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Bodies in Transit: The Imperial Mechanism of Biopolitics

Abstract I: Said's reflection on the complicities between cultures and imperialisms suggests possible readings of discourses of power in transit through history. The discursive body of the empire evolves applying the mechanism of biopolitics as a way of ordering bodies. This imperial mechanism will be examined in action as a means of controlling life and death through the enumeration of bodies in transit: that of the colonised and of the migrant. This will be done by reading J. M. Coetzee's *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* (a novel, 1976) and Marco Martinelli's *Rumore di acque* (a play, 2010). The applicability of Said's theory to bodies in transit will not only show the relevance of the ambiguous alliance between culture and empire, but it will also highlight the complex articulations of forms of necropolitics in late modernity, as Achille Mbembe and others have underlined.

Abstract II: La riflessione di Said sulla complicità tra cultura e imperialismo suggerisce possibili letture dei discorsi del potere in transito nella Storia. La retorica dell'impero si evolve applicando il meccanismo della biopolitica come una modalità per imporre ordine ai corpi. Questa strategia dell'impero e del potere sarà esaminata nell'atto di controllare la vita e la morte attraverso l'enumerazione di corpi in transito: quelli dei colonizzati e dei migranti. L'analisi si svilupperà intorno a *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* di J. M. Coetzee (un romanzo del 1976) e *Rumore di acque* di Marco Martinelli (un testo teatrale del 2010). Applicare la teoria saidiana ai corpi in transito rivela l'alleanza ambigua tra cultura e impero, e anche mette in luce

le complesse articolazioni della necropolitica nella tarda modernità, come Achille Mbembe e altri studiosi hanno evidenziato.

In this essay, the relevance of a postcolonial reading of the contemporary cultural and political world scene will be assessed in order to achieve an understanding of ways in which the mechanisms of power operate in late modernity, applying Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism* alongside new theoretical proposals and areas of inquiry. The focus will be restricted to practices of *bio* and *necro* politics observed through the figure of death. Scholars in different fields and from disparate ideological positions have shared a deep interest in how discourses and strategies of power and subjection operate in history. Certainly, postcolonial studies have taken this line in order to give public and political voice to subaltern and minority discourses. Drawing on Said's reflection on the complicity between culture and imperialism, this essay will observe discourses of power in history looking at two historical applications that trace a line of conjunction between the past and the present, as well as between two different geopolitical areas: eighteenth-century Southern Africa and twenty-first-century Italy. The theoretical aim is twofold: to analyse the complicity between culture and empire in different times, places, and narratives, with a specific focus on its relevance for the present; and to verify whether and how this complicity, as theorised by Said, contains the germs of its own deterioration and decline, the energy for resistance and change. In practice, Said's theoretical system (as applied to the reading of literary texts) will be functional to an interpretation of the arrival of migrants and their probable daily actions in Italy nowadays.

A postcolonial approach is suitable for a vision both of the general and of the particular as it allows for an exploration of cultural transnational trends and local productions using flexible theoretical and methodological tools. Therefore, Said's argument in *Culture and Imperialism* will be coupled with Achille

Mbembe's analysis of necropolitics to observe the specific application of power over death through the mechanism of biopolitics in history (Mbembe 2003). In *Empire*, Michael Hardt and Toni Negri interpret the actual collusion between biopolitics and empire as a marker of a new geography of power that is global, sovereign, and non-centred in administering peace and justice, order and democracy, in its own terms. This 'empire' is a new political subject born out of post-fordist America, as Hardt and Negri argue. It operates across borders through global fluxes, and feeds on biopolitical economy: the management of social life substitutes for the centrality of labour as the engine of economic production. Drawing on Foucault's studies of biopolitics and coupling them with Marx's and Deleuze and Guattari's analyses of capitalism, Hardt and Negri underline how empire is a paradigmatic form of biopower in that it aims at defining and controlling the entirety of social life. This reading is a basic background on which a study of the transit of empire in history may be proposed, in order to justify the choice of radically different literary texts (as in this essay) that, however, conspicuously stage the mechanism of necropolitics operating within the working of the empire. Necropolitics is actually an ideological and pragmatic tool of the empire. In Hardt and Negri's view, empire in late modernity is different from the practice of imperialism in colonial times. However the concept of empire will be taken here as evidence of the continuity and transit of power in history.

The topos of the body, both physical and metaphorical, will be useful so as to concentrate on the essential target of power: the human body. The material and discursive body of the empire moves and evolves in time using biopolitics as a way of controlling bodies, with the meaning of applying a rational, monitoring, and classifying order. In this essay, this imperial mechanism will be examined in action as a means of ordering life and death through the enumeration of bodies in transit: those of the colonised and those of the migrants. A vast and increasing literature is available on refugee studies, dealing

with the migrants' conditions in a state of exception (Agamben 1995, 2003). Also, the theoretical issues of surveillance, punishment, discipline, control, terror, and of the imposition of boundaries, have been used to contextualise and describe modern practices of power over individual migrants and groups. Forms of biopolitics over migration make plain the overwhelming need of identifying and fixing bodies in times, spatial locations, boundaries, pictures, and words. In Foucault's vision, these biopolitical acts do not only provoke physical death, but also bring about indirect modes of exposing bodies to death, both physical and political. Elaborating and expanding on Foucault's argument, scholars from a variety of fields and perspectives have explored the connection between life and death, biology and law, sovereignty and freedom (Mezzadra 2001, 2004; Cutro 2005).

It would be out of the scope of this essay to overview this massive body of scholarly literature. Instead, Achille Mbembe's argument in 'Necropolitics' will be adopted, since it updates to modernity the idea of seventeenth-century political theory according to which the ultimate expression of sovereignty resides in the authority of deciding who can live and who must die. With reference to specific examples drawn from South Africa and Nigeria, Mbembe observes how biopolitics operates in late modern history, identifying both conditions of war and material elimination of bodies, and conditions of objectification of human beings who survive in situations of death-in-life. It applies to the colonised at the time of European empires, and to the migrants in the present context, for example, African immigrants to Europe and specifically to Italy. Through the idea of death, the friction between the two forms of empire – colonial and late modern – exposes the dangers that the rhetoric of risk and preventive self-defence, disseminated in contemporary societies, represents for human bodies and lives (Beck 1992, 2008).

Said's theories about the ambiguous collusion between culture and empire will be analysed pursuing the representation and control of death, and

the enumeration of deaths in J. M. Coetzee's *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* and in Marco Martinelli's *Noise in the Waters* (1). It is a daring comparative reading, since the texts are apparently different. However, they are amazingly similar in that the central idea supporting both stories is exactly the mechanism of biopolitics perpetrated through counting bodies. Appropriately, the main character in Coetzee's *Narrative* defines himself "a hero of enumeration" (Coetzee 2004: 80), and the protagonist of *Noise in the Waters* speaks of himself as "the lord of numbers" (Martinelli 2011: 17). This correspondence and its implications are crucial to the argument of this essay.

Nobel laureate J. M. Coetzee's *Narrative*, written in 1974, is the first-person account of Jacobus, a Boer elephant-hunter (as he initially defines himself) who travels in southern Africa in 1760. Fiction is portrayed as historically documented and a number of references are quoted to support the truthfulness of Jacobus's "deposition" (Coetzee 2004: 123-5). However, points of view are fractioned in a postmodern way, because the narrative is introduced by two external characters who belong to different historical periods: S. J. Coetzee, a university professor who is said to have used Jacobus Coetzee's narrative for his lectures, and J. M. Coetzee, his son, the hypothetical translator of Jacobus's narrative and of S. J. Coetzee's introduction. *Noise in the Waters* is a play written in 2010 by Marco Martinelli, the playwright of the Ravenna theatre company Teatro delle Albe. On the stage, a shabby soldier, probably a General, articulates a monologue describing his work on a non-defined island – possibly Lampedusa or Sicily – in the Mediterranean Sea between Africa and Italy. He has been instructed to count and order the people in transit on the island. Unfortunately, most of them are dead. Corpses bear pieces of information and numbers – which recall those of Auschwitz – but numbers are often unreadable and corpses unrecognisable. They have been disfigured and mutilated by desperation, disease, 'sharks', and water.

In different ways, literary genres, styles, places, and times, both texts tell fictional stories of movement: Jacobus's travelling in southern Africa and the African migrants' passing across the island in search of better shores. In both tales, the point of view is that of the main character. Their perspectives are worth examining as they do not only reveal the protagonists' visions of the world, but also describe the hegemonic worldviews of their times. In a "contrapuntal and [...] nomadic" reading of the texts (Said 1993: xxix), as Said advises, Jacobus's and the General's viewpoints explain how empire has changed in time and how it works in different circumstances still holding sovereignty over life and death. These two characters help to focus on the disquieting alliance between cultures and empires.

In *The Narrative*, while factually conveying his travelling tale, Jacobus ideologically constructs himself as the voice of colonial power. His standpoint is univocal, absolute, and self-righteous. His identity as an individual gradually expands to comprise all contrasting definitions into one omnipotent vision of the self. He is a "father" and a "master" to his porters, "an evangelist" bringing to the heathen the gospel of the sparrow (Coetzee 2004: 101), the colonial 'I' who represents, dominates, and conquers uncivilised lands and peoples, and he is the divine 'eye' who orders the world: "I am all that I see" (Coetzee 2004: 79), "I command his life" (Coetzee 2004: 81), "A world without me is inconceivable" (Coetzee 2004: 106). Jacobus's all-inclusive identity radically separates his life from that of others – who are Hottentots, bushmen, and animals – and also justifies his work as "a tamer of the wild" (Coetzee 2004: 78). As such, Jacobus fears and abhors solitude; he needs the life of others in order to prove his authority and power by determining their fate: "Over them I pronounced sentence of death" (Coetzee 2004: 101), "they [the servants] died the day I cast them out of my mind" (Coetzee 2004: 106), "Through their deaths I [...] again asserted my reality" (Coetzee 2004: 106). As a hero of enumeration within the hegemonic mechanism, Jacobus presides over countless deaths (Coetzee 2004:

77), leaves behind him “a mountain of skin, bones, inedible gristle, and excrements [that constitutes his] dispersed pyramid to life, [his] logic of salvation, [his] metaphysical meat” (Coetzee 2004: 79). In this ontological vision, killing becomes an act of faith. It guarantees material supremacy and survival, and also ensures immortality in history and an afterlife. Arrogating to himself the right and the duty of deciding who will live and who must die, Jacobus loses his individual identity while becoming, as he states, “a tool in the hands of history” (Coetzee 2004: 106): the personification of hegemony, borrowing a Gramscian term, that survives and continues across times. Complicit acquiescent militant tools, like Jacobus, serve as the conduits of hegemonic power across history and guarantee the permanence of its master narrative.

In *Noise in the Waters* (2) the mechanism of the empire works through counting the deaths precisely as it does in *The Narrative*. The rationalistic logic of ordering, counting, and cataloguing, displays a supreme ordering obsession: “He who does not understand number does not understand death” (Coetzee 2004: 80), quotes Jacobus. In colonial times, this taxonomic delirium of empire is expressed through the creation of collections and imperial exhibitions as encyclopaedic miniatures of the *grandeur* of the empire. Counting recurs in Roger Casement's *Congo Report* as an enumeration of horrors perpetrated by the colonisers in Congo. Casement's denunciation is a classical example of that colonial mania well documented in imperial museums such as that of Tervuren in Belgium.

A comparative reading of *Noise in the Waters* next to Coetzee's *Narrative*, taking Said's suggestion of a secular critical perspective, brings to light discordant elements coexisting within the historical material conditions of production and use of the texts. The colonial model referred to in *The Narrative* is, in fact, quite different from the system of domination described in *Noise in the Waters*. Accordingly, the representation of power in the two texts refers to different versions of empire. While Coetzee's *Narrative* investigates the

beginning of European settlement in Africa and the unbalanced racial relationship between colonisers and colonised, Martinelli's *Noise in the Waters* concerns forms of neo-imperialism brought about by globalisation. While land occupation is Jacobus's concern, the creation and protection of boundaries is the General's one. And while the objectification of the colonised underpins the unbalanced relation with the colonisers, the invention of the enemy is the rhetorical task of neo-imperialisms. Hence, the representation of power concentrates on two main models: material colonial occupation, on the one side, and cultural neo-imperialism, on the other side. Said's analysis is again relevant, in this regard, as it highlights the passage in history from material to discursive imperialisms.

In the Western World, hegemonic discourses regarding immigration have produced a rhetoric of threat, danger, and risk that justifies the refusal and rejection of migrant fluxes and of people in transit. The rationalist and rationalising need of counting reveals a qualitative principle in the *Narrative* based on race (people are identified by race, they are Hottentots, bushmen, Boers), whereas it is quantitative in *Noise in the Waters*, based on numbers (people bear numbers as markers of identity). If *The Narrative* represents colonial hegemony as a project to be carried on (as Jacobus does), *Noise in the Waters* attempts to describe a new mode of Western imperialism: the working of discursive empire as a self-validating, self-supporting, and self-referential administrative mechanism. The General in *Noise in the Waters* speaks from within this present historical condition governed by a widespread negative discourse regarding foreigners and immigrants, and he acts consistently neither proclaiming judgement nor taking position on the issue of migration, but just counting. In this context, counting is a mathematical procedure and a symbolic act. As such it is based on taxonomic criteria and ideological principles. The rationale behind Jacobus's killing the bushmen and the Hottentots is, in fact, racial and religious difference – a metaphysical difference – a principle

according to which the right to live is bestowed. Conversely, the General does not kill; he uses numbers because he has been told to. He is a specific figure of the historical present he lives in, and in which the text is embedded. His behaviour allows a better understanding of the transit of bodies and imperial discourses into the present.

The play opens and closes within a frame stating the failure of the counting and classifying procedure. The incipit quotes:

Can anyone read this? / Can anyone make this out? / What a mess [...] At least make out the numbers / Line them up in order" (Martinelli 2011: 4). The conclusion rounds up the subject with a corresponding vagueness: "I can't make it out Mister Secretary sir / (silence) / I can't make it out / (silence) / No, I can't make it out at all / (silence) / I-CAN'T-MAKE-IT-OOOOUTT! (Martinelli 2011: 39)

Performing the unrewarding duty of counting corpses, the General reads numbers as markers of identification trying to match them with dates of birth and personal information. But the majority of the corpses are impossible to identify:

I lose my bearings / 3398 / unknown / 569 / unknown" (Martinelli 2011: 26). While struggling to decode the signs, the General invents identities for the bodies, he makes up names and stories of death: "This is a kid / 2917 / 2917 / Grab a name from the hat / Yusuf / Yusuf sounds good / This kid from Western Sahara" (Martinelli 2011: 6). "44 / Sakinah / 44 / she's not alone either / together with another thirty / Nigerian girls / little girls almost / precious cargo (Martinelli 2011: 15).

The General's ambiguous manoeuvre to concoct life-stories for the migrants does not voice human pity, rather serves the purpose of filling the void left by

the missing details which prevent him from doing his job. Still, his story is a version of official history.

His affiliation to the discourse of the empire is not established along the lines of a total adherence to the imperial project, as is for Jacobus, whose work is first and foremost an act of faith. Jacobus is aware of his mission, he chooses and wants to participate – actively and coherently – in the consolidation of European hegemony. On the contrary, the General is only a gear in the mechanism of empire, a bureaucrat who does not take any responsibility for his actions. More generally, in the system of power represented in *Noise in the Waters*, nobody seems to be responsible, or take responsibility, for what is actually happening. The process of the construction of domination is getting over ethics, de-personalising the agents of morality, and turning the seemingly rational mechanism of classification into a necessarily unavoidable procedure. Anyway, the system works:

Sure our / policy is grand / on this island all are welcome / on this island
you're all welcome / spirits / we refuse no one / open door policy / my
own invention / I'm the wisest of all / I'm the lord of numbers / count on
me / [...] Order and clarity / All in a row / Listed just right / One dead body
after another / Up-to-date list (Martinelli 2011: 17).

Using a telling inversion, the General ironically speaks of acceptance though leaving the inevitability of the migrants' condition unquestioned. Responsibility for the migrants' death is deflected on external uncontrollable agents in order to de-personalise the unchangeable, perennial, and indispensable order of the empire. Indifferent ferocious fish may be a cause:

no respect for the law, these fish / no respect for anyone / [...] damn you /
you keep me / me / from doing my work / of lining them up of giving a
name / [...] Who do you think you are? / The official gravediggers? / The

gravediggers of empire? / Who appointed you? / At least let me count them first, hey? / [...] can't you tell / one number from another? / Can't you be more exact? / What's all this chaos? (Martinelli 2011: 27-28).

Not bearing responsibility for his actions – as nobody does – the General may be recognised as a 'servant' of the kind Maurizio Viroli qualifies in *The Liberty of Servants*. Offering a historical and philosophical reading of the political situation of Italy in the last decades – in particular the periods of Berlusconi's government – Viroli theorises how Italians have been ruled by implementing an idea of freedom which have been distorted and manipulated. It is the freedom of servants, not of citizens. According to Viroli, while citizens are free because they are not dominated by the arbitrary will of an individual or a group, on the contrary, the freedom of servants dictates that no rightful obstacles are imposed on persons pursuing individual goals, because acknowledgements, prizes, and gifts are bestowed by the capricious governing power on people pleasing it. In this light, the General is willing to perform his duty not because he believes in this mission, as Jacobus does, but because he finally hopes to move from the dirty job to the rooms of power where people eat caviar and drink champagne (Martinelli 2011: 36). Jacobus and the General are two different emissaries of the empires they represent and work for. They are consistently embedded in the production, spreading, and use of the cultures supporting empires in different historical times. They signal the uninterrupted evolution of the practice and discourse of empire. The General's submission to the unavoidable mechanism of power, his shedding of responsibility and of political critical stance may aptly express the inevitability of economic neo-liberalism as a recognisable form of neo-empire. Applied to the power over life and death, this form of empire is directed to people who are not conceived as subjects, but perceived as inferior, doomed, and economically irrelevant.

For a better understanding of the association between bodies in transit – colonised and migrant people – and their commercial use in life and death, it is

worth turning to studies on the Atlantic slave trade. This detour allows a closer emphasis on the monetary value of people within the wider architecture of the empire. In the field of Atlantic studies it emerges that, for the slaves, understanding numeracy and acquiring the ability to count meant to enter the financial network of the sea: the trading of people and goods through the sea understood both as practical medium and discursive myth. While this move marked a step towards a possible freedom, it also signified the inclusion of the slaves into the liberal economic system that the transatlantic trade was promoting. For freed slaves like Olaudah Equiano, grasping the complexity of financial life in the Atlantic world order, as he describes it in his *Narrative*, also meant inquiring into the boundaries of liberty and the puzzles of economic justice in the Atlantic (Wickman 2011). The Atlantic economy was in fact based on the evaluation and selling of living bodies, while dead bodies were a commercial loss. Bodies were money (3). To count lives and deaths was symbolically to estimate wealth. The monetary evaluation of bodies in slavery still continues today, even if legal ownership over humans is not permitted. The history of the slave trade is a transcultural subject, Michael Zeuske argues discussing slavery in a global perspective (Zeuske 2012). His reading focuses on the sinister and ambiguous association between empire and slavery, neo-liberal economy and globalisation, living and dead bodies. Taking this line, the relationship between the victims in the texts might be interpreted through the conceptual lens of new slavery, also supported by the complicity of the institutions pressing for a bureaucratic normalization that facilitates the continuation and exploitation of new slaves.

The calculation of deaths is omnipresent in Jackie Kay's *The Lamplighter* (4) that traces back and rewrites the history of slavery searching for and commemorating the missing faces dispersed under the sea. The strategy of listing is a means of resuscitating names and lives silenced in the darkness of the

see and of slavery. But deaths are countless and the slave's story shapes a choral poetic memory and a litany:

The endless deaths in us, the windowless deaths, / The deaths in the dungeons, / The deaths at sea / The deaths in the ship / The deaths in the new land / The deaths ties to the trees / The deaths in the plantation / The deaths in the shacks / The tobacco deaths, the sugar deaths. / the broken-hearted deaths. The love-missed and missing / Deaths. The in-your-face Deaths. The stowed away deaths. / The sea deaths. The deaths at sea (Kay 2008: 21).

On a different note, the archival inventory of the shipping news records death through enumeration, filling a catalogue of the apparently common and banal events on the ship: "Buryed a woman slave of the flus. No. 29. Buryed a girl slave. No. 74" (Kay 2008: 45). Two opposing tales offer contrasting versions of slave history as the arrogant rhetoric of empire obstructs the slaves' mourning voices dialogically intertwined along the spirals of past and present times.

To give names is yet another mode of resuscitating memory to life, as the General roughly does in *Noise in the Waters* trying to fabricate lives of stereotyped identities for the victims. But the dead's actual stories are left unspoken and unknown. Differently, in *Turner*, David Dabydeen poetically entwines naming and invention to give voice to the stillborn child, Turner, and to the African land through the desire of transfiguration and the figure of recognition. In order to join the child with his land, the son with the mother, and reconcile them with their past history of humiliation and stereotyping, words and names should be revived to start a new life.

If the validity of the first assumption of this essay has been assessed – namely the transit of the body of empire in history through the mechanism of biopolitics – one needs to consider the metanarrative levels of the texts to verify whether the complicity of cultures and imperialisms contains the germs of

dissent and the energy for change (which is the second aim of this essay). In the examined texts, the enumeration of bodies, both as an effective strategy of domination and a metaphysical system of knowledge, is presented as undisputed tactics of power. No dissent is clearly expressed against this mechanism of the empire. However, in spite of the absence of critical judgement, the readers of J. M. Coetzee's *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* and the audience of Marco Martinelli's *Noise in the Waters* do not endorse the imperial view. According to a postcolonial reading of texts as political discourses, the responsibility for dissent is deflected on the readers and the audience. Using different techniques, Coetzee and Martinelli transfer on to their public the ethical duty of adopting an acute, inquiring, and disputing perspective. "Be a little more humane, / sharks!" (Martinelli 2011: 30), ironically shouts the General in *Noises in the Waters* shadowing a possible line of resistance out of the seemingly inevitable global cage that restrains him. As Said claims in *Culture and Imperialism*, paradoxically imperialism pushed distant worlds close to each other. This paper tried to show that a contrapuntal and nomadic perspective helps to identify opposing affiliations and ambiguous connections coexisting within the concrete historical experience that the texts narrate. *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* and *Noise in the Waters* describe the imperial system of biopolitics in different though comparable ways, aiming at an identical final point, typical of postcolonial writing, that is the political involvement of the audience in the active struggle against arrogant, enslaving, and omnipresent practices of power.

NOTES

1. References to J. M. Coetzee's *The Narrative of Jacobus Coetzee* will be included in the main text as Coetzee 2004. References to Marco Martinelli's *Noise in the Waters* will be included in the main text as Martinelli 2011.

2. The Italian version of *Noise in the Waters – Rumore di acque* – is the second production of Teatro delle Albe's triptych *Ravenna-Mazara 2010* by Marco Martinelli, Ermanna Montanari, and Alessandro Renda.
3. The registration of life and property is the basic principle of the Domesday Book, a census commissioned by William the Conqueror in 1086. This archive allowed control over people in order to impose taxation. By extension, its function was to commodify life, to make life a potential object of property in the hands of the ruling power.
4. Radio drama broadcast on BBC3 on 25 March 2007 on occasion of the celebrations for the bicentennial anniversary of the abolition of the slave trade in the British colonies.

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