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A credible past and a shameless body: history, violence and repetition in the lives of asylum seekers women in Italy

If Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience,
it's because literature, like psychoanalysis,
is interested in the complex relatio
between knowing and not knowing.
Cathy Caruth, *Unclaimed Experience*, 1996

By way of a preface

This work stems from a clinical and ethnographic research conducted over the last six years at the Frantz Fanon center of Turin[1]. In particular, since 2005 I started to follow regularly some African asylum seekers women, mainly from the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ivory Coast and Ethiopia. My goal is to reflect on their suffering, by questioning the ways in which

[1] The Frantz Fanon Centre in Turin (North Italy) is a public service within the SSN (*servizio sanitario nazionale*: Public Health Service) which offers counselling, psychotherapy and psychosocial support to immigrants, refugees and victims of torture, and which was founded in 1996 by Roberto Beneduce (University of Turin). The patients I followed complained of symptoms such as "insomnia", "flashbacks", "intrusive images", "depressed mood" (this is the language used by the medical and psychiatric services that send the patients to the centre). Between 2004 and 2008 I also obtained a diploma in psychoanalytic psychotherapy at a school that follows and promotes the teaching of Jacques Lacan in Italy (*Laboratorio Freudiano*). The thoughts I develop in this work stem from the analysis of some psychoanalytic practices. I propose, first, to examine the relationship between violence, memory and history in the biographies of these women; and secondly, to bring to light the issues and problems related to the practices we rely on when we take charge of someone and nurse her. This work is part of the thesis submitted on January 17th 2009 in Rome at the *Laboratorio Freudiano*, titled: "Time uncertain: more notes on trauma. Torture, memory, repetition" (unpublished manuscript).

social institutions produce a "victim" but also the ways in which a "victim" produces herself as such (accepting, therefore, the status granted by the host country, and reproducing the humanitarian and political discourse on refugees and asylum seekers that dominates today in Europe). My analysis will focus only on one aspect of my activities with these young African women, an aspect which concerns sexuality in two ways: when it is rape (and rape is a war weapon and a torture technique, aimed in the latter case to make a woman talk, or make some relative of hers talk, a relative who is imprisoned with her or still wanted); and when it functions as a logical operator (that is, when sexuation involves the production of a subject from a separation that is a "cut", a "wound", a "trauma" in its etymological *before than* psychoanalytical sense). One wonders whether, in the so-called "clinic of modernity", there is room for symptoms *innervated* in historical junctures marked by the violence of men on men (war, genocide, slavery) and especially the violence of men on women (since the genealogy of rape, in a *paternal institution* such as war, takes the form of a masculine historical writing on women, a writing conducted rather systematically: a writing that leaves a mark *in absence*).

When I tried to bring up these clinical situations in the working groups which supervised or discussed specific cases, within the school of psychotherapy[2] I attended from 2004 to 2008, I almost always received discouraging responses concerning my attempt to historicize the symptoms of the patients and their violent biographies. I quote here only one of the many comments I received, all of which I still consider emblematic. After presenting the case of a Congolese woman raped in front of and together with her mother and older sister, an analyst said: "In every war, women have been raped".

Is there something *new* that the history of Congo or Ivory Coast can say to psychoanalysis on rape, violence, mutilation, on the scar and the infection, and finally, on trauma? I cannot deny that these and other comments I received led me later on to consider that experience as a field for ethnographic research. I have become increasingly interested in how the psychoanalytical discourse – but it would be more correct to say, some psychoanalysts – answer the question of the "historical power of trauma" (the phrase is Judith Butler's) in relation to experiences of torture or violence. In most cases, this discourse remains strongly linked to the tools that had been used to produce "cure" in the clinical treatment of neuroses, as if you were in front of people complaining about the same *suffering* and displaying the same symptoms (which are certainly similar in form, in their working and function, but less so in their content).

One of the positions most supported and legitimized within the groups of analysts who adopt a Lacanian theoretical orientation, and one that I have heard many times in those formative

[2] *Laboratorio freudiano*, associated with the *Association lacanienne internationale* (ALI).

years, is well summarized in an interview conducted by Eliana Iacovazzi[3], an anthropologist who has worked in the ethnographic field of health care systems in Paris, both ethno-psychiatric and psychoanalytic, aimed at patients who are victims of torture, asylum seekers and refugees. This is the answer of a Lacanian analyst she interviewed at the *Association Primo Levi* in Paris:

> (analyst) "This is the difference between us and all these cultural things that try to explain: it is the political context ... it is normal. But we do not say anything. It is very important. Do not say anything and leave open the possibility that the person may empty (*vider*) the event. The more you talk about the event, the more you give it meaning".
> (E. I.) "And that's not good?".
> (analyst) "No, because meaning is enjoyment. [...] Psychoanalysis rightly seeks to empty events of meaning, to empty, so that the thing is not heavier than the ... the more I say yes to you, the longer this thing will remain. This makes it impossible to move on to other things".
> (EI) "It is possible for the person to forget the event."
> (analyst) "No, one cannot forget. The unconscious never forgets. The problem with these people, with trauma, the definition is that no one knows where you can put what you have experienced, you can not tell a story ... [...] The important thing in therapy, the goal is that you get to the point where you tell your traumatic experience as something trivial. Yes, it happened to me! In order not to make it too heavy. The psychoanalytic technique is not to add some sense, some kind of explicative contents, but to remain neutral. And to say: yes, I lived all this, but I am no longer a victim, it is a thing of the past" (2007, p. 207).

The researcher presses the analyst further with some *questions* and the analyst answers: "For us in psychoanalysis, the subject is in some way responsible for the creation of a symptom and does not want to admit it because he can not admit it" (2007, p. 208). And again: "Torture is not in itself a trauma. The event of torture is not traumatizing in itself" (*ivi*, p. 213).

We must take up some points calmly, because even if this work is borne from the effort to go over (and at the same time rethink) the *semantic corridors* of a disputed notion – the notion of "trauma" and, related to it, that of "victim" – this does not excuse me from being explicit:

1. rape, and the imprisonment, the physical violence experienced by these women is an experience that *cannot be assimilated*, and as such it produces an alteration in the subject's perception of time and duration, as well as a metamorphosis of her social (self)representation and her psychic experience of Self and Other: these and other forms of torture are always traumatic

[3] See also Roberto Beneduce (2010).

experiences, both for *those who were prepared* (Amery, 2002)[4] and those who had not reckoned that what has happened could happen;

2. such transformations must be analyzed carefully in order to understand the possibility or the impossibility that they have to be productive, that is, to produce new technologies of Self and new representations of the person; to produce individual agencies and strategies, survival tactics, and also intentions, methods or answers more or less "legal" (Das, 2007). These transformations may also results in an exploitative conduct, behaviors that are manipulative, deceptive, untrue (one wonders, then, if there is and what is the price someone pay to become "victim" first and then "witness" of a historic violent event accomplished through a human act);

3. the mistake is to think that life can no longer continue after the violence, while our goal is exactly the opposite: to understand how to create the conditions so that a life that can no longer proceed may continue (Kertész, 1999). In this perspective, the question of the responsibility and *the enjoyment of the patient*, as placed in those terms ("For us in psychoanalysis the subject is responsible in some way for the creation of a symptom"), as well as the issue of the *trivialization of traumatic memory* (to get to talk about a traumatic experience "as something trivial") risk being completely misleading: it seems to me that here psychoanalysts confuse *these* traumatic memories with what they called castration and the Oedipus complex in the theory of neurosis.

Historicized the *undreamt*

Now, the problem is to recognize that we are within a discourse, the discourse of violence, which in the human sciences often produces *universalizing* discourses. The universalization assumed in the discourses of the human sciences inevitably leads to the trivialization of both the notion of "trauma" (Fassin and Rechtman, 2007) and that of "violence" (Beneduce, 2008). Roberto Beneduce speaks of misleading *baroque scenes*, where under the same heading are gathered Aztec sacrifices, the gas chambers of Auschwitz, the Guayakì ritual or the suicide of a young Palestinian martyr. His metaphor intends to describe the risk inherent in an anthropology of violence – "The models of the death instinct or the discourse of socio-biology would then be enough to answer once and for all all questions on the causes and forms of violence" (2008, p. 7) – but this *Baroque picture* is just as relevant to our attempt to say something about the repeated assemblage that some psychoanalysts do between individual trauma and social violence, familiar scene and political drama. In this view, torture is similar to

[4]Amery writes: "I regarded myself – wrongly, as I see today – as an old, hardened expert on the system, its men and its methods. A reader of the 'Neue Weltbühne' and the 'Neues Tagebuch' in times past, well up on the German KZ literature of the German emigration from 1933 on, I believed to anticipate what was in store for me" (2009, p. 61).

other events or "acts" of human violence, and has therefore nothing more to say. Indeed, to intercede before the scene of torture means taking part in the *enjoyment* that the patient or informer has invested in it: this is a comment I have often received in recent years from some analysts. Likewise, trauma is always already known by psychoanalysis and patients cannot add anything original to this "reality" that touches them and affects them (Viñar, 1989).

The difficulties facing a historical-anthropological and psychoanalytical perspective on trauma, memory and repetition, however, lie mainly elsewhere in the peculiar historicity of the events that are at issue here, a historicity that cannot be reduced to the chronological reconstruction of the facts, to the diachronic linearity of social events. The question might well be: what does it mean to historicize these stories? Can you historicize violence (physical, symbolic, imaginary violence) that *works* those upon whom strikes? What kind of "story" are we talking about and what kind of historicization process can we imagine that can be effective in *not* reducing the other to a victim, a universal human being, a body to be saved?

To historicize the experience of torture or war rape means, according to Bogumil Jewsiewicki, to arrive always late and recognize that this process, has already been done by our interlocutors. Those women and men who have experienced similar traumatic experiences, at the time when they can tell what happened, have already placed themselves in the historical discourse as "victims" or "perpetrators", "tortured" or "tortures". "That experience has already been historicised, or, to put it differently, what happened – as with all historical accounts (*récit historique*) – is projected in the tale of an experience that is in the process of being built" (Jewsiewicki, 1998, p. 631). Jewsiewicki then asks: "Are we not confusing then the constructions and negotiations of the memory of violence (the testimonies) with its experience?" (*ibidem*). It is clear that the author asks this question to anthropologists and historians working on the fields of violence. As much as historians, and perhaps even more, anthropologists have long been accustomed to producing *only* "interpretations of interpretations", that is, "fictions" (at least those who have followed and follow the lesson of interpretative anthropology *à la Geertz* or of Ginzburg's "micro-history" and the history from "below" of Michel de Certeau). Therefore, the problem raised by Jewsiewicki does not correspond completely to a methodological question (what is collected in the field, what do these historical narratives represent?). The problem lies elsewhere, because it is not self-evident that in these biographies and histories, historicization has taken place, that it has run its course. In these events, it feels like *history itself appears as a symptom* (the phrase is Cathy Caruth's).

If so – that is, if history showed as a symptom in the affairs of men and women who suffer from the presence of fear, terror and death – it would then be necessary to reconsider

notions such as that of historical "event" (or "fact"), but most importantly it would be necessary to understand how, in these cases, "historical agency is transformed through the signifying process, how the historical event is represented in a discourse that is *somehow beyond control*" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 12).

There are well-known testimonies that tell of this uncontrollability of historical discourse, the inability to soothe History. About Auschwitz, for instance, Amery and Kertész write:

> *In this case, history itself becomes useless as a concept* […]. This is why, now as well as earlier, I always proceed from the concrete event, but never become lost in it; rather, I always take it as an occasion for reflections that extend beyond reasoning and the pleasure in logical argument to areas of thought that lie in an uncertain twilight and will remain therein, no matter how much I strive to attain the clarity necessary in order to lend them contour. However [...] enlightenment is not the same as clarification. Clarification would also amount to disposal, settlement of the case, which can then be laced in the files of history. My book is meant to aid in preventing exactly this. *For nothing is resolved, no conflict is settled, no remembering has become a mere memory*. What happened, happened. But *that* it happened cannot be so easily accepted. I rebel: against my past, against history, and *against a present that places the incomprehensible in the cold storage of history and thus falsifies it in a revolting way*. (Amery, 2009, pp. viii and xi; my italics).

> L'Holocauste, en ce qui concerne son caractère essentiel, n'est pas un événement historique, tout comme le fait que Dieu a remis à Moïse une table de pierre gravée n'est pas un événement historique.
> J'aurais peut-être plutôt dû écrire que l'Holocauste n'est pas seulement un événement historique. Car le fait que ce soit aussi un événement historique a une importance extraordinaire, tout comme le fait qu'on ne puisse pas le réduire à un simple événement historique […].
> On peut remarquer qu'Auschwitz a été possible, certes, mais la réponse unique à ce crime unique, la catharsis, n'a pas été possible. Et c'est justement la réalité qui l'a rendue impossible, notre quotidien, notre vie, la manière dont nous la vivons – à savoir tout ce qui a rendu Auschwitz possible (Kertész, 2008, pp. 179-180).

So it is the very notion of "history" to be twisted: History haunts, History repeats itself (and art, aesthetics, the myths, but also the "symptoms" of individuals, repeat again, even belatedly, History). What does it mean for the "victims" that trauma is likely to repeat itself? Where does the historical power that trauma produces in the subject come from? How do I change the role of the subject in history?

Giorgio Agamben (2008) describes clearly this twist of the very notion of "history" in his work devoted to the archaeological method in philosophy, introducing a notion of "past" that draws liberally from the concept of "Overbeck's Prehistory" or "Dumézil's fringe ultra-history", or "a history of a special type, which does not chronologically precede the present as a source, nor is it outside of the present (in this sense, in the words of Overbeck, it contains 'little or nothing of the past')" (2008, p. 95; my translation). The starting point is what the archaeological survey should be able to focus on, the point of articulation between past and present, seen as contemporary (and not placed chronologically before and after). I believe that in the very manner in which Agamben develops his methodological thinking about archeology as a tool for historical investigation, there is a crucial concept that can illuminate the nature of "trauma" and the delicate relationship which the analyst and the researcher should have with history (or rather, with the historical power of trauma): the point of emergence is the "revelation of the present as that which we could not live or think" and its memory is *already* contemporary to perception. "Such a memory belongs to the past for its form and to the present for its content" (Bergson, quoted in Agamben, 2008, pp. 95-96).

To historicize the violence has been one of the tasks of anthropological literature in recent years, particularly that literature which has placed at the center of its reflection the "post-colonial identity" (whatever that term means), on the basis of the work of authors who had spoken *already* in the 50s and 60s about the violence of colonialism. This literature – that today insists on the categories of agency and empowerment, of hegemony and subordination – has often put colonialism next to globalization, in a seamless continuity, but in doing so it naturally risked making everything "postcolonial" (Georges Balandier recently wrote: "We are all, in different ways, in a post-colonial situation", 2008, p. 24)[5]. I notice other risks in these general and generalizing expressions – the "We are all traumatized" sometimes uttered by a certain psychoanalytic tradition, or the "We all live in a post-traumatic century" by Shoshana Felman[6]. These claims do not state a falsehood, but they take a historical event (colonialism, slavery and Auschwitz) as a universal metaphor for all relationships of domination and in doing so, *dematerialize* "the substance of experience and social relations" (Portelli, 2004, 115)[7]. This is exactly what writers such as Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi, Aimé Cesaire had not done in their

[5] Here, I mention only a fragment of the overall criticism of Anglo-Saxon postcolonial studies: a certain "historical weakness". See Bayart (2008) when he writes: "Les *postcolonial studies* s'occupent moins de pratiques, que documenterait un travail de terrain ou d'archives, que de discours et de représentation à partir desquels elles dissertent, voire extrapolent de manière souvent abusive".
[6] I take this phrase from the work of Fassin and Halluin (2007, p. 310).
[7] Even if Portelli consider here African-American slavery *next to* the Nazi death camp – the "Who is not a slave?" by Frederick Douglass and the "We are all Jews" by Primo Levi – he is aware of the critical historiography that has dismantled the equivalence "extermination camp" = "slave plantation" (Portelli, 2004, p. 115 et seq.).

violent criticism of colonialism: to dematerialize the substance of experience and social relationships. The writing that I know best is certainly Frantz Fanon's, which I read and reread over these years of work. His writing is suspended between a precise description (a materialization of the social and historical experience *inside* the individual psychological experience: this is especially evident in his clinical work at the Psychiatric Hospital of Blida, Algeria) and a language that draws liberally from "fantasy" and "imagination", which makes his texts a clear break with that easy determinism, which sees Man as the product of History.

> Fanon's question is addressed not to such a unified notion of history nor to such a unitary concept of man. It is one of the original and disturbing qualities of *Black skin, White masks* that it rarely historicizes the colonial experience. There is no master narrative or realist perspective that provides a background of social and historical facts against which emerge the problems of the individual or collective psyche. Such a traditional sociological alignment of Self and Society or History and Psyche is rendered questionable in Fanon's identification of the colonial subject who is historicized in the heterogenous assemblage of the texts of history, literature, science, myth (Bhabha, 1994, pp. 42-43).

There is of course a risk in this approach, in accepting that there might be no guiding narrative, no realistic perspective that provides a background of historical events and social issues. I do not think that Fanon has ever taken such radical views in his writing, but I agree with Bhabha: *Peau noire, masques blancs* was written in another register, for much of the book. That said, it is important to recognize that Frantz Fanon was among the first, precisely in *Peau noire, masques blancs*, to claim the need to historicize the colonial situation, and to attack Octave Mannoni and his *Psychologie de la colonisation* (1950).

I believe that this is a risk that anthropology today should take: we have to listen to our interlocutors with the knowledge that they may not have a guiding narrative and they might try to place their stories in History, and with the awareness that neither the one nor the other are completed, resolved, nor were they handed over permanently to the dimension of "myth", "memory", "past": like what has been and is no longer (Ricoeur, 2005). In this respect, this work proceeds on parallel tracks with other historical and anthropological approaches (Viti, 2004), that analyze a Story "while the game is stopped" (Beneduce, 2010). I know that in so doing I could be criticized for placing this work in the anthropological discourse: it is my attempt at a non-trivial interdisciplinarity (not "hyphen" inter-disciplinarity, as Georges Devereux said), an attempt that tries to address a new ethnographic problem: how to write about violence without falling into vague *pret-à-porter* formulas.

Being nothing but human

Nancy Rose Hunt (2008) has recently dealt with the issue of repetition in History. In her work, she proposes that the mass rape of two hundred women committed in 2003 in the RDC, in the village of Nsongo Mboya (Equator Province), is a *late echo* of the abuses, the floggings and hangings of Congolese women during the reign of King Leopold II, the "scandalous" Congo Free State. The author puts forward this "comparison" on the basis of a video, titled *Les Âmes brisées*, produced by a Senegalese director for the UN Population Fund (UNFPA). In this documentary Gueye Khalil denounces – using language that according to Nancy Hunt betrays a fundamental lack of historical analysis – an historic event: the convinction of six soldiers who had raped more than two hundred women in the Equator province. The historical reconstruction of the events is based on a number of interviews with health professionals (especially those working in hospitals in Kindu and Bukavu in the East), the archival material of UN forces in the country (Monuc), and fragments of testimonies of women themselves. The director draws heavily from the archive materials in the province, where episodes of violence against women, committed mainly by members of the *Mouvement pour la libération du Congo* of Jean-Pierre Bemba, are known to have occurred. It is on this point that the author focuses her attention:

> Nsongo Mboyo is located just south of Bondoganda in the same Equator region where the largest, most notorious rubber concession company, Abir, was located when the Congo was King Leopold II's scandalous Congo Free State (1885-1908). The 2006 film makes no mention of this history of iconic imperial violence. Instead, the documentary begins its Equator section with a weak attempt to historically locate place, with a stone declaring the site of a colonial geographic marker. The filmmaker was Senegalese; history was not his purpose… But it is significant that none of the international and Congolese actors who have been making a concerted effort to help thousands of rape victims in the RDC […] seems to know that Nsongo Mboyo was once in the Abir concession, a region of death, starvation, wife abduction, "hostage houses", mutilation, and sexual abuse from 1892 when the violent rush for raw rubber began. Indeed, this *absence of historicization within today's international humanitarian campaign tells us something important about ruination, historical forgetting, and missed opportunities to work with "toxic imperial debris" in producing effective, urgent histories* (Hunt, 2008, p. 221; my italics).

The author could watch the documentary during her stay in Kinshasa in 2007, in the company of an educated Congolese woman, the widow of a university professor, who at some point during the projection shouted : "These soldiers, who had raped, should all be killed"). She immediately corrected herself, and said out loud what she thought was the best solution: "They

should cut off their hands"). Nancy Hunt sees in this outburst a persistent *impression* of images of the past and, quoting Ann Stoler's expression, asks what does it mean for the Congolese today to "think with the ruins of empire".

According to the author, the re-appropriation of a social imaginary polluted by "imperial toxic waste"[8] – vividly represented by Mama Pauline Betu's effort to recover the scores of hands cut off for decades in Congo – "could disturb us". From an analysis of archival documents, and the dense literature on the subject, Hunt questions the notions of "duration", "reproduction" and "repetition" in history and historiography. In particular, she investigates the forms of "repetition" in the humanitarian and missionary logos, since historically, in 1903 as in the years since 1996 up to now, the public has been consistently provided with "shocking numbers" and "shock photos" to induce repulsion, piety, and thus create the conditions to collect huge sums of money, "humanitarian funds" (2008, p. 238)[9].

This social construction of the Other from the shock photo of her/him as a pure and naked victim of events has helped produce the idea of a universal object of sympathy, to be looked upon with *pietas*, as in the case of the many "Palestinian" Madonnas, as well as the "Ethiopian", "Vietnamese", "Afghan", "Iraqi", "African" or "South-east Asian" ones portrayed in a book, *Refugee Women*, quoted by Liisa Malkki, precisely to better analyze and denounce this Western production of social imaginary accustomed to look the Other in her "natural" human vulnerability. Indeed, Liisa Malkki (1995, 1996) has been one of the first writers in the anthropological literature to insist on the de-historicization of the refugee as a figure emblematic of a universal humanity without awareness: awareness of history, culture or nationality (*elementary humanity* and *bare humanity* are the expressions more used in *Purity and Exile*). Nancy Hunt has also paid attention, in her paper quoted above, to the insistence for undeniable visual evidence from observers, journalists and all those who have gone through those regions at that time. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, public opinion acclaimed, wanted and justified social intervention (humanitarian and/or medical, political and/or legal intervention) *after* seeing the photographic material produced by the Europeans. The visual register prevailed over all other forms of documentation and testimony, something that Adam Hochschild (1998) had already documented in his *King Leopold's Ghosts*:

[8] This image is again due to Ann Stoler (2006).
[9] In the movie *Les Âmes brisées* the following data are reported: 24,520 rapes in the region of Kindu between March 2003 and August 2005 and 6,000 cases of women with traumatic fistulae requiring surgery (Gueye, 2006; Monuc, 2007). Discussing the same Congolese case, Chretien (1991) had already spoken of a "war of figures". See on this Beneduce (2007, 2008a, p. 186).

> "One problem, of course, is that nearly all of this vast river of words is by Europeans or Americans. […] Instead of African voices from this time there is largely silence." Hochschild perhaps did not realize how strongly he was echoing an idea found in his humanitarian sources. Consider these words from a CRA pamphlet of 1904: "It is from others, mostly, that we know what there is to know of his sad story … of women toiling in chains … the severed hands … But in all of this we have not heard the voice of the native himself. At most we have seen him in photographs, stretching mute, mutilated and uncomprehending" (Hunt, 2008, p. 224).

The author wants the Congolese women raped and mutilated in the Congo Free State *speak for themselves*, through her analysis of archival material and her ethnographic research, precisely because these stories have been confined for too many decades to the space of those who *have no say in the matter*. Even today, these stories seem doomed to oblivion, a common and above all suspect oblivion. On the one hand, Hunt reminds us of the instrumental use by Europeans of their old favorite historical tool: the eye at the expense of the voice, the image instead of the story. A choice motivated by the desire to affect their audience more deeply (a white, European, educated, middle-class, audience) and shock them with the image of a humanity bent to Western social meanings, but only because it was kept "silent", "dumb", "sick" (for example, *depressed* is the term used by the journalist Viscount Mountmorres in 1906 to describe the Mongo people)[10]. On the other hand, the author returns insistently on the vital and to some extent "intentional" (in the sense of self-imposed) use of silence on the part of the population attacked and mutilated: in the words of Boali – a woman of Ekolongo village in the *Abir concession*, who spoke before the commission of inquiry set up in 1905-06 – it is clear that the "choice" not to give any *sign of life* saved her from the ferocity of the soldier who had attacked her and that, having failed to rape her, believing her dead, cut her foot at the ankle to steal the bracelet she was wearing. It was therefore her silence and stillness *while* the violence raged on her body that saved her, as well as her continued silence and stillness while pictures of her were taken, to arouse feelings of closeness, support and solidarity. We observe this in other testimonies as well, when we read that whenever there is a strong link between an imminent danger to life and the smallest noise, sound, groan emitted by accident or automatic impulse ("When they perceived noise or a rattling of shots, they [the mothers] went further in the forest. Mothers buried alive their small children because of their crying": Boelaert cit. in Hunt, 2008, p. 233).

[10] Vaughan (1991). "The overriding concern in the writings that I have considered is less that of the construction of the mad African than that of the construction of the African *tout court*, with a constant reaffirmation of his Otherness. Much of the arguments on psychology and psychiatry in Africa continue to revolve around the idea of how much the African is constitutively different" (1991, p. 118). The effect of this was, according to the author, the *pathologization* of the "*normal*" *African.*

The social imaginary which now turns the stories of refugees and displaced persons in the stories of bodies (Malkki, but also Ong, 2003 and more recently Fassin and d'Halluin, 2005; 2007) betrays this aporia of the biological body: so eloquently silent, eloquent because silent. For those women who suffered physical violence and rape at the hands of military, paramilitary, militia or any other "man in Khaki" in that country, this risk is even higher because it is on their bodies that remain the signs of violence systematically perpetrated and committed (fistulae, sexually transmitted diseases, but also pregnancies). It is a violence that "works" the bodies and condemns the people it falls on to have only a "biological memory" (Deleuze and Guattari, 1972): a purulent body, a foul-smelling wound infection, a blind eye, a disfigured face, a swollen belly, feet or hands amputated.

As documented by archival material, the work of Nancy Hunt being one of many possible examples, there is nothing particularly new in all of this today, but it is important to continue asking questions:

i. a question on the systematic *crushing (reduction)* of the victims by their torturers to a bare biological memory (not only in its bestial form, historically well known to us – "Jews" = "lice", but in the more banal and effective reduction of man to "man" and woman to "woman" or "Tutsi" to "Tutsi" and Hutu to "Hutu"), without any chance to be "nothing else" but "bodies" (short/long, male/female...);

ii. on the *flattening* also systematically produced by social discourses that intervene *post hoc* on the "victim" to save her, treat her and welcome her, recognize her, and so on. To be reduced to biological memory sometimes dramatically eliminates all socially shared symbolic memory (i.e., that "memory of the words" that allows every human being to have *another* memory apart from the purely biological one, at the price, say Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1972), of removing "the biological memory"). This process, which features prominently in the dramatic metamorphoses in the mnemonic persons on whom the violence strikes (I shall come back to this topic below), is produced and supported by the social discourses dominant in our society today. These discourses pretend to be different from those that produced the violence before, the "original" violence, but on the contrary risk to share with them the grammar of the sign, and its semantics. It was a young asylum seeker from Congo, Brazzaville, who told me one day "Violence does not end for us when we arrive in Europe. You forget too often the violence that too often we face here among you."

How can we speak of this violence and how can we put it next to *that other*? Liisa Malkki has used the expression "de-historicization" to refer to this *violent process of humanization*:

> One important effect is to leach out the histories persons and become pure victims in general: universal man, universal woman, universal child, taken together, universal family. This dehistoricizing universalism creates a context in which it is difficult for people in the refugee category to be approached as historical actors rather than simply as mute victims. *Humanitarian practices tend to silence refugees. It is here that physical, non–narrative evidence assumes such astonishing power*" (my italics).

Gianluca Gatta (2007) has produced a rigorous and original ethnography on the landings of boats loaded with illegal immigrants in the island of Lampedusa (South Italy). In his work he underlines the active process by which both the humanitarian actors as well as the police, perhaps without full awareness of the violence of their gestures, let these *floating shipwrecked bodies* fall to the bottom: these bodies just saved from the wreck and immediately placed in the "gray area" of the "naked" body, rigorously inspected and made anonymous and homologous (quite equal to all the other bodies). The attention that the police give to the length of his beard (to establish the length of the trip), the thickness of the hair (to distinguish the adult from the child), the presence of razors or deodorants in the boats (to ridicule men and women who have tried to arrive clean, in order) show to the researcher a path of reflection about the bio-politics of the landings and the very early stages of reception. It clearly emerges a new profile of violence produced by the minute gestures of the everyday, the ordinary. We have been told about a similar procedure by some women we encountered:

> I asked a young Ethiopian girl, in the broadest and most generic way I could, which had been the most painful experience, the most difficult to remember, since she had left her country, Ethiopia: Maryam (2009) (looks down, there is silence for a moment): "At the Centre of XXX – a C.A.R.A. [Reception Centres for Asylum Seekers] – they gave me only a small piece of soap that had to last for one or two weeks and with which we had to wash their clothes".

On the one hand, I think that this was her attempt to make me understand how that experience was for her beyond any comment (how was it was possible that "in Italy" there was such a shortage of products for personal hygiene, bathing? She kept saying: "In Italy"). On the other hand, I thought then that in those sentences I could feel the embarrassment she felt at having to use the same piece of soap to wash her body and her clothes (since in Ethiopia is still widespread a certain ritualized practice of self-care and body washing that makes a clear distinction between parts of the body that are "clean" or "dirty", "contaminated" and "non-

contaminated"[11]). It was the first time that Maryam could express this thought of hers: as the "silent victim" (a *mute victim* indeed, as Malkki says) she had not said before to anyone that for her just one piece of soap was both a disgrace and a suffering.

Hannah Arendt had already denounced this *reduction to bare humanity* as the greatest danger facing refugees and displaced people ("The abstract nakedness of being *nothing but human* was their greatest danger.", 1973, p. 300). Giorgio Agamben (2005) takes up these considerations, and develops them. The notions of biopolitics and "bare life" show the strong reduction/claim that lies "behind" both asylum policies in Europe and humanitarian and medical discourses, that in different ways take "care" of asylum seekers and refugees in the early stages of acceptance, support, treatment. It is the universal human being – as the "biological body" or "creature of God" – that is welcomed, supported, nursed, not the men and women of flesh and bones, with their social and personal history, where politics *is already* psychic (and vice-versa), and where culture is embedded in the narrative strategies, in the mnemo-techniques, in the gestures of healing, in the habits ... All the more so in cases of rape, where the female body (Bosnian in Omarska or Kikongo in Kinshasa) becomes "the perfect threshold of indifference between biology and politics" (Agamben, 2005, p. 209). This is true both *there* (in the country where the violence was perpetrated) and *here* (where the person asks for political asylum, humanitarian protection, legal and social recognition). The "uncertain lands without a name", the "uncomfortable zones of indifference" mentioned by Agamben, can be seen in the histories of the Congolese and Ivorian women I met during these years, whose violated bodies (but also swollen, pregnant, scarred, bleeding) reveal themselves as "a threshold of absolute distinction between law and fact, norm and biological life" (*ibidem*). It is not by chance, I believe, that these women end up being recognized not as "political refugees" but as persons to be protected for "humanitarian reasons".

First story: Jacqueline

During a phone call I had with an operator of a voluntary religious organization, I expressed my concern about a young Congolese woman, who I had started to follow for psychological support. She had been referred to us by the health services as a result of her decision to continue her pregnancy – *chronologically* related to the events that had occurred in prison in Goma, and to the sexual violences she had been subjected to. I was worried because she had not yet been heard by

[11] Thanks to Alessandro Triulzi (personal communication, Naples, 2009) for pointing out to me this ethnographic consideration.

the Territorial Commission[12], and I thought there was an urgent need to help her understand what the hearing would have been like. (The "symptoms" of the young girl were *silence*, *vital exhaustion* and *despair*: Jacqueline could not talk, even more, she did not want to talk about what might prove to be a cause of misunderstandings with the members of the Territorial Commission, who would ask her to tell her story and the reasons for which she had applied for political asylum). My colleague reassured me by saying that from her point of view and on the basis of her expertise in the field, the young woman had a gynaecological medical documentation that *would be deemed sufficient* by those who had to consider her application. Whether she could "talk" or "not talk" was not so significant. What she had to say and how she would say it would not be "objects" of interest and attention. Her pregnant and tried body was eloquent *enough*, and her condition of motherhood was a sufficient element to "give life" to at least a humanitarian legal recognition.

The social workers, *despite their will* or in *good faith*, reproduce a logic similar to those that triggered forms of violence (physical, symbolic, imaginary violence) when they are satisfied to *look at the other as a human being*, in this case a female body, a "container of life". This young Congolese woman received in March 2008 some tragic news about her pregnancy. At the request of the doctors she had to decide urgently, within hours, whether to continue her pregnancy or terminate it. The stubborn choice to carry on the pregnancy (and one could say an almost *insanely determined* choice, as it was made by a girl who had been hitherto so silent and apathetic and almost without "nerve") was not understood by the health workers, who said in dismay: "Why is she so doggedly determined to keep *this* baby?" (conceived as a result of a rape in prison?).

One might well expect that in the face of such tragic news about the development of the embryo (who did not grow because of a prolonged lack of oxygen, the reasons of which have not yet been established by the doctors) the patient decided that the best thing would be not to pursue the pregnancy (a choice completely legal in Italy, even after the third month, for therapeutic reasons, that is, in case of serious risks to the health of the mother or the foetus).

In a frame where "providence" is relevant, or within an empathic relationship with the other, one that aims at identification with the other, "if I were you" – these are the registers most frequently used by operators of volunteer organizations, especially religious ones – it seems legitimate to ask why the young woman is so obstinate in her desire to continue the pregnancy, rather than terminate it (considering especially that she said that it was the result of repeated rapes and that there was a high risk of disability for the foetus).

The raw nerve of "bare life" mentioned by Agamben here emerges clearly. One wonders how much this "choice", so determined – but also expressed without comment, without explanation, without any word that could signify the potential act of "letting live" and not "letting die" – will

[12] The Commission is the collegiate ministerial authorised to recognize refugee status, or issue the "humanitarian" or "subsidiary" residence permits, in case the required conditions are met.

make her story *less credibile*[13] when she will have to speak before the Commission appointed to establish the veracity of the experience she described, (since this choice already made it less credible in the eyes of the social workers and the volunteers responsible for her accommodation and treatment. For my part, I tried to see in this choice *also* an attempt by the woman to escape the logic of humanitarian assistance, to be more than a biological body: the woman forced *me* and *us* to listen to what she had to say; she forced us to take into account *her* story. I have picked up fragments of her story that provided a *historical depth* to its choice (the promises made to her mother about the pregnancies that she would have, the familiar and social under which are written her future and her "destiny"; the values shared with her community). Jacqueline becomes, the more we talk, a Congolese woman, an evangelical Christian, from a family who taught her certain moral and religious values. A mother-daughter relationship emerges, necessarily unique and particular, and a bond with the mother, now deceased, takes shape. To get into the maze of details, particulars, fragments that lead to or determine certain choices makes it possible for a *historical subject* to emerge[14]. Jacqueline, bewildered, reveals her amazement: how is it possible that someone could advise her to carry out an abortion? She tries, even if timidly, to criticize a few sentences she heard, some indications she received in the hospital. What emerges is a very determined lady, and her apathetic traits remain clearly in the background.

Jacqueline has obtained a residence permit on humanitarian grounds. It was decided that she had no right to political asylum, but she has been granted humanitarian protection for her health condition and those of her child.

In this – as in all the cases I followed between 2007 and 2008 – the woman has obtained a residence permit for humanitarian reasons (but not asylum) and for reasons that concerned her state of health (and in this case also that of her child) rather than her experiences of violence and persecution in Eastern Congo (experiences deemed not credible, poorly documented, and perhaps deceptive, in any case improbable, given the choices she made, scandalous and *morally* uncomfortable). Some of these women did "rebel" against the decision that was offered them through the so-called "humanitarian" recognition, trying to get refugee status instead.

[13] Of a young Ivorian woman, in a particularly suffering condition, a member of the Territorial Commission (2008) said: "Does she pretend to be stupid or is she stupid indeed?". He meant that he felt *mocked* by a tale he considered bogus. After the refusal by the territorial Commission, she filed an appeal and was granted a residence permit on humanitarian grounds.

[14] There is much more to investigate on this historical subject, because it does not look like the product of a linear sequence of historic events, but rather a concatenation of "acts" (Lacan), some of them passively suffered, some others actively carried out, but always lived in a partially "latent" way (Caruth).

Second story: Anne

Anne is a girl of twenty-eight years. She arrived in Italy in late summer (2007) and after two weeks was summoned by the Territorial Commission in Rome. She was hospitalized for ten days, during which the violence she suffered had been certified medically and gynaecologically. During one of the first interviews she tells me that when she arrived in Italy she had undergone several medical examinations to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted diseases, furthermore, she has been certified to have deep bruises and scars on her legs, in the area of the groin. Anne has gathered all the needed documents to appear prepared before the Commissioners. But being called so early, Anne complains that she found herself in Rome with no knowledge of Italian, so she had to entrust her story to the words of an interpreter who translated her sentences, memories, facts.

In Kinshasa Anne was a journalist for a religious broadcaster of a Church of "awakened". Christians. She interviewed people, prepared news reports that were then aired on local television. Her professional activity, and that of many of her colleagues, led to her being jailed for a long, unspecified, time. She does not remember how many months she was detained, but she tells of continuous violence and abuse from three to four men at a time. Her escape was made possible by the help of one of her jailers ("Avec l'aide de l'autorité, du chef militaire") who recognized her as belonging to his own group ("Je pleurais, je pleurais, je pleurais tous les jours, tout le temps. Je pleurais pas en lingala, mais en kikongo. C'est pour cela qu'il m'a reconnue"). One night this "chef" let her escape.

Anne crossed the Congo River, reaching the opposite side, in Brazzaville. Here, a friend put her in contact with an Italian trader who heard her story and helped her reach Europe.

Once arrived in Italy, she tried to call her father because he was the first person who she wanted to inform of her exile. When she dialled the number an unknown voice answered.

"*My psychologist* (this is the formula with which she always addresses me: 'Ma psychologue'), I cannot remember the sequence, the order in which the numbers were written. Even the words, I do not get to master them any more (*maîtriser* is the verb she uses). It is the head, something is wrong in my head. I am traumatized".

"My psychologist, I am traumatized. I can not control words any more, in my head everything gets confused. I do not remember phone numbers. And the words, they are completely beyond me",

At night she cannot sleep and has frequent nightmares.

"I see the dead, the ancestors, who come in my dreams to talk to me. Not a good sign, it is never a good sign when the dead come in the dreams. I remember my father when he said in the morning, angrily: 'Why do you come to disturb me? Why did you come to bother me this night?'. My father said that the dead should stay where they are, and not come to disturb the living. When they come it is never a good sign".

During the Christmas period, Anne will spend a few days of the holidays outside Turin, because she has heard that in a city of northern Italy there is a pastor, who is a fellow countryman, of a Pentecostal Church (*Eglise du Christ au Congo*). She wants to go to him to tell him about these dreams and ask him what they mean.

Anne, even more than Jacqueline, looks like a traumatized person: she will repeat it several times in the first interview. She's always calling upon 'the psychologist' because she says she's "traumatized".
With "trauma" Anne wants to stress the effect that imprisonment and violence have had on her: the fact that words and numbers get confused in her mind, that she can not remember well the sequences of numbers, the order in which to utter words properly. Some words do come back, so disorderly. Even the dead are a problematic "come back" for Anne, because the dead should not invade the spaces of the living.
I again feel something in Anne that has to do with this loss of a "place": there are "numbers", there are "words" there are "dead" that are where they should not be. Or rather, where she did not expect them.
When I try to ask her if she remembers what her ancestors said in her dreams, she replies curtly: "It does not matter what they say. The important thing is that they should not be where they are, should not disturb me at night". She then remembers what her father said of the intrusiveness of the dead into the realm of the living.
Now, I want to emphasize only one aspect, a discomfort, that Anne felt since she is here in Italy and that she tirelessly began to bring to the talks after receiving the territorial Commission's response (which recognized her the right to have a residence permit on humanitarian grounds). Anne is deeply unhappy.

We dedicate several meetings to talk about this dissatisfaction of hers, which is increasingly turning into anxiety.
"Why was I not recognized as a refugee? I want to appeal. I want them to consider my story again. When I went to Rome I had been in Italy only two weeks and did not speak Italian, I did not understand the questions. I had to trust a translator but I'm not sure, I cannot be sure, that she translated well. I would like to talk to a lawyer and file an appeal".
"I want to have time to attend school this year and get a job. If we have to go to school now, how can I get a job within the next year? I want to learn Italian well, study and then find a job. But this way I am not certain I can renew my residence permit. The residence permit as a refugee would protect me more, give me more time to study, learn and find a good job in Italy".
"It is not true that they do not give refugee status to the Congolese. Two people I just met got it. Why not me?".

"Who gives me assurance that this new decree will not change with the change of government?[15] The law is not a guarantee of anything. They change everything, they even change names. Look at what happened in Congo: first it was 'Congo', then Mobutu called it 'Zaire', then went back to being 'Congo' when Mobutu fell ... Leopoldville became Kinshasa ...."

I accept Anne's reasons and I contact a lawyer who has worked for years with asylum seekers and refugees. The attorney tells me by phone that a repeal is not the best thing to do for Anne. I tell the lawyer I would like her to meet Anne so that the woman can ask her some questions that she thinks are important to understand the legal system, as modified by the decrees of Ministers Ferrero and Amato in recent months.

Anne reminds me of what Giorgio Agamben writes about the characters of Kafka. "Kafka's characters – and this is the reason why they interest us – have to deal with this ghostly figure of the law in a state of exception, they try, each according to his strategy, to 'study' and disable it, to 'play with it'" (Agamben, 2003, p. 83).

Also Anne is looking her own strategy to "play" with her uncertain legal status, disabling the mechanism that has defined her as a "non" refugee.

Anne will later tell me that she will not file an appeal after all because it is really too expensive. During our meetings she will then bring up another anxiety linked to the issue of documents and her "relationship" with the institutions charged with releasing them.

"There is one thing, my psychologist, you told me that if there were things I wanted to speak about I could do so here. There is one thing that bothers me since I arrived in Italy, when I went to the police station and I signed a paper."

"When I went to the police station I knew little, I did not understand any Italian. They asked me to fill out a sheet. I wrote my personal details. Then I had to say whether 'I was married' or 'I was not married' (*marié-pas marié*). I wrote that I was not married because I am not married. It did not say to indicate the children. Then when I went to pick up the residence permit there was a man ahead of me, with his children. When they gave him the sheet there were photos of the children on the residence permit. I have children".

I try to delimit Anne's anxiety. Would she like to declare that she has children? She fears that a "false statement" made to the police could jeopardize the future development of her migration history (for example, a family reunion?). Anne replies that she is not thinking of bringing her children to Italy, at least not now.

"I had my children when I was very young, eighteen or nineteen. I was still at school. Their father was a fellow student (a young Congolese from Brazzaville). The children remained at home with

[15] Starting from January 2008 changes were introduced with regard to residence permits on humanitarian grounds. While Ferrero (of the "Prodi Government") was Minister, they guaranteed, at the time of renewal, three years of regular residence in the country, instead of just one year.

my parents. It is my mother who has brought them up. They do not call me 'mom', but call 'mom' my mother. They know that I am their mother, but call me *yaya*, 'aunt' (*grande sœur*). I then moved into a house where I went to live alone and they stayed with my parents".

"The problem, my psychologist, is that it was written 'married'/'unmarried' and I wrote 'unmarried' because I'm not married, I'm not married".

Anne insists on a point that is very clear for her and remains opaque to me, as only the word taken literally can be.

"I've confessed it to you because you told me that thing ... that I could talk about what bothered me. I've never told anyone, but it is one thing that has bothered me for more than four months now, that's why I confessed it to you".

The fact that Anne was a journalist does not seem to me to be irrelevant for the weight she attaches to the words (you heard, you forgot, you did not master, etc.). I think that her suffering expresses something of her relationship with words, and with the "truth".

Anne, as a journalist, is a member of an institution that provides some degree of truth[16] *(and its reverse side, lies, because truth and falsehood are integral to the work of a journalist who has to "find the truth", "say the truth", "reveal lies" etc.). This aspect takes a special significance since she is a woman who has been tortured and raped in prison, so that she would tell a truth that could be useful for her captors.*

So this is a profile in my clinical work with Anne that has repeatedly questioned me: Anne's peculiar exposure to what Michel de Certeau calls a relationship with "the law of the signifier" (the belief in words). A possible/acceptable relationship only for and by those who are in a position to identify themselves with an institution of truth (an institution of law, or of meaning): lawyers, journalists, but also mystics, religious people (and then doctors, psychologists, psychoanalysts, etc.). As if in these circumstances, the author continues, some subjects could not afford to join the ranks of those who are unaware of the mechanisms of the production of truth and the use of the word (Anne's symptoms maybe arise from this inability to ignore).

Here is what she has to say of her captors:

"They talked all the time, talked all the time. They threatened me with death. They would always come and say that I would not have remained alive that day. I was in a tiny cell, there they could do whatever they wanted. They told me that now I was all 'wasted' (she uses the verb *gaspiller*: 'to be thrown away' but also 'destroyed', 'eaten', 'obliterated'). 'You no longer have any sense', they said. This I never understood, I do not understand it even now. What did they mean when they said that I had no sense?".

[16] This is true irrespectively of her political commitment. Her work as a journalist was not "politicized", at least in her story, as she told it to me, there is nothing to suggest that she was consciously and deliberately involved in her country's politics.

Anne asks me not to make her remember all this because she wants to forget. She attended the Pentecostal group meetings every week, and here she found the clue to be reborn and start a new life ("This – she tells me – is my second life, I began a second life. I know all that has happened in the first life and I do not know anything about this yet. I will find out what's new and beautiful"). Even this does not seem accidental to me in the story of Anne: her reliance on a religious institution – the Christian Churches of Awakening – guarantees a discourse that satisfies her hunger for truth, justice, and reconstruction of meaning in its dimension of duration.

On the basis of these clinical and ethnographic notes, it is possible to make two points on the rules of narrative to which these women have access. It seems to me that their stories are stretched between at least two forms of oscillation:

i) The first concerns an oscillation strongly linked to the "situation", by which I mean the constant alternation between places (there and here) and time (past and present). This alternation goes so far as to seamlessly produce a discourse about violence written both on her body (on what happened there) and on the documents (on what happened here). The very boundary between body and documents is deleted, both are joined and write each other incessantly, *encroaching* into each other. For Anne, for example, it is these incursions, these oscillations, that activate a process of remembering (of her being a mother without being married) that makes her hesitant about the border (so fragile) between lies and truth: as if she could no longer keep together the experience of being an unwed mother; as if she could not imagine herself as a potential "mother" and as a "good candidate" for marriage; finally, as if for her the only guarantee that can make these existential dimensions legitimate again were the possibility to spend more time in Italy, hence the violence that she pours in her speech against an institution that has not recognized her except as a raped woman, without offering her anything else (interruption of the studies, participation in training courses for hotel cleaners, etc.).

ii) the second oscillation concerns instead the "mnemonic" practice that originates within such a variety of bonds: it is an oscillation between memory and oblivion. The strategy and art of mnemonics based on oblivion – that these women tend to use – has been well described in the case of other wars and contexts close to the Democratic Republic of the Congo (I'm thinking, for example, of Marian Tankink's work (2004) on the "conspiracy of silence" in southern Uganda after the violence that continued there until the mid-80s). It should also be evident how much asylum seekers are forced to remember here in Europe for the evaluation of their applications for asylum. Asylum seekers and those who get some form of regularity in Italy (with the formulas of "asylum", "humanitarian" and "subsidiary" recognition) are in fact forced to tell what happened *there* (with as many details as possible). Both social workers and those organisms charged with

the task of recognizing their legal status need those stories to compile their reports and certifications (Fassin, 2004). On the other hand, these subjects are driven by the desire, very personal and intimate, to forget and be reborn, by imposing on the past its status of "has-already-been": "no longer" rather than "being-state" (Ricoeur, 2004). Ricoeur writes that "the background of the diseases of memory is always the fundamental relationship of memory and history with violence" (*ivi*, p. 72). Here we assume that these diseases of the memory arise and multiply also because of the particular narrative device that now dominates the practice of legalization of asylum seekers. If it is still valid, therefore, the argument proposed by Nietzsche in *On the Genealogy of Morality*, according to which man was formed through an active faculty of oblivion, thanks to the removal of biological memory that in turn made it possible to build another memory (the memory of "words", as Deleuze and Guattari, [1972] say), can we then say that these Congolese women have turned off, through the experience of torture and the subsequent experience of remembrance, imposed by our procedures, their active faculty of forgetfulness? Torture does not let us forget, exactly as the hearings for the recognition of refugee status do not let us forget. We remember, we remember all too well, that we are just cannon fodder, biological bodies, memories of being "a thing". When they are women, they are forced to remember all this.

> Territorial Commission, Torino, hearing (2011). Given the need to hide the identity of the woman I talk about, I will not reveal her country of origin. The woman is describing to a member of the Territorial Commission of UNHCR her experience of incarceration.
>
> As soon as she touches on the topic of "prison", she asks permission to go out. She goes to the bathroom and vomits. She comes back. She is asked whether she is prepared to continue. She answers yes. She starts to talk and but is interrupted. She is asked what did her jailers put into her anus (the patient has suffered for many months of hematochezia, as the Commissioners had the opportunity to read in the documents they were sent). She hesitates, starts to cry. She exits the room again.
>
> At the end of the hearing, which lasted about three hours with several breaks (at least three are recorded in the minutes), and once the woman is out of the room, the Commissioners comment with their colleagues that "she was not ready" "had not been prepared" enough by the psychologist who had undertaken a course of treatment and had produced the certificate.

The minutes of the hearing do not record the question asked by the Commissioner, but on the contrary they make it look as if the woman is telling "all, without interruption" (that is, the story is reported in full, as if she had started talking and had never interrupted herself or been interrupted by someone else's questions). The Commissioner's reference, so rude, to the fact that

"she was not ready" is not mentioned in any official document, but it was possible for me to register it through in-depth knowledge of the context, an exchange of opinions with other operators, the confrontation with those who were shocked when they heard that comment (or the question "Does she pretend to be stupid or is she stupid indeed?" reported in footnote 14). Two questions to conclude:

1. How useful can it be for the assessment of her status (humanitarian or political) a detailed knowledge of which instrument was used to torture her and cause her rectal bleeding (itself well-documented on medical grounds)? How useful can it be to probe a festering body, that stinks and bleeds, and to what end?

2. What does it mean that the woman was "not ready"? Ready for what, exactly? To recall in detail and without any (more) suffering?

I am a privileged witness, in my role as the psychologist that followed the woman along a therapeutic path in the months that followed, and what I can record is the peak of suffering reached by the patient that same evening. The lady called me on the phone at around 18: she was confused, upset, spoke without actually being able to speak and could not make herself be understood. She asked me obsessively: "Nobody will read, right, no one but them, right?". "Nobody must know this, nobody has to know, otherwise I will be dead". It was some months now that the woman had regained a little serenity and was *living* day by the day in the most ordinary possible way (school, self-care, learning Italian). The process of care and liberation from the domination of her tormentor had to be started almost from scratch.

On repetition: psycho-analytic notes and temporary conclusions

> *"What were you praying for, Ma'am?"*
> *"Not for anything. I don't pray anymore. I just talk."*
> *"What were you talking about?"*
> *"You won't understand, baby."*
> *"Yes, I will."*
> *"I was talking about time. It's so hard for me to believe in it. Some things go. Pass on. Some things just stay. I used to think it was my rememory. You know. Some things you forget. Other things you never do. But it's not. Places, places are still there. If a house burns down, it's gone, but the place – the picture of it – stays, and not just in my rememory, but out there in the world. What I remember is a picture floating around out there outside my head. I mean, even if I don't think it, even if I die, the picture of what I did, or knew, or saw, is still out there. Right in the place where it happened".*
> *"Can other people see it?", asked Denver.*
> *"Oh, yes. Oh, yes, yes, yes. Someday you be walking down the road and you see something or hear something going on. So clear. And you think it's you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It's when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away. Even if the whole farm – every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what's more, if you go there – you who never was there – if you go there and stand in the*

place where it was, it will happen again: it will be there for you, waiting for you. So Denver, you can't never go there. Never. Because even though it's all over – over and done with – it's going to always be there waiting for you. That's how come I had to get all my children out. No matter what".
Denver picked at her fingernails. "If it's still there, waiting, that must mean that nothing ever dies".
Sethe looked right in Denver's face. "Nothing ever does", she said.

Tony Morrison, Beloved, 2006, pp. 46 47

It is definitely a long quotation the one that I took from Tony Morrison's novel *Beloved*. I thought I had to quote it in full for three main reasons: i) the dialogue between an African-American mother, Sethe (a slave and an infanticide), and Denver, her youngest daughter (a survivor of her mother's deadly urge) shows a peculiar form of "repetition", as a psychic mechanism whose "cause" lies "outside of the world" (the "cause" then calls into question "the image of the place" that lies *outside of memory* and at the same time in that peculiar *bumping into someone else's memory*); ii) this "repetition", which takes shape in the words of the two women, questions the processes of memory *in* the passing of generations: it is not a repetition that is "closed" within a solipsistic, monadic, *individual* frame, and, precisely for this reason, it is "subjective" and always relational; iii) those who have fallen into it or lie captive inside it try to do something to repair the damage of History, in the best way they can or manage: more or less *clumsily.* Repetition here is already *in* History (and in the story). And it is already a repetition for (at least) two voices.

It seems to me that these pages of Beloved can help us articulate the link between a violent historical event and its "subjective" metamorphosis, which as such it never involves *only* those who experienced the event. The "subject" of psychoanalysis can not be identified or reduced tout court to the "individual" of the human sciences, because this "subject" is always in relation to an "object" (a small object: it is nothing more than a detached part of the image of "his" body carried "outside" in the world, or even a detached part of the image of "his" body that puts the subject "in touch" with the world) and the Other (the Great Other: the whole social world in which we become subjects to others subjects ourselves). On the contrary, the economy of the individual is to found in the relationship which he/she constantly maintains with "himself"/"herself". It is therefore necessary to understand what happens to the "subject" in these "traumatic" events. I will thus try to approach the issue of the "subject" and the "subversion of the ghost" in the trauma (the expression is taken from Charles Melman, 1994). It does not look like a coincidence that in other contexts, in other circumstances and with a different language people say *things similar* to what Tony Morrison is making Sethe and her daughter Denver say,

in that strange scene of teaching, in a sort of educational parenting. Gilles Lussac, writes about the Armenian genocide of 1915-17:

> À moins de réduire le sujet à son symptôme, nous sommes confrontés à une problématique infiniment plus structurale. […] Pour les générations suivantes, quel est l'héritage de cet innommable ? *Quels sont les signifiants d'une possible transmission ?* Le temps est-il venu de faire parler les morts dans la bouche des survivants ? […] *Pour les enfants de ces exilés, les effets de ce génocide sont-ils réductibles à un trauma* ? Peuvent-ils l'élaborer dans un travail de deuil ? […] *Une vie suffirait-elle pour venir à bout de ce "destin si funeste"* ? (1994, pp. 12-13; my italics).

Trauma cannot be reduced to the narrative dimension (to what is said); the signifier lasts only one generation, but the conditions that made the historical event possible remain; this is why a catharsis is not possible. If trauma is a real event[17] that introduces a break in the psychological experience of time, inside repetition there is a time that cannot be repaired in any way (there is no catharsis because the conditions which made the fact possible are "historical" and as such *still possible*). Time is not the same, after the trauma. Is this not what repetition is made of? How long does it take to *"get to the bottom"* of a "fate so dire"? Where "bottom" evokes both the origin and the end of something (while life flows in the middle: but is one life is enough to *get to the bottom of it*?). What do we *deliver* to the other, and to future generations? Therefore repetition, from a psychoanalytic point of view, has to do with acts: human actions in their historical depth (not all acts, therefore), with which the "subjects" are forced to cope in spite of themselves and for an indefinitely long time (Sethe, Beloved, Denver, Baby Suggs, Nan, but also Paul D, Halle, Sixo ...). "Repetition appears ... in place," says Lacan "add human, if you will, because as far as we know there is no act if not the acts of man" (1979, p. 55). Repetition is not the return of these "acts" – at least I never heard in the words of my patients this compulsion to repeat the trauma *as it was* – but it is the materialization of the conditions that make it possible to continually *meet the same real* (but not necessarily the same reality, but rather a "similar" one) that made them possible *the first time*, as if you would encounter *by chance* the same reality that has allowed *everything* to happen.

[17] Here I use this term, real, also as equivalent to "reality", even though I am aware that Lacan made a topological and semantic distinction (a distinction that is still not so prominent in 1964, in *The four fundamental concepts of psychoanalysis*, the seminar of reference in the construction of this chapter). I think it is useful for the purposes of this work, to keep open or to allow a *juxtaposition* of the two terms. I agree with what Cathy Caruth writes on the central role of psychoanalysis in the development of the concept of "trauma": "The notion of trauma has confronted us not only with a simple pathology but also *with a fundamental enigma concerning the psyche's relation to reality*" (1996, p. 91, my italics).

Repetition consists of this, at least in the profile that I was able to analyse in my clinical work with young asylum seekers and victims of torture: a repetition that needs something "new" – "repetition requires something new" writes Lacan (*ibidem*, p. 62) and on this Deleuze (1968) agrees – or at least an "other" that feeds it and makes it grow (Beloved and Denver *for* Sethe and Sethe *for* her Lady: *one for the other*). This "meeting" – with a "real" and at the same time with the "reality" of the other – can "restore access" to those "living signifiers" that a father, a mother, a son, a daughter, a sister, a brother are or become "after trauma", that is, *belatedly* (p. 64). The trauma of History brings into play, or leaves out the game, living signifiers that are a "father", a "mother", a "son". Therefore, in the clinical and ethnographic cases that I followed this articulation of *the historical in the psychological* questions me, because it was evident for me how in the vicissitudes of some of these women History falls down into story. History repeats itself in story and vice versa, as in Freud[18].

For this reason there is also a question of sorting out as well as possible these passages, these shifts, these transfers *between* a plan and another, *between* one time and another. In the words of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, the clinical risk lies in the Oedipalization of the patient, in his *belated enclosure* into the trap of Oedipus (mother-father-child) – what "normally" (in times of peace, as Freud would say) does not happen[19]. If the subject is de-culturalized and

[18] And was this also not the case with Freud? Which repetition has he put in place with *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* and *Moses and Monotheism*? Cathy Caruth "binds" the first but also the last work of Freud to the historical facts of the First and Second World War. She reflects on the fact that in the third part of *Moses and Monotheism* Freud inserts a "Summary", in the German version "Wiederholung", literally "repetition". I quote Freud's text, when he confesses, despite himself, why he could not avoid *that repetition*: "I have not been able to efface the traces of the unusual way in which this book came to be written. In truth it has been written twice over. The first time was a few years ago in Vienna, where I did not believe in the possibility of publishing it. *I decided to put it away, but it haunted me, like an unlaid ghost* ... [...] The rest, which might give offence and was dangerous ... I kept back, so I thought, forever. *Then in March 1938 came the unexpected German invasion.* It forced me to leave my home, but it also freed me of the fear lest my publishing the book might cause psychoanalysis to be forbidden in a country where its practice was still allowed. No sooner had I arrived in England than *I found the temptation of making my withheld knowledge accessible to the world irresistible* ... There are things that should be said more than once and cannot be repeated often enough. It should, however, be left to the reader's free will whether he wishes linger with a subject or return to it. A conclusion should not be emphasized by the sly device of dishing up the same thing twice in the same book. […] However, the creative power of an author does not alas, always follow his goodwill. A work grows as it will, and sometimes confronts its author as an independent, even an alien creation"(trans. Katherine Jones, Random House 1967, pp. 131-132).
Clearly, the point is not to reduce the last work of Freud to the nazist persecution of Jews – nor to trace back the entire *Beyond the pleasure principle* to the death of his daughter (or his son in war?) – but to understand how the "death" of a child or the "departure" from Vienna were, for the historical circumstances which led to the "acts", *a trauma for Freud*: something that one lives without being fully aware of it, or in other words an experience which contains in itself a form of "latency", of "forgetfulness". "However, the die is cast" wrote Freud in the second warning (London, June 1938) and "... the work [...] sometimes confronts its author as an independent, even an alien creation", which I would try to translate as "of what I write about I am not fully aware: I do not know fully what I'm writing".

[19] Deleuze and Guattari write: "The father, the mother and the self are at grips with, and directly coupled to, the elements of the political and historical situation – the soldier, the cop, the occupier, the collaborator, the radical, the resister, the boss, the boss's wife – who constantly break all triangulations and prevent the entire situation from falling back on the familial complex and becoming internalised in it. In a word, the family is never a microcosm in the sense of an autonomous figure, even when inscribed in a larger circle that it is said to mediate and express. The family is by nature eccentric, decentred" (1983, p. 117).

de-socialized by the torture of the jailers and the violence of History, it is to better oedipalize it[20]. I will try to explain how all this emerges in the meetings with these women.

Third story: Isabelle.

Isabelle is a young Congolese woman, who arrived in Italy at the age of ten, through a family reunification asked by his father. She says that this man – "but who can tell me that it was actually my father?" she said during an interview – took her along with her twin brother to the village where they lived with their paternal grandparents (of her mother Isabelle has no memory: she was told that she died in childbirth, but she is not certain that this is the truth about her mother, who *for all she knows* may well be still alive). In Italy she was abused by her father for seven years, in the house where she lived with his father's wife and her brothers.

Michel is a young Congolese, Isabelle's husband, he arrived in Italy a couple of years ago. He has obtained a residence permit on humanitarian grounds two years ago. In his story he says that he participated in demonstrations against the government of Kabila (son) and that he was identified by the police. For this, one day some policemen broke into his house and, *since they did not find him there*, raped his sister for several hours. He escaped from Kinshasa after a long period of incarceration. His family *does not want to know anything* about him after what happened.

When Isabelle arrives at the centre Frantz Fanon, to ask for psychological support, she is sixth-month pregnant. She has been married with Michel for a few months, but their relationship has been going on for over a year. For the first time, Isabelle told Michel what had happened at home, after he had forced her to speak, *suspecting that something was wrong* (because their sexual relations were always difficult for Isabelle).

[20] Dans un passage de *L'envers de la psychanalyse*, Lacan me paraît suivre un autre chemin. En parlant de ses trois patients togolais (il ne s'agit pas dans ce cas de patients torturés ou emprisonnés, mais *tout simplement* colonisés), Lacan affirme de n'avoir pu "avoir trace" dans leur analyse: "des usages et croyances tribaux, qu'ils n'avaient pas oubliés, qu'ils connaissaient, mais du point de vue de l'ethnographie. Il faut dire que tout était fait pour les en séparer, étant donné ce qu'ils étaient, ces courageux petits médecins qui essayaient de se faufiler dans la hiérarchie médicale de la métropole – nous étions encore au temps colonial. Ce qu'ils en connaissaient donc du niveau de l'ethnographe était à peu près celui du journalisme, mais leur inconscient fonctionnait selon les bonnes règles de l'Œdipe. C'était l'inconscient qu'on leur avait vendu en même temps que les lois de la colonisation, forme exotique, régressive, du discours du maître, face au capitalisme qu'on appelle impérialisme. Leur inconscient n'était pas celui de leurs souvenirs d'enfance – ça se touchait –, mais leur enfance était rétroactivement vécue dans nos catégories *familiales*".
Il faut s'arrêter un moment sur ces mots qui me semblent décisifs, et en particulier sur cette définition d'un inconscient "vendu en même temps que les lois de la colonisation", ou d'une enfance "rétroactivement vécue dans nos catégories", voire dans les catégories d'un Autre qui, à l'époque, était le représentant de la domination coloniale, avec ses tenants lieu : organes, structures, lois, vocabulaire, pratiques éducatives, institutions. En reconnaissant un bon fonctionnement de l'Œdipe chez ses trois patients togolais, Lacan ne s'attache pas à son universalité mais plutôt à son historicité. L'Œdipe devient ici un opérateur logique qui permet d'unir pour ensuite séparer (et non pas le contraire). Si Lacan établit un destin humain commun, sous le signe souverain de l'Œdipe, c'est pour séparer, un instant après et dans un contexte historique bien défini, les directions multiples qu'il peut prendre selon le lieu et le temps : on pourrait dire là où notre enfance et notre vie adulte sont vécues. C'est bien évident, on me pardonne cette simplification, que les *patients togolais* ne sont pas – et ne souffrent pas – comme les *patients français*. Il y a là bien des raisons pour reconnaître que la nature de l'inconscient, en tant qu'instance nécessairement historique, est inscrite à l'intérieur de relations sociales qui, dans le meilleur des cas, sont des relations d'autorité (tel n'était pas leur cas), et dans le pire des relations de pouvoir et/ou de violence, comme c'était le cas de la colonie et des déchirures sociales qu'elle avait provoquées.

What made Isabelle and Michel "meet"?

"[T]hat history, like trauma, is never simply one's own, that history is precisely the way we are implicated in each other's traumas" (p. 24): and this emerges clearly, according to Cathy Caruth, in Freud's work *Moses and Monotheism*.

There are times when their life together becomes unbearable: the presence of one embodies for the other something of "his/her" story that he/she is constantly committed to forget (incest and the conditions that made it possible: Isabelle's silence/Michel's absence). This is not a serial repetition of "men of a certain kind" (or "women of a certain type"): always marry the "same" man or the "same" woman. What is at issue here is to understand what leads a "subject" to create the conditions that make it possible to encounter a certain "real" and a certain "reality". In the case of Isabelle and Michel this is also a historical reality, and this makes their marriage singular and extraordinary (but certainly not "unique"). Michel, far more than Isabelle, seeks justice and is *obsessed* by the trial that will take place in a few months (the first hearing is to be held in April 2009, after two years of investigations by the judiciary). He is constantly asking how can you prove at least the judicial truth of what happened to Isabelle. On the other hand, Michel is sure that his sister will never obtain justice – and that his political choices made possible what has happened – and he is surrounded and engaged, far more than his wife, in the possibility that she obtains Justice in Italy.

Michel is involved in the trauma of Isabelle (and Isabelle, in other respects, in that of Michel), both, and together, are *condemned to repeat the trauma of the other*.

Frantz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* highlights something like that through the words of another of his Algerian patients who had begun to suffer from impotence after learning about the rape his wife had suffered at the hands of a French soldier. His wife, however, was "unable to say" if this soldier was or was not an officer. But whoever he was, he said in front of the other soldiers: "If you ever see that bastard your husband again, don't you forget to tell him what we did to you". The man, while trying to retrace the genealogy of his symptoms, said to Fanon: "I have to tell you I've seen peasants dry the tears of their wives who had been raped under their very eyes. That shook me up quite a bit and I have to confess that at first I could not understand their attitude. But, we had to intervene increasingly in such circumstances to explain things to the civilians and *I've seen civilians volunteer to marry a young girl who had been raped and made pregnant by French soldiers*. All that made me think again about my wide. *I've made up my mind to take her back, but I still don't know I'll react when I see her*. And when I look at the photo of my daughter, I think she was dishonored as well. As if everything that had to do with my wife was rotten" and he will also say of her daughter that "something was rotten inside". "If they had tortured her, if they had broken all her teeth or an arm, I wouldn't have minded so

much. But that, how can you ever get over it? And did she have to tell me about it?" (Fanon, 2005, Grove Press, pp. 186-189, italics mine).

It is always a repetition for many voices: between husband and wife, between mother and son, between daughter and father ... I tried to develop in this direction the issue of trauma and repetition, starting from the XIst seminar[21], where Lacan proposes a radical revision of the dream of the man "called" by his dead son in his sleep ("Father, don't you see that I burn?"), which Freud discusses in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, but also of the game of *fort-da* and the reel that the child holds in his hand (in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*). I am tempted to say that in these pages Lacan subverts and deeply, the Freudian text, even if he starts from it:

1. On the one hand, he analyzes the dream by highlighting the father's *waking up* and not his sleep (What is that wakes up?).

   If Freud, in other words, suggests that the dream keeps the father asleep, Lacan suggests that it is because the father dreams, paradoxically enough, that he precisely wakes up. The dream thus becomes, in Lacan's analysis, no longer a function of sleep, but rather a function of awakening (Caruth, 1996, p. 99).

   Lacan insists on both the reality "outside" – the noise of the fire - and even more on the reality of the actual words in the dream (Father, don't you see that I burn?)

   Waking up in order to see, the father discovers that he has once again *seen too late* to prevent the burning. The relation between the burning within and the burning without is thus neither a fiction (as in Freud's interpretation) nor a direct representation, but a *repetition* that reveals, in its temporal contradiction, how the very bond of the father to the child – his responsiveness to the child's words – is linked to the missing of the child's death. […]
   Awakening, in Lacan's reading of the dream, is itself the site of trauma, the trauma of the necessity and impossibility of responding to another's death (p. 100).

   Lacan seems to suggest, through this reading, that the awakening of the father is not accidental, does not happen *by chance*, but rather involves the "subject" in the ethical question of responsibility.

   [I]f Freud reads in the dream of the burning child the story of a sleeping consciousness figured by a father unable to face the accidental death of his child Lacan, for his part, reads in the awakening

[21] In particular, the fourth and fifth chapters of the Italian version (Einaudi, 1979), and the lessons of 12 and 19 February 1964 of the French version of the *Association lacanienne internationale*.

the story of the way father *and* child are inextricably bound together through the story of a trauma. […]

… Lacan resituates the psyche's relation to the real not as a simple matter of seeing or knowing the nature of empirical events, …, but as the story of an urgent responsibility, or what Lacan defines, in this conjunction, as an ethical relation to the real (p. 102).

2. Second, in the reel game, Lacan subverts the reel-mother identification:

> This reel is not the mother reduced to a little ball by some magical game worthy of the Jivaros – it is a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him, while still remaining his, still retained. […] The activity as a whole symbolizes repetition, but not at all that of some need that might demand the return of the mother, and which would be expressed quite simply in a cry. It is the repetition of the mother's departure as cause of a *Spaltung* in the subject – overcome by the alternating game, *fort-da*, which is a *here* or *there*, and whose aim, in its alternation is simply that of being the *fort* of a *da*, and the *da* of a *fort*" (Lacan, 1998, pp. 62-63).

To this object – "a small part of the subject that detaches itself from him, while still remaining his, still retained" – Lacan gives the name of the small object a. *The activity as a whole symbolizes a repetition* that has nothing to do with mastery of the traumatic experience (the departure of the mother) – with what has happened. Repetition is a "new act", "which concerns a reality that is not clearly taken", that *materializes* some signifier (but not just a random one) or some object for (all) the parties involved in the trauma. This embodiment, however, "can never be accurate enough in its memory ... So it is an evasion, apparently, *to develop it by varying its signifiers*" (my italics).

Now, if repetition is always a *new act* that develops some signifiers by varying its meanings, or a *new act* that produces "little something of the subject removed and attached at the same time"; as an "act", one must understand something of its transmission when the historic visibility of what has happened is not so alive. I wonder if they cannot be read otherwise – not only as symptoms – those behaviours that disturb some patients: particularly insomnia and this strange *waking up* in the middle of the night unable to sleep more. What awakes them and keeps them awake in the middle of the night? But also other "acts", rather embarrassing for the operators, which I now bring you as little testimony in the following case.

Fourth story: Julie

Julie is a Congolese girl of twenty-six, who fled from Kinshasa after being imprisoned with her husband and her father on 26 April 2007, for four months. All worked in a company, linked to

Jean-Pierre Bemba, involved in the trade with the Equator Province. Julie was a secretary. She had lived many years in Italy (she speaks an excellent Italian), and then decided to return to the Congo with the person who would become her husband, for the opportunities that were opening up in the workplace. Her husband was raised in Belgium from the age of ten years with an aunt. Both seem to ignore who Jean-Pierre Bemba was. In fact, her husband supports Bemba's campaign, and is increasingly involved in political issues in the country. Julie and her father are hired by the company. During a raid, she, her father, her husband and many other workers are arrested and taken to jail. During the imprisonment, Julie is repeatedly beaten and raped. There are several episodes of illness requiring his captors to take her to the infirmary. After the latest episode of violence, on 27 July 2007, the husband is told of what is being done to his wife, reacts, and is killed. Julie develops a new illness and is admitted to a hospital. She is discharged after a few days. During the interrogations, in the first days of August, she is again raped. As a result of a new illness, she is brought to the hospital where doctors informed her of her pregnancy. A "false" diagnosis justifies her hospitalization. Meanwhile, the doctor's wife organizes her flight to Italy.
Julie has no information about her family. She does not know whether her father is still alive or dead. She has asked a Congolese pastor to seek information, but she can no longer contact him. Here, she is put in a first reception center, but then soon after she is hospitalised for ten days. After being discharged, she is placed in a community. She decides to keep the baby, despite the medical staff informed her of the possibility of an abortion. She says for religious reasons[22].
I start to follow her in early November 2007. In December, she obtains permission to stay for humanitarian reasons. I follow her through her pregnancy and the early life of her child, James.

I hope it's a male, because males are more loyal to their mothers and he will not ask me much about his father.
She does not know what to say to his son about his father. She does not know what she will answer when he will ask her about his father. She says crying that she does not want to think about it.
Because of a health problem – Julie suffers from high blood pressure – she is admitted to hospital when she is eight month pregnant and undergoes a Caesarean section. The child is born and he is well, but is kept for a week in the incubator. Julie, meanwhile, develops a serious infection that requires a massive antibiotic treatment (the doctor will tell me that they have given her "an extra-large dose", and despite this the infection persists). I go to the hospital at least twice during the three weeks of hospitalization. Julie is visibly shaken, sad, apathetic, absent. In her room come and go several women, all accompanied by parents, grandparents, uncles ... Julie and James are visibly. Julie is holding James without force, flaccidly. Her eyes often falls on an empty space in the room, on the doorposts, on the bottom of the bed; she rarely watches James.

[22] I will note examine here the religious dimension in the story of Julie. She frequents the *Eglise du Christ au Congo* and met a lot of fellow countrymen who have supported her a lot in recent months.

Both I and the educator support Julie in this long difficult phase, made "excessive" by her hospitalization, that forces her to "see" and "feel" the others, the joy of others. I hope that no one in the hospital will talk of "post-partum depression", to not *medicalize* mother and son. Luckily, this does not happen, and Julie goes back to the community with James. Our talks at the Centre Frantz Fanon resume after about a month and a half.

In the first interview at the Centre, after the birth, Julie arrives accompanied by her educator. She looks more serene in her face, but very upset because, she says, *something happened that she did not know could happen*. When she was in hospital, a Congolese friend – that she had known for quite some time and had met *by chance* in the Church she attends – took her to the hospital internal registry service to record the birth of James. Julie had decided to give this man's name to James (the name in Lingala).

"We can do so. You can give the name of a friend to your son, if that person agrees. And he agreed", she said.

At the registry office James is registered with the surname of this man[23], and becomes in effect – by law – the son of his man.

Julie finds out what happened the same day we meet for the interview. She had first passed by the health service to "choose" the child's pediatrician and the operator had replied that James was regularly recorded in M. – a small town in northern Italy – and already had a doctor. Asking for more information, the educator and Julie manage to reconstruct what had happened back in the hospital. The case had been forwarded to the local registry and, being a small provincial town, the offices "attended to" all it had to be done. *Après-coup* James has a "father", at least for the Italian law.

Why are you angry? I ask.

Because James does not have a father, she says, then continues, I just wanted to give him the the name of this man, I did not want him to become his son. I did not know that for Italian law it was like that. If I had known I would never have done it. In my country is different. You can give someone's name without him becoming a father. By us is different. And then, I have not said anything about my history to this man. I want to wait. A woman should be expected. But even if he will become my husband he will not be the father of James …

And what will he be?

[Silence] At best, he will be the husband of his mother. If he were not sure he wants to be the father of James, in the future he could be dangerous for James. He might get tired, he could tell him ... it's better that James knows his story as it is.

[23] The difference between "name" and "surname", as found in many European societies, is not relevant to most African contexts, where the attribution of the patronym is ruled by other criteria (not to mention the case of matrilineal societies) and is associated with different names (according to the position in the kinship, situational, etc.).

And what is the story of James, I ask.

Of not having a father, she says.

It may not be entirely bad about what happened, Julie. It may not be entirely bad.

Before I have to talk with my friend.

Yes.

What happened has not happened by chance[24] and has been understood only *afterwards*. This seems to be the repetition which is at stake in the story of Julie as a *necessity* and *impossibility* of dealing with the death of her husband and her father (her father, on whose fate still reigns uncertainty because Julie does not know whether he is still alive or is already dead). It is not the repetition of past events as a *return* – the trauma of what has been: the violence in prison, the beatings, etc., even if in the narrative dimension that takes shape in our talks there is of course this "compulsion to repeat" – but the materialization of the conditions that make *her stumble* in real that most concerns her: the death of her husband, thought for a long time as the potential father of her children, and the uncertainty surrounding the fate of her father (alive, dead, tortured, saved?). After the interview, I tell myself that it is a *good piece of luck* that James has a father in Italy, because his story was not a story to pass on, but at the same time could not certainly be omitted.

It was not a story to pass on, Toni Morrison writes repeatedly towards the end of *Beloved*. It was not a story to pass on (to pass *on*) and it was not a story to leave out (to *pass* on): it was a story *to be repeated*, and indeed it was *repeated* by many voices, constantly, to ensure that the "subjects" involved would continue to have access to, and therefore develop, those "living signifiers" that were the various Sethe, Denver, Beloved ... involved in History: Julie, her father, her husband, his friend, their meeting, the small James ... involved in this story. In this, repetition has certainly to do with the unconscious, as a *subjective instance* aimed at preserving a historical and social event when its historical materiality has disappeared.

[24] Nor is it mysterious. One simply has to ask why Julie did not wait for her educator to come and register the child. The educator, moreover, had told her that they would do it together, as soon as her health improved. It is this hurry that makes Julie, sick with fever (an echo of the "fever" mentioned by Lacan about Freud), do something that she does not control fully and in a state in which she is not fully aware (or conscious) of what she was doing. Moreover, Julie was visibly *out of her mind* (absent) in the first days following the birth of her son.

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