

## Rosa Parks’ journey

*I remember him talking about violence. He spoke about the expression “Father, forgive them, for they know not what they do”, which is what Jesus Christ said when he was on the cross. Dr. King used to say that black people should receive brutality with love, and I believed that this was a goal to work for. But I couldn’t reach that point in my mind at all, even though I know that the strategy Dr. King used probably was the better one for the masses of people in Montgomery than trying to retaliate without any weapons or ammunition.*

*Malcolm wasn’t a supporter of nonviolence either. Referring to what Dr. King liked to say about people not knowing what they do, he used to say of the white racists who attacked nonviolent demonstrators for civil rights, “Not only did they know what they were doing, but they were experts at it”.*

Rosa Parks, *My Story*, with Jim Haskins

December 1st, 1955, Montgomery, Alabama. A young African-American seamstress gets on a bus. The seats in the “coloured” section are full; one seat is free in the “mixed” section a seat that – when required – black people must vacate in favour of a white passenger. This is what usually happens but that day the woman refuses to give up her bus seat to a white man. She does nothing: she says no and remains seated. Who knows why: she probably would have reacted differently the day before or the day after; she would have probably got up, made room for and honour the norms of state racism.

But on 1st December she decides to remain seated; a motionless (nonetheless, a frenetic one) and unruly body, as if at once, she no longer fits in the rules of the game. For this subtle and energetic form of opposition Rosa Parks is arrested and taken to trial.

What Maurice Blanchot wrote about 1968 multitude also applies to Rosa: “[she is] a supreme power, because it included its virtual and absolute impotence, without having any feeling diminished”. Rosa Parks’ *refusal* is the epiphany of a gesture, a gesture evoking an unimagined political charge.

What is a gesture? It is not, we believe, an action because it does not answer a programme, perhaps not even a decision. A gesture is the most intimate movement of desire; the most intense charge of a practice of refusal, of desertion against the unbearable universe to which we are consigned. A gesture erupts when we can no longer tolerate what we have always endured. To us, a gesture, to be named in such a way, invariably portrays a point of rupture with itself, with history, with power; to this extent, it proves to be immeasurable. It is immeasurable because a gesture has the task of letting a story end by provoking another time in time.

Alain Badiou thinks that politics is above all the power of remaining faithful to the event; to its event as an irruption into the world, each time new and different from what he calls the non-existent. Thus, we ask ourselves: how can we remain faithful to a gesture of rupture while avoiding its territorialisation, its canonisation and depotentiation? Because if a gesture is called upon to say no, to devastate a world, it has, nevertheless, the mission of continuing itself; certainly not within a project, but, as it were, surviving itself, reiterating its own strength.

Rosa's gesture is her repetition; her obstinate deterritorialization. Perhaps the New York artist Ryan Mendoza was thinking about something similar with his work *Almost home - The Rosa Parks House Project*. He was deciphering a crucial aspect of Rosa Parks' figure: her being "almost at home" in any context, in any discourse that aims at making her the symbol of a struggle, of an injustice, of an open wound. In these works, Rosa is always *almost* at home, because she remains a remnant, a ruin, which history is unable to assimilate and recount. A surplus even exceeding the story of a rebellious seamstress. The political nature of Mendoza's artistic gesture stands precisely in this despatialisation of Rosa Parks' house: not only does it invite us to look elsewhere, in a space that generally tends to remain out of focus, but it also immediately clarifies the function of the de-territorialisation of struggles. Mendoza's work gives us the opportunity to rethink Rosa's gesture. As stated by the artist himself: "I took the house as a hostage in the hope that one day it will be redeemed [...]. I was waiting to see if America notices that something is missing".

To this extent, with and beyond Mendoza, Rosa's house cannot perhaps be the object of a lack, as the American artist himself hopes, because it remains irretrievably the place of an elsewhere, of the infinite places where gestures, silences, imperceptible movements, refusals, and desertions open up the possibility for another world. Perhaps the truth of Rosa's house lies in its ruins and what Mendoza's work evokes through the materialisation of an absence, is the possibility of avoiding the integration of Rosa's gesture into a story that tames its force. In other words, the migrant destiny of the house, which survives its end by floating in the space of the world, makes it possible to think of Rosa not as a moment in a broader historical process, a stage in the integration of the black people into the Enlightenment universe of rights, but as an event that may happen unpredictably anywhere when those who generally tolerate every kind of violence and prevarication, unexpectedly, can no longer bear to endure injustice and find the courage to risk everything.

Rosa Parks' becoming homeless and nameless evokes, invents, provokes admirable genealogies where the loss of the self, in order to become other than oneself, by committing unpredictable acts and uttering unheard-of words, promotes struggles, radical forms of resistance.

Let's take, for example, Isabella Baumfree who was sold as a slave at the age of nine, along with a flock of sheep. We do not know her exact birth date, perhaps around 1797. What we do know, however, is that she was born again in 1843, when she decided to take a new name. She cut herself off from her past: she abandoned (her) history. She had been sold several times in the course of her life and in 1827 she ran away from the plantation where she worked as a slave and gave her name up, she linked French and English and, almost by radically deterritorializing herself, she became Sojourner Truth: «the one who dwells in truth».

Although she embraces the purposes of the struggles of the abolitionist movements, which she joins immediately after her escape, the emancipation from slavery is not enough for Sojourner Truth: the former slave envisions an end to segregation. Thus, she bravely defies the law and decides to get on a vehicle reserved only to whites. But if taking a seat in a carriage for white is an extraordinary act of resistance, it is nothing compared to the gesture that the former slave girl makes at a time when no black woman was allowed to speak in public to denounce her condition. We owe her one of the most disruptive speeches in the history of black women's liberation movement, delivered on 29<sup>th</sup> July 1851 at one of the first women's rights convention in Ohio; a speech that is a memorable watershed and is condensed in a disruptive question: "Am I not a woman?" (*Ain't I am a woman?*).

Many years later, bell hooks – another woman who chooses to change her name by borrowing her maternal great-grandmother's name but making sure it is written in lower case – dedicates part of her work as an intellectual and activist for black women's rights to recognising the role of the home and «the weight that black women have had in building domestic homes capable of being sites of resistance». Rarely does the history of women's rights movement sees white women and black women fighting on the same side: this happens because the segregation, racism and classism exerted on black women and workers is unknown to upper-middle class white women. While for white women the house is a symbol

of male oppression and the devaluation of the social role of women, for black women the house is the place where they can reclaim what they have been and what they have produced in the long history of human trafficking.

Talking about Rosa Parks means weaving the threads of those genealogies of gestures in which her gesture is extended, disseminated, repeated. It also means talking about a house that is not, however, planted on secure foundations: it appears to be a place that, thanks to the obstinacy and work of a woman within its walls, begins to walk beyond its neighbourhood, to travel the world.

The ambition of this issue is therefore to remove Rosa Parks from her symbolic and progressive character; to remove her from civil rights' history and Obama's myth and legend. To try to make Rosa neither a symbol nor an icon, but, on the contrary, a name to disseminate in the flesh of other infinite names capable of dissolving the arrogance of a struggling subjectivity. In order to evade any form of symbolic verticality, Rosa should therefore take leave from her history, evade any form of symbolic verticality, and inhabit, as Mendoza probably guesses, the uninhabitable of her own history.

There are the crucial battles for rights and the extraordinary friendship with Martin Luther King, but there is also something else: the struggle for justice, which is notoriously an endless struggle, without which, however, law always risks becoming only the name of the Law. Not only integration, then, but also thresholds, borders, radical conflicts.