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## Graphics of the multitude: reading figure and text in *Drawing from the City*

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### ABSTRACT

10 This essay interrogates the question of reading graphic novels from South Asia by proposing the analysis of *Drawing from the City*, the visual autobiography of Teju Behan, a contemporary artist from Rajasthan. The essay introduces the text and the author, who belongs to Jogi, a group classified as one of the 'other backward classes' in contemporary India. Instead of treating the book as ethnographic document or simple social testimony, this essay argues that Teju's narrative needs to be understood in its aesthetic dimension. Teju Behan is hence shown as an artist concerned with the passage from casteised labour to artistic work, and the possibility of linking individual experience to the formation of a collective. Indeed, a striking element of Teju's visuals is the use of artistic expression to envisage a multitude. From this point of view, the graphics are affiliated to the concept of art as 'liberated labour' necessary to the making of the multitude proposed by Italian philosopher Antonio Negri. In conclusion, this reading interprets *Drawing from the City* as an intense meditation on art and the possibilities of resistance to marginality.

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25 Art can only live within a process of liberation. Art is, so to speak, always democratic – its productive mechanism is democratic, in the sense that it produces language, words, colours and sounds which pull together into communities, new communities ... in order to construct art, we have to construct liberation in its collective figure. (Negri 51)

30 *Drawing from the City* is a graphic narrative produced by Tara Books, an independent publisher based in Chennai, in 2012. Tara is specialised in works by Adivasi writers and this specific book is authored by Teju Behan, the wife of a devotional singer belonging to the Jogi caste, one of the 'other backward classes' that have traditionally occupied a 'subaltern position' in Indian society (Jaffrelot 86).<sup>1</sup> The book's main plot revolves around the life of Teju, who in her youth had to leave her native village in Rajasthan because of a drought. Teju moved to Ahmedabad where, after years of poverty, she encountered artist Haku Shah, who encouraged Teju's husband Ganesh to translate his musical performance into drawing. Teju followed Ganesh by becoming an artist herself. *Drawing from the City* is Teju's work, dedicated to the memory of her husband, who passed away during the production of the volume. The book consists of visual and written elements, and has been manufactured

AQ2

with the help of Salai Selvam, V. Geetha and Gita Wolf, who contributed to the editing and translation of the oral narrative into written text.

5 *Drawing from the City* can be affiliated to other books disseminated by Tara, especially the visual narrative of tribal artists who emerged through the Pardhan Gond art movement initiated in the late 1980s. Like other authors published by Tara, the making of the text entails the transformation of oral tradition into visual narrative (Bowles 18–20). An important aspect of this work concerns its status as a book, now available to an international audience well beyond India, within what has been called a ‘world literary space’ of circulation and exchange (Casanova 82–102). By being bound into a book, Teju’s visual narrative is dis-  
10 seminated globally. However, the pages of the volume bear the trace of modes and media of expression which transcend the limits of the written page, especially Teju and Ganesh’s devotional songs. The text is, in itself, a work of translation, which attempts to reproduce on the written surface the songs and performances of the Jogi caste.<sup>2</sup> One of the main traditional economic activities of the Jogi is ‘a routine practice of performing song fragments and implicitly protecting a village from several agricultural pestilences, in exchange for pay-  
15 ment, traditionally uncooked flour, but more commonly other readily available foodstuffs or money’ (Napier 86). Ethnomusicologist John Napier shows how Jogi caste was described in derogatory terms in colonial ethnographies and how their traditional occupation continues to be seen in unfavourable terms as a kind of ‘begging’ (Napier 87). *Drawing from the City* is a reflection on the figure of Teju herself, her passage from devotional singer to visual artist.  
20

Reading this book, there needs to be an awareness of the distance that divides a reader outside India, only able to get access to Teju’s experience through the medium of the book, from the real life that is represented through its pages. Yet, can critical writing become a way to bridge this distance? One of the most controversial issues in current global literary  
25 studies concerns the distinction between the idea of close reading, established as hallmark of English and Comparative Literature, and the exigency of techniques of ‘distant reading’, which contextualise works of literature within a global frame of reference, beyond the nation, able to place each individual work within the history and geography of a global modernity. Close reading is based on the individual text, but in order to ‘understand the system in its  
30 entirety’, writes Franco Moretti, we need to go beyond it and ‘focus on units that are much smaller or much larger than the text: devices, themes, tropes – or genres and systems’ (Moretti 48–49). As the Warwick Research Collective explain in *Combined and Uneven Development*, Moretti’s intervention allows us to grasp world literature ‘as neither a canon of masterworks nor a mode of reading ... but as a system; and ... this system is structured  
35 not on *difference* but on *inequality*’ (7). World literature should not be reduced to a way of reading or a set of exemplary texts. World literature identifies a system of production that mirrors the material grounding of the global economy. Texts circulate – unevenly – in a worldly context of cultural and material reproduction. Within this systemic viewpoint, could close reading retain some value for grasping the unequal economic system that underlies  
40 the making of literary and artistic objects?

In the debate between close and distant reading – or text and system – a book like *Drawing from the City* shows that close reading is still crucial because artistic work takes the form of a textual object in order to circulate within an uneven global marketplace. The text cannot be separated from its material appearance in works and books, that is, objects of  
45 consumption. Yet, as Roland Barthes famously remarked in his reflections on text and work, the text is ‘experienced only in an activity of production’ (Barthes 157). The text, Barthes

remarks, 'decants the work ... from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice' (162). By being circulated internationally, the productive activity of the text becomes, unavoidably, the commodity-form of literature. As with any commodity, so the distribution of the text as a book embodies 'the social relation of the producers' (Marx 165) as a quality of the final product. Confronted with the text as commodity, the activity of close reading may still be necessary as alternative to a simple 'consumption' of literature. Indeed, close reading can be the prerequisite for connecting the nuances of poetic expression to the materiality of artistic production. The concept of the text in current debates on world literature can be helpful to signal the crucial interaction between art as material activity and art as commodity or product. For this reason, the act of reading South Asian graphic novels needs to achieve both closeness to the text and the awareness of global capitalism as material horizon, paying attention to the problem of material work in world literature. My reflections aim to propose a response to the question of world literature as mode of material production by emphasising the work of reading as possible counterpart to the art of writing, and radical alternative to mere cultural consumption. As James Procter points out, there are important 'questions of both proximity *and* distance that remain crucial to reading after empire' (Procter 7): how can attention to form become the precondition for engaging with the global and uneven context of circulation of literature?

Teju Behan's drawings tell the story of her life, especially the passage from her native village to life in the city and then the discovery of drawing as a medium of expression. These images do not simply represent a caste-based religious practice in commodified, textual form; they are the creative and critical thoughts of Teju as an artist. Doing justice to the book involves being able to respond to the narrative presented in it, in order to retranslate it into the experience of the reader. The following analysis will offer a reading of images from *Drawing from the City*, including references to the explanatory notes, which are contributed by the editors and translators at Tara. In the conclusion, I will return to the initial reflection on reading South Asian visual narratives today.

## 1. Girls with bicycles, or, art as liberated labour

After describing her childhood in Rajasthan, Teju mentions the event of a drought that compelled her community to flee the region and move to the neighbouring state of Gujarat. Rajasthan is a 'chronically drought-prone area' (Bokil 4171), where water scarcity occurs cyclically every few years. In the recent past, some droughts have proven devastating, deeply affecting the livelihood of the region. The 2000 drought caused a near-famine, with ruinous social, economic and environmental consequences. *Drawing from the City* documents how drought compelled Teju to move away from her village. The book reports her journey by train and her arrival in the city, Ahmedabad, where she starts a new life. In the city, Teju marries Ganesh, a traditional devotional singer, whom Teju joins by becoming a singer herself. After a year in Mumbai Teju and Ganesh decide to return home because life conditions become too difficult. It is at this point of the narrative that the passage from singing to drawing is described as a life-changing element by Teju. One image of the book captures the transition: across two pages, dots and lines represent a crowd of women riding bicycles. The image is very dynamic, giving a sense of speed and movement, and yet there is no central subject, no main character. The space of the page is filled with dots and lines, faces, bodies, bicycles, without apparent hierarchy. There is neither foreground nor background.

Spatial coordinates are displaced by a swarming aggregate of human figures. The image is black and white, but the use of different intensities of lines and dots creates a sense of varying tonalities and concentrations of mass and colour. All human figures are staring at the reader. Below the image, the text provides an explanation, which is a transcript of Teju's oral narrative, composed originally in Tamil and translated in English by the editors of the book, V. Geetha and Gita Wolf:

It is like magic. I sit in one place with paper and pen, and it is my hand that starts to move. Lines, dots, more lines, and more dots, and you have a picture. I can bring to life things that I have seen and known, but also things that I imagine. I can even bring the two together. (*Drawing* n.p.)

The image of the girls with bicycles is directly linked to the experience of drawing. The reason leading to the making of the image is explained by Teju, who says that she saw a girl on a bicycle going somewhere, and thus decided to represent a 'whole group of girls, all of them on the way somewhere' (*Drawing* n.p.). The image may seem simple, even playing with naivety and primitivism. There is no perspective, and pictures resemble tattoos or graffiti more than a drawing on paper. How can readers approach this image, as part of Teju's visual autobiography? The arrangement of textual and graphic representation provides two clear, unequivocal messages: the first one is about the 'magic' of drawing. The second one is about the subject: a girl on a bicycle turned into a crowd of girls staring back at the beholder of the image. I am going to consider these two aspects of the image.

Teju explains that drawing enabled her to depict real things alongside imagined ones. Drawing is hence implicitly different from any of the activities she did in her youth. Whereas devotional singing, her previous occupation, was linked to a casteised mode of survival, drawing allows a step beyond the immediate socio-economic context. Drawing brings the imagination and the real together. This may be reduced to a simple, even naïve reflection on the power of pen and paper, but it is in reality a deep reflection on the powers of artistic expression. The main quality of drawing is, according to Teju's explanatory note, 'the imagination'. And yet, Teju's decision to turn to drawing cannot be detached from her economic issues, caused by the unsustainability of devotional Jogi singing in contemporary India. A note in *Drawing from the City* explains that Ganesh and Teju became visual artists after their encounter with Haku Shah, an artist and anthropologist renowned for having promoted the inclusion of folk and tribal art into the Indian art scene. Drawing is today Teju's main work. And yet, what is the difference between caste-based devotional song and drawing for books that are commercially distributed worldwide?

Teju has become part of what is today an increasingly commodified art scene in India, where traditional forms of expression are caught into what Saloni Mathur describes as the 'merging of marketing and culture' (3) in the dissemination of contemporary Indian art. However, as Rashmi Varma remarks about the commercialisation of Pardhan Gond art, the inclusion of marginalised communities into the culture industry of Indian art is not simply reiterating economic exploitation. Varma writes:

[T]he art itself offers an allegory, however partial and incomplete, of the process by which it enters the world and is both transformed by it and transforms it ... I depart from accounts that see Adivasi or indigenous art as having been simply ravaged and desecrated by commercialization; instead I look at how the art itself exposes that process of commodification and accumulation on a global scale, and offers resistance to it. (Varma 749)

Indeed, Teju's work testifies to a new economic regime, where devotional singing is unsustainable and the making of a Jogi visual narrative can attract the attention of readers globally.

As an artist, Teju has been inserted in what Pierre Bourdieu called the 'field of cultural production', a space where 'works of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are known and recognised, that is, socially instituted as works of art and received by spectators capable of knowing and recognising them as such' (Bourdieu 37). The symbolic aspect of works of art, hence, cannot be divided from the material production of the work inside a field of institutions, publishers, readers and critics able to receive Teju's visuals *as work of art*. Indeed, the interplay of image and text in the book testifies to the needs of an international audience: the text is written in English, and it introduces the context of Teju's work, her life-conditions and life story. The links between figure and word exhibit the making of Teju's activity through the channels of an uneven economic system of global dimensions. Teju's image of the girls with bicycles can be approached as a profound meditation on this process. The first thing that should be noted is that the image does not represent a scene of traditional life in the village, nor is it a denunciation of the impoverished life-conditions of 'other backward classes' in India. *Drawing from the City* does not claim to be portraying any essence of cultural authenticity, nor can it be understood as a political work reporting the harsh life-conditions of the Jogi, though aspects of culture and politics do enter into the narrative. The reader gets to know about Jogi devotional singing. Furthermore, there are images in *Drawing from the City* that provide a testimony of the precarious situation of Teju's community, and the displacement caused by social and environmental devastation in Rajasthan. Other images in the text witness the extreme poverty Teju had to endure while fleeing her native region, and the dispossession of the poor living in slums in Ahmedabad.

The image of the girls with bicycles, however, signals a change in the graphic narrative. From autobiography of a Jogi artist, the book becomes reflection on the possibilities of art: bringing the real and the imagination together. The scene of the crowd of girls is suggestive because it shifts *Drawing from the City* from being a work by an 'other backward class' artist to be a reflection on the differences between art and labour. Drawing is presented by Teju herself as a kind of 'magic', which is opposed to all forms of labour and occupation she had known before: gathering food in the forest, doing domestic work, working in fields, and singing for the coins that people throw at Jogi singers in the streets. Drawing is different because it still is a form of labour – she has to draw for a living – but it is, at the same time, a kind of work with extraordinary potentialities. The question that the image in Teju's book raises can be expressed as follows: what kind of activity is drawing? The question is inherent to the graphic narrative itself, because Teju meditates on it. The author provides a reflection on drawing as a life-changing experience, a new activity that is substantially different from her previous jobs. This does not mean that links to devotional singing are severed. Rather, it means that drawing enables Teju to reflect further on her status as an artist, bringing the imagination together with the everyday. *Drawing from the City* can be read, from this point of view, as a work of art, because the book envisages a kind of 'artistic' labour that is not entirely submitted to the poverty, displacement and marginality that Teju had to experience. Drawing becomes, in Teju's captivating narrative, liberated labour.

In a series of letters published with the title *Art and Multitude*, Italian philosopher Antonio Negri provided a redefinition of art as a liberated, disalienated labour that corresponds to the potentialities of drawing explored by Teju in her work. The aim of juxtaposing Negri's reflection on art to Teju's graphic narrative should not be mistaken for forcing Indian art within the structures of Continental theory. Instead, a reading of *Drawing from the City* through the concepts of art and multitude developed by an Italian philosopher can be seen as a way of translating

the experience of the author into the experience of the reader. Instead of attributing Teju's expressive activity to the tradition of Hinduism or the ethnographic file on Jogi communities, my reading attempts to reflect on the transformation of Teju's labour from devotional singer to accomplished visual artist inserted in the global channels of circulation of late capitalism. As a graphic narrative, *Drawing of the City* embodies this passage from regional ethnographic context to global capital. The paradox of the situation captured by Teju in her picture of girls with bicycles is that her work becomes, at the same time, part of an economic regime of exploitation – as image that is printed, sold and reproduced – and yet a way of setting free creative abilities that are not exhausted by the re-appropriations of the art market.

Negri developed his concept of art as liberated labour in order to express a paradox that lies at the core of contemporary capitalism, in its abstract, cognitive, financial and neoliberal aspects. Negri writes that 'artistic labour is the index of human being's inexhaustible capacity to render being excedent – labour liberated ... from the obligation of exploitation, from alienation to a boss, from servitude' (Negri 49). Artistic activity, indeed, as Teju's drawing makes clear, is work, productive action. The acts producing the pictures that compose the book, *Drawing from the City*, are a form of labour, and they produce a commodity, the book itself, which is then distributed and purchased. But this process also entails the liberation of productive and creative potentialities that go beyond the product itself and create an excess. Liberated labour is human activity when it is not subjugated by forms of exploitation or dispossession; it is a 'constituting power' (Negri 60): whereas alienated labour is aimed at making profit, hence capital, liberated labour is the production of life through free creative energies. Teju discovers that drawing is a kind of 'magic' that enables her to link the world around her to the imagination, transgressing the narrative of poverty that her life seemed to incarnate after the escape from the drought in Rajasthan. Drawing becomes, for Teju, an expressive activity that cannot be reduced either to the biographical element or the commercialisation of her work. Antonio Negri's reflections resonate with Teju's work because they provide a theoretical formulation of the transformation involved in the liberation of creative ability enabled by drawing. Negri writes:

The work of art is always indissociably two things – incidentally, like all objects produced in the era of capitalism: it is both activity and commodity. And it is on the basis of this two-sidedness of productive activity that one can grasp ... the inner reality of the contemporary artistic relationship: not only a manner of producing art which could be understood as a simple production of commodities, but also a manner of production in general which becomes the very figure of *potenza* [strength and potentiality], in other words of the being-creative in the world. Labour power, a free bird in the forest of life. (Negri 109)

The picture of girls with bicycles included in *Drawing from the City* expresses this double-sidedness of artistic work in an era of capitalism. Sold and produced as commodity, the image is also sign of a labour-power that has the potential to elude the system of exploitation and appropriation of the market. It is not by chance that the episode narrating the discovery of drawing in Teju's graphic autobiography becomes a crucial step in the book, and the beginning of the representation of an important theme that Teju develops in the remaining pages of her volume.

## 2. Drawing the multitude

How does Teju's graphic narrative continue, after the crucial passage represented through the image of the girls on bicycle? The image derives, as Teju makes clear, from a scene

actually seen, a girl riding a bicycle. The reader does not know when and where Teju saw the scene, nor why has it become so important to be included in the volume. The image is captivating. The figures stare at us, readers of the text. It is very important to register what happens to Teju's story after her reflection on the liberation of creative potentialities engendered by the 'magic' of drawing. Before the image of the girls riding bicycles, the graphic narrative provided a linear account of Teju's life: childhood in a village, then the main event of the drought and relocation to slums in the city, the marriage with Ganesh and the beginning of an itinerant life as Jogi devotional singer. Then, the topic of the narrative changes abruptly. The remaining pages of the book do not tell Teju's life, but explore and expand on the potentialities that drawing gave Teju as an artist. After the image of girls with bicycles, other similar graphic elements follow: a kind of traffic jam, represented by cars, depicted with dots and lines. Two girls sit in each car, one of them watching outside. After the crowd of cars and girls, another crowd, packed on an airplane, and lastly, in the concluding image of the book, a group of women, this time using a parachute to escape from the cabin of the airplane. Teju writes that 'my women are not content to sit still. So I float them down, wondering where they should go next. Should they fly forever like birds? Or should I draw some lines taking them down to the sea?' (*Drawing* n.p.).

How to read the concluding images of Teju's graphic autobiography? The images have a figural value, being seemingly irreducible to any kind of narrative or symbolic structure. The distinction between textual and figural space has been developed by French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard, who writes in *Discourse, Figure*: 'The two spaces are two orders of meaning that communicate but which, by the same token, are divided ... the text and the figure each engender, respectively, an organisation specific to the space they inhabit' (205). In *Drawing from the City*, the captions tie the images to Teju's autobiography – a narrative, a discourse – while the pictures gradually detach themselves from the text, becoming figural elements, especially in the conclusion of the volume, where the visual is almost independent of any narrative frame. Images exceed the enclosure of the narrative and any symbolic aspect of the work. They do not really conclude the book, which is rather interrupted by the explanatory note, 'I rest my pen here, for a moment, I have time to decide' (*Drawing* n.p.). The interruption may or may not be part of Teju's own authorial intention. The caption is, in fact, a transcript from Teju's oral narratives, but it is written, edited and composed by the editors. The interruption that provisionally concludes the book can be grasped as the inability of the book-form, the commodity, to capture fully the artistic activity of Teju, especially her discovery of drawing. Teju interrupts the work, but the work does not end with the book. The interruption expands on the opening already announced by the divide between image and narrative: the commodity-form is overwritten by a reference to the materiality of a continuing creative activity. The narrative is in abeyance; the gap between image and text deconstructs the ensemble of the graphic narrative. The graphic part and the narrative element take different paths: whereas the narrative of Teju's story is interrupted with the reflection on the potentialities of drawing, images continue to flow, to evade storytelling, thereby manifesting Teju's creative power, her skill as a visual artist in a pure state. One of the aims of reading the visual narrative should hence be to find a story for the arresting pictures that conclude the book. What do they represent? Why were they included in the text? The most evident and striking element of the concluding pictures of *Drawing from the City* is that the images do not represent Teju or her family or surroundings. The end of the graphic narrative tends towards de-individuation. The subject that is

constantly represented in the concluding images is a multitude. A single girl on a bicycle becomes a crowd of girls and women in constant motion: with bicycles, cars, airplanes and parachutes. Teju's multitude has no identifiable character but a movement that cannot be interrupted. The breakdown of familial and individual narrative coincides with the emergence or prefiguration of a collective entity. These images can be read as a transition from Teju's reflection on the potentialities of the visual medium to prefiguring an as-yet inexistent collective of the poor, a multitude that, in Teju's work, has neither direction nor clear political orientation. The work does not provide a political statement on fighting for the rights of 'other backward classes', to which Jogi community belongs, alongside Dalit and tribal populations in India. There is no such thing as a political message in *Drawing from the City*. And yet, the figures represented by Teju seem to connect the transformation of one's own productive potential to an aesthetic of the multitude, a concept that Negri defined in many of his works, which also finds expression in *Art and Multitude*. The element of the 'multitude' that can be found as poetic element of *Drawing from the City* has to do with the creative potential of art. Indeed, the multitude is, first of all, a constructive, creative, even poetic process – an assembling, gathering together of what Negri calls 'singularities', that is, elements that cannot be reduced to the logic of equivalence imposed by capitalism and the market (Negri 87). The multitude is the expression of liberated labour and human creative strength; it can be seen as a collective movement that is not blocked by apparatuses of capture such as political parties or modern concepts of communal unity: proletariat, people or working class. The multitude is the coming together of irreducible stories and subaltern living experiences, with no pre-given political programme, but only a common resistance to inequality and the dispossession of productive resources.<sup>3</sup>

It is worth noting how Teju's multitudes could be connected to a rethinking of collective belonging in India, a country where since Independence, as Arundhati Roy points out in her recent introduction to Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste*, "the people" was not a homogeneous category that glowed with the rosy hue of innate righteousness' (45). Rather, the making of a unified idea of 'the people' has led to suppression of minorities, marginal communities, Dalit, Adivasi and other backward classes. The 'idea of India', as Perry Anderson makes clear, should be rather seen as 'the Indian ideology' (Anderson 3–4), a structure of feeling that keeps the country together at the price of what Roy calls a widespread 'quotient of Brahminism' that corresponds to violence and discrimination at any level of the social hierarchy. As Arundhati Roy writes:

It is the ultimate means of control in which the concept of pollution and purity and the perpetration of social as well as physical violence – an inevitable part of administering an oppressive hierarchy – is not just outsourced, but implanted in everybody's imagination, including those at the bottom of the hierarchy. (Roy 51)

Against hierarchical discrimination and a homogeneous idea of 'the people', Teju's multitudes construct a sense of belonging that is horizontal, de-individualised and linked to the possibilities that the channels of global capitalism could give, in spite of its violence and inequality.

Teju's concluding graphics are intimations of a multitude to-come. Her pictures do not express any unifying vision but provide a graphic representation of the possibility of collective existence. A single girl becomes, in Teju's imagination, a multitude of figures elegantly moving across an empty space, at the same time independent of each other and interdependent, gathered together in a common tension or movement. In *Art and Multitude*, Negri

points out the indissoluble link between art, creative labour, and collective existence. He remarks that there is

no production without collectivity. There are no words without language. There is no art without production and without language. Art is, above all, this synthesis. Art is the construction of a new language which, first, alludes to a new being. (40)

Art becomes, from this point of view, the 'allusion' or suggestion of a new collective being, and the artist is redefined by Negri as an 'intermediary' (73) between collectivity and the occurrence of a revolutionary event.

For this reason, *Drawing from the City* needs to be approached on a purely aesthetic level – without being reduced to political programmes or to sociological/ethnographic pigeon-holing. A way of reading the book closely is by detecting the shifts, transitions and allusions presented by the graphic narrative itself. Without mentioning any politics, the graphics drawn by Teju envisage and imagine the making of a multitude of women moving restlessly through the spaces opened by the symbols of capitalism and modernity: cars, airplanes, parachutes. Teju's women embark these objects of modernity but also defy their powers of constriction, because they are represented as an elusive crowd, on the move, perhaps on the verge of finding a common direction and creating a real social transformation. The final image represents women escaping from an airplane, trying to find a direction but still not sure where to go. In its engagement with global capitalism – through its symbols but also material forms of production and reproduction – Teju's book is at the same time a commodity and a reflection on the liberation of the potentialities of creative labour. Teju's graphics of the multitude suggest the making of an as-yet non-existent collective subject gathered through the spaces and media of capitalist modernity, and yet constantly challenging the strictures of modern means of transportation.

### 3. Conclusion

They say the poor have nowhere to go. I am not sure. When people don't have enough to eat, they take the train to the city, to find work. (*Drawing* n.p.)

In these reflections, a graphic narrative by a Jogi artist has been interpreted as expression of liberated labour and prefiguration of the multitude. Her images have stimulated a reading response through references to the concept of art proposed by philosopher Antonio Negri. In the context of contemporary South Asian graphic novels and visual narratives, such reading can suggest a few points, which are still open questions in postcolonial literary studies. First of all, graphic novels by Dalit, tribal or 'other backward classes' artists should be approached as works of art, if their authors want to be recognised as such. There is no point in trying to do justice to the voices of subaltern artists without taking their works as seriously as critics and readers would take a novel by Salman Rushdie or any other internationally recognised creative writer. If 'debased labour is the source of the non-transferable specificity of the caste condition', as Gajrawala (347) points out in an essay on Dalit literature, understanding artistic production as a form of disalienated labour can indicate potentialities that go beyond the specificity of caste discrimination. A subaltern aesthetics could suggest the making of collective subjects, future multitudes at the same time eluding caste violence and capitalist dispossession. This requires, hence, a practice of close reading, which does not overlook the social context in which the texts are produced, but rather rethinks the position of texts within a global circuit of circulation and reproduction.

In the case of graphic novels, this effort requires that pictures are not always reduced to the narrative frame. Teju's book can be partly read as an autobiography, but there is a point at which the text moves away from the autobiographical on a purely figural level. The richness of graphic narrative derives from the coexistence of visual and written elements, which should maintain a relative autonomy and independence from each other. In *Drawing from the City*, graphics are a counterpoint to the text, which does not always register in full what is happening in the image. The book registers a difference between the image and the narrative, which appears in the captions in English translation, mainly aimed at an international audience. The narrative hence indicates the entanglement of the work within an uneven economic system of circulation. Yet, the figural density of Teju's drawings escapes the capture of the narrative frame. Close reading can fine-tune the understanding of the book to those aspects or details that cannot be fully explained and absorbed by the narrative. This excess, or interruption of the narrative, is the space where, within the commodity-form of the book, a glimpse of the material activity of art as liberated labour can emerge. Therefore, Teju's drawings appear as a counter-discourse that silently exceeds editorial work, packaging and commodification. Accordingly, reading South Asian graphic novels can be a productive intervention in current controversies over the concept of 'reading' in world and postcolonial literature. As Aamir Mufti writes in an important essay:

The universalism that is inherent in the task of rethinking the concept of world literature and its usefulness ... has to be confronted with linguistic heterogeneity and the concept itself uncoupled from the effects of standardization and homogenization both within and across languages and cultures that come masked as diversity. (Mufti 493)

Reading graphic narratives, indeed, should contribute to a rethinking of world literature in postcolonial contexts, by focusing on inequality, injustice and exclusion instead of the reifications of 'diversity' or 'identity'. What is needed is a practice of reading that is not 'distant', Mufti writes,

[B]ut neither can it take the form of close reading for its own sake. What is needed is better close reading, attentive to the worldliness of language and text at various levels of social reality, from the highly localized to the planetary as such. (Mufti 493)

Graphic novels can complicate the concept of a worldly close reading with references to the intersection of text and image, and the use of different media and tools of expression. Instead of collapsing narrative and figure, close reading can provide a way of exploring histories, experiences and structures of feeling that are not always registered in the plot or verbal language. The combination of visual and written elements can express an idea of art that is not only commodity, object of spectacle and consumption, but also productive activity and creation of subjectivities. In the context of South Asian visual narratives, Teju's work can be approached as a reflection on the role of art in liberating labour against the grain of the channels of global capitalism. Whereas Teju's work circulates as a commodity produced for an international audience, the discrepancies between narrative and figure indicate a space of production, activity and practice that is not exhausted by the appropriations of the capitalist world system. Teju's creative activity is merely paused in the concluding pages of the book: images overflow the enclosure and binding of the book by gesturing towards potentialities that go beyond the commodity.

For this reason, a practice of close reading needs to be attentive to the nuances of the image alongside the questions of economic dispossession, uneven circulation and

commodification. It can be a way of relating the study of graphic novels to what Stephen Morton, following Walter Benjamin's theses on the concept of history, refers to as the 'tradition of the oppressed': 'both the histories of anti-colonial resistance and struggle and the different aesthetic forms in and through which these histories are mediated in postcolonial writing' (Morton 23). Instead of treating these 'aesthetic forms' as a 'fixed object of knowledge', an emphasis on disalienated labour can be a way of approaching what Morton calls the 'emergent and often unarticulated forms of knowledge and agency of people whose lives are subjected to the forces of imperialism' (23). The liberation of labour registered in *Drawing from the City* could hence indicate a step in the making of a future collective engagement, which will hopefully dismantle caste violence and, at the same time, the inequality that capitalism constantly reproduces, in India as elsewhere.

## Notes

1. Christophe Jaffrelot shows that the recent political mobilisation of other backward classes 'for the first time seriously questions upper-caste domination of the public sphere' (86). In 1989, the attempt by the Indian government to implement the Mandal Commission, which attributed seats and reservations to other backward classes, provoked strong protests by upper-castes (Omvedt 87).
2. Ann Grodzins Gold provides a remarkable description of Jogi performances, which are based on the idea of generosity as 'awakening to the imperceptible', an expression meaning 'waking up their listeners to the existence of invisible realities far more significant than the mundane ones' but also warning the listener that not giving to the performer may bring greater calamities (Gold 91). Gold also makes clear how performers make a sharp distinction between 'begging' and Jogi ritual performances. A selection of songs by Ganesh and Teju can be found online through the 'Beat of India' website, which includes a brief biographical note: <http://www.beatofindia.com/arists/gjtb.htm>
3. Hardt and Negri write in *Multitude*:

The multitude is an internally different, multiple social subject whose constitution and action is based not on identity or unity (or, much less, indifference) but on what it has in common ... the multitude is the common subject of labour, that is, the real flesh of postmodern production, and at the same time the object from which collective capital tries to make the body of its global development. (100–101)

Interestingly, the multitude and the work of art have, according to Negri, a crucial element in common: both are instances of liberated labour with the potential to dismantle forms of power, hierarchy and exploitation, and yet always at risk of being constrained by the reifications of capitalism. The horizontal, anti-hegemonic and heterogeneous aspects of the multitude prevent it from being ascribed to a political programme that would replicate exclusions and force irreducible singularities into newly founded structures of domination.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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