A MEDITERRANEAN PERSPECTIVE ON MIGRANTS' FLOWS IN THE EUROPEAN UNION: PROTECTION OF RIGHTS, INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS AND INTEGRATION POLICIES

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FEMALE CORPO-GRAPHIES IN THE MEDITERRANEAN PERFORMANCE ZONE
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Trespassing into the Mediterranean cartography, through the critical map of Mona Hatoum drawn by Celeste Ianniciello, I would like to propose further configurations of female artistic practices and poetics, with the aim of offering a personal response to the themes of migration in the contemporary Mediterranean. I will then briefly discuss the performative experimentations carried out by some female artists who move, write and dance inside and outside the aesthetical and political borders of the Mediterranean Sea. In this sense, I will highlight the bodily tension of their languages, their compositional desire of re-mapping and re-imagining new corporeal geographies, proposing alternative sensorial and identitarian modes of inhabiting the Euro-Mediterranean space.

The material and symbolic construction of the Mediterranean as a borderland, among which, the institutional politics of management of migration, and the subalterns' strategies of adaptation, contestation and subversion of 'Fortress Europe', enable the space of its sea to become a potential imaginary zone of performance for the activism and the experimentation of different art practitioners. As the French feminist writer Catherine Clèment reminds us, "… somewhere, every culture has an imaginary zone for what is excluded, and it is that zone we must try to remember today" (Clèment and Cixous 1986, 6). To echo this, I explore the Mediterranean as the methodological resource for alternative gender-critical investigations, envisioning its performance zone as the imaginary-actual-virtual space that serves to retrieve back excluded bodies, forgotten voices, hidden movements, and negated traces of otherness. In my interpretation, this marks the emergence, out of the sea's liquidity, of unfixed and fluid forms of female agency, the choreo-politics of bodily location-affirmation that interrupt and interrogate the history of Mediterranean modernity (Chambers 2008).

Against the backdrop of this, the female body – rather than being considered as a surface of inscription, an 'object' ruled by migration policies and restrained by measures of controlled mobility – becomes a

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transversal 'subjectivity' that inscribes and invents new ways of existing, moving and surviving through-and-as-performance. I will present the corpo-graphies of two Mediterranean video-performance artists: Nisrine Boukhari who lives and works between Syria and Austria, and Filomena Rusciano who began her artistic career in the city of Naples, after completing her degree in African Studies at the University "L'Orientale". Their choreographic digital interventions offer the instances of a rethinking of the contemporary 'politics of location' that they conceive as the poetical-political positioning of a body inside/outside a national geography, a cultural space and a temporal juncture commencing from their – and, at the same time, our – corporeal territory.

Differed and dislocated in time and space, Boukhari and Rusciano's aesthetical examples dialogue across the spectre of their differences, thanks to the liquid space of digitality the artists both share and inhabit. Located in Damascus and in Naples, crossing the Mediterranean Sea, their *corpo*-graphies engage with the language of *choreo*-graphy so as to be able to compose dancing counter-narratives which respond to the European technocratic 'utopias' of controlling mobility, their pretention to manage the established borders and their rigid limits to hospitality.

By the term *corpografia*, Sara Marinelli means the symbolic and tangible act of 'writing with the body', also suggesting this body should be conceived as a territory, the map where to inscribe and locate the individual memory of women in a precise configuration of historical time and geographical space (Marinelli 2004, 15). The scholar, in particular, explores the inadequacy of European national mapping in hosting identities always in transit, in movement, 'out of place', and which, consequently, cannot be 'contained' within any constructed corpo-geographical frontier.

By taking up Marinelli's reasoning, my question would then be: which specific geography might incorporate and situate a body that is 'out of place'? What happens when we explore the critical intersection between the bodies of the migrants, excluded and rejected by the Euro-Mediterranean politics of containment, and those female subjectivities marked as 'indomitable' and 'uncontainable' within the patriarchal geography – the system, the law – which still endures across cultural and national borders? The 'migrant' body and the 'female' body are mapped as entities on the edge, as 'abject' bodies. The post-structuralist Julia Kristeva, in *Powers of Horror*, describes the 'abject body' as the

object of 'primal repression', referring to the moment in our psychosexual development when we establish a border or a separation between the human and the animal, culture and what precedes it (Kristeva 1982). Kristeva maintains that, on the level of our individual development, the 'abject' marks the instance when we begin to recognize a boundary between 'me' and the 'other', between 'me' and the '(m)other'. This, specifically concerns those bodies epitomised today as anti-social, anti-national, that material and bodily substance that "disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules…" (Kristeva 1982, 4).

The abject of the feminine and the monstrous body of the migrant, indeed, resist and react against national, sexual and gender confinements through 'writing'. The most influential critical proposal in this sense comes from Hélène Cixous, who advances *l'écriture feminine* as a model of feminine desire, the language of body writing that reconstitutes her expression as a revolutionary movement against the male rhetorical ruling language. Cixous invites women "to write. An act which will …. give her access to her native strength, it will give her back her goods, her pleasures, her organs, her immense bodily *territories* which have been kept under seal…" (Cixous 1976, 880).

An alternative female corpo-graphy – which asks for a more conscious politics of location and body affirmation – is drawn by the feminist American poet Adrienne Rich who, in an except of her "Notes Towards a Politics of Location", writes:

"I need to understand how a place on the map is also a place in history within which as a woman, a Jew, a lesbian, a feminist I am created and trying to create. Begin though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in-the body". (Rich 212)

If the closest geography is 'in-the' body, these theoretical and critical thoughts – glimpsed here in the form of fragmented traces or as steps for an imaginary map – can be absorbed into the feminine gestures of the choreographies created by Boukhari and Rusciano. Here the 'choreographic', meant as the intertwining of body movement and writing par excellence, proves a conceptual and corporeal practice that re-orients the established and normative relationship to space and language, to the ethics of what is identified as 'out-of-place' (Joy 2014).

Boukhari and Rusciano's inventive choreographic languages seek to place, on the creative scene, first and foremost, one subject in relation to another, allowing the dancing body movements, and their boundless gestures, to mark the emphatic contact between corporealities and narratives, even when they are involved across geographical distances (Foster 2011). It is a choreographic critical force that takes particular relevance in the Mediterranean performance zone, where dance extends beyond aesthetics into the social realm, exposing both a geographical specificity – Syria and Italy – and a wider geo-political horizon – the Global South.

In *The Veil*, Nisrine Boukhari signs the im-materiality of the digital screen with a corporeal matter emerging from the light surface of a red veil.[1] Behind this fabric dances an un-discernible figure, choreographing ephemeral gestures to the rhythms of fractal sonorous vibes. Jacques Derrida would say that what emerges here is "an a-physical body, that could be called… a technical body or an institutional body", but which has no materiality (Derrida 1994, 127). The viewer can perceive with her eyes, the traces left by the body when it pushes, weighs, crushes, squeezes, slips, grabs and stretches, appearing and disappearing, a spectre inside/outside the monochromatic texture.

It is a corpo-graphy that aligns to the multitude of disembodied spectres – or 'no-bodies' – of the anonymous corpses dispersed in the necropolis of the Mediterranean today. Nevertheless, as if in an imaginary dialogue, the ghostly female body connects with the not-yet-born, the corporealities of the ones who have survived the transit, and who are now looking for possibilities of existence and dignity in the new geography of arrival. In this sense, it becomes a metamorphic body whose incompleteness offers its potential for the transformation of national, identitarian and sexual specificity. It is like a silkworm in *véraison*, that is, "in the moment of ripening and the moment of maturation" (Derrida 2001, 91); an identity emerging in new forms of in-corporation, whose fluxes push towards the future. The inspiration for such *à-venir* might come from the imaginary encounter between Boukhari's dancing hands and Jean-Luc Nancy's thinking body, when it casts the idea of dance as an instance of birth: "… the detachment of the body from the plane of the ground through its multiple unfoldings that open up toward the world" (Nancy 2000). Behind and beyond the veil of

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[1] Nisrine Boukhari, *The Veil*, 2007. Link to the video: https://vimeo.com/11463913.

The Veil, the perception of the eye across the malleability of Boukhari's corpo-graphy, allows for the becoming of a new, potential and eventual Syrian identity – out-of-place, boundless, extended in her transit, a body wanting to escape, gesturing towards a form of refuge and hospitality within the Euro-Mediterranean geographical and aesthetical borders. In conclusion, indeed, Boukhari displaces the tactile weight of her *corpo*-graphy onto the liquid-digital *milieu*, here, in this space of free movement, she entrusts the resistance of her poetical-political image to the public eventfulness of her work – beyond the corporeal frontiers of her established Syrian identity and belonging.

On a different shore of the Mediterranean performance zone, the Neapolitan coast, Filomena Rusciano choreographs her *Liquid Path*.[2] Referring to this video-dance piece, she writes:

"I embodied the migrant's courage, as I wore her clothes, her hope, floating in the sea, unsettled as a message stored in a bottle…I travel towards uncertain paths". (Rusciano 2013).
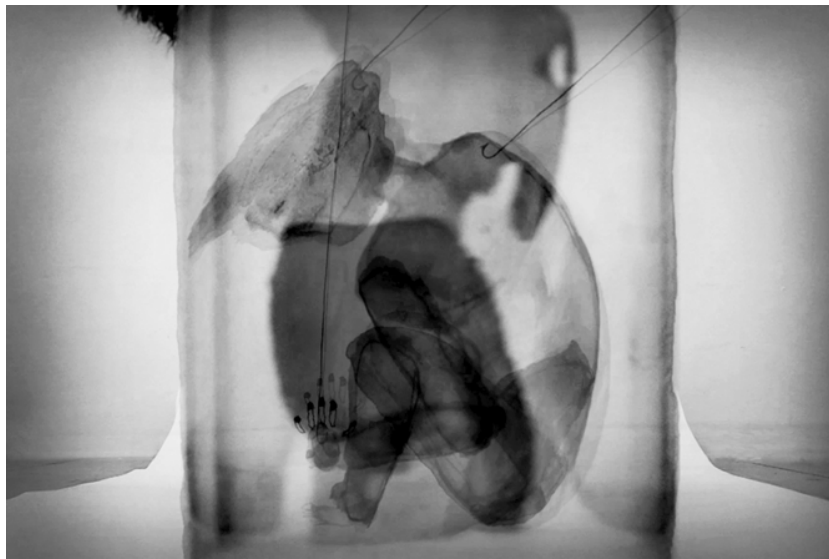

Fig. 1 Filomena Rusciano, *Liquid Path*, 2013
Video-choreography, video stills. Courtesy of the artist

[2] Filomena Rusciano, *Liquid Path*, 2013 – link to the video (short version): https://vimeo.com/74490969.

These words affirm the urgency of another perspective, the necessity to consult a different map that would mark irregular routes and unusual trajectories. Through the experimental dissimulation of her bodily gestures into the watercolour technique, Rusciano dilutes abstract movements, symbolic images, and maritime rhythms on the digital screen. Unsettling the corporeal paths behind and beyond, inside and outside a glass bottle, her body turns liquid, blurred, opaque, fragmented and, eventually, boundless; the in-definite contours of her corporeality make her subjectivity indomitable, and ungraspable. Nobody can control, define or categorize the malleable shapes of her dancing body.

Fig. 2 Filomena Rusciano, *Liquid Path*, 2013
Video-choreography, video stills. Courtesy of the artist

Rusciano commences by composing from her body, from the tragic geography and the historical contingency she experiences, confronting her ability, as a European-body, to provide a personal and political re-action to what she sees and in-corporates. Indeed, this peace is her recalling of the collective and traumatic memory of those who experience the tragic crossings, and of those who witness the event from the other side of the divide, placed in the archive of migration into Fortress Europe World, exposed to the news and the images of thousand

migrants drowning on flimsy boats or washing up, dead or alive, along the shores of the sea…. Looking at her African or Syrian sisters crossing the Mediterranean, Rusciano composes an 'empathic' geography that embodies the kinaesthetic journey of the other, hopefully giving, at least in the imaginary geography of her-self, a sense of female agency and new hospitality.

Evocated in fragmented memories, the two female corpo-graphies here briefly presented, bear witness and re-perform the recent history of the Mediterranean. The being-body-identity, located behind and beyond *The Veil* by Boukhari, re-enacts the survival 'movement' of Syrian refugees, who, escaping the deadly tangles of war, are seeking freedom; on the other hand, the asylum requested by the infinite fluxes of exiled people arriving in Lampedusa, is embodied by the corporeal *Liquid Path* created by Rusciano. Both the works offer the performative locus for the thinking of a more dignified – cultural and artistic – hospitality to those 'others' who hopefully land on the Mediterranean shore.

In times of traumatic emergency such as ours, these interpretative considerations, in truth, constitute my own personal and political responsibility – at least in the research practice realm – in assuming the not-yet-elaborated trauma experienced today by European and, specifically, Italian memory. It is high time that we Italians experienced a historical and political *corpo*-graphy hosting the lost memories and subjectivities from our colonial past, which still cross and configure the modernity of our present. This is to invoke the necessity to re-route the Mediterranean region towards a future-*to-come*, where and when new corporealities might be located, respected and finally saved 'otherwise'.

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