

GIOVANNA COVI -INNSBRUCK JUNE 2010
LA DIVIDUA

- Talk based on
- **Giovanna Covi, “La Dividua— A Gendered Figuration for a Planetary Humanism” in:**
- **Mina Karavanta and Nina Morgan, eds. *Edward Said and Jacques Derrida: Reconstellating Humanism and the Global Hybrid*, Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2008, pages 274-303.**
- A HYBRID AND SEXED FIGURATION TO THINK ABOUT THE HUMAN, HUMANISM, HUMAN RIGHTS WITHIN THE FRICTION BETWEEN EDWARD SAID AND JACQUES DERRIDA AND IN THE UNEVENNESS OF GLOBALIZATION

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- Simone de Beauvoir, “Introduction,” *The Second Sex*, 1949 : “Surely woman is, like man, a human being; but such a declaration is abstract”
- Judith Butler, “Afterword,” *The Humanities in Human Rights*, 2005: “One must become critical of “the human” to assert human rights [...] human rights do not take the human as their ground but query the human as a site of power differentials”
- How can thinking and action for women and for human rights be enacted if neither woman nor the human provide the grounding?

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- WHY HUMANISM AND THE GLOBAL HYBRID?
- WHAT CONSTITUTES THE HUMAN WITHIN THE MATRIX OF CONTEMPORARY GLOBAL POWER?
- WHAT DO WE MEAN TODAY BY HUMAN RIGHTS—I.E., WHO IS THE HUMAN IN HUMAN RIGHTS?

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- Why Said and Derrida?
- They have shown how to imagine possible changes in human thinking
- Creative frictions (K. Braithwaite) between unreconcilable positions
- In the name of the unevenness between Said and Derrida, it is possible to reconstellate a humanism capable of hosting the contradictions of the present in order to invoke the necessary, albeit paradoxical, relationship between the universal and the particular.
- Acknowledging philology (Said) and friendship (Derrida) as the means by which democracy can be constructed

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- **An Address from Elsewhere**
- Edward Said's *worldiness*
- *Critical, militant, socially situated thinking*
- Jacques Derrida's *différance*
- *Woman as the hope that logocentrism can be resisted, philosophy redefined and the body be returned to thinking by deconstructive practice*

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- One cannot do justice to justice
- Only by assuming ethics to be impossible can we guarantee the respect for alterity
- A project of abyssal politics, ethical activism, groundless solidarity
- The network of global powers compels us to act within these grooves, fractures and frictions in order to build improbable, unexpected and yet necessary affiliations

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- Said and Derrida encouragingly reassure: solid ground is provided by literature.
- Derrida: “literature is the most interesting thing in the world, maybe more interesting than the world”
- the literary capability of fusing thought with poetry paves the path to framing the question of the human in terms of an encounter, a temporary colloquy

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- Poetic thinking accepts the “ungrounded grounding” of truth, the open and empty revelation of Dasein to a trace of alterity (Heidegger, 1971: 52).
- Theorists think with poetry—Derrida with Celan, Heidegger with Hölderlin, and Freud with Schiller,
- poetry strengthens civil disobedience,: “Black is Beautiful” (the most outstanding American poem of late modernity); Caribbean poet Audre Lorde’s dictum, “poetry is not a luxury”, declaring poetry essential for those women who need to birth their silenced voices, to lift the structures that have denied their being, and to liberate their own complexity from sexism, racism, homophobia, and classism

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- **The Condition of Vulnerability**
- Dissonance between Said and Derrida
- Disinterest in feminist theory by Said and Derrida
- The acceptance of the address of others
- Structured by the address of another—
patriarchy—outside itself (Butler), feminism is
restructuring its response through multiple
confrontations with the addresses of the others—
feminisms—within itself.

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- *Integration of the Human Rights of Women and the Gender Perspective 2002: “rape in the conduct of armed conflicts constitutes a war crime and may constitute a crime against humanity”*
- data in a country at peace in 2006-07, issued by the Italian Government:
- violence causes more deaths and invalidity than cancer among women between 14 and 50
- violent attacks against women have increased by 22 percent in one year
- the primary victims are women holding higher degrees and a profession;
- 62 percent of these abuses qualify as domestic violence.

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- Giorgio Agamben has identified civil world war as the inevitable consequence of the reduction to norm of “the state of exception,” the *interregnum* in which the distinction between *authoritas* and *potestas* are suspended and which today has reached its maximum planetary spread
- Within the state of exception, the Derridean “*force de la loi*” remains a force, but the law is put under erasure—it becomes a force of the law without the law.

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- Under these conditions, politics is being reduced to juridical politics, which is equivalent to saying that it ceases to function as politics—i.e., as the activity which can sever the link between violence and the law. The actual elimination of politics is the lethal weapon that disseminates civil war around the whole planet (Agamben).
- A feminist perspective on the social conditions of the planet tragically supports this disturbing projection

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- **Framing My Address**
- How to represent and access a more hospitable human? How to represent and access a human that is gendered and plural? How to represent and access a human that is not grounded on the exclusion of the animal and earth?
- D. Haraway, L. Irigaray, J. Butler, G. Spivak, A. Rich, A. Lorde, T. Morrison, A. Ronell, among others, provide means to show the way

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- Judith Butler (2006): the question of human rights is necessarily connected with the notion of the human; it compels critical interventions that involve problems of ethics and problems of translation between the two modes of discourse.
- human rights cannot take the human as their ground since the human is established within the juridical frame of human rights themselves
- it is the task of human rights to query the human as a site of power differentials.

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- Stripped of its metaphysical aura, the question of the human as a question of power relationships becomes a crystal clear issue with reference to the past and present silence of too many groups of women and an equally transparent program in its call for a jointly theoretical *and* pragmatic intervention.
- The question of speakability (Gayatri Spivak)' is a question of recognition, not only: who can speak, but also, who can recognize and receive the claim?
- The question of the human, human rights, and the humanities is praxis as well as theory and it is relational. It is “theory made in the flesh” with other bodies (Moraga and Anzaldúa, 1983), “poetics of relation” (Glissant, 1989)

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- To begin with the personal, which is always also the political:
- In *Giving an Account of Oneself*, Butler analyzes the relationship between identity and responsibility under vexed socio-cultural conditions, and argues, self-knowledge is limited, flawed, and weak and “‘becoming human’ is no simple task”

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- the subject is constituted through her own speaking and thus the account she gives of herself cannot be understood outside the interlocutory scene
- Thus, telling the truth about oneself implies confronting the question of power, which is to say that ethics must become critique

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- subjects constitute themselves as they perform their own telling the truth about themselves, in response to an address which comes from the outside; the subject is cast in the context of an address to another as a historical formation, a negotiation with the forces of power in place in the context of the address, and as a performance of its own telling the truth about oneself to another.

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- the question of the subject is a moral question precisely because it exposes the question of how the human is constituted
- casting subjectivity within the conversation between the emerging “I” and “another” lifts the question of responsibility out of the frame of a narcissistic, self-sufficient individualism.

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- I am taking a double risk:
- the personal risk of giving an account of myself that may lead me into the abyss of aporetic experience
- the political risk of begetting actions and alliances that lead me elsewhere and in unexpected company
- In moments of unknowingness, what forms us diverges from what lies before us, our willingness to become undone in relation to others constitutes our chances of becoming human.

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- second question—how to represent and access a human that is gendered and plural?
- Feminism has challenged the singular abstraction *woman* and forced us to adopt plural framings and to speak rather of “women,” “feminisms,” and “gender and its others,” accept a fractalic web of relations
- *gendered* multiculturalism and postcolonialism and production of interculturality

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- not an easy task: see the debate provoked by Susan Moller Okin's essay, *Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?* (1999)
- If one year after the UN General Assembly's adoption of the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*, Simone de Beauvoir declared it "abstract" to consider woman, "like man, a human being," since the early 1980s, feminism has started to consider "abstract" regarding "woman" altogether. Now, Judith Butler is inviting us to consider that also the concept of the human sits on abstract ground.
- "for women, then, poetry is not a luxury" (Lorde, 1984)

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- How to dwell in the border zone between the philosophical human and the political human right? By making translation visible.
- Colonialism imposed a regime of segregation dividing colonizers from colonized as human from savage—wild, beastly, animal.
- Donna Haraway’s “naturculture” envisions the difficult but necessary task of a future shared with different beings
- proclaims war on logocentrism and Western *Humanismus* by embracing a fusion with animals and machines,
- investigates the vulnerability of signifying diversity in the context of biopower and technoscience
- identifies in the relationship between human and dog, based on translation, a conscious attempt to bring together non-harmonious actions

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- third question: how to represent and access a human that is not grounded on the exclusion of the animal and earth?
- the groundless ground of the human must have permeable boundaries around a mixed space

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- Gloria Anzaldúa's *mestiza* on the borderland (1987) captures both the implications for locationist historically-specific significance related to the region on the border between the United States of Mexico and the United States of America and for non-locationist cultural meanings produced by the power of the figuration beyond its specific constituency.

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- Leela Gandhi's *Affective Communities* has conjugated anti-colonialism with vegetarianism and animalism in ways that help me envision a decolonialized future outside and/or beside the colonial frame.
cosmopolitanism based on a definition of politics which is friendship—a groundless but solid relation
- relational politics as a “noncommunitarian understanding of community” (Gandhi, 2006: 20)
- Derrida's notions of hospitality and friendship (
- Said's defense of the exilic intellectual
- Invitation to explore simultaneously both the home and the foreign land

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- Situated knowledge / positioned subject
- My address is located in Europe; articulated in a global English that makes an effort to show the Italian language through which I also think, to let the original be seen through the translation; it is composed of the discourses of feminist theory (plus poststructural, postmodern, and postcolonial theories, and cultural studies), and it is nourished by the lyrical philosophies of writers, mostly women and largely of African heritage from the USA and the Caribbean.
- I am no less interested in the question, who am I? than in the question, who are you?

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- Indeed the question is: who am I in relation to you?
- I aim at foregrounding those discursive tools that may oppose the endurance of patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist structures within contemporary cultures. To this aim, I propose *la dividua* as a figuration of resistance to sexist, racist, and imperialistic globalization—to the artistic and cultural production of an exclusive and limited humanity packaged within the myth of multicultural and multiethnic democracy.

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- the concept of *the human* is traditionally regarded as linked to that of *the individual*
- the term *individual* is synonymous for person. *Individual* refers to a distinct, indivisible entity
- *individual* evokes the phallic and singular self of modernity; it is modernity, indeed, to have invented the individual

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- the standard image of perfection for the individual is that of Leonardo's *Vetruvian Man*, produced by the way in the same year as Christopher Columbus's first voyage to America.
- The gendered Italian language further reinforces this perception: *individuo* is both a masculine (universal) noun and an adjective used in literary form to indicate the indivisible, as in "santa e individua Trinità"

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- to contribute to the development of a discourse that resists these inherited associations (conception of the individual leads to pathological forms of individualism and generates a deficit of solidarity and a loss of community)
- the Derridean concepts of gift, hospitality, and friendship, leads to the connected articulation of the concept of passionate responsibility enabling the subject to relate to others not in the name of altruism but out of necessity and to build a community not for the others but with the others

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- *la dividua*—a feminine (embodied) noun refers to that which can be divided, and is relational, multiple, fractioned, evokes (but is not grounded in) the body of the mother.
- L. Irigaray has been richly and consistently elaborating a subjectivity which is the one and the other at the same time. “I am, because there is a You who is listening to my speaking myself and reassures me that my spoken I will be in turn narrated to someone else.”
- *la dividua* as culturally affiliated (not necessarily naturally filiated, according to Said’s renowned differentiation) to the dividual (in Italian *il dividuo*, a universal masculine noun) which, in arithmetical division, refers to the parts of the dividend.

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- *la dividua*, wishes to retain this relational meaning charged, in addition, with a gendered feminine connotation to underline that difference and relationality, not universality, are the primary marks of subjectivity: I exist because You are listening to me and through your listening you reassure me of my existence; I exist because, in the world there are always two of us, because at the beginning I was two; I exist as a gendered female subject because my lips represent hospitality and exchange (Irigaray,).
- “At the most intimate levels, we are social; we are comported toward a ‘you’” : Butler rejects the notion of the subject as individual to propose instead “a model for agency and intelligibility,” “a precondition of political agency”

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- *La dividua* is a representation of cultural and political agency by subjectivities engaged in building “planetarity”—i.e., “in inscribing responsibility as right” (Spivak)
- reality mapped by a complex network of performative utterances which are positioned “beside” one another (E. K. Sedgwick) in order to resist narratives of origin and telos and embrace instead a phenomenology of the affects

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- an epistemology that interrogates emotions as well as ideas and actions—a theory-practice of the “touching feeling” Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003)
- *la dividua* is meant to figure the slow process towards “the decolonialization of language and thought” (Carter), which is needed to construct “affective communities” (L. Gandhi) and deploy a “politics of friendship” (Derrida)
- *La dividua* accepts the vulnerability of human existence (Butler)

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- **How Do You Do That?**
- “How do you do that? I mean, how do you get somebody to love you?” asks Pecola in Toni Morrison’s 1970 novel *The Bluest Eye*
- a reflection on the vulnerability of human existence
- the weight of the novel’s inquiry on so delicate and vulnerable a character could smash her and lead readers into the comfort of pitying her rather than an interrogation of themselves for the smashing

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- *The Bluest Eye* is about a shattered life and a shambled community but it does not seek pity nor offer comfort.
- What corrections in our picture of the human are we called to make to include Pecola and Cholly, who “loved her enough to touch her,” but “his touch was fatal”?

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- readers who do not withdraw into the comfort of pitying Pecola, but accept to interrogate “the smashing” must do more—they are forced to engage the triple address I have been discussing, How to represent and access a more hospitable, gendered, racialized, and plural human that is not grounded on exclusion?
- They are forced to become *dividue*.

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- “love is never any better than the lover”
- Pecola’s sacrifice gives shape the impossible but necessary dream of ecological justice: “the supplementation of collective effort by love,” which itself is “an effort—over which one has no control yet at which one must not strain—which is slow, attentive on both sides.” How does one win the attention of the subaltern without coercion or crisis? The effort must be “mindchanging on both sides,” because “without the mind-changing one-on-one responsible contact nothing will stick” (Spivak)
- *The Bluest Eye*: scene with the dog: an expression of love between human and animal—an effort

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- intra-species relationship immediately stopped by the economics of violence
- Outside *The Bluest Eye* there is a world full of hope—an impossible dream that only the telling of the void at the center of Pecola’s heart could make available for those of us who are prepared to become *dividue*, and risk interrogating “the emergence and vanishing of the human at the limits of what we can know”

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- **In Conversation**
- *Le dividue* are community builders, precisely because they cannot cast themselves within the dichotomy self versus society, because they exist “towards” others, and because they become themselves only (but not solely) as they speak themselves

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- Their beauty belongs to the Heideggerian domain of art and poetry which “is a realm that simultaneously dwells among and gives dwelling to difference, is a space hospitable to the singular and the non-identical, one that offers refuge to the ineluctable thingness of things, preserving the rich assortment of the world.” Gandhi names this realm “interested autonomy,” thus correcting Said’s “interestedness” to make sure that historicism is not divorced from aestheticism
- *le dividue* are beautiful because they are just

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- beauty is situated on the border between identity and difference; this is what gives beauty the capacity to conjugate death with life. As such, beauty counters the modern idea of identity as individualism (Taylor)

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- *Le dividue's* struggle against sexism and racism is a struggle against exclusionary definitions
- since it is precisely through human action that beauty and justice are produced, preserved and renovated, their production requires the adoption of a relational human identity
- Grace Paley: one of the things that art is about, for me, is justice. Now, that isn't a matter of opinion, really

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- Beauty and justice are acts of love dependent not only on human action but also on human thought
- in order for love *to be*, there must be lovers and also a theoretical elaboration of the significance of love

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- No, ace, it is *not* a barrier. If it is anything it's a kind of leakage. Tell a girl: 'I love you.' No trouble with two-thirds of that, it's a closed circuit. Just you and she. But that nasty four-letter word in the middle, *that's* the one you have to look out for. Ambiguity. Redundance. Irrelevance, even. Leakage. All this is noise. Noise screws up your signal, makes for disorganization in the circuit. (Pynchon's Entropy 1960)
- Like THE HUMAN, like IDENTITY, LOVE must always be negotiated, cannot rest on a universal definition

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- If the speech act “I do” results in marriage, by law, the phrase “I love you,” on the contrary, may be said to act in the Agambenian state of exception, without the law. Both theatrical and deconstructive, “I love you” may yield to situated, contingent and temporary embodiments of *love* ranging across the multiple opposite poles of its possible definitions, from life to death, affection to hatred, emotional to physical attachment, and so on. Love is only “leakage” and “noise” —the link between the I and the You.
- Morrison recommends that both the I and the You must be agents, lovers, otherwise “the loved one” becomes “neutralized.”

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- If Dante in the *Inferno* makes Francesca declare that no one who receives love can avoid loving, “*Amor, ch’ a nullo amato amar perdona, /mi prese del costui piacer sì forte, /che, come vedi, ancor non m’abbandona*” (V Canto), Morrison in the inferno of Pecola’s world can no longer rely on the love of liberation theology—the love that produces love just by loving, that reassures good people that they are reproducing themselves and that their goodness is contagious, that is defined metaphysically. But I and You must love and define their love in order for love to be. Both I and You must be *dividue* because nobody alone can be an agent.

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- *La dividua's* negotiative nature situates her at the junction between acting and being acted upon, precisely where responsibility is located (Butler 2004b: 229). Avital Ronell observes that “in the twentieth century, a subtle shift occurred in the terms in which we locate the ethics and values of responsibility” and shows that Hannah Arendt has inaugurated a “movement away from the concept of the citizen and towards the *refugee* as the figure that carries the demand for clear ethical responsiveness” (Ronell, 2005: 20). This observation is contained in a powerful essay lamenting that nowadays the poetic word has remained largely “without recognizable address.” Ronell declares that “theory without poetry” is a “misery” and observes, moreover, that “as symptom, the aberrant dissociation of poetry from theory reflects an increasing technicization, not to say impoverishment, of critical language”

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- Poetry lets otherness be and keeps the question alive underlining the value of conversation that can never be coerced or compelled. As such, conversation is a gift, which the poet asks for in his quest for the friends.

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- LET POETRY BE
- For example, liberate the brown women from the category of the Different
- The humanities can reach for human rights through conversational theory that does not consider poetry a luxury