overcome, Irigaray advocates for understanding difference as something to enjoy and learn from. As such, sexual difference is not only a biological and static difference, it is also dynamic and fecund.<sup>29</sup> Sexual difference is what brings magic into the world.

To illustrate this, Irigaray takes the Cartesian concept of *Admiration*<sup>30</sup> – as developed in *Les Passions de l'âme* (1644).<sup>31</sup> According to Descartes, admiration, or as it is translated into English *wonder*, is the first of the passions. Wonder is what strikes us when we meet something different from ourselves.<sup>32</sup>

Unfortunately we are not able to retain the openness towards the other inherent in the concept of wonder. Instead of wonder, our meeting with the (sexual) other is marked by “[...] Attraction, greed, possession, consumption, disgust, and so on, etc.”<sup>33</sup> The other is made into an object for the subject. It is this destructive dialectics that Irigaray tries to find a way out of. This has to happen through an acceptance of sexual difference because it is the first of all difference and thereby ontological – it can never be reduced to the same. It can be denied or repressed, but it can never be reduced away.<sup>34</sup> There will always be a leftover. Irigaray puts it this way: “Wonder goes beyond that which is or is not suitable for us. The other never suits us simply. We would in some way have reduced the other to ourselves if he or she suited us completely. An *excess* resists: the other’s existence and becoming as a place that permits union and/through resistance to assimilation or reduction to sameness.”<sup>35</sup>

That sexual difference is irreducible means that trying to grasp it will always fail. There will always be an insurmountable *interval* – and hence, wonder.<sup>36</sup> And, more importantly, the very insurmountability of sexual difference is what makes love possible in the first place. Through the impossibility of

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 177-181

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 186

<sup>30</sup> The italics indicate it is the French word *admiration* that I am using here and not the English.

<sup>31</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference* (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), 20 & 75

<sup>32</sup> Rene Descartes, *Les passions de l'âme* (Paris: Gallimard, 1964 [1644]), 108 - 9

<sup>33</sup> Luce Irigaray, *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*. (London & New York: Continuum, 2004), 15

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Ibid., 19

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>36</sup> Cf Ibid., 20

transgressing the difference of the genders the possibility of love between the genders emerges.

The acceptance of this irreducible sexual difference is the ethical task. Only in this way it is possible to retain the sense of wonder vis-à-vis the other.

Irigaray develops this through the concept of love. It is with love as our common horizon that we are able to meet the other as the other. The understanding of sexual difference as the limit and the creation of the subject *makes* love between two possible.

It is the Irigarayan concept of love that I examine more deeply in the next paragraph.

### ***Love/Relationship***

One of the concepts that Irigaray has elaborated on as a possible way towards a future society is the concept of love. The philosophy of Irigaray is a philosophy of love as philosophy's etymological meaning: love for wisdom. As such, she takes up a theme that has been central to philosophy since antiquity and one of the major themes in Christian philosophy. But her philosophy is not only a philosophy *about* love, philosophy for Irigaray *is* love, as philosophy. As such, she stays within her theme – being a part of it herself – rather than analysing it from the outside. This is very much in the line with Irigaray's philosophical approach in general – mimesis/mimicry.<sup>37</sup> Love as a subject for philosophy has been rather neglected in the last hundred years – and not only in philosophy: also psychoanalysis is curiously silent about the theme. So turning back to the theme of love – and especially philosophy as love – is also a break with the tradition of philosophy in Irigaray's time.

The question for Irigaray becomes the following: How do we love the other without absorbing the other into our possession, or how can the other still be the other in a relationship of love? The Irigarayan notion of love is intertwined with her political ideas/philosophy, since the notion of love is contesting the notion of possession.

The notion of love is twofold as it is the right to be other and a subversive concept. The theme of love will also contest language as a frame for univocal meanings since it will show how love cannot be given in a static frame of meaning. The language of love is an open-ended constituting of meaning.

<sup>37</sup> This is also part of the gendered epistemology. To Irigaray, approaching a theme from outside, as a subject to an object, is masculine, whereas being part of the theme yourself is feminine.

### *Implications for teaching*

When I originally began to think of my contribution to the Travelling Selves workgroup I was very much inspired by the term *selves* – the plural form of self. The treatment of the concept *selves* allowed me to flee from the philosophical canon on the self or the *I*. The concept of Travelling Selves created a firm ground to explore the dependency and intertwine with other selves. My chapter serves as a request to question and challenge particular thought experiments in the liberal Anglo-Saxon political philosophy stemming from John Rawls canonised work *A Theory of Justice* (1976) where he advocates a methodology of ignorance to one's enmeshment with the world – known as the veil of ignorance. The Self or the I behind this veil of ignorance will, in the ideal situation, create the most just and fair society since he does not know where in the society he will be situated after he has created the societal structures and distributed wealth.<sup>38</sup> Do we need these sorts of thought experiments where the self is left alone and striped of all marks of ethicality, belongings, gender, age, etc? The self we are left with is only imagined and displaced from its worldly belonging and engagement with other selves.

A question that students might like to consider is the following: Were these thought experiments elaborated because the world is too real and there actually exist real examples of the consequences of injustice and trade in real human bodies, which can be too hard to face? (Here, facing is meant in its most literal sense.) Or is it necessary to detach ourselves from one another and from our worldly being to conduct a rational life?

The text highlights an often-neglected fact when dealing with highly theoretical texts and discussions, namely the plausibility of singling out a subject or the self as a unique enclosed object of study.

Firstly the text may facilitate and encourage the student's own involvement and dependency with the studied object. Secondly the text can serve as inspiration to reflect on one's own dependency on other subjects at a time when individuality has been emphasised as the goal of living a successful life. The latter brings the text to another level of reading since it renders an existential account of making a career within academia, since questions of professional life and private life are not considered to be fully separable. Study of the text will be a fruitful way of questioning independency, dependency and interdependency in the case of scholarly life and the manner in which one's research affects one's

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<sup>38</sup> John Rawls, *A Theory of Justice* (Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999 [1971])

own personal standpoint or social status/or the understanding of stratifications such as gender, race, class and age in today's society.

In this essay I have travelled through different philosophical voices and mixed in my own travelling to becoming a feminist philosopher. I have visited places where I only was blind.

I will end the present journey with a new beginning. Rather this is *not* the end but an opening to the other.

The concluding sentence is a question to the other. Are we two now?

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## LEAVING HOME? THE 'WORLDS' OF KNOWLEDGE, LOVE AND POWER

*Eva Skærbæk (Østfold University College)*

In the 1970s, feminists in the United States and in many Western countries argued that 'the personal is the political'. The point being that relations of power within families should be a matter of public concern, because these relationships form a crucial part of how power is socially created, distributed, maintained and changed. To neglect or forget the interdependency of the personal and the political, as has been the case since the 1970s, leaves a gap between life practices and theories, between us and them, a gap that tends to reproduce the old subject/object dichotomy. To amend this, the Norwegian social anthropologist Marianne Gullestad suggests extending political theory to include the analyses of everyday life practises as a source of central values and as a metaphorical-experiential grounding for political meaning making and identity construction. It does not suffice to look to everyday life practises *or* to political and public documents. The essential point is to trace connections between arenas and domains that are normally conceived as separate in popular understandings as well as in scholarly work; a task that necessitates bringing together very different sorts of empirical material.<sup>1</sup>

With her book *Lily's History of Denmark* (2007), Pia Fris Laneth, a Danish political scientist, has demonstrated one way of doing it. By following her own family of four generations of working-class women, Laneth tells her-story covering 150 years of Danish history. To read this, her story linking private stories with the situation in civil society when striving with the same theme, made a great impression on me. Perhaps this was due to the fact that both of us became the first academics in our family, although the author is ten years younger than me and from another class. Laneth not only succeeded in reviving the link between the personal and the political, she has also found a language with which to bridge these areas.

Both Gullestad and Laneth underline the important argument of Donna Haraway that the only way to find a larger vision is to be somewhere in particular.<sup>2</sup> Feminists start, as Lorraine Code says, from a realisation that epistemolo-

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<sup>1</sup> Marianne Gullestad, *Plausibel Prejudices* (Oslo: Scandinavian University press, 2006), 120 - 125.

<sup>2</sup> Donna Haraway, "The Persistence of Vision. An Excerpt of Situated Knowledges," in *Writings on the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997)

gies, in their trickle-down effect in the everyday world, play a part in sustaining patriarchal and other hierarchical social structures, both in academic life and throughout Western societies.<sup>3</sup> The alternative to relativism is not totalisation or single vision; the alternative is partial, locatable and critical knowledge. This realisation is built on what is seen. What is seen depends on the eyes of the beholder. To see well is not just a matter of having good eyesight. It is a located activity.

My field is ethics and the way I understand it, each of us is impregnated from birth with values that affect our identity and ways of being and acting publicly and privately. The origin is the Greek word Ethos that etymologically means character or dwelling. Dwelling is both a noun and a verb; my habitual way of life, including sets of habits, determines my specific character. These habits are not just given; they are constituted through the repetitions of bodily acts that again are governed by the habitat I occupy. To belong to and to act from an ethos is to take up a position in relation to others. The point of reference for temporality and spatiality, and consequently for difference is one's own body. The basic misunderstanding in most traditional ethics is that it has overlooked the embodied and sexed materiality in the concept of ethics itself. The passionate discussion in the wake of Carol Gilligan's book *In A Different Voice* (1982), resulted in a split between ethics of justice and ethics of care, ranking the latter lower – leaving it to women (care, private, reproduction) – and the former higher – upholding it as men's arena (justice, public, production).

In the following I shall trace connections between areas and domains normally treated as separate, demonstrating how ethical and moral values influence the ways in which we act, write and relate publicly as well as privately. First I will present Maria Lugones' 'world travelling' and with the lenses of my own life I will reflect critically the gender polarity between independence and dependence in which I have been raised. Secondly I will analyse the play *A Doll House* by Henrik Ibsen, especially focusing on how Nora develops from being a doll to a critical citizen. By means of myths, personal and religious, I shall argue the responsibility of especially women and men in academia to acknowledge the interdependency of the personal and the political and to begin linking in their writing and teaching daily life practises and theories, and vice versa. The overall intention is to find ways to create a more equal and ethical society, processed by citizens equal in value but different as to experiences and knowledge.

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<sup>3</sup> Lorraine Code, "Taking Subjectivity into Account," in *Feminist Epistemologies* (New York: Routledge, 1987)

## *Personal travelling*

It is some years now since I first read Maria Lugones's article about 'World' travelling. Not only did she offer a useful conceptual method to approach the other without invading her or him, she also helped me to understand and to reconcile with my mother, and to some extent also with myself. Maria Lugones describes how she was raised by her mother into 'arrogant perceiving', using the concept Marilyn Frye introduced together with its opposite 'loving perceiving': "I thought that to love her was consistent with my abusing her...to love her was supposed to be of a piece with both my abusing her and with my being open to be abused in other relations. Women who are perceived arrogantly are taught to perceive other women arrogantly in their turn".<sup>4</sup>

To Lugones there is a parallel between her relation with her mother and the relation between White and Coloured women. Lugones did not only learn how to keep others as slaves but how to be one herself: "The more independent I am, the more independent I am left to be. White/anglo women are independent from me. I am independent from them. I am independent from my mother, she is independent from me, and none of us loves each other in this independence."<sup>5</sup>

Independence without any link to dependency leaves both parts ignored, invisible and unloved. Independency alone will not help women to break out of the arrogant way of perceiving. On the contrary it will reproduce itself again and again and keep women in the male subject/object frame of reference. To be raised into independency is to value the father and the values he represents over the mother and her values. This way love is distorted, a distortion that permeates every adult relationship privately and publicly.

At a fairly old age my mother uttered that it was her fault that we children loved our father more than her. It was said in a bittersweet tone. Since she was right in that we or at least I did value and love our father more than her, I made no comment. As Lugones I learnt to abuse and be abused, and I wonder whether I ever will be able to break out of the arrogant way of perceiving not only others but also myself. It was when I was reading Lugones that I began to understand, and then it was too late: my mother was dead. It is, however, not too late to follow Lugones and how she came to understand her mother and herself by means of the concept of 'world travelling'.

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<sup>4</sup> Maria Lugones, "Playfulness, 'World' Travelling and Loving Perception", *Hypatia*, vol.2 (1987), 5.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

Through traveling to other people's "worlds" we discover that there are "worlds" in which those who are the victims of arrogant perception are really subjects, lively beings, resisters, constructors of vision even though in the mainstream construction they are animated only by the arrogant perceiver and are pliable, foldable, file-away able, classifiable (...) Aristotle never tells us anything about the slave *apart from the master*. We know the slave only through the master. The slave is the tool of the master. After working hours he or she is folded and placed in a drawer till the next morning.<sup>6</sup>

By travelling to the world of her mother Lugones came to realise that her mother was not foldable or pliable, that she was not exhausted by the mainstream Argentinian patriarchal construction of her. There were worlds in which her mother shone as a creative being, and in this world Lugones is the one to be different. This is also my story. My mother was lively, funny, sharp, a singer and piano player, a good cook, bridge player and in many ways a strong woman and by no means pliable or file-away able, or classifiable. Still, I did not want to be like her. At the same time my mother came to influence me in a way my father never did or could have done.

### *Personal myths*

Stanley Krippner maintains that every human being creates his or her own personal mythology; only if you can identify them, you might change your life. The stories we remember are personal myths that have already marked our lives in every way. Personal myths are decided from within and from the outside; they originate in the biological organism, but are socially and culturally constructed. Following Krippner's instructions first at a seminar, later by working through his book *Persönliche Mythologie* (1987), I discovered how much my mother and her personal myths had impregnated me. Each one of them concerned what I only much later learned to be narratives of the many mechanisms of patriarchy, public as well as private. Working with one's personal mythology is vulnerable and difficult. Travelling like this is an exercise in careful reflexivity.

My mother's brother was one of the first pilots in Denmark. He was tall and handsome even when I met him in his fifties, and must have had quite an appearance when he, as a young man, came to visit his mother in a flawless uniform. One day he invited his little sister, my mother, out for coffee and

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 18

cakes. Before they went out, he inspected her hands; seeing them, he withdrew his invitation. My mother never forgot this. Her hands were rude and red from washing and cleaning in order to help her mother send money to her brother. She herself received no education. When her mother, my grandmother, was asked to marry a former fiancé, her brother talked her out of it, saying that everything was going just fine. To *him*, my mother bitterly added, but to *me* it would have made a big difference. I would not have had to wash and clean and I might even have received an education.

This is one of my mother's narratives. I cannot remember when my mother told me this. Was it when I came home from my uncle and aunt's house, filled with admiration over them and their way of life? The reflection mentioned above on her part of responsibility for our love of our father came very late; obviously my mother had done some memory work. Only when it was too late did I come to understand and recognise the insight underlying this reflection; my mother took on responsibility for our valuing our father more than her. I will return to this later.

As for my own observations I noticed and became more and more appalled by the way my mother had to account to my father for the money she received for the household. In order to have what she needed for her personal needs she had to cheat; this my father knew and she knew that he knew. He could have raised her allowance, but he did not do so. Instead he made jokes, telling me that my mother used all the money and left him with only wool in his pocket and demonstrated it by turning out his pocket.

In the beginning my mother and my father worked together building up a firm. She told me how her knees became ruined when cleaning bricks, and how she was expected to keep the house clean and neat even in the cupboards. My father used their home as a showroom. Every Friday evening they would walk down the main street, buy something for the house using the rest of the household money, and also two bars of their favourite chocolate. Later when the firm was established, she was no longer needed; she became a housewife. To work outside the home was never an option; my father would never have allowed that. After my father's death, she had difficulty managing the economy; or rather she had problems recognising that she was rather well off and able to do what she wanted without asking anyone. It was as if the money was not hers or she had not earned it; she took out as much out as necessary in order to survive but she never really enjoyed being independent.

My mother, her myths and her life; I decided to get a life different from hers. I did not want to be dependent like she was; I wanted to be independent like my father. In this I was not alone. With minor differences it was the same for three generations of women in the twentieth century – according to a study by Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen and Monica Rudberg, who interviewed three generations of women in Norway.<sup>7</sup> It is nearly always positive to be or want to be like your father, while it is ambivalent if not negative to be like your mother. One way of understanding this is to examine the division of labour and the value applied to it; another is the psychological issue of identity. Both of them are connected to the role of the mother as the first object of love and the person who does most of the caring. Even if a girl is not as close to her father as she is to her mother, the father is still praised for being generous, giving important impulses and strengthening their self-confidence. When the mother is the invisible Cinderella of the house and the father is the knight on the white horse coming home now and then with inspiration and money, it is no wonder that a girl's relationship with her father is one of love and of identity: she wants to be autonomous like her father.

### *Independent or/and dependent*

In *Simone de Beauvoir – The Making of an Intellectual Woman*, Toril Moi tells how a girl raised in Norway in the 1950-60s only met adult women who were housewives. Only on reading Beauvoir's *A Second Sex* did Toril Moi become aware that it was possible for a woman to be something else.

More or less I used the glorious example of Simone de Beauvoir as an ideal in my fight against the future of a housewife that the Norwegian village would have tried to catch me in if they had had the smallest chance. I had an ideal: I wanted to become an intellectual, without children, and with a least one lover at a time. And I would have to go to Paris. To learn French was suddenly self-evident. The mere thought of becoming a dependent woman, locked up in a small narrow-minded Norwegian town was unbearable. Now I live abroad, I have become an intellectual and I have no children. Simone de Beauvoir helped me to become exactly what I dreamt about when I was fifteen.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Harriet Bjerrum Nielsen and Monica Rudberg, *Moderne Jenter, - Tre generasjoner på vei*. (Modern Girls - Three Generations.) (Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2006)

<sup>8</sup> Toril Moi, *Simone de Beauvoir, The Making of an Intellectual Woman* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 8. My translation, as this is only mentioned in the introduction to the later Norwegian edition.

Like Moi I was raised at approximately the same time on the west coast, not of Norway but of Denmark. In my case it was not Beauvoir but Henrik Ibsen that enlarged my world. Being a man Ibsen could not be a concrete ideal to me like Beauvoir could be to Moi. While Beauvoir with style, elegance and intellectual conviction demonstrated to Moi that it was possible, even better, to be a woman without having children, Ibsen's plays made me able to recognise patterns and interactions in my family leading me to the conclusion that I should never be or become dependent like my mother.<sup>9</sup> To me it meant first and foremost to get an education, to earn money of my own; with that in place it would be no problem to live together as free subjects that, with their individual freedom, can forge laws valid for all, as Beauvoir wrote in *An Ethics of Ambiguity*: "An ethics of ambiguity will be one which will refuse to deny a priori that separate existences can, at the same time, be bound to each other, that their individual freedom can forge laws valid for all."<sup>10</sup>

A priori it should be possible; a posteriori it was not that easy. In her letters to Nelson Ahlgren, Beauvoir explains that she cannot marry him and move to United States. The reason was partly the pact with Sartre and partly that in the United States most women were housewives. It became a heartbreaking choice of intellectual partnership over love. The time had not come. The question is whether the time will ever come. Women from all over the world share the vision of Beauvoir that equal worth, interdependency, recognition and freedom are, or should be, keystones in life, in relations of love and in society. Most often they experience, like Nora, the main character in *A Doll's House* by Henrik Ibsen, that this, "the most wonderful", did not happen.

### ***A Doll's House. A short abstract.***

It begins in December, Christmas is approaching. Nora is coming home with a Christmas tree and a lot of packages that have to be hidden away. While she is eating macrons, she tiptoes to Helmer's door, and he asks whether it is his little bird that is singing outside his door. Look what I have bought, Nora replies, and Helmer, who does not want to be disturbed, comments her shopping with: "That much. Has my little birdie again wasted a lot of money?" Nora says that Helmer's new position allows for more generosity, to which he replies that it will have to wait until his first wage arrives in three months' time.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *An Ethics of Ambiguity* (New York: Carol, 1976 [1948]), 18.

“But we can take out a loan”, Nora says. At first Helmer answers humorously: “Nora, Nora, thou art a woman.” And then more seriously: “You know what I think about that. No debt, no borrowing. There can be no freedom or beauty about a home life that depends on borrowing and debt.”

With this opening the main characters are presented: Nora, irrational and irresponsible, and Helmer, rational and responsible. There is, however, another story to be added: Eight years previously Helmer had become so ill that his doctors had told him to go and live in the south in order to regain his health. This was expensive, and due to Helmer’s views on loans, Nora herself had to find a solution. Nora tells this to her old friend, Mrs. Linde, to underline that she is not the spoiled young woman Mrs. Linde takes her to be. Since no woman can take out a loan without her husband’s permission, Nora told Helmer that her father gave her the money before he died, while she in fact borrowed the money from Krogstad. As Krogstad wanted her father’s signature, Nora faked his signature. Unfortunately she dated it three days after her father’s death. Krogstad has a superior position in the bank of which Helmer has become manager. When Helmer offers Krogstad’s position to Mrs. Linde, Krogstad sends a letter to Helmer about the loan. This is the dramatic core in the play.

When Helmer reads the letter, Nora changes in Helmer’s eyes from a wonderful little birdie into a hypocrite, a liar, a criminal. The whole affair has to be kept quiet. Nora may remain in the house but she is not allowed to raise her children. Then another letter arrives in which Krogstad withdraws his threat, and Helmer does the same. Suddenly he understands that Nora had acted out of love for him, and he forgives her. This should bring “the most wonderful” about, and when it does not, Nora leaves.

“What is ‘the most wonderful?’” Helmer asks and Nora answers: “Both you and I would have to be so changed that our life together would become a real wedlock.”

### ***Love and ethics***

In 1882, the Women’s Society in Oslo celebrated Henrik Ibsen for acknowledging women’s situation. More than a hundred years later the Norwegian male researcher Jørgen Lorentzen argued that Ibsen’s focus was on men and their inability to live and love.<sup>11</sup> Ibsen himself said that he did not know

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<sup>11</sup> Jørgen Lorentzen. “Ibsen og farskap (Ibsen and fatherhood),” *Tidskrift for kjønnsforskning* nr. 2 (2005), 73-89.



much about women; human beings were his concern. Based on my reading Ibsen many years ago and now again, I believe that Ibsen is utterly modern, presenting in his plays how all human beings are interdependent and thus involved in games of power throughout their lives.

This is the basic understanding present in the ethical theory of K.E. Løgstrup (1971), which was developed in the middle of the last century. Based on the ontological condition of human life, he claims that an ethical demand is made on all human beings. The ethical demand stems from the fact of interdependency and its companion, power. It demands that I give without thinking about getting back. The ethical demand underlines that this is not something to choose or not choose; this is a part of the life we share. The reason is that life is a gift; all of us, no matter our religion, culture, age and gender, are in debt to creation. Since the ethical demand is mute, every one of us has to interpret what is best for the other without assuming the responsibility of the other for her/himself, which is a question of power.

Seen in this perspective, Nora interpreted the ethical demand coming from Helmer. As the play proceeds all the arguments for her decision are revealed. If Helmer had been made aware of his illness, this would, according to the doctors, have made it even more dangerous. Since he refused to take out a loan to go and live in the south for a while for her sake, and since she as a woman could not get a loan from a bank, she had no choice but to forge her father's handwriting in order to receive a private loan.

Without Nora's intervention Helmer would most probably have died. This would have been a disaster not only for himself but also for his family. Does this justify Nora's assuming Helmer's responsibility for himself? In her mind it does. She is, however, aware that Helmer will be of another opinion. To Mrs. Linde, Nora confides that it would be most painful and humiliating for Helmer, with his manly independence, to find out that he owes Nora something. "It would upset our mutual relations altogether; our beautiful happy home would no longer be what it is." This does not stop Nora from adding that it may come in handy later on when she is not as beautiful as she is now!

Seen from Nora's perspective, her deed is an act of love as she has been raised to understand it: it is about taking responsibility for another person when that person cannot see his or her own best interest. And women and children automatically counted as non-rational, dependent beings without the capability of taking responsibility. The way Helmer talks to Nora makes it evident that

she is beautiful but not reliable, at least not in matters of money. To pay off the loan, Nora had to work in the late evenings; it was the only job she could find: copying by hand. In addition, she asked for more money for the household. Just like my father, Helmer suspected that she was being too lavish. Nora plays her role, because this allows her to set aside money from the household. My mother did the same thing – although her motive was to secure enough money for her personal needs. Although Nora knows that the means are wrong, she hopes that “the most wonderful” will happen: that Helmer will recognise her deeds as acts of love and forgive her. In the end Helmer does forgive her, in the sense that she is reinstated as a doll in a doll’s house: “You have loved me as a wife ought to love her husband. Only you had not sufficient knowledge to judge of the means you used. But do you suppose that you are less dear to me because you don’t understand how to act on your own responsibility? No, no; only lean on me; I will advice and direct you. I should not be a man if this womanly helplessness did not just give you a double attractiveness in my eyes.”

And when Nora does not seem to understand, Helmer underlines that he has indeed forgiven her: “You have no idea what a true man’s heart is like, Nora. There is something so indescribably sweet and satisfying, to a man, in the knowledge that he has forgiven his wife, forgiven her freely, and with all his heart. It seems as if that has made her, as it were, double his own; he has given her a new life, so to speak; and she has in a way become both wife and child to him. So you shall be for me after this, my little scared, helpless darling.”

Forgiveness is often defined as reinstating the person you forgive in the same position. This is also the difficulty in most cases. In this case Helmer has no problem with reinstating Nora; in fact the more helpless she is, the more lovable and attractive she becomes to him. This is, however, no longer a position Nora wants. Instead, she asks Helmer why they have never had a serious conversation in their eight years of marriage. Helmer wonders what good that might have done her. Should he have told her about his financial troubles?

**Nora:** You have never understood me, I have been greatly wronged, Helmer. First by papa and then by you.

**Helmer:** What! By us, by us two, who have loved you better than anyone else in the world?

**Nora:** You never loved me. You have only thought it pleasant to be in love with me.

Nora continues to state how her father raised her by telling her his opinion about everything and expecting her to listen and agree. Her father played with her like she played with her dolls. When she was 'transferred' to Helmer, he continued the same pattern and arranged everything according to his taste.

**Nora:** You and papa have committed a great sin against me. It is you fault that I have made nothing of my life.

Although Nora does give credit to Helmer for having been good to her, their home has been a doll's house. She has been Helmer's doll-wife, just as she was her father's doll-child, and Nora's children have been her dolls. Nora found it great fun when Helmer played with her, and the children enjoyed it when Nora played with them. Helmer then announces that playtime is over; it is time for some education. He will educate Nora. Nora however wants to educate herself.

**Helmer:** You are first and foremost a wife and a mother.

**Nora:** I don't believe that any longer. I believe that before all else I am a reasonable human being just as you are, or at all events, I must try and become one. I know quite well, Helmer, that most people would think you right, and that views of that kind are to be found in books; but I can no longer contend myself with what most people say, or with what is found in books. I must think things for myself and get to understand them.

When Helmer questions her lack of moral sense, Nora struggles to respond.

**Nora:** The thing perplexes me altogether. I only know that you and I look at it in quite a different light. I am learning too, that the law is quite another thing from what I supposed, but I find it impossible to convince myself that the law is right. According to it a woman has no right to spare her old dying father, or to save her husband's life. I can't believe that.

When Helmer reproaches her for speaking like a child with no knowledge of the society in which she lives, Nora agrees, realising that she needs to find out whether the laws of society are just or have to be adjusted. Blamed for being out of her mind, Nora states that her mind has never been as clear and certain as now. When Helmer says that she does not love him any more, she agrees. This is why she cannot stay any longer. "The most wonderful" did not happen. And she no longer believes that it can happen, at least not to her and Helmer.

Something has happened to Nora; she is no longer a doll. In her conversation with Mrs. Linde, Nora says: “Many a time I was desperately tired; but all the same it was a tremendous pleasure to sit there working and earning money. It was like being a man”.

By taking responsibility Nora changes into a critical citizen – by acting against the law in the public sphere and the law of the house she lives in. This is, according to Ruth Lister, the stuff that personal autonomy is made of. The opportunity to participate in the social roles of production, reproduction, cultural transmission and political authority is crucial to personal autonomy in the sense that critical autonomy is the ability to situate, criticise and, if necessary, challenge the rules and practices” of one’s society, in short, the ability to act as a critical citizen.

As I hope to have shown, a closer analysis of the play reveals how love is defined and lived differently by the main characters and how this makes it impossible to achieve “the most wonderful”: a life in interdependency, recognition and freedom. This is why Nora leaves. Her father raised her to be a doll, dependent on his money and his definitions of good and bad, right and wrong. As Nora came to see it, her father and her husband have done great damage to her. Helmer, however, claims the opposite: they have both loved her, he says. Paradoxically Nora has exerted the same “maternalistic” love in deciding for and about Helmer. She has left him no choice, and at the same time she expects him to defend her.

### *The norm of knowledge and sexuality*

In the theory of Jessica Benjamin, this is a result of being raised in a Western culture permeated by gender polarity that establishes the position of master and slave by means of dualism as autonomy and dependence.<sup>12</sup> Domination is a two-sided process upheld by both parts – the one that exercises power and the one that submits to it. This structure of domination can be traced to one’s earliest awareness of the difference between mother and father and to the global images of male and female in culture.

Being a theologian by training I want to suggest an older key to why this structure of domination is reproduced over and over again. Let me challenge you to follow me into an analysis of the creation myth found in the Old

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<sup>12</sup> Jessica Benjamin, *The Bonds of Love* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1988)

Testament at Genesis 2:7 – 4:2. Due to my first name I have heard most of the jokes about this myth. Sometimes they are funny and make us laugh, but humour does not make the myth go away; it may even keep it alive. Adam is the first human being (*ish*), and from his bones another human being (*isha*) is made. So far no one is superior to the other; *isha* is not created to be a helping maid but to be an equal partner.<sup>13</sup> The temptation to eat the fruit of the forbidden tree is to get to know good and evil just like God. In Hebrew “good and evil” is a synonym for all knowledge; a knowledge that makes it possible for us to identify that they are different although equal. The punishment is decided accordingly. From now on the desire of *isha* has to be directed towards *ish*, and he has to be her master. The verb *jada* indicates an intriguing conflation of knowledge and sexuality; it means “knowing good and evil” (3:6, and 3:22), and “sexual intercourse” (4:1). In other words, both *isha*’s knowledge and her sexuality are to be defined by *ish*. A result of the changed situation is that Adam gives *isha* a name that consigns her to the reproductive function.

In this way, Adam becomes the embodied norm of knowledge and of sexuality. Sexuality in its master/slave pattern is installed and made normative, at least in heterosexual relationships. Eve’s existence is from now on focused on reproduction and care. Adam is to be the producing part, fighting nature for food and survival. Their areas of living are differentiated and their relation has become asymmetrical; an asymmetry is developed and reproduced in this their primary sexual contract. The punishment is fulfilled. It is no longer possible to be different and at the same time maintain equality.

The myth is traditionally understood as composed in a patriarchal culture to state that the blame for the inequality between human beings and their hard life lies not with God, but with Eve and Adam. In my reading the myth proposes an original sameness and equality of the sexes, an equality that remains undestroyed by eating of the tree of knowledge. To know good and evil, the most common definition of ethics, does not alter the relation and position of the two first interacting creatures in history. It is the punishment that distorts their interaction by making a divide between the private and the public sphere and ranking the latter higher. Thereby both sexes are punished. In other words, in addition to indicating the mutual interest of both sexes in finding another and more equal way of living and loving, the myth also demonstrates “how come” this is so difficult.

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<sup>13</sup> Phyllis Trible, *God and the Rhetoric of Sexuality* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 98

According to Daphne Hampton, the repetition of stories from both the New Testament and the Old Testament in churches and in schools is devastating.<sup>14</sup> The negative view of women is conveyed at an almost unconscious level, which makes the biblical stories profoundly damaging to human relations even now. Even today many centuries later, in a time when society has formally established equality, the main problem is the public/private divide – which produces inequality, although in a more hidden and subtle form. Women of today are, according to Elena Pulcini, not to be seen or treated as passive objects. When they conclude a sexual contract waiving their power and chances of citizenship, it is because they get something in return: the power of love.<sup>15</sup> The power a woman receives in the new family model is, however, linked to a screen of inequality: “European modernity builds an image of woman as the subject of sentiment and at the same time deprives her, with her own unconscious complicity, of two fundamental rights for the formation of identity: the right of citizenship and the right of passion, also the meaning of the right of excess, disorder, conflict – that is, the negative – as a vital and unrenounceable dimension of the building of the self.”<sup>16</sup>

### *Embodiment and recognition*

It has taken me many years to realise the price to be paid for valuing my father over my mother. Although I got an education and a job, I remained a woman, independent financially but dependent on being recognised as an academic – not only by others but also by myself. This has to do with the lack of recognition of me as a girl and woman of mind, of rationality. Feminist theory has for years criticised the male norm of knowledge that subjects any other form of knowledge. In her book *The Gender of Knowledge*, Karin Widerberg, with a point of departure in her own experience, describes how a woman entering academia in the 1960s and 1970s, had to leave her body outside; she had to choose between body and mind.

My father often said about me that my hands were hard-working ones. Although he supported my education, he saw it primarily as a means of ensuring that I could provide for myself even if I did not get married. When I got

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<sup>14</sup> Daphne Hampton, *Theology and Feminism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996)

<sup>15</sup> Elena Pulcini, “Modernity, Love and Hidden Inequality,” in *Love and Law in Europe: Complex Interrelations*. (European University Institute: Italy, 2000), 39

<sup>16</sup> Elena Pulcini, *Feminine Identity and the Idea of Passion in Politics* (New York: Zed Books, 2002), 101

married, he suggested that I should leave university, and two years later when I gave birth to my first child, he repeated this advice. Somehow I managed to keep going. Although my CV shows that I have been an academic since 1971, it took me years, a divorce and some more years to recognise myself and to demand recognition by others for my way of thinking and writing. My husband was a third-generation academic in the traditional sense of the word, which he did not fail to remind me of.

As a young student I thought that an education would make all the difference. We were equal and would live equally at home and at work. And it went fairly well until we had children. This is not new. Most divorces take place when the children are small. Apparently, this is when old traumas and norms enter the scene.

### *The point and responsibility of writing*

When Ibsen claimed his concern to be not women, but human beings, it did not prevent him from illustrating their difference. Instead it made him capable of showing how we – men and women – develop our identity interdependently within, and as an effect of, a specific social context *and* that it is possible to change. New citizens coming from another culture often present a family pattern actualising how important it is to be aware of how this interdependency works, and how it relates to responsibility and citizenship. In *Guilt* (2003), two young journalists describe the story of two Turkish cousins, who in 2002 murdered a young Italian backpacker in Copenhagen. For this crime they were sentenced to jail and expulsion after their prison sentences. How could this happen?

*Guilt* is an important documentation. Although *Guilt* does not place guilt, it nevertheless underlines the responsibility of Danish society for the failing integration of these families. The book is not gender neutral; it is about men, young men and older men, sons and fathers. Thus one of the fathers claims to have 70 per cent of the guilt, leaving 20 per cent to the Danish system and the societal milieu, and 10 per cent to the young man himself. Where did all the mothers go? There is, in the book, nearly no reference to the mothers, the wives; seemingly they have no influence both inside and outside the home. Following my presentation and analysis above there is reason to believe that this has to change if the situation of the young men of the second generation is

to change. Leaving the mothers out of their documentation, the authors Jesper Dehn Møller and Aydin Soei come to underline the need of tracing connections between domains that are normally conceived as separate, if anything is to change in our society and in our families.

This is linked to what one may consider to be the point of writing and even the responsibility of the writer. Toril Moi presented this theme at a seminar celebrating Simone de Beauvoir at Oslo University in 2008. To Beauvoir, Moi claimed, the task of literature was to make transparent what it is to be a human being. To be able to know oneself, one has to narrate oneself. Life is ambiguous in that the meaning must be conquered again and again. Literature is a laboratory in which one explores how human beings live their lives.

The point of writing is, for Beauvoir, intimately linked with philosophy and ethics. Linnel Secomb even reverses the order, describing Beauvoir as a woman philosopher masquerading as a writer.<sup>17</sup> Rather than become a traditional philosopher, Beauvoir developed her thinking by writing about her own experiences. Kate and Edward Fullbrook characterise Beauvoir as a philosopher of experience, who insists on the philosophical relevance of individual human experience.<sup>18</sup> In *Les Belles Images* Beauvoir states that each human being's concrete existence is prior to universal regulations and rules. As any other approach seems to lead to yet new rules and generalisations, Beauvoir chose to develop her understanding of ethics implicitly in her novels and by means of incorporating philosophy and daily life experiences. Linking ethics with experience in her writing, and presenting and developing a new paradigm of ethical understanding, Beauvoir has inspired me in my writing, research and teaching.

### *Implications for teaching*

In my field, which is ethics, it is important to enable students to see and identify ethical dilemmas and reflect critically on their own values, culture, myths, and so forth. Above I have, by means of my own personal story, illustrated how ethical and moral values influence the ways in which we act, write and relate publicly as well as privately. In a certain sense we never leave home; it is therefore necessary to reflect our own childhood in a broader historical and societal perspective. My mother was not the only one to make her children love their

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<sup>17</sup> Linnel Secomb, "Beauvoir's Minotrian Philosophy." *Hypatia*, vol.14. no 4. (1999)

<sup>18</sup> Edward and Kate Fullbrook, *Simone de Beauvoir. A Critical Introduction*. (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998)



father more than her. It is the love and caring work of many women that has made it possible for men to uphold their 'autonomy'. For me it took years to recognise that it is neither possible nor attractive to be autonomous in the way my father was. Writing this chapter I have become aware of the interdependency between them and the love they gave me, each in their way. The inequality between them and the influence this has had on my life has, however, made me realise that democracy between the sexes is a necessary condition of democracy in the public sphere. The same realisation is also stressed by Elena Pulcini in *Modernity, Love and Hidden Inequality*.

Within feminist pedagogy there is a strong tradition of empowering students and stimulating their awareness and critical thinking. To make this happen it is, as I hope to have demonstrated, necessary to see the interdependency of the personal and the political. Otherwise teaching will reproduce the subject/object dichotomy, in the sense that the teacher is the subject, telling the students, the objects, what they have to learn. This again would leave students with no other choice but to reproduce this pattern when they leave college and become professionals. In this way the other remains the other, the power scheme is reproduced, and nothing has changed! I have recently re-read bell hooks and her description of how her joy of being a student paradoxically changed with racial integration.<sup>19</sup> Knowledge was no longer about freedom; it was about information. It has no relation to how one lived and behaved, and it was no longer connected to the anti-racist struggle. "Bussed to white schools, we soon learned that obedience, and not a zealous will to learn, was what was expected of us. Too much eagerness could easily be seen as a threat to white authority."<sup>20</sup>

My understanding of teaching is intimately linked to my conception of knowledge and epistemology and thus to the conception of what it is to be a human being and what it takes to be a responsible subject and citizen. To be a human being is, as I have illustrated above by tracing connections between areas normally treated as separate, to be in a continuous process of becoming, allowing both that one's ethos is embodied and socially constructed *and* that there is a remainder providing space for agency. In this understanding knowledge is more than theories in a book, empirical data collected, or even experiences; knowledge is to me an ongoing co-creational and situational

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<sup>19</sup> bell hooks, *Teaching to Transgress. Education as the Practise of Freedom*. (New York: Routledge, 1994)

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 3

process enacted in dialogue between gendered embodied human beings. To see well is, as Haraway has taught us, not only a question of having good eyesight; it is a located activity involving awareness of both one's particularity and one's responsibility.<sup>21</sup> To help each student to become a subject responsible for what she/he sees and learns, requires that she/he identify their experience and knowledge as 'theirs'; only then will it be possible to reflect critically on this knowledge and all other kinds of knowledge she/he is presented to.

During my many years of teaching post-bachelor and master students, the majority of my students have been senior professional women coming back to university to obtain further skills. In my experience as a teacher, it is difficult for these students to relate the theory they read to their professional practice, and even more so, to their personal life experiences. The reason for this is that they – as also I myself – have been raised and trained in a system where knowledge is conceived as a collection of data and information.

The most important element in my teaching is to see and empower the individual student as a unique subject, as this is a presupposition for her /him in turn to be able to see and empower the patient, the client, and the pupil as an equally unique and valuable person. Although I think this is important for all students, it might be especially important for those who are to be professionals in the arenas of social and care work. By means of narratives from my own personal and professional life I challenge the students to reflect critically on their upbringing, their experiences and their knowledge. In this way I hope to make Ibsen's 'the most wonderful' happen in the classroom, so that all participants are willing to let their situated and embodied knowledge challenge that of the other, allowing new knowledge to be processed, and thus change to happen.

This brings me back to the core of this chapter: the interdependency between the personal and the political. By illuminating the many ways in which the personal and the political are interwoven in our lives, and how norms structuring the public arena affect the way we live and love and relate in the private arena and vice versa, I hope to have inspired colleagues and students to reflect upon the impact of their daily life practises on their professional work.

Only when the common condition of existence is seen as a continuous process of becoming is it possible to uphold both that one's ethos is embodied

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<sup>21</sup> Donna Haraway, "The Persistence of Vision. An excerpt of Situated Knowledges," in *Writings on the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

and socially constructed *and* that there is a remainder providing space for agency and change. This is important as it is in this space that we write, teach and do research; it is in this interaction that we produce and process a new kind of knowledge. This conception of knowledge is crucial in order to find ways to create a dynamic society, processed by citizens equal in value but different in terms of experience and knowledge.

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## Part II: Travelling Selves: Voices, Interpolations, Claims ON COUNTER-NARRATIVES, NOSTALGIA AND RISKS

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### *Reminiscences and feminist multitudes*

During the conference that the Centre for Women's Studies organised in September 2008 in honour of Simone de Beauvoir on the 100th anniversary of her birth, and within the session "Simone and I" envisioned as an active container of multiple personal voices on/of Simone's work, a wondrous moment occurred.

Amid various theoretical and personal reflections on Simone de Beauvoir and how she had influenced the lives and thoughts of the participants present there, suddenly a woman's taped voice rang out. The voice was that of Jelena Zuppa, a woman who spoke passionately of Simone de Beauvoir and her concept of women's freedom, speaking at the same time of how her own life became a place of various synchronical attempts for (re)taking and enjoying that freedom. Beauvoir's auto-referential syntagm – "J'accepte la grande aventure d'être moi" – received its own particular staging at this moment. Only her voice, powerful and deep, partially modulated by the recording, indicated the presence of, for that small feminist circle, a renowned feminist proponent of *écriture féminine* which she had already presented in the early 1980s with her exceptional translations of the works of Luce Irigaray, Marguerite Duras and Chantal Chawaf.

This disruptive moment that gave us the illusion that she was with us despite her absence, encouraged me once more in my endeavour to connect certain meanings and distinctive thoughts of some feminists with my personal motives for approaching the issue of loss. The voice of Jelena Zuppa which filled, or better yet, literally cut through the space/air of the European House was like an unexpected gift parallel to the theoretical voice 'borrowed' from Judith Butler in my attempt to capture the role of Beauvoir within contemporary feminisms.

For a moment I felt both determined and excited. Images of different women passed before my eyes in some puzzled framework, searching to mark the space of their own imprints and signatures, longing for location and

ownership of their own selves, words and lives. Many of them, who anchored themselves in the feminist arena in sweeping strokes from this particular region, namely the region of former Yugoslavia, passed away during the last two decades. They were remarkable, well-known, courageous, 'wild', persistent and creative women – sometimes mentioned within key feminist narratives but more often placed within the footnotes or additional sources of knowledge of local feminism(s).

The more I tried to draw attention to a critical analysis of feminist positioning and feminist actions in particular periods of time, the more I was overwhelmed by my own personal motifs, that is, the relationship between my fragile Self and my close friends whom I carried with me and occupied with deep and silent mourning, with the ideas, images, gestures or moments that crystallised the meanings around/of loss. A few *in memoriam* pieces appearing in feminist and alternative journals and magazines comprised my written response, which at the same time preserved and sparked emotions witnessing anger and pain. Žarana and Nirman strengthened my intent to undertake this harsh and uncertain exploration; these two feminists whose existence remains irreducible to knowledge but probably to the very paths of human epistemology. The thought expressed by Irit Rogoff in her book *Terra Infirma. Geography's Visual Culture* that "(t)he moment in which loss is clearly marked and articulated is also the moment in which something else, as yet unnamed, has come into being"<sup>1</sup> came to me as a possibility to handle this inquiry with particular care.

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<sup>1</sup> Irit Rogoff, *Terra Infirma. Geography's visual culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 2000) 3.

Žarana Papić and Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać.<sup>2</sup>

Confronting the problem of recollecting the meaning of women's lives and narratives through being open to another way of knowing, I asked myself, in the Butlerian sense, about my own epistemological certainties regarding my making myself capable of this? How should I deal with the vulnerable self and human vulnerability as such? Which shape of responsibility would I endeavour to fulfil in relation to them [to you, my close friends]? What is the way of tracing loss, or mourning in a different manner beyond consolation itself? What are the appropriate 'tools' and which discourse should I use or invent? I felt that I

<sup>2</sup> Žarana Papić (1949-2002) and Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać (1954-2007) are the most outstanding figures for feminism(s) in former Yugoslavia, namely the region of new post-Yugoslav states with their distinctive motifs, interests and contributions to feminist knowledge and feminist activism. While their biographical lines overlapped to a certain extent, the very momentum of their feminist strength belonged to a close but different historical period of time.

Žarana Papić was one of the key pioneers of the feminist movement in Yugoslavia in the late 1970s, and co-founder of the Belgrade Women's Studies Center (1992). A sociologist-anthropologist by profession, as well as an academic and activist with an international feminist career, she taught social and cultural anthropology at the Department of Sociology and Archaeology (1989-2002) and was one of the initiators of the first Gender Studies course at an academic level in Belgrade. She was born in Sarajevo but spent most of her life in Belgrade. As an exceptional mind, already in the late 1970s she became a powerful and consistent exponent of contemporary feminist theory. With art historian Dunja Blažević she organised the first international feminist conference in the Eastern communist/socialist countries entitled "Drug/ca žensko pitanje, novi pristup?" [Comrade/ess – the woman question, a new approach?] that was held in Belgrade in 1978 and which was a turning point for Yugoslav feminism. In a decade marked by war within the respective region, Žarana was at the same time a very passionate antiwar activist in Serbia and an engaged feminist intellectual who articulated the problem of political responsibility by bringing a critical awareness to the link between nationalism, patriarchy and war. In this regard, she was part of the international feminist community, including El Taller, Transeuropéennes, WISE, within which she endeavoured to link theory and activism. Žarana's work is essentially important for feminist theory in the region, and includes several books, namely *Antropologija žene* [Towards an Anthropology of Woman] (1983) with Lydia Sklevicky, *Sociologija i feminizam; savremeni ženski pokret, misao o oslobođenju žena, i njihov utjecaj na sociologiju* [Sociology and Feminism: Contemporary Women's Movement, Thoughts on Women's Liberation and Influence on Sociology] (1989), and *Polnost i kultura: telo i znanje u savremenoj antropologiji* [Gender and Culture: Body and Knowledge in Contemporary Anthropology] (1997), and numerous studies in national and foreign journals.

\* Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać was a unique figure for the Bosnian academic and cultural scene, a critical analyst of the culture practices within the local and regional framework; a passionate researcher in the fields of literature, philology, discursive practice, theory of acting, etc. She was a distinguished professor of theory of literature, literary critique and narratology, and theory of acting at the Faculty of Philosophy and Academy of Scene Art in Sarajevo and was a guest professor in this capacity at various universities in Bosnia and Herzegovina and worldwide. She lived and made her career in Sarajevo where she was born in 1954, but her theoretical and academic networks crossed many state borders. Although she joined the feminist scene at the beginning of 2000, the brilliancy of her theoretical voice accompanied by her personal commitment was as exemplary as it was powerfully engaged. In this regard she became in a very short time a leading thinker for gender theory within the post-Yugoslav region. Along with engaging in an alternative women's studies programme organised by Žene ženama (Women to Women) in 2001, she took on the role of president of the Center for Gender Research of International Forum Bosnia. She was a key figure and co-founder of the first MA Program in Gender Studies at the Center for Interdisciplinary Postgraduate Studies at the University in Sarajevo that started in 2006. The module she invented and taught before passing away was "Gender, Ideology, Culture" within which she tried to create a theoretical framework for gender and cultural studies in a local context. She authored and edited several books as well as numerous studies including *Metatekst* [Metatext] (1991); *Retorika tekstualnosti* [Rhetoric of Textuality] (2003) and *Izazovi feminizma* [Challenges of Feminisms] (2004) in coauthorship with J. Babić-Avdispahić, J. Bakšić-Muftić and M. Katnić-Bakaršić; *Bosnien-Herzegovina: Interkultureller synkretismus* (2001).

had no clue, aside from my inexplicable desire to honour them [to honour you!]. My particular endeavour would be to situate these dilemmas (subjective, human, multiple and ambiguous) that tie and affirm coherences and the ‘displacement’ of feminist bonding and mourning, and the invitation for validating women’s life narratives, in both a more sensitive and transgressive manner.

### *Places of crossing/walking*

“Crossing borders, walking, moving within spaces divided by war is a political act”, is what Žarana said on many occasions. “Untamed feminists always did that”, she added, drinking tea with rum in the foyer of a modest hotel in the centre of Warsaw in 1997. Regional seminar on Gender and Culture. While she was saying this, I glimpsed a furtive smile on her face, which her small body immediately soaked up. I then felt a peculiar and genuine feeling of belonging/togetherness. A real socialist ambience of a hotel waiting for a ‘taste’ of transitional modernity, doubled up in a half-lit corner imbued with diverse shades of light, signs of milling passers-by through frosted glass. During those ‘leaden’ years, we were the inevitable anti-war ‘pair’ of feminist scholars; travellers who both signified and manifested Zagreb-Belgrade feminist togetherness, taking pleasure in every second of these acts/actings, of these desirable movements. “Her call to motion remained in me. Now that she’s gone, wherever I turn, I have the feeling that she is with me, and that I am with her,”<sup>3</sup> is what Žarana wrote in her “*in memoriam*” note to her friend L. S. from Zagreb, a renowned feminist who tragically passed away almost twenty years ago. An endless labyrinth of untold friendships.

The rituals of the *voyages* included preparing coffee in hotel rooms, the ceremony of dressing, a separate time dedicated to reading, some verbal interactions and a feminist ‘stage’. The interplay between distinctive places, our public acts and our feminist ‘mission’ was in motion with various entries, unpredictable moments and impacts. Edward Soja was right when he noted: “How this ontological nexus of space-time-being is conceptually specified and given particular meaning in the explanation of concrete events and occurrences is the generative source of all social theory, critical or otherwise,”<sup>4</sup> but also how

<sup>3</sup> Žarana Papić, “L.S.”, *Kruh i ruže*, ed. Biljana Kašić, Đurđa Knežević and Anamarija Starčević-Štambuk. Ženska infoteka, Vol. 3 (1995):33.

<sup>4</sup> Edward Soja, “History: Geography: Modernity.” In *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 123.



meanings of time and space have been radically shifted. The most striking feature of space and its discernment in the midst of war and destruction was not a sense of the invention of a new belonging, more precisely, the recognition of belonging to a new state-space as a result of war-based divided communities, but rather a sense of the mobility of spaces, their geographical and historical status and dimensions, their symbolic and real power as well as boundaries.

“Activists crossing borders”, organised by Transeuropéennes, was a project in which Žarana participated with remarkable political responsibility in creating new spaces across the divide within the former Yugoslav region. Walking together, Žarana and I, transcending the spatial/historical multiplicity of the Central-Eastern-South social reality, we both kept drawing new traces of a joined feminist vision and spaces with new feminist friends. We also witnessed ‘additional’ divides including historical and ideological lags as well as time-space relations: “East/West”, “South/North”, “Far East/Middle East”, “not being/being a part of Europe”.

The feminist cartography of resistance itself shifts the meaning of unitary and hegemonic space in order to make possible a repositioning and a new positioning, the entry of new perspectives, personal decisions and choices. Michel Foucault – whom Žarana intensively studied – in calling those ‘other’ spaces “heterotopias”<sup>5</sup> in a socially created spatiality, both concrete and imaginative, signified several spaces at once and the potential for inventing new spaces and new meanings within them. Warsaw, Budapest, Bratislava, Budapest, Ljubljana, Dubrovnik, Paris, Tunis, Cape Town, all these places were in a way, as I later discovered, heterotopias (unreal and real, singular in its setting, calling on a new set of feminist relations). And then came Sarajevo.

Feminist ‘chronotopos’ (koinos topos)<sup>6</sup> possessed the territory of post-socialist/postcommunist time, signifying the mobile and changeable assemblage of women’s heterogeny, multinational, cultural, polyglossy identities open to newly-created ones.

I came to Cluj three years after her, as a promise. Her excitement about the Anthropological Department at Babeş-Bolyai University and her connection with Enikő M.-V. was the ultimate imperative to make my arrangement possible.

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<sup>5</sup> Michel Foucault, “Space, Power and Knowledge,” in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 140.

<sup>6</sup> Chronotopos is literally translated as “time-space” as well as common place. The discourse of temporal and the discourse of a-temporal in that sense are interwoven in various variations and disorders ensuring a process of re-articulation of feminist perspectives, positions and networks. (See Kulavkova, 2007).

“You should know her, I will introduce you to her, we can develop some projects together!” is what I remembered from her gentle coaxing, repeated several times. It was in Budapest in 2000 that I heard this suggestion for new feminist friendships, as an appeal for shifting our already traumatic war boundaries, over a decade clamped in their mental and almost obsessional formats. We were there together, having received scholarships from the then Gender and Culture Program at Central European University. At that very time postcoloniality became a fresh matrix for our ‘travelling through locations spatially and historically’ but also a possible clue to deal with the ambiguities of one’s own history and the incomprehension of one’s own being within.

“The Traumatic Living in the Place of Crime. A Case Study: Seven Years of Life in Serbia of an Involved and Distanced Foreigner” was the title of her presentation; I spoke about “‘Trendy Identities’: Questioning the Socialist Matrix, Memory and Global Economy.” Titles as heavy burdens travelled with us – like stone blocks – as the contexts from where we had come.

Michel de Certeau’s observation that “(p)laces are fragmentary and inward turning histories, pasts that others are not allowed to read, accumulated times that can be unfolded but like stories held in reserve (...),”<sup>7</sup> passed through my mind. July 2003, Cluj, I try to recall the summer delights accompanied by the feeling of exceptional hospitality. I felt like I was replacing her but I did not feel any discomfort. Such a distant and such a habitable place that enabled me my inner process of mourning.

Sarajevo came after although it was already before. A continuity of absence and presence. Pulsation.

### ***Crossroads and/or location***

How do you finally respond to your life and your name? was the question raised by Jacques Derrida, the author of the most intriguing thought on mourning, in his final interview with *Le Monde* in 2004 8. *Instead of searching for an immediate answer, I added another question: When comes the time when you dare to ask this question?*

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<sup>7</sup> Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California, 1988), 108.

<sup>8</sup> Jacques Derrida, “Jacques Derrida, 1930-2004. The Last Interview,” (SV, November 2004 <http://www.studiovisit.net/SV.Derrida.pdf>, accessed 20 February 2009). Judith Butler, “Letter by Judith Butler to the New York Times - Jacques Derrida in Memorium”, October 9, 2004, (*New York Times*, 10 October 2004(a), [http://www.humanities.uci.edu/remembering\\_jd/butler\\_judith.html](http://www.humanities.uci.edu/remembering_jd/butler_judith.html) (accessed 14 November 2008).

Layers of vivid memories gradually unravelled that day when I was slowly climbing to that place, looking for that place with her name. An ‘atheist parcel’ (‘ateistička parcela’)<sup>9</sup>, I try to memorise this unique and almost untranslatable word. Sparkling Sarajevo, a sunny morning with a coldness that slashes the soul. “There is something sunnier here but with a tendency for the sky to fall on your head”, is what Nirman wrote in one of her e-mail letters in 2004 while organising a public forum on the topic “Trafficking of Women and Modern Slavery”.

I knew, locating that place without its yet inscribed name, that she [you] would know how to best explain, in her [your] ludic exceptionalness of linguistic art, all the meanings of an ‘atheist parcel’, standing like a semantic parodic figure, denouncing the previous regime and its confusion. A peculiar reminder of ideological ‘intimacy’ that displaced ‘sacred’ with atheist behaviour but enabled civil sociality and agnostic aspects of existence/being to a certain extent. What happens to people “who are dislocated by or excluded from the matrix of life’s inscription into territory/ethno-nation/order, and who do not give in to their liminality”<sup>10</sup>, is what Jasmina Husanović, one of Nirman’s real and imaginary students, questioned in her text “Feminist Aspects of the Postcolonial Imaginary of Bosnia”. For Moranjak-Bamburać, who is one of them, the notion of “un-belonging” in Homi Bhabha’s sense would fit perfectly. Knowing her, she would accept it with full theoretical accuracy. To rethink not only war trauma induced by ethno-nationalism but the complex textuality of human survival, Jasmina Husanović went further with her proposal emphasising that “(...) the central question of gender studies in the context of Bosnia is how to deal with loss, rupture, breakage – to mend it, to repair it, restore it, re-politicise it, re-imagine it, make it creative, politically productive, and turn it into a politics of hope”.<sup>11</sup>

Because of Nirman [you] I accepted an invitation to teach within the MA Program “Gender Studies” which she [you] initiated 2006, in her [your] honour and because of her [you] I accepted this invitation. Decisively, incalculably.

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<sup>9</sup> Cemetery Bare, organised in a specific manner, following the logic of the dual matrix of life, the religious one and the worldly one, is based on patrilineal and ideological paradoxes. The name itself, “ateistička parcela,” signifies this fully; those who did not belong to any of the official religious communities (Muslim, Catholic or Orthodox), or were socialist/communist by their political convictions or did not want to separate themselves from their “mixed” background (ethnic/national/spiritual), are buried here. The parcel figures as a place marked “for all others” and in that sense is permanently liminal.

<sup>10</sup> Jasmina Husanović, “Feminist Aspects of the Postcolonial Imaginary of Bosnia,” in *Feminisms in a Transnational Perspective. Rethinking North and South in Post-Coloniality*, ed. Sandra Prleđa and Renata Jambrešić Kirin. (Zagreb: Centar za ženske studije, Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku, 2008), 200.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.

Why would female university professors agree to be placed on the market of ideas from which they had historically been systematically excluded, if they did not attempt to turn over the effects of the discourse of power, if they did not take the risk of producing a new praxis, if they did not attempt to be artists of performance – whenever I lectured, this sentence of Nirman’s [yours] echoed through my mind. Yet how should I fully express appreciation? How can one rupture the silence that comes with loss and suffering, as from the uniquely personal perspective offered by Derrida when he writes about his friends Michel Foucault, Sarah Kofman, Gilles Deleuze, Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-François Lyotard? Yet, how should I fully comprehend his message that “learning to live ought to mean learning to die?”<sup>12</sup>; yet, how should we articulate, announce and experience the place in which we are left by the death of another? Derrida’s honouring those friendships in the wake of passing constitutes and articulates an act of mourning (Judith Butler is right!). According to Greek anthropologist Nadia Seremitakis, who explored deeply the issue of mourning, *Maniat Laments* are, for example, in their contextual pervasiveness and multi-functionality, about the representation of those who passed away “in order to witness, suffer for and reveal the truth about”<sup>13</sup> the pain of the survivor in the throes of mourning and the long-term experiential pain that the mourners bear during their life.

It was in the classroom that I witnessed the politics of mourning that occupied both Jacques Derrida and Nadia Seremitakis as a posthumous gift. In the Greek tradition grief, pain and memory burn, and it happened that first day in May 2007 within my lecture on “Feminist subject, globalisation and ethnicity: On positioning and belonging”. Several months after she [you] had passed away. I ‘allowed’ this expressive dialogue of feelings a few times after that, a very tangible ritual of disclosure emotions. Expressive complements of ‘burning pain’ were scattered everywhere within the classroom, among the students and me, and also overflowing outside it.

“Gender, ideology, culture” was the last module that Nirman created and taught as an introductory invitation to the complexity of Gender Studies fields, problems and topics in 2006, in order to provide critical thinking by using an inter-theoretical matrix in the areas of language, discursive practices, arts, lite-

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<sup>12</sup> Derrida, *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Nadia Seremitakis, “Memories of the Aftermath: Political Violence, Posttraumatic Stress and Cultural Transitions to Democracy”, in *Women and the Politics of Peace. Contributions to a Culture of Women’s Resistance*, ed. Biljana Kašić (Zagreb: Centar za ženske studije, 1997), 134.

rature and theatre. *Gender and Culture: Body and Knowledge in Contemporary Anthropology* was Žarana's last comprehensive book that appeared almost ten years before this in which she, in a theoretically extraordinary way, elaborated the old feminist *aporia*, that is, the nature/culture distinction primarily referring to and dialoguing with C. Levi Strauss's anthropological work. It was not by accident, certainly not, that the first Gender Studies Program at the university was set up in Sarajevo primarily by Nirman's tremendous engagement just as the alternative women's studies program within "Žene ženama" (Women to Women) is called "Žarana Papić".

Žarana was born in Sarajevo, Nirman lived there until she passed away. Both women died at the age of fifty-three.

### ***On nostalgia and placement***

"Where are the places where the memories of feminists are situated?" and "What are the ways to create a potential space that may allow for an engagement with loss that is imaginative and lively?" These are two questions that have simultaneously appeared in the last few years, occupying and extending the horizon of my thoughts. This linking of memory to one who passed away with a potential place in order to re-activate a sense of one's own being through meanings that constitute the same memory leads to the conclusion that the two abovementioned questions become inseparable in a way. Yet they are different.

Obituaries, "in memoriams", dedications in books, footnotes, rare archives with the names of renowned feminists, speeches often locked in conventional rituals, all these public forms of dedication are there, signifying a socially desirable grieving response. A presence of inexpressible anxiety within myself, as I came to this later, was connected with a set of uncertainties but much more with the certainty that signifies human interrelatedness to the most extent, to this inescapable momentum, to death as an 'indexical symbol' of human beings, to use the Lacanian term<sup>14</sup>.

Although I took part in some of these acts, I felt restless and paralysed, unready to deal with the impossibility of responding to one's own loss as well as to listen to my own indescribable wounds relating to this. Clearly, what I remembered was my prompt gesture of gathering all the letters and virtual correspondence, dispersed photos and the trifles that might simulate

<sup>14</sup> Jacques Lacan, *The Ethics of Psychoanalysis* (New York: Norton, 1992), 26.

a 'materiality' of connections, a provisional coherence of joint being(s), some 'real' rootedness, their presence. A style that connotes a unique way of being in the world and that completely fits to each of them separately was outside the range of any possible collecting procedure. I 'exercised' remembering. Writing, walking, carrying oneself, facing problems, articulating feminist questions, all these moments connote the virtue of their particular style.

My primary impetus in responding to the loss was to keep them as (a) whole(s) with and within me, to carry them beyond any theoretical analysis or response to the issue. Knowledge itself was neither a key nor an entry but a gentleness of emotions which in intrinsic waves spoke both in public and in myself honouring them, formatting a discourse on honouring them, responding to the call. I tried intensively to keep saying their names publicly and privately, to keep ceaselessly reading their texts, to keep continuously writing about them in the gap between facing loss and a time of mourning which would never arrive in its final shape. At this point I echoed Derrida's explanation that the inability of acceptance defined that which mourning itself is, namely "the history of its refusal"<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, "(t)he work on mourning is not," as the abovementioned author pointed out in his article *By Force of Mourning* "(...) one kind of work among other possible kinds; an activity of the kind of 'work' is by no means a specific figure for production in general"<sup>16</sup>.

The moment when I accepted the temptation to work on this very challenging task, I realised not only how this particular 'travelling' assumes multiple efforts of Self in its dramatic and often unknown setting, but how any claim for an auto/biographical narrative resists the politics of closure or its own imaginative order. Along with facing my own limitations for critical insights, this quest seemed very difficult, especially in terms of inner-positioning. Numerous dilemmas suddenly appeared. Is it about the issue of personal mourning after the loss of the feminists with whom I shared very often an inexplicable closeness or a peculiar concept of nostalgia for recalling a joint feminist past or both that turned out to be an invocation? Do I think of me and my loneliness? Or is it about my ultimate will to work on mourning as an act of personal responsibility?

The very meaning of death and loss and the ways in which they resonate towards the meaning of the lives of those who continue to live, are ontological

<sup>15</sup> Jacques Derrida, *Cinders* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1991), 55.

<sup>16</sup> Jacques Derrida, "Excerpt from *By Force of Mourning* by Jacques Derrida," transl. by Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, *Critical Inquiry*, (Winter 1996).

matters. How might one live with the absence of dear, beloved ones, or even more demanding questions such as how to authorise oneself to work on mourning belongs to these unanswerable questions or something that, as work on origin (literature, poetry), as Gayatri Ch. Spivak on one occasion said, is “(...) the necessary experience of the impossible, which is lived as a calculus without guarantee”<sup>17</sup>.

It seemed to be this type of journey that I took as my personal entry knowing how uncertain and sometimes very fragile I could be. The first time I was exposed to the risk of doing this, I felt an enormous quivering, restlessness and sense of being lost. All these aspects, dilemmas, unclear moments, temptations, sensors, constituted the conditions of my embodiment and put me, namely Myself, into question parallel with the Other, Myself and the Other, in a new way of exposure. Indefinite, uncrossable, unpredictable.

On one hand, embodiment, as Levinas rightly notices, “(...) is not the inevitable closure of the mortality of each person; rather, it is openness to the mortality of others”<sup>18</sup>, on the other hand it always (re)posits the Self itself as a potential subject of this inquiry, as one from which the potential of both autobiographical reflection and biographical work about Others might appear.

### *Places and (re)placement*

Posing the very fundamental question, “Where is one’s place?”<sup>19</sup>, Bill Ashcroft pointed to the intrinsic tension between a sense of place and the experience of displacement. “(...) [A]nd where is the place? (...) clerical-patriarchal Belgrade? Humph!” stands in the middle of one of the last email messages I received from Žarana in December 2001.

Žarana and Nirman experienced this tension by travelling within violent ambiguities and across them during the 1990s to the greatest extent; through displacement in the pure geographical sense either by political pressure or by their own ethical stand, but above all, being “in” their own de-territorialisation or witnesses to the same, or being in their own exile as the only possible place that was very soon re-installed in the desired/desirable situatedness. Human atrocities, memorycide and ruptures everywhere.

<sup>17</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1999), 428.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Cohen, “Introduction vii,” in Emmanuel Lévinas *Humanism of the Other* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2006), XXXiii.

<sup>19</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation*. (London and New York: Routledge, 2001), 124.

Feminist place(s) were re-invented in the midst of wartime, liberated of any concreteness of the places, although by intention very contextualised. Sarajevo-Zagreb-Deutschland-Sarajevo or Belgrade-Sarajevo-Budapest-Zagreb-Belgrade, these were some determined roads of Nirman and Žarana's travelling, but many more crossroads gave a meaning to their re-placement. And the crossing divide. By this, both of them, along with others [us/we] functioned as "travelling selves", witnessing 'unbelonging' that became, in Homi Bhabha's sense<sup>20</sup>, an ultimate condition of critical political and theoretical activity. This situatedness at the same time meant feminist positioning and critical self-location. Žarana, who was a consistent feminist critic of the Serbian nationalistic regime, wrote at the end of 1990s: "A nationalist/fascist discourse and order of the body, re-traditionalising gender roles, and reconstructing aggressive masculinity, were a vital symbolic precondition for the wars in ex-Yugoslavia – for the strategies of the destruction, cleansing, displacing, torturing, violating of the body of the Other(s)"<sup>21</sup>; Nirman, who was a passionate critic of war rhetoric, addressed the significant question a few years later: "To what degree is every question on sex/gender regimes – heretical, and thus bearable at all for great narratives, which are often taken as an excuse for violence?"<sup>22</sup>.

Both positions correspond in a way, although a serious analysis and critical comparison should be made. By exposing an act of feminist resistance that is embedded within the 'shelters' of counter-narratives, they extended a meaning of engagement giving a possibility for the acts of Other(s) [us]. Feminist autobiography stands out as a certainty in all its expositions.

What are the semantic places that open up space for autobiographical memory, for emotional reception, for personal journeys, for intervention? In Greek, the verb *nostalghó* means both "the journey" and "the return" as well as "feeling pain" in terms of longing for return. In this sense "(...) nostalgia is linked to the personal consequences of historicising sensory experience which is conceived as a painful bodily and emotional journey"<sup>23</sup>.

Dealing with loss, is it that kind of journey? And can I be an appropriate appraiser of this?

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<sup>20</sup> Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), 9.

<sup>21</sup> Žarana Papić, "Europe after 1989: Ethnic Wars, the Fascistization of Civil Society and Body Politics in Serbia," in *Thinking Differently. A Reader in European Women's Studies*, ed. Gabriele Griffin and Rosi Braidotti (London & New York: Zed Books, 2002), 139.

<sup>22</sup> Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać, "Hasanaginica's Heritage," *Treća [The Third]*, Vol. 7 (1-2) (2005). Nirman Moranjak-Bamburać, *Retorika tekstualnosti (Rhetoric of Textuality)* (Sarajevo: Buybook, 2003).

<sup>23</sup> Seremitakis, *Ibid.*, 137.



## *Speaking/Naming*

I have been carrying on a dialogue with Žarana and Nirman [with you, my dears] on different occasions and spaces; announcing them [you], I myself have been invited.

Being intensely concerned with questions of the Self and its relation to the Other for various reasons over the last ten years, my separate and unsettled self wishes and yearns to continue the conversation, to keep in touch, leaving “the call on hold”. Nothing other than this metaphor that Homi Bhabha and W.J.T. Mitchell formed when continuing their dialogue with Edward Said in the book *Edward Said Continuing the Conversation* (2004) dedicated in his honour, best responds to my will and desire. In which manner does “waiting for a reply” touch me, or call you, or invite all of us? Or how does it signify collaboration and togetherness? I had known Žarana for years; I met Nirman by pure feminist fortune a few years before she passed away.

There are two unfinished projects still waiting to respond to: with Žarana, El Taller and the public hearings of women, with Nirman, work on the publication of a feminist history within the Balkans. They are, in the Derridian sense, “my debts” to them [to you] but certainly something “in addition” for which I am still searching for the right words. The meanings of words elude me; never precise enough, never (ful)filled enough. How could you, I wonder, come to me, how could the stories of you yourselves come to mean(-ing)?

How and to what extent does this loss [your loss] become the opening of a possibility?

In her letter to the New York Times of October 2004, which she wrote in honour of Jacques Derrida, Judith Butler came to an answer regarding this delicate issue concerning his work on mourning his friends and his “debts”: “He “owes” them something or, perhaps, everything, if only because he could not write without them; their writing exists as the precondition of his own; their writing constitutes the means through which his own writing voice is animated and secured, the voice that emerges, as an address.”<sup>24</sup>

Two titles appear before me, two ‘in memoriam’ voices by which I honoured them [you] through a sense of ethical urgency: “Umijeće slobodnog hoda” [Art of Free Motion] and “Ponovljena lektira – čitati i pisati kao žena” [Repeat Assignment – Reading and Writing as a Woman]. Two single entries

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<sup>24</sup> Judith Butler, “Letter by Judith Butler to the New York Times - Jacques Derrida in Memoriam”, October 9, 2004(a), Ibid.

in the space of an unfinished conversation; entries into a web of many re-imagined directions and meanings that come together through rediscovering words, actions, thoughts in their interrelations, linkage and ambiguities.

As according to Lévinas's thought that responsibility for the Other occurs before being, it means that all the questions concerning the Other's death appear at the same time as an "ethical awakening"<sup>25</sup>. What does the ethical relation of being responsible for the Other mean in this situation? How should we fulfil responsibility to the Other knowing that it is a kind of "impossible responsibility of consciousness in its own originating relation to others" (Lacan, according to Caruth 1996) when we face loss? How should one carry oneself with these layers of responsibility? Am I competent for that? Am I ready for that? I ask myself again and again.

Despite the various inner blockades accompanied with contradictory and changing feelings through facing unimaginable, unacceptable loss, I know that the heart of this matter touches the continuous dialogue within, from which none of us is excluded. Joys, arguing, feminist subversions, sparkling thoughts, I remember all these moments of being together and I might imagine new ones.

### *Meetings and imaginary places*

How did it happen, Nirman, that we never discussed her [Žarana's] feminist political engagement or her inner preoccupation with French theoretical affairs? How was it possible, Žarana, that we never mentioned her [Nirman]? There is no explanation or excuse that would 'pass' my elegant acceptance. This uncertainty embodies my vocation and my voicing you. I do not even know whether you met each other, although I may guess that you did.

Enwrapped in a large cashmere garment in warm shades of cinnamon, Žarana crosses the threshold.

And you, Nirman, once more with rhetoric dignity, say a quote that addresses the last question from the conversation of Medea with Arin: "Where will I go? Is it possible to imagine one world, one time, to which I would fit/belong. No one close by to ask. That is the answer."<sup>26</sup> Žarana turns attentively to you.

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<sup>25</sup> Emmanuel Lévinas, *Alterity and Transcendence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 26.

<sup>26</sup> Moranjak-Bamburać, *Ibid.*, 2003: 267.

### *Implications for teaching*

“‘What is it in the Other that I have lost?’ – posits the ‘I’ in the mode of unknowingness” is how Judith Butler in her book *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence*<sup>27</sup> (Butler 2004b, 30) explored the very momentum of facing loss. It can be a moving point from where we may begin a reflection of how this issue, as one of the most vulnerable and profound of life’s experiences, can affect teaching, both the content and meaning of teaching.

The task is implicitly harsh as there is a dense web of human dilemmas that at the same time prevents us from going beyond the conventional order usually embedded in a memoryscape or locked in secure public rituals of mourning but also challenges us to find potential answers.

Loss, particularly the loss of dear ones, underlies a complexity of uncertainties that refers to various points, concerns and states of emotion, yet there are some opportunities for openness to often unanswerable and unreachable questions. What are the transformative effects of loss? Can students identify with one’s own loss and is the classroom a suitable place for a fruitful exchange of these transformational opportunities? What are the outcomes that have effects that differ from the effects of the process of healing? How to teach, or rather what to teach when human loss is accompanied with grieving and unexplainable vulnerability matters? Emotional exposure, human rupture, grieving, human bonding, work at mourning?

Derrida was quite precise saying that there is no possibility of being taught how to live or how to accept death. Humans are, in his view, “all survivors on deferral” (Derrida 2004) but also inheritors of others with whom they feel an affinity. Coming back to Butler’s previous point, I found here a kind of interrelatedness as well as a potential for, or promise of, a departure.

The position of the Self as unknowingness in a situation of the loss of the Other, although presuming an uneasiness, anxiety, despair and drifting, means above all ‘I’ “*as infinite layers*”<sup>28</sup>, never unified, total, closed but impregnated and embodied by and through others, and in that sense Self functions in a particular way as an inheritor of them (others). Therefore, the importance of inventing new theorising and teaching methods relating to loss, mourning and grief, despite all epistemological and human limitations and ambiguity, is present and could be developed in a few directions. First, one should offer

<sup>27</sup> Judith Butler, *Precarious Life. The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London and New York: Verso, 2004).

<sup>28</sup> Trinh T. Minh-ha, *Woman Native Other* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1989), 94.

a new framework for understanding and articulating the issue of loss, respecting the experience-based way of thinking, acting and sharing that interweaves personal and cultural biographies with story-telling, memoirs, counter-narratives, art exhibitions, reflections on various events and delicacy within more contextual and distinctive places (spatial, material, historical). Second, one should enable feminist situatedness that relies on recognising and re-examining relational ties among human beings and women in particular and on calling for an ethical responsibility that from a woman's perspective evolves "the capacity for responsibility and care"<sup>29</sup> or careful interdependency. That which, for instance, thanks to women's love and friendship, enables one person facing loss to become "(...) another person's radical interlocutor"<sup>30</sup> or one "who could get past her face to her embodied voice"<sup>31</sup>, or one who, as Gloria Anzaldúa's friends<sup>32</sup> did, in honoring her willingness "to risk the personal", keeps opening potential identifications with her *spiritual activism* or new *mestiza* theory.

Dedication to the feminists who passed away, and a refusal to enact closure, enables an engagement with loss that is active and imaginative as well as creative and hopeful, and this seems to be both an opportunity and a distinctive act of responsive relationality. Third, one should open up spaces in order to properly evaluate women's heritages<sup>33</sup> by creating access and new links to them and by installing new entries in the corpus of women's auto-biographies. The genuine voicing of women's stories and their interrelatedness by women who regard this task as their own ethical vocation while respecting those whose loss they live with as well as carefully enouncing the layerings of past and present within their mutual narratives, can be a threshold leading to a new horizon of teaching and sharing knowledge.

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<sup>29</sup> Carol Gilligan, *In a Different Voice. Psychological Theory and Women's Development* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1996), 127

<sup>30</sup> Mary Cappello, "Autobiography of a Friendship," Rev. of *Truth and Beauty: A Friendship*, by Ann Patchett (October 2004), <http://www.wellesley.edu/WomensReview/archive/2004/10/highlt.html> (accessed 15 February 2009).

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>32</sup> AnaLouise Keating, "Remembering Gloria Anzaldúa (1942-2004)." (October 2004). <http://www.wellesley.edu/WomensReview/archive/2004/10/highlt.html> (accessed 25 February 2009).

<sup>33</sup> Francisca de Haan et al, ed. *A Biographical Dictionary of Women's Movements and Feminisms, Central, Eastern, and South Eastern Europe, 19th and 20th Centuries* (Budapest& New York: Central European University Press, 2006). Saskia E. Wieringa, ed. *Traveling Heritages. New Perspectives on Collecting, Preserving and Sharing Women's History* (Amsterdam: Aksant Academic Publishers, 2008).

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## IN SEARCH OF THE “THIRD SPACE”

*Melita Richter Malabotta (University of Trieste)*

I have different cultures, and I have different countries.

I belong to all of them.

*Marguerite Yourcenar*

### *Multicultural experience and personal layers of memory*

I would like to start my approach to the issue of travelling selves by exploring my personal experiences of migration and mobility through space and time, comparing them with the life stories and narratives of other women's experiences of migration and of the dislocation process. I believe that migration – whether resulting from ‘free’ personal choice, or from social and political circumstances – inevitably results in the migrant subject finding a period of time when she/he will position herself/himself between two or more cultures, in a so-called ‘third space’ which emerges from, but also embraces, multiple positions.

This third space, fertile soil for memories and for the creation of cultural hybridism, is dominated by a series of opposing movements – attraction and/or resistance – both to the birth place and to the place of adoption, between the need to belong and the need to discard every biological root. But the key concepts that inform research into the third space are migration, voyage and boundaries or, rather, lack of boundaries.

Considering the concept of travelling, the Italian writer Mario Soldati writes: “Usually we revolt against living in two spaces simultaneously, when one or the other occupies our mind... We can start travelling then, but while the target of our travel becomes closer and real, the place of departure is becoming more distant, and we substitute for it a destination of unrealistic remembering: gaining one, we lose the other. The distance between the two becomes a feature of the human condition.”<sup>1</sup>

In this wave of contracting and extending distances – in what we call the ‘transformative space’ – which characterises the migrant subject in his/her geographical and cultural dislocation, I will try to examine more closely the meaning of my own experience of existing in and appropriating this ‘third

<sup>1</sup> Mario Soldati, *America primo amore* (Milano: Arnoldo Mondadori, 1976), 22.

space'. The intention is to illuminate my migrant life by seeking what may exist beyond the boundaries of the history and geography of my *no-land(s)*, to see if there are still forgotten or unexplored experiences which mark my subjective displacement.

Looking more intently inside my autobiographical framework – a modality with which I am not familiar at all and which is intentionally dislocated and left to exist in a kind of parallel reality – I can perceive, emerging from a forgotten world, a daily border crossing of cultural and linguistic patterns already existing during my childhood in the family environment in my birth-place, Zagreb.

My great grandfather came to Zagreb from the Sudeten region, an area in the Czech lands where a substantial German minority lived until the end of the Second World War. He emigrated during the nineteenth century when his home region was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. My father was born at the beginning of the twentieth century (1900) when the memories of his grandfather's migration were still alive within the family. The transmitted familial saga memories were rich in anecdotes, although these were more linked to great grandpa's geographical journey than to real cultural displacement. Most citizens of the so-called smaller nations within the Austro-Hungarian Empire were trilingual or multilingual, most of them travelled throughout the territory of the Empire and many were in contact with individuals from other ethnic and cultural communities or member peoples of the Empire. Briefly, this means that in my family, part of the not large but culturally dominant *Agramer*<sup>2</sup> middle-class, it was not at all surprising to meet people using German, Hungarian and Latin in addition to the Croatian and Serb language, and this rich linguistic mixture was further elaborated with French, Russian and Turkish expressions. In our family gatherings the sounds of languages and music coming from afar, from Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, Slovenian, Serbian, Macedonian, Bosnian and Russian cultural *milieux* became familiar to us, the youngest generation. Nobody was specifically teaching us anything but we acquired the multiethnic 'mark' by just existing, breathing, eating, playing and singing during family celebrations, and listening to stories about the world existing before our birth. I should add that such kind of crossing of different cultural and psychological borders was not exceptional or surprising, nor did it only occur in middle-class old Zagreb.

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<sup>2</sup> Agram, the old German name of Zagreb.



Let us see what Kenka Lekovich, a young writer from Rijeka/Fiume, the important Mediterranean city on the Bay of Quarnaro, Croatia, says about her family experience:

In our house, at the table, we used to pass each other the salt in Italian, Serbo-Croatian or Croatian-Serbian, German, Hungarian, Turkish, in the dialect of Trieste and Fiume, in Istrian-Venetian dialect, in the dialect of Napoli, in *ciakavo*<sup>3</sup> and in *kajkavo*<sup>4</sup>, sometimes in English and in French, as my mother spent a good deal of time in London and her father, my grand-father, died in Paris in a minefield. When things are like that, when during an everyday ordinary lunch you find yourself passing the salt in twelve different idioms, you understand that to be multilingual cannot be a question of distinction, but simply a factual matter, normality, I would say. The real anomaly or even near madness was, and still is, being forced to choose, to opt for only one language, only one dialect, and finally, for only one culture.<sup>5</sup>

Why do I think that similar segmented life stories should illuminate the distinctive points of my self-location? I am convinced that the past experience of being able to cross the inner borders of different cultural segments and doing it as a *normal* part of everyday life, experiencing it first in the framework of the 'national', reinforced my multicultural being and my mental orientation towards being open to others.

There is no travel without going beyond borders. I was already traversing the world when I was still at home. A mixed marriage was not a surprise in my biography, nor my migration to Italy. When it occurred, I was saved, at least partly, from cultural shock by moving to Trieste, a city of the same Austro-Hungarian past as my native city, Zagreb. The Mediterranean and *mittel-european* Trieste was where I founded my family. I did not feel dislocated from my emotional roots. I knew the language, I was studying Italian language and literature at university level before I moved. Another crucial factor was that I received my new citizenship at the same moment that I was married. There was not a single day, a single hour, in which I lost my civil rights. I added the new citizenship to *my* citizenship. I was not willing at all to accept loss but I was open to addition. That was my normal expectation.

Perhaps I was fortunate, but I still think it was too self-evident to pretend otherwise. To me it was absolutely normal, that people moving from their own

<sup>3</sup> The dialect spoken in the heart of Istria, Croatia.

<sup>4</sup> The dialect spoken in the area close to Zagreb, Croatia.

<sup>5</sup> Kenka Lekovich, *I speak Gulasch und andere Texte* (Klagenfurt/Celovec: Drava Verlag, 2006), 44.

countries should not be exposed to the humiliation of losing their civil rights. They should keep their rights and the practices of active citizenship wherever they were. Maybe this conviction was/is my arrogant pretension, but unconsciously I was elaborating Bill Ashcroft's question 'Where is one's place?'<sup>6</sup> by considering that *my place* is where *I am*.

Was it a sufficiently realistic answer to the question?

No. I was behaving as *if* it were *my place*, but it was not. That place, its people, its cultural environment and, most of all, the value system of the host society, demonstrated actively to me on a daily basis my personal boundaries and that this was *not* 'my place'. I was becoming aware of the distance of which Mario Soldati writes, the space in between. I found myself searching for my new identity location and my new relation to the Real. My migration became travel, not in the sense of Ulysses' journey, a circular one where returning is included in the experience; rather it became rectilinear and possibly infinite. At the same time, I was not willing to follow Breton's suggestion, 'Lâchez tout',<sup>7</sup> leave all behind you, cancel your entire identity. I was observing the paths my life was taking and resisting the negation of my 'entire' identity while being willing to mutate it by addition.

This job of adding and not losing is substantial, a constant burden in the migrant's life; and it is crucial to my understanding of multiculturalism. Reinventing home from the fragments of *displaced places* adds yet more weight to this burden. The Macedonian author, Elisabeta Šeleva, describes it thus:

The home is something more complex and more serious than the small idyllic garden of Candide. While some of us (willingly or under coercion) are turned into captives of Home, others remain permanently infected by the herpes of homelessness. For some the home remains the exit only into the domain of the virtual, as an inexhaustible craving, as an important energetic and motivational charge. The home is perhaps only a lifelong, endless, unreachable, inestimable project... Therefore, the ultimate question addresses the fundamental dilemma: does our home have an address in the real - clear spatial coordinates?<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> "Start to travel and 'chez tout'", wrote Breton in 1922 and exhorted the concept of *dépaysement*. See in: Claudio Magris, *L'infinito viaggiare*, Mondadori, 2005, XII.

<sup>8</sup> Elisabeta Šeleva, "House and Queasiness: Anxiety of Location", in *Feminisms in a Transnational Perspective. Rethinking North and South in Post-Coloniality*, edited by Renata Jambrešić Kirin and Sandra Prleđa (Zagreb: Centar za ženske studije i Institut za etnologiju i folkloristiku; 2008), 278.

This is home as the constant object of our desire, as a relation between global and intimate, the space in the world and emotional space. Home is a metaphor for feeling at ease in the world.

### *The meaning of displacement*

The real displacement in my life, in my autobiography, came in the form of a landslide which deprived me of the framework of my identity references. It occurred when the war in Yugoslavia started, when the partition of the country generated inexpressible brutality, crime, ethnic cleansing, when my country and its multiculturalism, the historic experience of Southern Slavs living together with their differences, started to disappear. I was transformed into a mere observer, an impotent observer of its agony from a neighbouring foreign country. That was the time when most Yugoslav citizens became losers, and many of us were losing our plural cultural identity. We lost our history, our biographies, our collective memory, our freedom of movement through the territory. The territory became 'former', the country itself became 'former' and we were all transformed into 'former citizens'. In that dark time, exercising the memory became subversive; it was considered an unpatriotic political act against a new ethnic dream and the building of the nation-state(s).

Under pressure from this tragic and coercive emotional rupture, of which Biljana Kasic reports in this book and recalls the 'claiming of feminist togetherness or longing for pre-war feminist engagement', I myself, for the first time in my life, understood – with an unpleasant awareness felt on my very skin – the powerful meaning of history, the concept to which Hannah Arendt dedicates a significant part of her philosophical thoughts. In this perception the meaning of history and the identity building are tightly linked. "*If we lose the connection with history or tradition, we become orphans of inherited ideas, dislocated from our origins and an identity crisis occurs.*"<sup>9</sup>

My roots were no more partly situated in 'another country'; that country simply ceased to exist. Dubravka Ugrešić, the Yugoslav writer who took herself into exile from the Balkan nationalistic madness, posed in one of her works the question that became the paradigm of our/my living abroad. The simple question, addressed to the immigrant hundreds of times, receives an illogical and bizarre answer:

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<sup>9</sup> Hannah Arendt, *Between past and Future*, New York, Penguin, 2006, 150-151.

Where you are from?

From Yugoslavia.

Does this country exist?

No, but I do still come from there.<sup>10</sup>

This no-land was exactly the place in which my *self* was pushed and started to float without points of reference, and at the same time to resist the forced choice of only one identity and the erosion of my plural cultural belonging. More than ever before, certainly more than at any other time of my geographical and cultural dislocation due to the experience of migration, I was convinced of the necessity to reinforce my pertinence not to the single reality, but to a multiplicity of spaces. As never before, I kept remembering irrationally the shape of my country still entire and unbroken, without the scars of the new borders drawn on a mainly historically incorrect 'ethnic basis'. My imagined country was visible only from the window of a plane flying over the Balkans, as only from the air are the new states' borders and walls of ethnic separation invisible. In my stubborn conviction I was keeping all the scattered pieces together as a mental map of my non-existent homeland.

I needed its past for my future and for my own existence, for being my Self and travelling through the world.

### ***Reflexive nostalgia***

I was/am not alone in this sensation of loss transformed by reconstructing mental spaces in spite of the awareness of the irreversibility of time and place. There are many sons and daughters of a disappeared Atlantis scattered all over the world who are forced to reorganise and negotiate their memory and personal recollections, who are mediating feelings of belonging and a new marginality.

The Kurdish author Mehmed Uzun,<sup>11</sup> born in a little village of Anatolia and a political refugee in Sweden, speaks about the uneasiness of attachment to the living past in which whoever writes from exile lives: "Exile is separation,

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<sup>10</sup> Dubravka Ugrešić, "La confisca della memoria", in *Nostalgia. Saggi sul rimpianto del comunismo*, ed. Filip Modrzejewski and Monika Sznajderman (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2003), 276.

<sup>11</sup> One of the main Kurdish writers, born in southern Anatolia. Uzun lives in exile in Sweden and writes in Turkish and in Swedish. He is the author of an anthology of Kurdish literature.

is pain. Exile is a serious punishment, inhuman. It obliges one to leave behind an immense part of one's own life. Being conscious of having to live my new existence in the shadow of memories, I have tried to make those shadows more visible. This bitter feeling does not let the past become past and it keeps it permanently alive."<sup>12</sup>

The reference to the past is central in the writing of exiles. It is always linked to the concepts of memory and homesickness, of *nostalgia*. It gives the tone of the mood of the Kurdish author – ‘a dumb sadness, a longing for the birth place’, a common trait not only of many writers who live in social conditions of exclusion but also of many ordinary men and women, the new scattered exiles throughout the world. They are conscious that the road of return (invoked but very often unrealistic) is signposted by broken bridges, bridges in the physical, material and metaphorical sense. This is painfully true for war refugees, for those in exile, for wandering people. But it is also true for all those who do remain ‘at home’ but live under new orders of exclusion.

Self-writing by women is often in parallel with the writing of exiles in *excised existence*, imbued with longing and a sense of loss. The feeling of loss is embodied in *reflexive nostalgia*, a kind of profound mourning capable of adding suffering and pain into actions directed towards the future. That is how Svetlana Boym uses the term in her writings about nostalgia<sup>13</sup> According to Boym, *reflexive nostalgia* focuses on past times, which are both individual and collective. It ponders the sequence of time, its passing and fluidity, and distance. It has not established the aim of recovering the past nor of rebuilding the mythical place called home; it finds that the critical mind and aching desires are not oppositional. And it generates new knowledge. That is why its definition includes also the future and the potentiality of change. As many of the female writers who are writing ‘outside the nation’<sup>14</sup> note, *being foreigners produces new knowledge which is a prelude to metamorphosis, a pervasive and destructive metamorphosis, but a necessary step to personal autonomy and to becoming a ‘critical citizen’*<sup>15</sup>

At this point I intend to use extracts of the autobiographical memories of a female writer particularly interested in the processes of (re)defining identity

<sup>12</sup> Mehmed Uzun, “Una rinascita curda in esilio”, in *Autodafe* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2000), 67-68.

<sup>13</sup> Svetlana Boym, “Ipocondria del cuore: nostalgia, storia e memoria”, in *Nostalgia. Saggi sul rimpianto del comunismo*, ed. Filip Modrzejewski and Monika Sznajderman (Milano: Bruno Mondadori, 2003), 88.

<sup>14</sup> Referring to the title of Azade Seyhan's book *Writing Outside the Nation* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

<sup>15</sup> Ruth Lister, *Citizenship Feminist Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Mac Millan, 2003), 7.

and of positioning of self during migration. Migration remains the event which predominantly defines her 'being in the world'. I recognise many aspects of my own experience in her recollection of memories and retrieval of the past, but also in her enquiries into the modalities of integration/assimilation into host societies. As my privileged interlocutor I have chosen Eva Hoffman, a Pole who emigrated to Canada and the United States as an adolescent and wrote about her experiences and the psychological aspects of her integration in the enchanting book, *Lost in Translation: A Life in a New Language*.<sup>16</sup> This book allowed me to develop my interior monologue and transform it into a literary dialogue, seeking a relationship and spiritual contact between our two nomadic selves.

### *Imaginary dialogue or a walk with Eva*

Firstly I would like to make it clear that this is an imaginary walk, imaginary but not random. There are so many factors and circumstances which distinguish the path of Eva's migration from mine, but still, there is a fascinating similarity in our geographical and cultural dislocation (East-West), of adjustment and reconstruction of the plural 'I' for both of us and our writing across borders.

Eva Hoffman is characterised by her Jewish identity, by her 'socialist' childhood in her birthplace, Krakow, and by her emigration – a forced leap overseas to Canada, previously un-imagined to her, resin-scented, from where another journey will take her to the United States, 'land of all freedoms', to the metropolis, to adulthood.

Eva's novel, *Lost in Translation*, is a passionate autobiographical reflection on the migratory process that embraces both continents, Europe and America, spreading over two different worlds – the Western capitalist and the Eastern socialist. It is a reflection also on her integration into the new cultural and social context within which she will struggle with all her intellectual capacities and with the huge sensibility of a young girl becoming a woman, resisting the linear paths of assimilation into America.

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<sup>16</sup> Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation. A Life in a New Language* (London: Vintage Edition, 1998). The book is published in Italian under the title *Come si dice?* (Roma: Donzelli Editore, 2004). Hoffman is the author of another reportage novel about the Eastern European countries with the title *Exit into history*, published in English in London and New York in 1992.

Our walk is not a mere virtual game; it reflects that awkward feeling that arises sometimes in real life when one feels suddenly and unexpectedly ‘in tune’, almost in symbiosis with another person, never seen or met before and, in this instance, recognised through the written word, so close to our ‘I’ that it seems the two individuals merge into one life experience. It is intriguing because, objectively, it should not be possible to compare my life to Eva’s life, her experience of migration to mine. Nevertheless, I felt that she was my sister in many situations, a feeling that seemed to develop and grow in many directions from a subtle shadow of remote likeness. While I was reading her book, I could observe how the ballet of similarities and differences started to vibrate and to plait around us a thread of thought that I, night and day, mutated into long imaginary dialogues as if I was really wandering around the streets and the parks of a European city with the author of Polish-American-Canadian-English origin.

The core of our utopian dialogues had already become stable enough to leave the shadows of that protected space represented by the inner mind and to be transformed in a written text. Before the dialogue begins, I would like to outline a sparse factual framework:

Eva emigrates from Krakow, Poland; I emigrate from Zagreb, Croatia, then Yugoslavia.

Eva emigrates in 1959 aged 13, together with her family. When the ship *Battory* sets sail from Gdynia and the crowd crammed on the edge of the quay disappears over the horizon, Eva feels a tearing pain that could reflect ‘the end of the world’.

I commute for more than ten years between Zagreb and Trieste, crossing the borders between the two countries (two states then; Yugoslavia, Italy, nowadays three; Italy, Slovenia, Croatia – with multiple boundaries). When I decide *really* to leave Zagreb, it is 1979 and I am 32 years old. Once arrived in Italy, I try with all my might to ensure the continuity of my life. I do not have any ‘end of the world’ feeling.

Both of us emigrate from a socialist country to settle in a capitalist one. This takes place in very different moments, in very different conditions. In spite of that, our displacement reveals subtly similar threads.

We both study in our birthplaces subjects that we will not be able to practice in our receiving societies. She studies music, I study urban sociology.

\* \* \*

A long time has passed, time marked by the wake behind the trans-Atlantic ship that set sail separating you from your Poland, time blurred by the monotonous lullaby of the train that transported you and your family towards the unknown Canadian lands. From then on, your life was divided into two parts. The word emigration, as well as the rest of the life of the emigrant, is divided in two, traced by the line of the departure-signed, by the decision to abandon the emigrant's own country of origin. And on arrival at the destination, not your own goal but your parents', you will feel yourself *'sliding into a silent indifference'*, falling over a *'nothingness edge'*.<sup>17</sup>

For me it has only been partially like that. My departure was oscillatory, made of countless zigzags between the two neighbouring countries. And, even though it is always a deep wound marked by the 'before' and the 'after', for me these concepts had multiple confused meanings. In the first place, they have been easier, I would say less traumatic, than yours. The parts of your biography are worlds apart from each other, divided by oceans, by different views of life and by wholly new perspectives, by a new birth that for you and your family meant a survival exigency. This is a birth which was painful, but rich and liberating at the same time. For me, the closeness between Zagreb and Trieste helped to cultivate the illusion that it was possible to belong to both worlds at the same time. After all, what significance is there in moving from one city to another which is only 240 kilometres away? Probably the wound of my displacement has been immeasurably smaller than yours. It was a choice matured through many years, a *free choice*. Yet, it is always a wound, because in this borderland, the identities have collided with high tension.

The personal weighing in the balance, the losses and the gains are inscribed in the biographies of all emigrants. What turned my identity axis upside down, my 'before' and 'after', was the tragic disappearance of my country and the violent shifting of territories. From one day to the next, I –and millions of my co-nationals – were informed our country did not exist any longer. And it happened in a terrible blood-drenched way. The complexity of the historic event marked my biography, dividing it in two in a deeper way than leaving my birthplace city.

Do you remember what happened to Marguerite Duras, in her complex human situation, when all of a sudden she is 'informed' that she is French? Do you remember when she, a girl, has to plan the departure and the separa-

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<sup>17</sup> Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation. A Life in a New Language* (London: Vintage Edition, 1998), 112.



tion, a separation that would never allow her to return? She will transform the experience of her migrant pain into an extraordinary narration and she will become a great European writer. She will also lose the double helix of her dual identity, the double language, the double memory and she will find haven in a 'nobody's land'. Do you remember what Marguerite tells us with reference to this?

My fatherland/motherland is a watermark. The watermark of the lakes, the streams that descended from the mountains, the watermark of the rice fields, the muddy watermark of the plain's rivers where we took refuge during the storms...Who can speak about the smell of the warm soil steaming after the rain... The smell of certain flowers. The smell of jasmine in a garden... I am a person who will never return to my native country.<sup>18</sup>

We migrants are deprived not only of our countries but also of the familiar landscapes that lie hidden to others in the most private folds of our souvenirs.

*Loss is a magical preservative. Time stops at the moment of severance, and no subsequent impressions muddy the pictures you have in mind. The house, the garden, the country you have lost remain forever as you remember them. Nostalgia – that most lyrical of feelings – crystallises around these images like amber.*<sup>19</sup>

But it does not finish there. These images crystallised from our experiences lived *elsewhere*, become a standard by which we measure the *other* landscape in the world; everything acquires meaning in the distance that has its end point in our experience. All the new vistas that we discover are reflected onto this primary measurement. It happens to you when you walk in the streets of Vancouver. You say:

*As I walk the streets of Vancouver, I am pregnant with the images of Poland, pregnant and sick. The 'tesknota' throws a film over everything around me, and directs my vision inward. The largest presence within me is the welling up of absence, of what I have lost. This pregnancy is also a phantom pain.*<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> Margherite Duras, *La vita materiale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1988), 67.

<sup>19</sup> Hoffman, *Lost in Translation*, 115.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

It will happen again in Houston:

*The Houston air is thick with heat and humidity, which slow everyone's movements to a sluggish, lazy saunter. The humidity is layered with so many smells that I detect a whiff of a Krakow summer among them, and it shoots me through with a sudden longing, as for a love one has almost forgotten to mourn.*<sup>21</sup>

It will always happen. It will happen to me as well. The perfume of lime blossom, for example, more than anything else, precipitates me into the very much alive childhood memories. For me, that is the smell of pleasure, of freedom. When the lime trees blossomed, it was the end of the school year and the summer holidays made our children's dreams reality. We played, climbing to the highest branches of the trees, competing with the boys, gathering the flowers and bringing them home in cotton bags to mothers who put them in white rags to make dried flowers... We were used to the sweet fragrance that invaded the houses and then, during the winter, to drinking lime flower tea to calm sore throats which appeared with the first cold... The smells and the sounds of childhood appear unexpectedly in our immigrant lives whenever least expected. It happens to everybody, of course, not only to immigrants. But perhaps our memories have an extra layer of pain because we are aware of the impossibility of their repetition, both in time and in place.

Often, our lives are linked to *non-places* and, with reference to time, that in exile is not layered. However, landscapes with which an immigrant cannot identify are not an issue for me. I have always been a convinced admirer of the most different landscapes in the world, able to find some sense of belonging to them. It happened in faraway Norway when I was going through the forest and breathing the bright fragrance of the cool waterfalls, on the steep slopes of the volcanic mountains that fall into the cobalt sea in the Greek islands, in the steep clefts that I crossed in the little villages in Sicily... It happened also in grey and damp Edinburgh and in the intense colours of faraway India. I would have been able to appropriate these and other landscapes without suffering, with only a minimum of effort; all of them could have become 'mine', or at least that is what I believed. To me, they are landscapes of discovery, of acquisition, not of loss. But this is only a condition of the soul. Your *tesknota*, which is my *tjeskoba*<sup>22</sup> invades me when I feel that I have lost my roots at home and I

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 171.

<sup>22</sup> Both expressions, the first in Polish and the second in Croatian, are close to the sense of Portuguese *saudade* (nostalgia, melancholy, desire...) Note the similarity of the Polish and Croatian terms.

recognise with difficulties the landscapes of my birthplace city, when I become aware that its changing face does not belong to me.

You describe that first assault on your identity – yours and that of your sister – as the change of your names when you were at the lesson where English is taught to immigrants. You were given a new name.

*Mine – Ewa’- is easy to change into its near equivalent in English, ‘Eva’. My sister’s name-‘Alina’- poses more of a problem, but after a moment’s thought Mr. Rosenberg and the teacher decide that ‘Elaine’ is close enough. My sister and I hang our heads wordlessly under this careless baptism. The teacher then introduces us to the class, mispronouncing our last name – ‘Wydra’– in a way we’ve never heard before. We make our way to a bench at the back of the room; nothing much has happened, except a small seismic mental shift. The twist in our names takes them a tiny distance from us – but it’s a gap into which the infinite hobgoblin of abstraction enters. Our Polish names didn’t refer to us; they were as surely us as our eyes or hands. These new appellations, which we ourselves can’t yet pronounce, are not us. They are identification tags, disembodied signs pointing to objects that happen to be my sister and myself. We walk to our seats, into a room of unknown faces, with names that make us strangers to ourselves.*<sup>23</sup>

It never happened to me. Melita remains always the same, it does not change either in pronunciation or accent. Sometimes somebody writes it with two ‘t’s as if it was the trademark of the Austrian coffee. It does not matter. But the phenomenon that you describe is widespread and it becomes particularly obtrusive with names from other cultures.

What I find more offensive are the new baptisms in our old countries; the cancellation of names that constitute the collective and the individual memory in the new ethnic states, the destruction of a whole era as if just passing over a sponge. Zak! – and you do not exist any longer. The street where you were born does not exist any longer; the square, your school, the museum, your language, your city do not exist any longer. Even your country does not exist any longer. There is no longer memory. This confiscation of names and memory is something arrogant, dreadful, something against which we must rebel. We must rehabilitate the biographies and human relations with tenacity and assert normality. That is the huge difference between your biography and mine. My

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<sup>23</sup> Hoffman, *Lost in translation*, 105.

‘before’ has been cancelled with a sponge that left rivers of blood. Your ‘after’ has been a proud struggle to reconcile the two separate parts of your biography. Both of us have made a total effort so that everything can be reunited, all that we love, as in childhood fantasy, the whole that gives completeness, because, as you say, we are the sum of all our parts. To achieve this goal we should penetrate and appropriate the cultural and linguistic codes of our adoptive societies. And in this chosen path, language is viceroy.

In the beginning, you will learn the new language, every day you will learn new words, but their artificiality hurts you. You see these words simply as signs on the paper, signs that do not represent life.

*But mostly the problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified. The words I learn now don't stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. 'River' in Polish was a vital sound, energized with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. 'River' in English is cold – a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke (...) I try laboriously to translate not from English to Polish but from the word back to its source, to the feeling from which it springs (...). This radical disjoining between word and thing is a desiccating alchemy, draining the world not only of significance but of its colours, striations, nuances – its very existence. It is the loss of a living connection.*<sup>24</sup>

All immigrants undergo this period of dissociation of the new language from their emotional experience. The new words are enigmatic and have no relationship whatsoever with their previous experience. It is necessary to be born again, to appropriate a new life, new emotional experiences so that the new words may become full of meaning, of feeling, of warmth.

### *The “third space” on the horizon or exercising heterotopia?*

I situated the scenario of our imaginary dialogue in one of the East European ‘transitional’ countries, in Hungary, in Budapest. I wrote a long version of my dialogue with Eva in Italian.<sup>25</sup> The dialogue continues on the narrow streets of old Buda, where we are engaged in investigating concepts such as: border

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 106-107.

<sup>25</sup> Melita Richter Malabotta, “A passeggio con Eva”, in *Almanacco del Ramo d'oro* (Trieste, n. 4. 2004), 11-28.

crossing and diasporic experience, losses incurred in migration, cultural and linguistic translation and interpretation, amnesia or too much remembering, the meaning of (reflexive) nostalgia and East-West relations. Through these key themes the dialogue embraced other voices of feminist travellers and their written witness from exile – exile not as a moralistic conceptual foundation and pathos but, as Kundera would consider it, a lived experience of *openness to all the liberating possibilities of living Elsewhere*<sup>26</sup> Today, thinking again about this text from a certain distance, I manage to distinguish with a somewhat more critical eye some aspects of my writing.

First of all, the reason why I placed the dialogue and the imaginary walk in Budapest, a city where neither Eva nor I have lived, can be seen as searching for a geographical Third place, a symbolic one because equidistant from both, almost neutral. However, it is also a city that binds us to our common central European Austro-Hungarian past and where even being foreign would not make us feel alien. It would not assume any cultural, linguistic or any other kind of domination that we may have felt imposed on our Selves. For our imaginary stroll Budapest was a perfect geographical representation of ‘in-between-space’ in Homi Bhabha’s sense.<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, it is a city with a Socialist past, close to both of us despite our very different experiences of socialism. Perhaps this geographic mapping with the intentional search for a space of mediated experiences, of the urbanity that at the same time is familial and alien, mirrors my need to inhabit a comfortable space.

Once we (Eva and I) have ‘recognised’ each other, we tried to succeed in our attempt to reconstitute the archives of memories across the borderlines. In this attempt, our imaginary ‘we’ was guided by the less imaginary question: *How can we preserve the critical insight that otherness can be experienced in and through a self-reflexive use of one’s own language without erasing the specificity of cultures and the heterogeneity of belongings?*<sup>28</sup> And how to forge new, non-territorial alliances, bearing in mind that every identity and each life is understood only in terms of its larger history?

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<sup>26</sup> Milan Kundera, “L’esilio, lungo viaggio liberatore”, in *Sagarana*, no. 22, January 2006, <http://www.Sagarana.net>.

<sup>27</sup> Homi Bhabha, ed., *Nation and narration* (London-New York: Routledge, 1990), 34.

<sup>28</sup> Azade Seyhan, *Writing Outside the nation* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University press, 2001), 91. The original text says: “How can we preserve the critical insight that otherness can be experienced in and through a self-reflexive use of one’s own language without erasing the specificity of cultures and the heterogeneity of non-national literatures?”.

But we are also conscious that whatever never happened, a real encounter, became real only on the written page. In this context, we/I have permuted the unreal in a real place defined in the *landscape of the mind*. Was it then that the contours of the Third space started to appear timidly on the horizon? Or was mine only a kind of exercising *heterotopia*<sup>29</sup> a desired belonging to *topos* across the spatial/historical multiplicity of our time? A kind of Persian garden, a reserve of imagination, simultaneously mythic and real, a place that “enables me to see myself there where I am absent.”<sup>30</sup> Or just the illusion of invented space calling for meeting, sharing and contamination?

One of the outcomes that appeared clearly during our wandering is linked to our ability to cross borders and overcome rigid divisions in order to grasp the free flow of memories without pretending that they are complete, exhaustive. We (my imaginary Eva and I) were open to restless self-interrogation and ready to question the certainties because we/I were/was tortured by our/my multiple identity and belongings. Tortured and fascinated at the same time with remembering and amnesia, with a meaning of home and inhabiting the world, with searching for our/my place within it.

However, what I find significant – and perhaps this is the reason why I looked for Eva Hoffman’s help – is how we *inverted the concepts of loss and strength*. In some way or other, the fact that we are ‘orphans’ of country and lack a haven, opened a new cognitive dimension and made emerge a nucleus of new necessities: to keep an ‘extreme vigilance and alert state’, as described by Luciana Floris<sup>31</sup> interweaving loss and empowerment without any hierarchical order, transmuting bitterness into a special strength, into irony, into energy; all this with narrative as a powerful tool. And, as Floris emphasises, quoting Simone Weil, in such a journey marked by dislocation, roots are unnecessary, notwithstanding that cutting roots means cutting a vital relationship. However, this cut, this wound, this loss is necessary. Weil admits in *Cahiers de Marseille* when she escapes from France, at the time of its occupation by the Nazis, “uprooting is necessary (...) it is necessary to go into exile from any earthly

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<sup>29</sup> The introduction of the concept “Heterotopia” in contemporary philosophy is made by Michel Foucault. See in: Michel Foucault, “Space, Power and Knowledge”, in *The Cultural Studies Reader*, ed. Simon During (London and New York, Routledge 2006), 134-142.

<sup>30</sup> Michel Foucault, “Des Espace Auters”, published by the French Journal Architecture/Mouvement/Continuité, October 1984. Translated into English by Jay Miskowic and published online with the title “Of Other Spaces (1967), Heterotopias” at <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.en.html>.

<sup>31</sup> Luciana Floris, “Abitare la soglia”, in *Il globale e l'intimo: luoghi del non ritorno*, ed. Liana Borghi and Uta Treder (Perugia: Morlacchi Editore, 2007), 74.

fatherland. Through the uprooting process we look for something more real (...). One becomes conscious of being at home in exile."<sup>32</sup>

The Third space, which lies outside any geographical coordinates, is only a *mind place*, meaning a new hypothetical homeland in which to live. It is a longing for the creation of *something more real*, resistant to the predestinated biological fixed belongings and traditions and resistant to the efforts of assimilation strategies by the host society. It is a safe place. In this space, the word and writing play a fundamental role because they generate memory and bring it into the present. But this now is a *metis* memory, fluid; it is not a memory of lost fatherlands any longer.

### ***Implications for teaching***

This text can be used as teaching material in Women's Studies in international and multicultural contexts in order to enable students and staff from different educational and cultural backgrounds to reflect on differences and likeness in facing some important issues of our time such as the migration process, identity building, women's writing, writing from exile, feminist empowering, the meaning of 'the Third space'...

The assignment may consist in asking them to explore the concepts of *travelling* and *migration* and how they are related to their own experience and the experience of some female figures in their families.

In feminist pedagogical tradition it is important to introduce students' personalised histories and to connect them to other women's experiences. In this sense, Berteke Waaldijk and Andrea Petö write that "students can enter the discussion, not only as learners, but also as 'teachers'".<sup>33</sup>

This text offers a wide opportunity to study in depth a meaning of the term 'home' and of 'reinventing home' in a condition of geographical and cultural displacement.

Students may be asked to form the discussion groups and to analyse how the author deals with the concept of plural identity and of loss, and how these concepts are intertwined with the author's subjective experience of migration and the sense of loss of the homeland.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>33</sup> Berteke Waaldijk and Andrea Petö, *Teaching with Memories: European Women's Histories in International and Interdisciplinary Classrooms*, Women's Studies Centre, National University of Ireland, Galway, 2006, 26.

The other aspect of the feminist pedagogical tradition reflected in this chapter is the awareness of the existence of traits of the self life experience and personal narratives in other women's writings. This provides an opportunity to ask the students to search for the present or past female figure with whom they can identify. Teachers may suggest to the multicultural class to write a free autobiographical text developing a dialogue between the two female subjects and interlacing their memories. By taking an active part in this scenario, students come out from the fixed role of only learners and experience their self-empowerment; one of the ideals of feminist pedagogy.

The departure point for the reflection on how to structure the story stimulated by this chapter, may be organised by posing some questions in a form of assignment.

Chose the woman in whose life story you can recognise some common traits of your experience;

Try to develop an imaginary dialogue with her;

Try to explain the time and the place where the dialogue develops; do they have a special meaning for you?

Try to find what is common in your writings;

Where/how do you find that your dialogue and women's narratives are located in relation to the official history and the 'grand narratives'?

What is the interaction of time and history and the individual in your narrative?

How are these issues treated in the text?

Can you see some aspects of the relation East-West treated in the text?

Do you know any female authors from the former Yugoslav area? From the Balkans? From Eastern Europe?

What is your knowledge of the history of the *peace and women's movements* in the area of former Yugoslavia?

Do you know some female authors writing from exile? To which cultural and linguistic area do they belong? Which (imaginary and real) borders are they crossing?

The final questions will certainly give rise to a debate in thematic seminars and group discussions involving students from Eastern Europe or from the Balkan region and the former Yugoslav area.



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## I REMEMBER, THEREFORE I WRITE: THE VOICES OF CONTEMPORARY ITALIAN CANADIAN WOMEN WRITERS

*Silvia Caporale-Bizzini (University of Alicante)*

I REMEMBER  
The Route to which I entered  
The island, the snow.  
The rooms in which I waited.  
The food. Unspoken words...  
I REMEMBER  
Memories are not lost...  
Canada is home.  
Identities are regained.  
Youth is all I have lost  
("PIER 21", Bruna Di Giuseppe-Bertoni)<sup>1</sup>

The theoretical interest that enlightens my research focuses on the study of the anthropology of the self and how this is represented through writing personal narratives in their multiple and complex manifestations. I strongly believe that it is not by chance that I became interested in theoretical matters and that the personal quest that brought me to theory originates deep within me and is due to my individual circumstances. My idea of "travelling selves" moves from my own autobiographical experience that, at some point, I felt I had to understand and delineate within intellectual parameters and personal boundaries; these conceptual and individual borders originate in a nodal point that regards as crucial the process of construction of identities of the "nomadic" subject informed by geographical and cultural dislocation, social class, cultural or transcultural hybridism, history, memory, storytelling and their effect in the psychic perception of the Real.

According to Hannah Arendt, the present time is a field force rooted within the flux of time, it represents a moment of self-discovery that becomes deeply and powerfully meaningful insofar as the individual consciously

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<sup>1</sup> In *Italian Canadian Voices. A Literary Anthology 1946-2004*, ed. Caroline Morgan Di Giovanni. (Oakville: Mosaic Press, 2006), 150-151.

experiences it in-between her past and the coming future.<sup>2</sup> If we loose the connection with history or tradition, we become orphans of inherited ideas, dislocated from our origins and an identity crisis occurs.<sup>3</sup> This represents a motivating point of departure in my approach to auto/biographical tales by writers whose roots are partially situated in their “other” country, far away and, at times, only imagined.

The issues that inform my target writings in this paper as well as my theoretical approach are concerned with *writing* the experiences of the ontological “travelling” and the subject’s “dislocation”. Writers like, Gianna Patriarca, Penny Petrone, Caterina Edwards or Mary Di Michele share either the experience of emigration or the experience of belonging to the first generation of immigrants. This is what Gianna Patriarca, born in Italy and immigrated at an early age to Canada, writes in her “Birthday Poem”: “...there is the one story/we are immigrant girls from the 1960s/the in-between women who fit/nowhere very comfortably/but we are at home with each other...”<sup>4</sup> On her side, Penny Petrone remembers how her mother used to knit red, green and white scarves, the colours of the Italian flag, that she, Penny, would firmly refuse to wear: “She made the girls tricolour toques, mitts, scarves and dickies. I refused to wear mine. ‘These are the colours of the Italian flag,’ she protested. ‘I am not Italian. I am *Canadese*. I am a Canadian. I am a Canadian,’ I tried to explain. It was no use.”<sup>5</sup>

These autobiographical pieces, among others, are representative of a duality difficult to come to terms with and of the every so often complex process of accepting a divided cultural identity. What springs out from these authors’ writings is that their splitting up, more often than not, does not materialise in abstract and complex theoretical issues, but in everyday life and experiences like cooking, playing, dressing or, as in the case of Penny Petrone, the religious rituals that marked the passing of the seasons and helped her mother to maintain emotional ties with her motherland and the family’s village in the south

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<sup>2</sup> “... autobiographies are always a document of the set of historical conditions that made them possible. It is this same conviction that has allowed historian Diane Bjorklmed to build her study of autobiography: history shapes the self and it is thus directly related to one’s story of oneself”. Ilaria Serra, *The Value of Worthless Lives. Writing Italian-American Immigrant Autobiography* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 150.

<sup>3</sup> See Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> Gianna Patriarca, *Daughters for Sale* (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1997), 26.

<sup>5</sup> Penny Petrone, “Mamma”. In *The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing*, ed. Joseph Pivato (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1998), 281.

of Italy: “St Anthony’s Church at the corner of Banning and Dufferin was our parish church. It was here that Mamma felt at home when she arrived from Calabria. It was here she heard the familiar Latin and her native tongue.”<sup>6</sup>

### *Narratives of remembering*

I will approach these narratives from a twofold standpoint: the first originates in my partial identification with their experience of inhabiting a “third space”, a kind of identitary heterotopia. The second approach starts off in my understanding of the act of writing and/or telling a story also as political accomplishments and within a political theory of identity that belongs to the realm of the “polis”, the democratic dialogue that grants the individuals access to the public sphere and to visibility, namely the opportunity of being fully considered as a rightful citizen. For such reasons, my aim in this essay is to associate the praxis of autobiographical and memoir writing to the (self) definition of difference in a context of cultural hybridism within the experience of immigration.

The idea of dislocation I am concerned with, is related to the material as well as to the psychological experiences of emigration, adjustment, assimilation and the issue of language. I understand autobiographical writing (in its wider sense)<sup>7</sup> as an instrument that facilitates to the displaced subject coming to terms with her apparently floating and unstable self or, as Paul John Eakin asserts: “... as an integral part of a lifelong process of identity formation.”<sup>8</sup> In her study on memoirs written by Italian immigrants, *The Value of Worthless Lives*, Ilaria Serra states that: “Immigration and autobiography have several connections. Immigration works as a kind of Copernican revolution that destabilises an individual’s sense of self: one is *severed out* as a *single particle* from the rest of the universe of countrymen [sic]; that individual is no longer at its centre.”<sup>9</sup> At the same time, autobiographical writings become a way to re/construct the Real, negotiate with one’s

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<sup>6</sup> Penny Petrone, “Breaking the Mould”. In *Pillars of Lace. The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Women Writers*, ed. Marisa de Franceschi (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1998), 51.

<sup>7</sup> The texts quoted in this essay are mostly autobiographical. In some cases, as in “Home and Away” by Caterina Edwards or “Stealing Persimmons” by Gianna Patriarca, they only retain a strong autobiographical authorial input which originates in autobiographical experiences that are eventually transposed into the biography of literary characters.

<sup>8</sup> Paul John Eakin, “Breaking Rules: the Consequences of Self-Narration”. *Biography* vol. 24, n° 1, (Winter 2001), 114.

<sup>9</sup> Serra, *Ibid.*, 16. Emphasis added.

life experiences and heal the wounded “I”<sup>10</sup>: “Preserving the testimonies of these individual experiences from permanent erasure gives another face to history (...) As Antonio Gramsci, a scholar of the people, summarised, ‘Autobiography certainly has a great historical value in that it shows life in action and not merely written as written laws or dominant moral principles say it should be’.”<sup>11</sup>

Ilaria Serra also points out how the need for redefining one’s self through autobiographical discourse by keeping, for example, a diary, emerges during times of personal crisis. There is no doubt that the experience of emigration is an essential moment in a person’s life, it is marked by fear and uncertainty about the future and by the – still unconscious at this point – rupture with one’s past. Angela, the main character of Caterina Edwards’s short story “Home and Away”, while writing a letter home, remembers that: “Years ago, *Nonna* told me, when people emigrated, their departure was marked by funeral rites. When they left the village, they ceased to exist. Maybe that explains what I felt was a lack of interest in what kind of life you have made for yourself in Canada.”<sup>12</sup> In her moving short story “Espresso, Camaros and Gianni Morandi”, Gianna Patriarca narrates the day she, her mother and her baby sister left their village in the south of Italy to start their journey to Canada:

My very gentle, rotund grandfather, leaned on his home-made wooden cane ... I locked my arms around his knees, like a trap, and held on tight. I would not let go, I could not let go, screaming like a wild thing until I felt my small lungs explode as my heart climbed towards my throat. At that very moment, while my uncle and mother tried to tear me away, kicking and screaming, from my grandfather’s knees, I knew I had no choice. The decision had been made for me. *The choices would go on being made for me for a long time to come.*<sup>13</sup>

Self-writing can then become a survival strategy to heal the grief of the separation and mend the loss of those basic points of identity self-reference. Self-writing also aims at making and re-making one’s self; it represents our chance of coming to terms with an external reality that seeks to mould our responses while setting us in a pre-definite subject location. We are obviously free to accept such a process of relocation or question it; both ways we become

<sup>10</sup> “To speak of narrative identity is to conceptualize narrative as not merely *about* identity but rather in some profound way a constituent part *of* identity, specifically of the extended self that is expressed in self-narration”, Eakin, *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>11</sup> Serra, *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>12</sup> Caterina Edwards, “Home and Away”. *Other Voices*, Vol 5, n° 1 (Spring 1992), 27-28.

<sup>13</sup> Gianna Patriarca, “Espresso, Camaros and Gianni Morandi”. In *Daughters for Sale* (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1997). 9-10. Emphasis added.

agents and look at “the birth of narrative as a metaphor of life” (Hyvärinen 2006, 21). Broadly speaking, the outcome can be a more complex form of identification and/or affiliation with both countries, Italy and Canada, resulting from a cultural reformulation of a psychic reality which deals with a *hybridised* family romance. In an autobiographical piece of literary criticism, “Discovering Voice: the Second Generation Finds Its Place: a Polemic”, Caterina Edwards, the Canadian writer and daughter of an Englishman and an Italian woman, explains her cultural and painfully accepted “travelling” between cultures: “I started to write of Italy and the Italian Canadian experience to find my place, to determine where I belonged. Yet I found I could not write myself into belonging. My split was only emphasised. Now I see that I will be ever obsessed with the split person: the Canadian in Rome, the Italian in Edmonton, immigrant and emigrant. I have found no physical place, but I have found another kind of place.”<sup>14</sup>

Mary Di Michele, one of the most acclaimed among contemporary Italian Canadian poets and writers, painfully states her inner fight against a feeling of double belonging in one of her poems “Life is a Theatre (or to be Italian in Toronto Drinking Cappuccino on Bloor Street at Bersani & Carlevalè’s)”:

Back then you couldn't have imagined  
yourself openly savouring a cappuccino,  
you were too ashamed that your dinners  
were in a language you couldn't share  
with your friends: their pot roasts,  
their turnips, their recipes for Kraft  
dinners you glimpsed in TV commercials...  
you needed an illustrated dictionary  
to translate your meals, looking to the glossary (...)

(...) What you had was rare and seemed to weigh  
you down as if it were composed of plutonium,  
What you wanted was to be like everybody else.  
What you wanted was to be liked.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Caterina Edwards, “Discovering Voice: the Second Generation Finds Its Place: a Polemic”. *Italian Canadiana*, Vol. 2, n° 1 (Spring 1986), 67.

<sup>15</sup> Mary Di Michele, “Life is a Theatre (or to be Italian in Toronto Drinking Cappuccino on Bloor Street at Bersani & Carlevalè’s)” In *The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing*, ed. (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1998), 296-97.

As Di Michele illustrates through her words, the ongoing dialogue we keep with the past, understood as a time continuum projecting onto the present, permits us to develop an interior and silent conversation with ourselves that, according to Arendt, is what characterises the human conscience: "... the first thing to be noticed is that not only the future – 'the wave of the future' – but also the past is seen as a force, and not, as in nearly all our metaphors, as a burden man has to shoulder and of whose dead weight the living can or even must get rid in their march into the future." In the words of Faulkner, "the past is never dead, it is not even past".<sup>16</sup> In her poem "Returning", Gianna Patriarca builds an imaginary bridge between the land she left in the 1960s as a child and the land she considers as her own as a grown woman; the woman is now a poet who writes in English, but she is at the same time that little girl who crossed the ocean with her mother and sister to meet a nearly forgotten father ("We held on/two more nights on a stiff, cold train/headed for Toronto/where the open arms of a half forgotten man/waited"<sup>17</sup>), Patriarca inhabits both places at the same time while she declares that: "We don't discuss the distance anymore/returning is now/the other dream/not American at all/not Canadian or Italian/it has lost its nationality."<sup>18</sup>

The past cannot be negated, it does exist and constitutes the interrelational autobiographical self that both authors need and that has to come to terms with the present moment; as already anticipated, the negation of the past, the breaking of the relation between what happened and what can happen as a result of previous actions, brings us to live a "biological existence lacking in depth" (Khon in Arendt 2006, xviii) and suffer, in the wider context of a generational standpoint, an identity crisis: "Immigration and autobiography even share the same narrative discourse. Immigration is a physical journey through space in a specific quest for a place. An autobiography is basically an immigration of the soul;"<sup>19</sup> accordingly, both collective memory and personal remembering construct our perception of self,<sup>20</sup> but I reckon that this is not the

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<sup>16</sup> In Arendt, *Ibid.*, 10.

<sup>17</sup> Gianna Patriarca, In *Pillars of Lace. The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Women Writers*, ed. Marisa de Franceschi (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1998), 207.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 206.

<sup>19</sup> Serra, *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>20</sup> "The point of the matter is that the "completion", which indeed every enacted event must have in the minds of those who then are to tell the story and to convey its meaning, eluded them; and without this thinking completion after the fact, without the articulation accomplished by remembrance, there simply was no story left that could be told", Arendt, *Ibid.*, 6.



only aspect to consider. In the negotiation that must be carried out between the narrating subject's feeling of pertinence to a collectivity and the personal and psychic insight, memoirs become a *fictionalised* transcription of past events that does produce a meaningful tale.

The social life of emigration/immigration is an important part of these narratives that do not exist in a social vacuum but within a common dislocated perception of one's identity. Self-writing narrates one's own history in relation to other people's experiences; it constructs a text which is at the same time personal and relational. As Mink suggests: "Stories are not lived but told. Life has no beginnings, middles, or ends; there are meetings, but the start of an affair belongs to the story we tell later, and there are partings, but final partings only in the story."<sup>21</sup>

Giovanna Del Negro stresses that life stories are an example of how people use words to thread a textual net that draws a picture of their past within a wider existential project whose final aim is to give meaning to their present (2003, 14). One of the women interviewed by Del Negro, Filomena Azzuolo, states very clearly that it is because of her leaving Italy and migrating to Canada that: "What I didn't do, maybe my children will do",<sup>22</sup> the other women's stories, one way or another "...offer insights into how subordinate groups have developed, and continue to develop, creative survival strategies for coping with repressive social conditions".<sup>23</sup> In *Diario di una emigrante* (Montreal 1979), published in Italian under the pen name of E. MacRan and translated into English by Joseph Pivato, Elena Maccaferri Randaccio narrates how, during the 1940s, a woman educated according to tradition becomes a different person when her husband is sent to a prisoner camp in the north of Canada for participating in a fascist rally. She is then obliged by the circumstances to take care of the family business, a farm, and the children; eventually, she not only manages to do it, but she succeeds in increasing the family income and wealth. Once she is told that her husband has been released and will be coming home, she suddenly realises that she cannot accept to go back to the way things used to be:

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<sup>21</sup> Louis O. Mink, *Historical Understanding* (Ithaca & London: Cornell University Press, 1987), 60. Quoted in Hyvärinen, Matti (2006), 23.

<sup>22</sup> Giovanna del Negro, *Looking Through my Mother's Eyes* (Toronto: Guernica, 2003), 40.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

I learned that Beppe would soon be coming home. We now owned a farm and a motel. But I was not really at peace. Maybe for this reason I always worked so hard; I had seen many sunrises and worked 'til the stars came out. If I stopped working a long pain would grab my heart, a pain which came from many problems and from nothing. Then I felt I was a stranger to myself, to my children and to the place where I lived. And I was not satisfied with my life. And when I learned that Beppe would return I no longer understood why, after having waited for him for so long, I felt so full of anxiety...In fact, he had changed little from the time he had left. Instead, I had changed a lot, he said to me after we first embraced.<sup>24</sup>

Elena Maccaferri finds herself located in-between cultures and languages, and away from her native country, she is forced to reflect on how she positions herself and how she interrelates with the world that surrounds her. Her everyday life epitomises the inevitability of looking for answers in relation to feelings and sensations often misunderstood or even negated by most people close to her; in this sense, Mary Di Michele writes that: "If art imitates life, it is as true that life imitates art. Which brings me back to the idea of *"l'imaginaire"*, and the social and psychological role of culture, to define us as it reflects us, to examine our lives, to give us perspective, to illuminate our existence, to create that map, that psychic landscape by which we can find our way and not be lost to ourselves or to each other."<sup>25</sup>

Now, Di Michele's autobiographical (and theoretical) approach to the meaning of literature and writing is appealing to me as, like her, more than twenty years ago I underwent a (geographical) journey that unexpectedly brought me away from my home country, so far. As a "travelling subject" – and/or as a subject dislocated from her emotional roots – I learnt that the inner quest becomes a way of coming to terms with a set of norms that belongs to a reality defined by "different" standards from those of the subject's original ones. A new learning process has to be carried out: (a) new language(s) to master, new codes to mimic (I have used the word mimic and not "interiorise" on purpose), public, personal and psychic spaces need to be reconceptualised and deeply and painfully negotiated. As in the theory of the Foucauldian Panoptic, the "outsider" (that is "*me*") is subject to scrutiny and is the object of curiosity. She is then classified and defined as "self" by the gaze of people

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<sup>24</sup> Elena Maccaferri Randaccio, "Ricordo bene quella sera" in *The Anthology of Italian Canadian Writing* (Toronto: Guernica Edition, 1998). 32-33.

<sup>25</sup> Mary Di Michele, "Writers from Invisible Cities". *Canadian Woman's Studies/Les Cahiers de la Femme*, Vol. 8, n° 2 (Summer 1987), 38.

that, in general terms, share a familiarity in habits, culture, language, history, memories, schooling, smells, savours, jokes ..... It is a gaze that, consciously and/or unconsciously, does not define you as *another*, but as *other*. As stressed above, negotiation becomes then one of the strategies of survival that the dislocated subject has to develop as a way to come to terms with a reality that tends to regard you (me) as something *other* than itself. Within this ontological context, the self is subject to tensions that originate from the outside as well as from the inside of the individual's daily experiences; on the one hand, we stumble on the external field forces that define you as "*other*" and that tend to see you as a "fixed identity" which belongs to the "collective imaginary" of what a "foreigner" is, should do, should say and which social role she should perform. On the other hand, we become aware of the resistance that the individual herself is constantly carrying out to retain her right to be a "subject-in-progress/ changing/floating subject" and to reflect on the inevitable and unstoppable process of hybridising she is undergoing as a social and psychic self.

In such a complex and bewildering personal context, remembering as healing becomes an essential part of everyday life and a necessary strategy of resistance as it works both as an active and conscious way of retrieving memories and reconstructing wounded parts of one's self<sup>26</sup> through words. In a touching short story whose title is "Stealing Persimmons", Gianna Patriarca narrates the story of Rosa, an old woman that can neither walk nor speak ("Her voice. Why her voice? Rosa thinks. Why not her eyes? She could still see without her eyes. But this cruel, cruel silence ... No more long conversations. No more stories in any language."<sup>27</sup>), she spends her time close to the bay window of her Canadian house and uses memory as a tool of survival: "The bay window is her world. It is her memory."<sup>28</sup> It is by remembering her past in the Italian village that Rosa is able to live again gone feelings and sensations and regain a lost, but not forgotten, identity: "Rosa turns to the bay window. Tomaso [sic] is shovelling potatoes deep into the ashes of the fireplace. "We need salt Rosa." She lifts the heavy wooden top of a chest, opens a brown bag and scoops out a spoonful of

<sup>26</sup> Contemporary developmental psychology has now accepted and developed the distinction between "involuntary memory" and "voluntary memory". The first is a kind of unconscious activity, an involuntary act, while the second is defined by the rational act of remembering. John Kihlstrom points out that: "...memory is not a thing, represented by a noun, but rather an activity, represented by a verb. Memories might be things that people *have*, but remembering is something people *do*. In terms of the library metaphor, then, memory is not like a book that we read, but rather like a story we tell anew each time we remember", John Kihlstrom, "Memory, Autobiography, History". *Proteus: a Journal of Ideas*, Vol. 19, n° 6, 2002, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Gianna Patriarca, "Stealing Persimmons". In *The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing*, ed. Joseph Pivato (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1998), 63-4.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

salt. The potatoes open and smoke while Tomaso sprinkles the coarse granules over them. *“Mangia Rosa, sono buone.”*<sup>29</sup>

John Kihlstrom<sup>30</sup> points out that the use of autobiographical memory associates moments of our life experiences to a determined psychic representation of ourselves, this means that the subject is converted into an active agent in the process of re/definition of her individuality. He also stresses that memory is a process that not only involves a mere act of recollection, but also of re/interpretation of past events: “... *explicit memory* entails conscious recollection of some past event, as in recall or recognition; by contrast, *implicit memory* is represented by any change in experience, thought, or action which is attributable to that event.”<sup>31</sup>

Language as storytelling is then an important part of the displaced subject as she lives in-between languages and interprets, at the same time, various semiotic codes, linguistic as well as cultural. Homi Bhabha defines this state as the anxiety of translation<sup>32</sup> of the subject that lives in-between languages (“being-in-difference”<sup>33</sup>). The question of identity is thus interwoven with the issue of language(s) as these codes represent much more than a linguistic exercise for the individual that is obliged to learn a new way of communicating: “Anxiety represents an ongoing, vacillating process of *translation* that iteratively crosses the border between external/internal, psychic/somatic, between the ego “as the actual seat of anxiety” and the inner attack of id and superego”.<sup>34</sup> Interpretation becomes a way of life, it is ever present in the individual’s daily experience; these daily acts of interpretation characterise a process of acculturation that develops into an “*I*” that together with autobiographical memoirs re/defines a person’s identity while bridging her past, her present and project her on to the future.

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>30</sup> <http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~kihlstrm/rmpa00.htm>. 3

<sup>31</sup> Kihlstrom, Ibid., 5.

<sup>32</sup> “The borderline affect of anxiety emerges from a similar disjunctive relationship between the external and internal worlds, or material reality and psychic reality, in its *translational* function. For however internal the drive, Laplanche argues, it is constituted through the experiences of the external world; yet the *relation* to the external world *through* the fantasmatic representation of the drives confuses the priority or causality of externality and internality and, as with minority discourse, actively neutralizes, even estranges, the division between sense and experience”, Homi Bhabha “Editor’s Introduction: Minority Maneuvers and Unsettled Negotiations”. *Critical Inquiry*, 23 (Spring 1997), 443.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 438.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 442-43.

Licia Canton sees this state of being in writing and in translation as a hyphenated representation of a subjectivity that is composed of two or more languages;<sup>35</sup> anyway, this hyphenated linguistic positioning can become an emotional burden and a reinterpreting of the binary code that is hidden behind the concept of a hyphenated subjectivity is required: “Two important issues are raised here: the necessity of free choice and the possibility of cumulative as opposed to dissociation identity. The latter notion, cumulative identity, involves the deconstruction of the binary and exclusionary mechanisms of opposing the Self to the Other.”<sup>36</sup>

This process, the feeling of “being-in-difference” and its projection on the way language represents us and what surrounds us are, for example, poignantly stressed by Mary Di Michele in a short piece of writing where she describes the sensations she feels walking around the small town of Duino in the north of Italy: “Colours, though singularly bold in Italy, here seem demure, horticultural, not of the open field afire with wild poppies, but of plots, of containment ...vivid evidence of how the Latin can so easily be tempered by the Teutonic. The expatriate from Canada empathises. You too are hybrid, you too are hyphenated.”<sup>37</sup> But immediately after this sentence she is firm in rejecting a hyphenated identity and accepts her own cultural and linguistic hybridisation: “Hybrid yes! Your species comes from the evolution of everything that lives by adding on. Hyphenated no! Hyphenated subtracts both ways, bears the sign of its division at the centre.”<sup>38</sup> Now, to avoid hyphenation, we can read Bhabha’s “anxiety” as a way to get to a linguistically focused interaction with another culture and a way to give voice to a *chosen* hybridity as a part of a linguistic “third space”, a linguistic as well as cultural heterotopia.

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<sup>35</sup> See Licia Canton, “The Clash of Languages in the Italian-Canadian Novel”, in *Adjacencies. Minority Writing in Canada*, ed. Lianne Moyes, Licia Canton, and Domenic A. Beneventi (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2004), 143-156.

<sup>36</sup> Amaryll Chanady, “The Construction of Minority Subjectivities at the End of the Twentieth Century”. In *Adjacencies. Minority Writing in Canada*, ed. Lianne Moyes, Licia Canton, and Domenic A. Beneventi (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 2004), 33.

<sup>37</sup> Mary Di Michele, “Passeggiata di sogno”. In *The Anthology of Italian-Canadian Writing*, ed. Joseph Pivato (Toronto: Guernica Editions, 1998), 289

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

### *The definition of a “third space”*

In his essay “Different Spaces”, Michel Foucault introduces his definition of heterotopia, “a placeless place” that has “...the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves”.<sup>39</sup> The floating subject occupies an emplacement where she is and she is not at the same time; she ends up belonging to the third space that materialises in the metaphor of the mirror: I am there reflected in it, but I am not there as what I see is at the same time myself and my reflection. I simultaneously occupy both spaces but I do not truly belong to any of them. The “floating I” comes to represent a self that, while retaining her points of conscious and unconscious references, moves on to “different” negotiated positions that, also through the writing process, enters into a dialogue between the wounded self and a reinforced sense of identity and pertinence not to a single reality, but to a multiplicity of “heterotopic” spaces: “In the mirror I see myself where I am not, in an unreal space that opens up virtually behind the surface; I am over there where I am not, a kind of shadow that gives me my own visibility, that enables me to look at myself there where I am absent—a mirror utopia. But it is also a heterotopia in that the mirror really exists, in that it has a sort of return effect on the place that I occupy.”<sup>40</sup>

As suggested above, to facilitate and fix the individual’s process of adaptation, or acceptance of her ethnic origins and dual feelings of pertinence, she has to go through a double array of ontological re/definition. On the one side, the writing subject needs to recuperate and come up with her own (dual) history, in cultural and family terms; on the other side, she has to negotiate with the environment and a reality that influence our understanding of ourselves and the relation we maintain with the people and things that surround us:

The disclosure of the “who” through speech, and the setting of a new beginning through action, always fall into an already existing web where their immediate consequences can be felt. Together they start a new process which eventually emerges as the unique life stories of all those with whom he comes into contact ... These stories may be then recorded in documents and

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<sup>39</sup> Michel Foucault, “Different Spaces”. In *Essential Works of Michel Foucault 1954-1984*. Ed. James D. Faubion. Vol. II *Aesthetic, Method and Epistemology*. (New York: The New Press, 1998), 178 and 179.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

moments, they may be visible in used objects or art works, they may be told and retold and worked out into all kinds of material ... *In other words, the stories, the result of action and speech, reveal an agent.*<sup>41</sup>

Telling one's story means that the speaking subject becomes part of the public world through storytelling. Hannah Arendt relates "speech" to (political) public "action"; she says that our humanity is defined by our capacity of telling stories and establishing a biography.<sup>42</sup> Words and speaking as an act of identity statement represent the origin and the answer to the question "who are you?"<sup>43</sup> As already suggested, the emigrant and/or dislocated person who tells her story, by becoming an agent, puts back together the pieces of her broken story and can thus overcome the feeling of being divided between two continents or countries and, as Antonio D'Alfonso points out, she can consciously accept a "composite" identity, a "cumulative as opposed to dissociative identity".<sup>44</sup> The voice of autobiographical memory is the way to a rebirth in a new country and in a new language without erasing the past and without rejecting the former identity and cultural background.

### ***Implications for teaching***

When I approach a new course of literature, my starting point always focuses on the importance of understanding the construction of identities through discursive practices, or how discursive practices play a basic role in our understanding of who we are and how society defines our selves in relation to gender, race and social class. As I have already suggested elsewhere (Caporale Bizzini 2006), students must understand how cultural practices help to define our perception of *self* and *other* and the fictitious boundaries that mark this perception. One of the main aims of a class of literature is to demonstrate how theory and praxis are interrelated and cannot be studied one without the other. Autobiographical practices help students to better understand this and relate it to life experiences as well as to their own personal story.

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<sup>41</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 184.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 178.

<sup>44</sup> Chanady, *Ibid.*, 33.

In a diasporic context, it is not uncommon to have in our class students from a number of different backgrounds. The feeling of displacement does not only belong to the postcolonial identity but to all individuals who are forced to redefine themselves within “foreign” identity parameters and see themselves through the gaze of the dominant other. Foreign students, or first generation Spaniards, soon understand this by reading autobiographical pieces from emigrant women while recognising their own identity vulnerability; we do not have to forget that Spain relied heavily on emigration until the Seventies and that many Spanish citizens were obliged to look for a job far from their homeland. This means that many of our Spanish students are aware of what exile or emigration mean, and many of them belong to families where the experiences of exile after and during the dictatorship and/or emigration are strongly felt. This eases the teacher’s approach to the chosen texts.

There are a number of discursive practices that can be analysed and discussed when reading a text that relates any of the stages of the autobiographical experience of emigration and that help some of the students to better understand and voice their subject position while helping others to develop a process of identification that inevitably leads to comprehend the other’s identity location. After the reading of the assigned text, students are asked to identify a number of concepts that pave the narrator’s story and answer questions such as: how is memory used in the process of redefinition of a new identity? How does the narrator interrelate with her actual situation and how does she refer it to her past? Does she reassemble her past in order to bridge it with her possible future? What are the cultural elements (clothes, foods, habits, family jokes...) that she stresses in order to either accept her hybrid identity or to reject it? How is the original mother tongue, if so, used in relation to the new situation?

Students, at this point and following the patterns discernible in the text, can write either their own story or a story of identification. As Michael Smith points out: “Our students can only make a political commentary on a literary text if they understand the codes and conventions that text invokes (...) The potential for political critique confounds the hierarchy because political critiques are not grounded in literary knowledge, a kind of knowledge that will certainly be unequally distributed”,<sup>45</sup> by answering the above suggested questions, students will give shape to the understanding of what displacement means in matter-of-fact terms.

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<sup>45</sup> Michael Smith, *Authorizing Readers: Resistance and Respect in the Teaching of Literature* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 32.



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## TRAVELLING THROUGH WORDS: REINVENTING A HERITAGE OF THE IMAGINARY AND OF THE AFFECTIONS

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Following a feminist line of critical and historical recovery of past literary works, this article proposes a travel to the silenced world of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Portuguese feminine conventual writing. Departing from the basic question: where is one's place? the aim is to illuminate such literary production, emphasising the shape of the identities and their close connection to the travel metaphors. I will give special attention to "Life Accounts" [Relações de Vida] – autobiographic narratives written by many nuns in seventeenth-century Portugal. Sister Maria do Céu, Mother Mariana da Purificação, Sister Isabel do Menino Jesus, Mother Maria Josefa, and Antónia Margarida de Castelo Branco are the selected writers. I will especially focus on the narration of the loving self. The aim is to show that this type of writing was one of freedom, of opening to the other, of joy. The perspective of the analysis tries to establish a dialogue between the personal history of the author and the subjects revealed/fictionalised by the "Life Accounts" in a space-time journey that aims at reconstructing memories and fictionalising a kind of feminine heritage of the affections and of the imaginary.

### ***From relativism to a sense of belonging: the reinvention of a past***

In my personal history the reality of travel came together with the need to establish roots, the logic of the gratuitous, the fragmentary, the discontinuous, with the nostalgia of the absolute.

From the itinerant existence which, partially, characterised my childhood, I may have retained the habit of living in-between, of attending different circles, different fields, different beliefs, as someone who walks or travels around. The first consequences of this "nomadic" existence are a sense of relativism, being open to the perspective of the other, a concern with cohabitation, and a fondness for hybridism and crossing borders. And also, conversely, a tendency for scepticism, for gratuitousness, for meaningless. The impossibility of being devoted to a cause, the impossibility of believing.

And yet, the will to believe, the will to surrender persisted, tenuously, finding berth in a more remote personal universe: the enchanted world of my mother's stories, the stories of her childhood spent at a school run by Catholic nuns. Inside me I could hear the echoes of her indomitable faith, of a fragile, uprooted little girl, separated from her parents in Africa and brought in the 1950s to a claustrophobic, classist and racist Portugal. I was also touched by the happy, full and radiant way she devoted herself to her role as a mother.

The growing need for that sense of plenitude became acute when, years later, during my studies of Baroque literature, I came upon the novel *Enganos do Bosque, Desenganos do Rio* by Sister Maria do Céu for the first time.<sup>1</sup> This allegorical narrative describes an inner travel, a pathway of mystical initiation. A beautiful, young, thirsty Peregrina [Pilgrim], looking for a spring where she can appease her thirst, finds herself at a crossroads: one of the paths ahead is delightful, filled with nymphs and hunters, from where the echoes of birds singing and the murmur of calm waters resound; the other is terribly steep and arid, but a shepherd with his face covered and an irresistible voice is taking it, and Peregrina's heart starts beating for him. Giving in to the easiness of the first path, Peregrina reaches a seductive wood inhabited by fantastic creatures that offer her all sorts of gifts. Nevertheless, Peregrina quickly realises that the water from the springs is not able to quench her thirst, the initial brightness and beauty of the wood soon become a horror of darkness and ugliness, and the same happens to the creatures living there. Following the wise advice of a river, Peregrina is able to escape from the wood just as a terrible hunter is getting ready to steal her heart. Finding the steep and desolating path once again, she then embarks on a painful course where she finds different characters that force her to face all sorts of difficulties and proofs of detachment: taking off her shoes, exchanging her silk dress for one in raw cloth, refusing a basket of apples, and so forth. After crossing a tenebrous lake, Peregrina faints and wakes up in a true garden of delights. Everything there is touched with perfection. And then the journey ends. Peregrina abandons her precarious condition; she gains a new identity and meets the shepherd, now with his face unveiled, to whom she unites in unspeakable happiness.

I was touched by the sense of elevation and plenitude that characterised the narrative, as well as by the sense of detachment from material things. I continued to read this and other unknown female writers, especially auto-

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<sup>1</sup> Soror Maria do Céu, *Enganos do Bosque, Desenganos do Rio* (Lisbon: António Isidoro da Fonseca, 1741).

biographic narratives written by nuns in the same period, with their dazzling visions and their intensely erotic language. The exercise of full, detached abandonment that characterised these texts, the sense of openness to the other, echoed in my remote memory. And from there a personal project emerged. That of creating a feminine genealogy, a heritage of the affections and of the imaginary that would allow me to establish an unlikely connection between my own history, my mother's history and the histories of those nuns.

By resorting to a literary production that has been successively ignored throughout the years, I intend to exercise a resistant memory against the relentless forces of oblivion. By giving voice back to these forgotten texts, re-reading them and re-evaluating them in a new light, I seek for an autonomous imaginary, knowing that, by ransoming and reinventing such memory, it is the heritage of humankind in its multiple dimensions that will be enriched. This work of re-reading, of re-signification, becomes a possible narrative, a possible fiction, an alternative to the hegemonic categories of thought.

### *The convent as a place for the development of female authorship in Portugal*

The authoritarian, misogynous Portugal of the 1600s, witnessed developments in the literary production by female authors. In spite of a tradition that had excluded women from knowledge and the written word, the number of female writers who published and were publicly acknowledged multiplied. Despite the literary richness, the works of these female authors remains invisible even today in the Portuguese contemporary historiographic discourse, thanks to the subtle mechanisms of female production stigmatisation, including the mechanisms of the production of literary canons.

It is curious to see that the women who wrote in this period in Portugal lived in convents, turning these places into a privileged space for the creation of a specifically feminine culture.<sup>2</sup> This was a movement that is too powerful to be ignored. It is worth considering the specific set of circumstances that turned convents into a kind of reservoir of female talents during the Baroque period.

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<sup>2</sup> For further developments on the theme of convents as privileged space for the development of a specifically feminine culture in Portugal you may refer, amongst other studies, to: Anabela Galhardo Couto, "Escritoras de finais do século XVII e inícios do século XVIII: seu contributo para a definição de uma cultura barroca em Portugal", in *Em Torno da História das Mulheres*, (Lisboa: Universidade Aberta, 2002), 183-205. *Gli Abiti Neri: Letteratura Femmine del Barocco Portoghese*, (Roma: Il Filo, 2007). Isabel Morujão, "Por trás da grade: Literatura Conventual feminina em Portugal: séculos XVII e XVIII" PhD Diss. (Porto: Faculdade de Letras, 2005).

This pre-eminence of writer-nuns is not surprising if we consider that, following the consolidation of counter-reformist Catholic power (against the threat of the Protestant Reformation), seventeenth-century Portugal was a country dominated by a strong religious matrix. Not only was education dominated by religious orders, but also the main artists and writers were friars and, since they were subject to the imperatives of the Council of Trent, regarded art as a privileged way to spread faith. Convents also had a fundamental role in the social dynamics of the period. Being the natural destination for sons and daughters lacking the necessary dowry to get married, convents became crowded places, and some of the inhabitants had no real spiritual vocation.

As far as women were concerned, the convent was the only place where “high-born” daughters could obtain some social and intellectual power. This institution represented a living community, perfectly integrated into the life of society, rich in terms of history and prestige, allowing for a certain degree of mental autonomy, despite all the constraints. For some of the rebellious women, monastic life represented an opportunity to escape an imposed marriage or an unwanted husband. This was true in the case of Violante do Céu, the brilliant and talented author of profane love poems collected in *Rimas Várias*, who entered the Convento da Rosa in Lisbon at the age of 23, after a tumultuous life and an unauthorised romance with the poet Paulo Andrade, to whom she continued to dedicate love poems from inside the cloister. Then there was Antónia Margarida Castelo Branco, who in her *Autobiografia* tells of the tragic misfortune of ten years of marriage to a violent husband.<sup>3</sup> By entering the Madre Deus convent in Lisbon she was able to have her marriage annulled and to obtain the divorce. Others embraced religious life in an almost libertarian attitude, simply because they wanted to devote themselves to study. We know, for example, that throughout her life, Sister Maria do Céu often appealed to her superiors to excuse her from different tasks so that she could fully devote herself to books. Still others eagerly surrendered themselves to a spiritual and mystical life, which in view of the mentality of that time appeared as a highly appealing and exciting ideal of life. This is how many young girls escaped from home to enter the convent against the will and authority of their parents. Sister Maria de Jesus “sendo muito pretendida, não desistiram os seus pais de a persuadir ao matrimónio, valendo-se umas vezes de indústrias,

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<sup>3</sup> Antónia Margarida de Castelo Branco, *Autobiografia* (Lisbon: Imprensa Nacional Casa da Moeda, 1983), 82-219.

outras de violência”.<sup>4</sup> For twenty years she stubbornly refused to surrender to such a fate, taking chastity vows, cutting her hair and living secluded in her own home, finally taking religious vows at the age of fifty, after her father had passed away.

Convents, therefore, gathered a heterogeneous and lively group of women, joined according to their social class, to whom seclusion assumed a wide range of significances. At the time, these institutions encompassed a set of very specific circumstances that ended up fostering and promoting literary creation. They offered more general access to book culture than did secular life; they encouraged a set of writing practices: some examples are the life accounts demanded by confessors to certain mystical or “problematic” nuns, recreational or moral-function pieces of writing for the amusement of the nuns, or the practice of poetry competitions in the various conventual festivities open to mundane society. On the other hand, despite the constraints of a rigorous discipline, aiming at muffling any manifestations of individuality, life in the cloister allowed for a certain level of privacy and independence, that place of imagination and memory that is indispensable to any act of creation (that Virginia Woolf would later call a room of one’s own).<sup>5</sup>

What was the profile of such nun-writers? In terms of social background, some of the women were members of the aristocracy, such as Sister Maria do Céu, others were members of the nobility or rural bourgeoisie, such as Sister Isabel do Menino Jesus and Margarida de Castelo Branco or Mariana da Purificação.

The women displayed a remarkable culture for their time, shaped according to the standards of a period in which knowledge of rhetoric, languages, ancient philosophy and religion was a privileged one. They sometimes received education at home, benefiting from the private classes given to their brothers and almost always against the will of their families. Education was frequently obtained through self-instruction, at home or at the convent through a “close relation with the holy books”.

The literary activity of these nuns did not, obviously, have a professional character; nor was it an instrument for economic survival. According to the authors, they wrote in order to fight against nostalgia arising from idleness.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> [“having a high number of admirers, her parents did not give up persuading her to get married, often resorting to industries, some other times to violence”]. Barbosa Machado, *Biblioteca Lusitana*, (Lisboa: Luiz Ameno, 1759), 273.

<sup>5</sup> Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (London: Penguin Books, 2002).

<sup>6</sup> “Divertir a melancolia e suavizar o ânimo” says Sister Madalena da Glória, (*Reino da Babilônia*, Lisboa, 1742), 13.

Saying that they have been excluded from knowledge, the writers inscribe, perhaps intentionally as a survival strategy, their literary exercise in the field of curiosity, outside the limits of what society recognises as knowledge or *autoritas*. In terms of critical reception, the successful writers were seen as exceptional – by ordinary people and the female gender. Dictionaries and commentators presented them in an un-sexualised manner, in an almost mythic-like manner, as prodigious creatures that formed an “exception to their gender”. “A Sacred hand”, “a new deity”, “a distinct ingenuity that is so egregiously able to appease her gender even though not engaged in study”, are expressions used to describe them.

### *Literary production: The autobiographic narrative*

What did these women write?

We should not think that their productions were necessarily devotional in nature. True, religious, or even mystical, inspirational works are predominant, but this is a trend that characterises literary production at the time and not only among this sub-group. The climate of religious exaltation that was dominant in the Counter-Reformation period and the dissemination of devotional models based on the cult of saints and martyrs, created a propitious environment for the emergence of mystical talents. Indeed, a significant part of their handwritten literary production was of a pious or mystical character.

Nevertheless, the scope of their literary production is wide. The one hundred or so Portuguese women who produced works during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries wrote treatises on the philosopher’s stone, works on rhetoric and eloquence, and treatises on civil architecture, mathematics and philosophy. They were well versed on a great variety of subjects and they cultivated a wide range of literary genres and formats that were typical at that time: religious and profane theatre plays, epic, lyric and satiric poetry, sentimental and allegoric novels, as well as other literature inspired by the spiritual or mystical.

Some of these nun-writers produced and published remarkable works, impressing their admirers in literary and mundane circles. Others left manuscripts of limited circulation: life accounts, spiritual works, recreational works intended to mark the festivities of conventual life, and testimonies of the everyday lives of women in a monastery and of their aspirations and wishes. The first group included Sister Maria do Céu and Sister Isabel do Menino



Jesus. Mariana da Purificação, Antónia Margarida de Castelo Branco and Maria Josefa were in the second group.

Autobiographic narratives occupy an important place among this type of feminine authorship. Religious biographies written by women in the cloister are a type of narrative that disseminated broadly in Portugal throughout the sixteenth century, reaching its peak in the seventeenth century. Almost always entitled “Relações de vida” [Life Accounts] or “Vida da Serva de Deus” [Life of the Servant of God], the majority of such texts relate to manuscripts that circulated mainly in the convents. But other reaching wider audiences were also printed, such as a book by Sister Isabel do Menino Jesus entitled *Vida da Serva de Deus Soror Isabel do Menino Jesus*, and published in Lisbon in 1757.

As spiritual exercises, autobiographies date back to the *Confessions* of St. Augustine and to the medieval tradition of the «saints’ lives», culminating in the sixteenth century with the autobiographical texts of St. Teresa of Avila and St. Ignatius of Loyola. With an exemplary and edifying function, autobiographies can be placed in the context of the exaltation of the saint as a hero, as disseminated by the Catholic reform movement, and within the scope of the promotion undertaken by the religious orders regarding their exemplary nuns. Promoting Tridentine values and the ideal of imitating the perfection of Christ, they reflect the ideal models of the saints that had just been canonised: St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross and St. Ignatius.

Promoted by the Counter-Reformation, this type of writing aimed at shaping consciences and providing behaviour role models. The texts articulated a confessional practice that was carried out in convents. The objective was to shape and purify the members of religious orders, an objective that was later adopted in civil life.

As a compulsory exercise, this type of writing was demanded from women, especially the mystical ones, who were viewed differently as recipients of “divine favours”.

Reading texts of such nature, one becomes aware that we are looking at a particular class of texts in the history of autobiography: texts written by order of a hierarchical superior, with a clear modelling function and adhering to a very precise and fixed set of narrative parameters. These narratives describe the eventful individual lives of the nuns. They almost always start with references to birth and a short account of childhood. Next there is a reference to a not always well understood and very often denied

“call”, which normally comes early on in life. They continue by revisiting episodes before and after admission to the convent, but now the events are seen in relation to values such as redemption and expiation. That is to say, the experienced episodes are now reframed and understood as means of becoming closer to God. Actions, thoughts, feelings, dreams, visions, and temptations are dissected in a kind of self-knowledge exercise. Even though they were compulsory and subject to the tight surveillance of spiritual mentors and although they adhered to strict literary conventions, these autobiographic narratives turn out to be rather unexpected and touching literary pieces.

Reporting upon episodes in the personal and daily lives of the nuns and expressing their inner feelings and conflicts, as well as their mystical ecstasies or prophetic visions, these texts convey unique shades of thought, due to the extent of private experience they transmit. In addition to their value as historical documents, supplying precious data on education, family relations, food habits, sociability practices, and on daily life in female convents, these texts are also, in some sense, documents of desire, embryonic exercises in the construction of female subjectivities and identities.

The autobiographic self that is represented in such texts is, to a certain extent, a convention, a fiction created from certain literary and religious parameters, but simultaneously it is a character where singularity echoes. It is this that is unique and unrepeatable in the subject, and which is acknowledged by Adriana Cavarero in her essay *Tu che mi Guardi, tu che mi Racconti* as the factor of interest in autobiographies.<sup>7</sup> Their fascinating nature is derived partly from this structural ambiguity.

The enunciation subject of such texts is, therefore, constantly crossed by the tension between the model and the individual, between what the author wants to say and what she can really say, between the desires silenced by the social and moral codes and the discursive strategies that subtly oppose them.

Between the lines it is possible to have access to the shadow of an intimacy that is weaved with silence, gaps, insinuations that can be only guessed, and where the absences, the gaps, the omissions are as significant as the very words. In this mixture of words and gaps, of what is spoken and unspoken, it is possible to witness the emergence of the unique and unrepeatable singularity of a life.

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<sup>7</sup> Adriana Cavarero, *Tu che mi guardi, tu che mi racconti: Filosofia della narrazione*, (Milano: Giangiacomo Feltrinelli Editore, 2007), 7-11. On the concept of singularity see Jean-Luc Nancy, *Être Singulier Pluriel*, Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1996.

There we find references to affections, to friendships, to jealousies, to small hostilities, to ill-intentioned rumours – “the whispers” [“murmurações”] – to the climate of envy that sometimes surrounded nuns that became conspicuous. They touch on intimate dramas, missing the past, and the appeal of life outside the convent. Doubt, vacillations of faith, rebellion and the weight of the sense of sin stand out. The battle against carnal temptations must always be fought and it is expressed under the various guises of the devil and the temptations. For this purpose we should consider the words of Antónia Margarida de Castelo Branco, taken from her *Autobiografia*: “Na semana passada tive terceiro assalto contra a obediência. Havia alguns meses que tinham crescido as murmurações com as minhas demoras no confessionário. Perturbou-se o meu interior com várias atribulações que me traziam quase irracional. O demónio atormentava-me com imaginações de que jogava comigo como com arma sua. Algumas horas senti veementes impulsos de desesperar e de outros vícios.”<sup>8</sup>

One is struck by the repeated attempts, always ending in failure, to practise virtues – modesty, obedience, a renouncing of self-esteem. The torment of full devotion to God is constant, as well as the mortifications, the practices of flagellation as expressions of excess devotion.

In her autobiography, Mother Maria Josefa gives an account of her desire for mortification: “No que toca à penitência tive sempre grandes desejos dela, posto que nunca chegaram minhas obras a meus desejos. Procurava licença das Preladas e às vezes dos Prelados, e davam-me algumas para tomar disciplina e usar de cilícios e cadeias alguns dias da semana, e alguns jejuns de pão e água em dias particulares.”<sup>9</sup> But these texts also tell us of the delights of divine love, of the ecstasies and the wonderful visions. Mother Maria Josefa writes in full ecstasy in one of the multiple extraordinary visions that fill her manuscript:” Estando uma noite no coro em oração, me mostra Cristo um campo de flores mui ameno e de alegre vista, onde sua Divina Majestade estava sentado, com mui grande formosura, e em particular lhe vi as mãos, com toda e muito mais perfeição que a Esposa nos Cantares. Das mais perfeições do rosto não pude dar fé.

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<sup>8</sup> [“Last week I felt a third assault against obedience. Some months ago the comments on my delay at the confessional have grown. My mind was again ruffled with several tribulations that would drive me almost insane. The devil tormented me with imaginations that he would play with me as if I was a weapon of his own... For some hours I have felt strong urges of despair and of other vices. ] Antónia Margarida Castelo Branco, *Autobiografia*, 363.

<sup>9</sup> [“Regarding penitence I have always had great desires of it, since my works have never been to the measure of my desires. I would ask for permission from the Abbesses and sometimes of the Prelates, and some were given to take discipline and use cilices and chains for some days each week, and some bread and water fasts on specific days.”] Madre Maria Josefa, *Relação da Vida da Madre Maria Josefa*, n.d., Manuscript, Biblioteca Nacional de Lisboa, cod.79, 273.

Em alguns dos dedos tinha anéis formosíssimos de ouro e pedras a modo que de safiras, mas não têm que ver as coisas deste lugar mui pobre e miserável em que vivemos com aquelas...”<sup>10</sup>

We are interested in stressing the dynamics of openness to the other, the freedom and joy that partially characterise these texts, which acquire new and enhanced interpretative possibilities in the light of contemporary feminist concepts, such as the concept of vulnerability put forward by Judith Butler, or the concept of “écriture du corps” introduced by Hélène de Cixous.<sup>11</sup>

### *Travelling through words: Contrasting confinement and freedom*

It is important to underline a significant aspect: the contrast between the physical, psychological and emotional confinement these writers were subject to and the freedom of the spiritual travels they underwent and about which they wrote. We are speaking about women who were physically (and intellectually) confined in a radically exiguous space: the cloister. They entered the convent when they were still young; without ever leaving the convent, they would grow up there, grew old and die. And yet, how far off to other worlds did their words carry them! To which unexplored territories did they lead them! What prodigious universes did their fantasy offer them! Confined to their tiny cells, immobilised in that “secular sequester”, they took wide steps into the unexplored territory of the “other”. They explored the unknown meanders of words and love, they ventured through the differences of the mystical experience, they dared to leave themselves in ecstasy, and they experienced a fusion with “unity”.

The spiritual journey these women undertook in their texts was a journey in the ancient sense. Their travelling included risk: the risk of an encounter. Their travelling encompassed fear: of the unknown. Their travelling encompassed ordeal: renouncing “worldly things”, crossing the “tenebrous lake” and “the dark night”. It is a journey that encompasses change: openness to the

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<sup>10</sup> [“Being one night at the choir praying, Christ showed me a very pleasant and joyful field of flowers, where His Divine Majesty was sitting in marvellous beauty, I have especially noticed His hands, with all the perfection and more than the Spouse of the Chants. From the remainder perfections of the face I could not take notice. In some of His fingers He had the most beautiful rings of gold and stones similar to sapphires, but the things of this very poor and miserable place we live in, have nothing to do with those.”] Ibid., 276.

<sup>11</sup> I refer to the concept of vulnerability developed by Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself*. (New York, Fordham University Press, 2005). The concept of “écriture du corps” is developed by Hélène Cixous in her article « Le Rire de la Méduse » *L'Arc*, (1975).

other and learning a new identity. And, at the end of the road, to a longing for perpetual happiness.

As far as the mystical experiences mentioned in the autobiographies are concerned, the inner travels reported are effectively felt as a displacement, expressed in terms of “rapture” and “transport”. Violently and physically dragged out of them, “enraptured” for hours, their bodies would invariably be “as if dead”, while in some other dimension they would let themselves be swept off by a more corporeally spiritual sensuality and happiness in the loving arms of their sweet Spouse. Sister Isabel do Menino Jesus states: “Uma noite destas, acabada a obrigação de Matinas pus o pensamento em um atributo de Deus, que era a sua formosura Imediatamente me cercou uma grande luz, que bastou para ficarem logo as potências alienadas e presas a Deus. E estando assim algum tempo, me achei sem saber como, toda coberta de ouro fino, que me parecia que corpo e alma estava vestida de ouro. Saí em suspensão, ficando sem sentidos, nem potências, ficando quase o espírito sem natureza, como separada a alma do corpo.”<sup>12</sup>

Expressions such as suspension, elevation, flight, displacement, rapture, and transport are used to express this imperious, uncontrollable, and inexplicable movement, which swiftly sweeps through the self off and throws it outside, in ecstasy.

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<sup>12</sup> [“One of these nights, after finishing the obligation of the Matins, I started praying, turning my thoughts to one of God’s attributes, which was His beauty. I was immediately surrounded by a bright light, which was enough for my faculties to be alienated and bound to God. And after being like that for a while I found out I was entirely covered in the finest gold, and it felt like both my body and soul were dressed up in gold . My spirit grew. I was in suspension, I lost my senses, my faculties; my spirit was almost left without nature, as if the soul was separated from the body.”] Soror Isabel do Menino Jesus, *Vida da Serva de Deus Soror Isabel do Menino Jesus*, (Lisboa: José da Costa Coimbra, 1757), 20.

### *Radical exposure of the self*

The narratives of mystical experiences reveal the person as a laboratory of unique and individual experiences.

These are radical, excessive experiences that oppose the established way of doing things, the known order.

This radical experimentation of the self, this openness to the excess encompassed several types of risks.

First of all it attracted the rigorous surveillance of the religious authorities and the Holy Inquisition Court, committed to identifying true and false mystics and to firmly condemning the latter, who were frequently accused of witchcraft and of making “pacts with the devil”. In fact, the Catholic Counter-Reformation in Portugal restricted and repressed religious ecstasy, which was usually associated with women’s religious experience and was regarded as being dangerously close to heretical practices.

Mother Mariana da Purificação was one of the women accused of witchcraft and of being a false mystic. She was made subject to two proceedings by the Inquisition Court, both of which were concluded for lack of evidence. The nature of the affront to the established order that characterised her mystical manifestations is very clear in the statements of one of the Inquisition Court officers; talking about the defendant, he says: “Pareceram-me suas revelações falsas como embustes seus, ou enganos do inimigo e nelas alguns ditos ou proposições malsoantes, escandalosas, temerárias, erróneas, ou heréticas.”<sup>13</sup> Also the mystical manifestations of Sister Isabel do Menino Jesus were made subject to severe restrictions and they became a source of controversy and dispute – despite the fact that she was regarded *post-mortem* as “Venerable” and acknowledged as a mystical authority. Published in 1757 (five years after her death), her book, *Vida da Serva de Deus Soror Isabel do Menino Jesus [Life of the Servant of God Sister Isabel do Menino Jesus]*, was the subject of a long and complex process of approval by the religious authorities, a process that lasted for decades.

It is with full detachment that this autodidact Franciscan tells of her mystical travels, not hiding from the reader the character of radical discovery, the fear and the risk that such exposure brings – , especially when it has the mark of the female gender. She states: “O caminho da via unitiva é caminho sem carreira e não se anda por ele senão por voos; e por voar tão alto,

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<sup>13</sup> [“I found her revelations false, as deceits of her own or tricks of the enemy, and in them some offensive, scandalous, unfounded, erroneous or heretical sayings or statements] Inquisição de Lisboa, manuscript 1720 , Torre do Tombo, Lisboa, 238.

que vai fora da capacidade de mulher, confesso que temi o voar, com receios de cair de tão alto.”<sup>14</sup>

It is an exposure, an exercise of abandonment that also implies feelings of discomfort and even of shame, as Mariana da Purificação notes: “Sucedeu-me já há algum tempo, que estando no Coro, Nosso Senhor fez-me mercê de me unir consigo; amanhecendo me acharam assim. Coisa que eu senti muito, porque logo vieram umas e outras, e fizeram uma roda à volta de mim. Quando acordei fiquei tão corrida e envergonhada que não quisera aparecer diante de gente e por isso desejo sempre andar metida pelos cantos.”<sup>15</sup>

In her book *Il Dio delle donne*, dedicated to female mystical writing, Luísa Muraro underlines the fact that these texts talk about an experience of relation. In mystical writing, the self is in relation with the other, besides itself.<sup>16</sup> In fact, the narratives of the mystical ecstasies express a full abandonment, an extreme receptiveness to that other – the loved object. These accounts place us before subjects willing to be “affected” by otherness.

Antónia Margarida de Castelo Branco states: “Assim como o sal se desfaz na água e fica todo incorporado nela, se desfazia minha alma para incorporar-se com Deus.”<sup>17</sup> Love is experienced as a pathway that culminates in one’s “self diluting” in divine love. Love is felt as a gift, a gift of oneself. The “I” abandons itself, so that it can be shaped by the “other” and form into one.

The metaphors of openness, the offer, the gift succeed in rendering account of the unspeakable experience of union with the beloved object. We are far from the autonomous subject, a monolithic entity closing in on himself as in the Western tradition.<sup>18</sup>

In a different context, and without wishing to establish a strict comparison, we may draw a faint line between the concept of love expressed by the nuns and the concept of the love of the other as a gift explored by Butler in *Giving an Account of Oneself*.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>14</sup> [“The path of the unitive way is a path without a road and you have to follow it by means of flying; and for flying so high, so out of the capacity of a woman, I admit I was afraid of flying, worried that I would fall from such height”. Ibid., 149.

<sup>15</sup> [“It happened to me some time ago that being at the Choir, Our Lord gave me the grace of uniting me to him; in the morning people was entering the Choir and they have found me like that. I was very distressed, because everyone immediately arrived and made a circle around me. When I woke up I was so scared and ashamed that I didn’t want anyone to see me and I only wish to hide in any corner.”] Madre Mariana da Purificação, *Cadernos*, 272.

<sup>16</sup> Luisa Muraro, *Il Dio delle donne* (Milano: Mondadori, 2003), 62-75.

<sup>17</sup> [“Like salt melts in the water and fully blends in it, so my soul would melt to blend in with God”] Antónia Margarida Castelo Branco, Ibid., 266.

<sup>18</sup> For further development see Irigaray, *The Way of Love* (2002).

<sup>19</sup> Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*: Ibid., 138.

## *A rhetoric of joy*

Following the enchanted pace of successive matins, the autobiographic narratives underline the intensity of the amorous transports and of the extraordinary visions, in a writing dominated by pleasure and joy.

Mother Mariana da Purificação states: “Depois que estou neste retiro, a maior parte dos dias passo-os todos naquela união do meu divino esposo, toda unida e abrasada em seu divino e puro amor, sem me lembrar cousa desta vida, nem deste mundo, como se para mim o não houvera.”<sup>20</sup>

Expressions giving account of the happiness abound: consolation, favours, glory, delights, pleasure: “Estava tão fora de mim com o júbilo que gozava minha alma, que não podia tomar assento o discurso”<sup>21</sup>, writes Sister Isabel do Menino Jesus.

Weaved in the intimacy of the cell, these texts speak, therefore, of women who, through the exercise of writing, set out on a quest to find a “different way of saying things”. Experiencing the unknown, the unspeakable, the inexplicable, they lived the “syntax of fire” that passes through these mystical accounts, that “writing of the hearth” mentioned by Teresa Joaquim.<sup>22</sup> Sister Maria Josefa says: “Outra noite antes de tangerem as matinas, senti junto a mi um anjo de pequena estatura e grande formosura e alegria interior e tão ágil e ligeiro que me lembrou com quanta razão o Profeta chama aos anjos ministros de fogo. Trazia na mão um molho de setas; Com algumas me trespassava o coração, lançando uma e outra com grande pressa, de sorte que, quando tangiam a matinas, com grande trabalho estive nelas e não sei se entendi o que rezava, porque desejava a alma não sair daquele exercício amoroso.”<sup>23</sup>

In that quest for loving speech, the game of metaphors succeeds; as if hallucinated, it runs at every moment into the limits of language, unable to say what cannot be said, or understood.

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<sup>20</sup> [“Since I am in this retreat, I spend most of my days in that union with my divine spouse, fully united and inflamed in His divine and pure love, without reminding the slightest thing of this life, or this world, as if it would not exist for me.”]

<sup>21</sup> N.T.: “I was so completely out of myself with the delights my soul was enjoying that I could not make use of speech”.

<sup>22</sup> Teresa Joaquim, “O coração e a escrita ou um outro tipo de saber”, in *Mulheres que escrevem, mulheres que lêem: Repensar a literatura pelo género* (Lisbon: 101Noites, 2007), 145-153.

<sup>23</sup> [The other night before the matins sounded, I felt near me an angel small in height but big in beauty and inner joy and so agile and swift that it reminded me of how right the Prophet was to call angels the ministers of fire. In his hand he carried a bunch of arrows; he pierced my heart, with one arrow after the other, and when the matins sounded I had a difficult time attending and I am not so sure I could understand what I was praying, since my soul desired nothing but not to abandon that loving exercise.”]



In that search for another language, able to give account of the experience of divine love, the inscription of the body in the writing is constantly present. Mariana da Purificação states: “Indo eu para me recolher, como me mandava meu esposo, o senti sempre muito junto a mim, e assim como me ia despindo, sentia que me iam ajudando a despir, como uma pessoa que sem ver sente que está outra ao longo dela... e tanto que me deitei logo me senti abraçada com meu Esposo.. Lançou o senhor o seu braço que estava tão magestoso e me apertou muito a si. O que então ali logrou minha alma, não o sei compreender, e muito menos dizer, nem dar a mínima notícia.”<sup>24</sup>

In an attempt to convey the excess, to express the inexplicable, they use the body as a way to communicate. Either through the use of images replete of eroticism, as in the previous case, or through the use of images about the delights of maternal love, as in the following example: “Um dia estando na cela, era de tarde, deu-me um ímpeto de amor tão forte, que me suspendeu, de sorte que não fui a Completas, nem voltei a mim senão à noite. Em todo este tempo estive logrando grandes favores e carícias do meu Esposo, feito menino, que na idade da infância é que continuamente se me representa. Nesta ocasião se me veio pôr no colo com um ramalhete de boninas brancas e se pôs a brincar comigo: Dava-mas e tornava-mas a tirar, e dava-mas a cheirar e outras garridices.”<sup>25</sup>

The inscription of the senses, the synaesthesia, is constant in these spiritual travels. Sister Isabel do Menino Jesus reporting on a conference with the Divine mentions: “Traziam estas palavras grandíssima eficácia, com muita doçura e fragrância de cheiro suavíssimo.”<sup>26</sup> And a little later, in a curious expression that erases the body/spirit cleavage: “Aqui conheci claramente, com inteligência espiritual e corporal, que quase se me representou (Cristo) com sua santíssima humanidade”.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> [“When I was about to retire, as my Spouse orders, I felt Him very close to me, and as I was undressing, I felt as if He was helping me undress, as a person that despite not seeing anyone, feels that someone is there... and as soon as I laid down I immediately felt embraced by my Spouse. And the Lord stretched His majestic arm and embraced me very closely. What my soul felt then and there I cannot understand, or even say, or give notice.”] Madre Mariana da Purificação, *Ibid.*, 260.

<sup>25</sup> [“One day I was in my cell, it was in the afternoon, I felt such a urge for love that I was suspended in such a way I could not attend Compline, or came to my senses until it was night. During all that time, I was receiving indescribable favours and caresses from my Spouse, as a child, because He continually appears before me in His childhood. In this occasion He came to sit on my lap with a bunch of white daisies and played with me: He would give them to me and then take them way again, He made me smell them, and other sorts of games.”] *Ibid.*, 280.

<sup>26</sup> [“These words brought along very great efficacy, with extreme sweetness and a very softly scented smell.”] Soror Isabel do Menino Jesus, *ibid.*, 103.

<sup>27</sup> “Here I was able to clearly know, with spiritual and corporal awareness, that (Christ) came before me in His holy humanity.” *Ibid.*

Resorting to unarticulated cries, to moaning and sighing, to touch, is another way of saying what cannot be said in words, and of involving the body in a quest for that other way of expression. The mystical love poem of Sister Maria do Céu “A esposa dos Cantares” [The Spouse of the Chants], which echoes the Canticle of Canticles, fully expresses that rhetoric of the sighs, the moans, the clamours:

Terníssimo suspiro  
Rompe pelas prisões do silêncio  
Diz-lhe que, amante, clamo  
Si em este fino empenho  
Não alcanço uma palavra  
Quando, ai amor, suspiro por um verbo.  
Diz-lhe que a seus aromas  
Arrojo meus alentos  
E ao buscar as fragrâncias  
Bebo os ares, as cores perco.<sup>28</sup>

Resorting to the rhetoric of the sighs and of the cry, experiencing a syntax of fire, inscribing the body in the writing, these texts search for another language, another articulation of speech.

With their powerful and joyful writing, their erotic dreams and visions, the Sisters’ texts introduce fissures in the hegemonic speech on women.

With their openness to alterity, they configure a receptive, interrelational subject that grows apart from the autonomous subject of the western tradition.

With their aesthetics of pleasure and suffering they point out to another way of understanding the relationship between body and spirit, reason and the senses.

These are texts that search for another way to say the unspeakable, the excess, the love, the desire. They configure a quest for another kind of word, different from the institutionalised word; a word that disarticulates knowledge and love. In that sense, these texts travel to the present time and still have something to say.

With the Sisters’ writing I have learnt to look far.

I have also learnt to look afar, which allowed me, in turn, to understand how transient and ephemeral things are and, therefore, to treasure the moment.

<sup>28</sup> [Oh tenderest of sighs/break the chains of silence/tell Him his lover is calling/since in this loving commitment/I remain speechless//when, my love, I sigh for just one word./Tell him that to his scents/I owe my breaths/and searching for such perfumes/I drink the air, I loose my colours.] Soror Maria do Céu, *Enganos do Bosque , Desenganos do Rio*, 273.

With them I have gained awareness of fallibility, of vulnerability.

From them I have retained the joy of abandonment, of surrendering without reservations and the grace of accepting oneself.

In this imaginary dialogue/travel with the writing of the Sisters I found my place, as the heir of a choir of female voices.

### *Implications for teaching*

A feminist pedagogy should stimulate awareness and critical thinking about the world, and at the same time call for its transformation. Hence, a feminist pedagogy invites learners to expand their consciousness and be transformed in the process. One of its educational aims is to promote the empowerment of women. Several factors concur towards this goal: critical knowledge and the deconstruction of the paradigms and mechanisms that rule the organisation of gender relationships in the most diverse fields (including literature); the production of knowledge about women's lives in history, placing them at the centre of critical discourse, as part of a wider political process; thinking from different theoretical viewpoints; making feminist classrooms the site of transformative learning experiences by trying new methods and new approaches in order to establish a collaborative learning environment where students' ideas count as contributions to knowledge.

Centred on research about autobiographical texts by seventeenth-century women, the article may be used in a classroom context in many ways.

Given the diversity of feminist approaches to literary texts, the article represents a methodological example of a possible perspective: the feminist outlook on the critical rescuing of literary works that were marginalised because they collided with hegemonic categories of thought.

This particular approach makes it possible to reflect on a set of other problems of a literary nature and on issues of sexism that may be expanded in the classroom: to reflect on the construction processes of literary canons in history and on the stigmatisation mechanisms that go hand in hand with them; on the political nature of interpretations; on the marginalisation of certain literary formats, such as the autobiographical genre; on the hostility towards and myths about the figure of the woman writer; on the particular conditions of exercising women's creativity, and so forth.

Furthermore, a reading of the autobiographical narratives of Portuguese nuns offers the student a cross-cultural research on social class issues, topics in the history of education, or in private lifestyles. Some examples include the social status of women in the Baroque period and the representation of everyday life. We may encourage students to relate and confront mysticism as a form of resistance along with other forms of struggle led by women in different contexts, for instance, the suffragists.

Topics broached in the article, such as the pairs confinement/freedom and physical journey/ spiritual journey, may be related to other topics, such as travel/ exile/ third space, travel in the global era, or set in a framework of multicultural and global issues.

The theme of the body and its radical exposure may be compared, for example, with topics such as the self-portrait in contemporary women's art. The theme of the inscription of the body in writing, or of the search for a different form of language, may be explored in the novels or essays of numerous contemporary authors.

Using the students' own experience as a learning resource, they are invited to write about their personal experiences. Here are a few exercises of exploratory writing to be developed: My personal experiences of confinement/freedom; My own sense of travelling; Writing through the body, what does it mean? How can I write about difference? How do I relate with the Other? How may difference and co-existence be experienced?

Challenging the politics of domination, students are encouraged to seek their own "voice choir", to find other marginalised texts, to explore their elective affinities and to fictionalise their own patrimony of affections, imagination and symbols.

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