

TRANS-ATLANTIC

In-Between Worlds

Latin America was no wilderness, the conquest made it that (B. Bailyn)

I ask for a history that deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices (D. Chakrabarty)

During the course of his tenth labour, stealing the red cattle of Geryon from Erytheia Island in the border area between Europe and Africa, Hercules marked what was according to mythological tradition the Western edge of the Mediterranean by placing two pillars at Gibraltar. In this way, the way back to Europe was delineated and the diaphragm opening towards the unknown space of the Atlantic received a precise cartographic determination. This imaginary realm of the Atlantic as an unknown and unexplored place was destined to persist for centuries, for Europeans as well as Arabs; this lasted at least until the 15th century, and was still actual at that time as demonstrated by a Latin edition furnished with maps of the Greek geography of Ptolemy, re-published in 1477. This reprint reveals the scientific validity of a globe displaying only two maritime spaces: the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean. As seen in these Ptolemaic maps of the 15th century, the Atlantic was only a thin strip of sea surrounding the perimeter of the African continent. The other side was removed, as if the edge of the African coast marked at the same time the ends of the earth and a mystery of unapproachable spatial dimensions. After several more years, the first exploratory missions of Portuguese merchant ships took place, in which the archipelagos of the Atlantic islands (Madeira, the Azores, Cape Verde, São Tomé and Príncipe, Saint Helena) were charted and made it possible to recognize the complete geographic reality of the Atlantic Ocean, and they thus led to the establishment of its image as a space to be crossed, and to the history of the New and the Old Worlds. The polarity between old and new, as represented by the logic of the emergent colonial thought, found its synthetic expression in two complementary definitions of the Atlantic, two evocative images of the Atlantic space as geographic and intellectual possibilities. Within the first definition, the historians Jacques Godechot and Robert Palmer give shape to the completely modern and trans-border image of the Atlantic space, evoking it as a *permeable space*, a circular communication system without limit, while this same epochal alteration of the Atlantic expressed in terms of mobility was described by the French historians Pierre and Huguette Chaunu within

the sense of an *immutable connection*, a stable platform for colonial and commercial traffic¹.

These two definitions introduce within their evocative power the textual complexity created by Runo Lagomarsino in *Trans-Atlantic*. For this work, the Swedish artist entrusted forty-nine white paper sheets to a sailor who was about to single-handedly cross the Atlantic. Every single sheet was placed in a plastic covering as an envelope. In this way, Lagomarsino allowed the sailor full liberty to expose one sheet after the other to the sun over the ocean during the crossing. Fixed by ropes at the boat, each sheet reveals on its surface a unique and unrepeatable trace, mapping out its exposition to the rays of the sun which slowly burned the white sheets, marking them with diverse brownish surfaces, each different from the other. The irregular white streaks on the sheets show the spaces covered by the ropes and therefore protected from exposure to the sun. Like travel diaries, or the single scores of a larger composition (i.e. the extension of the crossing), the sheets were catalogued by the sailor, according to the dates of the days of their exposure. On a label at the back of the sheets is written the relative information of latitude and longitude. In this way, Lagomarsino has originated, through a scientific protocol the building and development of a cartographically complex knowledge, which has been pointed out in rigorous geographic codexes, through the means of the sheets thus exposed and strictly recorded by the sailor. In this way every sheet maps a geographically analytic event and registers the progress of the small boat across the Atlantic. In total, they could serve as a kind of archive, a source which can also be studied in reverse in order to re-trace the stages of the journey. In *Trans-Atlantic* there are displayed two different cognitive codexes on the same object. The first is empirical and refers to the free sedimentation of the sun's rays which have stained and maculated the paper, while the other is a scientific codex referring to the registration of the exact geographic measurements. Therefore there simultaneously exist two epistemological canons, which permeate each other with two different ways of measuring the world. On one hand the memory of long stretches (weeks and months) within the journey across the Atlantic are symbolized by the slow discoloration of the paper by the sun, and on the other hand the encoding of the cartographic European ratio of an enlightened matrix. The latter positions the European control of the geographic image of the world by epistemologically fixing the vanishing point of the perspective and of the axes of latitude and longitude. This second code is the one that since the end of the 15th century has been related to the development of colonial thought, imposing a geometric grid on the planet, reducing it to a governable globe that could be crossed by means of the channels of oceanic communication; in this way, the Atlantic Ocean was established as the key point of European commercial expansion. According to the perimeters of this scientific standard, the image of the Atlantic – in the words of

1 Jacques Godechot and Robert R. Palmer, "Le Problème de l'Atlantique du XVIIIème au XXème Siècle", in *Relazioni del X Congresso Internazionale di scienze Storiche* (Florence, 1955), V Storia Contemporanea, pp.181-188; Pierre and Huguette Chaunu, *Séville et l'Amérique aux XVIe et XVIIe siècles* (Paris, 1977), pp. 224-225. Both cited in Bernard Bailyn, *Atlantic History – Concept and Contours* (Cambridge, Mass., London, UK, 2005), p.83.

D.W. Meinig – was changed forever, becoming *a single arena of action*, a platform of completely governable extension². The *lògos* of European scientism in this way nullified the ancient sense of awe represented by the two pillars of Hercules, and thus permitted the successors of the Greek hero to immerse themselves in permanently extensive adventures, by means of a secure reproduction of the world in cartographic scale.

The theme of Lagomarsino's work is based entirely on the idea of crossing the Atlantic, i.e. on the ocean as *locus* that intersects a multiplicity of cognitive hypotheses, geographic perspectives and historic echoes. The drift of the itinerary, to which the sheets have been subjected as part of their exposure to the sea air and the sun's rays, is intended by the artist as a return to the times of long maritime journeys, as they were experienced in the centuries of the beginning of modernity. The direction of the boat travelled again along the traces of the older maritime routes, as they were consolidated during the explorations of the 15th century – those of the “Portuguese Atlantic” – and first traced by the Portuguese merchants who charted the routes from the Western coast of Sub-Saharan African to the South American continent³. The cartographic invention of the direct line traced by Columbus across the horizon of the ocean was the first attempt at overcoming the unknown by means of a new geographic awareness. After his example, the Atlantic became a dense network of permanent ties that intersected across its entire surface. From this beginning as the basis of the *imperial history* of Europe, the concept of the Atlantic Ocean was thus defined, progressively complicated further as a network of places, points of meeting and exchange, involving many political factors and social groups. Africans, Native Americans, sailors of various countries (among the most famous of which is the so called Jack the Tar, of the naval traditions of the British Empire⁴), merchants, traders and military forces all contributed, in different ways, to the history of Atlantic mobility. *Trans-Atlantic* alludes to this past by carrying on its shoulders the fundamental sign of an essential *permeability*, a characteristic that has determined the entire history of the Atlantic as a porous place, a frontier between three continents and the upheaval of their social, cultural and political histories. In the words of the historian of the Atlantic Bernard Bailyn, one needs to consider that *there was no static historical unity whose elements and essential nature could lie motionless before the historian [...] the history of the Atlantic is the story of a world in motion*⁵. Thus, *Trans-Atlantic* is a world in motion unto itself, not an abstract reflection of a conceptual nature. It is

2 D.W.Meinig, *The Shaping of America: A Geographical Perspective on 500 Years of History* (New Haven, Conn., 1986-1998), I (*Atlantic America, 1492-1800*), p. 6. Cited in Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, p. 83.

3 A.J.R. Russel-Wood, “The Portuguese Atlantic, 1415-1808” in J.P. Greene, P.D.Morgan (edited by) *Atlantic History - A Critical Appraisal* (Oxford, NY, 2009), pp. 81-109.

4 M. Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea. Merchant Seamen, Pirates and the Anglo.American Maritime World, 1700-1750* (Cambridge, NY, 1987), pp. 10-76.

5 Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, p. 61.

the performative re-proposition of the Atlantic crossing – within the real time of the sheets' own mobility – as marked by accumulation, erosion and shifts of identity.

It is precisely from the inception of the Portuguese Atlantic that European modernity invented the polarity between Old and New world, designing a new configuration and relationship between cultures since then unknown to each other. What the Ocean has made possible, in Meinig's words has been *a sudden and harsh encounter between two old worlds that transformed both and integrated them into a single New World*⁶. The old route followed by Lagomarsino's papers on the boat, upwards along the subequatorial African shores, close to St. Helena island and then heading straight towards South America across the Ocean, marks thus not only a geographical suggestion but also traces an economic enterprise. It is that of Atlantic history as an economic and cultural development, a collective achievement mobilizing three continents, Europe, Africa and Americas. From XV to XVIII this mobilization contributed to re-figure modern history from both sides of the Ocean, giving start to Western capitalism and posing the basis for the development of European industrialization.

The afro-Brazilian side of the transatlantic crossing marked by the history of the slaves ships transporting human labor from Angola to Brazilian plantations is the most dramatic side of the Portuguese colonial triangle, that of the diaspora generated from the captivity of two worlds, that of African people and native Americans. The performative trajectory of the journey of Lagomarsino's papers from Africa to Brazil metaphorically testifies this unresolved fracture (evoked by Meinig's harsh encounter) and definable in terms of colonial difference. In the words of the anthropologist Walter D. Mignolo colonial difference draws the space in which coloniality of power is enacted in terms of imposition, control and authority upon others, and where subalternity of knowledge is sanctioned. Moreover, according to Mignolo colonial difference is the place where the articulation of the overarching western imaginary stays in a conflictual relationship to the emergence of border thinking. As an oppositional response to from the side of the subalterns to the colonial hegemonic discourse, border thinking is a resistance practice from above, absorbing and displacing knowledge into the perspective of the subaltern. It is precisely the strained narrative of this forces-relationship between power and subaltern to be symbolically at the core of *Trans-Atlantic*. Thus, through the process of chromatic transformation activated by Lagomarsino in turning their surfaces from white to brown, the papers – burnt by the sun on the boat – recount a story of racial difference. A performative image of a progressive creolization of knowledge through the miles of the Atlantic crossing, the papers testify a radical transformation that records their progressive change of identity.

Trans-Atlantic frames in linguistic terms this attempt to marginalize the categories of modern rationality,

⁶ Meinig, *The Shaping of America*, pp.64-65. Cited in Bailyn, *Atlantic History*, p.55.

informed by racial and colonial codes, by opening up a different representation of knowledge and its imaginary. It is a re-foundation inscribed on the margins of local, alternative stories, detached from the binding, unidirectional character of European history. The Trans-Atlantic dimension towards Latin America is thus for Lagomarsino the place where it is possible to build a renewed space of desire, re-forging in terms of imaginative liberty the established geographies and master narratives of Western knowledge. In this sense, as a work in motion *Trans-Atlantic* marks an outstanding reflection on the understanding of what a horizon is, as a strained line in between knowledge and colonial thought. In a previous work, *Horizon (Southern Sun Drawing)*, (2010), Lagomarsino had created with a similar sun-exposure an hypothetical horizon-line, by covering a thin line in the middle of a series of papers. The papers were then put against the sun in the window of the artist's studio for several weeks and as the sun burnt, the paper turned yellow except for the covered "horizon". In that work Lagomarsino had activated the ingredients of an extended temporality, provided by the prolonged exposure to the sun rays, aimed at relativizing a geographical date, that of the horizon-line, by uncovering it as an invention, a strategic tool of coercion. By starting from the invention of the perspective in the Florence culture of the XV Century, the idea of the horizon determines a rational-visual control of the world, reducing the planet to a manageable tool. The horizon is thus not an innocent line but the imposition of a single model, a method, a geometry of coercion. Lagomarsino argue thus in *Horizon (Southern Sun Drawing)* that it is always possible to trace an horizon as a geographical projection of the coloniality of power. The Trans-Atlantic papers counter this very logic by just being a series of discontinuous white lines produced by the juxtaposition of the ropes on the papers, beyond the control of the artist. They trace step by step the route of the journey without determining any horizon perspective. Cartography here doesn't mark any will of domain and the crossing of the Atlantic towards Latin America becomes thus the tale of a journey without horizon, a drift of the imaginary without the bindings of linear perspective organized in degrees of latitudes and longitudes.

In this sense, the dissolution of the horizon line enacted in *Trans-Atlantic* makes of Lagomarsino's work a performative enactment of what the Indian historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has programmatically defined as Provincializing Europe. It is in his words the will to *Find out how and in what sense European ideas that were universal were also, at one and the same time, drawn from a very particular intellectual and historical traditions that could not claim any universal validity*⁷. In Chakrabarty's terms this is a reflection that contests the inevitability of what has been defined as modern in European terms and that has been unidirectionally imposed as necessary in every place and culture. European rationality is not immutable and can't be imposed as a ineluctable and colonial destiny to all the world. It is exactly to this project that Lagomarsino's reflection of Trans-Atlantic comes close, in its attempt to counter European rationality as expressed through the

7 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe. Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* Princeton, NJ, 2000), p. xiii.

scientific cartography by using a smoother and more fluid narrative as the one provided with the sedimentation of sun rays upon the surfaces of the papers. It brings to the fore another set of codes, that of time, sea and sun, asking for a different logic and a different reading, relied by the artists to the sensibility of the viewer.

But in Chakrabarty's argumentation Provincializing Europe is a dramatically difficult and complex attempt, doomed to generate what the Indian historian calls the *politics of despair*, the hard task to fight against the winners' history and contrast the forced assimilation of diversity of other stories to the unidirectional codes of European tradition. It is as though contesting the straight narration of European modernity would be a necessary operation, but one trapped in the risk of failure and dismay. Politics of despair brings thus about an imagine of almost poetic frailty and it is precisely this uncertain, elusive beauty to be evoked by the ephemeral documents of Lagomarsino, 32 sun-burned papers, abandoned on a boat in the spaces of the Atlantic Ocean.

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