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Displacement and shifting geographies in the noir fiction by Cesare Battisti

Un giorno o l'altro lascerò la Francia e attraverserò l'oceano verso ovest, inseguendo il sole morente. In un tramonto che non finisce mai, dove la gente applaude la fine del giorno e ha gli occhi che sorridono.¹

(*L'Orma Rossa*, 110)

Cesare Battisti - an Italian author and former member of the ultra-left guerrilla group called Armed Proletarians for Communism, which was active in Italy in the 1970s and 1980s - writes his novels and short stories from the vantage point of a ventennial exilic experience in Mexico and France. By looking closely at Battisti's fiction, published in French and Italian,² this paper examines displacement and exile in the current Italian and European socio-political context.

In his preface to the collection of short stories entitled *Terres Brûlées* (*The Burnt Lands*), edited by him and featuring his short story 'A la tienne, Marlo' ('Cheers, Marlo'), Battisti describes his own writing aesthetics as 'post-1968 noir', which appropriates the 'narrative virtues' of oral discourse by simply recounting events and staying away from any ideological or 'psychological' judgment. The conflict is not between the forces of good and evil, he says, since '*le représentant du "bien" n'est autre que celui qui combat un adversaire donné à un moment donné*' (2000c: 8).³ In addition to this renunciation of moral judgment, characteristic of *noir* fiction in general, Battisti's fiction is notably autobiographical. In his postscript to Marco Ferrari's novel *En 2 CV vers la révolution* (*In a Citroën 2CV Towards the Revolution*), he quotes the dictum attributed to the French film director François Truffaut, which affirms that, '*dans la création, tout doit ressembler à ce qu'on a de plus cher dans la vie*' (1996b: 139).⁴ This principle is indeed the driving force of Battisti's storytelling, in which the authenticity and intensity of the author's personal experience turn out to be a *conditio sine qua non* of literary creation.

By probing the thin line between reality and fiction in Battisti's novels and short stories, this paper examines Battisti, in Foucauldian terms (1977), as an author-function, constructed discursively as a reference tag for a range of ideas and phenomena, such as the Italian autonomist movement of the 1970s, radical leftist thought in general, resistance to institutional power, political exile and asylum, globalization, terrorism and postmodern 'rootlessness'. I do not intend to search for the 'truth' about the actual person, Cesare Battisti, associated with this author-function. Clearly, arguments in support of his innocence or guilt, as well as those in favour or against his extradition from France to Italy fall well beyond the scope of this paper.

From Cesare Battisti to 'caso Battisti'

Mitterrand est mort. Ce sont les nouvelles dispositions de l'espace

juridique de l'Union. Au gouvernement, ils ne savent pas quoi faire. On nous conseille de nous cacher. Pour le moment.⁵

(Battisti 2003b: 94)

Were it not for the accelerated drive towards Fortress Europe following the Schengen Convention (1990, taking effect in 1995), and the politics of fear post September 11 (2001), there would have been no 'caso Battisti' ('Battisti case'). Cesare Battisti, one of many former Italian militants who had found refuge in Mitterand's France, would have continued his relatively inconspicuous existence in Paris, as a father of two daughters and a successful author of *noir* fiction. His life story, which will be briefly outlined in the following paragraphs and which has recently gained notoriety beyond the Franco-Italian context, would have been known only to a selected few.

Like many young Italians in the 1970s, Cesare Battisti (born in 1954 in Latina, a southern district of Rome) was drawn by the massive political unrest, which shook Italy in that period. At the age of 17, he abandoned high school and entered a world bordering between 'political struggle' and 'metropolitan banditism' (Evangelisti et al. 2004: n.p.). This was a world where politically motivated robbery - euphemistically and somewhat romantically referred to as 'proletarian expropriation' - was considered by many young people a legitimate act of wealth re-distribution. Following a period in jail for a series of minor offenses in 1976, he moved to Milano, where he became involved in the then nascent guerrilla group of *Proletari Armati per il Comunismo* (PAC - Armed Proletarians for Communism).

PAC was one of the many guerrilla groups inspired by the autonomist movement, which swept Italy during the 1970s. The group, based in Milan, shared the principal ideological *credo* of the movement: a belief in de-centralization of power and the non-hierarchical self-organization of labour. PAC was involved in a number of politically motivated expropriations and assassinations, targeted specifically at the prison personnel, as well as the shop-owners who had responded to expropriations by killing one or more perpetrators. The assassinations claimed by PAC include those of prison warden Andrea Santoro in Udine (6 June 1978), jeweler Pier Luigi Torregiani in Milano (16 February 1979), butcher Lino Sabbadin in Mestre (16 February 1979) and policeman Andrea Campagna in Milano (19 April 1979), all of which have been directly or indirectly attributed to Battisti himself.

Arrested in 1979 in a police roundup of the Autonomous Collective of the Milanese Barona district following Torregiani's assassination and detained during investigations in the special prison of Frosinone near Rome, Battisti was eventually sentenced in May 1981 to 12 years in prison for arms possession and membership of an armed gang. Only five months later, however, he escaped from prison and, after a brief period in France, settled in Mexico, where he stayed until 1990.

In Mexico, he was one of the initiators of the militant cultural journal *Via Libre*, the name now adopted for a website which promotes Battisti's cause and publicizes his fiction (<http://www.vialibre5.com>). In September 1990, he left Mexico to seek refuge in France, attracted by the promise of asylum that the then president, François Mitterrand, had extended to the Italian political exiles of the 1970s willing to renounce their violent past. As a result of France's protectionist stance, and despite having been, in 1993, sentenced in Italy *in absentia* to life imprisonment, he

was able to continue living in Paris and gain considerable prestige as a critically acclaimed author.

Up to this point, Battisti's exilic experience falls neatly into the category of exile. Allatson and McCormack call the 'flip side' of 'legislated banishment', that is, 'judicial evasion': 'The flip side of legislated banishment is exile chosen to evade a state's legal apparatuses. Aside from millions upon millions who have fled the rise to power and operations of totalitarian, dictatorial or simply ideologically unpalatable regimes, this form of exile also characterizes the experiences of innumerable outlaws.' (Allatson and McCormack 2005: 4-5)

Enter Fortress Europe. While border controls between EU member states and non-members are fortified, those within the expanding union are progressively rendered more open. This openness is 'integral to [EU's] postmodern economic and political experiment' and therefore, any impediment to it becomes highly controversial (Stevenson 2003: 82). Indeed, only a year after the Schengen Convention had taken effect - following Belgium's refusal to extradite two Basque separatists accused by Spain of membership of ETA (Statewatch) - it became clear to the European legislators that the judicial basis for extraditing terrorists within the Schengen area would have to be harmonized.

For the Italian political refugees in France, the Schengen Convention did not bode well. In his novel *Le Cargo Sentimental*, Battisti recalls the feeling of uncertainty, which spread among the Parisian group when the word 'Schengen' entered into circulation. What could it mean? Laws, treaties, nothing good in any case: '*Là-bas, à Schengen, siège de la nouvelle inquisition, un juge sans scrupule s'était mis en tête de nous réexpédier dans une très démocratique prison italienne.*'⁶ (2003b: 94) A reassurance for the refugees came only when, despite the developments at the European level, the then Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin explicitly declared that he would not allow their extradition (*La Repubblica*, 5 March 1998).

The drive towards judicial harmonization within the EU gained a new impetus at the Tampere European Council meeting in October 1999, which emphasized the importance of co-operation in both civil and criminal matters within the Union and of mutual recognition of judicial authorities of the member states. A political agreement on a European Arrest Warrant (EAW) applicable to the entire EU territory was reached in December 2001, following the catastrophic terrorist attacks on 11 September. Ironically, Italy has been quite vocal in opposing the implementation of the European Arrest Warrant, despite the resurrected fear of terrorism following the murders of two ministry officials working on labour reforms, Massimo D'Antona (Rome, 20 May 1999) and Marco Biagi (Bologna, 19 March 2002), committed by the Red Brigades.⁷

The emotional charge of the word 'terrorism' and its power to inspire fear, seal alliances and mobilize people for war has grown exponentially since 11 September 2001. To quote Quentin Deluermoz,

'[t]erroriste' est devenu une sorte de catégorie en soi, rendant inutile toute réflexion - parce qu'elle serait indécente - et accuse à l'avance celui qui est étiqueté comme tel: au pire, il est coupable; au mieux, il est suspect. Cet usage complexe, international, national et même ordinaire de

cette appellation est rendu encore plus intense du fait des attentats violents perpétrés par des groupes que nous pouvons clairement qualifier de 'terroristes' (encore qu'eux se considèrent sans doute plus comme des 'héros' ou 'martyrs'). Ils confèrent en effet à ce terme et à ses usages une présence et une efficacité inédite.⁸

(Deluermoz 2004: 36-37)

While Cesare Battisti is often labeled as 'terrorist' by the media, and sometimes even wrongly represented as 'member of the Red Brigades' (see, for example, Henley 2004), his fiction has been described by *Paris-Match* as 'the best-written condemnation there is of the absolute impasse that is terrorism' (Ibid.).

On 10 February 2004, a month before France officially began to implement the EAW, Cesare Battisti was arrested in Paris, to spend three weeks in the Parisian *Prison de la Santé*, before being granted conditional freedom by the Paris Tribunal. It was at this point that Cesare Battisti became 'caso Battisti'. His plight was taken on by a number of artists, filmmakers and intellectuals in both France and Italy, who mounted a crusade in his defence. In France, the issue at the heart of the debate was (and still is) that of national 'honour', focusing on an argument against a retraction of the promise made by Mitterrand and endorsed by the subsequent left-leaning governments. In Italy, his cause was espoused by those interested in restoring the autonomist movement of the 1970s and its eventual suppression to the Italian collective memory, including the political philosopher Toni Negri and writers Roberto Bui (Wu Ming 1), Giuseppe Genna and Valerio Evangelisti. Petitions and editorials in support of his release were publicized on several websites (www.vialibre5.com; www.carmillaonline.com; www.miserabili.com; www.wumingfoundation.com; www.mauvaisgenres.com; www.samizdat.net etc). In addition, two rather eclectic collections of documents, articles and opinion pieces related to his predicament have been published in book form in Italy and France respectively (Evangelisti 2004; Vargas 2004).

A decision in favour of Battisti's extradition was made on 30 June 2004 by the Investigations Chamber of the Parisian Court of Appeal. Two months later, on 21 August, Battisti failed to report to police as required every Saturday. His whereabouts remained unknown for almost two years. In March 2007, he was captured in Brazil, where he is now awaiting extradition.

At present, Battisti's displacement forecloses any possibility of alternative emplacement. Like Viktor Navorski (Tom Hanks), the protagonist of Steven Spielberg's recent film *The Terminal* (2004), he can only exist in a non-space, or - to use Deleuze's and Guattari's symbolic imagery - in a desert, the traditional home of the nomad.⁹ In a world of shifting geographies, exile and its counterpart, the political asylum, have come to represent a lost privilege, confined to the nostalgic memories of a recent past. The exile has become the nomad, characterized by a constant state of movement and signifying utter deterritorialization. (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 [1980]).

Tropes of Displacement

The trope of exile has figured prominently in 'Western' narratives of cultural identity

since the earliest times. In the realm of poetry, Ovid's (43 BCE-17 CE) poems written in exile have been studied extensively by scholars interested in exilic condition (see, for example, Williams 1994 and Claasen 2003). The most influential 'Western' stories of origin, such as the Biblical "Exodus" or the abduction of Europa by Zeus, are premised on both privilege - a person or people chosen by God - and displacement, culminating in a symbolic act of creation. The Italian national narratives of origin are no different: Aeneas's wanderings from Troy to the Apennine peninsula in order to fulfill his role as the founder of Rome are a case in point. Furthermore, in the Italian national imaginary, some of the forefathers of present-day cultural and civic Italianità - notably Dante (1265-1321) and Mazzini (1805-1872) - are both strongly associated with their exilic experience.

Displacement in general, and exile in particular, have been described by critics as the quintessential tropes of a modernist *weltanschauung*. According to Caren Kaplan, 'Euro--American modernisms celebrate singularity, solitude, estrangement, alienation, and aestheticized excisions of location in favor of locale - that is, the "artist in exile" is never "at home", always existentially alone, and shocked by the strain of displacement into significant experimentations and insights' (Kaplan 1996: 28). In modernist discourses, distance is taken to signify objectivity and independence, that is, the ideal perspective on a subject of investigation and a precondition for intellectual creativity. From molecular science, we have learnt that 'it is the moment of separation that allows new elements to appear' (Ainley 1998: 19). Not surprisingly, exilic condition - 'being rootless, displaced between worlds, living between a lost past and a fluid present' - is considered the most appropriate metaphor for the 'journeying, modern consciousness' (Rapport 2002: 264).

A similar view of exile as a metaphor for creativity and progress has been adopted by the Italian political philosopher Toni Negri. For the Italians, says Negri, the notion of exile transcends the familiar scenarios of displacement and nostalgia for the country of origin, to become an essential part of Italy's very identity. According to Negri, exile is the 'normal condition of intelligent Italians', one necessary for 'reproducing creative thinking':

Both literary history and social history in Italy are continually marked, in fact, by the presence of exile. From Dante to Machiavelli, from Tasso to Leopardi, from Giordano Bruno to Gramsci, from the anti-Trinitarian Socinians in the sixteenth century to the autonomous workers' movements, one always finds that exile is a fundamental element in the constitution of the real identity - the identity of the struggle - of the greatest Italian literature and philosophy.

(Negri 1997: 43)

Negri thus offers a Janus-faced vision of Italy and its history, with the two opposing forces of inertia and progress represented in turn by the 'master', or the 'eternal' institutions and the 'slave', or the productive counter-power associated with exile.

Battisti's representation of exile in his novels and short stories does not subscribe to this optimistic, modernist agenda. For Battisti, displacement can only offer a temporary promise of advancement. In *Avenida Revolucion* (2003a: 99), the maxim borrowed from the Roman poet Horace (65-8 BCE), that "[c]oelum, non animum mutant, qui trans mare currunt"¹⁰ (*Epistles* I: 11) is taken to underscore the

illusory nature of the promise of change associated with displacement. Finding oneself under an unknown, indecipherable sky offers the traveller a false impression that his or her life is going to change for the better. However, this is only a '*ballo in maschera*' (a masked ball, a travesty), since the promise of change is only short-lived and the world beyond the border is equally bleak.

Generally speaking, in Battisti's textual universe, there is little scope for enthusiasm and joy. It is a universe of broken lives, estrangement, shady deals, violence and betrayal. It is also an all-male world, where female characters are represented either as treacherous, or purely instrumental.¹¹ There is no innocence, morality or responsibility. There is no escape, only relentless movement.

Displacement, in its myriad of possible manifestations, is the central trope of Battisti's entire opus. For a good reason, Giuseppe Genna has called Battisti an '*adrenalinico zingaro dello spirito e delle geografie*' ('an adrenaline-driven gypsy of the spirit and geographies', Genna 2003: 5). According to Genna, '*[I]a vita di Cesare Battisti è un viaggio e, in un certo senso, i suoi romanzi possono apparire una forma innovativa e impazzita dei resoconti di viaggio*'¹² (Ibid.). In an introspective gesture, true to his aesthetic credo, Battisti situates most of his narratives within the trajectories of his own lived experience. The protagonists of the majority of his novels - namely, *Les Habits d'Ombre* (*A Shadow's Clothes*, 1993), *Buena Onda* (1996), *L'Ultimo Sparo* (*The Last Bullet*, 1998), *L'Orma Rossa* (*The Red Track*, 1999) and *Le Cargo Sentimental* (*The Sentimental Cargo*, 2003) - move within a geopolitical landscape dominated by the three sites representing the most significant turning points in the author's life: Italy of the *anni di piombo*,¹³ France and Mexico. In these novels, the dominant theme is the estrangement of the protagonist both from his¹⁴ original community and from any other environment he dwells in during his quest.

Like Claudio Raponi, the protagonist of *Les Habits d'Ombre*, all Battisti's heroes are irrevocably deterritorialized nomads, *senzapatría*, who carry their homeland 'on the soles of their shoes' (1993: 13). Memories of physical home - the 'country of the *ravioli* and the mandolin' (1999: 41) - are either suppressed, or suspended somewhere between nostalgic sentimentalism and bitterness. In *Vittoria*, the hero and narrator, Onno, returns to Rome after thirty years of exile. During the three decades of separation, he had been imagining the 'ancient whore' (a reference to the Biblical personification of Rome as the 'whore of Babylon', in "Revelation", Chapter 17) 'dead and buried under a thick layer of dust':

Inutile de la chercher, elle débouche devant toi à l'improviste. De derrière un pont, généralement, et la jupe encore retroussée. Un instant d'amour, un furtif rêve de gloire, Rome ne les a jamais refusés à personne. Et moi, dans ce bordel-là, j'y suis né, j'aurais dû le savoir mieux que n'importe qui. Mais une absence de trente ans m'autorisait à croire l'antique putain désormais morte et enterrée sous une épaisse couche de poussière.¹⁵

(2003c: 9)

In *L'Orma Rossa*, Corrado - an Italian political refugee living in Paris - declares, with a salutary dose of self-irony, that the only time when he thinks of Italy is when he is expecting a money order, or yet another mandate for extradition (1999: 41).

However, this denial of belonging often transgresses the boundaries of the original home, to include '*les autres lieux où, dans l'intervalle, j'avais appris à garer mon cerveau*' (2003c: 9).¹⁶

Battisti's 'travelling heroes' - whether exiles (1993, 1998, 1999, 1996a, 2003b), tourists (2003a) or migrants within Italy itself (2000a) - can be read in relation to a number of late-twentieth century theories of location, displacement and identity. To start with, they embody the nomadic practice of shifting location, that is, an utter and unconditional deterritorialization (Deleuze and Guattari 1987 [1980]). They are also reminiscent of Kristeva's 'deject', who 'strays instead of getting his bearings' and whose space 'is never one [...] but essentially divisible, foldable, and catastrophic' (1982: 8). Collectively, the heroes of these texts can also be seen as representations of the 'universal stranger', described by Zygmunt Bauman as 'devoid of all attributes', a 'true man without qualities', 'having no home and no roots'. According to Bauman, whatever qualities may give the stranger a body 'and thus draw him out of the void are graciously bestowed and may be withdrawn at a whim':

The stranger is universal because of having no home and no roots. Rootlessness relativizes everything concrete and thus begets universality. In rootlessness, both universality and relativism find their roots. Their hotly denied kinship is thus unmasked. They both, in their own ways, are products of ambivalent existence.

(Bauman 1991: 90)

Between the privileged exile/intellectual of the modernist myth and the 'empty', dispossessed nomad/deject/perpetual stranger, there is a substantial difference. Like the author himself, Battisti's nomadic heroes are forced to lead a life of uncertainty, due to their irregular status in their 'host country'. In *L'Orma Rossa* (1999: 4-5), Corrado ponders over the intricacies of his precarious existence in Paris: '*...io non sono un immigrato, ma un insolito rifugiato politico senza statuto, un residuo degli "anni di piombo" condannato all'invisibilità in cambio di un bivacco in territorio francese. Per me non ci sono diritti civili, ma esclusivamente debiti penali che non si estingueranno mai.*'¹⁷ His stay in France is 'hanging by a thread', and can be easily suspended under the international arrest warrant. Without a residence permit, Italian refugees are no more than temporary guests of the French government. Without this 'maledetto pezzo di carta' ('damned piece of paper'), their prospects of finding a job are extremely limited. Corrado spends most of his time at home, '*un detenuto in attesa di giudizio o, nella migliore delle ipotesi, un quarantenne improduttivo, appena tollerato nella sua propria casa*'¹⁸ (1999: 5). His relationship with his Parisian girlfriend, Martine, is in a profound state of crisis. As the main breadwinner, Martine is forced to work long hours as a cleaner, while stuffing envelopes is the only lawful job Corrado can secure for himself. In France, the country where '*anche i cani hanno diritto alla mutua, purché abbiano un atto di nascita*',¹⁹ Corrado has to suffer an excruciating toothache, because he cannot afford a visit to the dentist (1999: 45).

In addition to these tangible aspects of 'dejection', Battisti's heroes are afflicted by the fraught memories of the political struggle they were once part of. Like Corrado in *L'Orma Rossa*, they hold on to an 'image' of their revolt (1999: 101),²⁰ but that

image does not belong to them any more and they don't know what to replace it with. Exiles are like ghosts, says Battisti. For them, '*[l]e passé a été remplacé par un présent infini, immuable. Les fantômes, comme les exilés, sont une espèce destinée à peupler la dimension correspondant aux zones mortes de l'univers: un territoire où il est presque impossible de laisser le moindre signe de vie*' (2003b: 79).²¹

This erasure of memory, characteristic of the Italian militants of the 1970s (see, for example, Negri 1997: 47), is lamented by the hero of *Le Cargo Sentimental*:

Si chaque génération a son désert à traverser, la nôtre eut celui les années 70: allez les gars, il ne s'est rien passé, par là la prison, s'il vous plaît. Vingt ans plus tard - c'est le temps qu'il faut pour rendre nos histoires intéressantes - il ne reste de la révolte que du sable. Nos traces ont été effacées par le vent du nord, les rêves abolis, l'histoire entièrement remâchée sur papier recyclé pour actes judiciaires.²²

(2003b: 88)

Deprived of a historical memory, Battisti's characters are caught in a whirlpool of their own competing and always only temporary identities. In his novels and short stories, we find no clear-cut identities, only numerous potentialities awaiting to be 'triggered' by events beyond the characters' control. The force of destiny is paramount. Not surprisingly, Kundera's novel *The Joke* (1967) is evoked in the short story '*A la tienne, Mario*'. Like Kundera's narrator and protagonist, Ludvik Jahn, Battisti's characters are prey to fate's unpredictable jokes. In a given set of circumstances, characteristically involving displacement and 'new beginnings', law-abiding citizens can easily turn into villains and vice versa.

The paradigm of multiple identities emerges most clearly from two of Battisti's delightful shorter novels, *Copier--Coller* (*Copy--Paste*, 1997a) and *Nouvel An, Nouvelle Vie* (*New Year, New Life*, 1994), as well as from his more ambitious and markedly complex novel, *Avenida Revolucion* (2003a). In *Copier--Coller*, which is intended for pre-teenage children, Bruno Proietti is a fourteen-year old boy, who lives at the outskirts of Milano with his parents. The entire plot is an account of Bruno's delirious dream, which involves a chance meeting, a theft, an accidental murder and a raid of the National Informatics Centre, in order to shed light on Bruno's mysterious maternal grandfather. Bruno's companion in adventure is a boy of his age nicknamed Pixel. On the surface, Bruno and Pixel are very different: while Bruno has problems at school, Pixel excels; while Bruno lives in one of Milan's poorer suburbs, Pixel is obviously rather well off; while Bruno gets easily into all kinds of trouble, Pixel always seems to avoid any punishment for his transgressions. It is not until later in the novel that the reader discovers that Pixel is really Bruno's alter ego,²³ existing only in the subliminal sphere of the boy's desires and activated in an altered state of consciousness.

Nouvel An, Nouvelle Vie also explores the paradigm of dual identity, but this time the duality assumes a more precise allegorical meaning. The hero of the novel is Jean Cobi, a petty criminal living in a shabby Parisian hotel. He just spent three years in prison and was immediately after his release left by his girlfriend Clara, who emigrated to the United States, a country so vast that '*on peut changer de*

*saison sans présenter de passeport*²⁴ (1994: 15). While the unfolding of the plot is in itself represented as a result of an episode of mistaken identity, the primary duality is between Jean and his *alter ego*, the policeman Dan Lafargue. The reader learns that Cobi's father, a Jewish anarchist active in the Resistance movement, had left Jean and his mother when Jean was only three years old. Dan is his adoptive son, in reality the son of one of his companions in adventure. The narrative clearly alludes to the profound rupture within the Italian political left in the post-WWII period, seen from the perspective of the disenchanting radical wing, suppressed and exiled in the course of the 1980s and 1990s. While the 'natural son' - interpreted as the 'true heir' to an 'unadulterated' communist agenda - is banished from public life and living on the margins of society, the 'adoptive son' - a personification of the Italian left subscribing to the 'historic compromise' - is a policeman, and thus an official representative of the state apparatus.

In *Avenida Revolución*, Milanese accountant Antonio Casagrande is an 'accidental tourist', who leaves behind his comfortable, if somewhat boring existence after winning the first prize in a commercial competition: a return airfare and a month-long trip, in a camping car, from Mexico City to Vancouver. By a strange turn of fortune, Antonio finds himself in possession of another person's passport, and decides to play the game and assume the identity of the passport's owner, Luigi Trombetta. As it turns out, his enthusiastic performance of this new identity is a futile exercise. Both identities - his own original identity, and his new temporary identity as the writer Trombetta - are fraught with danger and uncertainty and neither can secure him a safe passage across the border. Antonio's chaotic identity-switching, creative but ultimately doomed to failure, is in stark contrast with the multiple avatars - in different places, at different times, but always effectively the same - of the elusive border (wall) itself, representing the ever-changing sites of division in today's world; the policeman Gomez H., signifying institutional power; and the archetypal female, Brigida.

Conclusion: The Borderzone

Avenida Revolución is the most multi-layered of Battisti's texts and its symbolic geography sums up his complex treatment of 'exile' and 'displacement'. Situated in the quintessential borderzone, the one on both sides of the border between Mexico and the United States, *Avenida Revolución* evokes Gloria Anzaldúa's (1999 [1987]) notion of borderlands as a space for potentially creative encounters where differences congregate and interact. In Battisti's novel, the border, the wall, the 'guardian angel', can only be annihilated through the combined efforts of the dispossessed on both sides. In an ironic twist, this can be done, not with the power of weapons, but with the weight and the strong smell of their excrement, since the '*più solido di tutti i muri*' ('the most solid of all walls') is in fact the one which each of us carries within (2003a: 177-8).

Battisti's treatment of the borderzone echoes Anzaldúa's incisive critique of borders, encapsulated succinctly in the following quote from her *La Frontera/Borderlands*: 'Borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish *us* from *them*. A border is a dividing line, a narrow strip along a steep edge. A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state of transition.' (Anzaldúa 1999 [1987]: 25) Battisti's border in *Avenida Revolución*, is 'a farce', 'a mirage' (2003a:

137). However, without the border, there would be no borderzone: without it, millions of people on both sides of the border would not have come to 'inhabit this burnt land' and Tijuana and San Diego would have remained two petrol pumps on the edge of a desert track.

Like Anzaldua's '*los atravesados*' - the 'squint-eyed, the perverse, the queer, the troublesome, the mongrel, the mulatto, the half-breed, the half dead; in short, those who cross over, pass over, or go through the confines of the "normal"' (1999 [1987]: 25) - Battisti's heroes are in a constant state of transition and embody the numerous tropes of displacement which characterize today's postmodern world.

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Notes


¹  Sooner or later, I will leave France and cross the ocean westwards, following the dying sun. In a sunset that never ends, where the people applaud the day's end and have the eyes that smile.


²  Significantly, only four of Battisti's novels - *Travestito da Uomo* (quoted in this paper in its French translation as *Les Habits d'Ombre*), *L'Ultimo Sparo*, *L'Orma Rossa* and *Avenida Revolucion* - have been published in Italy and in their original language, reflecting the Italian publishers' reluctance to make his work public to the wider Italian readership. The rest of Battisti's opus was published in France and in French translation.


³  'the representative of 'good' is no more than someone fighting against a given adversary in a given moment'.

⁴  'in creation, everything needs to resemble what one holds dearest in one's life'.

⁵  Mitterand is dead. These are the new arrangements of the juridical space of the Union. In the government, they don't know what to do. For the moment, they advice us to hide.


⁶  ' Over there, in Schengen, the seat of the new inquisition, a judge without scruples got it into his head to send us back to a very democratic Italian prison.'


⁷  France began its implementation in March 2004. Italy is now the only country out of the twenty-five EU members that has not passed domestic legislation, which would enable the application of EAW. The contentious point for Italy is the long list of crimes, which would warrant extradition, and which include fraud and money laundering - the crimes notoriously widespread among the Italian political class in the post-WWII period (*Statewatch* 2004).


⁸  'terrorist' has become a kind of category of its own, which renders all reflection useless - because it would be considered indecent - and accuses *a priori* those who are labeled as such: at worst, they are guilty; at best, they are suspect. This complex international, national and even everyday usage of this term is complicated even further by the violent attacks by the groups we can clearly qualify as terrorist (even though they undoubtedly consider themselves as 'heroes' or 'martyrs'). They in fact endow this word and its applications with an unheard-of presence and effectiveness.


⁹  By the same token, for the characters in Battisti's novels - such as Onno in


Vittoria and Fausto in *Le Cargo Sentimental* - homecoming equals the end of the life journey.


10  'They change their sky, not their mind, who cross the sea.'


11  The misogynist streak emerges most clearly in the novel *Jamais Plus Sans Fusil* (2000b), which focuses on the stereotype of the castrating, murderous female.


12  'Cesare Battisti's life is a journey and, in some way, his novels can appear as an innovative and mad form of travelogue'.


13  The term refers to the period of the late 1970s and early 1980s, characterized in Italy by killings and kidnappings committed by both the extreme right and left. It derives from Margarethe Von Trotta's homonymous film (1981). The 'years of lead' have been explored by filmmakers such as Guido Chiesa (*Lavorare con Lentezza* 2004); Marco Bellocchio (*Buongiorno, Notte* 2003), and Marco Tullio Giordana (*I Cento Passi* 2000, *La Meglio Gioventù* 2003).

14  The protagonists of all five novels are male.

15  It is useless to seek her, for she appears in front of you when you least expect her. From behind a bridge, usually with her skirt still rolled up. Rome has never denied anyone a moment of love, a furtive dream of glory. And I, I was born in that brothel, I should have known that better than anyone else. But a thirty-year absence has authorized me to believe that, since my departure, the ancient whore has been dead and buried under a thick layer of dust.


16  'the other places where, in the interval, I had learnt to find shelter'.

17  '... I am not an immigrant, but an unusual political refugee without a statute, a residue from the "years of lead" condemned to invisibility in exchange for the permission to camp in the French territory. For me, there are no civil rights, but only outstanding penal convictions, which will never be erased.


18  'a detainee awaiting his judgment, or, in the best case, an unproductive forty-year old, barely tolerated in his own house'.

19  'even the dogs are entitled to Medicare, as long as they have a birth certificate'.


20  'flames of revolt'

21  '[t]he past has been replaced by a neverending, immutable present. Ghosts, like exiles, are a species destined to inhabit the dimension corresponding to the death zones of the universe: a territory where it is almost impossible to leave the

slightest sign of life'.

22  If each generation has a desert to cross, our desert is the decade of the 1970s: come on guys, nothing has happened, to the prison, please. Twenty years later - the time necessary to make our histories interesting - nothing remains of our revolt but the sand. Our traces have been erased by the Northern wind, our dreams have been abolished, our history entirely recycled for the paper for judiciary acts.

23  Pixel is in fact the name Bruno had given to his computer.

24  'people can change calendar seasons without having to present their passports'.