

A Poetics of Merciful Solidarity

Practicing Nonviolence Through the Literary

Giovanna Covi

Writing this paper during the Covid-19 pandemic underscores my impression about the urge to revise the concept of solidarity in the face of the impelling challenges of the present. Since the Greek crisis, through the Brexit, and now with the ongoing pandemic and the explosion of the brutal war in Ukraine, this urge has made itself more and more plain. It seems evident to me that the question of whether to vaccinate is first of all a question of solidarity, perversely disputed in the name of freedom. It seems even more manifest to me that Putin's ferocious invasion of Ukraine excruciatingly threatening to spread war world-wide has shattered the simplistic equation of solidarity with peace to show the complexity of peace-making and the sometimes-necessary association of nonviolence with actions of resistance that may be violent. Even though the political rhetorical confrontation today is more commonly expressed in terms of social responsibility versus individual liberty, the binary paradigm is the same one deployed during the Cold War as a conflict: solidarity versus freedom, the collectivity versus the self, then expressed more emphatically as socialism and communism versus liberalism and capitalism. The paper regards theories that help us think differently and argues that such difference finds its materialization in three exemplary works of fiction: Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*¹ (2008) briefly treated as a representative classic, Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise*² (1993), analyzed more closely to give visibility to a less-known author, and Kaha Mohamed Aden's *Dalmar, La disfavola degli elefanti*³ (2019) offered as a promotion of marginalized literature.

This brings me to Fred Dallmayr's *Freedom and Solidarity: Toward New Beginnings*⁴, which convincingly argues that such rhetoric is built on the relation between society and the individual cast as a dichotomy of object versus subject. My argument stems from a deep concern about our violence-torn world and is triggered by the

1 Cf. Morrison, Toni: *A Mercy*, New York 2008.

2 Cf. Cliff, Michelle: *Free Enterprise: A Novel of Mary Ellen Peasant*. 1993, San Francisco 2004.

3 Cf. Aden, Kaha Mohamed: *Dalmar. La disfavola degli elefanti*, Milano 2019.

4 Dallmayr, Fred: *Freedom and Solidarity: Toward New Beginnings*, Lexington 2016.

determination to engage the current political crisis of democracy and the cultural crisis of modernity in order to foster the process towards building a cohesive and increasingly more just society. I side with Dallmayr, who claims that we need a different radical rethinking of human freedom and its constitutive relation to the surrounding social and natural world in which solidarity is no longer conceived as the antithesis to individual freedom.

I am pursuing his invitation by proposing to inflect solidarity with mercy within the frame of nonviolence provided by Leela Gandhi's theory about radical democracy and Judith Butler's theory about agential vulnerability and Rosi Braidotti's call for the posthuman.⁵ The definition of mercy that I am deploying here is drawn from considerations provided by Bryan Stevenson's *Just Mercy*⁶ (2015) and Emmanuela Zurli's "Kyrie eléëson"⁷ (2010) and finds its materialization in Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*⁸ (2008), which casts mercy outside a relationship of sovereignty, apart from the idea of grace granted by a powerful entity from above.⁹ In Morrison's fiction, the slave mother who gave away her own daughter to another master in the final pages of the novel is finally given the possibility to speak. She states: "It was not a miracle. Bestowed by God. It was a mercy. Offered by a human" and offers the following elaboration: "to be given dominion over another is a hard thing, to wrest dominion over another is a wrong thing; to give dominion of yourself to another is a wicked thing"¹⁰.

Stevenson too casts mercy outside the power paradigm and is clear on the potential qualities of an open conceptualization of mercy, when he inverts the standard question about justice, "Do they deserve to die?" and rephrases it as, "Do we deserve to kill?"¹¹ thus underlining that mercy is a form of social empowerment especially when it is offered to those who do not deserve it. Speaking for the convicts, mostly African Americans, condemned to capital punishment, Stevenson's could be defined

5 I have first engaged a comparison between Leela Gandhi's and Judith Butler's theories of nonviolence in a paper presented at Brown University, during the seminar organized by the Middle East Studies Department, April 21–22, 2017. Now the publication of Rosi Braidotti's third volume on the posthuman, including the important references to Donna Haraway's and Karen Barad's theories, is calling for a wider comparative analysis of a transnational feminist discourse that is becoming more and more compelling.

6 Cf. Stevenson, Bryan: *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, New York 2015.

7 Cf. Zurli, Emmanuela: *Kyrie Eleison, L'invocazione biblica a Dio, che ci ama come una madre*. In *Rassegna di Teologia* 51(2010) 215–232.

8 Cf. Morrison, *A Mercy*.

9 For further considerations on this interpretation of mercy, also based on readings of Morrison, Cliff and Aden, see my essay *Kyrie eleison: sostantivo femminile per una democrazia radicale* forthcoming in *La società del genere umano*.

10 Morrison, *A Mercy*, 167.

11 Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, 313.

a minor voice, comparable to Zurli's feminine interpretation of the Christian theological tradition within the patriarchal institution of the church. She too offers an epistemic turn when she traces the origin of mercy in motherly love, rather than in compassion or pity, and thus liberates the concept from its link with guilt. These two "minor" definitions of mercy, I claim, point towards Gandhi's dazzling vision of a secular horizontal eternity, because their grounding is viewed as reciprocal, unjustified, and even paradoxical love. Like a Derridean gift, gratuitous mercy may surprise us with a Butlerian vulnerability that turns into political agency. I like to believe that the mercy which does not depend on forgiving, which does not have the adulterous woman that the Lord should save from lapidation as its referent, the mercy that is rather the resistance of love against the impossibility to love, is tremendously empowering. Coupled with the idea of solidarity *for* peace, which is much more radical than the EU solidarity as liberal sovereignty, this idea of mercy as not merely compassion has the potential to be a promise for a nonviolent future that is material, even possible.

A brief reflection upon the aporetic nature of the concept of solidarity¹² highlights its Derridean "blind spots" and leads to its being expressed indeterminately, more as a proposition than as an accurate notion. The European Union is called to come to terms with this ambiguity, since it was declaredly born out of the will of its founders for solidarity, by addressing the conceptual split while addressing its own crisis. The classical rooting of the term solidarity is linked to the law and the economy: the juridical Latin phrase *in solidum obligari* (the obligation to pay one's debt in full), where *in solidum* means first of all complete. Two words in Italian derived from *in solidum* carry its second meaning: *soldo* (money) and *soldato* (soldier), thus solid, robust. The modern rooting of solidarity in the French Revolution, *solidarité*, is linked to ideology to indicate the nationalist feeling of fraternity shared by citizens within democracy, associated with political freedom and equality. In 1848, with the Chartist Convention of the International Workers Movement, the association came to include ethics, with the meaning of mutual help and support for a common struggle for labor and civil rights. The modern rooting thus links solidarity to community – specifically to the democratic nation, in fraternity, and to the working classes world-wide, in camaraderie. Within socialist ideology, solidarity expresses equality based on mutual trust; within liberal ideology, solidarity provides the basis of the welfare state. In our globalized times, solidarity expresses the dream for a humanity that is commonly shared; it is associated with love and charity, with voluntary work

12 I have first engaged a reflection upon the concept of solidarity during the Greek crisis, when the MLA first met outside the USA, in Germany, and I presented the paper *Europe's Crisis; Reconsidering Solidarity with Leela Gandhi and Judith Butler* published in *Synthesis* in 2016.

and international collaboration that seek peace and human rights. Clearly social solidarity is deeply rooted in politics and as such configures rather as a proposition than as a concept, in a way that is comparable to Étienne Balibar's *egaliberté*, understood as an aporetic condition that is rooted in bourgeois ideology but has a revolutionary potential within a tension that determines the political field within which popular sovereignty without exclusions may occur.

This double rooting, technical and nominal on the one hand, ideological and material on the other, raises the question of whether solidarity derives from its budget or its ethics, whether a society that we consider solid is also ethical. By casting solidarity within such binary rooting, the EU has culturally embedded its own paralysis, shaped by the weakness of separating politics from poetics, society from aesthetics, praxis from ethics, and also communal solidarity from individual freedom. I argue that we may be able to recast this immobilizing frame in the light of the feminist theories I have mentioned above.

The concepts of radical democracy as defined by Gandhi and of vulnerability as defined by Butler show how to understand solidarity relationally and reciprocally, even to propose another utopia, one that gets us out of merely thinking negatively, an inadequacy that has characterized leftist thinking (and acting) to the point of paralysis, a negativity that has diluted into nothing and given space to the proliferation of obscurantist forces. Gandhi's conceptualization of a community of affects¹³ sharing the common good through an ethics of imperfection (*Common Good*) and a politics of becoming minor¹⁴ offers me the opportunity to envision the goal. What further encourages me to undertake the task is Butler's definition of solidarity as a "a mode of sustaining conflict in politically productive ways, a practice of contestation" that produces a culture capable of exposing the "self-difference" at the core of each political position.¹⁵ In "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance"¹⁶ Butler also underlines that vulnerability is relational and necessary for thinking resistance.

I would reiterate that we need a utopia that is not ideal and perfect, but rather one that may take place, albeit imperfectly, in this world, here and now – an incongruously possible utopia, a paradox that Gandhi's nonviolent thinking helps us conceptualize. This day-after-day differently and temporarily articulated utopia is shaped through the one-to-one relationships that each person creates in their interaction with other persons, in the name of the common good, is articulated in

13 Cf. Gandhi, Leela: *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*, Durham 2006.

14 Cf. Gandhi, Leela: *Utopal Life: A Genealogy for Global Ethics*. In: Robbins, Bruce/Horta, Paolo (eds.): *Cosmopolitanisms*, New York 2017.

15 Butler, Judith: "Merely Cultural." *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge 2015, 37.

16 Butler, Judith: *Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance* In: Butler, Judith/Gambetti, Zeynep/Sabsay, Leticia (eds.): *Vulnerability in Resistance*, Durham 2016, 12–27.

multiple languages and from different locations to seek a coming together, an assembly that may lead, perhaps surprisingly, possibly imperfectly, towards the desired change for radical democracy as nonviolent practice, ahimsatic mode, utonal life, and postcolonial historiography. Gandhi's call for becoming less in order to relate to each other as ordinary people, for accepting imperfection in order to counter the totalitarian, colonial, and liberal frame of domination, leads towards a nonviolent society centered on a "politics of friendship," hence on the Derridean notion of hospitality, grounded on radical relational subjectivity within which guest-friends are never known in advance. Acting under such conditions of unconstituted subjecthood requires countercultural revolutionary practices and inventive ethical enterprises¹⁷, the deployment of "solidarities" that "simply cannot be fixed in advance" and "a utopian mentality" that shows the way forward to a genuine cosmopolitanism: always open to the risky arrival of those not quite, not yet, covered by the privileges which secure our identity and keep us safe¹⁸. Such fierce activism takes the risk of affective incongruous relations among subjects who pursue self-ruination, which requires a politics that is also a poetics, a counter-narrative that does not repress desire and imagination to pursue cognition and justice¹⁹. I suggest that this poetics/politics opens up a middle ground between the monetary and the ethical within which solidarity may act materially and ethically.

I hear an echo of this positioning in Butler's "Merely Cultural," where she suggests that solidarity should not be based on the obliteration of the differences between identities, but rather on the "synthesis of a set of conflicts" and invokes "a practice of contestation" within which each political position discloses its own "self-difference" and does not pursue identitarian assimilation.²⁰ Thus conceived, solidarity becomes a cultural production capable of turning conflict into positive politics. Further, in *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Butler talks about an ethos of solidarity as a force that affirms mutual, reciprocal dependency. Butler's proposition allows us to see that ethical questions are always implicated in economic ones²¹ and invites us to think about vulnerability and agency together, to think about bodies that are actively and inactively supported both by infrastructures and social solidarity. By putting the body at the center of solidarity, I understand that Butler liberates philosophy from being confined to the realm of the intellectual as opposed to the physical, from banning sensibility in the name of sense, from being locked up within the merely conceptual, and frames a philosophy that allows the mind to be part of the body.

17 Gandhi, *Affective Communities*, 9.

18 Ibid., 31.

19 Cf. *ibid.*, 142–176.

20 Butler, *Merely Cultural*, 37.

21 Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 22.

Such framing of irreducibly corporeal subjectivity, of vulnerability as politics rather than ideology, and of ethics as always responsive, relational, and collective is in tune with as Rosi Braidotti's call for the posthuman, which she articulated in three volumes between 2013 and 2022. She equates the Subject, the Self with consciousness, universal rationality, and self-regulating ethical behavior, and the Other with the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized, less than human, disposable bodies. She embraces a neo-Spinozian monistic ontology in which intelligent, self-organized matter has the priority. Posthuman knowing, she argues, compels us to figure the subject as nomadic, hence not as transcendental consciousness, but as relational entity, corporeal and incorporated, affective and responsible, that is as a continuum between mind and body, nature and culture. Posthuman feminism, she claims, entails a renewal of subjectivities and practices that include solidarity, care and compassion that radically revises the humanist legacy to express a positive trust in a future of solidarity among others.

These feminist theorists help clarify the resistance of the vulnerable to be a form of critique performed by bodily encounters that claim recognition within the public sphere and in the process reconstitute it and operate under principles of Gandhian nonviolence, under which solidarity can be recast as *ahimsa* or self-ruination, as the willingness to become less in order to relate. This model allows for relations to no longer stand in hierarchical order – neither dictatorially through domination nor liberally through generosity.²² Such relations are not between Self and Other, but are rather exchanges among singularities, others who are different but seek social inclusiveness and exchanges performed under conditions of equality, ruled by a politics of friendship and linked together by affiliations. This clearly challenges forms of subjecthood, both individual and national, based on the posing of an Other, on the masculinist grounding of domination and exclusion. It requires instead the joining of the cultural and the social performed by a poetical politics and a political poetics that speaks in multiple languages, inhabits borders, and does not categorize people according to abstract taxonomies. Gandhi argues that such radical democracy embraces an ethics of imperfection: the modern liberal fiction of the disembodied entity “the people” in representative democracy becomes a temporary, fragmented, yet powerful constituency through the sharing of a gathering among subjecthoods that are relational and non-normative. Gandhi's heuristic epistemology entails an-archism, disobedience, no-saying, imperfection, the staging of nonviolent militancy (which sometimes is not even pacifist, because it must respond to violence through civil disobedience) in pursuit of spiritual and political practices of becoming less, “minor,” because the subject is no longer lead by an ethics of virtue but rather an eth-

22 Gandhi, Leela: *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy, 1900–1955*, Chicago 2014, 10.

ical commitment to the revolutionary ordinariness of the social contract (see “Lectio Magistralis”).²³

Nonviolence thus is defined by Gandhi not as the opposite of violence, nor is peace inflected as other from war, but rather as a practice of becoming, as the rejection of any hierarchical categorization and the abdication of power. Nonviolence embraces negativity by asking men to renounce to their own masculinity and by encouraging women to disobey, to cultivate their own no-saying in order to take better care of the world. Only by rejecting the perfectionism that joins fascism, imperialism, and liberalism to democracy, Gandhi argues, can democracy cease to be an ideological utopia and become the possible utopia of speaking a common language and being in common with others.²⁴ Solidarity for Gandhi, Butler, and Braidotti is conceived as subject formation; their politics/poetics yields hope for transformation precisely because it is not functionally grounded on pre-constituted identities.

I would like to hope that conceiving solidarity as ethical ordinariness and vulnerability within the posthuman frame may offer Europe the cultural means to face the dramatic challenges of the present. But how can these theories yield to practical transformation? This is where the political role of literature is crucial, in giving poetical shape to a re-imagination of the future.

Morrison's slave mother who gives away her daughter to a slave master embodies a definition of mercy theorized by Stevenson and Zurli to invite us to think differently, outside the power paradigm. Likewise, a narrative embodiment and poetic incarnation of the epistemic revision of the subject articulated by Gandhi, Butler, and Braidotti is evident in Michelle Cliff's *Free Enterprise: A Novel of Mary Ellen Pleasant* (1993).²⁵ This fiction allows us to step into interpretative configurations that frame mercy and solidarity relationally for people seeking the means to manage the interconnections that characterize lived lives in the present, and therefore needing a structural epistemic change. Such change was already pointed to by Phillis Wheatley's “‘Twas Mercy that Brought Me from Africa [...]” inaugurating with a woman's

23 It is not marginal to the considerations in this article that Gandhi elaborates her position with reference to the Istanbul Convention for contrasting gender violence. The human society is torn equally by the ongoing proliferation of wars and by everyday practices of violence that hinge on ideologies of gendered and racial supremacy. Her *Lectio Magistralis* delivered at the Italian Parliament in 2016 is available in English as “Reflections on Violence and Non-Violence in UNIRE-Gender Violence is Also a Cultural Issue! Gandhi convincingly argues that tackling gender violence entails embracing the civil disobedience called for by nonviolence and praising the no-saying uttered by women—a cultural shift that our patriarchal societies have not yet undertaken.

24 Cf. Gandhi, Leela: *Lectio Magistralis*. In: *Libere dalla paura libere dalla violenza*, edited by the Delegazione italiana presso il Consiglio d'Europa, [Italian] Camera dei Deputati, 2016, 15–21, 21.

25 Cf. Cliff, *Free Enterprise*.

voice the African-American cultural tradition, a discourse forcibly located in the aporia between slavery and liberty, in which mercy retains a double-speaking that well expresses the play between sovereignty and relationality. Wheatley engages such double-speaking, so that mercy is not reduced to a mere gesture of charitable giving but is rather audaciously deployed and ironically used when speaking can only mimic and signify the master's voice.

Cliff's *Free Enterprise* retells John Brown's armed revolution through the framing of revolutionary history as nonviolent epistemology. Her narrative poetics allows a story of armed revolution to be paradoxically grounded on a nonviolent episteme; it articulates a neo-slave narrative in ways that produce radical transformative effects both historiographically and epistemologically. It expresses plantation slavery from a transnational perspective, thematizes it through a multifocal diasporic narrative, and queers both the master-slave dichotomous framing and the representations of gendered, sexualized, and racialized subjectivities. It produces epistemic twists that radically innovate our understanding of the economics of slavery. Vulnerability as political agency towards transformation and moral imperfection, towards radical democracy, materializes through what I would call merciful solidarity.

Cliff's absorbing narrative revolves around two women, the historical figure of Mary Ellen Pleasant and the legendary character of Annie Christmas, respectively a free Black entrepreneur and a mixed-race Jamaican evoking the heroine of African-American tall tales of the Mississippi Delta, who both join the abolitionist cause on the side of John Brown. It is both historical and autobiographical fiction, but not only. Subjectivities and communities are grounded in reciprocity, affective relations are formed in resistance in a narrative in which fact and fiction are inextricably tangled, as are Mary Ellen and Annie, as well as the many other characters. A complex plot includes the fragmentation, violence, and resistance of the Caribbean, as Cliff herself states, attentive to mix "time and incident and place and character and also form to try to mirror the chaos of the times".²⁶ Such a mix certainly makes her prose challenging, although I would suggest never obscure. By pursuing innovative thinking and experimental forms of expression, queering content and form simultaneously, it proceeds obliquely through interruptions and contradictions in the thick of an intercultural discourse that mixes imagination with legend to capture history, and uses poetry to express humanity through gaps and circles, documents and dialogues, signs and words, into the reality of the abolitionist struggle. Cliff's neo-slave narrative tells a story of resistance through a revision of the definition of resistance itself. Her story-telling not only generates a knowledge of the past that focuses on

26 Cliff, Michelle: *If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire*. In: *The Land of Look Behind*. Ithaca, NY, 1985, 57–76, ix.

the oppressed and puts women into history, but also produces a knowledge that empowers the transformation of the present.²⁷

Cliff's writing is empowering not only because it focuses on the resistance to violence rather than on the subjugation of the victims to racist colonial power, but also because it nourishes critical thinking that privileges the complexity of relations rather than the simplification of a linear plot built around one main character. Her two main characters are minor voices who also represent multiple and at times conflicting ideas, and often leave the stage to other minor characters. Minor becomes major in this endless process and the plot unfolds as a continuous variation of major and minor tones, thus resembling the musician Harry Partch's utonal music, which – as Gandhi's essay "Utonal Life" explains – produces a music where "the minor mode exposes the raw assembly and immiscible gathering of musical tones, and opens them out to a multiplicity of unfinished relationships" and "breaches the exalted stability, consonance and resolution of the major mode"²⁸. Gandhi forcefully argues that "in the context of colonial encounter, major/minor globalisms (otherwise, otonal/utonal; totalizing/democratic) play out in diachronic interactions between an imperial variant that presents as a model of sovereignty, and an anti-imperial variant that presents as a model of relationality"²⁹. Cliff overtly accentuates the coexistence of major and minor in the resistance to domination. Her epistemic field includes the grounded body and groundless desire, the finite and what is not-yet-realized. In this field, connections and the results they yield become more important than the subjects who connect. Consequently, the dichotomous master-slave dialectics of colonial history is opened up, both to include queer variations in the past and to seek possible interactions between sovereignty and relationality in the present.

The title is also an act of double-talking, an act of African-American signifying. Taken at face value, *Free Enterprise* not only captures the core of capitalism – the reason for the institution of slavery – but also communicates ironically the glorious enterprises of resistance to slavery. This double meaning is superbly personified by the historical figure of Mary Ellen Pleasant. It is worth recalling what is historically documented about her. Pleasant was a frontier Black woman, and like most African Americans of her time, the identity of her parents and the date and place of her birth

27 In one of the few published critical essays on *Free Enterprise*, Bénédicte Ledent observes that it goes beyond unearthing the past buried by colonialism to acknowledge the ruptures and discontinuities invoked by Stuart Hall's use of historiography (177). Rajeswari Mohan compellingly develops this aspect of Cliff's writing and discusses the revolutionary character of her historiography to underline that her gendered excavation of the past has the specific purpose of decolonizing the present.

28 Gandhi, Leela: *Utonal Life: A Genealogy for Global Ethics*. In: Robbins, Bruce/Horta, Paolo (eds.): *Cosmopolitanisms*, New York 2017, 3.

29 Ibid., 4.

remain uncertain. Here is how her biography is introduced in the *African American National Biography*:

Pleasant, Mary Ellen (1812?–1904), legendary woman of influence and political power in Gold Rush and Gilded Age San Francisco, was born, according to some sources, a slave in Georgia; other sources claim that her mother was a Louisiana slave and her father Asian or Native American. Many sources agree that she lived in Boston, as a free woman, the wife of James W. Smith, a Cuban abolitionist. When he died in 1844 he left her his estate, valued at approximately \$45,000.³⁰

According to an article published in *Ebony* in 1976, Pleasant's father might have been either a White slaveowner, a Cherokee, or a Kanaka, that is a Polynesian from the Sandwich islands, while her mother was a "full-blooded" Black slave from Louisiana (Bennett 71).³¹ Portraits of Pleasant show a woman that could pass for more than one racial identity, and could also have easily passed for White, had she wanted to. But we know, instead, that she never did. Pleasant was a free Black woman who claimed her Blackness and fought for the dignity and rights of the enslaved Black people with strong determination. With comparable willpower, she also struggled for her own economic independence and success, seeking freedom and fortune by going West; here she profited so well from the money she had inherited from her first husband that in the 1890 census she could list her occupation as "capitalist"³². Pleasant thus became a capitalist abolitionist free Black woman.

She arrived in San Francisco in 1849, when only 15 percent of the population of the city was female and the Black population numbered only 425.³³ She worked first as a cook and then as the owner of a boardinghouse, which eventually grew into a thirty-room structure. Her entrepreneurship allowed her to help many who had escaped from slavery, turning her boarding house into an important center for the underground railway. In 1976, a small park was dedicated to her where her building once was, and a plaque was installed that declared her birthdate to be certain: 1814. Pleasant also appears in one of the murals in the lobby of the Monadnock Building on Market Street, where she is portrayed as a prominent San Franciscan, together with architect Bernard Maybeck, actress Lotta Crabtree, dancer Isadora Duncan, and Civil Rights advocates Walter Lum and Harvey Milk.

30 Downey, Lynn: Pleasant, Mary Ellen (1812?–1904), legendary woman of influence... In: *African American National Biography*. Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, 30 Jan. 2013. Web. 18 Jan. 2017.

31 Cf. Bennett, Lerone Jr.: A Historical Detective Story, Part II: Mystery of Mary Ellen Pleasant. In: *Ebony* May 1979, 71, 86, 71.

32 Halley, Marian: Don't Call Her Mammy. In: *The New Fillmore*. Web. 18 Jan. 2017. <http://newfillmore.com/fillmore-classics/dont-call-her-mammy/>.

33 Adkins, Jan Batiste: *African Americans of San Francisco*, Charleston 2012, 7.

In 1858, Pleasant supposedly met John Brown in Canada and donated \$30,000 to his cause of slave rebellion. The conditional in the telling of this part of her story is again forced by the usual lack of official records about the history of the marginalized, to which she fully belonged by color and gender. After Brown was captured, following his failure to seize the arsenal at Harpers Ferry, Pleasant returned to San Francisco under the cover name of Mrs. Elle Smith. Apparently, she did so because Brown was carrying a note signed “W.E.P.,” which stated, “The ax is laid at the root of the tree. When the first blow is struck, there will be more money to help.” Presumably, Pleasant had written an “M” that looked like a “W” to protect herself.³⁴

There are, however, two events that allow us to lift the conditional in Pleasant’s biography since they are both documented in California legal records. The first grounds her legendary reputation on substantial facts, making her a milestone in San Francisco’s history of civil rights struggles. It also qualifies her as a worthy precursor of Rosa Parks: she sued the streetcar company twice, in 1866 and 1868, for having forbidden her from riding.³⁵ Although the Supreme Court eventually ruled against her, these two suits contributed to California passing a statute in 1893 that made segregation on streetcars illegal. The second involves her rejection of the name by which she became notorious: Mammy Pleasant. She firmly refused the nickname by returning to senders all the mail addressed to Mammy Pleasant.³⁶ She considered the epithet offensive since it suggested that a certain aura of mystery and suspicion surrounded her: either by indicating that she had voodoo powers over some wealthy men or by implying that prostitution was taking place in her house, which came to be known as “the house of mystery.” Most likely, her reputation as a voodoo queen, madame, or even a murderer derived from envy over her flourishing business, patriarchal opposition to her gender, racist hostility towards her color, and political disapproval of her abolitionist militancy.

Although fragmentary, the historical evidence is sufficient to demonstrate that Mary Ellen Pleasant was the “Mother of the Civil Rights movement” in California and the first African American woman millionaire.³⁷ The only double dealing that is documented in the incomplete historical record is her overt catering to wealthy Whites while secretly helping runaway slaves. She eventually died in poverty in San Francisco’s African-American district and was buried in Napa. Sixty-one years after

34 <https://hutchinscenter.fas.harvard.edu/pleasant-mary-ellen-1812-1904-legendary-woman-influence>

35 Hudson, Lynn M: Mining A Mythic Past: The History of Mary Ellen Pleasant. In: Taylor, Quintard/Moore, Shirley (eds.): African American Women Confront the West, 1600–2000, Norman 2003, 56–70, 59.

36 Halley, Don’t Call Her Mammy.

37 Bennett, A Historical Detective Story, 71.

her death, the San Francisco African-American Historical and Cultural Society arranged to have the words that she herself had dictated on her deathbed carved on her gravestone: "She was a friend of John Brown"³⁸.

Cliff gives full life to this legendary historical figure, by having her meet Annie Christmas, the legendary heroine of the Mississippi Delta, in 1858, one year before Brown's defeat at Harpers Ferry. We readers actually meet Annie before we meet Mary Ellen, and Chapter One is titled "Annie Christmas." The novel opens in 1920, 61 years after Annie met Mary Ellen. Incidentally, this is the same number of years Mary Ellen's gravestone had to wait to be inscribed. We meet Annie at Carville, Louisiana, the historical place on the Delta north-west of New Orleans, once home of the Carville National Leprosarium built on the site of a former sugar plantation, then sold to the Federal Government in 1921 and turned into United States Marine Hospital Number 66.³⁹ The space in which we first meet Annie is exemplary of extreme marginalization.

Nevertheless, Cliff hastens to return Annie to the grand reputation of her legendarily defiant character and, by placing her within this specific historical context, she queers the narration. Annie is presented as a young Jamaican who sided with John Brown and, following his defeat, retreated into the Leper Colony, where she joins people who remember a world before the Whites and who help her recall an island whose history displays "Arawak. Slavery. Cane"⁴⁰ and is "bisected by a limestone aqueduct"⁴¹ – clearly Jamaica. The narrative opens with a description of the Caribbean that is both interpretatively accurate – "a confused universe [...] with no center and no outward edge. Where almost everything was foreign. Language, people, landscape even"⁴² – and politically incisive – "Tongues collided. Struggled for hegemony"⁴³. Various languages are listed with specific distinct characteristics: French indicates both fashion and sophistication and nostalgia for Toussaint; English is the language of commerce; Spanish of the categories; Latin is the language of the soul; Hebrew, Chinese, and Arabic are not shared; on the contrary, "African of every stripe"⁴⁴ runs into the languages of the superior classes and turns *le gens inconnu* into *Jonkonnu*.

It is immediately palpable that the proliferation of tongues expresses an abundance of people hierarchically ranked according to the racial taxonomy molded in

38 Ibid., 86.

39 In 1993, this facility became the National Hansen's Disease Museum, the mission of which was to eradicate the stigma associated with leprosy and spread accurate information about the disease.

40 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 5.

41 Ibid., 10.

42 Ibid., 6.

43 Ibid., 6.

44 Ibid., 8.

Spanish and based on the breeding of animals. Although Annie's skin was "carefully inbred"⁴⁵ by her parents, proud to be *inconnu*, she chose to be African instead and joined the movement for the armed rebellion of slaves "on the mainland"⁴⁶ in the hope that things would really change, whereas on the island she saw only paralysis. Cliff's narration underscores the relationship between the United States and the Caribbean, thus queering the casting apart of these two Americas as polar opposites. The narration, moreover, underlines the participation of Caribbean people in US discourse: Annie's choice to relinquish her personal privileges as a member of *le gens inconnu* and her identification as Black puts her in the company of Mary Ellen Pleasant and Rosa Parks, who also assumed race as an act of will, as an act of anti-racism. Annie, like Mary Ellen and Rosa, politically claims her identity as forcefully as Cliff herself does in her *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*. Such positioning is powerful evidence that their fight against racism does not fall into the trap of reversing racist categorizations. This narrative move lifts Blackness from the position of perennial victimhood, and conversely it also frees Whiteness from that of persistent perpetrator of racism. It raises political action from essentialist grounding, liberates it into the realm of self-consciously developed ideological positioning, and allows subjectivity to be defined by relations among multiplicities.

Identity as the negotiation between the given and the willingly performed is further embraced when Annie meets Mary Ellen at a restaurant called "Free Enterprise"⁴⁷. Annie is dressed like a man and their conversation is revealing when the more experienced Mary Ellen invites her to keep a female name as her battle name: "It's all well and good to dress as a man in the cause, my dear, but for heaven's sake, take a *nom de guerre* fit for a woman"⁴⁸. Readers are outright exposed to the implications of gender b(l)ending, understood as the freedom of becoming, of being other than what is pre-defined by the boundaries of one's body, by the color of one's skin, by the nationality that imposes forced territoriality. We understand here that the narrative is taking the risk of moving outside categorizations, and this break comes as no surprise because it follows the exposure of the colonialist implication of taxonomies in the previous pages and the rejection of labelling imposed by the Jesuits later in the story.⁴⁹ These two women therefore offer a new perspective on the history of the antislavery movement, not simply because of their so-far under-represented gender, but rather because they are women who self-consciously manage the social significance of masculinity and femininity to pursue their goals. And they do so without mimicking patriarchal power, without surrendering their being who they

45 Ibid., 9.

46 Ibid., 10.

47 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 25.

48 Ibid., 25.

49 Ibid., 111.

are. Rather, they take the risk of experimenting with their being women through a performance of masculinity and femininity according to their own needs, desires, and wills.

Initially their conversation turns to legendary female figures: for example, the woman from Africa working on the Mississippi without chains in revolutionary times and drifting out to the Caribbean after a peaceful death; the great Nanny of the Maroons and her magical powers.⁵⁰ This exchange offers a reflection upon the necessity of engaging the factual together with the imaginary: the historical and mature Mary Ellen scolds the legendary and young Annie for suggesting that these figures of African power are just imaginary. She provokes Annie with a sarcastic tone: "If so many can believe in that other twelve and their divine center, water into wine, rolling back the stone, rising up, take-up-thy-bed-and-walk, Lazarus, why can't you believe in her?"⁵¹ At this point in their conversation an unknown factual-heroic figure materializes in Annie's memory: Industry, an enslaved African woman who served the *gens inconnu*, whom Annie loved as a child; she "slept on a pallet" next to Annie's bed⁵² and would tell her stories about the Maroons; she stubbornly fought for her own freedom but did not succeed. Annie admits that she could not save her even though she "believed in her"⁵³ and confesses: "I saved myself instead"⁵⁴. Sadly, the system of racial domination could not be defeated by their affectionate bond.

It is this conversation that leads the young Jamaican fighter to assume the nom de guerre of the African slave. The exchange between Mary Ellen and Annie raises their consciousness about joining the armed antislavery revolution. Significantly, they never mention John Brown, never discuss the idea of revolution in the abstract, and never talk about taking up arms. Instead, their conversation unfolds in search of their personal, intimate roots that give a sense to the need for action. I am suggesting that they approach the idea of revolution with a feminist difference. Revolution is not presented as a metaphysical utopia but rather is pragmatically constructed through a relation between women, built on ordinary, everyday experience. Revolution is defined through a consciousness-raising practice.

This is definitely the case in Chapter Two, where in the Leper Colony we meet individuals who are so diminished in their humanity that they are distinguished only by a number instead of a name.⁵⁵ They start a story-telling group that rewrites the history of modern colonization through a multivocal and intercultural circle that effectively creates a coalition of humans constituted by diverse relations to the flowing

50 Ibid., 27.

51 Ibid., 27.

52 Ibid., 28.

53 Ibid., 28.

54 Ibid., 29.

55 Ibid., 40.

of the telling rather than by identity categories. I suggest that this affective community, albeit incoherently, points to the “horizontal infinitude”⁵⁶ that Gandhi indicates as the only possible utopia for human eternity. Through their telling, they live on, although life has been denied to them.

The systematic colonial reordering of plants and even animals⁵⁷ is first narrated by the Hawai’ians.⁵⁸ The uncompromising commentary of the narrator of “great-grandfather’s story” prevents us from resting on any assumed truth, be it of History or Counter-history. He bluntly says that the ancestors had “purified the experience [...] made a monument [...] to our people’s innocence,” and then adds: “the truth, I suspect, lies somewhere in between. It usually does”⁵⁹. With this specification, we are taken immediately from Hawai’i to Jamaica where, referring to Jamaican Revivalism, Annie declares, “the history of my part of the world, is of the one-step-forward, two-step-back variety”⁶⁰. Her tale is followed, four pages later, by the history of the rape of Tahitian women by the mutineers of the ship that was transporting breadfruit from Tahiti to the West Indies.⁶¹ All these stories show “the imbalancing of the world”⁶² caused by colonial imperialism. We then hear Rachel’s story, which begins in a temple, moves to the Spain of the Inquisition, and discreetly escapes from there behind “the Niña, Pinta and Santa Maria, in search of a new world, but for different reasons than [...] *El Señor Colonización*”⁶³, to declare that she ended up “in the hills, a *cimarrón*”⁶⁴.

Rachel, the “wandering Jew,” assures Annie that once told, the stories “do not die”⁶⁵. The adjective “placeless” defines Annie in these pages and marks her affiliation with Rachel as well as with the Author. In fact, in Cliff’s autobiographical *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*, Section VIII, we read the following exchange: “I always ask about these people. Somewhere I have confused them with lepers. ‘Are they lepers?’ I ask my father. ‘No, Not lepers; just people with no place to go’”⁶⁶. A “new kinship” is thus “forged”⁶⁷ through the stories by these many “placeless” that

56 Gandhi, *Lectio Magistralis*, 21.

57 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 55f.

58 *Ibid.*, 45–51.

59 *Ibid.*, 51.

60 *Ibid.*, 52.

61 *Ibid.*, 54–58.

62 *Ibid.*, 56.

63 *Ibid.*, 60.

64 *Ibid.*, 61.

65 *Ibid.*, 59.

66 Cliff, Michelle: *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*. 1980. In: *The Land of Look Behind*, Ithaca, NY 1985, 19–52, 47.

67 Cliff, *Claiming an Identity*, 43.

have suffered discrimination and exile. Their kinship displays identities that are relational, both in their own self-construction and in the construction of their new community. Resilience and resistance are built on the adaption to, and the queering of the continuous and diverse flowing of their multivocal, intercultural, fragmented, translated, and dialogical narration.

Rachel's story is followed by another told by a woman who is an "exception to the general rule of darker-skinned races"⁶⁸. She takes us to Mammoth Cave, Kentucky, the world's longest known cave system; it became part of the grand tour of America in the 19th century and its peculiar fascination was sung, among others, by Ralph Waldo Emerson in 1857. He describes the cave as "a kingdom of illusions," "an alarming gallery" as he weighs practicality with poetry and play, as he praises the intellect for seeking the truth in Nature and also accepts the effects that illusions produce on our emotional understanding of the world.

Emerson's reflections must have been influenced by the African-American history that marks this natural site. The cave was certainly known by Native Americans and its first tourist guides were slaves, among them the most renowned is Stephen Bishop, described by a visitor as "a slight, graceful, and very handsome mulatto"⁶⁹. He had a good reputation due to his precise knowledge of the extensive network of the cave; he produced books and maps that circulated also overseas, and showed a fine appreciation of the natural wonders, as well as a dramatic ability to tell and sing stories about the cave. This entrepreneurial histrionic figure was brought to Mammoth in 1838 in his teens as a slave and gained his freedom only in 1856, one year before his premature death at 37. Today two neo-slave narratives by Elizabeth Mitchell and Roger W. Brucker bring his legendary and fragmentary reputation to full life. In 2000, Davis McCombs published a book of poems titled *Ultima Thule*⁷⁰, which sing four-hundred years of human presence into and above the Mammoth Cave from the point of view both of a slave guide and explorer in the mid-1800s and of the author who was a park ranger in the 1990s. These recent texts offer an important counter-history.

Cliff's text digs even deeper into the cave and leads us beyond counter-historiography. In *Free Enterprise*, Kentucky woman #12548 tells about colored people who lived in the lowest levels and only came up to trade with her father; they were "Africans mixed with Indians, Cherokee and Creek and all kinds, half-breeds, quarter-breeds, whatever [...] they called themselves Maroons, and they mined the caverns for lead and zinc"⁷¹. She adds: "for the most part it was peaceful between the whites and the

68 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 61.

69 National Park Service: Black History at Mammoth Cave. In: Mammoth Cave. National Park Service. Web. 18 January 2017.

70 McCombs, Davis: *Ultima Thule*, New Haven 2000.

71 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 63.

coloreds, each kept to themselves, each was armed. Peaceful, and profitable too"⁷². Yet, although it was okay to make a profit, it was not good to "get too close"⁷³ because the papers, including eastern magazines like *Harper's* and *The Atlantic*, kept reminding them, the Whites, that "you couldn't trust any of the darker races, the servile ones. Male or female. Indian or African. Not even those living ten feet down into Ultima Thule"; then one night the militia came down to Ultima Thule to kill and behead on the charge of "servile conspiracy to commit revolution"⁷⁴.

So ends Chapter Two, with an act of institutional violence. The power of the militia buries in silence, with the assumed "revolution," the entire community living in the cave. Cliff's narrative makes us watch this act of state violence from an important perspective, the point of view of the victims. This is of vital importance because it dehumanizes the criminals instead of the victims, thereby dismantling the paradigm of the assumed legitimacy within which the state acts.

To expand comparatively on the significance of this narrative point of view, let us consider how often we represent violence, including the widespread violence by men against women, by resting on the pattern within which it has been enacted. In so doing we privilege the perspective of the perpetrator, show the victim as such, deprived of agency, and protect the criminal's privacy. Even within campaigns to oppose domestic violence, at the center of the stage we more often see the brutalized body of the victim and her fear than the face of the perpetrator and his rage.

Cliff subverts this paradigm and in so doing, I claim, she liberates alternative possible representations and understandings of violence, where vulnerability is conceived in the terms articulated by Butler, as a politics that yields political agency. In "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," Butler underlines that vulnerability is relational and necessary for thinking resistance. Vulnerability becomes agency when bodies assemble together to oppose power and form coalitions, sometimes only temporarily and even unintentionally. Cliff shows how these communities are constituted by resistant and revolutionary agency. Her narrative style compellingly questions the conditions that allow the reproduction of violence, both dominant institutional violence and insurrectional revolutionary violence. It does so by searching nonviolence in revolutionary practice, instead of easily relinquishing to an embrace of metaphysical peace.

Free Enterprise is centered on armed insurrection, John Brown's battle, and explicitly addresses the issue of the reproduction of violence in a revolutionary context. The discussion of this issue foregrounds implications that deepen the radical revisionism engaged by Cliff. It should be recalled that in the United States during the mid-nineteenth century, consensus over the abolition of slavery was growing at least

72 Ibid., 63.

73 Ibid., 64.

74 Ibid., 64.

as much as dissent about arming the slaves. It should also be considered that still today historical representations of abolitionism understate the role of armed insurrections or, at best, confine their relevance to the sole field of slave history, as if racism was not a complex matter entangled with economy and the possession of women. Cliff's transnational, comparative, and comprehensive perspective may be usefully employed to reconsider modernity at large, for example to understand democracy more fully.

Modernity traditionally casts the origin of democracy in the American Revolution (1765–83) and the French Revolution (1789–99) and the Treaty of Paris that sealed US independence (1783). A more complex picture is provided by coupling these events with the numerous Caribbean revolutions that slaves made during the 1790s, thus bringing the Caribbean into the world instead of casting it apart. A symbolic juxtaposition is provided by the fact that 1783 is not only the year of US independence but also the year when Grenada and Dominica were passed to Britain by France. The list of slave revolutions during the 1790s in the Caribbean is long: Toussaint Louverture's revolution in Santo Domingo-Haiti; Julien Fedon's rebellion that sought to make Grenada a Black Republic like Haiti; slave uprisings in Trinidad inspired by the rebellion in Grenada; the Second Maroon War in Jamaica in which rebels were exiled to Nova Scotia and then shipped to Sierra Leone; the Black Carib Wars against the British in St. Vincent; the "Guerre des Bois" in St. Lucia; the Colihault Uprising in Dominica; the slave rebellion, led by Tula, Mercier, and Karpata in Curacao; the slave insurrection in Demerara, Guyana; and the Coro slave uprising led by Black generals Jose Leonardo Chirino and Jose Caridad Gonzalez in Venezuela. To complete this map, we should not forget literary representations, such as the Black Carib War that inspired *The Drama of King Shotaway*, the first full-length play written and performed in 1823 by Blacks in the United States; *Hiroonia: A Historical Romance*, the first Caribbean epic poem by Vincentian Horatio Nelson Huggins (1830–1895) that was published in Trinidad in 1930.

Besides including the Caribbean, the map should also show that on the mainland of the United States John Brown's raid on Harpers Ferry in 1859 was not isolated. This list too is substantial: a thousand enslaved blacksmiths in Virginia built their own swords and bullets to overthrow slavery but their revolt was quelled in 1800; Denmark Vesey, a freed African-Caribbean slave, planned an urban insurrection which was discovered and strangled in 1822; Nat Turner's armed rebellion in Virginia spread terror through the South and the rest of the country in 1831. Monica Hill observes that Vesey's insurrection sparked publication of the first Black newspapers, which openly called for Negro rights, slave rebellion, and the organization of the Underground Railroad. She relates too that in 1829 David Walker's pamphlet *An Appeal to the Coloured Citizens of the World* called for armed insurrection to overthrow slavery and denounce the hypocrisy of Thomas Jefferson. She also highlights that in 1831 William Lloyd Garrison published the first White anti-slavery newspaper, *The*

Liberator. She finally reminds us that the speeches of Sojourner Truth made a fundamental contribution to the movement that led to the Civil War. Hill significantly uses the word “revolution” to refer to the anticipation of, and participation in the Civil War by an astonishing number of slaves.

This historical sketch shows that the history of democracy is marked from the beginning by an enduring tension between the radical and liberal positions. These many intertwined revolutions have nourished the process of democracy and by acknowledging major as well as minor episodes, we may contribute to the realization of a more inclusive and more just democracy in our present times. Lisa Lowe’s research on Atlantic slavery is exemplary in this respect because it includes Asia in the picture and shows the role of Chinese and Indian indentured labor within the abolition of African slavery. Cliff’s *Free Enterprise* addresses such inclusion. The reference to “Chinese slaves”⁷⁵ is explicit and the remark that “the trade was not monolithic”⁷⁶ unequivocal. Her narration reaches widely to fill all possible gaps in the telling. On the contrary, mainstream historiography has glorified some events and obscured others, while counter-historiography has broken the silence of the under-represented, as witnessed by the mainstream glorification of John Brown and the dismissal of Harriet Tubman.

Cliff underscores this neglect when she observes that “Harriet Tubman had been disregarded”⁷⁷. Tubman was evidently too good to be true and acknowledged. Her legendary life is indeed so unbelievable that it appears to be fictional. A fugitive slave, Tubman was long sought but never captured; she sided with Captain Brown and became one of the most successful conductors of the underground railway; she later sided with Susan B. Anthony and became one of the most active suffragists in New York state; heavily involved with the Methodist Church, she became an activist for the rights of the elderly and donated her money to the African Methodist Church Home to take care of the poor. Even the brain surgery she underwent in her later years has epic tones: she asked for it to be performed without anesthesia, allegedly only by biting a bullet. When she died, she was buried with semi-military honors and Booker T. Washington delivered the address. She is now listed in the Episcopal and Lutheran calendars of saints.⁷⁸ Nevertheless, the glory is still granted mostly to John Brown.

Cliff’s narrative seeks to articulate the tensions between history and counter-history, like the tensions between liberal and radical democracy, in order to provide an alternative moral and political framing within which to understand the various events in their full complexity. *Free Enterprise* does not seek to claim “ownership of

75 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 101.

76 *Ibid.*, 109.

77 *Ibid.*, 100.

78 Humez, Jean M: *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories*, Madison 2003.

history” through alternative narratives; rather, it challenges conventional historical narratives because “the official version is a cheat”⁷⁹. This perspective entails more than mere inclusion or juxtaposition. It requires employing imagination and fiction in the historical framing. Most importantly, it involves re-conceptualizing the very ideas of revolution and democracy. This revision is accomplished through a dialogical articulation of the issues at stake, through a narration that moves from story-circle to epistolary form, from lyric verses to symbols, in a relentless search for a language that does not force lives into predefined categories. Issues are presented by an I that speaks with a You and through their exchanges, confrontations, and agreements they examine the very core of the question of slavery and consider which participants in the abolitionist movement are truly prepared to consider the slaves fully human.

Cliff’s narrative adopts throughout a form of address that always brings the You into the story, thereby engaging a reshaping of the humanist subject. After taking us deeply into the dehumanized lives of the leprosarium, into an extreme subalternity that reduces people to mere digits, Cliff asks us not only to view colonial conquest from this subaltern perspective but also to experience the sharing of lived lives and ideas of the people cast apart by colonial power. In the process, she never invokes the word “revolution,” not even when she mentions Toussaint⁸⁰, John Brown⁸¹ and the Suffragettes⁸². The word “revolution” is uttered instead only by the militia that kills, beheads, and silences in order to oppose what they assume is a revolution. Rather, it is the word “peaceful” that is repeated to introduce those who, although “armed”⁸³, had managed the sharing of the cave. In this linguistic paradox, we are witnessing nonviolent militancy, as defined by Gandhi – i.e., as anarchism, disobedience, no-saying, non-normative practice, rejection of categorizations. Through a slow-paced narrative, Cliff shows us how to be common with others and speak an ordinary language, through conversation in Chapter One, story-circle in Chapter Two, and correspondence in Chapter Three.

Chapter Three begins with a letter written to Annie by Mary Ellen from Boston in 1874 about Joseph M. W. Turner’s 1840 painting *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On*. The letter takes us into the world of the abolitionist White ladies, their salons, their servants, and their company. Mary Ellen is invited to Alice Hooper’s house for the unveiling of the painting, but leaves distressed and in silence although she is invited to offer her witness. We understand her utter refusal to act as native informant within a liberal movement lead by Whites. Although she

79 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 137.

80 Ibid., 6.

81 Ibid., 16.

82 Ibid., 22.

83 Ibid., 63.

cannot find a way to ask her interlocutor the fundamental question, “Can you understand the constructive use of violence in the cause of liberation? [...] Can you accept, nay, believe in the deepest part of yourself, the full humanity of the African?”⁸⁴, she clearly draws the line that separates the two of them by marking their different interpretations of the painting: while Alice Hooper focuses on the whiteness of the storm at its center, comparing Turner with Coleridge and Melville,⁸⁵ Mary Ellen focuses on the foreground, on the chained brown leg of the drowning slave surrounded by fish.⁸⁶ She cannot tear her eyes from the foreground because, she offers, “It is who we are”⁸⁷.

Yet again Cliff insists that it is not enough to add other voices to the same framing; it is the framing itself that needs to be changed. We need a method that makes convergences and connections available, so that history is not simply told differently or in more voices, but told in ways that were previously unthinkable, unimaginable. As Lowe clearly puts it, we need to use a narrative tense of what could have been, a tense that symbolizes attention to what has been missing in history so far, a tense that breaks the silence about the obscure moments when “transformations have begun to take place” (175) so that they are no longer locked within paradigms and orders that foreclose their telling. Lowe urges us to employ “a past conditional temporality” that “suggests that there were other conditions of possibility that were vanquished by liberal political reason and its promises of freedom, and it suggests means to open those conditions to pursue what might have been”⁸⁸.

Chapter Three of *Free Enterprise* unquestionably pursues the “conditional temporality” of what might have been. Its first section about Turner’s *Slave Ship* is entitled “Provenance” and tells us about the official document that matches the painting at the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston. The document, Andrew Walker describes, lists Alice Sturgis Hooper (1841–1879) among the owners, states that she “placed the painting for the first three years on loan at Boston’s Museum of Fine Arts” almost immediately after purchasing it in 1876, and comments about the “shift in perception from an image of color specks to an image of protest” caused by “a genteel band of socially active Bostonians [who] developed a moral interpretation [...] that would later be used for political purposes.” For the next ten years the painting returned to the Hoopers’ home; here, according to Walker, it “became a catalyst for political action.” The painting was then bought by the Museum in 1899 “and advertised not as a

84 Ibid., 79.

85 Ibid., 78.

86 Ibid., 79.

87 Ibid., 80.

88 Lowe, Lisa: *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Durham 2015, 175.

picture with important historical content but as one of the artistic masterpieces of the nineteenth century”⁸⁹.

Cliff’s neo-slave narrative contrasts the document’s standard opposition between politics and aesthetics and the image of the museum as a stronghold of pure aseptic art. Instead, she presents the painting as one of multiple architects in the temporal, and hence political production of knowing. Turner’s *Slave Ship* is placed at the center of an exchange between liberal and radical democracy, respectively represented by Alice and Mary Ellen. Alice is blinded by the beautiful light at the center of the painting and cannot see the drowning body in the corner. Mary Ellen’s eyes are paralyzed by the shock at the sight of the human tragedy in the foreground. However, her attention cannot simply be added to Alice’s crippled reading – an appendix would only be a crutch and Mary Ellen is no crutch for the abolitionist liberal establishment. Rather, she is an outright radical abolitionist. Cliff’s narration shows what must change is the paradigm: in order to focus on the foreground, Alice must first agree that Africans are fully human. Gandhi would say that Alice must lessen herself and her culture, and *ahimsaically* touch the You that she wants to save, the drowning slave.⁹⁰ She must invest her body too in this action; the idea(l) is not enough. Radical democracy demands corporeal relations, bodies that are in common with other bodies. Butler likewise, as illustrated in her discussion about Fanon above, would say that Alice must reach for a bodily touch, feel the You in order to explain the You to herself. Abstract understanding is not enough. Radical abolitionism must seek a reciprocal relationship with the slaves, otherwise they will never be considered fully human and humanity will not be redefined, otherwise “man” alone will remain at the center of the human, and humanism entangled with colonialism.

Cliff’s narration is persistent and does not turn away from Alice because of her imperfection. It follows Alice in the relation with her cousin Clover, a photographer of the Civil War, “a spinster with artistic pretensions [...] dangerous, like Margaret Fuller”⁹¹. The historical Clover was the wife of the intellectual Henry Adams; she committed suicide in 1885. This relation is explored in the section bearing the Whitmanic title “Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking,” the 1859 song that creates a dream-like action. With the pace of a reverie, Cliff’s narrative shows the two women exchanging Sappho’s verses and allowing themselves the fantasy to go West, where “female couples, the most daring of pairs” were told to be “traveling with the wagon trains”⁹². The two women interact with a homeless, mixed blood woman

89 Walker, Andrew: From Private Sermon to Public Masterpiece: J.M.W. Turner’s *The Slave Ship* in Boston, 1876–1899. In: *Journal of the Museum of Fine Arts*, Boston 6(1994) 6–7.

90 Gandhi, Utonal Life.

91 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 93.

92 *Ibid.*, 97.

with green eyes who reads poetry and talks about the human condition, about entering another realm through reading, about “being transported by words”⁹³ and becoming “the most unnatural being, the intellectual woman”⁹⁴. She says her name is Scheherazade, but the other slaves call her Sally⁹⁵ – she is a woman with two identities. Clover would like to take her picture. This leads to an important specification about the divide between “spectating life” like tourists and “becoming real, descending into it, striding through it with intent”⁹⁶. Clover never becomes real, because she never accepts herself fully as what she is – “no woman she”⁹⁷. Her fantasy of going West to live freely as a female couple abruptly ends and provides a tragic prelude to her suicide in later pages: “the reality of that existence was not for the likes of her”⁹⁸. Even when the fight is for themselves, the liberal ladies who fight for the ideal of freedom are cast apart from the radical women who struggle for the freedom of their own bodies – indeed, even after the abolition of slavery, there is still “free and free”⁹⁹.

The next section returns to Mary Ellen and her visit to her first home in Martha's Vineyard, where her mother had enrolled her as a four-year child in the free African school. It is 1874, fifteen years after her collaboration with John Brown, which has gone undetected. She has become a successful businesswoman by now, and Cliff indicatively gives a picture of San Francisco by singing a hymn to the prostitutes, “to their enterprising ways”, and stating that they deserve a monument, “to the women who serviced the men who opened the frontier”¹⁰⁰. This remark introduces the elucidation that Mary Ellen's enterprise was no bordello despite the rumors, that it was instead underground railway business. It should be noted that the moral glorification of the latter is not done at the expense of the former business – on the contrary. This too, I suggest, is a rhetorical renunciatory practice in tune with Gandhi's theory about becoming less in order to build communities.¹⁰¹ In these pages of the novel we meet both her father and her mother, a family of freedom fighters that leads us into Maroon communities in the Adirondacks, Canada, the Caribbean, and at Fort Mose, a fortress in Florida where Blacks fought for freedom, as well as to the Cage in Montego Bay, Jamaica, where runaway slaves were imprisoned. A lyrical telling searches through this past. It moves among impalpable items: inscriptions of cosmograms on the prison walls that only Africans (not Africans born in the New World) could

93 Ibid., 93.

94 Ibid., 93.

95 Ibid., 92.

96 Ibid., 97.

97 Ibid., 168.

98 Ibid., 97.

99 Ibid., 91.

100 Ibid., 102.

101 Gandhi, *The Common Cause*.

decipher¹⁰²; childhood memories – her father's adventures over the seas to liberate slaves while pretending to participate in the Trade¹⁰³; her mother's memories¹⁰⁴ of Africa and the Atlantic crossing – children at the bottom of the sea, helpless African gods, the powerless woman “on a chariot of *abeng*”¹⁰⁵. The sections on her father and on her mother are separated by the most poetic pages in the text. Cliff nourishes our imagination about the sounds and meanings of the languages spoken by the Arawaks with graphic signs¹⁰⁶, as if to underline that in order to accomplish a radical revision of kinship a linguistic revolution is also needed.

Mary Ellen's mother was killed in a raid in 1825¹⁰⁷. Mary Ellen inherited her revolver. After Brown's execution, during her escape, she met a group of White racist teens who threatened to capture and force her into slavery by taking her to Virginia. She killed and burned them, and then posted a sign on a tree, saying “These were some mean niggers. You owe me a favor. Signed, A Gentleman”¹⁰⁸. This wording is clearly another act of linguistic revolution, the lexical choice a double-saying like the signature. Even though the whole episode is told in the minimum number of words, less than a page, in matter-of-fact journalistic language, the incident is a crucial elaboration of the main theme of violence. Although *Free Enterprise* thematizes armed insurrection against slavery, no acts of violence perpetrated by the insurrectionists are included, except this one. This, however, is not a planned insurrectionist act. Rather, it is an extreme act of responsive violence by a woman when treated sexually like prey. This is no mimic reversal of the colonial paradigm, in Butler's terms. On the contrary, it is a material action of personal survival and a rhetorical act of signifying.

The narrative at this point leaves her personal life to focus on Mary Ellen's political relationship with John Brown. She defines him as “a splendid ally. No more, no less”¹⁰⁹, acknowledges their “differences”¹¹⁰, and admits that she “almost fell out [...] over his devotion to communism, his notion of an African state as a christo-utopia, a heaven on earth for colored folks”¹¹¹. This division is fundamental: she had “objected immediately” to his Christian romantic vision, which she immediately detected as a claim of ownership. She instantly understood that he was “caught in a revolution-

102 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 114.

103 Ibid., 108–120.

104 Ibid., 126–131.

105 Ibid., 128.

106 Ibid., 121–125.

107 Ibid., 130f.

108 Ibid., 140.

109 Ibid., 141.

110 Ibid., 142.

111 Ibid., 143.

ary dreamtime"¹¹². She eloquently argues that this practice risks "pedestalizing the African" and is "as potentially degrading, and damaging, as enslavement"¹¹³. Instead, Mary Ellen positions herself like the Fanon who asks, "Was my freedom not given to me then in order to build the world of the *You*?"¹¹⁴. This way, Mary Ellen participates in a redefinition of humanism outside the colonial paradigm, as hoped for by Butler. Such uncompromisingly radical political positioning is further emphasized in her letter to Annie, where she directs at John Brown the same question she would have liked to ask Alice about Turner's painting: "Why not allow us to be human?"¹¹⁵. In these final pages, Cliff takes us to the heart of Butler's articulation about the grounding of humanism. Mary Ellen spots the liberal limitations of Captain Brown's romantic abolitionism when she challenges: "Are we to be made a shining example of the impossible? Or be treated as a group of living, breathing human beings?"¹¹⁶.

These questions are as potently political as they are vigorously epistemological. While John Brown envisions a utopian state that is like the Kingdom of God for the African people¹¹⁷, Mary Ellen points out that this would result in a theocracy, just like the missions along the Camino Real that have exterminated the Indians.¹¹⁸ She elaborates theoretically: "I dread the notion of suffering into redemption"¹¹⁹. This remark is crucial because it shows her effort to lift the victims from their state of victimhood and make them human. Defiantly Mary Ellen reminds the Captain that "we do not wish to enslave the enslavers"¹²⁰. This reversal of roles within the power system can only be avoided if the system itself is changed, if the fight is for eliminating power rather than taking it over. Only in this way may the revolution avoid replicating the violence it is opposing. If, on the contrary, power is figured as masculine and superhuman also by the revolutionary imaginary, as Butler argues, the enslaved can only picture their vindication in terms of an otherworldly people, triumphant in their redemption that originates in their suffering but confined within the Kingdom of God, and still excluded from the sharing of this world, the realm of the possible. Cliff articulates a counter-discourse to mainstream representations of the long-suffering enslaved, whose moral victory prevails over their just rage and rebellion, and whose superhuman dream silences their desire for ordinary humanity.

On the contrary, Mary Ellen's representation pursues lived lives, imperfectly, by fragments, with interruptions, through listening to different modes, tongues, po-

112 Ibid., 143.

113 Ibid., 143.

114 Qtd. in Butler, Judith: *Senses of the Subject*, New York 2015, 194.

115 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 147.

116 Ibid., 147.

117 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 148.

118 Ibid., 148.

119 Ibid., 148.

120 Ibid., 144.

sitions, and in search of affiliations. No single narrative nor homogeneous picture can contain the politics of her temporary location because it is defined by moral imperfection. As Gandhi underscores, perfection is the violent modality of dominant power, of totalitarianism and colonialism but also of liberalism within globalization, while moral imperfectionism leads towards nonviolent radical democracy.¹²¹ Perfection, Butler likewise underscores, is the single voice of masculinist power, only capable of replacing one “man” with another “man” instead of sharing the vision, imperfectly, interlocutorily, and worldly between an I and a You. Mary Ellen pursues such relational and reciprocal power to be shared with all by a collectivity of diversities irreducible to categories.

Right after the episode in which we witness that Mary Ellen is capable of perpetrating violence – she has killed “the sons of the South” and with cold calculation also concealed the murder¹²² – we are made to understand that she is a nonviolent fighter. Cliff’s narrative has taken us through a journey that has prepared us to accept surprising and incoherent turns – a journey through lived lives. The contradiction in the sequence of events is only apparent: we are prepared to understand why she dreads the pacification of her people because she knows that violence can take turns – she has experienced it herself, both as a victim and as a perpetrator. This is why she rejects a metaphysical vision of the abolitionist future, where the Africans either have a prime seat in paradise or return to Africa. Cliff is well aware that there is no Africa to return to for the Africans in the Americas. Mary Ellen does not subscribe to the realm of the impossible. Instead, she lays out a pragmatic plan for the here and now of human temporality: becoming common in order to build a community and sharing the property.¹²³ She is also saying yes to capital: “Dammit,” she declares with defiant irony, “our people knew capitalism intimately, historically”¹²⁴. Power in this world is capital and overturning power, Mary Ellen understands, does not mean eliminating power but sharing it – sharing capital too, here and now, us and them. The future of Africans is in the equal sharing by women and men of capital and positions of power within capitalistic society.¹²⁵ Mary Ellen’s last words as she closes her memories of the past are pronounced while she is holding a newspaper that announces the lynchings in her present time. The fight continues, with the awareness that the elimination of violence cannot always be peaceful. Nevertheless, this is not a sufficient reason to undertake armed battle in the name of justice.

Mary Ellen illustrates her political philosophy in letters to Annie. The letters contain words of deep affection for her, while she is wondering where her friend is: “You

121 Gandhi, *The Common Cause*; Gandhi: *Utonal Life*.

122 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 140.

123 *Ibid.*, 151.

124 *Ibid.*, 143.

125 *Ibid.*, 150.

are to me like an old lover"¹²⁶; "You are the closest thing I ever had to a daughter"¹²⁷. She fondly remembers Annie's "mannish overalls" and laments that their fight was defeated, that it is always "the winner" that "names the age"¹²⁸; she voices her apprehension when the defeat comes, her fear that she would be dead.¹²⁹ Mary Ellen's love for Annie is deeply affectionate, not sexual – it expresses her unselfish acceptance of her difference not of their sameness. However, Annie's masculine identity is not depicted as singularity in *Free Enterprise*, but rather as common. We meet lesbian couples in Maroon communities; we watch Clover's fragile desire for women; we hear the name of Mary Walker, a feminist abolitionist and the first female US Army surgeon who received the medal of honor in the Civil War. Walker strongly opposed women's long skirts and petticoats by arguing against their discomfort, their limitation to the mobility of women, and their not being hygienic. Pictures show her wearing men's clothes as well as the skirts over pants that she designed herself.

Annie's only letter to Mary Ellen comes a few pages before the closing of *Free Enterprise*. The year is 1898. The letter follows another episode where Annie and Rachel exchange personal stories and where Annie marks the difference between herself who withdrew and Mary Ellen whom she admires for having kept up the fight. She and Rachel (the couple providing another autobiographical reference to Cliff's life with Adrienne Rich) applaud their heroine Mary Ellen. In these final pages we learn that Annie, too, has killed: two White women. They were naked, bathing where she had gone to water her horse. She was dressed like a man, her skin was dark. At the sight of what the bathing women thought was a Black man they started screaming in terror. Annie shot them. Like the episode where Mary Ellen shoots the boys, this passage is worded as a scanty factual report. It happened a few days before Brown's defeat, when the Maroon camp in which Annie lived was raided, Indian and African women were killed before the eyes of the men, the men were chained together, Annie with them, until her sex was discovered.¹³⁰ Her chained body was then the target of violence by the chained men.¹³¹ While she was being raped all Annie could think of was Industry, the slave she could not save. Annie's letter concludes sharply, "This is the story I do not tell"¹³². Annie, the conductor of the story circle, can only share the telling of her own deepest suffering with Mary Ellen. Here too violence is not enacted within a simple good-versus-bad frame. Annie kills, we may say, for a translation mistake. The mainstream paradigm dictates that women are raped by men.

126 Ibid., 133.

127 Ibid., 137.

128 Ibid., 137.

129 Ibid., 139.

130 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 196f.

131 Ibid., 207.

132 Ibid., 208.

Annie is the victim of male violence as a woman. When she appears dressed like a man in front of vulnerable women, these read her as a threat. But there is an interference in the message in the intersection between racism and sexism: the women are White and she appears as a Black man. Outnumbered, she can only kill. Hers too is responsive violence although triggered by figurative, not literal understanding.

The closing pages return to Mary Ellen's voice, the memory of receiving her mom's gun and going to Free African School where books were memorized so that they would not die. This enables Cliff to fill the ending of *Free Enterprise* with poetry – slave poetry, the poetry written by the first African American woman in Colonial times, Phillis Wheatley. Perhaps only poetry can be uttered after Annie's suffering without transcending or displacing it. Perhaps only poetry can dive under the surface of the ocean, below the fish and the slave's leg in Turner's painting. Perhaps only poetry can let Mary Ellen see the bones in the sand and hear the silence at the bottom of the Black Atlantic¹³³ to honor the victims of the Trade. Perhaps only poetry can tell the paradox I do dare emphasize: *Free Enterprise* tells the story of two women who joined armed insurrection and killed and nevertheless embraced nonviolent revolution.

Mary Ellen remains a friend of John Brown and yet admires Annie's withdrawal. Both women practice a lessening of their own selves that shows how to fight violence within a nonviolent frame. Both embrace an ethics of passive resistance, within which Butler reminds us that vulnerability can be defiant agency, and within which Gandhi powerfully invokes a becoming common that disregards oneself and enables inclusive sociality.¹³⁴ Indeed, neither Mary Ellen nor Annie are raised to the status of heroine. As Annie explicitly puts it, "I am a uniquely ordinary human being"¹³⁵, to which Mary Ellen replies by silencing herself and letting Wheatley speak.

Cliff's *Free Enterprise* empowers non-violent revolution by putting the material economic sphere at the center of her critique. It foregrounds the connection between production and reproduction and the roles of racial domination and heteronormativity within capital. It sheds light on the interlocking relationship among different emancipatory struggles and the limitations of confining individual identities within the merely cultural. It places exclusion and lack of recognition at the center of the materiality of political economy. *Free Enterprise* presents us with an affective community, which Gandhi defines as being grounded on anticolonial, radical revolutionary thinking and on the politics of friendship, which is a politics of affiliations among singularities seeking inclusiveness, ethico-political, intra-subjective self-understanding, rather than transcendental morality.¹³⁶ The affective commu-

133 Ibid., 210.

134 Gandhi, *The Common Cause*, 152.

135 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 206.

136 Gandhi, *Affective Communities*.

nity displayed in this neo-slave narrative is made of people who are not fixed into abstract taxonomies but are rather pulled together by their relations, by their solidarity *for* their community, never against another, actively engaged in the making of radical democracy which can only be made, albeit imperfectly, of and by the people – all the people. To the question, “What kept them going?” referring to the enslaved, Cliff’s text answers: “People. Their own. That’s all they had”¹³⁷.

I have argued that Mary Ellen and Annie define “people” through their relational practice, with each other, with Alice, Clover, Rachel, and also with John Brown to express a Gandhian resistance and a Butlerian agency and recast subjectivity within a Braidottian posthuman frame that invites me to inflect vulnerability with mercy as a transformative proposition. Although both Mary Ellen and Annie have participated in the armed revolution and both have killed, their agential vulnerability, their becoming less in the relationships, and their self-ruination qualify their recourse to violence as responsive, not deliberate. They have never planned violence within their armed revolution and the guns they carry are a motherly legacy – only meant to be used defensively and contingently, only where there is a specific I and a You at play; they are not at the center of a masculinist replacing of a “man” with another “man.”

Stevenson’s call for just mercy, qualified as “most empowering, liberating, and transformative when it is directed at the undeserving”¹³⁸ compels us to face the question of justice from the opposite perspective and ask: “do we deserve to kill?” rather than “do they deserve to die?” *Free Enterprise* demonstrates that if we ask the right questions we find empowered “people” even under slavery, even in a leper colony, even among the most marginalized and disempowered.

I wish to conclude with another narration of merciful solidarity: Kaha Mo-hamend Aden’s *Dalmar. La disfavola degli elefanti* (2019), which may be translated as *Dalmar: The Elephants’ Unfable*, *disfavola* being a word created in Italian by the Somali author to underline the need for a new telling of both history and legends based on a social ethos characterized by a disposition towards others.¹³⁹ Aden uses the Italian language by adjusting lexicon and syntax to a new tune, a music that sings in two cultures, the Somali where Aden was born, the Italian in which she is living. Her fable is both utopic and dystopic and while it carries us into the 1990s ethnic massacres in Somalia as well into the present Italian racism and xenophobia, it also manages to look into a brighter future through the eyes of Dalmar, a young

137 Cliff, *Free Enterprise*, 118.

138 Stevenson, *Just Mercy*, 313.

139 Aden’s fable, in my opinion, deserves translation and wider circulation, as the critical appreciation by Simone Brioni who has also co-edited the video documentary *La quarta via* on Aden, makes clear. Her work not only should not be confined to the margins of Italian literature under the colonial label “migration literature” as is still common today, but should call central attention within the contemporary theoretical and political discourse on how to tackle the persisting tragic brutality of our civilization.

elephant. I value Aden's unfable not only for its telling of Somalian history and condemnation of Italian racism, but also for the epistemic change it offers on the discourse on war, on interculturality and in general on human society. Like Morrison who speaks about slavery to talk about humans not just slaves, like Cliff who represents homosexual affects to speak about human affects not identity politics, Aden speaks about elephants from the savannah and bears on an island in order to reflect upon shared practices and the meaning of revolution both in her torn-up Somalia and in the slashed relationships among immigrants and autochthonous people in Italy.

Aden's story compels us to revise our definitions of liberation, liberty, peace, and shared living and empowers us to imagine the future within a new frame. Relations are always foregrounded in this fable: those who do not relate are the rats devoted to arms traffic, to making war indirectly and producing arms for profit to the point that they neglect to see that the arms they produce destroy everything, including themselves. Likewise the cook Irina – a bear so focused on her own pontifications about the urge to get to work that she neglects to consider what the elephants invited to the banquet may wish to eat – displays an incapacity to relate that is a parody of hospitality reduced to assimilation. Bears are sedentary, they have lairs in which they spend winters and think they should live happily and undisturbed on their island. The elephants running away from the war who arrive on the island do not know about lairs and winter; they sleep very little and keep walking all the time. While the bears imagine themselves free, they are in fact ruled by a former general, now called the Barber who only cares about erasing the memory of the past, a Club of respectable stingy misers who only care about making money, and the Happy League that repeats its dictum, "the elephants must go back home." The island exposes the many imperfections of Italian democracy, especially in its erasure of colonial history: the bears avoid the forest peopled by the restless souls and by some survivors from the ethnic massacres. Among these is the snail Babalush who will inform Idman, the female elephant leader, about the cultural censorship that is crippling the bears' society. Idman is a democratic temporary leader eager to pass on her role to a younger elephant and return to her own life full of love for her beloved Doctor Dooli, one of the best educated people of the savannah, a descendant of the sea mice that navigated with Vasco de Gama but then became earth mice, because even in the savannah there are immigrants too! And nowhere is identity politics without faults and contradictions: rats are not all the same. Even elephants are not all impeccably democratic: Dalmar's grandfather loves tradition so much that his repetition of the old fables also translates into a form of erasure and distortion of memory.

The encounter between elephants and bears is not a simplistic dichotomy between the difference of democracy and oligarchy, but also unexpected encounters among the many differences within democracy and oligarchy. It is Bruna, the bear, who organizes a banquet to welcome the elephants, and in the end it is Idman and

Bruna, who are learning from their little ones to relate as common people, who will practice nonviolence as a common everyday strategy and figure out how to share the island: bears will give some of their furs to elephants to face the winter; elephants will build larger and warmer huts for the bears and for storing hay for themselves. The practice of sharing turns into a mutual advantage because merciful solidarity is a two-way road, not a grace handed down from above. Idman and Bruna will succeed because they act outside the impasse of the frame us versus them, war versus peace, by practicing hospitality and friendship temporarily, imperfectly, by inventing in the process a polysemic cohabitation which never forgets love. The meaning of their merciful solidarity is in the words of the song composed by Idman while leading her people away from the war: "if you wish to let them rest in peace, seek them. Unlearning indifference is possible." Merciful solidarity is learning to unlearn indifference: love grounded on the practice of critical thinking rather than on an abstract ideal. Such practice enables them to navigate ambivalences and nourish the feelings and affects that are characterized by such ambivalences and also constitute them.

This takes us back to Dallmayr, on his insistence that social equality, collective solidarity, are not to be juxtaposed to individual liberty, and to return to Butler who underscores that if no political sovereignty establishes which subjects have more rights to life, then the relationality of life is constitutive of the interdependence among different humans.¹⁴⁰ More explicitly than in Morrison's and Cliff's narratives, Aden's unfable foregrounds also the posthuman interdependence and coexistence invoked by Braidotti by showing a society in which bears and elephants with the help of rats, mice, snails and mostly bees practice nonviolent equality. Aden thus gives body to Butler's argument about how to turn nonviolence into a practice: by observing that violence always operates as social inequality and is always nominal, that is interpreted, she claims that it is through thinking of nonviolence as equality that we may empower ourselves to achieve nonviolent resolutions of conflicts.

With the help of Aden, Cliff and Morrison I have argued for the crucial role of merciful solidarity to cast a hopeful look upon our future. To conclude, I wish to emphasize that the positive figuration of this alternative future is made possible by the creative imagination that literature and the arts provide us with – an imagination that is therefore vital to and never a mere embellishment of our lived lives. When Butler compares the resolution of conflicts to translation, referring to Benjamin,¹⁴¹ which acts upon both the target and the source language, she calls for the responsibility we all must share to take a stand and decide, for example, whether to translate *Gewalt* with violence, power, or force.¹⁴² The responsibility of the translator is rooted

140 Butler, Judith, *The Force of Nonviolence*, New York 2020, 203.

141 Ibid., 122–141.

142 Ibid., 135.

in the appreciation of the ambiguity of the literary, which opens the field to what might otherwise be, beyond grammatical control and towards the semantical multiplication of interpretations, in that space where relationships endlessly proliferate. Gandhi powerfully defends the role of the literary in the making of radical democracy,¹⁴³ because within the flux of the ongoing temporality of reading after reading we can nourish the hope, sometimes against all hopes, that things might be otherwise, that thinking may be shaped differently, because by paying literary attention to literariness, to the relationship between expression and meaning, we may give body to Butler's theory of performance as agency¹⁴⁴ and believe that it may be possible to ground human society on merciful solidarity, on the practice of cohabitation, equality and justice for all – humans, animals, and the whole planet.

Cited Works

- Aden, Kaha Mohamed: *Dalmar. La disfavola degli elefanti*, Milano 2019.
- Adkins, Jan Batiste: *African Americans of San Francisco*, Charleston 2012.
- Balibar, Étienne: *Equaliberty: Political Essays*, translated by James Ingram, Durham 2014.
- Barad, Karen: *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham 2007.
- Bennett, Lerone Jr.: A Historical Detective Story, Part II: Mystery of Mary Ellen Pleasant. In: *Ebony* May 1979, 71, 86.
- Braidotti, Rosi: *The Posthuman*, Cambridge 2013.
- Braidotti, Rosi: *Posthuman Knowledge*, Cambridge 2019.
- Braidotti, Rosi: *Posthuman Feminism*, Cambridge 2022.
- Brioni, Simone: *The Somali Within*, Oxford 2015.
- Brucker, Roger W: *Grand, Gloomy, and Peculiar: Stephen Bishop at Mammoth Cave*. Dayton 2009.
- Butler, Judith: "Merely Cultural." *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge 2015.
- Butler, Judith: *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, Cambridge 2015.
- Butler, Judith: Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance In: Butler, Judith/Gambetti, Zeynep/Sabsay, Leticia (eds.): *Vulnerability in Resistance*, Durham 2016, 12–27.
- Butler, Judith: *Senses of the Subject*, New York 2015.
- Butler, Judith: *The Force of Nonviolence*, New York 2020.
- Butler, Judith: *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, London 1997.

143 Gandhi, The Common Cause, 149–166.

144 Butler, Judith: *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative*, London 1997.

- Cliff, Michelle: *Claiming an Identity They Taught Me to Despise*. 1980. In: *The Land of Look Behind*, Ithaca, NY 1985, 19–52.
- Cliff, Michelle: *Free Enterprise: A Novel of Mary Ellen Peasant*. 1993, San Francisco 2004.
- Cliff, Michelle: If I Could Write This in Fire, I Would Write This in Fire. In: *The Land of Look Behind*. Ithaca, NY, 1985, 57–76.
- Clinton, Catherine: *Harriet Tubman: The Road to Freedom*, Boston 2004.
- Covi, Giovanna: Europe's Crisis: Reconsidering Solidarity with Leela Gandhi and Judith Butler. In: *Synthesis: An Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies* 9 (Fall 2016), 147–157.
- Covi, Giovanna: Kyrie eleeyson, sostantivo femminile per una democrazia radicale. Realizzazioni di merciful solidarity in Toni Morrison, Michelle Cliffe Kaha Mohamed Aden: In: M. Nicoletti, M./Pulvirenti, G. (eds.): *La società del genere umano*, Brescia 2022, 279–313.
- Dallmayr, Fred: *Freedom and Solidarity: Toward New Beginnings*, Lexington 2016.
- Derrida, Jacques: *The Gift of Death*, trans. Wills, Chicago 1995.
- Derrida, Jacques: “Hospitality”. In: *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 5 (2000), H. 3, 3–18.
- Downey, Lynn: Pleasant, Mary Ellen (1812? – 1904), legendary woman of influence... In: *African American National Biography*. Hutchins Center for African and African American Research, 30 Jan. 2013. Web. 18 Jan. 2017.
- Emerson, Ralph Waldo: Illusions. In: *Atlantic Monthly* November 1857, 58–62.
- Enszer, Julie: What Remains: Remembering Michelle Cliff, Beth Brant, and Stephania Byrd. In: *Lambda Literary*. Lambda Literary Foundation, 4 Aug. 2016. Web. 18 Jan. 2017.
- Gandhi, Leela: *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*, Durham 2006.
- Gandhi, Leela: *The Common Cause: Postcolonial Ethics and the Practice of Democracy, 1900–1955*, Chicago 2014.
- Gandhi, Leela: *Lectio Magistralis*. In: *Libere dalla paura libere dalla violenza*, edited by the Delegazione italiana presso il Consiglio d'Europa, [Italian] Camera dei Deputati, 2016, 15–21.
- Gandhi, Leela: *Utopian Life: A Genealogy for Global Ethics*. In: *Robbins, Bruce/Horta, Paolo (eds.): Cosmopolitanisms*, New York 2017.
- Gandhi, Leela: Reflections on Violence and Non-Violence from a Political, Cultural and Ethical Perspective. In: Marchi, Lisa (ed.): *UNIRE-Gender Violence is Also a Cultural Issue!* Trento 2020, 47–56 available in Open Access at <http://hdl.handle.net/11572/264649>.
- Halley, Marian: Don't Call Her Mammy. In: *The New Fillmore*. Web. 18 Jan. 2017. <http://newfillmore.com/fillmore-classics/dont-call-her-mammy/>.
- Haraway, Donna: *Staying With The Trouble: Making Kinship in the Chthulucene*, Durham 2016.

- Hill, Monica: The Role of Slaves and Abolitionists in Securing the Emancipation Proclamation. In: *Freedom Socialist: Voice of Revolutionary Feminism*. 34(2013) H.2, n. pag. Web.18 Jan. 2017.
- Holdredge, Helen: *Mammy Pleasant*, New York 1953.
- Hudson, Lynn M: Mining A Mythic Past: The History of Mary Ellen Pleasant. In: Taylor, Quintard/Moore, Shirley (eds.): *African American Women Confront the West, 1600–2000*, Norman 2003, 56–70.
- Humez, Jean M: *Harriet Tubman: The Life and the Life Stories*, Madison 2003.
- Ledent, Bénédicte: Here, There and Everywhere: Michelle Cliff's (Con)version of Caribbean Identity. In: Ghosh-Schellhorn, Martina (ed.): *Writing Women Across Borders and Categories*, Münster 2000, 79–88.
- Lowe, Lisa: *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Durham 2015.
- National Park Service: Black History at Mammoth Cave. In: *Mammoth Cave*. National Park Service. Web. 18 January 2017.
- McCombs, Davis: *Ultima Thule*, New Haven 2000.
- Mitchell, Elizabeth: *Journey to the Bottomless Pit: The Story of Stephen Bishop and Mammoth Cave*. New York 2004.
- Mohan, Rajeswari: The Excavation of History in Michelle Cliff's Fiction. In: *Otherness: Essays and Studies* 2(2011) H.1, n. pag. Web. 18 Jan. 2017.
- Morrison, Toni: *A Mercy*, New York 2008.
- Museum of Fine Arts, Boston: Paintings: Slave Ship (Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhoon Coming On). In: *Collections*. Web. 18 Jan. 2017. <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/slave-ship-slavers-throwing-overboard-the-dead-and-dying-typhoon-coming-on-31102>.
- “Solidarietà” in Enciclopedia Treccani, <http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/solidarieta/> (accessed 15 January 2017).
- “Solidarity” in Marxist Internet Archive, Encyclopedia of Marxism, Glossary of Terms, <https://www.marxists.org/glossary/terms/s/o.htm> (accessed 15 January 2017).
- “Solidarity Clause” (Article 222 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union), Eur-Lex: Access to the European Union, http://eur-lex.europa.eu/summary/glossary/solidarity_clause.html (accessed 15 January 2017).
- Treaty of Rome (popular name for the Treaty Establishing the European Economic Community, 25 March 1957) http://ec.europa.eu/archives/emu_history/documents/treaties/rometreaty2.pdf.
- Stevenson, Bryan: *Just Mercy: A Story of Justice and Redemption*, New York 2015.
- Walker, Andrew: From Private Sermon to Public Masterpiece: J.M.W. Turner's The Slave Ship in Boston, 1876–1899. In: *Journal of the Museum of Fine Arts*, Boston 6(1994) 6–7.
- Walker, Mary E.: *Hit*, New York, 1871.

Wheeler, B. Gordon: *Black California: The History of African-Americans in the Golden State*, New York 1993.

Zurli, Emmanuela: Kyrie Eleeson, L'invocazione biblica a Dio, che ci ama come una madre. In *Rassegna di Teologia* 51(2010) 215–232.

