

A tale of conversations and encounters

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ABSTRACT

The Special focus of *FES 5* presents two international projects of scientific research and political activism initiated by Claudia Gualtieri, Lidia De Michelis, Roberto Pedretti, Itala Vivan, BA and MA students at the Department of Language Mediation and Intercultural Communication of the University of Milan, in conversation with Chemnitz Technische Universität in Germany, and the University of Kent and Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group in the United Kingdom. The contributions that follow develop a conversation around the notions of mobility and immobility, brought to the foreground by the current European political situation, in order to devise strategies for renovating language by telling tales that generate effective humane encounters.

Keywords

storytelling, tales, mobility, immobility, Lampedusa, the Mediterranean, borders

Introduction

This section of *From the European South 5* offers a reflection on people's encounters through the opposing notions of mobility and immobility by presenting recent research projects and dialogues that have been ongoing at the University of Milan. In this context, mobility refers to today's movements of people from the southern shores of the Mediterranean Sea towards, across, and throughout Europe. Contrastingly, immobility indicates ways in which control over mobility is alarmingly producing strategies of pushing back: camp implementation, wall raising, indefinite detention, hostile environment, racisms, the suspension of human rights, and other forms of mobility prevention that disqualify and nullify encounters. With the aim of fighting visibly against this worryingly inhuman drive through culturally and politically incisive actions, dialogues have developed along diverse complementary trajectories that have focused on the Souths and Norths of contemporary movements of people, hence weaving a network of encounters. Recently, at the University of Milan, this international and interdisciplinary network has included people and groups in a variety of roles and positions in societies: scholars in different fields, artists, students, storytellers, activists, voluntary workers, and people who, in their own way, wish to contribute actively to the debate on mobility and encounters.

A fundamental strategy of their shared and various activism has centred on language and storytelling. There is, these various participants insist, a need to revise the words that popular rhetoric has been using rashly to describe movement as 'migration', process as 'crisis',

people as ‘enemies’, arrogant power as ‘established and unquestionable right’, thus raising hard borders, both visible and invisible, among people. It is advocated here that telling tales will help both to forge new visions and to invent new languages for fruitful conversations. In this section, two trajectories will be presented that have clustered around the projects “Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe” and “Refugee Tales,” the first in collaboration with Chemnitz Technische Universität in Germany, the second with University of Kent and Gatwick Detainees Welfare Group in the United Kingdom.

At its outset in 2014, “Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe” was sponsored by the DAAD Hochschuldialog mit Südeuropa of the German Foreign Office, which renewed its financial support in 2016. This continuity allowed the dialogue between northern and southern Europe to expand in consideration of the recent and continuous developments regarding the European situation. The critical analysis relied on the contextual, contingent, transdisciplinary, and resistant methodological approaches of Postcolonial studies and Cultural studies. Hence, the conversation has extended to embrace the Refugee Tales project. At the moment of writing this introductory essay, the project “Hostile Environments: Policies, Stories, Responses” – emerging out of Refugee Tales and associated projects, and led by David Herd, with Claudia Gualtieri and others as co-applicants – has been awarded British Academy funding under the programme “Tackling the UK’s International Challenges.”

This collaborative international network of people, ideas, and projects ambitiously aims at observing people’s movement on the global world scene through the lens of local examples and through the practice of storytelling. Mainly clustering around the geographical locations of Milan, Chemnitz, and southern England, this dossier will attempt to show how locally contextualised situations help to frame the ways in which people’s mobility has too often been interpreted as problematic and dangerous. By contrast, the essays here will show how the sharing of tales may help to contradict populist rhetoric and official history by offering visions that widen understanding, sharpen awareness and encourage solidarity. A fruitful connection of official history and personal stories occurs through storytelling, through the power of spoken and creative words, such as those of the tales of the refugees and the rap song presented in the essays, as well as through the portraits that capture diverse encounters with a compelling immediacy and which bring our inquiry to a close.

Methodology: the contiguity between postcolonial and cultural studies

The methodological approach adopted in this dossier is dialogic, just as Cultural studies and Postcolonial studies intrinsically are as regards both their ideology and praxis. As cultural, artistic, and political movements, they were born and developed in different, often distant, contexts; had diverse ideological affiliations, creative expressions, and militant applications. However, it seems strategically relevant to highlight how their intersection and contiguous concerns provide a useful set of tools – unquestionably valuable for the projects presented

here – with which to address today’s complexities.

Postcolonial studies examines the modern phenomenon of European colonialism as a paradigmatic expression of how conquest, exploitation, slavery, aggression, and ferocity operate in order to impose power and subjection. It also detects ambivalence in the colonial discourse of power and oppression, and observes how the complicity of culture and empire opens possible spaces of resistance, as Edward Said and other well-known postcolonial intellectuals have argued (Said 1978, 1993; Bhabha 1984, 1985). In this light, postcolonial theoretical and pragmatic concerns concentrate on the constitution of the subject and on the possibility for each subaltern subject to speak and act, to be part of a new history. Individual stories then help to re-write the colonial master narrative and official history by offering dissenting perspectives, hybrid versions and alternative visions according to diverse agencies and voices. Difference is a key concept that allows a resistant theorisation of the colonial system of dominion, enslavement, and violence. On resistance, postcolonial critical theory continues to shape actions of interrogation and protest against all forms of imperial power and its master narrative in favour of plurality and hybridisation, which determine new articulations of the subject’s identity and status in society. This subject position entails both the achievement of public voice and the political responsibility of contributing to a collective revision of uneven power relations and arrogant power expressions. These key notions make of the postcolonial an interpretative and operative paradigm that extends beyond the temporal borders of the modern European colonial enterprise to include our present time.

In a complementary way, for the scope of this dossier, Cultural studies roots in context and conjuncture – namely, in their social and political combination – its definition of culture as daily-life production, and recognises in the focused analysis of this combination the possibility to devise incisive, socially, and culturally transformative projects. Attention to social context and daily practices allows for the magnification of trivial, subordinate, ignored, and apparently irrelevant life expressions and for their inclusion in a re-founded tale of history. As Lawrence Grossberg claims in *We all want to change the world*: “Cultural Studies believes one must always begin by denaturalizing what appears to be obvious and taken for granted [...] prising apart relations that appear to be natural, inevitable, necessary and universal and showing how they have been constructed” (2015: 221). Raymond Williams’s definition of culture as a whole way of life also reformulates the concept of the subject as primary and responsible agent in any specific context and conjuncture of action (1958). This political and ideological involvement of the subject leads to a project-based strategy, which also informs a new critical and political pedagogy and relies on the public function of the intellectual. As Grossberg claims in “Making Culture Matter, Making Culture Political”: “The intellectual remains responsible, before all else, to the world and those suffering from the existing relations and structures of power. [...] the intellectual is responsible as well to the demand of producing the best knowledge possible about what’s going on” (2017: 27, 28; see also Giroux 2011).

The sketched contiguity between Postcolonial studies and Cultural studies is critical in enabling us to reflect upon and act within our postcolonial present. For the purpose of this dossier on mobility, immobility, and encounter, I endorse the by now widely shared extension and updating of the notion of the 'postcolonial' beyond the chronological frame of modern European colonialism to include a new modernity (Chambers 2018). The postcolonial condition we are living in presents widespread mobility, cultural hybridisation, and the mixing of languages and stories. It is a global condition which, in diverse contexts, produces different situations, relationships, cultural practices and forms of subordination never witnessed before (Mezzadra 2007). This condition also defines an ideological and political intellectual stance, which requires that action be taken locally and explicitly from within the contexts and conjunctures that individuals and groups experience daily.

In this light, I wish to draw attention to storytelling, to spoken and creative words, to testimonies, to the very act of telling tales as modes of reconstituting people's lives in conversation, and of reformulating common, shared stories. Within this frame, the essays here included offer contextualised stories of mobility, immobility, and encounters along the South-North European route.

The projects: "Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe" and "Refugee Tales"

The project "Crisis, Risks and New Regionalisms in Europe" is described in Roberta Garruccio's essay, which underlines the dual focus the project adopted: "Cultural Studies Workshop" and "Emerging Diasporas and Borderlands." The project aimed at examining the systemic crisis of contemporary Europe and the emergence of new regionalisms and political populism that threatened to disrupt the European Union. A third step, "Crisis, Risks, New Regionalisms and Im(Mobility) in Europe," showed an additional focus in the pluri-annual research project on the contemporary European crisis by concentrating on mobility and immobility as factors of increasing social unrest, political division, and growing violence both in Germany and in Italy. Cecile Sandten's essay offers a cultural analysis of recent outbursts in the city of Chemnitz.

Since what has been defined as the "mobility turn" and the "mobility paradigm," "mobility studies" have developed widely, encompassing a variety of phenomena, trends, "regimes of mobility" and the power relations and social inequalities that complicate the diverse forms of mobility (see van der Velde and van Naerssen, 2018; Salazar and Smart, 2011). However, the analytical compass of the project concerns the limitations to mobility within the specific frame of the South-North European route: a factual and imaginary line that extends from northern Africa – an unspecific point of departure for a generalized wave of migration in common popular rhetoric – northwards across Italy and Germany to the United Kingdom. The argument for a radical rethinking and a revision of the principle of, and the right to mobility, which is taking place in our present time when movement is hindered by both subtle strategies of immobility

and violent forms of immobilisation, stands out as a major motivation of the contributors to this project.

In the current European context, politics of protection separate and imprison people, while political populism and resurgent conservative drives prevent the possibility of dialogue and constrain practices of solidarity and welcoming. In addition, political and cultural forces appear unable to analyse, understand and elaborate both the fears and the problems existing in European countries where globalisation and rampant capitalism are creating havoc. Unemployment, growing poverty and inequality, lack of definite perspectives and uncertainty about the future present realistic material challenges, while populist rhetoric and media-hype create the emotional background and amplify the anxiety and irritation that produce a situation unable to absorb new tensions and develop policies of openness to mobility.

In this gloomy atmosphere, the project “Refugee Tales” may be described as an exemplary form of utopia in the present. The notion of utopia is here conceived as a political and ethical project – rooted in Ernst Bloch’s principle of hope – that begins in the present and is put into practice in the form of “doing”/making a utopian process possible (Gualtieri 2018). The projects develop as conversations that concern movement, the possibility, or impossibility, of moving and to think about moving across the Mediterranean and northwards in Europe. On the right to move, wars on mobility, and human mobility as “the key dimension of the big, planetary shifts that are under way”, Achille Mbembe has elaborated suggestions for the future of life and reason for Africa and Europe (2019: 16). This complex form of mobility – or lack of mobility – entails both physical movement and the movement of immaterial feeling, of performative practices, of original forms of utopia in the present that unambiguously lead *off-line* beyond factual and linguistic borders.

The refugee tales that David Herd presents in his essay are built on the structure of Geoffrey Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales*, and are both an act of political protest and a gesture of poetic imagination for the present and the future. Following the legacy of the literary text and employing it as a lever for change, the walks provide the physical and affective context in which the stories of asylum seekers, refugees, persons who have experienced indefinite detention and undocumented migrants, are listened to, told and re-told, re-imagined and passed around while walking, resting, eating and meeting people. It is in the powerful combination of ideas, analyses, memories, representations, performance and conversations about the feelings that imprison and, conversely, help to unfold the contexts in which the stories came into being, that encounters are possible. Following this inspiration, Lidia De Michelis’s essay explores how the Refugee Tales are practices for restoring hope. Stories are passed around and re-told in order to change the affective landscape in which they are produced. Also, they are listened to and shared in order to inspire political action.

If the tales of Refugee Tales cross the linguistic borders of widespread jargon, conventional rhetoric, worn out political formulae, and the established language of the literary canon

and of conventional history narratives, the project's walks (in which these stories are listened to cross both physical borders and the immaterial boundaries of affect and diverse life experiences. A keyword for this factual and symbolic border crossing is solidarity, a term that characterises both a humane and a political stance. The politics of walking and the practice of solidarity take place and grow through language: the communal, engaging act of storytelling as explicit strategy of border traversing.

In order to exemplify how this all happens, I will briefly tell the tale of my own participation in the 2019 refugee walks. It is not an easy task, because of the emotional and intellectual involvement that the community of walkers experiences and shares: a resolute commitment that persists afterwards. The perspective from which I wish to present my contribution is in the form of a personal tale made of two interconnected stories: one refers to being there, one among others, having signed up for a five-day walk from Brighton to Hastings along the south-eastern shores of the United Kingdom; the other refers to a lunch talk I was asked to give and which I decided should include my 2016 travel to Lampedusa within the frame of the terrible shipwreck of 3 October 2013 and the case of Carola Rackete, the captain of the rescue ship Sea-Watch 3, who, at the time of my talk, was attempting to dock at Lampedusa against Italian Vice-Prime Minister Matteo Salvini's security decrees.

2019 Refugee Walks: "Lampedusa on my mind"

On 5-10 July 2019, the Refugee Walks followed the south-eastern shore of the United Kingdom in order to mark (and ideally challenge, defy and undo) a border that is protected by the application of indefinite detention for refugees and asylum seekers. Since 2015, the proclaimed political aim of the walks has been to call for an end to indefinite detention. Drawing inspiration from the *Canterbury Tales's* structure, every evening tales are told which will be included in a published collection. In 2019, the volume *Refugee Tales III* has been issued. *Refugee Tales* was published in 2016 and *Refugee Tales II* in 2017. In the three collections, readers read and listen to tales that are mostly told by refugees and asylum seekers to established writers, in the majority of cases, who lend their written words. But the whole walk is basically an act of storytelling, as I experienced during the 2019 iteration. As a matter of fact, walkers get to know each other through telling their personal stories and become acquainted with one another by listening to stories. Clearly, not all the tales will be written and collected in books but all will contribute to the conversation and to the significant process of story-building that happens while walking. Like mosaic tiles, the walkers' tales, their life stories, their doubts, questions and expressions of friendship will become part of the personal tale that everyone will bring back home. Individual tales will be diverse, expanded and enriched by the conversations: each will contain a plurality of stories.

Practically, for those who apply for the whole walk, five full days will be spent with the group. On July 6, as soon as we started walking, spaces of encounter opened and con-

versations bloomed. I was approached by people who had stories for me and I asked all the possible questions I had in mind. As a scholar, I was eager to understand more of what was going on, and also had some potential academic criticism in mind as regards how the project had been conceived and sustained. Stories dissipated my scepticism and filled the gaps of my intellectual curiosity. More interestingly, they answered unexpressed questions as regards the secrets that stories always preserve while, in the meantime, revealing other imaginings. This secrecy proved to be a key notion that helped me to realise that solidarity is not dependent on fully understanding, but in listening, walking, sharing personal tales, imagining a new language and looking with new eyes. While listening to evening readings of the tales, I could recognise the storytellers behind the words of the actual writers. A tale acquired a face, a body, a voice and a wider and more complex meaning. Surprisingly and pleasurably, each tale extended imaginatively beyond the words on the page and developed in more words, stories, images, feeling, visions and relationships.

I resolved that my lunch talk would be my public personal tale, not at all similar to the refugee tales in content but consistent in form. I gave it the title “Lampedusa on my mind” (Gualtieri 2019). As a matter of fact, the island was in the process of becoming the stage of a further narrative of migration and confinement. In my talk, it was presented as a symbolic border, such as Calais and Ventimiglia in Europe, Libya in northern Africa, and the Mexico-USA borderline in America. From a general perspective, I suggested that Lampedusa be employed as a working tool, a paradigm for places of border and confinement, in order to perceive both the shortening of geographical distance and the urgency to face the effects that practices of bordering and indefinite detention produce in diverse contexts.

In describing my 2016 trip to Lampedusa, I took as my premise the fact that some information was missing, especially concerning the hotspot which I knew was located in the centre of the island. I could not personally verify the application of juridical norms, and other information was also ambiguous. My tale resulted in a partial picture of the island as far as details on rescuing, migration, and detention were concerned. Significantly and affectingly, after the talk and while walking, I was approached by people who had experienced life in the Lampedusa hotspot, had been rescued in Lampedusa and detained there. They provided the information and data missing in my tale, which they wanted to share. While my tale was still incomplete, the experience of sharing it was important not least because it allowed me to appreciate how stories grew and embraced all the walkers: how they join the community of storytellers that every edition of the Refugee Tales gathers in ways which are increasingly captivating and international in their intent and scope. Words create the bond and give the community its emotional and revolutionary force.

Words are powerful both for their political function and for their intellectual and creative strength, even more so when serious social challenges and political difficulties affect everybody. Raymond Williams pointed out how words are a barometer of social change and cultural

transformation. Cultural studies and politically engaged intellectuals have continued to be alert to the fundamental function of words in culture and society, because they signal emerging revolutionary dynamics that need acute scrutiny and critical analysis. The New Keywords Collective (2014) has quite recently observed how the use of such words as migration and borders have conveyed radical changes in the global world.

Postcolonial studies has been similarly concerned with the revolutionary function of language as a radical form of resistance. Its fundamental objective has been that of exposing the lies of colonial discourse and unmasking ambiguous colonial rhetoric while, in the meantime, re-writing colonial history and culture by way of postcolonial counter discourse. A postcolonial strategy of word-revision and language re-invention shows how to look with new eyes beyond the deception of colonial artifice. As Siphso Sepamla writes in the poem “Words, Words, Words”: they are colonial words that enslave and hide subordination and exploitation:

we are talking of words
words tossed around as if
denied location by the wind
we mean those words some spit
others grab
dress them up for the occasion
fling them on the lap of an audience
we are talking of those words
that stalk our lives like policemen
words no dictionary can embrace

we mean words
that spell out our lives
words, words, words
for there's a kind of poetic license
doing the rounds in these parts (1984, 104)

The cathartic power of spoken words is the magic of creation. Words have the power of revelation. Creative words are redeeming, saving, and healing. They unite and strengthen, help to invent new imaginings and create new worlds.

Of the magics of words, literature has offered endless examples. Chaucer's pilgrims with their wise and perceptive tales and Hamlet's sarcastic, cultured, often mysterious words have inspired practices of resistance and re-creation. Today, from postcolonial and culturalist perspectives, a powerful invitation for a reinvention of words as agents of transformation is coming from across the Mediterranean: from the South of the world, suggestions for saving words are coming.

To foreground the primacy of real people, experiences and place, and in the form of a praise to the creative word, the closing section of the dossier presents pieces of writing by a university student. It has been the policy of our extended research group at Milan University to gather students who are willing to contribute to the debate with their fresh and original gaze and insight, and to raise their voices in solidarity. Andrea Farabegoli's texts encapsulate

portraits of people, swift interactions, simple daily actions and expressions that invite careful observation on apparently trivial moments of human life, which are, nonetheless, essential steps in paving the way for more welcoming and humane forms of storytelling. These compositions from the pen of a teenager, now university student, call for a pause and for a receptive closer look, and imaginatively expand the meaning and benefit of encounters.

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