Cross-Cultural Encounters:
Identity, Gender, Representation

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CHRISTOPHER COLUMBUS HAS A DREAM

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I'd like to start from a beautiful story written by the Anglo-Indian writer Salman Rushdie. The title is 'Christopher Columbus and Queen Isabella of Spain consummate their relationship'. Here, America is opportunity, hope, desire: and, indeed, the erotic impulse that drives Columbus and Isabel towards America is the eroticism of the Possible. Columbus is described as an idiot, with sparkling eyes dreaming of a golden paradise beyond the western border of Things. The Queen is always promising him everything he wishes, but later, the same day, she does not even see him, as if he were transparent. Columbus does not understand her behaviour, but he knows that she is full of discontent. No conquest can ever satisfy her, nothing seems to be enough to make her happy. When even the Alhambra is hers, she ... yawns.

Columbus is desperate and full of anger, because Isabella, by killing his love and hopes, is also killing the dream of the Possible. He lost his dream of the New World, he lost money and patronage; this loss, Columbus says, 'is as bitter as unrequited love' (Rushdie 1995: 115). Thus, he finally gives up hope and decides to move away from the Queen, and rides for days and days. 'He walks beyond fatigue, beyond the limits of endurance and the frontiers of self, and somewhere along this path he loses his balance, he falls off the edge of his sanity, and out here beyond his mind's rim he sees, for the first and only time in his life, a vision' (1995: 115). It is the dream of a dream: he dreams, in fact, that Isabella has a vision, and in this vision she finally understands that she needs Columbus because she will never 'be satisfied by the possession of the Known. Only the Unknown, perhaps even the Unknowable, can satisfy her'(1995: 116). In Columbus' dream, Isabella cries desperately, and sends her messengers for him, and when they reach him, he keeps hiding from them, enjoying the sour taste of revenge. But then he wakes up and finds Isabella's messengers around him, imploring him to go back to her. He would like to say he is not going, but his impulse is stronger than his pride. Like 'a groom on his wedding day', Columbus stands up, and tells the heralds: 'Yes, I'll come' (1995: 119).

In this story, included in his collection *East, West*, Salman Rushdie, a writer who experienced the meaning of life in exile, as he moved as a young man from India to England, recreates the

encounter between Columbus and Isabella, maybe because this encounter represents the most crucial event in modernity, since it changed the world for ever; and it can even help explain why Rushdie himself had to move, one day, from his India/East, to England/West, like so many millions of people who had to leave their countries for ever and go find their fortune in other lands.

Columbus'discovery gave indeed an immense impulse to the successive travels of exploration and conquest, that facilitated the expansion of the Western dominion (i.e. European hegemony), often imposed all over the rest of the world in the name of a civilizing mission: from the Atlantic, to the Pacific, and Mediterranean Seas, to the Caribbean we can easily find unexpected links and contacts among very distant places and cultures, as well demonstrate, for instance, all the European languages spoken in India, Africa, America, Australia.

Christopher Columbus – as historian C.L.R. James explains – after landing on the island of San Salvador, and praising the Lord, immediately started his gold-rush. Haiti, called Hispaniola, became the Eldorado, whose docile natives were slaughtered and enslaved. When the compassionate Bartolomé de Las Casas implored the Spanish King to abolish slavery for the natives, insisting on their human nature, he convinced the King to import niggers from Africa – in 1517 Charles V authorised the exportation of 15.000 slaves to Santo Domingo – and that was the origin of the slave trade in the world, and of slavery in America (James 1938).

Odd correspondences of distant places; men violently transplanted from their African motherlands, over those seas, that Paul Gilroy defines the Black Atlantic, to work to death in the tobacco, cotton and sugarcane plantations, the favourite merchandise for European markets and tables (Gilroy 1993).

In Africa the Guinea coasts were the most familiar to the slave-traders. Even Robinson Crusoe, the hero of modernity in Western literature, is shipwrecked while travelling to the Guinea coasts, to import slaves for his tobacco and sugar plantations in Brazil.

Stories are then intertwined and communicating; and they must be interpreted in this complicating perspective which emphasizes the connections among cultures and events, as the French historian Serge Gruzinski proposes. In his reading of the Catholic Monarchy, for instance, this political entity possesses a real planetary dimension. The Catholic Monarchy, which implied all the territories under Phillip II since 1580, including Portugal and its overseas possessions, is for Gruzinski the cradle of the first world-economy, with planetary interactions among Christianity,

Islam, and the so-called idolaters, a category including both native American and African religiosity and the ancient Asian religions, but also the place where the networks created by the religious orders, by the Jesuit company, by Italian bankers, connected the four continents. The Catholic Monarchy is present in places which are geographically and historically distant, like Mexico City, Lima, Salvador de Bahia, Manila, Macao, Goa or Luanda, prodigiously extending European horizons (Gruzinski 1996).

And again, it was Columbus who inaugurated for the European the opportunity to confront himself with something completely different from himself: indeed, the long lasting western tradition of exhibiting the *Other*, as *monstrum*, or *wonder*, dates back to Columbus, who brought with him some Arawaks to the Spanish court, one of whom was left on display there for two years. Montaigne wrote his famous essay on cannibals (1562) after he saw some native Americans presented to the King of France as a gift. Shakespeare's inspiration for Caliban was an *Indian* exhibited in London. Pocahontas the Indian (1617) arrives in London to advertise Virginia tobacco, and she will die soon after for a disease caught in England. And the most recent case is the exhibition of a black woman at the Minnesota State Fair in 1992.

In five hundred years Australian Aborigines, Tahitians, Aztecs, Iroquois, Cherokee, Iowas, Hottentots, Somalians, Guianese, Nubians, Zulus, Patagonians, East Indians, Japanese, and many others, have been exhibited as popular entertainment in fairs, zoos, circuses, museums, gardens, squares. In the Eighteenth century these exhibitions popularized the idea of the *Noble Savage*, so central to Enlightenment philosophy. These exhibitions were reinforcing racial stereotypes, justifying colonial crimes, the ones already committed and the ones still to be committed. But they were also reinforcing the white man's sense of racial unity, both in Europe and in Northern America. Exhibiting physical deformities could also signal the evident inferiority of the Other: the Hottentot Venus (1810), with her excessive shapes, pointed at the exuberant sexuality of the Southern African race.

And we should also remember that the fascination with the exotic and the primitive was at the basis of much avant-garde art in Europe, as Dadaism, Surrealism, Cubism or other modernist trends in art, obsessed with the idea of origins, primordiality and authenticity, well demonstrate (Clifford 1988).

Lately, celebrating Columbus' discovery has become for many artists the occasion to remember the famous quincentenary with

events of counter-celebration. Among these events, we can choose the performance *The Couple in the Cage, A Guatinaui Odissey* created in 1992 by the Chicano artist Guillermo Gómez-Peña and the Puerto Rican American artist Coco Fusco, who always address in their works the complex articulation of cultural identity and intercultural communication. The original intent of the performance was a satirical one, as performer artist Coco Fusco explains:

> Our original intent was to create a satirical commentary on Western concepts of the exotic, primitive Other; yet, we had to confront two unexpected realities in the course of developing this piece; 1) a substantial portion of the public believed that our fictional identities were real ones; and 2) a substantial number of intellectual, artists, and cultural bureaucrats sought to deflect attention from the substance of our experiment to the 'moral implications' of our dissimulation, or in their words, our 'misinforming the public' about who we were. The literalism implicit in the interpretation of our work by individuals representing the 'public interest' bespoke their investment in positivist notions of 'truth' and depoliticized, ahistorical notions of 'civilization' (Fusco 1995: 37).

Gómez-Peña and Coco Fusco have represented in some European and American cities, from Madrid to London, from Chicago to New York, a truly displacing performance, by appearing in a cage, as extraordinary specimens of a yet undiscovered tribe, from the unknown island Guatinaui, in the Gulf of Mexico. Exhibited in public city squares and other public spaces, like museums and other strongholds of western knowledge, these *primitives* would perform tribal dances, and narrate stories in their *authentic* language, wearing animal skins, modern trainers, necklaces and bracelets, sunglasses, and other modern gadgets. The woman, the female specimen, with a straw skirt on, would be typewriting on her laptop, or dancing rock music played by her radio. For five dollars the male specimen would show his genitals, and for a dollar he would tell a Guatinaui folklore story; for less money you could have your picture taken with the two specimens stroking your hair. To guarantee the *scientificity* of the exhibition, assistants outside the cage would provide plausible explanations and false maps, full of details on the non-existent Guatinaui island.

The artists, of course, would never imagine that their performance could be mistaken for a real exhibition of human beings. Many people, in fact, never doubted the truthfulness of the performance and would ask many questions about the strange habits of these two primitives. Many others felt deeply offended

at such a racist exhibition, still thinking it was a real event. The performance, as Coco Fusco points out, was characterized by a strong interactive effect: the artists were focusing less on what they did then on how people interacted with them and interpreted their actions (1995: 40).

This performance *The Couple in the Cage. A Guatinaui Odyssey* confronts us with the invisible in history, or, better, with the repressed which, never fully removed, can always come back to take us by surprise. From the past, from a distant place, from the unknown, from the land yet undiscovered, there appears the confrontation with two specimens, scrutinized by our inquisitive looks, craving for an *other* to admire, and onto which to project the white man's fantasies about the other, which are ultimately fantasies about oneself. The cage becomes a sort of screen over which the white onlooker projects his own fantasies about the *other* and about himself. His central position confirms his position as a global consumer of exotic cultures, while the accent on authenticity as an aesthetic value remains fundamental for the entertainment (1995: 47).

This *reverse ethnography*, as Coco Fusco defines the experiment, compels us to explore our prejudice, our identity awareness, our history, our sense of being, and of not being. To believe strongly in the museum as a stronghold for truth, and to make sure that a real primitive exists, means for us to be able to declare who we are and, above all, who we are not.

This might be the hidden sense of utopia, the non-existent place which allows us to project on it our desires and expectations, anxieties and fears. Guatinau is the island which doesn't exist, the imagined island which promises to reflect back to us the image of what we would like to believe we are. Utopia as an ideal model of perfect society, for desires and expectations unrealized in our own land: the pure uncontaminated land desired by the man suffocated by the urban dimension; on the other hand, utopia is the place for the monstrosity, the absence of civilization, and the wilderness, inhabited by that beast we are not: the typically degraded vision that the colonizer portrays of the man he wants to colonize (Retamar 1989: 21).

We can find in the imaginary island what we would like to be and not to be. And the Noble Savage is there, waiting for us, gently and full of gratitude, like Friday with Robinson Crusoe, following the script that the Western imagination would like to compose. Like Friday, the good savage should always be as docile as to allow us to dress him differently and feed him, but also to teach him the white man's language, not too much, just what is needed to be able to execute the Master's orders; Friday was not

too expert in his master's language, even after twenty years spent together with Robinson on the desert island, because the gap between the West and the Other must be evident, visible, measurable – and it must be heard, too, as Joseph Conrad explains in *Heart of Darkness* (1899) through the image of Kurtz's voice, the voice of a demi-god from Europe, with his imperious, authoritarian, penetrating, powerful, uncontrasted voice.

On the other hand, if in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, Caliban succeeds in learning beautifully the language that his master taught him, and he moves in it so wonderfully that, much later, the English poet W. H. Auden could imagine it distilled into the metaphysical prose that Caliban offers in the long poem *The Sea and the Mirror* (1939), even then something will betray the beast in Caliban's nature, the untrustworthy nature, of an inferior being: his bestiality is, in fact, immune to the civilizing word that his Master teaches him; his attempt at raping Miranda condemns him forever among the monsters of humanity.

However, when in the performance by Coco Fusco and Gómez-Peña, *The Couple in the Cage*, some people among the audience observe insolently the male's genitals and the sensual body of the female *specimen*, they are considered adventurous and naughty, but they would never be considered disgusting, repulsive, and inferior humans, as Caliban was. As artist Coco Fusco explains:

> Our experiences in the cage suggested that even though the idea that America is a colonial system is met with resistance – since it contradicts the dominant ideology's presentation of our system as a democracy – the audience reactions indicated that colonialist roles have been internalized quite effectively. The stereotypes about nonwhite people that were continuously reinforced by the ethnographic displays are still alive in high culture and the mass media. Imbedded in the unconscious, these images form the basis of the fears, desires, and fantasies about the cultural Other (1995: 48).

Yet, Columbus'America was also the *Eldorado* of the many Italians, in search of an opportunity in the land of promises; they too were familiar with the physical and cultural ghettoizations that today we reserve for the foreigners appearing on our shores. Back then, in America, Italian immigrants, who mostly from Southern Italy tried their luck overseas, were not considered *whites*, and yet they were not *blacks*. They were called *dagos*, from *daggers*, and they were violent, dirty, untrustworthy and ignorant, as historian Gian Antonio Stella explains in his recent book *L'Orda, Quando gli albanesi eravamo noi,* published in 2002. The title, which we could roughly translate in English as *The Horde,*

When We Were the Albanians, presents in a way a sort of subliminal answer to the Albanian catastrophe described in Gianni Amelio's 1994 film *Lamerica*. The Italians, after black people, were the most ghettoized community and also the most lynched in America, that America that Mark Twain used to call 'United States of Lyncherdom'.

Stories which reappear today, in the current events of immigration. Maybe, these stories come back, to question us about our past, and, above all, about our present.

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