



## Kindness and Solidarity as Political Acts

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In this article I reflect upon human (re)actions in times of crisis. A series of crises mark our present (Brexit; the election of Trump; the rise of populism; femicides; the migrant crisis; ongoing conflicts and wars; and ethnic and racial hatred). Conflict, violence, and fear are predominant, while rage, selfishness, and the new kind of “keyboard-hate” are rampant, and they all contribute to the formation of exclusionary discourses, which in turn bear an impact on policies as well as on the culture produced. Dystopian fiction is flourishing and is the preferred artistic and literary response. To counter the “enormous rage” of the times, I argue that solidarity, kindness, as well as a feminist education are the political acts needed today. A reflection on these notions is followed by an examination of these themes in some utopian and dystopian works: Mary Shelley’s novel, *Frankenstein* (1831), the film, *Cloud Atlas* (2012) by the Wachowskis and Tom Tykwer, and Octavia E. Butler’s science fiction story, “Speech Sounds” (1983).

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– For GL

*Tell her that kindness matters. Praise her when she is kind to other people. But teach her that her kindness must never be taken for granted. Tell her that she, too, deserves the kindness of others. Teach her to stand up for what is hers. If another child takes her toy without her permission, ask her to take it back, because her consent is important. Tell her that if anything ever makes her uncomfortable, to speak up, to say it, to shout.*

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

*Dear Ijeawele, Or a Feminist Manifesto in Fifteen Suggestions* (2017)

I would like to start with a couple of examples that explain what happens when we employ or dismiss solidarity and kindness.<sup>1</sup> The first example comes from the healthcare system a country adopts. Why should you care whether a person totally unknown to you gets healthcare? In Europe, where good health is among the universal rights granted by the constitutions of most countries, healthcare is provided to all citizens and residents under a mixed public-private system. In Italy, for example, family doctors, specialists, and diagnostic tests are free with minor copay fees, prescription drugs are subsidized, and emergency medical services are always free of charge to all, including undocumented people. I like to think that the fight currently going on in the US over what has been known as “Obamacare”, The Patient Protection and Affordable Care, is incomprehensible to most Europeans. It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze in depth the different systems, their flaws and benefits, but the idea of extending health insurance to that part of the US population that lacks it, only seems a sensible notion.<sup>2</sup> A system where, based on income, all contribute to taking care of those who are in the community is an example of kindness and solidarity. We are all dependent people, needing each other for support and comfort.

On a different matter, a reversed situation between Italy and the US can be seen on the issue of recognition of citizenship. A child born within the territory of the US, or even “a person of unknown parentage found in the United States while under the age of five years”, is considered a citizen (§ 1401, “Subchapter III,” 421). In Italy, on the other hand, at the time of writing, the Parliament is still debating a law that would grant citizenship to children born or raised in Italy to non-Italian parents. According to the current law (91/1992), children born in Italy to legal immigrants must apply for Italian nationality after they turn 18. The process, however, is especially long and complicated, and while waiting for this recognition, which can take up several years, they must apply for individual temporary residence permits in order to avoid deportation to countries where they have barely or never lived. The new “tempered” law would combine the principles of *ius soli* (the right to citizenship based on one’s place of birth) and those of *ius culturae*, that is, cultural participation (at least five years of school in Italy after reaching the age of twelve). The proposal is met with great resistance from right-wing parties, the Northern League, and the 5 Stars Movement,

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this work was presented at the 18<sup>th</sup> Utopian Studies Society Conference “Solidarity and Utopia” (Gdansk, 5-8 July 2017). I would like to thank Sam Whitsitt, Betsy Whitaker, Rita Monticelli as well as the conference audience for their stimulating comments.

<sup>2</sup> A similar argument could be made about blood donation, which in most European countries is free while in the US is a paid service.

who are all exploiting the anti-immigrant sentiment in view of the next elections. In particular, they are capitalizing on the “Italians first” reaction, as if to extend rights to others would diminish one’s own.<sup>3</sup> These examples, I would argue, show how kindness and solidarity are intrinsically connected.

Along the same line of thinking, I would like to offer another instance of a failure of kindness and its disturbing consequences on the matter of intercultural integration in Italy. A cultural association from the city of Forlì, where I teach, recently invited me to comment on an Italian documentary by Antonio Rezza and Flavia Mastrella, called *Milano, via Padova*. The documentary shows the actor-performer Rezza walking along via Padova, a street in a problematic area in Milan, where many immigrants live. In 1999 the area became infamous for a series of criminal acts that left nine people killed in nine days. Demonstrations against immigrants from Albania and Africa followed, until it was then discovered that the killings were the work of white criminals, headed by a Dutchman. In the video, Rezza interviews Italian citizens and migrants and decides to ask absurd, paradoxical questions that no one is able to deconstruct or defuse. A recurrent question is, “Would you host an immigrant in your living room for free?” and when most people say no, he provokes them, “Why not? What’s wrong with someone sitting on your couch, doing nothing all day long?” which often provokes even stronger reactions. The film raised much laughter in the audience, despite its very strong racist comments. My reaction, however, was one of discomfort. I felt displaced and uneasy. I disliked the racist people and their ideas, but I could not laugh at them; I did not enjoy the feeling of complacency, of moral superiority that allows us to feel better than the people interviewed. But not only that: I think the reactions the documentary stimulates can actually be problematic, as they make us concentrate on the inhumanity and ignorance of others while letting us remain oblivious to our own “privilege”. Despite the possible intention of the authors to create a dialogue between immigrants and natives, the documentary ultimately insists on division and differences. In the end, there are very few moments of real dialogue in the film, and no instances of kindness. And considering the reaction of the public, no kindness seems to be elicited by its being seen. Even more remote is the possibility that the documentary promotes an intercultural dialogue between the divided groups, including “enlightened” spectators and “ordinary” people.

I believe that kindness can become a revolutionary act in a world characterized by selfishness and hatred. These are only a couple of examples that form the background to my reflections on our need for kindness. Moving from these personal and political considerations, I intend to reflect upon human (re)actions in times of crisis. We live in a time of crises: Brexit; the election of Trump; the rise of populism; femicides; the migrant crisis; ethnic and racial hatred; and terrorism and ongoing conflicts and wars. Conflict, violence, and fear are predominant, while rage, selfishness, and the new kind of “keyboard-hate” are rampant, and they all contribute to the formation of exclusionary discourses – just as the ones presented in my introduction – which in turn have an impact on political policies as well as on the cultures they produce. In utopian literature, for example, dystopian fiction is flourishing and is the preferred artistic and literary response to these times. Originally, I had intended to follow the reflection on kindness and solidarity with an examination of their presence in some recent utopian and dystopian novels. But, interestingly, it has been very hard to find

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<sup>3</sup> Again, a similar reaction has been present in Italy with regard to same-sex marriage.

kindness and compassion in recent works. Therefore, I will draw instead from *The Feminist Utopia Project*, edited by Alexandra Brodsky and Rachel Kauder Nalebuff (2015). But I will also turn to that very first science fiction novel, Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1831), to a recent film, *Cloud Atlas* (2012) by the Wachowskis and Tom Tykwer, and to Octavia E. Butler's science fiction story, "Speech Sounds" (1983).

The word kindness, meaning "kind deeds; kind feelings; [the] quality or habit of being kind" (Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.), comes obviously from the Middle English ("kinde") and Old English ("[ge]cynde") words for "kind". Originally referring to the state of being "natural, native, innate, [...] with the feeling of relatives for each other", "kind" is etymologically linked to "kin" – also through Old English ("cynn"), referring to "family; race; kind, sort, rank; nature". Hence, kindness is first of all used toward kinship and those who are similar to us. In time, it has developed to suggest the quality of being "benign, compassionate, loving, [and] full of tenderness" and "friendly, deliberately doing good to others" (Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.). It is interesting that both the Germanic and the Latinate words are similar because the root of both terms is related to the quality of being good and compassionate. Kindness and gentleness are linked to the sense of being good to one's own, to one's family: "kin" is at the root of kindness and "gens/gentilis" (meaning, "of the same family or clan") is at the heart of gentleness (Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.). But when we take into consideration a similar word, such as "tenderness", with its meaning of "kind, affectionate, [and] loving", a devaluation of the quality of being compassionate is introduced: to be tender is to be weak, "soft, easily injured", from both Old French "tender", meaning "soft, delicate; young", as well as Latin "tenerem", also meaning "soft, delicate; of tender age, youthful" (Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.). In contrast, another word in the same semantic field, "solidarity" comes from "solid" – from Old French "solide", meaning "firm, dense, [and] compact" – which, in the late 14<sup>th</sup> century, also meant "not empty or hollow", and again from Latin "solidus", that is, "firm, whole, undivided, entire", and therefore figuratively "sound, trustworthy, [and] genuine" (Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.). The classical root of "solidarity" can also be linked to a Latin expression, "in solidum obligari", meaning to pay one's debt in full. And thus, in Italian, solidarity is also linked to "soldo" (money) and "soldato" (someone fighting for money, in the Middle Ages; see Covi 2016, 148).

It is only after the French Revolution that the new meaning of "communion of interests and responsibilities, mutual responsibility" (a coinage of the *Encyclopédie*, 1765) is introduced from the French "solidarité" (1829): a word deriving from "solidaire", meaning "interdependent, complete, entire" (Online Etymology Dictionary n.d.). Whereas the classical root links solidarity to the law, money, soldiers, and the state of being solid, it took the French Revolution for the modern root of solidarity to be linked to social and ethical values of the community. Therefore, what do we talk about when we use these terms? What kind of solidarity? What kind of kindness? I will concentrate primarily on kindness and use this term for two reasons: first, because it has undergone a kind of feminization, for which it has been disparaged – and therefore needs to be reevaluated – and second, as I will show in my examples, because kindness is the notion that mediates between the vulnerability of tenderness and the strength of solidarity.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A related and yet different concept is that of "compassion" – the ability to be aware of the pain of the others and an inclination to act to relieve that pain. On compassion, see Lampert (2005) and Prete (2013), among others. On solidarity, see Rodotà (2014) and Covi (2016); on tenderness, see Guanzini

While kindness and tenderness might be deemed to be inadequate for the rage that is rampant in today's world, I would like to suggest that they are exactly what is needed to be human and hopefully take action to change our culture. For most of western history, the prevailing tradition of kindness has been Christianity, up until the 17<sup>th</sup> century when the concept "came under increasing attack" (Phillips & Taylor 2010, 5). In a study on kindness, psychoanalyst Adam Phillips and historian Barbara Taylor notice how, today, kindness is "incidentally praised while being implicitly discouraged" (2010, 6). They define it as "the ability to bear the vulnerability of others, and therefore of oneself" and add that it "has become a sign of weakness", so much so that most people today believe that "kindness is a virtue of losers" (2010, 6-7).<sup>5</sup> However, the devaluation of kindness is not a recent phenomenon: "one of the key outcomes of the egoism/kindness quarrel", Phillips and Taylor argue, "was to feminize kindness" (2010, 16). This was, I would add, the result of a binary logic that sees men as rational and women as emotional, according to which kindness becomes a feminine prerogative linked to maternal love. From ancient times, "pro-kindness thinkers had worried that too much sympathy might undermine manly gravitas", thus, by the close of the Victorian period, "kindness had been largely feminized" (Phillips & Taylor 2010, 42; 41). The derogatory appraisal of kindness continued into the modern age, where competitive individualism has become the prevailing consensus. Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan's electoral victories further contributed to the reinforcement of the dominant egoistic narrative of neo-liberal capitalism, which, Phyllis and Taylor remind us, "is no system for the kind hearted": being "a competitive society, one that divides people into winners and losers, breeds unkindness" (2010, 106-07).

The effects of a failure of kindness in dystopian fiction, old and new, can testify to what we risk and lose when we let go of kindness and tenderness. In Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, it is the lack of kindness and recognition that transforms the creature into the monster. His creator, who at times is deprived of words at his sight, reacts with "rage and hatred", while the "barbarous villagers" even attack him (1992, 102; 108). It is a sentiment of exclusion that transforms the creature into a wretched man, as he recalls the events that led him to be violent: "everywhere I see bliss, from which I alone am irrevocably excluded. I was benevolent and good; misery made me a fiend" (1992, 103). Acts of gentleness, on the other hand – "the gentle manners" of the cottagers – shock the monster and affect him to the point that he "longed to join them, but dared not" (1992, 113): kindness in fact breeds kindness and the monster stops stealing the food from the cottagers and helps them, unseen, by gathering wood for them (1992, 114). The vision of kindness and joy, however, makes him reflect upon his own condition: whereas he would like to be part of the community of the cottagers, he realizes he is "dependent on none, and related to none": there is therefore, no *kindness* for him (1992, 131). Despite his deformed state, he believes he is worthy of receiving "kindness and sympathy," but the lack of recognition on the part of both his creator and the cottagers dispels the "feelings of kindness and gentleness" and gives place instead "to hellish rage" (1992, 143).

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(2017); while on positive, communal responses to disaster, see Solnit (2010). A recent study on finding hope in times of crisis is Solnit (2016).

<sup>5</sup> US President Donald Trump strikes me as probably one of the great examples of a person who promotes the idea that kindness is weakness: his infamous refrain, "you're fired!", in his TV show *The Apprentice*, epitomizes the absolute pleasure of hurting another.

Although I do not intend to use the novel to suggest that lack of recognition necessarily breeds or justifies rage and acts of violence, the novel can aptly remind us of the consequences of denying the other, when our reaction to otherness is devoid of any kindness. As Slavoj Žižek writes, the other is tolerated and accepted as long as they are perceived as similar or assimilated; as long as their presence is not “invasive”, that is, when they are not really other. When the other is perceived in all their difference, the common reaction is one of fear and hatred (see Žižek 2005, 82, qtd. in Guanzini 2017, 41-2). Hate and fear lead us to perceive the other as perpetually and negatively other, as lawyer-activist Valarie Kaur has stated: immigrants are perpetually foreigners and potentially terrorists. This is true for different ex-centric subjects: Muslims are “perpetually foreign, potentially terrorist, automatic suspects”; Blacks are seen as “criminals”; Latinos as “illegal”; LGBTQ+ people as “deviant”, while women continue to be viewed as “property” (Kaur 2016).

The film *Cloud Atlas*, based on David Mitchell’s eponymous book, comprises six related but separate stories that form a visionary journey on interconnectedness and on the value of kindness for utopia. In each story, a protagonist struggles against individual and societal acts of unkindness – greed, corruption, and injustice. In particular, the segment dedicated to Sonmi-451, a genetically modified clone, takes place in a post-apocalyptic Korea in 2144 and provides an example of individual and collective utopian struggle based on the principles that the former slave-clone dictates and broadcasts to the states and off-world colonies that make up the future as portrayed in the film. These principles are about responsibility; knowledge and respect for the other; and kindness and interconnectedness:

The nature of our immortal lives is in the consequences of our words and deeds;  
To know oneself is only possible through the eyes of the other;  
Our lives are not our own. From womb to tomb we are bound to others, past and present. And by each crime and every kindness we birth our future.

The utopian horizon of the film is maintained through this idea of interconnectedness and relationality. Each story, in fact, presents individual struggles against different forms of colonial, corporate, neoliberal, and globalized powers – struggles that succeed when an individual opens him/herself to kindness, recognizes an “other”, and trusts that other. Just to give a couple of examples from the film, the seed for a radical transformation of the social order is established when the recognition and vulnerability associated with kindness are embraced: when a young member of the insurgent Union of the Rebels recognizes the clone’s humanity, and when the clone herself recognizes his kindness, seeing for the first time through his eyes “what [she] was and what [she] could become”. And it is also the look of recognition exchanged between the nineteenth-century notary at the center of the first story and the slave who is being whipped – that look of recognition of the essential humanity of the other. As a result of these moments of kindness, changes are enacted, and small utopias – however frail and temporary – are created. And while one uprising may fail, it will nonetheless echo into the future and inspire others, as did the notary’s individual decision to fight against the institution of slavery. After all, it is also from small acts of kindness that the possibility of a utopian transformation is created. Or, as the notary says, “what is an ocean but a multitude of drops?”.

But despite the importance of kindness, our society tends to ignore the dire consequences of relationships without solidarity. Just telling people to be kind,

however, is not enough and is not going to work. We need to turn to the issue of education, instead. Theodor Adorno considers education as a powerful instrument of transformation, the only possibility that “Auschwitz not happen again” (Adorno 2005, 191). He identifies in coldness, “the inability to identify with others”, one of the reasons why people accepted the horror of the concentration camps (Adorno 2005, 201). At the root of coldness, Adorno places “the ideal of being hard” – that is, the opposite of being tender and, hence, kind (Adorno 2005, 197). “Being hard”, he continues,

the vaunted quality education should inculcate, means absolute indifference toward pain as such. In this the distinction between one’s own pain and that of another is not so stringently maintained. Whoever is hard with himself earns the right to be hard with others as well and avenges himself for the pain whose manifestations he was not allowed to show and had to repress. This mechanism must be made conscious, just as an education must be promoted that no longer sets a premium on pain and the ability to endure pain. (Adorno 2005, 198)

Western traditional education privileges rationality, objectivity, and coldness over emotions – those same principles together with efficiency, individualism, and maximization that lie at the basis of new-classical economics. And emotions are devalued when perceived as weaknesses. Tenderness and kindness call into question hegemonic masculinity as they suggest a lack of virility. Similarly, emotions should not be seen as weak components of our critical discourse. Rita Monticelli rightly suggests that “one should not be afraid to appear less of an intellectual if [...] words such as emotion, affect, and solidarity [are taken] to be essential parts and needs of [his or her] identity” (Monticelli 2011, 3; my translation).

But how can kindness then be a catalyst for utopia? First, we need to strip it from the religious associations it might have, and then we need to rescue it from its derogatory connotation. Kindness and tenderness – the recognition of vulnerability and the strength of solidarity – can be seen as fundamentals of feminist traditions, along with the problematic notion of “sisterhood” that, I agree with Angelika Bammer, should not have been dismissed completely. Guided by her feminist belief in the power of collective action, Bammer “highlight[s] the importance of sisterhood (a word that long ago went out of fashion in feminist circles) as a foundation for a feminist politics” (Bammer 2015, xlvii). Aware of the problems of essentialism associated with the word “sisterhood”, Bammer nonetheless calls for the re-inclusion of “the belief in the transformative potential of women coming together in what we called ‘sisterhood’, even when that commonality is not a given, but the endpoint of a struggle we have to work toward” (Bammer 2015, xlvii). In its struggle to realize emancipatory worlds for all of those who have been historically othered, contemporary feminism, for Bammer, needs to continue to invoke “sisterhood as a utopian principle” (Bammer 2015, xlviii).<sup>6</sup>

Together with sisterhood, I believe that kindness and tenderness can be founding features of a feminist education toward utopia. In one of the articles in *The Feminist Utopia Project*, Ileana Jiménez explores the idea of a feminist education and explains how it would sustain a utopia:

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<sup>6</sup> For Bammer, the concept of sisterhood is well summarized in Estelle Carol’s words: “the love we tried to feel for one another and, to some extent, actually did” (2015, xlviii), which she considers foundational to the utopian feminism of the 1970s.

Bullying and harassment stem from racism and sexism, homophobia and transphobia. A feminist education is about stopping this kind of ignorance and violence so that we can cultivate compassion and love instead. So, what if the goal of a feminist school was to teach young people to love? Wouldn't that be the ultimate goal of utopia? To live in a loving world? And wouldn't schools be the first place where we could teach these skills to help sustain the utopia we want to live in? (Jiménez 2015, 130-31)

In our relationships as well as in the education we want, we must act as models, and promote and reward kindness instead of hardness: in the words of Mindi Rose Englart, another contributor to *The Feminist Utopian Project*, we need “empathy over defensiveness, reason over reaction, and conscience over compulsion. [...] The ability to choose a response rather than react, to create rather than destroy, is what makes humans human” (Englart 2015, 100-1).

A science fiction short story that brings together the different themes raised here is Octavia E. Butler's “Speech Sounds” which shows the tragic consequences of viewing others as suspects, the need to act kindly in one's relations, and the importance of education in order to make utopia a possibility (see Butler 2005). The story describes a post-apocalyptic society where a mysterious illness has left humanity differently impaired: many have been killed and the majority of people have lost all abilities to communicate, while some have lost only the ability to read and write and others have lost the use of language. By portraying a dystopian society where selfishness and violence run rampant and where people choose self-defense rather than kindness, Butler depicts a world governed by fear, jealousy, and hatred – a world that, having lost all kindness, has also lost all traces of humanity. The absence of communication – being almost impossible to understand others as well as to make oneself understood – has reduced relations among people to violence and exploitation. The chance encounter of the protagonist Rye, a former university teacher and professor who has lost her husband and kids, with a man and two young children provides Butler with an opportunity to deliver her utopian vision of a potentially better world. The encounter with the man allows the protagonist to move from a position of self-defensiveness and potential violence to one of kindness and cooperation. After discovering that the man can read and write but cannot speak, Rye is able to resist the instinct to kill him out of jealousy and hatred. She chooses a response of cooperation over an impulsive reaction. The encounter with the two children who, like her, have retained the ability to speak, on the other hand, introduces hope in Rye's otherwise hopeless world. It is also Butler's opportunity to depict a budding utopian vision – a vision that begins with the education of younger generations: “What if children of three or fewer years were safe and able to learn language? What if all they needed were teachers? Teachers and protectors” (Butler 2005, 107). Kindness and education are the principles that lie at the basis of Butler's utopia. They are a reminder that utopia is not really a fixed geographical place, but rather a process in which, in this case, relations can be peacefully mediated through language and kindness.

We live in an age of resentment, hate, and cynicism, where kindness has been trivialized and devalued. To be sentimental is a capital offense; political correctness is scorned, while cynicism is cool. But acts of kindness are not necessarily weak: the January 21<sup>st</sup> (2017) women's march on Washington DC, for instance, has been seen as an example of *gentle* strength. Rosi Braidotti (2017), among others, has recently reflected on a diverse way to carry out a politics of affirmation. We need to find ways

to resist against the present not only in an oppositional way, but also in an affirmative and positive way. Along similar lines, I think that we need to resist this era of polarization, nationalism, and rage through kindness as a political act, against those who thrive in conflict. We need to change the culture first of all in order to create the conditions that are necessary for a lasting political and social transformation. In this respect, I would agree with Marc Augé, who has spoken about the “utopia of education for all” as the only possible way to stop today’s dystopia – a dystopia that is characterized by an unequal global society, mostly ignorant or illiterate, and is condemned to consumerism or exclusion, and is exposed to all forms of violent proselytizing and ideological regression, and is ultimately at risk of planetary suicide (Augé 2017, 17; my translation).

We cannot afford to give up on kindness.

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