

(CON)FIGURATIONS OF EXILE

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The contribution that follows would like to be a synthesis of the (theoretical-practical) work carried out in the workshop devoted to “Exile Writing. Arts and Technologies of Women”. The bibliography used in the workshop (the references to the pieces of art, in the form of novels, photography and video-art, dance performances and internet blogs) can be traced back in the proposal we offered to the participants.

Here I would try to explain the theoretical premise that brought me to reflect on the relevance of the figure of the exiled; then, in a development of this premise closer to my expertise, within gender studies or *écriture féminine*, I will try to show the interconnection between exile and women’s invention and creativity – the necessity of re-writing (in a ‘enlarged’ notion of *écriture*, as a gesture that “can remain purely oral, vocal, and musical: rhythmic or prosodic”) [1] the pains and sufferings of displacement, dislocation and diaspora, meets the capacity of female artists in a singular and exemplary manner: they narrate, envision, experiment, communicate the experience of their own and their communities’ exile with an intense drive for intimacy, sharing, and survival; even more, their ‘yes’ to life takes the shape of a consistent innovation, of the technologies peculiar to their arts, producing renovation and transformation, linkage, fragmentation, and recombination of the languages of *teckné*.

Hospitality

‘Banished’? O friar, the damned use that word in hell
(William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*)

“Any person who (...), owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable, or owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.”
(Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees”, Geneva, July 28th, 1951)

A figuration is a living map, a report in continuous transformation of the self; it is not a metaphor. Being nomads, homeless, in exile, refugees, victims of war rapes in Bosnia, migrants without fixed home, clandestine migrants, it is not a metaphor...it is history tattooed on one’s own body. [2]

Exile – the whole question of ‘hospitality’ resounds here: how to welcome the one who arrives unexpectedly, the one who flies away from the origin because of violence, expulsion, under the threat of death? What is so singular about the ‘figure’ of the exiled as to make it crucial for our thinking on hospitality? Hospitality should be absolute [3] – why does it connect to the singular figure of the exiled? Because, maybe it is the figure of the political par excellence, [4] maybe because s/he shares something common to human destiny – displacement, dislocation, diaspora, escape from the origin, insistent nomadism, loss and endurance. Julia Kristeva would say “we are all strangers to ourselves” [5] – the exiled

being experiences such strangeness even more, more vividly, under the strongest pressure – we might use the expression ‘on the skin’, if it did not keep its impression on the surface...

Women and the Arts

Much of the exile’s life is taken up with compensating for disorienting loss by creating a new world to rule. It is not surprising that so many exiles seem to be novelist, chess player, political activists, and intellectuals...

(Edward Said, “Reflections on exile”)

Skin/body – it is women who reach the highest percentage in the contemporary fluxes of exile. Among refugees, expatriates and the exiled, women undergo the imposed trajectories as the men away from their communities, in a double exposure – of race and gender. It would make a whole spectrum of difference; would not the hospitality due to the exiled woman be different? Would she ask for different acts of welcoming? ‘Who’ would welcome ‘whom’? Today, are not the women on the planet questioning the places of their confinement (the home, *oikos*), of belonging (women’s infinite practices of singularity) of residing – globalization, cosmopolitanism, crossing, fluidity? Women share the exile—from themselves; their ‘double’ exile – from themselves and from their mother tongue. They share it because they urge the work of hospitality – to their alterity, difference, hybridity, ‘monstrosity’, and constant metamorphosis. [6] To their ‘writing’ – it means here: their ‘arts and ‘technologies’. It can be a story, an image, a movement, dance, or internet writing; the diary, the novel, the short story; photography, video-art, digitality, blogs – there is an immense production of female oeuvre inspired by (the experience of) exile, devoted to the (impossible) testimony of its experiences, of its impossible trajectories – would this commonly mean ‘being thrown into the world’? Would this ‘common’ mean an abstract overcoming of the difference between privileged cosmopolitan women in the western world, and their sisters expelled and scattered throughout the world? No, it is, rather, difference itself – in the signs of writing, in the frames of photography, on the screens of the installations, recorded by a digital camera or shared on the screens of computers, women are ‘different’ from themselves and from the others, only commonly incapable of ‘staying’ within the boundaries, the pages, the frames, languages, limits; and thus, necessarily – it is their strategies of survival – capable of crossing (lines of lands/lands of lines), of trespassing (geographically, culturally, linguistically, technologically), of overflowing (history, disciplines, lives), finally able to celebrate – their own hybridity, monstrosity, metamorphosis...

Paths of Exile

The film *Transit* by Bani Koushnusdi (2004) follows a group of young exiled men throughout Italy, in their escape to Paris. In France, there is a small room waiting for them – where they will wait for a pass to England. In the room, it is impossible to sleep or sing; still, on a mattress, there is a silent girl – why does she never speak? Where does she go at night, taken out by the guardian? One of the guys, left alone with her, starts asking – over the gift of an orange, with a strange music coming from the radio, the story she tells is a story of separation, literal loss, extreme and lonely survival: the girl was escaping from persecution with her sister and family; at one point, they had to cross a river – the girl crossed the water; her sister, the husband and their children were left behind! She never saw them again; this was months ago – now she despairs over their destiny. The screen remains dark, the voices are low; on the screen, however, the story writes the beginning of a friendship – maybe the girl and the boy will make it together to London ...

This intense, dark and sad, wonderful and painful, film gives us the image of a specific diaspora: from Afghanistan to Europe. What about the journey away from the origin framed when it is framed by the photographer Emily Jacir, in her “Where we come from” (2003) or in “Memorial to 418 Palestinians villages that were destroyed depopulated and occupied by Israel in 1948”, to tell us of the exile par excellence – so cruelly inscribed on Palestinians after the originary diaspora of the scattered Jewish people? What about the Algerian exile, if it is the wonderful work by Zineb Sedira to narrate the destiny of the ‘mother tongue’ for the generations-to-come: the artist’s mother can speak only in Arabic, after years of permanence in France; the French – as a legacy of colonialism – spoken by her daughter; the English of her granddaughter? No origin, no sovereignty of one language [7] – exile is experienced in the multitude of languages – and if there is no communication through words, there will be love and affection through the eyes, the touch, the bond that dissipates beyond all claims to a commonality of origin. And what about “hai mish eishi” (“this is not life”, 2001), a video by Alia Arasoughly who gives space to the women’s everyday life contrasted with the television news from the Palestinian territories, or the docu-fiction “Who gives kisses from her lips” (2004) by Farkhondeh Simin, dealing with a different tradition of ‘marriage’ – it was once up to the women to choose their husbands – in Iran... (you can watch how some young women in Naples, Italy, rewrote their own paths through exile on <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=stteSX7w1ys>)

Exile-Writing

Obscure arrivals, transits and escapes – across the land of Afghanistan to Europe, between colonies and post-colonies; to give sense to the terrible conflict in Palestine; providing the details of the everyday life of women in an impossible confined life; perhaps, to let the memory of a different power of women emergence on the plane of visibility ... There are so many examples we could never be accurate here – still we could ask a different question: what would happen if we thought of exile as a territory for collaboration? If we thought of exiled women as agents of a common sharing? As the chance of the invention of new ‘bonds’, new collaborations, other forms of commonality, sensibility, and imagination? This could provide a line of attention across geographical boundaries, among female creations, in-between the female ‘I’ and the ‘eyes’ of women – in-between their arts and their technologies. In this case, we could gather the photographs of Newsha Tawakolian (www.neshatavakolian.com) together with the incredible images by Shirin Neshat in the series “Women of Allah”; we could compare, in their difference still re-sounding of the same chant, the video-art of Shirin Neshat in “Turbulent” (1998) and the retelling of Kenji Miyazawa’s *Milky Way Railroad* in “Night Passage” by Trinh T. Minh-ha (2004); [8] we could read the collaboration across the Partition of India and Pakistan between the novel *Cracking India* by Bapsi Sidhwa and its filmic re-elaboration in “Earth” by Deepa Mehta; we could read the extraordinary common work of the writer Sharmuch Parsipur and the director Shirin Neshat around the fairy tale and the film *Women without Men*; finally, we could enjoy the aesthetic collaboration of the choreographer Isabella Rocamora with some exiled women within their shared “Horizon of Exile”(2007); we could finally reflect on what is happening in North Africa now, with the revolutions in progress, thanks to the digital tales told by the blogs of the young women who want to inform, communicate, create dialogue and the con-division of history across a whole population of migrants, expatriates, and refugees...

The Castle of Crossed Destinies (Italo Calvino)

After two thousands years of world history dominated by the sacredness of the Baby Jesus, might women be in a position to give a different coloration to the ultimate sacred, the miracle of human life: not life for itself, but life bearing meaning, for the formulation of which women are called upon to offer

their desire and their works.

(J. Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred*)

This would only be 'one' line of work, the material for gathering women together and discuss, watch, think of exile, of its pains, together with their inventions. There would still be stories to tell – you can hear, watch and reflect on some of them, on their infinite paths of written and visual re-articulations their crossings of invention and creation, on the website 'Exile Writing' (http://www.melissaramos.com.au/exile_writing/index.html) – a palimpsest electronic space of the experiences of the women gathering in the Istanbul workshop, re-narrating, recreating, rewriting their sense of displacement in the city, on the page, on the screens, in the frames, according to their own 'thrown of chance'.

The crossing of reality and functionality, of creation and technological invention centres the figure of the female exiled as the locus of a necessary and urgent theoretical reflection, focusing on her artistic production as a crucial nexus of contemporary imagination – 'Exile Writing' can be taken as the collective proof of this thesis, through the narrative, visual, multimedia narration of our common displacement in Istanbul. Here I offer my own line of thought, one kind of path of reading its extreme potentiality – as if I were a character in Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, it is my way of making sense of the cards of our common story...

Once upon a time, the inhabitants of the city of Babel had no need of translation. There and then women – marine creatures searching, veiled or unveiled, the depth of the underworld – were fluid, unconfined within any barrier of language; their space was the sea, water, the fluxes and the movements of waves. Then came (the lost) translation, the confusion of languages, the speaking in tongue – it was the vertigo from which Zoë was born, the Byzantine Empress who died in 1050, now, as a child, cradled by the curve of the world. Exposed to displacement and violence, her first question was: "How can we find peace?" Music, more music!! Indeed, her birth, her emergence from water and silence, was soon exposed to the craziness of the world – frames, inside/inside, the minaret, the prayers, men fishing, men doing their abduction – rigid shapes raising to the sky, hierarchy, conflicts, wars – was she alone in this world? It seems she is surrounded by loneliness; still there is music, a local violin playing, and a 'throne' waiting for her, a small and lonely barge (would she not resemble the Queen of Egypt, Cleopatra?) waiting to take her on. It signs the moment of her 'aporetic' responsibility: she is in the middle of movement and stillness – where could she rest in such madness? Could she dance at the beat of the violin? Can she survive? In order to return to her underwater world, she urges for passionate stories that countersign her destiny – she looks for stars ("female, enlightened celestial bodies, material or immaterial, durable or ephemeral") and for the images taken for 'wander': man and woman separated; the sea and the sky, covering her soul, a veil to hide her tears – 'writing' would be her inventing way back home, once again... Around the mermaid, there is light and magic; death can be overcome by strength, destruction can be won by rebellion. Is she looking for justice in the world? Justice would rise onto the horizon as a sign of the future, l'à-venir, messianism without messiah. Placed in-between the Devil and the Papess, blissed by the banishment of the Pharmakon, writing would come to her/to us, from the water onto the surface – it would inscribe women's gathering around the goddess of Justice; it would feel other women's art and creativity, their thankful hands of invention – it would write their nightmares and dreams in spider webs, textiles, weaving and texting the cruelty of the world and, together, its militant witnessing: occupations of spaces of culture, birthing, improvements of common justice – fights/pride, battles! It would then follow the dance of the silhouette of chance, the choreography of women; it would perform the life of Zoë: life. [9] Would it be Theodora and her dog: a duo, two playmates who are "bound, bowing, wounded, found, hung, fallen, lumping, leading, turning" towards the invention of a new world, through the reappearance of music, the music of birds – with birds, there would be more poetry, more women, and more

courage...! [10] *The ladder of writing is only indicating another 'passage', another transit, a different path, a sense of community, communality and communion for the exile of women – from themselves and from their mother tongues...*

...we find: less and less poetry/less and less angels/less and less birds/less and less women/less and less courage. Jacob wakes up, he gets up. What becomes of the ladder? You have to take a rock, put it under your head, and let the dream ladder grow. It grows down – toward the depths. [11]

References and Notes:

1. Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other, or, the Prosthesis of Origin* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 1998), 65.
2. Rosi Braidotti, *Metamorphoseis* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2002), 11.
3. Jacques Derrida, *Cosmopolitanism* (the opening speech for the celebration of the first congress of the refugee-cities in Europe 1996, an initiative of the Parliament of the Writers to grant hospitality to the writing of exiled artists), and also *Of Hospitality* (Stanford: Stanford U.P., 2000).
4. Giorgio Agamben, "Politico dell'esilio," <http://isole.ecn.org/filiarmonici/agamben1998.html> (accessed September 2011).
5. Julie Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1991).
6. For the female 'monstrosity' in relation to the 'panic debate' on the veil in France, I refer to F. Benslama, "Le voile de l'Islam", *Contretemps*, 2 (1997).
7. *Fichu*, (Paris: Galilée), 2002 by Jacques Derrida; in Italian, the first publication of the essay was bearing the title "La lingua dello straniero."
8. Trin T. Minh-ha, "Reading Miyazawa Kenji and Making 'Night Passage'," *Anglistica*, 11, 1/2, 2007.
9. This is the 'task' of crossing zoo (biological life) and bios (the life to be told, capable of being written), accorded to the women of new century comes from C. Clément and J. Kristeva, *The Feminine and the Sacred* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2001) 14.
10. Helene Cixous, *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (New York: Columbia U.P., 1993), 108.
11. *Ibidem*.