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*Travelling concepts:
teaching complexity as the core of inter/transcultural literary studies*

I begin by positioning myself at the crossroads of the teaching positions (plural) I speak from. All of us live complex lives, and mine is no exception. As a tenured researcher at the University of Firenze, Italy, every year I am assigned the teaching of one or two modules in English Literature in addition to my usual tasks as senior researcher in Anglo-American Literature with a special interest in gender studies.

In our present university system, a 10-week module is supposed to give students some idea of a century of English Literature, and gender or women's studies are not specifically included in our degree program. But since I cannot and will not separate my research fields from course requirements, by long-standing departmental agreement I teach writing by women from English speaking countries and a variety of contexts, mid-18th century to the present. I use an interdisciplinary approach that combines geopolitical and transnational feminisms, postcoloniality, questions of migration, displacement, exile, identity, racism and homophobia with techniques of literary representation. I have the impression that my teaching a hybrid brand of gender studies under the heading of English Literature is viewed with miffed suspicion within the university, largely because it falls under no specific disciplinary field. However, this crosscultural mix well reflects my feminist history and could satisfy nicely my experimental bend in that direction if the course layout allowed satisfying exchanges with the students, which it doesn't. Hence the need to create some kind of interactive learning space outside academic boundaries.

For the past five years I have been involved with a small group of other local members of the Italian Society of Women in Literature in devising and organising a summer school for a week's residency of about fifty women students – native, immigrant, undergraduate, postgraduate – in order to experiment with intercultural curricula based on gender studies. Since a university degree is not required to attend the school (a necessary clause to include immigrant women), our project comes under the

heading of “life-long education” and is therefore eligible for university credits only by special agreement with individual teachers.

My teaching situations inside and outside the university differ, among other things, for reasons of students’ attendance -- a difference more noticeable until a couple of years ago before our university’s School of Letters opened an “intercultural” degree course alongside the traditional course in English language and literature. The students in my classes used to be Italian undergraduates of mixed gender and many shades of “white”. But when I taught two intercultural modules last year, 15% of first year students and 10% of second year students had foreign backgrounds. Teaching “white awareness” as a situated form of literacy, and explaining practices of embodiment in fiction to a mixed class of young and shy students was a challenge for me.¹ I was grateful for the experience acquired at our summer school, where we had tested methods and curricula with women of different cultural formations, levels of education, age, sexual preference, ethnicity, economic backgrounds.

Yet, our intercultural all-female school taught along feminist lines by several academic women together with other experts meets with patronising indulgence within academia rather than with the positive acknowledgement it should have after 4 years of favourable reviews and the support of local authorities. When I am in a good mood I view this as a high grade received for non-conformity.

We had planned the summer school curriculum so that a variety of teachers and students could enact together our “significant otherness”.² The need to establish a women’s summer school had arisen partly from a feeling of pedagogical frustration, but much more from the desire to involve other and diverse women in making a community where practices could stay attuned to our more theoretical feminist discourses. I use the plural here to indicate that differences in approach and belief in our group, which are part of the school’s training in cultural mediation. Theories must be able to travel from one situation to the other and beyond, flow back and forth, changing as they go – but at the same and every time they must translate into practice and (as Eva Skaerbeck once put it) work in practice.

¹ Clare Hemmings’ early position paper where she analysed the varied background of her students proved very helpful at that time.

² Donna Haraway in her “Manifesto for Companion Species”, p. 6.

The two teaching situations I have outlined may not seem to fit the overall ATHENA II project where grassroot feminist cultural activities (including life-long education) are kept separate from university gender curricula, but the pattern is common in many countries. Many women teachers, not only of my generation, have an activist background – with its tradition of reading groups, political discussions, social involvement, publishing, public speaking and other voluntary work. Some are involved solely in academic activities, but those of us who have retained some public feminist involvement often find their academic expertise on demand in non-academic teaching situations, especially now, with (inter)national and local authorities endorsing equal opportunity policies and related training requirements. Neoliberal flexible trends in education have already produced a wild diversification in teaching and training opportunities that in Italy and other countries involves a power struggle regarding private and public funding, teachers' careers, the status of credits and credibility, etc. Our modest summer school was not born to compete, yet its short history could serve as a further example of how Otherness is produced, sustained and enforced among women's projects.

And now, here is something more about goals, methods, and subjects. When this ATHENAI group first met, most of the keywords we chose for further inspection were already part of the teaching/learning context of our summer school. Gender, empowerment, difference, singularity, responsibility, positionality, adjectives like inter-, cross- and transcultural, were part of our ongoing debates on global issues and cultural representations. We had asked ourselves how can literature be more than a didactic aid and become a training of the imagination, and, in Gayatri Spivak's words, "how can literary studies prepare us for multiple-issue gender justice", and how can we make community and assume responsibility without exercising hegemonic power in so doing.³

Looking for a suitable feminist pedagogical approach, I had come across and liked the work of Adriana Hernández⁴ (Argentina) who considers pedagogy "a

³ Gayatri C. Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia U.P., 2003): 13, 39.

⁴ Adriana Hernández, *Pedagogy, Democracy, and Feminism. Rethinking the Public Sphere* (New York: SUNY P. 1997), see pp. 5,12,14.

counterdiscourse and public sphere that articulates multiplicity of counterdiscourses”. Her critical pedagogy of radical citizenship is related to feminist theory and “addresses questions of both knowledge and identity production and their connection within power relations”. She specifically addresses a variety of subject positions within postcolonialism, literary theory and other “theoretical fields that are undergoing radical renewal”, and sets a liberationist agenda for her process of theory making,

uncovering the link of the specific oppressions of women to the larger structure of capitalism, and to oppression of other groups – gays, minorities, the working classes, and so on – issues such as difference, the possibility of engaging in dialogue in spite of heterogeneity, and women’s representations through language.

During the four sessions of our summer school, we have found that her agenda works very well with and for most of the migrant women, and also for others who work in the social sciences, anthropology, and in the field of intercultural mediation, usually concerned with immigration politics, citizenship rights and other matters of urgent concern to immigrants.

Hernández’s liberationist agenda for a transformative pedagogy, with its commitment to democracy, social justice and social change, fits well in the intercultural discourse our summer school experiments with, but we also use many other conceptual frames to analyse the turbulent effects of globalization on our late capitalist societies. Planned by “women in literature”, the school is based on the study and practice of auto/biographical storytelling: how stories are told, how we share meanings, construct narratives, use rhetorical strategies, understand body language, experience signs, read images, etc. We draw attention to the *metanarratives* embedded in the stories, hoping that by deconstructing them we may realize how control, power and knowledge are, and have been, re/configured, and how we can resist some of their more unwholesome pulls. Our Silvia Bizzini describes a similar process in terms of how a subject “resists the way it is interpellated and symbolically identified”.

Self-reflexively, we school organizers try to resist this excessively literary bias. Luckily one of our founding members is a young and talented astrophysicist with a gift for relating key concepts both to everyday occurrences and to other disciplines, and two other young teachers are involved in cybernetics and artificial intelligence. Together they have shown us how scientific tropes operate in cognitive/existential dimensions

and in socio-political situations, how we make everyday use of images and metaphors related to cybernetics, quantum theories, chaos theory, and how scientific concepts affect our organization of reality, whether we discuss cultures and migrations, mediation and translation, or theory, poetry, and representations of complexity.

The paragraph that follows is a deleuzian reading given by Luciana Parisi and Tiziana Terranova (two Italians teaching in England) of the shift from modern to postmodern formations. I quote it because it well explains the kind of analysis on which we based our school program:

the dissolution of the solid walls of the disciplinary society... has not dismantled disciplinary power so much as released it throughout the social field. Post-disciplinary power operates in a space of flows, a liquid, turbulent space which it rules by way of modulation and optimisation.... Within societies of control, power must modulate itself on turbulence.... [and] complexity theory, chaos theory and connectionism are all concerned with this...".⁵

In preparation for last year's summer school, our steering group had decided to explore the boundaries of literature and science and to experiment with complexity (the theoretical field which questions order, disorder and the complex systems at the edge of chaos) in order to see if it would enable us to give a semblance or "unorderly order" to the migratory flows and the transcultural crossings which are part of our perception of global change within the context of technological wars, neoliberal environments, and that ensemble of phenomena labelled globalization. We gave ourselves one directive: that theories be complex and political strategies simple.

We had already worked on some of the concepts from different points of entry, such as not insisting on the binary of self/other but viewing otherness as situated on a differential grid of heterogeneity. The narratives we chose pointed out the complex individuality of "others" and drew topographies of whiteness. I had used those and other strategies when teaching "queering gender and its others" in my classes, and I found that critical pedagogy sustains quite well this cross-over of theoretical approaches, being by definition self-reflexive and self-critical, conscious of its constructed character and its commodity status. Teaching students to be critical and

⁵ Luciana Parisi and Tiziana Terranova, "Heat-death. Emergence and Control in Genetic Engineering and Artificial Life" *Ctheory. Theory, Technology and Culture* 23, 1-2 (also in http://www.ctheory.net/text_file.asp?pick=127). A good primer on chaos theory is James Gleick, *Chaos: Making a New Science*, Viking, New York 1987.

analytical is one of self-reflexive goals of this pedagogical approach, and the narratives of complexity we had chosen proved to be good honing stones.

We worked, inspired by our science-oriented young women, on how to apply scientific tropes to literature, film, discourse analysis; how to explore the socio-historical composition of ideas, arguments, theories; look into social examples of complex systems like slavery, apartheid, women's subordination; consider systems on the brink of overthrow, dissolution, implosion; or frame the painful knowledge of endangered or transforming species; we worked on metamorphic bodies, and one of us wrote a ground-breaking senior thesis on Italian F-to-Ms. We also worked on the translation of concepts and models, as in the case of scientific ideas incorporated in literary texts, and planned further parallel investigations of language and science, including writing itself AS technology. This particular line of inquiry has proved most productive for critics like Gillian Beer, Jane Tomkins, Anne Mellor, Adelaide Morris, N. Katherine Hayles, for a host of SF writers and critics like Pamela Zoline, Gwyneth Jones, Nicoletta Vallorani, Pat Cadigan, Laura Chernaik, Sarah Lefanu, and for cyberfeminism in general. It has also proved a great experience for us teachers and students together.

I can't remember who said that new situations require new subject formations, but our summer school proved the point. We necessarily discussed long and hard on subjectivity at every session -- Rosi Braidotti, Teresa De Lauretis, Donna Haraway and many others being some of our favourite scholars. Of the women teachers who attended regularly (and are part of this ATHENA team), Giovanna Covi had written extensively on "prismatic subjects" in relation to Caribbean literature, and Elena Pulcini has just published a book that features her hopeful definition of a "contaminated subject" exposed to the contagion of the Other's demand for care. Out of the discussions on networks, flows, and fractals came the need to track similar patterns in the texts written by migrant women which we were studying and in the stories of school participants. The recurrence of given narrative patterns which we called "fractal geometries" enabled us to frame "fractal subjects" -- entities that can be termed self-similar for the stories they tell, unique in their complexity but composed of repetitive units which are captured and held together by key themes behaving like strange attractors (exile, fear, silence, nostalgia, homesickness).

In all this complexity – which I must say most of us thoroughly enjoyed playing with -- we tried to remember that no matter how complex were theories and situations, our political strategies should be simple. One of our teachers, a journalist, connected the pattern of fractals to the lace she had seen in a museum in Vienna – women’s work from which she drew inspiration for a politics of resistance that was both modest and sustainable, based on “*organizing what there is*”. I think that she best explained what we have been trying to do as a group with limited economic resources but with such a rich network of women, ideas, friendship, political and social commitment. Not surprisingly this situation has produced yet another popular subject formation: those of us who have attended the school now call themselves “fiorelle”, after the villa where we meet. A transitory identity, no doubt, about which more anon, as we work around the trope of precariousness which was chosen for 2005.⁶

⁶ Some of the lectures from two Villa Fiorelli school sessions can be found in *Visioni in/sostenibili: Genere e intercultura*, eds. Clotilde Barbarulli and Liana Borghi (Cagliari: CUEC, 2003); *Figure della complessità: Genere e intercultura*, eds. Liana Borghi and Clotilde Barbarulli (Cagliari: CUEC, 2004). I have not specifically mentioned here the women involved in the project that I refer to. Information about them and the school in general can be found on our websites. Just ask Google for <Raccontarsi>.