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Jolly Roger as Method
A 'Conceptual Persona' for Rethinking with the Sea

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Abstract. *This contribution discusses and extends beyond a hermeneutic paradigm that isolates geopolitics within terrestrial-centric epistemologies. Specifically, it proposes an expansive* pirate methodology *that, through the multifaceted lenses of blue studies, deconstructs dominant linguistic and imaginative frameworks, habitually* grounded *in the land and, as such, predatory and radically colonial. Thus, by shifting perspectives from the ground to the offshore, the paper argues that geography and philosophy can converge to generate new political ecologies under the Jolly Roger flag which, simultaneously transnational and transcultural, challenges and revolutionizes world-making processes as well as our modes of conceptualization and representation of our dwelling. Finally, I introduce the figure of pirate as a 'conceptual persona' which, embodying a maritime multi-perspective, enables us to rethink critically and creatively both human-environment organizations and human-community interactions.*

Keywords. Global South, Blue Studies, Piracy, Anarchism.

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From the River to the Sea…

In the time it takes to write this contribution, the President Donald Trump declares his commitment to buying and owning Gaza, displacing the Palestinian population and turning the coastal enclave into the *Riviera of Middle East*. This statement, in its outlandish prospects, as well as its brazen implications, recalls an era when great Western powers redrew the maps of the world and moved around populations without any regards to their autonomy (Henderson 2017, Meschiari 2025). Moreover, the declaration of the United States taking over territory by imposing a forcible removal of a population in favor of a big real estate site, highlights that short-sighted way of thinking politics that fragments and reorganizes borders along imperialistic claims[1].

In this context, I do not intend to dive into the complex geopolitical debate surrounding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which would require a broader space, tools and knowledge that I do not possess. Rather, my desire is to promote a positioning from

[I] To more details, see some articles appeared on February 2025 in the New York Times. Specifically, I remind to Shear, M. D., Baker, P., Kershner, I., *Trump Proposes U.S. Takeover of Gaza and Says All Palestinians Should Leave,* New York Times: 4.02.25; Moses, C., McCreesh, S., *Trump Says Palestinians Will Not Be Allowed to Return to Gaza Under His Proposal,* New York Times: 10.02.25.

and through which to question the negotiations that shape contemporary politics. To this end, I seek to make visible our worldmaking constrained within a language and an imaginary that are entirely *grounded* in the land, and as such, predatory and radically colonial (Mawani 2016). Our present modes of thinking and drawing geographies are, in fact, «equally the residue of colonialism and nationalism; the partition of the world during the Cold War; and the pedagogical structures at universities and academic production that has largely worked within this curtailment of the conceptualizations of space» (Menon et al. 2022, 13). All the dominant epistemologies, then, entrenched within terrestrial categories, have been structured our understanding, hiding a distinct division of the world into states and nations (Pagden 2024).

Contrary to this territorialization and colonization of thought, it is not surprising that the slogan for the liberation of Palestine conceptualizes a space across waters and beyond lands, simultaneously immersive and otherworldly. Thus, by 1969, *From the river to the sea Palestine will be free* came to signify one democratic secular state «that would supersede the ethno-religious state of Israel» and present itself «as part of the global anti-imperialist movement in solidarity with other nonaligned or socialist nations or revolutionary movements» (Kelley 2019, 78). Although its use is controversial and the subject of heated debate – consider, for instance, the accusations of antisemitism raised recently (Confino & Goldberg 2024) – the slogan, along with the cause it represents, has become the symbol of the Global South. And it is under what it stands for – drenched in the water, flowing through it and constantly reaching towards it – that we can move away from an imagination driven by settler and terrestrial hubris (Traverso 2024).

Bringing wet routes into focus allows us, thus, to view latitudes and longitudes that do not belong to the landscape nor landscaping (Colafranceschi 2024). Moreover, it «reveals the necessity of recalibrating the geographical hierarchies consolidated through intertwined Western imperialisms» to challenge what is defined as metageography (Bystrom & Hofmeyr 2017, 2). Reflecting on the set of spatial structures through which we order our knowledge of the world, enables us to reveal how our geographical frameworks (as global and inter-imperial assemblages) provide not so much a description of the world as it is, nor an idea of how the world is being made, but an image that mostly justifies and glorifies the actions of those who have possessed and colonized it (Lewis & Wigen 1997). This image confirms and demonstrates how our global connections, which have already been taken as givens, have in fact only been reshaped by imperial powers (Ferretti 2007).

On closer gaze, then, that floats in hydro-colonial or hydro-imperial routes, this hubris of nationalism resonates with what Cornelius Castoriadis (2007) writes regarding the possibility of a democracy as a regime where power is entirely established by a singular community – which, in this saltwater context, may be figured as the vernacular cosmopolitanism among sailors and enslaved individuals. According to Cornelius Castoriadis, for whom democracy corresponds to the tragic system of self-limitation, individuals must challenge institutionalized power and become autonomous, in the original meaning of finding and formulating their own laws, if they are truly committed to consolidate a free and democratic social organization (220-221). However, today a similar project of autonomy clashes with the driving force for unlimited expansion, both within and beyond the land and the self-proclaimed obsession of consuming territories. Moreover, it seems unrealistic to withstand the privatization of all spaces, from the underneath to the seabed – all under the claim of *drill baby drill* (Latour & Schultz 2023). If such is the dominant imaginary in which contemporary society drowns, the consolidation of a free democratic regime requires «immense changes, a veritable *earthquake*, not in terms of physical violence but in terms of beliefs and human behaviors» (Castoriadis 2007, 245; italics mine). And therefore, if it is a matter of a radical change in the way the

world and human beings' place therein are represented, what languages and imaginaries should we shape?

The argument I intend to present in this article is that such an *earthquake* must, first and foremost, engage with the sea and become a movement that, both within and beyond waters, facilitates the conceptual displacement promoted by the blue studies as a method of defamiliarization and decolonization (Melody 2020; Ferwerda 2024). Navigating through aquatic routes and immersing ourselves in wet matter would, on one hand, challenge the terrestrial colonial paradigms of theorizing and representing the world into which we have become *rooted*, thereby fostering alternative categories and epistemologies (Ingersoll 2016; Maddaluno 2022). On the other hand, it would establish an alternative imaginary through which individuals can embrace a new institutional framework for society, collectively re-envision its geographies and redefine its postures, rights and responsibilities.

Meanwhile, contemporary neo-imperialist politics, through their increasingly brother oligarchies and technologies, appropriate a theological-political redefinition of the living space[2] of their citizens, their dysfunctional dispositive colonizes the space of thought and collective creativity (Mhalla 2024; Varoufakis 2024). Against this vortex of both conceptual and visual algorithms, stands the opportunity to overturn the main institutions of society (language and imaginary) towards a radical approach that enables an anarchist positioning to move through seawaters and vice versa (Bey 2001; Land 2007; Shantz 2011).

In summary, this contribution seeks to reshape our dominant discourses, terrestrial and colonial, by promoting a maritime multi-perspective that facilitates the shifting, expanding and simultaneously deepening of our modes of conceptualization and imagination, both geography and society. In this regard, the paper is structured into two sections: one focusing on the language and the other one on the imaginary.

1. Revolutionize the Language. It's not a sea of troubles

By keeping the traces of land-bound language that continues to echo through time and space, crossing with clairvoyant insight the realms of current political philosophy, in 1942, Carl Schmitt introduces his reflections on the story of worldmaking remarking:

> Man is a terrestrial, a groundling. He lives, moves and walks on the firmly grounded Earth. It is his standpoint and his base. He derives his points of view from it, which is also to say that his impressions are determined by it and his world outlook is conditioned by it. Earth-born, developing on it, man derives not only his horizon from it, but also his poise, his movements, his figure and his height. That is why he calls Earth the star on which he lives, although, as it is well known, the surface of the planet is three fourths water and only one fourth firm land; even the largest continents are but huge floating islands. And since we found out that our earth is spherically shaped, we have been speaking quite naturally of the "terrestrial sphere" or of the "terrestrial globe". To imagine a "maritime globe" would seem strange, indeed. (Schmitt 2006, 1).

The work *Land and Sea* – presented in the form of a letter addressed to his daughter – reinterprets human political history within the opposition between land and sea. It identifies its specificity in the conflict between Leviathan and Behemoth – figures deeply

[2] The concept of *Lebensraum,* developed by the geographer Friedrich Ratzel, is here used in a critical sense regarding the expansion and/or contraction of borders, aimed at the subordination of population politics to continental imperial planning. For more on this, see Diner (1999).

established in Hobbesian thought and undeniably imbued with a highly geopolitically projection. According to Schmitt, the enduring and unresolved struggle of their mutual annihilation constitutes the organic core of the organization of humanity in its imposition of dominion over the world or in its hegemonic mode of self-consolidation as society (Scuccimarra 2023). While the analysis of these figures and their derived theological-political imaginaries is outside the extent of the present contribution, it is important to underscore the centrality with which Schmitt positions the terrestrial element, both geographically and linguistically. I shall also defer to other domains the juridical implications of Schmitt's reconstruction that emerge from this specific work (see Schmitt 2006; Galli 2008). Here, I intend to focus solely on the specific vocabulary employed by the philosopher for a reflection that should analyze on the history of the world, yet in practice remains constrained within a narrow perspective.

This view, which moves in a one-way direction – from man[3] to the land and from the land to the sea – without ever repositioning the gaze, has been producing effects in our conceptualizations and representations of both the world and our place within it. As terrestrial beings and, by convention, accustomed to recognizing as possible and plausible only non-liquid territory, our way of theorizing has over time been nourished by an entirely land-centered vocabulary (Mentz 2019; 2024). This lexicon is based on the use of the term 'ground' as well as its application in various discourses and *fields*. Specifically, what I wish to focus on here is how 'ground' has permeated and continues to permeate both philosophical and geographical thought, being employed, on one hand, as the foundation of being (*Grund*) and, on the other hand, as a criterion for determining the validation of viewpoints and the stability of arguments.

The concept of 'ground' as *subjectum* has been widely discussed by modern metaphysics, interpreting its meaning starting from the term *hypokeimenon*, that is that-which-lies-before and that, meaning it is under (*hypo)*, gathers everything onto itself (Derrida 1965). Building on this definition, which remains intrinsically bound up with the positing of a substance or substratum as the ontological foundation, a framework for conceiving of the origin comes out. This framework, precisely because it is underlying and gathers everything, must be understood as *ground*, conceived as an immobile, stable space upon which all else occurs and takes form. The necessity of *grounding* the origin to somewhere fixed and *rooted* is challenged by Jacques Derrida who formulates a thought that, while centralizing language, shifts and redefines its meaning. And thus, he introduces decisive neo-graphisms through which entity and being, ontic and ontological, are derivative to difference and to what he calls *difference* – an economic term designating the production of differing/deferring (Derrida 1997, 23). The introduction of this term, which is neither a concept nor a word and, as such, remains elusive, allows for the possibility of thinking about an original, abyssal dimension, more erratic and rhythmic, less methodic and more floating, which undermines the necessity of positing *subiectum* – as a transcendental *ground* – whose notion belongs essentially to the history of metaphisics (Marder 2009). Despite the intuition of conceiving a groundless ontology, the concept of 'ground' is rarely re-elaborated to deconstruct the terrestrial imagery to which the term refers (Regazzoni 2022) and its use continues to invade philosophical language, displaying the solidity – and thus once again, the centrism and stature – of reasoning. As if being anchored to the land ensured that depth of thought, original and founded necessary for affirming its validity and truth.

[3] The specification of grammatical gender is useful for displaying the interdependence between dominion over the world and the construction of its geographies, which have been wholly and historically designed from an anthropocentric and, more specifically, male-centered perspective. See to this regard, just to quote a few, Vergès (2020); Bottici (2023); Elia (2023).

Moreover, ordinary ways of speaking with and through the 'ground' present the concept as the equivalent of stability, concreteness and evidence: consider phrases like *keep one's feet on the ground* or *being well-established*, used to highlight the attitude of a reliable person, or even formulations such as «they have no *grounds* to make that claim, their expertise is *grounded* by many years of fieldwork» (Melody 2020, 11) serve to affirm and prove the legitimacy of certain situations. As a result, 'ground' creeps into our ways of conceptualizing, our arguments as well as the space and the world we live in. In fact, numerous reflections on the environment continue to position the 'ground' as a fundamental condition for our objectivity and perpetuate that mode of thinking which is always situated terrestrially, and as such, relies on a whole grammar, both metaphorical and non-metaphorical, oriented and focused on the imperative of *landing* (Thorsen & Vandsø 2017; Cuervo Restrepo 2025).

Following this trajectory, which is traced down to the land, even some of the most prominent and recent theories of political ecology absorb a terrestrial perspective, with which they ultimately end up promoting the definition of 'terrestrial' as a decisive political category within which and through which to test a palpable and radical alternative to the left\right dichotomy.

> Are we not beginning to ask ourselves: Are we Moderns or Terrestrials? Political scientists will say that one never invents a new orientation in relation to such fundamental values as those that run from Left to Right; to which historians will perhaps retort: "Were there people 'on the right' and people 'on the left' before the eighteenth century?"
>
> What is important is to be able to get out of the impasse by imagining a set of new alliances: "You have never been a leftist? That doesn't matter, neither have I, but, like you, I am radically Terrestrial!" A whole set of positions that we shall have to learn to recognize, before the militants of the extreme Modern have totally devastated the stage. (Latour 2018, 52-53).

This return to the 'ground', this imperative of belonging to the land in order to reveal that «under the ground of private property, of land grabs, of exploitation of territories, another ground, another earth, another soil has begun to stir, to quake, to be moved» (Latour 2018, 20-21), merely reassert, once again, a way of seeing and conceptualizing worldmaking that fails to transcend all borders, remaining confined within a perspective entirely terrestrial and *rooted.*

What would occur if, instead of transforming into a termite – «devenir-termite, devenir-blatte» (Latour 2021) – our metamorphosis involved becoming amphibious?[4] What if, rather than residing in Kafka's wardrobe and struggling to understand the organization of the world as Gregor Samsa does, we found ourselves within Cortázar's aquarium, submerged in water, on the other side of the glass, observing the world through the eyes of gold, without iris or pupil, of the Axolotl (Cortazar 1967)? Undoubtedly, as with the protagonist of the story, our way of thinking would remain human; however, the environment we inhabit, the posture we assume, and our floating body – one that, rather than adhering to a straightforward vertical axis, moves through a volumetric orientation – would compel us to employ another language, a vocabulary capable of containing and enhancing this shift from the ground to the offshore.

Such a transition would correspond to what Steve Mentz (2020) calls a "watery transformation", which, as a form of self-emancipation, requires abandoning one's territory for an unmeasurable space as well as a radical metamorphosis of our lexicon

[4] The reference here is directed towards Latour (2021). Through this *grounded* direction, consider the 2023 exhibition *La morsure des termites* at the Palais du Tokyo in Paris, where fifty international artists created an environment emphasizing *underground* thinking in which «the eye does not see things but figures of things that signify other things».

(Mentz 2020, xiv). This is realized by swapping out the old terrestrial language for seawaters terms, so that we obtain at least seven new words to trust and employ: *current* replaces *field*; *water* turns into *ground*; *progress* becomes *flow*; *state* becomes *ship; landscape* turns into *seascapes, distorsion* replaces *clarity*, the *horizon* of merchants and lands shifts to the *horizon* of sailors and watery connections (xv-xvii).

These *deterritorializing* terms remind that our metaphors should float through waves rather than resting into the ground and, simultaneously, they introduce more complex narratives arising from an uncertain and ever-evolving realm. In this way, this vocabulary breaks up with the colonial imperative of monolinguism and bring us in a polyglot universe alongside non-contiguous spaces and multiple languages (Glissant 1997). Rethinking with and from a maritime-multi perspective, in fact, enables the sea as a space to embody more fluid ways of theorization and to radically reformulate our deep-*rooted* knowledge structures. This shifting, which floats beyond static framings and dives into wet, liquid, volumetric spaces, endorses the perspective of a world of flows, connections, liquidities and becomings. It also proposes «a means by which the sea's material and phenomenological distinctiveness can facilitate the reimagining and re-enlivening of a world ever on the move» (Peters & Steinberg 2015, 248).

This displacement moves us away from the terrestrial approach to philosophy and immerses us into a wet and more-than-wet ontology (Peters & Steinberg 2019). A watery perspective that bringing «geographic theory to the sea and the sea to geographic theory» (Peters & Steinberg 2019, 261) reshapes and redirects not only our spatial understandings but also our political possibilities, always entrenched within the static and solid imaginary of landed place. A language that comes from seawaters and through their material reformation, mobile churning, erratic and instable constitution, enables us to rethink not only our ways of mapping and representing, but also our way of imagining. Relying on the sea and in all its complexity, we can nourish an imaginary that destabilizes our land-based linguistic intransigence and moves across uncontrolled routes (Oppermann 2023; Helmreich 2023).

If the sea thus becomes the context within which we develop thought, if language shifts and becomes wet, what figures do we need to sustain this disorientation and continue enacting a conceptual and visual displacement that can guide us toward a new worlding?

2. Revolutionize the Imaginal. Which Liberty Leads the People?

In *Imaginal Politics. Images Beyond Imagination and the Imaginary,* Chiara Bottici (2014) introduces the notion of the 'imaginal' as a conceptual tool to emphasize the centrality of images rather than the faculty or the context that and in-between they have been produced. This concept is thus presented in contrast both to the imaginary – often associated with unreal and fictitious – and to the imaginative – which usually denotes the quality of a person endowed with the individual faculty of imagination or an act of imagining (Bottici 2014, 177). By asserting that the human being, before being a rational, is an imaginal animal, Chiara Bottici analyzes the close relationship between politics and our faculty to form images. Today, deprived of imagination despite living in a world satured of images, we still lack any ability to envisage things differently and construct alternative political projects. Recognizing the connection and reciprocal interdependence of the imaginal with politics, «because it is only through the help of unifying images that a public can exist» (10) and because «images are consubstantial with our being in the world but we need a world in order to be in the first place» (104), signifies reconsidering different possibilities of our world-making. These ones range from the freedom of the

individuals in new egalitarian imaginaries to its erosion in oppressive social ones. And to avoid any misunderstanding, since that the imaginal plays an increasing role in our politics and can mediate and reorient our being-in-the-world (89) it becomes *imperative* to discern which images we engage with and in which we should immerse ourselves.

In the final chapter, titled *The Freedom of Equals: A Conclusion and a New Beginning*, Chiara Bottici reinterprets the image of the boat in the middle of the sea as a symbol of radical freedom through an exceptional poem by the italian anarchist Belgrado Pedrini.

> Tell me, groaning slaves,
> why do we row just to row?
> Better to die among the waves
> on a sea of whitening foam.
> Let us row until the ship
> dashes against the reef,
> raise the black and red
> upon the whistling breeze!
> And let the frothy wave
> be a pitiful place to lay
> but let the sun of anarchy
> rise o'er the martyrs one day. (Bottici 2014, 179-180).

The poem that depicts a miserable galleon, manned by slaves who struggle with a corrupt social system, against which they oppose themselves in the name of justice and freedom, immediately evokes a way of co-living anti-authoritarian, resembling the one enacted on pirate ships. Although Chiara Bottici uses the image of the galleon as a point of convergence between marxism and anarchism, no mention is made of the world of piracy – an association that, I believe, instead, is quite relevant to highlight. To specify the image of the galleon while aligning it with the pirate one effectively serves to emphasize those distinctive features that could position it as the medium from which we ought to commence and toward which we should direct our politics (Rediker 2007; 2025).

The juxtaposition between the two boats is herein legitimized by the intrinsic connection between the 'freedom of equals' sought by the slaves aboard the galleon, who are on the cusp of becoming anarchic and the political structures that underpin the organization of pirate ships, particularly those of the Golden Age[5]. Pirate culture and its ideology – whose fundamental aspects undoubtedly trace fragments of an anarchist anthropology (Graeber 2004) – are intimately connected to the desire for social change. The one capable of up*rooting* the dominant political order and establishing a new regime of freedom and complete autonomy among equals.

The purpose of establishing alternative communities that challenge the prevailing political systems land-focused, *grounded* upon exploitation and colonization of other lands, serves as both the engine and the compass by which the entire organizational framework of pirate communities is constructed and steered. Overall, most studies on piracy underscore and accentuate the inherently democratic and egalitarian nature of their social order (Blakemore 2024). Frequently described as a floating democracy, maritime republics, stateless communities, self-organized collectives and peripatetic societies in which liberty, equality and solidarity remain the fundamental laws, these societies are inextricably linked to anarchism. This connection is legitimized by their unequivocal rejection of any constituent authority (Wilson L. 1995; Graeber 2023):

[5] The beginning of the Golden Age of Piracy is generally placed within a period spanning from 1650 to around 1722 or 1730.

> Pirates constructed a culture of masterless men. They were as far removed from traditional authority as any men could be in the early eighteenth century. Beyond the church, beyond the family, beyond disciplinary labor, and using the sea to distance themselves from the powers of the state, they carried out a strange experiment. The social constellation of piracy, in particular the complex consciousness and egalitarian impulses that developed once the shackles were off, provides valuable clarification of more general social and cultural patterns among seamen in particular and the laboring poor in general. Here we can see aspirations and achievements that under normal circumstances were heavily muted, if not in many cases rendered imperceptible altogether, by the power relationships of everyday life. (Rediker 2014, 68).

The collectivistic ethos of life at sea, expressed and enacted aboard pirate ships, is «an experiment in radical, anarchistic forms of democratic organizing [...] explicitly opposed to the systems of authority on conventional sailing vessels» (Land 2007,180-181). This sort of *commonwealth*, set up through seawaters where no power would be able to dispute with or capture them, is most materially expressed by the best-known symbol of piracy: the Jolly Roger.

Clearly, the primary and standard criterion of recognition for pirate crews, the Jolly Roger itself – despite the numerous variations from ship to ship – is a black ensign, in the middle of which there is a large white skeleton with a weapon (cutlass, sword or dart) in one hand striking a bleeding heart and, in the other hand, an hourglass. Its origin remains uncertain, both in linguistic and visual terms. The name may derive either from a variation of the french *le jolie rouge*, in reference to the red flags raised by crews to signal the commencement of battle, or from a modification of *Old Roger*, a historical popular word used to designate the devil (Kuhn 2020, 115). The representational figures, instead, are utilized with the explicit purpose of instilling fear in the pirates' prey and its triad of interlocking symbols – death, violence, limited time – simultaneously points to say, unequivocally, to merchantmen that their time is short, they must surrender immediately or they would die a bloody death (Rediker 2004, 80-82).

Rather than articulating its genealogies and symbolisms, the focus here is on the significance that the creation of the Jolly Roger has in the formation of a transnational, transcultural and multiracial identity in which all pirate crews recognize themselves (Giovannoli 2011). Beneath the black flag, the solidarity of a gang of proletarian outlaws prevails, self-organized in a daring way and in opposition to the powerful, colonial nation-states of that time. By raising the skull and crossbones and proclaiming themselves as 'Villains of all Nations', an exclusive community of individuals begins to take shape. They are all drawn from various nations and countries, yet united by a shared destiny for the sake of freedom and self-autonomy (Rediker 2004).

This floating, nomadic and libertarian crew, a melting pot of cultures, speaks a creole language composed of sailors' slangs, songs, code words, watery vernacular and jargon that has nothing to do with landed, monolinguistic and restrictive language. And within these linguistic codes, moving in-between rum, waves and gunpowder, is established a wild, non-authoritarian and erotic regime: «it signified nothing what part of the world [someone] live in, so [they] lived well» (Linebaugh & Rediker 2000, 164): a «brotherhood of sea-sharks» (Snelders 2005, 146) in which a convoy of former sailors and slaves, previously forcibly conscripted on merchant ships, military vessels, privateers and fishing boats. Among these bodies, racialized, mistreated and exploited[6] and, under the Jolly Roger, finally self-liberated, there are also women who, only aboard pirate ships, can fully experience their personal and political independence (Duncombe 2017). Pirate women

[6] See Boswell (1791, 86) in Rediker (2004, 35): «No man will be a sailor who has contrivance enough to get himself into a jail; for being in a ship is being in jail with the chance of being drowned. A man in jail has more room, better food, and commonly better company».

are often illegitimate daughters and/or unrecognized by their biological fathers: as such, both on land and aboard ships under other flags, they are compelled, as a form of resistance to the leading norms of family, state and capital, to adopt a male identity in order to work and have more power (Powell 2023). On the pirate crew, however, women are not only able to reveal and enjoy their own bodies, but these are even regarded as equal, if not superior, to those of their male counterparts (Klausmann, Meinzerin & Kuhn 1997). This recognition is so pronounced that women assume positions of command aboard the ship and, due to gender differences in the laws, they are even legitimized to avoid death execution, outcome that was inconceivable for a male body (O' Driscoll 2012).

Given these premises, in seeking an image that might effectively orient our way of engaging in politics, it is therefore more fitting to look toward the Jolly Roger rather than to mere insignia of a galleon. This distinction would, in fact, permit us to recognize, in the black flag flown by a crew of self-liberated slaves, an expansive and plural agency capable of activating new imaginal politics and embodying that *freedom of equals*.

While the figurative realm of Jolly Roger encompasses a broad spectrum of domains and extends its symbolism across various currents of knowledge, thus, affirming a significant trans-medial iconographic potency (Guarnaccia 2015), it seems particularly relevant to expand upon Marcus Rediker's (2004) analysis of an anonymous illustration (fig.1) appeared on the frontispiece of the Dutch version of Captain Johnson's *A General History of the Pyrates* (1972 [1724]). The image, which features a bare-breasted woman, militant and armed with a sword and a torch, beneath a big and multi-skulls Jolly Roger, is immediately reminiscent of the famous painting Eugène Delacroix's *Liberty Leading the People* (fig.2). In the pages dedicated to the analysis of the anonymous work and its comparison with the French painting, Marcus Rediker (2004, 61-64) focuses on the variations and occurrences of symbols and figures, with, although brief and concise, attention to the features of the two female bodies. Regarding this, the historian emphasizes how the body of the pirate woman – violent, riotous, criminal, overflowing with anger and anguish, as the allegory of anarchy suggests – is manipulated and redefined within the precise contours of a figure that is both solemn and ethereal. This silhouette, untainted by any sign of effort, becomes an idealized representation, that seeks to unite and exalt both the artistic heritage of classicism and the contemporary conception of femininity (62). He writes, in fact, that «his critics notwithstanding, Eugène Delacroix has turned a partly naked woman into a partly nude woman, exerting over the female body an aesthetic control that parallels the taming of the warrior woman in popular balladry» (63). Concluding his reflections, Marcus Rediker insists on the possibility that the image of the pirate woman, symbolizing a subversive culture and a counterpower in opposition to the dominant politics and in the name of freedom, may have influenced Eugène Delacroix. If this correspondence, plausible but unverified, are indeed true, it would serve as a valid tribute to piracy, affirming how the freedom under the Jolly Roger contributed to inspiring one of the most famous depictions of liberty the modern world has ever known (64).

An Allegory of Piracy in Captain Charles Johnson, *Historie der Engelsche Zee-Roovers* (1725), Amsterdam, (fig.1).

Eugène Delacroix, *Liberty Leading the People* (1830); the Louvre, Paris (fig.2).

It is precisely upon this final assertion that I intend to focus, seeking to expand its perspective. Without engaging in a historical-aesthetic analysis of the work and its elements, which, being polysemic and multidirectional, would require a far broader frame, this contribution finds it appropriate to propose a deeper exploration of the *landscape* in which Liberty itself is situated.[7] A setting that, originally maritime, fluctuating, elusive and ungovernable, is transformed into a terrestrial, measurable, controllable and confinable one, *grounded* in bodies and feet that leave traces and erect barricades. An environment that, once again, exalts a terrestrial imaginary while suppressing, even erasing, the watery one from which it might have originated: on the right, wind and water are replaced by buildings and city views; at the center, the flag ceases to be the medium representing an entire community and enabling movement within the sea, instead being halved and raised in a gesture that incites, yet without taking action, emphasizing the individual role of commander over the surrounding context.

The evocative power that *Liberty Leading the People* has had and continues to have in the history of art and visual culture, regarding an iconography that upholds revolutionary aspirations, is undoubtedly undeniable (Skinner 2025). Nevertheless, this feminine figure, dressed in a semi-transparent white garment that seems to hover and bless the disheveled human bodies on the ground, appears to suggest that the struggle for freedom can be nothing other than a struggle for the land. Cannot, nor does it seem capable of being, anything other than a struggle for the homeland and for that people who, to the

[7] For a deeper examination of the political iconography of the landscape, see Daniels (1988) and Warnke (1997).

left of the painting, continue to fight with their feet firmly rooted on the ground. Yet, what would occur if this freedom were to refuse the claim of any land, homeland or landed people? What if this freedom sought no specific territory, no nation (Barrera de la Torre & Ince 2024) but instead, while preserving its features and perspectives, turned towards all those revolutionary bodies that were sacrificed in defense of its name and unreachable freedom?

The gaze of the pirate woman, whose body seems to come to life from the rugged cliffs, such is the hardness of her posture, is entirely directed toward a group of slender bodies positioned to the left of the illustration. These figures presumably represent the pirates who, once captured according to the law of the time (Rediker 2004, 13; 2007, 69), would be hanged along the coast to serve as a warning to anyone daring to follow the path of the Jolly Roger. While the gaze of the woman turns toward those captured bodies, her garment – indestructible and covered with small eyes – looks simultaneously forward and backward, elsewhere, suggesting a multi-directionality that opens onto other geographies. This stands in stark contrast to the iconographic model of the Leviathan, which serves as a monocular lens, drawing all gazes toward itself.[8]

This multi-directionality, which I define as a *maritime multi-perspective* adopting a slant position, looking both ahead and behind, enables the illustration to be reread on two levels: on one hand, beneath the giant flag, the pirate woman seems to assume the role of a responsible custodian of the history that precedes her, fully aware of the struggle for freedom that others before her fought for and died for; on the other hand, the slant gaze looking forward and in multiple directions on her garment seems suggesting that this struggle is far from and that the gaze must remain clear, vigilant, prepared, needing to become plural and open to all other directions, both by sea and by land. It appears as a warning, filled with eyes, positioned there to underscore that the freedom without nations nor borders demands constant vigilance, an unyielding awareness of what is intentionally hidden and a refusal to ever allow oneself to become blind or, even worse, to pretend not to see what is happening before and around us (de Souza, White & Springer 2016). And thus, it becomes necessary to interrogate how our politics might have differed had it been a woman emerging from the sea, facing outward and observing the events unfolding around her, rather than an ethereal woman *anchored* to the land tasked with representing one of the revolutions that have shaped European history (Traverso 2021). How would our understanding of liberty, fraternity and equality have been affected if, instead of lifeless bodies lying on the ground, we were confronted with those hybrid, inappropriable marine beings, both human and non-human? How might our language and imaginary have shifted if our idea of democracy had not been celebrated under the flag of a single nation-state, but under the emblem of the Jolly Roger?

Certainly, these are provocative and, in many respects, untranslatable questions, which I raise more to discuss the issue than to define it. The intent is to reinterpret certain images through the multifaceted lenses of those who move across the seas, whose movements and directions can provide alternative perspectives through which we might reconsider the way we name and represent our geographical and political existence and, consequently, our freedom (Wilson R. 2025). Perhaps then, rather than focusing on just a simple galleon, a complex ship or a transnational flag, we should begin by contemplating entirely from the environment itself and, through it, rethinking our positionings. Nevertheless, leading our imaginary to the Jolly Roger and examining our co-living beneath its agency could prove to be a valid starting point for this displacement.

[8] See David M. Hart's article on his website: http://www.davidmhart.com/liberty/Papers/Hobbes-LeviathanState/index.html.

3. … Jolly Roger to be free.

Voici venir l'heure où les mers de chaude colère vont remonter le courant glacé des fleuves, déborder, féconder à grandes brasses un sol sclérosé, pétrifié, arracher les frontières, emporter les églises, nettoyer les collines de suffisance bourgeoise, décapiter les pics d'insensibilité aristocratique, noyer les obstacles que la minorité des exploiteurs opposait à la masse des exploités, rendre à son devenir l'humanité en la libérant des institutions périmées, des peurs religieuses, de la mystique patriotarde et de tout ce qui fait et divinise les maux du plus grand nombre au profit des requins à deux pattes, de leurs rombières et de toute la clique.
(Crevel 1933, 169).

In an article entitled *Piracy as Method* (De Sutter 2011) the author advances the hypothesis of a critical and generative intersection between legal theories and literary studies which may emerge through the elaboration of what is there called 'epistemology of piracy'. A justification hijacking, by all possible means, of identity through the subversion of established boundaries**:** though, an epistemology that insists upon the porosity of the *et* positioned at the heart of *différance* (De Sutter 2011, 66) thereby facilitating a process of co-becoming that remains perpetually subject to contamination, appropriation and subsequent liberation. This co-becoming is specifically named *pirate methodology.* However, what does *piracy* mean today? Which are the categories, conceptual and imaginal, and thus political, through which is possible to question it and rethink of it, again and differently?

Piracy, in its intrinsic characteristics of in-betweenness – *extraterritorial, ex-straneus, extra legem* and yet consistently citizen of a state and thereby compelled to confront some institutions (Cotta 2023) – provides an epistemological method to reconsider our geographies as well as our co-existing through seas and within communities. The commonwealth under the Jolly Roger, in fact, establishes the very foundation of its freedom in the inseparable connection it shares with waves, currents and salty waters, whose limitless, unpredictable and uncontrollable nature, ensure the negation of any form of possession and domestication (Ganser 2020). And thus, could the figure of pirate reveal an alternative mode of conceptualization and representation our worlding? What if pirates were to become those uncomfortable, antagonist, antipathetic '*conceptual personae*' that Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1994) describe as capable of interacting in the very creation of thinkers' concepts? Unlike the characters in philosophical dialogues, who merely set out concepts,

> the role of *conceptual personae* is to show thought's territories, its absolute deterritorializations and reterritorializations. Conceptual personae are thinkers, solely thinkers, and their personalized features are closely linked to the diagrammatic features of thought and the intensive features of concepts. A particular conceptual persona, who perhaps did not exist before us, thinks in us. (Deleuze & Guattari 1994, 69).

Therefore, the *conceptual personae* create the very conditions of possibility for thought itself and are precisely regarded as the philosopher's heteronyms, insofar as the philosopher's own destiny – and with it the becoming and subject of their philosophy – appears to correspond to, and entirely depend upon, these *personae* (64). From this perspective, considering the pirate crew as a *conceptual persona* could open up a new mode of doing philosophy and, more broadly, of understanding what it truly means to embody a freedom of equals. More specifically, it could foster an ecological mode of thinking capable of developing a discourse of *domus* in opposition to domestication and subjugation (Malabou 2024, 249). Without a master, without a center – nomadic and

therefore ungovernable – pirates are audacious outlaws who elude gender, class and nation (Steinhoff 2012) moving across the waters and standing in defiance of all oppressive power. As such, they open the possibility for concepts and images that inspire a new approach to political thought and, by extension, to the understanding of geography.

It is therefore unsurprising that a recent publication on survival strategies and worldmaking is titled *Pour une écologie pirate. Et nous serons libres* (Ouassak 2023). In this text, the second volume of an ongoing trilogy, Fatima Ouassak presents a liberation project originating from working-class neighborhoods, founded on the connection to the land and its inherent freedom of movement. Although the focus remains terrestrial-centric, it is significant to highlight how the pirate imaginary serves as both the main axis and the guiding principle for a total liberation from contemporary forms of oppression. After suggesting that true liberty requires three struggles (for land, for labor rights and for cultural autonomy), Fatima Ouassak underscores the necessity of engaging with the sea (53-68) and a few pages later, she further questions the Mediterranean Sea.

> And what if the Mediterranean were to become an autonomous space, like pirate ships? We would take to the sea, and once the sea was freed, it would belong to no state, to no power. It would become a place of inalienability. It would no longer be the morbid theatre where Europe asserts its domination over Africa, but the space where we could experience our equal human dignity – what a beautiful reversal that would be! (Oussak 2023, 75; translation mine).

Ultimately, reclaiming the Mediterranean Sea to liberate it from the colonial occupation it endures and the sacred rights that such liberation would allow, serve to substantiate the potential of adopting a maritime multi-perspective that moves freely beneath the Jolly Roger. A pirate epistemology as a method of liberation and autonomy that, operating both linguistically and imaginatively, enables us to grasp erratic and multiple postures and directions through which – and toward which – we should orient our gaze to contemporary politics, to establish alternatives opposed to dominant systems.

In this context, Jolly Roger as a method would, in effect, enable the materiality of that extraordinary moment so crucially evoked by the surrealist and prophetic poet. The moment when the Castoriadis' *earthquake* engages with the sea, turning into movement of waters and manifesting as *the seas of hot anger* that will ascend the *frozen current of rivers*, overflow and, with sweeping force, revive a paralyzed, petrified soil, tearing down borders (Crevel 1933, 169; translation mine). Thus, freedom could materialize not only from the sea to the river, but also and once again, from the river to the sea(s) – and beyond.

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