



Sidelong thinking. Disobedient geographies and subaltern cultures

by Nicoletta Vallorani

1. SIGNIFIERS OF (IN)STABILITY

In 1983, Homi K. Bhabha introduces the twin notions of “synchronic essentialism” and “signifiers of stability” while approaching the question of the Other and pointing to the reassuring power of the stereotype in troubled times, when imperial knowledge is called into question by the proliferation of new nation-states (1994: 24). The development of colonial discourse into a host of postcolonial theories has been variously inflected but it always appears to be grounded on the same Western, shared ground that makes it possible to frame the new theoretical approach in the usual dichotomic structure of Western thought. Simplifying a little, I think the whole process can be read as an attempt at bringing the world back to order – an understandable order according to Western epistemology – after the end of the colonial enterprise. In this respect, it really seems a matter of mere definition whether you prefer speaking of “postcolonial” or “decolonial”¹.

Basically, the operation of keeping the debate within the “safe” borders of Western epistemology worked, for some time, but seemed to reach crisis point more or less around the 90s, when a number of scholars and researchers – some of them of

¹ I am aware of the simplification implied in my position, and partly share Mignolo’s reflections on this issue (Mignolo 2000), but for the time being, I would prefer putting aside the specific distinction between the two terms.



“colonial origins”, though not necessarily so – raise the issue of the possible theoretical inadequacy of the widely accepted notion of postcolonialism. The term, according to McClintock, is shaped by a paradox that is also to be seen in other highly fashionable terms – “post-colonialism, post-modernism, post-structuralism, post-cold war, post-Marxism, post-apartheid, post-Soviet, post-Ford, post-feminism, post-national, post-historic, even post-contemporary” – all of which run the risk of designating an empty signifier relying on a notion of linear, historical progress that is no longer plausible (McClintock 1992: 85). Ella Shoahat cleverly identifies the core of the problem when she states that “The ‘post-colonial’ implies a narrative of progression in which colonialism remains the central point of reference, in a march of time neatly arranged from the pre to the ‘post’, but which leaves ambiguous its relation to new forms of colonialism, i.e. neo-colonialism” (Shoahat 1992: 107). Shoahat also defines the reasons for the inefficiency of the term pointing out a failure to situate the research geographically, historically and institutionally (1992: 100), which has resulted in “ahistorical and universalizing deployments, and its potentially depoliticizing implication” (1992: 99). She then proposes a “more limited, historically and theoretically specific, usage of the term ‘post-colonial’, one which situates it in a relational context vis-a-vis other (equally problematic) categories” (1992: 100), which is definitely a feasible critical path. Again in 1992 – apparently a key-moment in postcolonial criticism – Prakash shares McClintock’s and Shoahat’s positions, but also crucially takes a slightly more optimistic stance, stating that “One of the distinct effects of the recent emergence of postcolonial criticism has been to force a radical re-thinking and re-formulation of forms of knowledge and social identities authored and authorized by colonialism and western domination. For this reason, it has also created ferment in the field of knowledge” (Prakash 1992: 8).

What all this debate reveals is a general gap between theory and practice that in time has gradually reinforced the tendency to neutralize the possibilities of political agency implied in different critical inflections of postcolonial theories, as pointed out by Simon Gikandi (2002) and Paul Gilroy (2004), among others. The impact of globalization, clearly difficult to locate in time and space because of the inherent character of the process, has made things worse, producing a more or less marked downplay of any kind of multiplicity, and making it difficult to relate the “globalizing gesture of the ‘postcolonial condition’, or ‘post-coloniality’” with highly situated “anti-colonial, or anti-neo-colonial struggles and discourses” (Shoahat 1992: 104).

It is quite true that, basically, theories are theories, and they work as long as they prove effective tools in explaining texts in congruence with the conditions, situations and representations that they are supposed to analyse. Therefore, it is probably safer to proceed along a critical path that is adaptable and ready to take into account the fact that colonial and postcolonial discourses are a “condition of possibility” – borrowing Mignolo’s definition (2000: 5) – where the notions of knowledge and



understanding are to be constantly refigured in the light of a difference that cannot be reduced, because this reduction is impossible as well as of no use.

This is particularly true for the issue I want to approach here, that is the tendency of theories to work in a Medusa-like fashion. They make reality into marble, lifeless stuff, certainly easier to study but progressively farther and farther from the real world of experience. In terms of the kind of issues I am concerned with, this process has been triggered by the epistemological and hermeneutic frame largely operating in the Western cultures, working on an essentially dichotomic pattern and devoted to the purpose of *separating* A from non-A rather than the act of *relating* A with B and C and D... It is now quite obvious that most theories concerning the colonial and de-colonial process – to use a definition that tries to rule out the complexities of the “post” prefix – have actually kept within the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchisation, in some cases openly embracing the existing ideological construction of Otherness that is already at work. This radically Western attitude may be at least partly responsible for the inability of academic criticism to find an effective label to cover the different meanings of this frayed contemporary context, thence reverting to the usual act of building enclosures and fences while at the same time proclaiming an end to Western thought, though without being able to produce a convincing alternative way of thinking.

In this respect, I tend to share Hall’s position that it is highly dubious whether the postcolonial is to be intended as a “sign of desire or a signifier of danger” (1996: 242), though I resist this – again – dichotomic formulation. I would prefer to say that a further development is needed, and this development may be brought about by the kind of attitude I have provisionally named *sidelong thinking*.

My definition is obviously modelled on Kara Walker’s notion of *sidelong glance* (Shaw 2004) and at the same time it is applied to the kind of thought and research in the field of Humanities that appears increasingly divorced from the cultural and political agency required by the issues that are tackled. After-empires geographies can no longer be disciplined. They prove unruly and disobedient, and refuse to be turned into lifeless stone. And as Westerners we have problems in accepting this. Disobedience is unpredictable, singular, unruly. It is an odd number in the orderly pattern of even numbers. And it is highly troubling: that is why we have problems in coping with it.

2. CONRAD AND THE IMPERIAL EAGLE

The writing of *Heart of Darkness*, probably one the most famous and widely debated works in literature and in postcolonial criticism, originated from a specific request by the *Blackwood Magazine*. They needed an exotic tale and were confident that Conrad could produce it. Drawing on his personal memories as reported in the *Congo Diary*



and the *Up-river Book*, the writer produced a tale that in time has become a pivotal text in postcolonial criticism. My position is that, quite accidentally, Conrad succeeded in providing a brand-new representation of the Other that still proves fruitfully ambiguous today. Critical awareness of the process underlying Conrad's representation would come much later, and yet Marlow's tale provides plenty of evidence that, as Said and others have stated in recent times, the existence of any empire is never divorced from the idea of having an empire: it is therefore inseparable from some highly specific ideological discourses and a well-defined vision of the world, modelled on a shared relationship with and attitude towards the Other (Said 1993: 15; Mellino 2005: 24). Foucault's notion of subjugated knowledges comes in handy here, because it implies "a whole set of knowledge that has been disqualified as inadequate to its tasks or insufficiently elaborated: naive knowledges, located low down on the hierarchy, beneath the required level of cognition of scientificity" (Foucault 1980: 82; Mignolo 2000: 19-20). Though never explicitly, Conrad happens to be one of the first authors to resist the objective of colonial discourse as voiced by Bhabha (Bhabha 1994: 23). To this construction, unflinchingly and unproblematically accepted as the norm by other authors, Conrad applies a different discursive strategy, a sort of sidelong approach, slanting and indirect.

I would suggest that also the lack of focus, which is one of the main sources of fascination in the text (Sertoli 1974: IX-XV) provides a stylistic equivalent to Conrad's rejection of the concept of "fixity" that will later on become basic in the ideological construction of Otherness. Nothing is straightforward in *Heart of Darkness*; the physical journey upriver is made up of interruptions, returns, losses and recoveries as well as the symbolic journey. Marlow is running *away from* something rather than *toward* something else. The natives are not hiding from the colonizers, but deliberately taking refuge in their mystery even when dying. Marlow only draws near to them through a number of sidelong movements, never direct, and never explicit. And so on and so forth.

In the very famous passage of the Black shapes at work in the quarry, this attitude is very clear.

Instead of going up, I turned and descended to the left. My idea was to let that chain-gang get out of sight before I climbed the hill. You know I am not particularly tender; I've had to strike and to fend off. I've had to resist and to attack sometimes -- that's only one way of resisting -- without counting the exact cost, according to the demands of such sort of life as I had blundered into. I've seen the devil of violence, and the devil of greed, and the devil of hot desire; but, by all the stars! these were strong, lusty, red-eyed devils, that swayed and drove men -- men, I tell you. But as I stood on this hillside, I foresaw that in the blinding sunshine of that land I would become acquainted with a flabby, pretending, weak-eyed devil of a rapacious and pitiless folly. How insidious he could be, too, I was only to find out several months later and a thousand miles farther. For a



moment I stood appalled, as though by a warning. Finally I descended the hill, obliquely, towards the trees I had seen (1988: 20).

Marlow descends a hill, taking an unexpected path ("instead of going up") guided by an unclear intention, resulting in the act of getting nearer to the natives and understanding what is happening to them. To this purpose, he moves obliquely, not overcoming but avoiding and going around obstacles ("a quarry or a sandpit", "a very narrow ravine", "Drainage pipes"), ending up "under the trees", where he means to take some rest. There he meets the natives.

Black shapes crouched, lay, sat between the trees leaning against the trunks, clinging to the earth, half coming out, half effaced within the dim light, in all the attitudes of pain, abandonment, and despair. Another mine on the cliff went off, followed by a slight shudder of the soil under my feet. The work was going on. The work! And this was the place where some of the helpers had withdrawn to die.

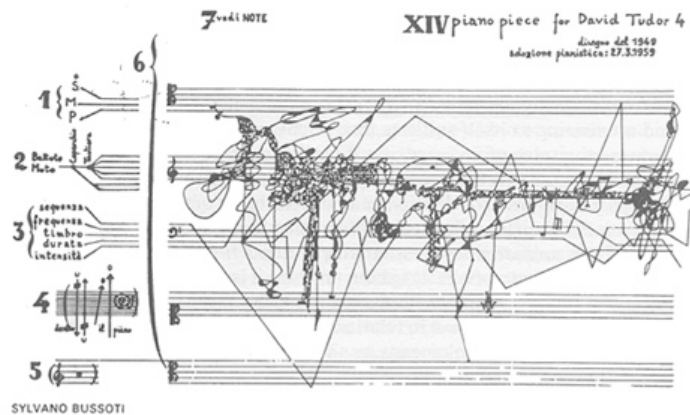
They were dying slowly – it was very clear. They were not enemies, they were not criminals, they were nothing earthly now – nothing but black shadows of disease and starvation, lying confusedly in the greenish gloom. Brought from all the recesses of the coast in all the legality of time contracts, lost in uncongenial surroundings, fed on unfamiliar food, they sickened, became inefficient, and were then allowed to crawl away and rest. These moribund shapes were free as air – and nearly as thin (1988: 20).

The meeting seems unexpected, not looked for, but simply happening while the narrator is trying to reach a place where he could rest. This kind of inconclusive movement seems to be repeated several times. All through the text, the characters and the narrator in particular seem totally focussed on drawing possible escape routes in order to avoid facing what sooner or later they will be obliged to cope with.

In their famous introduction to *Mille Plateaux*, Deleuze and Guattari insist strongly on the notion of the escape route, inflecting it in highly symbolic and graphically effective ways. The text is meaningfully introduced by an excerpt from "Aquila imperiale con Ganimede" (1970), a musical score by the musician and avant-garde artist Sylvano Bussotti (Deleuze 1980: 9).



1. Introduction: Rhizome



SYLVANO BUSSOTTI

Picture 1. "Aquila imperiale con Ganimede" by Silvano Bussotti

Though not connected to the Conradian interpretation of the imperial ideology, the drawing graphically suggests what I mean, and what Deleuze and Guattari intend by "lignes de fuite, des mouvements de déterritorialisation et de déstratification". Any migration, in whatever direction, is basically a process of deterritorialization taking place in both space and time. And it implies a break (with one's own past) that is also a new connection (with the new, temporary, place of belonging) that will be shaped in ways nobody can anticipate: disobedient geographies, in fact.

For obvious reasons, Conrad cannot be aware of the postcolonial implications of his text, but all the same, even when producing his own version of the usual scenario of colonial fantasy, he is one of the first to suggest to the Westerners that they *cannot* understand the natives. They can simply look at them, trying to figure out their mystery. By saying so, Conrad is therefore metaphorically poised between the old dichotomic thought and a new perspective where any possibility of linear progress is removed.

The empty space it leaves is soon filled up by a tangled combination of unsound elements – regressions, jumps forward, temporary stillness, inexplicable developments – that provisionally coalesce in the Conradian "black shapes", reported by Marlow's sidelong glance and equally sidelong words, authorized by the accidental journey of an unskilled explorer who is not a supporter of the imperialist ideology and nevertheless is white, male and a Westerner, and therefore has literally no idea whatsoever of who the Other is and why he/she should be *naturally* subaltern².

² A close analysis of the passage quoted here is provided in "Exterminate all the brutes". I percorsi dell'invasione" (Vallorani 2010).



In 1983, Homi K. Bhabha critically articulates the same concept, stating that “The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction” (*The Other Question*, 1994: 23). This is a major discursive strategy partly called into question by the recent circulation and proliferation of cultural and racial types of otherness, ultimately unveiling the stereotype as an ambivalent mode of knowledge and power.

Edward W. Said is curiously silent on the issue of postcolonial thinking, which he seems to consider not without reason, as primarily a sexy label, successfully marketed, but he perceives the inadequacy of current critical tools in analysing and portraying the other and meaningfully enough introduces the need for “thinking plural” (1978). Said does not elaborate much on the issue, but quite clearly the idea is to devise a critical approach able to respect the sometimes dizzying multiplicities of positionalities marking the second half of the Twentieth century and growing through the first decades of the Twenty-first. In short, I believe that necessity is forcing the issue, not only in terms of labels to be used (postcolonial? Decolonial? Both, each with a specific meaning?), but most importantly in terms of how to recover the possibility for critical theory to effectively connect the analysis of cultures to the problematic aspects of the real worlds from which these cultures have originated.

So, again, the issue is: how can criticism – be it postcolonial or decolonial – keep its political agency? Is criticism to proceed along the paths already traced and stick to the traditional definitions? Or would it be much more effective to try and imagine approaching the world emerging from the end of the empires in a different way? And ultimately: can the humanities be of some use with regards to the current forms of post-imperialism and their consequences?

3. THINKING PLURAL

What makes Edward Said (and other scholars) particularly perceptive about the efficacy of the critical tools to be used when dealing with the postcolonial is at least in part his unflinching trust in the power of literature, art and criticism to produce an impact on the real world. This impact, however, is functional to the ability to devise tools (both in representations and in their critical analysis) flexible enough to embrace the many complexities of a “real” that is constantly in progress (1984).

What is happening here (in Europe) and now (I would say, from 1996³ to today) unavoidably transforms Europe into the most complex and diversified arena where – due to a specific historic contingency – different notions of otherness are brought into

³ The first shipwreck in the Strait of Sicily causing the death of 283 people, mostly Pakistanis and Indians, is the so called Christmas Massacre, in December, 1996.



play and verified against a constantly changing backdrop. It appears quite easy to find a number of works closely exploring a profile of the Other that rejects the usual forms of stock representation and chooses to revise the ideological construction of the migrant.

In this last section of my analysis, I would like to consider more closely the field of creative production by looking at the representations provided by two European artists evidently trying either to imagine the condition of the Other as an asylum seeker or a migrant, or to reflect on the Westerner's reaction to the foreigner, when this reaction does not simply result in the superimposition of a general, ready-made image onto the endless individuality of human beings. In both cases, the main problem seems to be: how do I represent a problematic, ever changing reality? How do I relate the current flux of migration to my colonial experience (the English, the Italian and the French, most closely implied in the African continent's current instabilities) in which I, as a colonizer, have some very uncomfortable responsibilities? How can I overcome *my* fear of the native and rethink the usual scenario of colonial fantasy? Can I, as an artist, *decolonize* representation and produce a brand-new reflection on *my* otherness when portraying the migrant as an Other?

The questions are obviously too complex to be adequately explored here (and they are in fact part of a work in progress), but I feel some hooks can be thrown considering the possible implications of sidelong thinking in terms of artistic practice.

I would start from a small, probably forgotten tragedy that happened in the real world. On July 29 1999, Yaguine Koïta and Fodè Tounkara, two young boys from Guinea, hid on the undercarriage of a Sabena Airlines Airbus in an attempt to run away from their home country and seek refuge in Europe. They froze to death before getting to Brussels airport, but what made things even more tragic is that the bodies were not found immediately, but some days later, on August 2, after at least three return trips between Conakry and Brussels. And on them, the rescuers found a letter to the European community that soon became known all over the world and that basically depicted Europe as a civilized, rich and benevolent place, in a fantasy of Enlightenment with no correspondence whatsoever with the current *real* context in Europe.

In the field of postcolonial art and criticism, I am certainly not the first to mention the event. Simon Gikandi, in his very effective 2001 essay devoted to globalization and postcolonial legacy, evokes the same story to consider colonialism in a different light, and therefore produces some kind of sidelong thinking:

Unsure how to respond to the failure of the nationalist mandate, which promised modernization outside the tutelage of colonialism, citizens of the postcolony are more likely to seek their global identity invoking the very logic of Enlightenment that postcolonial theory was supposed to deconstruct. For me, there is no better representation of this other desire for globalization within the logic of Enlightenment than the following letter left behind by two Guinean boys whose



dead bodies were found in the cargo hold of a plane in Brussels in August 1998 (2002: 630).

Gikandi also provides a careful historical reading of the reasons that drove the boys to start out on a journey to salvation resulting in their death:

Their quest for a modern life in the European sense of the word; their risky journey from Africa was an attempt to escape both poverty and alterity; it was predicated on the belief that their salvation could only come from that Europe which, only two generations earlier, black nationalists such as Jomo Kenyatta and Aimé Césaire had declared to be the major threat to the prosperity of well-being in Africa (2002: 631).

These reflections can only be fully understood if related to what Dirlik says about the academic popularity of postcolonial theories in the 1980s and 1990s, which quite soon appears embarrassingly triggered by the successful “marketing” of the work of “foreign” intellectuals in the US academy⁴. This marketing process has brought about a loss of contact between postcolonial theories and the current facts of migration. More specifically and with reference to Yaguine and Fodé’s tragic death, what seems really difficult to grasp within the current frame of artistic and critical European practice is the two-fold implication of our current emergency: a) the people migrating and too often dying are *real* people, neither numbers nor stereotypes but single and unique men, women and children; and b) their decision to set out on an often deadly journey continues to be rooted in the perception of Europe as a site of prosperity and welfare easily compensating for the hardship and poverty of the colonial world.

Both Dirlik and Gikandi support their critical readings of the current situation by choosing to take a problematized stance on the birth of the nation-state and the rift soon created between the expectation of new prosperity at home and the sudden failure of nationalistic projects. Gikandi also argues that those who elaborate on the new global order so as to show how it can open up new possibilities for the ex-colonies, namely Bhabha and Appadurai, tend to approach it in “almost exclusively cultural terms” (632), putting aside the crucial juncture between the current situation and the older ideas, images, imaginations and identities that are bound to survive and whose relevance may easily be understood when considering stories such as the one of the Guinean boys. These stories are grounded in a postcolonial reality that defies any fascinating though empty critical definition. And, as Gikandi states, “Global images have a certain salience for students of culture, especially postmodern culture, but this does not mean that they are substitutes for material experience” (2002: 631-632).

Again, political agency is at issue here. And the persistence of the enlightened vision of Europe in the ex-colonies is not to be ignored. But still, the point is: how do

⁴ A position that S. Gikandi, an academic and an exile from Nigeria, obviously shares.



we– as Westerners, scholars and artists – relate to this drive? How do we represent and/or deconstruct it? And, voicing some questions that are very relevant for my argument here, how can a white, Western, European artist tell a story such as the one of the Guinean boys? How can he/she escape the ever impending risk of “colonising” the tale after having colonised the land? How can he/she avoid colonising an imagination he/she will never be able to dwell in?

L'estate vola is an almost unknown documentary film by Andrea Caccia, and it was made soon after the death of the two Guinean boys. As a *film du réel*, it soon appears rather unusual, shot as it is in a very specific place at a very specific time (Milan in August), but metamorphosing this setting into a grimly dystopian vision of the future. The voice off belongs to an alien who has come to the Earth looking for his brother. As the tale unfolds, the audience learns that this brother has been the victim of a shipwreck, after which he has gone missing in unfamiliar surroundings. Technically, the film is shot in super8, the footage is rough, scratched and deliberately out of focus, the voice off speaks French and is not always fully comprehensible while he tells the story of a slow death. Only at the end of the film, is the public is given the key to the tale, in white end titles on a black backdrop. This key is Yaguine and Fodè's letter, their naïve and direct call for help, the stubborn, persistent and well established perception of Europe as “a better place”. No comment is provided, thus avoiding any risk of “colonizing” the voices of the boys: the letter is crystal-clear in itself.

As a Westerner who has no experience whatsoever of forced migrations, Caccia keeps his distance and in so doing is able to express a deep respect and the same kind of awareness of the difference that is visible in Conrad's description of the “black shapes”. He succeeds in doing so because he chooses a kind of representation that does not approach the story directly but takes a sidelong path, combining the tragic end of a very real journey towards one's (supposed) salvation with the imaginary tale of two brothers, the one looking for the other in a totally alien landscape. The fixity of the stereotype – a kind of protective strategy regularly used in Western representations – is therefore resisted through a creative choice that acknowledges the difference and relies on a series of metaphors belonging to the dystopian fictional tradition, though revisiting and adapting it to the narrative needs of this specific tale. So the Westerners – both the filmmaker and his public – stay Westerners, but they really face the difference and try to relate to it, in their own way, without trying to colonize the tragedy of the Others.

I would also add, borrowing from Bhabha, that Caccia successfully identifies a mode of intervention that allows the shift “from the *identification* of images as positive or negative, to an understanding of the *processes of subjectification* made possible (and plausible) through stereotypical discourse” (Bhabha 1994: 18, emphasis in the original). Once this process of subjectification is unveiled, it becomes impossible not to see the opacity of the other (Glissant 1998: 57-58), together with the Western



tendency to endlessly replicate the usual relational pattern and to go on representing itself, and nobody else.

The photographic and artistic project *I Carméni. Ritratti improbabili* (Mario De Carolis 2015, <www.mariodecarolis.it>) specifically develops this tendency combining it with an unusual version of the process of mimicry. Focussing on the neighbourhood of San Faustino, in Brescia (Italy), the project arises from the exploration of an urban microcosm that has gradually developed into a multicultural environment where a number of different ethnic groups live side by side, mutually influencing each other. After becoming a familiar presence in the neighbourhood, the artist shot a number of close-ups of the people dwelling in the area who had come to trust him as a friend. The photographic portraits were then printed on sheets of drilled aluminium and laid on plexiglas mirrors. A video is available here:

<https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=i+carm%C3%A8ni-docucity>.

Viewing the portraits, what happens is that the viewer sees the portrait but also his/her own reflection. The two faces combine, producing a new image, the temporary combination of differences, symbolically evoking the fluctuating and unpredictable combination of two histories, cultures, experiences and, more often than not, ethnicities. De Carolis claims that his main artistic reference was the very famous painting by Antonello da Messina, *Annunciata di Palermo* (1476): as in that work, the object of his representation is someone who is not there, the angel in the case of Antonello da Messina and the new transcultural identity in contemporary Europe in his photographic portraits. With no full awareness of this, the artist has produced a work that sticks to the theoretical approach of the most recent findings in the field of postcolonial and decolonial criticism and symbolically translates a development of Western identity constantly transformed by the mosaic of local and individual context it happens to operate in⁵. From a critical standpoint, what is at issue here is the notion of reflection as proliferation – not mere duplication - of mirror images, which easily combines with the concept of identity as an interaction between colonizer and colonized producing a new third (and then fourth, and then fifth ...) identity that later on will combine, in turn, with other “pure” identities, determining new forms of hybridization.

Quite obviously, De Carolis’s project emphasizes the idea of a performative identity as a way to stress the notion of singularity and multiplicity that is intended not as opposite but as alternative to the traditional (and Western) dichotomic structure of knowledge.

More importantly, this kind of artistic representation is able to show how persistently the condition of being a Westerner has determined the impossibility of conceiving of the Other and ourselves as *different* without reverting to the kind of

⁵ About this, Mignolo’s reflections in “Coloniality of Power and Subalternity” (2000) and “Delinking” (2007) may give more critical substance to what I am proposing here.



hierarchical thought defining our culture as the only authorized one. Based on the sharp distinction between the one and the Other, this line of thought is no longer feasible, and is being replaced by a mechanism of fragmented and multiple reflection tracing new geographies, islands rather than continents, places marked by their singularity though needing to relate to each other in archipelagos.

4. CONCLUSION, OR DECOLONIZING THE POSTCOLONIAL

At this juncture and drawing towards a (provisional) conclusion, I suggest going back to the terminological debate that triggered my reflections. Quite obviously, what is needed is a sharp recalibration of the grounding parameters in both the notions of post-colonial as a linear, diachronic progress from empire to nation states (a notion that has been recently debated and criticized by many scholars, Bhabha among other), and de-colonial, or the progressive, both physical and symbolic, leading towards the impossible recovery of one's own original identity. Though both terms primarily refer to the Western process of founding colonies, it is also true that both are unthinkable within the borders of the Western world, keeping within the theoretical grid mainly referred to so far. Any time a relation involving differences is stated, this relation is bound to develop in unpredictable ways: not in a linear and orderly fashion, but more likely as the rhizomatic articulation of a multiple and multidirectional process. This rules out any vertical relation between coloniser and colonised (Hall 1996: 250) and may lead us to consider theories – as Mignolo suggests – not as “new forms of colonization”, but rather as “new tools to enlighten the intelligence of the theories’ host” (2000: 173).

Thinking different may definitely be a viable option. The artistic installation *Arcipelaghi postesotici/Archipels en lutte* (ideadestroyingmuros 2014) seems to result precisely from just such an idea of thinking different. The transnational and transdisciplinary group of young women artists authoring it produced this collection of mobile islands on the grounds of a reflection on sites, contemporary times, politics and decolonization. The installation was first exhibited at the centre of Etudes féminines de genre (Paris 8, 5-28 May 2014) and the process of creating it is described in a video where the artists explain their artistic project (<<https://vimeo.com/107572022>>). Reflecting on the islands as post-exotic places whose touristic value has got lost, and developing a discourse on the notions of loss, recycling, memory, and archive, this group of poetic militancy and dis/educational activism tries to get back to ideology by proposing a sidelong interpretation of it and using it to explain the real rather than bending it to specific individual purposes. This form of resistance of course mediates a reflection on the need to repoliticize theory and to recover the role of art and culture in the real, everyday world. I think it is precisely through this kind of artistic practice that a new approach to the issue of decolonization is gradually being devised.



It requires new tools and a new sidelong way of thinking, sparked off by the awareness that what used to be labelled as subjugated knowledge is merely and importantly *different*, and for this very reason, precious.

WORKS CITED

- Bhabha H., 1994, *The Location of Culture*, Routledge, New York & London.
- Bhabha H., [1983] 1994, "The Other Question: Stereotype, discrimination, and the discourse of colonialism", in H. Bhabha, *The Location of culture*, Routledge, New York & London, pp. 66-84.
- CACCIA A., 2000, *L'estate vola*, Super 8, 18'.
- Conrad J., 1988, *Heart of Darkness*, in J. Conrad, *Heart of Darkness. An Authoritative Text. Backgrounds and sources Criticism*, a cura di R. Kimbrough, W. W. Norton & Company, London & New York, pp. 7-78.
- Deleuze G., 1980, "Introduction: Rhizome", in D. Guattari, *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, Éditions de Minuit, Paris, pp. 9-37.
- Dirlik A., 1994, "The Postcolonial Aura: Third World Criticism in the Age of Global Capitalism", *Critical Enquiry* 20(2), pp. 328-356.
- Foucault M., [1976] 1980, "Power/Knowledge", in C. Gordon (ed.), *Power/Knowledge. Selected Interviews 1972-1977*, Phantom, New York, 78-108.
- Gikandi S., 2002, "Globalization and the Claims of Postcoloniality", *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 100(3), pp. 627-658.
- Gilroy P., 1993, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Verso, London.
- Gilroy P., 2004, *After Empire. Melancholia or Convivial Culture?*, Routledge, London.
- Glissant E., [1996] 1998, *Poetica del diverso*, Meltemi, Roma.
- Hall S., 1996, "When Was the 'Post-Colonial'? Thinking at the limit", in I. Chambers and L. Curti (eds.), *The Postcolonial Question: Common Skies, Divided Horizons*, Routledge, London & New York, pp. 242-260.
- Hall S., 1997, *Representation. Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, Routledge, London & Thousand Oaks & New Delhi.
- McClintock A., 1992, "The Myth of Progress: Pitfalls of the Term Post-Colonialism", *Social Text* 31-32, pp. 84-98.
- Mellino M., 2005, *La critica postcoloniale. Decolonizzazione, capitalismo e cosmopolitismo nei postcolonial studies*, Meltemi, Roma.
- Mignolo W. D., 2000, *Local Histories/Global Design. Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges and Border Thinking*, Princeton University Press, Princeton (NJ).
- Mignolo W. D., 2007, "Coloniality of Power and Subalternity", in I. Rodriguez (ed.), *The Latin American Subaltern Studies Reader*, Duke University Press, Durham & London, pp. 424-444.



- Mignolo W. D., 2001, "Delinking", *Cultural Studies* 21(2), pp. 449-514.
- Prakash G., 1992, Postcolonial Criticism and Indian Historiography, *Social Text* 31-32, pp. 8-19.
- Said E., 1978, *Orientalism*, Pantheon Books, New York.
- Said E., 1984, "Reflections on Exile", *Granta* 13, pp. 137-149.
- Said E., 1993, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, New York.
- Sertoli G., 1974, "Nota introduttiva", in J. Conrad, *Cuore di tenebra*, Einaudi, Torino, pp. V-XLII.
- Shaw G., 2004, *Seeing the Unspeakable: the Art of Kara Walker*, Duke University Press, Durham (NC).
- Shoahat E., 1992, "Notes on the 'Post-colonial'", *Social Text* 31/32, pp. 99-113.
- Spivak G. C., 1987, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*, Routledge, London & New York.
- Vallorani N., 2010, "'Exterminate all the brutes'. I percorsi dell'invasione", in N. Vallorani (a cura di), *Tessiture. Letterature e culture di lingua inglese nella didattica dei Cultural Studies*, Firenze, Edit Press., pp. 23-58.
- Young R., 1995, *Colonial Desire*, Routledge, London.

Nicoletta Vallorani is Professor of English Literature and Cultural Studies at the University of Milan. Her specializations include visual studies, gender studies and queer studies. Among her works, we mention *Utopia di mezzo. Strategie compositive in When the Sleeper Wakes, di H.G.Wells* (1996), *Gli occhi e la voce. J. Conrad, Heart of Darkness: dal romanzo allo schermo* (2000), *Geografie londinesi. Saggi sul romanzo inglese contemporaneo* (2003), *Orbitals. Materiali e Script di London Orbital* (2009). Recently, she authored two volumes: *Anti/corpi. Body politics e resistenza in alcune narrazioni contemporanee di lingua inglese* (Libraccio Editore, 2012) and *Millennium London. Of Other Spaces and the Metropolis* (Mimesis, 2012). She also coordinates the project Docucity, on documentary filmmaking and urban geographies (<www.docucity.unimi.it>) and is the Deputy director of the online journal *Altre Modernità* (<<http://riviste.unimi.it/index.php/AMonline>>). Her current research has developed along a line of reflection that links literature to cinema and visual studies.

nicoletta.vallorani@unimi.it