Plunged into Darkness: Rootlessness, Displacement and Vulnerability in Melania Mazzucco's *I Am With You. The Story of Brigitte*

Maria Antonietta Struzziero
Independent scholar
Piazza Pompei 14- Rome, Italy
Email: mstruz@hotmail.it

Abstract:

Melania Mazzucco's *Io sono con te. Storia di Brigitte* (*I Am With You. The Story of Brigitte*) (2016), the paper argues, articulates the existential and psychological condition of displacement and vulnerability of Brigitte, the immigrant protagonist, and her cultural negotiation for recognition as a refugee and asylum seeker by the host country, Italy. In *I Am With You* two women meet for months, getting to know and trust each other. One is Brigitte who has fled her country, Congo, having lost everything, including her children who are left behind. The other is Melania, the writer, who listens to her and decides to give voice to Brigitte's story. The novel, a combination of narration and documentation, is the jagged and painful true story of the protagonist's fall from her small personal paradise to the hell of loss, violence and trauma. Her arrival in Italy as an illegal immigrant is the beginning of a new ordeal as well as of a rebirth, in a city, Rome, which is both inhospitable and welcoming, politically inadequate, and yet still full of potential 'miracles'. Mazzucco's text will be examined and discussed in the light of trauma theory, psychoanalysis and memory studies.

Keywords: Fictional testimony, forced migration, integration, liminality, trauma, vulnerability

Thou shalt leave each thing
Beloved most dearly: This is the first shaft
Shot from the bow of exile. Thou shalt prove
How salt the savour is of other's bread;
How hard the passage, to descend and climb
By other's stairs
Dante Alighieri, *Divine Comedy, Paradiso*, Canto XVII, ll. 55-60

Introduction

This paper sets out to examine Melania Mazzucco's *Io sono con te. Storia di Brigitte* (*I Am With You. The Story of Brigitte*)[1] (2016), in order to analyse and discuss how the writer addresses such topical themes as the illegal, forced migration of asylum seekers and the successive complex integration process, with its diverse obstacles and implications. Mazzucco's text, the paper argues, encapsulates the existential and psychological condition of liminality and vulnerability of Brigitte, the protagonist, and her cultural negotiation for recognition as a refugee and asylum seeker by the host country, Italy.

I Am With You is the true account of a cultural, psychological, and existential journey during which two women meet for months, getting to know, understand and trust each other. One is Brigitte who has escaped political persecution in her country, Congo, having lost everything, and is 'shipwrecked' in Italy. The other is Melania, the writer, who listens to her as a human being and decides to tell her story. Mazzucco's novel edges towards the territory of fictional testimony, being a combination of narration and documentation; it is the harrowing story of the protagonist's fall from her small personal paradise to the hell of loss, helpless exposure to violence and trauma with the shattering array of consequences, in a condition of social and economic dispossession and precariousness.

The novel narrates the protagonist's violent oppression in her home country, leading to precarious migrancy and displacement, a discourse informed also by the issues of race and gender, and the anxieties they tend to generate. The text follows the gradual downward curve of the protagonist's existential trajectory, a process that thoroughly transforms her: from being a successful, autonomous subject, first she is threatened and politically persecuted; then, degraded to an abject inhuman condition and subjected to all types of awful brutality. In the end, on her arrival in the host country, she becomes an illegal body and the "possible epitome of the Levinasian face of the other, as she is the one who depends on others in her frailty, which makes her the recipient of the other's generosity and ethical response" (Ganteau 2015, 1). Uprooted from her known familiar world and community, she treads a thin line, wavering between hunting memories of the past and the children she had to leave behind, and the necessity to adapt to a different socio-cultural reality in order to (re)construct her identity, start a new life, and gradually look forward to the future.

The paper will consider how Brigitte's whole life trajectory verges on thresholds and inhabits a condition of liminality, though of a different nature: in the African narrative she moves in the liminal state of living death, oscillating between the human and the inhuman, life and impending death. In the Italian section it is the psychological and existential liminality of someone who lives between worlds, "between a lost past and a non-integrated present" (Chambers 1994, 12); on the margins of society, in a degraded or cast out status, coming from an elsewhere, thus being simultaneously neither inside nor outside, her identity constantly challenged.

Mazzucco's choice to record the true story of a woman who undergoes all sorts of traumatic experiences, it is maintained, highlights some of the important functions that the contemporary novel fulfills. First, to capture what happens in reality and reflect upon it, to interrogate our certainties and practices, therefore to be "an ethical and political prism through which to apprehend the contemporary world" (Ganteau 2015, 24), in order to offer a further key to understand the complex challenges that some processes pose to our communities. Second, to be the privileged site for the expression of different forms of vulnerability, loss and trauma, issues that demand our constant attention and vigilance. In fact, it seems as though "vulnerability, in the wake of – or alongside – trauma, has become a paradigm of the

contemporary culture, and a template for the wounded contemporary subject" (Ganteau 2015, 4). In light of this, the paper claims, the novel also performs a powerful ethical gesture.

Silence and fragments of conversations

Oscillating between the novel and the essay, in *I Am With You* Mazzucco leans towards the investigation and description of peripheral spaces that are relevant from both a sociological and a literary perspective.

In a long interview given a few months after the novel's publication, the author throws light both on *how* and *why* the project of writing the novel originated. The book is the outcome of the collaboration between the writer and the Astalli Centre in Rome, the Italian section of the Jesuit Refugee Service. Since 2002, the centre has promoted the project 'Windows – Stories of Refugees' aimed at students from secondary and higher education schools in order to encourage them to reflect on the theme of the right of asylum, in particular through direct contact with refugees and their stories.

Mazzucco's first declared objective was not "to write a story in the past, but one still evolving, thus making a journey together with the protagonist" (Riggio 2017, 126), a choice that also allowed her to continue her reflections on the general theme of migration, a long-cultivated interest that had culminated in her prize-winning novel on Italian migration to America, *Vita* (2003). Consequently, she decided to avoid the happy-ending narrative of a refugee who had made it, and started to look for "someone who was still struggling" (Riggio 2017, 126). She also refused the logic of the news report, where refugees are mere numbers left in the anonymity of their despair, and embraced a different perspective, "that of lives that deserve to, and can, be narrated" (Riggio 2017, 125). So she chose to write about one single person, whose story was similar to that of many others, but that could become a true narrative.

Adding also her reflections within the text while appropriating the discourse of migration, Mazzucco revisits the form of the conventional immigrant novel in a manner that epitomizes the hybridity of the genre. At the same time, by responding to – and engaging with – the narratives of others, aware of our own otherness, she bears witness to the possibility of an ethical relationship and encounter between the migrant and the host country.

The novel charts Brigitte's difficult process of adaptation to a new community, weaving together two storylines. Narration does not proceed in a strictly chronological order, but mirrors the working of memory, in which past events continue to reverberate in the present – as if *being* present – thus belying the supposed linearity of time. It is a technique that the writer tends to privilege in most of her novels, as she herself admits: "What holds my novels together is the way they relate to time. [...] following the characters' time and lives" (Galeotti 2009, 2).

The first storyline is a retrospective narrative that records the protagonist's odyssey to escape the military regime's persecution in her country and reach Italy. The second thread follows her arrival in Rome as a refugee seeking shelter in a totally unknown country. It is

actually a second journey for her and a further ordeal, but also a possible beginning, in a city that is both inhospitable and welcoming, politically inadequate and yet a potential site of 'miracles' and transformation, a story that begins in 2013 and is still evolving at the end of the book in 2016.

In the above mentioned interview, Mazzucco discusses the structural and formal choices she had to make in order to allow Brigitte's true voice to emerge, refusing the idea of appropriating her story and, with it, her identity. She decided that the protagonist's African story had to be narrated by Brigitte herself in the first person, because the writer could not reconstruct it in any other way. On this issue, Mazzucco faced the difficulty of *how* to render Brigitte's voice in the act of writing; she rejected the use of mimetic language and decided to convey her point of view. She says: "I have tried to be her in the only possible way I can, that is to say by writing" (Riggio 2017, 127). The adoption of this perspective allows Brigitte's gaze to observe both the culture of the host country – that is 'other' to her – and the writer herself, and she does it with her own prejudices, stereotypes, her personal vision of the world, an approach that deconstructs the dichotomous opposition I / Other.

Conversely, the writer tells the section of Brigitte's Italian 'shipwreck' in the third person, "because at that stage Brigitte is depersonalized, she receives a name only after frère Antoine comes across her at Termini station and sends her to the Centro Astalli, where she meets the humanitarian aid worker Filippo" (Riggio 2017, 127). Finally, there is the writer's own self present in the narrative since, she affirms, "this story was given to me, I took it and from a certain point on our relationship became its key" (Riggio 2017, 127).

Piecing together Brigitte's painful, long-repressed memories that gradually resurface, the novel relates Brigitte's almost two years spent in Rome before she meets the author and her relationships with all the people who helped her. In the writer's intention, the structure of the novel had to reflect the evolution of their relationship, so that the reader gets to know Brigitte as she herself did, approaching her memory gradually. Indeed, Brigitte begins to recollect the 'facts' of her story only after she has been meeting the psychiatrist and the psychologist for three months, and the book follows this process of reconstruction and psychological healing, when the fragmented recounting of suffering, fear and abjection quiets down, and can be concatenated into a story.

The novel opens with an introductory first-person unnumbered section that leaves the identity of the protagonists unspecified. They are introduced simply as "we", "she", "the child" (Mazzucco 2016, 3),[2] a choice that hints at an initial tentative stage of acquaintance between the writer and the protagonist who are still extraneous, as Mazzucco reminds the reader in her interview: "At first we were two strangers" (Riggio 2017, 132), adding that it took her time to learn to overcome Brigitte's resistance.

The first descriptive paragraph appears to be a sort of objective correlative of the psychological condition of both protagonists. A series of elements and lexical choices contribute

to create the emotional atmosphere: the adjectives used, as well as the symbolic presence of an "austere wooden table [that] separates us", "the empty chairs", the dim "light flowing from a dusty lamp" (3), are all elements that communicate a sense of melancholy and solitude. Even the weather adds to this gloomy sensation as the rain is "malevolent and tired, and humidity intensifies the cold" (3). The second paragraph is punctuated by the repeated use of negative sentences to underscore the writer's skepticism about the possibility of ever being able to relate Brigitte's story.

A theme that abruptly surfaces during their initial conversation, to the writer's surprise – and that is central to understand the protagonist's personality, her resilience and reactions to what happens to her – is religion, already hinted at in the novel's title and in the epigraph, "Don't be afraid, because I am with you" (Isaiah, 41.10). At first, Brigitte juxtaposes Mazzucco's identity as a Roman with the ancient Romans who killed Jesus Christ, considering it a probable serious obstacle "which might nip [their] friendship in the bud" (5). Her skeptical attitude is assuaged only when the writer offers her some historical facts and points out how things have changed over the centuries. Besides, the religious reference to Jesus Christ becomes also symbolic of Brigitte's condition as a victim of the tortures she had to bear at the hands of her persecutors, thus proleptically anticipating the tone and nature of her future narrative.

The initial conversations, that take place in French, a sort of neutral language for both, are more like "ineffectual digressions", proceeding "in fits and starts, fragmentary associations" (4), shifting topics, all the time circling around the upsetting African events that loom large at the back of both their minds, while avoiding mentioning them. These are cautious, tentative explorations of the 'other', to approach a foreign psychological and cultural territory that is still too fragile and obscure even to Brigitte herself.

Though the text interweaves Brigitte's double narrative in alternating chapters or sections within the same chapter – as mentioned before – the paper will discuss first her African story, because chronologically it precedes the narrative of her arrival in Italy which opens the novel.

A narrative from the heart of darkness

Brigitte's African narrative is indirectly introduced by the author herself who muses on the psychological mechanisms that human beings unconsciously activate when they have to cope with unbearably shocking traumas in order to protect themselves from collapsing.

At the Centro Astalli, Mazzucco learns that asylum seekers tell stories that are often false, or partly so, adapted to make them sound worse, like scripts frequently too similar to each other. In such cases, "the true story of a person is turned into the counterfeit story of many others – and it is used and abused, till the fabric wears out, disclosing its texture" (32). However, many more are true,

> not less atrocious, absurd, at times incredible, because reality ignores verisimilitude, and coherence. And the violence that a human being can inflict on another almost always exceeds our well-bred imagination

> as Europeans born and grown up in peacetime. Besides, whoever has experienced a trauma or has penetrated the labyrinths of the psyche knows that, to protect ourselves from suffering and be able to bear it, we must find expedients and activate displacement, slippage, estrangement, alienation mechanisms. And pretend that what happened to us has actually happened to someone else. The truth is that it will take her months before she accepts to recognize herself in that story. That she can bear it, and understand that it belongs to her. And neither she can, nor she must, cancel or forget it (32-33).

Brigitte's first-person narrative takes the reader back to her city, Matadi, where she was a professional nurse and owned two clinics, one of which is the place where the terrible events leading to her final escape begin. Her nightmare starts on a November afternoon when a group of seven young people, wounded during a political demonstration against the government in power, are taken to her clinic to have their injuries treated. A few hours later, a stout army colonel, with eyes "as hard as a crow's" (40), comes to the clinic and, with no preamble, offers Brigitte a bank cheque in her name for a substantial amount of money. In return, he tells her, she simply has to inject the demonstrators who are in the clinic with a lethal dose of a liquid he has with him, to provoke their death. Brigitte refuses to comply with the colonel's request. She reminds him that she is a Christian and has also taken the Hippocratic oath, so she has a moral and professional code to obey to. The colonel leaves, apparently unaffected by her refusal. The day after, at night, three civilians and two soldiers violently burst into her house where she lives only with her children, having lost her husband in a car accident probably caused by sabotage.

The men seize her while her children are sleeping in the next room and luckily do not hear or see anything. She starts to yell for help, and her only surviving brother Cyprien, whom she profoundly loves, comes to her rescue: he is shot dead even before he can utter a single word. One of the militia men gags and blindfolds her, and pours an urticant liquid on her tied hands, scalding them. Then they fling her on the back of a jeep and throw on top of her the still warm body of Cyprien that continued to spill blood all over her. Brigitte thinks her end is nearing and, as usually happens in such cases, they will drown her in the river, still alive, tied in a sack: "They do not leave parents a corpse to bury, not even a small heap of bones. [...] They wipe us out. Even our death no longer exists" (46).

After a very long drive, when they reach the forest, they drag her out of the jeep, fling her into a dark hovel and lock the iron door. She hears moans, whisperings and gradually begins to distinguish the presence of many other bodies, so many that it is impossible to sit or breathe, women and men too traumatized to talk to her. Her body loses its physical consistency and she becomes "viscid, liquid". Barefoot, she treads on "a clay floor, wet – with blood, urine, or both. The stench of rotten iron, excrement and gangrene takes the breath away" (102), and she almost faints. She does not even dare to ask where they are because nobody knows. What they all know is that "[they] are dead, but not yet. It will be a fortune if they kill [them] straightaway" (102). Brigitte needs to go to the loo but there is no such place, so she wets her knickers.

Someone tells her that she should use a "tin", as everybody else does, because, they add, "that will be your water. You will have nothing else to drink here" (103).

Both the images and the tone of this section, evoke the figure of the *abject* described by Julia Kristeva: "These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death" (1982, 3). Here Brigitte is at the border of her condition as a living being, and her entire body risks falling beyond the boundaries of what is deemed to be human and become *other*.

Kept in a condition of fear, the prisoners are given nothing to eat for two days; when at last their jailors throw something on the floor, they "rush like vultures on a carrion" (103). Their food for the whole week consists of banana skins; Brigitte can only grab half of a blackish skin which she devours because she is starving. After a couple of nights, the jailors push five prisoners upstairs, among them Brigitte, and none of them can protest as they are mere "lifeless things", not human beings, for the abusers. "They do not call our names from a list, they are not interested in our names. We are all women and we do understand they are not taking us to die" (104). Deprived of freedom and identity, stripped of agency and subjectivity, they are separated and she is pushed into a room where her worst nightmares begin.

In her deranged testimonial narrative, Brigitte gives a profoundly horrific account of what happened to her during her detention, something that would test the mental sanity of any human being, leave indelible traumas thereafter and have destabilizing, life-changing consequences. It is a painful, dark narrative that, being a true account from the victim's point of view, has a great emotional impact. First, the captors kick and whip her using rubber strings, even put out cigarettes on her hands and drip candle wax on her forehead, so that she can feel her skin sizzle and burn. Then, while two of them hold her arms tightly, one starts to rape her; she is repeatedly raped by her captors all night long, and on all successive nights as well.

This narrative confirms the common pattern that violence committed against women generally takes two forms: "Physical violence in the form of torture and mutilation, and sexual violence in the form of rape" (McCann 2010, 86). Here rape is perpetrated by members of a repressive state apparatus, an institution that functions by violence and uses a woman's body in order to crush and silence her opposition to its will. It is clearly a question of power rather than sex, as is well documented and corroborated also by a number of feminist studies. Sexual crimes committed against women at times of conflict, such studies maintain, "are a direct consequence of the appropriation of women's bodies for symbolic uses within the dialects of patriarchal cultural/ethnic/religious nationalisms" (Martín-Lucas 2010, 131). In fact, Brigitte's body, as that of the other women who are seized together with her, is the site over which power is exacted, transformed into a territory to be invaded, plundered, and submitted: "They hate me. They have been told that I am an enemy of the government. [...] They take me all night long" (104). And then: "They take me every night" (105).

The use of free indirect discourse in this section, a style that allows access to Brigitte's thought process, is characterized by the combination of several devices: the predominance

of parataxis; the massive use of lexical items that belong to the semantic field of violence or disintegration, with the repeated use of verbs like "fling", "hurl", "drag", "push", "kick", "lacerate", "knock", "crush"; the anaphoric repetition of negatives that gives this part a hammering rhythm; the short staccato sentences and phrases punctuated by full stops. These formal features destabilize the text and draw attention to the explosion of chaos in Brigitte's mind, her psychological fragmentation, and the accompanying feelings of shame and degradation.

Drawing from Roberta Culbertson's distinction between "violence" and "violation", here Brigitte appears to voice an "experience of violation", as she undergoes a

> violence from which there is no escape or recourse because one's body and one's repertoire of responses are quite simply overpowered from the outset, [...] involving not a contesting of hierarchy or power but its full, primary assertion, and the threatened, even actual, dissolution of the self in the midst of it (Culbertson 1995, 171).

This critical interpretation is supported also by the simultaneous elision from Brigitte's narrative of the word rape, substituted by "take", because, Culbertson adds, "in this sort of violation one is not merely invaded by another, but literally *taken* (emphasis added); the wounding in this sort of circumstance becomes a physical marker of one's clear permeability, one's flowing into the world, and one's being entered by it" (Culbertson 1995, 171).

The reader gets the overall impression that the violent act of rape is displaced onto the verbal domain, a strategy that is not "indicative of a refusal to acknowledge the violation by the victim[...]", but is more likely "a means of reinforcing the simultaneously physical and psychological repercussions of this particular form of violence" (McCann 2010, 89) on Brigitte's whole being.

This section encapsulates the gradual process of dehumanization of the woman, and the erasure of any residual trace of personhood, leading to the inevitable, final invasion of her most private sphere. Being deprived of all the constitutive attributes of the subject, and being subjected, by the abusers, her domain is that of the *abject*.

When she arrives in Italy, after months of silence, resistance to remember, and refusal to open herself up, so as not to relive the past nightmares endlessly, Brigitte will suddenly and unexpectedly find in herself the psychological strength to look over the abyss, thus allowing the dark matter still buried there to emerge. At that point, she will confront the uncomfortable and shocking nature of sexual violence, and speak the unspeakable to the psychologist at the SaMiFo (Forced Migrant Health Centre). The narrative of trauma that at last she utters appears to envision for her the possibility of some form of catharsis which might gradually lead to healing and recovery.

In her narrative she allows no textual space to the perpetrators of the rape: they are ruthlessly and violently present but shadowy and insubstantial. She underscores their animalistic savagery

and foregrounds the violence of the attack, but denies them any dignity that individualized attention might afford. They are deflated to being mere cold instruments of power and oppression, in a way subjected to narrative erasure. Brigitte refuses even to watch her rapists in the eyes when they take her. Inert and defenseless, in her pure passivity, her ultimate form of resistance resides in her mind and, above all, in her strong religious belief, "Il faut que le bon Dieu les pardonne" (105), a faith that supports her morally and psychologically, and keeps her whole through the ordeal, though she is convinced that they will soon kill her.

Brigitte, however, will not die because, by pure luck, the head of the prison reads her name in a list and recognizes in her the person who, in 2001, had saved the life of his wife and his baby son, who would certainly have died in childbirth without her help, because he had no money to pay for her hospitalization and had been rejected by other clinics. As a token of gratitude, he had promised Brigitte that one day he would pay her back, something he could not do at the time because, being in the military, he had been sent to serve abroad for seven years. Now, he will repay his debt helping her to escape, provided that she is ready to leave Congo for good, otherwise, if she is found out, they both will die. Brigitte agrees and he helps her leave the prison on New Year's night; hiding on a truck whose driver picks her up along the road, she reaches Kinshasa. Here she has a close friend, Constantin, who is almost a brother to her, as her father had paid for his studies at university after Constantin's father had died. Constantin shelters her in his house and contacts a friend who is a politician: Brigitte will fly abroad with him as his wife, using a forged passport.

They land in Rome on the 26th of January, catch a bus going to Termini station where he hands her some money and leaves her, saying that he can do nothing else for her, as he must fly to Paris in three hours' time. At that point, Brigitte concludes, "I am alone, at the station of an unknown city, in an unknown country, in an unknown continent. I am alone and have nothing left" (147). It is here that frère Antoine comes across her after she has spent nine days lost in the station, and will actually redirect her journey in Rome. Many months later, while she is still struggling to reconstruct her fragmented self, she receives a phone call from Congo informing her that Constantin had died from poisoning.

Encountering otherness

Brigitte's Italian story, a third-person narrative, begins in chapter one, from the place where she has been left to fend for herself, at Termini, Rome's huge railway station, a liminal no man's land. The whole chapter charts her aimless, confused wondering during the nine days that she is stranded there on her arrival in Italy, at a loss but struggling to survive.

Against the microcosmic universe of the station, an external observer seems to look at her; actually, the narrative is focalized from Brigitte's point of view, and her own eyes simultaneously observe both what happens around her and herself from the outside.

"She walks", or indeed, "she passes by" (7), a verb repeated many times on two successive pages, having no direction to walk towards. She passes by, "limping, wobbling on aching feet,

cramped, almost bent over; she bumps into bodies, knocks against shoulders, arms, backs, stumbles among suitcases, bags, shoes" (7). Brigitte's is an aching body, the visual instantiation of suffering, of "[b]eing as ill-being" (Kristeva 1982, 140), unprotected against the cold that freezes even her tears, and shivering because of January's chilly temperature. To add to the sense of utter bewilderment that overwhelms her, there are the piercing volume of loudspeakers, the clang of the incoming and outgoing trains, the roar of car engines reaching her from the nearby streets.

Observed through the eyes of Brigitte, who does not even know in which city she has landed, the noisy station is a confused mass of stalls, shop windows selling all kinds of items, and voices. Above all, there is an anonymous crowd of people of all sorts, both travellers who hurry by without even seeing her and the underworld of stray human beings: homeless, poor, marginalized people who live by their wits, petty criminals, robbers, for whom the station is their only refuge where they live hidden in cardboard shelters for protection against the cold at night.

It is the topography of a world that is alien to her, and whose signs she cannot decode, made even more threatening when darkness falls and "swallows the square's borders" (10), a square that is "a boundless inhospitable space, a dark wasteland crossed by ghosts dragging their trolleys behind" (11). She continues to walk in and out of the station, but keeping within its limits, because "the station is the magnet of lost people" (16) and, despite its unfamiliar nature, it still offers her protection, especially at night when she tries to find some rest after two sleepless months.

The first chapter conveys the sensation that Brigitte has lost touch with her own body:

> She cannot feel her fingers, nose, face, legs. Neither does she feel the pain tearing her apart, the knife that for weeks has been thrust right at the centre of her body. She feels nothing. It is as if she were not where she is, nor who she is. As if the woman who wavers, staggers and wanders around the square outside Termini station were another woman, a person she does not even know. Because she cannot be this woman. They have nothing in common (13).

It is the portrait of a woman who is evidently the victim of some traumatic events, and in conditions of economic precariousness and vulnerability. The image of "the knife" and the intense pain that Brigitte feels hint at a wound, an obvious correlative for the enduring consequences of the past trauma.

During her future meetings with the psychiatrist, it will emerge that at this stage she is prey to psychic dissociation, a condition that explains the double perspective adopted in this section. Brigitte's is the psychological state of the *deject*, a person who is excluded and keeps wondering, "*Where* am I?" and "*Who* am I?", in short "a *stray* [...] on a journey, during the night, the end of which keeps receding (emphasis in the original)" (Kristeva 1982, 8). And she has been plunged into a psychological and existential night of the soul.

She undergoes a clear process of defamiliarization and abjection of the self that she sees as external and extraneous to her, because the abject has actually the quality "of being opposed to *I*", drawing the fragile texture of the self "toward a place where meaning collapses" (Kristeva 1982, 1-2). Indeed, she perceives herself as – and *is* actually – an 'other', separated from the true Brigitte she had left behind in Africa. At this early stage of the novel, the reader knows nothing about her yet, her terrible past only glimpsed through a very brief disturbing memory surfacing unbidden when she feels hungry and hints at what she had learned about hunger in "the darkness of prison" (14). Split into two, she refuses to acknowledge the self she has become in the abject creature that scavenges among the filth and garbage to grab furtively the leftovers that people throw away, even biting into a piece of sandwich left partly uneaten, feeling disgust while doing it but needing to silence the hunger pangs as she has not eaten for two days.

She is 'other' both to herself and to the people who, crossing the station during the nine days she spends there, keep away from her considering her a madwoman, because "a woman who is black and crazy is dreaded more than a beggar or a criminal. She embodies a female ghost trapped in the thousand-year-old memory of people living on this Continent, a creature that has been hurt and that people fear might look for revenge" (16). She is a stranger and, in the order of Western culture, "a figure of subversion that forces the native to confront their own foreignness" (Brigley Thompson 2010, 201), the unknowable disturbing otherness within them.

Gender and race intersect to add to the anxiety generated both in Brigitte herself by the feeling of being lost – stranded in a place she does not know and with nobody to ask for help – and in the people who catch a glimpse of her reduced to less than human conditions.

The first person who really *sees* her is a foreigner, dressed in black, and "black like her, even more than her" (18). He approaches her, offers her help and something to eat, and leaves her after having written an address on a piece of paper inviting her to take a bus and go there when she needs to eat. The man is frère Antoine whom she will meet again on her arrival at the Centro Astalli, actually the man who puts an end to her period in the limbo of the station and sets in motion her second journey.

Brigitte's meeting with the Centro Astalli is at first a source of profound confusion and anxiety for her, because she has difficulties grasping the required administrative steps necessary to obtain a temporary residence permit and be recognized as an asylum seeker. Here, when she is asked to spell her full name to be registered, she "realizes that she is indeed Brigitte, and what is happening to her is real, not a nightmare she might awake from only to find herself back in her past life" (31). By spelling her name aloud, she begins the slow and painful process of recalling her past self; she gathers its fragments, and gradually pieces them together to reconstruct a whole and new self. However, it will take her months before she accepts to identify herself in that story, and this happens when the day of the legal hearing to obtain the residence permit approaches.

In order to assist her in the process, the centre assigns her a lawyer, Francesca, a choice that

provokes a true cultural shock in Brigitte: first, because Francesca is a woman; second because she is young, pretty, and elegant, all features that, to Brigitte, cannot be signifiers of a professional lawyer. In fact, she thinks of her as "a petite fille, actually still a little girl" (29). Convinced that Francesca cannot help her, Brigitte asks for "a true lawyer" (29), preferably a man. Her mistrust, coming from a woman, actually interrogates clichés and prejudices on both cultural sides. In fact, too frequently we take for granted that, as migrants escape from countries where there is poverty, civil war, political or religious persecution, when they arrive in our country they should feel privileged and view us in a positive light. It is actually a wrong assumption as evidenced by Brigitte's case. However, after some time, she starts to trust Francesca and to acknowledge both her professionalism and her dedication.

Mazzucco herself, in the quoted interview, discusses Brigitte's perception of white people who, to her, have "wax skin" (24), particularly women:

> I was surprised by her difficulties to establish relationships with white women because of a deeply-rooted prejudice she had, which surprises readers a lot. We always think of their skin colour as a problem, but how do they see us? As enemies. During the first period, in fact, instinctively Brigitte trusted Filippo, but not her lawyer, Francesca, a woman too young to be good and too elegant to understand a story as ugly as hers (Riggio 2017, 128).

On the other hand, we tend to see refugees through the lens of Islamic fundamentalism that invades us, and this is scaring. Brigitte's story reminds us that these people, refugees or migrants, live their spiritual dimension as an integral part of their daily life, a dimension that surprises us because we have forgotten it in our secular way of living. Their narratives confront us with the question of what it means to be human, a question that the writer invites us to address by looking beyond the surface of the text to uncover its wounds and silences, and allow us to be affected by it, because "we are persistently defining who we are in relation to violation" (Winnberg 2003, 20), and our reactions to it.

It is only after three months of meetings with Francesca, her lawyer, and Dr Santoni, the psychiatrist she is assigned to, that Brigitte can begin to remember and tell her true story.

The first-person narrative of her past proceeds parallel with, and is interrupted by, the story of her present wandering through Rome, the procedures necessary to find her a house to stay in and have a series of medical tests, while also preparing all the documentation required to see her refugee status recognized. In the meantime, while anxiously waiting for an accommodation and the results of the medical tests, she goes back to sleep at Termini. Here one night she wakes up when she vaguely feels hands exploring her body and sees five men who try to rape her. She starts to shout and attracts the attention of some policemen who come to her rescue; before the men manage to escape, they steal her few possessions. This episode will prompt her resolution never to sleep there again. From then on, she spends some weeks with neither money, nor possessions or a roof over her head, wandering aimlessly between

the square and the station, and sleeping in different places: from a bench in a central square or in a large garden, and other unknown places she never talks about. She goes back regularly to the Centro Astalli to eat, though she dislikes Italian food, and to the SaMiFo to meet Maria, her psychologist. At one point she disappears for ten days and when she goes back she offers no justification or information about her whereabouts. Her narrative has blanks and silences that neither the people who are in charge of her at the Astalli centre nor, later on, the writer try to intrude on or ask about.

As with Francesca, Brigitte opposes a strong resistance to Maria and does not trust her; above all "she does not want to remember what happened to her. She strives, every minute of every single day, to obliterate three months of her life. It is the only way to remove the anguish that eats her, and find some dignity again. And pride" (68). Francesca in particular is afraid that Brigitte might end up ruining herself, as many others before her, so she does whatever she can to assist her. In fact, with the help of padre Camillo, they find an accommodation for Brigitte, a room at Casa di Giorgia that she shares with three other women. Here, at last, she spends her first night in a bed. After some months, one of the other girls will confess to Brigitte that they have secretly renamed her "tempest"; that her arrival was a disaster, because "she had nightmares, shouted every night, with an inhuman voice, as if they were slaughtering her" (82), so she often kept them awake at night for weeks on end.

A view of the horizon

Brigitte's memory reconstruction of the events leading her to Rome and to the Astalli centre at one point collapses while she is recollecting the most traumatic moments of her captivity and her repeated rape in Congo. Her psychologist realizes that "Brigitte is no longer there", because "prey to a major dissociative episode" (106) in medical terminology. Furthermore, she misinterprets a conversation between the psychologist and the psychiatrist, and suspects that they intend to send her to prison. It is an emotional and psychological tipping point: something breaks inside her and she bursts into an uncontrollable fit of weeping which after even turns into violence and aggressiveness.

From that moment on she is also placed in the care of a psychiatrist, Dr Santone, who will meet her every fortnight to help her heal her profoundly wounded psyche. Side by side with him, Francesca, her trusted lawyer, will assist her with the tortuous procedures to obtain political asylum and have a residence permit, which gives her the right to apply for reunification with her children.

In time, however, though alternating moments of high and low spirits, Brigitte begins to change and, to the people at the centre, "every day she appears to be experimenting with a new identity", as if "she had begun to reconcile herself with being a woman" (148). She actually reclaims her body, wishing to take possession of herself again, a process in constant evolution.

Following Francesca's advice, she attends a course to learn Italian both to busy herself while

waiting for her residence permit and because knowledge of the language is an essential requisite to start looking for work. However, the next months are truly testing for Brigitte: she has to change accommodation twice, and the relationship with the other refugee women who share the house with her, all of them with similar traumatic stories behind, is at times quite tense and problematic, and she also risks losing herself.

Her aspiration would be to work as a nurse, as she did in her native country, but her original diploma is not legally recognized in Italy. However, the Astalli centre offers her the possibility to attend a training course at a very big hospital that will qualify her as a caregiver for elderly people who are no longer self-sufficient.

While Brigitte gradually begins to recover and, after some months, also finds a temporary job at a retirement home for nuns, Francesca does some research – with the little information Brigitte can provide – to find out what had happened to the children she left behind. She discovers that, after their mother's disappearance, they were entrusted by the local authorities to the care of a neighbour, the owner of the house where Brigitte lived and where the children were found after their mother's disappearance. It takes time, patience and additional help from the Astalli centre and the Red Cross for two of her children, the boys, to finally join their mother in 2015. At the end of the book, the two little girls are still in Congo, living with a friend of Brigitte and their grandmother, but in the hope that one day they may be reunited as a family in Italy.

I Am With You ends with a two-page section, entitled *Post scriptum*, which closes the novel, though not the trajectory of the protagonist's new life in Italy that is actually an open-ended narrative, a story still on the making. However, what really counts is not so much the provisional conclusion as the path of destruction and even more reconstruction faced.

The last paragraph portrays Brigitte and the writer by the sea, to keep a promise the latter had made to her. It is a natural element that, at the beginning appears in the novel with the connotation of a deadly threshold, of the tragedy of Brigitte's shipwreck in Italy. In the end, however, the sea metamorphoses into the horizon, the metaphor for the future, that Mazzucco and Brigitte observe together. Thus, the image of the horizon that closes *I Am With You* harbingers possibilities, hope and unity, as the closing sentence openly suggests: "Even though neither of us knows what to expect, we have watched the horizon together" (254), a place that is no longer an obscure, even dangerous, point of arrival but a point of departure.

Brigitte's narrative, then, is far from being complete and having a happy end. It is the true story of a wounded human being, "fearless, fragile and broken, yet indestructible" (253), who shows great resilience and endurance in the face of the dispossession, loss and violence she has to bear. Her 'I' is always contingent, in transit, continually being formed and reformed, (re)constructed from the fragments of memory blown ashore by the tempest of her past life.

At the same time, and more importantly, her story epitomizes the significance of working from the wound, of speaking about the unspeakable to voice a trauma narrative both as a form

of therapy –for the wounded subject – and as an ethical act for those who, by listening to another's wound, witness what it means for the body and the mind to be physically and emotionally hurt and bear the destabilizing traces of the trauma. Indeed, through the prism of Brigitte's existential paradigm, Mazzucco claims the value of humanity and relationality; of the encounter with the suffering other in her/his singularity; of care of the vulnerable, not as 'other' but as a fellow human being. Above all, she asserts the importance of being open and exposed to alterity as "the very condition of subjectivity as *becoming* (italics in the original), which postulates an image of the self as ceaselessly interrupted by the event of the other, indefinitely open and refusing the totalizing effects of closure" (Ganteau 2015, 6).

Conclusion

> No man is an island entire of itself; every man
> is a piece of the continent, a part of the main.
> John Donne, Meditation XVII

The authentic emotional investment of Mazzucco, both as a fellow human being and as an artist, is at the heart of the narrative of Brigitte's existential trajectory in *I Am With You. The Story of Brigitte*. She accomplishes "what is generally demanded of a novelist. [...] to suspend our disbelief [and] follow her till the very last page" (129), believing what she tells us and empathizing with the characters she brings to life before our eyes. The pact of trust between writer and reader, necessary when approaching a story that finds its intrinsic strength in truth, is never broken, despite the novel's complex architecture with its continuous alternation between different space-time planes. Besides, by lending Brigitte a strong and undefeated voice, that implicitly advocates resistance to violence and refusal to be silenced, Mazzucco ethically empowers her with some degree of agency and control over her story.

Brigitte's existential trajectory shows the necessity and value of listening to the voices of alterity and what they want to tell us. Because, to be human and ethical is to view the myriad narratives woven by each human being as a web in which individual stories are not fragments separated from the rest, but intersecting threads, each having its own value and interest, each contributing to a better understanding of ourselves and of the world we live in. It is our moral duty to listen to and respond to the best of our possibilities to these *other* narratives, which might also reverberate with new meanings in our own life-stories, adding depth and value to them, and help us expand our understanding of both ourselves and of the world we live in.

Endnotes:

1. The original Italian title of Melania Mazzucco's novel is *Io sono con te. Storia di Brigitte.* The novel has not been translated into English, but on the website consulenzeditoriali.it, it appears with the English title used in this paper.

All the English quotations from the novel, as well as from the interviews with Melania Mazzucco in *Aggiornamenti Sociali* and in *L'Osservatore Romano* are my own translations.

2. Further quotations from the novel are given between parenthesis and refer to the Italian edition.

References

Brigley Thompson, Zoë. "The Wound and the Mask. Rape, Recovery and Poetry in Pascale Petit's *The Wounded Deer: Fourteen Poems after Frida Khalo*." *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, Collection. Ed. Gunne, S. and Thompson, Z. B. New York &London: Routledge, 2010. 200-216.

Chambers, Iain. *Migrancy, Culture, Identity*. London & New York: Routledge, 1994.

Culbertson, Roberta. "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self." *New Literary History* Vol. 26. 1 (Winter 1995): 169- 195.

Galeotti, Giulia. "Sogno di sparire dentro i miei personaggi: A colloquio con Melania Mazzucco." *L'Osservatore Romano.*
http://www.vatican.va/news_services/or/or_quo/interviste/2009/244q04a1.html

Ganteau, Jean-Michel. *The Ethics and Aesthetics of Vulnerability in Contemporary British Fiction.* New York & London: Routledge, 2015.

Gunne, S. and Thompson, Z. B. *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation.* New York & London: Routledge, 2010.

Kristeva, Julia. *Powers of Horror: An Essay in Abjection.* Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Martín-Lucas, Belén. "'Mum Is the Word'. Gender Violence, Displacement and the Refugee Camp in Yasmin Ladha's Documentary-Fiction." *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, Collection. Ed. Gunne, S. and Thompson, Z. B. New York & London: Routledge, 2010. 130-145.

Mazzucco, Melania. *Io sono con te. Storia di Brigitte* (*I Am With You. The Story of Brigitte*). Torino: Einaudi, 2016.

McCann, Fiona. "Writing Rape. The Politics of Resistance in Yvonne Vera's Novels." *Feminism, Literature and Rape Narratives: Violence and Violation*, Collection. Ed. Gunne, S. and Thompson, Z. B. New York & London: Routledge, 2010. 85-95.

Riggio, Giuseppe, ed. "In cammino con una rifugiata: "Io sono con te", intervista a Melania
Mazzucco e Camillo Ripamonti." *Aggiornamenti Sociali* 2 (2017): 124-133.

Winnberg, Jacob. *An Aesthetic of Vulnerability: The Sentimentum and the Novels of Graham Swift.* Göteborg: Acta Universitatis Gothoburgensis, 2003.