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Stories

Emma Bond

No nation now but the imagination¹

Jacques Derrida's famous 1966 lecture 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences' is perhaps best known for signalling the arrival of post-structuralist thought in the United States.² But if we are to pick apart and reassemble key moments in the essay, it can actually be used to formulate an enticingly dynamic manifesto for how to read stories in a transnational frame. Derrida's premise (much simplified) is that structures of knowledge and culture have, in the past, been assumed to function outward from a pre-established centre, or 'locus'. This centre anchors the structure in question, organizing and delineating it, but it also stagnates any potential for creative play or innovation. Instead, Derrida asks us to follow the deconstructionist methods of Nietzsche, Freud, and Heidegger: turning away from the centre and replacing it with a kind of 'nonlocus', or non-centre that allows for processes of substitution, transformation, and re-assemblage to take place. In this way, a space will be created for a mapping of 'freeplay' that privileges the relations between the signs that make up the structure.

This process of relational decentring becomes even more relevant when Derrida applies it to the human sciences. He takes as his example ethnology,

¹ Derek Walcott, 'The Schooner *Flight*', in *The Star-Apple Kingdom* (New York: Farrar Straus & Giroux, 1979), pp. 3–20 (p. 8).

² Jacques Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences', in *Writing and Difference*, trans. by Alan Bass (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 351–70.

which emerged as a science just as European culture itself was being ‘dislocated, driven from its locus, and forced to stop considering itself as the culture of reference’.³ And this is where his argument might suggest how to engage the transnational as a narrative methodology, something I will illustrate here by placing Ubah Cristina Ali Farah’s 2014 novel *Il comandante del fiume* into dialogue with the multi-media artwork of Maud Sulter (1960–2008). By privileging this ethnological impulse to look beyond old imperial centres of knowledge in order to bring new networks of cultural diversity into relational contact, I want to dislodge the transnational from its usual cultural associations with an author’s biography or the contents of a book, and instead see where we can identify it in stories as a stylistic or technical choice, or even as a methodological tool of analysis.

When seen in this way, cultural production that we term ‘transnational’ cannot simply be conflated with other labels such as ‘multi-cultural’, ‘global’, or ‘world’, which rely on transactional practices of circulation and commerce.⁴ Rather, the transnational has specific intentions to negotiate systems of time and space through that same sense of relational linkage or exchange described above, of ‘multiple ties and interactions linking people or institutions across the borders of nation-states’.⁵ In terms of style, the transnational embodies a similar association with play through its ‘fluidity of constructed styles and practices: syncretism, creolization, bricolage, cultural translation and hybridity’.⁶ It is this practice of construction by addition and association that lies at the heart of the transnational story, and is equally identifiable in Derrida’s discourse on the ethnological method of ‘bricolage’ in ‘Structure, Sign and Play’. Derrida is here discussing the work of anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, who defines the ‘bricoleur’ as someone who uses ‘the means *at hand*’, that is:

The instruments he finds at his disposition around him, those which are already there, which had not been especially conceived with an eye to the operation for which they are to be used and to which one tries by trial and error to adapt them, not hesitating to change them whenever it appears necessary, or to try several of them at once, even if their form and their origin are heterogeneous – and so forth.⁷

³ Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play’, p. 356.

⁴ Maria Koundoura, *Transnational Culture, Transnational Identity: The Politics and Ethics of Global Culture Exchange* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), p. 5.

⁵ Steven Vertovec, *Transnationalism* (London: Routledge, 2009), p. 3.

⁶ Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, p. 7.

⁷ Derrida, ‘Structure, Sign and Play’, p. 360.

The term 'at hand' takes on a critical importance here, since it specifically implies a range of bodily acts of selection. Hands that choose, cut, and paste enact playful manual juxtapositions and re-assemblage that rely on the dynamic interplay between the here and now of corporeal organs of perception and tactility, yet that can also access materials (within reach) that originate from or simply reference other times and spaces. This emphasis on the body as placed in a local setting is characteristic of transnational storytelling, in which the local and the global are inevitably entwined.⁸ Transnational narratives span 'distant proximities',⁹ in which the global works precisely by means of linking up a series of particularities. Transnational methods can therefore be identified in stories that feature interactions of bodies and material (texts), narrative interactions that allow – crucially – for the creation of *new* meaning from existing parts.

Such transnational practices of cultural bricolage thus stage relations of proximity and distance that lead us back to Derrida's insistence on the relationality of signs. For equally, the abandonment of the centre, as a presupposed, original, absolute value, is also essential for an understanding of contemporary human diaspora and mobility. As Vertovec states, diasporic consciousness is 'marked by dual or multiple identifications' and an individual 'awareness of de-centred attachments, connections elsewhere, multi-locality'.¹⁰ It is during such processes, as we will see through analysing examples of both written and visual narratives, that the imaginary can actively *re-create*, in a transnational fashion.

Il comandante del fiume is Ali Farah's second novel and tells the story of Yabar, a troubled Roman teenager of Somali heritage. It is narrated from a first-person perspective that nonetheless muddles any sense of strict temporal linearity and combines an Italian language narrative with Somali and English insertions to form a complex series of flashbacks, memories, and myth-building. This characteristic of folding together composite elements is not, however, confined to the structural or linguistic composition of the story. The element of bricolage becomes absolutely fundamental to Yabar's remapping of his own composite identity through the recuperation of social and cultural signs, symbols, myths, and memories. In a literal sense, this process begins with the play sessions he recalls from his childhood:

⁸ Ulf Hannerz, *Transnational Connections: Culture, People, Places* (London: Routledge, 1996), p. 27.

⁹ James Rosenau, *Distant Proximities: Dynamics beyond Globalization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

¹⁰ Vertovec, *Transnationalism*, p. 5.

Nei giorni di pioggia [...] ci sbizzarrivamo con tempere, colla, cartoncini, conchiglie, foglie secche, insomma *tutto quello che ci trovavamo per le mani in quel momento*. [...] Non ero bravo a riprodurre le figure esattamente com'erano [...] a me piaceva dipingere le scene mentre accadevano: battaglie navali, astronavi nello spazio, un esercito di formiche, tutto succedeva mentre lo armeggiavo con il pennello.¹¹

Yabar perfectly reproduces the bricolage activity of using found objects (at hand) to create fantasy scenarios that rely equally on imaginative or creative re-assembly. Yet such practices become a fundamental element not only in his desire to recuperate lost memories connected to his Somali origins, but also constitute an attempt to literally reinsert himself (as a Black Italian) into the popular national cultural identity, one that seems to reject him at every turn. As an example, he recounts how he and his mother attempt to reproduce a Will Smith doll, the first cultural symbol he has encountered that physically resembles him. His mother Zahra locates a generic male doll that the two proceed to dismember together and re-create in the image of the African American actor.

Mia madre mi aiutò a segare la testa del pupazetto, che incollammo con il Super Attak al corpo nudo di un guerriero muscolosissimo, dopodiché lo colorai con un pennarello marrone indelebile, in modo che avesse la pelle dello stesso colore del mio eroe. Mamma si mise a cucire un intero set di abiti per Willie. [...] L'ultimo vestito che ricordo fu quello da soldato. In quell'occasione usammo la iuta di una confezione di riso thailandese e il quadratino di cuoio dell'etichetta.¹²

The feelings of attachment to the miniature model engendered by this transnationalizing bricolage allow Yabar to achieve a sense of mastery through

¹¹ Ubah Cristina Ali Farah, *Il comandante del fiume* (Rome: 66thand2nd, 2014), p. 39 (my emphasis): 'On rainy days, we would let our fantasy run riot with colours, glue, card, shells, dried leaves, basically *anything that we could lay our hands on in that moment*. [...] I wasn't very good at reproducing figures exactly, but I preferred drawing scenes while they were happening: naval battles, spaceships in orbit, an army of ants, it all happened while I was holding my paintbrush'.

¹² Ali Farah, *Il comandante del fiume*, pp. 85–86: 'My mother helped me to saw off the head of the doll, which we glued onto the nude body of the super-muscly warrior with Super Attak, after which I colored it in with a permanent brown marker, so that its skin was the same color as my hero's. Mum started sewing a set of clothes for Willie. [...] The last outfit I remember was the soldier. On that occasion we used the jute from a box of Thai rice and a small square of leather from the label'.

active play, as well as to experience positive aesthetic emotion. As Lévi-Strauss explains, this pleasure is drawn precisely from the small-scale dimensions of such an object, whereby the virtue of reduction means that the concept represented by the object 'can be grasped, assessed, and apprehended at a glance'.¹³ Through such bricolage artistry, therefore, Yabar successfully achieves a certain self-knowledge (of the transnational whole of his identity rather than composite parts of his mixed heritage), for 'in it and through it, a person is made into a subject'.¹⁴

But most importantly for the narrative action itself, this kind of transnational bricolage also characterizes the decomposition and subjective *re*-composition of Yabar's relationship with his father, who has disappeared following his involvement in the violence of the Somali civil war. Yabar can't remember clearly what his father looks like since his mother has removed all traces of him from the house, but he manages to find some photos of them together in a box where as a child he would keep 'monete del mondo, conchiglie, cartoline e altre piccole cose'.¹⁵ In this box are four images of Yabar and his father taken in a photo booth on the one visit he paid his son at the boarding school he is temporarily placed into soon after their arrival in Rome.

Nelle immagini si vedono due facce sempre tagliate, un uomo e un bambino i nostri visi non erano mai completi, allora ho preso le forbici per separare la sua faccia dalla mia e un cartoncino su cui attaccare i pezzi. Mi ero messo in testa che dovevo comporre le nostre facce, per vederlo di nuovo, ma i pezzi non combaciavano tra loro e così il risultato appariva mostruoso, un occhio più grande, la bocca sul collo, la fronte troppo bassa.¹⁶

The shattering of his family unit by inter-clan fighting and resultant diasporic movement is thus re-enacted by Yabar in his collage work in a way that may not allow for an easy recuperation of his past heritage or his father figure, but

¹³ Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1972), p. 23.

¹⁴ Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 23.

¹⁵ Ali Farah, *Il comandante del fiume*, p. 134: 'coins, shells, postcards and other little things'.

¹⁶ Ali Farah, *Il comandante del fiume*, p. 135: 'In the images you can see two faces that are always cut off, a man and a child [...] Our faces weren't ever complete, so I took some scissors in order to separate his from mine and a bit of card that I could stick the pieces onto. I'd got it into my head that I needed to recompose our faces to see him again, but the pieces didn't fit together properly and the result was monstrous, one eye bigger than the other, the mouth on the neck, the forehead too low'.

that crucially does allow for another display of mastery through re-presentation. Moreover, Rome itself provides a wider canvas for other positive bricoleur acts, as witnessed in Yabar's encounter with a fantastically adorned homeless woman, the composite migrant community of the other riverside characters, and in the Tiber itself as a repository of local and global riches, representative of multiple timespaces:¹⁷

Si dice che nel letto del Tevere siano custoditi tesori fantastici, perle preziose, lance di lanzichenecchi, pistole garibaldine, statue di marmo bianco e antichi candelabri. Naturalmente ci sono anche altre cose nelle profondità del fiume, carcasse, relitti, carogne, e quando vengono a galla bisogna rimuoverle perché possono accumularsi sotto i ponti e ostacolare il flusso.¹⁸

These presences below the river waters not only conjoin the ancient Somali myth of the book's title to the Tiber of Yabar's contemporary physical location, but also recall the salvage diving of Derek Walcott's 'Schooner *Flight*', where the sea is imagined as a fish broth, 'so choke with the dead', that only the colonial subject can know the 'pain of history words contain'.¹⁹

Within the narrative context it is up to Yabar to negotiate such identity treasures and burdens, and this transnational conflict is – as above – mapped out through the context of creative linguistic bricolage. The colonial presence of Italian hovers in composite words ('isbaghetti') voiced by a Somali migrant Yabar encounters in London, and back in Rome, he corrects the Italianized pronunciation of his friend Libaan's name from a double back to a single 'b'.²⁰ Libaan cannot speak his mother's language, Somali, and engages Yabar to act as a composite, by proxy mouthpiece for their communication. This constitutes a *physical* journey of recuperation for Yabar, too:

(V)edo le parole in fila dentro la testa, le sento e le vedo tutte, scalciano e prendono forma come noci, e io spingo con la fronte e con

¹⁷ Jon May and Nigel Thrift, eds., *Timespace: Geographies of Temporality* (New York: Routledge, 2001).

¹⁸ Ali Farah, *Il comandante del fiume*, p. 134: 'people say that the bed of the Tiber guards fantastic treasures, precious pearls, medieval lances, pistols from the time of Garibaldi, white marble statues and antique candelabras. Of course there are other things at the bottom of the river too, carcasses, wreckages, corpses, which need to be removed when they come up to the surface because otherwise they accumulate under the bridges and can block the flow of the water'.

¹⁹ Walcott, 'The Schooner *Flight*', p. 7, p. 12.

²⁰ Ali Farah, *Il comandante del fiume*, p. 121.

gli occhi per farle passare. Le parole sono dure, mi tagliano la testa [...] sento una fitta tra gli occhi e riprendo fiato. Ma anche così il dolore non smette, allora ricomincio a spingere con forza ed ecco che sento le parole venirmi alla gola e tocco la loro forma con la lingua.²¹

The retrospective action set of the bricoleur can be identified in this representation of temporal and linguistic (re)-birth, a bricoleur who turns back to an existing set of knowledge or objects in order to set up the means for a dialogue.²² It thus functions as an acknowledgement that knowledge can be useful because it is known,²³ and because it allows for a successful fusion of past and present, here and there:

La voce della madre arriva a tutti e due e le nostre voci le arrivano insieme. Sento le parole tutte intere nella bocca, era tanto tempo che non le sentivo, e quelle parole sono le parole del figlio e sono anche le mie, io e Libaan diciamo insieme 'hooyo', mamma, e 'waa aniga', sono io.²⁴

In an episode such as this, 'discourse and syntax supply indispensable means of supplementing deficiencies of vocabulary',²⁵ permitting translational relationships that are determined by particular histories. Movements of play are 'permitted by the lack or absence of a center or origin', and Yabar's collated mediation thus succeeds in facilitating a transnational 'movement of supplementarity' throughout the narrative.²⁶

In *Il comandante del fiume*, it is language that ultimately affords a successful suturing of elements of the past and the elsewhere into the transnational 'freeplay' of the contemporary moment of the text. In a different

²¹ Ali Farah, *Il comandante del fiume*, p. 126: 'I see the words lined up in my head, I feel them and see them all, they take shape like nuts, and I push with my forehead and my eyes to get them out. The words are hard, they cut my head [...] I feel a pain between my eyes and take a deep breath. But even then the pain doesn't stop, so I try pushing again, harder, and now I feel the words coming to my throat and touch their form with my tongue'.

²² Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 20.

²³ Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 9.

²⁴ Ali Farah, p. 126: 'His mother's voice reaches us both, and our voices reach her together. I feel the words whole in my mouth, it was such a long time since I'd felt them, and those words are the words of her son, and mine too, me and Libaan say together "hooyo", Mum, and "waa aniga", it's me'.

²⁵ Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 1.

²⁶ Derrida, 'Structure, Sign and Play', p. 365.

example of transnational bricolage, visual artist and poet Maud Sulter recasts diverse political and historical fields through a dynamic interplay between image, word, and sound. In her own words: 'Language is powerful. And the application of language itself is a site of power'.²⁷ Sulter's use of language allows her to collage together portmanteau, dialect, and vernacular forms that speak of transnational mobility and play in order to subvert the power dynamics usually embedded in hegemonic discourses. Once inserted into her visual art, 'words and images disturb, abrade, supplement and entrap each other' to create a new mode of transnational storytelling.²⁸ The technique of photomontage and text-image relations that Sulter employs in collections such as *SYRCAS* (1993) fold and bend both time and space. Juxtaposing Welsh and German elements in the title, it is presented as the imaginary collage work of a fictitious Afro-German child named Helga, who collates images in order to weave together lost stories and visuals into a narrative of unorthodox, dynamic history. As the accompanying poem, 'Blood Money (Remix)', states: 'She was good with things metal, like scalpels / and scissors, and made pretty pictures / to hang on the walls of their pretty home'.²⁹ The static status of the stylized Alpine landscapes in the background is disrupted by the collaged overlapping of anonymized artefacts from Africa, which in turn neutralizes both as *non-loci* and asks us as viewers to '(re)adjust our vision'.³⁰ The 'disjointedness of the assemblies' draws attention not only to the 'dislocation of these artworks, often forcibly removed by war, stealth and theft',³¹ but also works towards 'recovering, analyzing and making visible the historical presence of black people in Europe'.³² This radical re-situating of African subjects within German history is here overlaid with the gaps and absences caused by their persecution in the interwar period and beyond. Sulter uses this collage method to warn against the dangers of easy racial categorizations in the face of the 'dazzling' variety of encounters and fluidity of categories that makes up the transnational reality of contemporary Europe.³³

²⁷ Maud Sulter, *Passion* (London: Altitude Editions, 2015), p. 9.

²⁸ Sulter, *Passion*, p. 9.

²⁹ Sulter, *Passion*, p. 71.

³⁰ Eve Rosenhaft and Robbie Aitken, 'Introduction', in *Africa in Europe: Studies in Transnational Practice in the Long Twentieth Century*, ed. by E. Rosenhaft and R. Aitken (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2013), pp. 1–16 (p. 5).

³¹ Deborah Cherry, 'The Ghost Begins by Coming Back: Revenants and Returns in Maud Sulter's Photography', in *Maud Sulter: Syrcas* (London: Autograph ABP, 2016).

³² Rosenhaft and Aitken, 'Introduction', *Africa in Europe*, p. 5.

³³ Patricia Clavin, 'Defining Transnationalism', *Contemporary European History*, 14.4 (2005), 421–39 (p. 423).

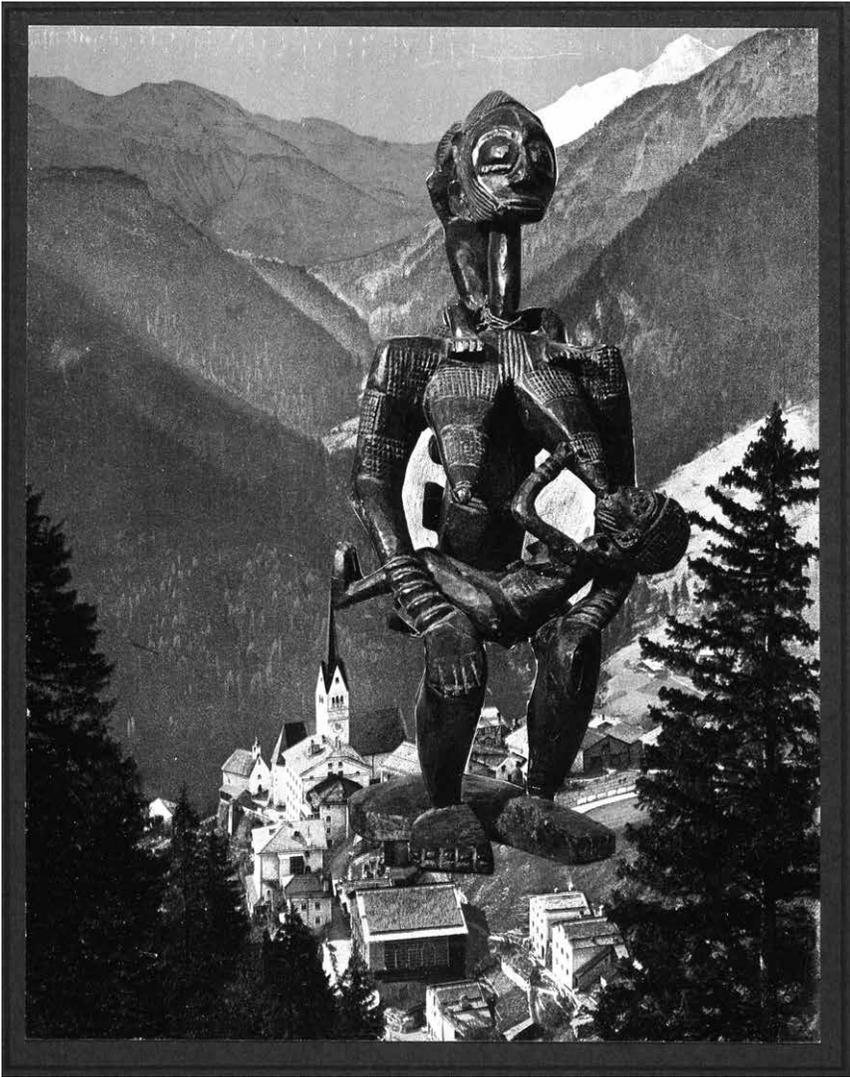


Figure 1. Maud Sulter, *Noir et blanc: Un* (1993).

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In both Sulter's visual and poetic collages and the textual bricolage enacted in Ali Farah's *Il comandante del fiume*, signs gain meaning from their interplay with other signs. Such transnational play is revealed in the disruption of presence through the alternative presence of absence, and works to command both. The aesthetic pleasure produced by this rupture creates a

sensual line of communication between past and present cultural production and its future users.³⁴ In the words of Michel de Certeau, 'what the map cuts up, the story cuts across',³⁵ and, as we have seen, this transnational story of bricolage necessarily spans different forms and media. This richness does not mean hiding the violence of the cutting and ripping actions of global history,³⁶ but rather points to the possibility of exploiting the 'openness' of the transnational in the supplementary creation of new composite elements, 'patterns in which they serve alternatively as ends or means'.³⁷

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³⁴ Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 27.

³⁵ Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. by Steven Rendall (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), p. 129.

³⁶ bell hooks, *Black Looks* (Boston: South End Press, 1992), p. 4.

³⁷ Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, p. 33.