

Mediterranean Blues: Archives, Repertoires and the Black Holes of Modernity

Iain Chambers and Marta Cariello

The Mediterranean is frequently evoked as the metaphor for the multifarious faces of modernity: from its presumed roots in classical Greece to the ever-tighter intertwining of Africa, Asia and Europe in its waters induced by today's immigration "crisis." From the beginning to the end of this parable, questions of cultural identity, together with historical and political authority, have been elaborated, contested and imposed. Sedimented in its waters, as though in a liquid archive, both ancient amphorae and contemporary migrant bodies propose an inescapable materiality that breaches the metaphorical consolidation of language. Unable to reduce the spatiotemporal heterogeneity of this stretch of water to a unique narrative, our language inevitably splutters on the edge of the unsaid and the indecipherable. The sea, with its fluid and tempestuous custody of the ebb and flow of histories we seek to know, frustrates our rationality. This maritime challenge suggests, beyond the more obvious appeal to the necessity of interdisciplinary and trans-national analyses, the registration of limits. Such borders are never simply barriers. They are also productive in their invitation to consider what exceeds our conception and control. To take an obvious example from the Mediterranean Basin, we could consider, in all of its variants and dialects, its most widely spoken language: Arabic. Perhaps an "Arabic Mediterranean," in the manner we Europeans are accustomed to consider such coordinates, does not exist. In fact, the term *al-Muttawassit* only begins to circulate in Arabic at the beginning of the twentieth century.¹ Europe has imposed a unity on what elsewhere carried multiple names. This distinction and fracture draws attention to a more open archive: one whose subaltern language is not merely of European provenance. At the same time, this is not to propose a separate alternative. Rather, these complexities take us to the underside and unconscious dimensions of a Mediterranean which, when laid out flat as the map, betrays all the limits of its modern European inscription.

In commemorating the termination of Western metaphysics (although, of course, it refuses to be overcome), we not only find ourselves afloat, learning other coordinates and listening to other languages, but we also begin to acquire a deep skepticism towards the knowledges and methodologies that continue to dominate explanations of the modern world. If that inheritance cannot be abandoned—we would be left speechless and powerless—it can nevertheless be crossed, confused and confuted by other trajectories. This might draw us towards the more

¹ Nabil Matar, "The 'Mediterranean' through Arab Eyes in the Early Modern Period: From Rūmī to 'White In-Between Sea'," in *The Making of the Modern Mediterranean, Views from the South*, ed. Judith E. Tucker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2019).

inclusive concept of difference without separability proposed by the Afro-Brazilian philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva.²

To think *with* the Mediterranean in the light of the intellectual and political wreckage on the shore is to reverse the philosophical gaze accustomed to observing shipwrecks from the comfort of solid ground.³ This is to remove thinking from the calculus of Occidental objectivity and relocate it in the intersecting currents that compose a historical density, cultural complexity *and* epistemological challenge irreducible to a single language or point of view, no matter how universal its claims. In responding to the world, rather than the West, as method, we abandon an imperious theoretical habitus.⁴ By that we mean to renegotiate historical sense and cultural semantics in an altogether more extensive series of concerns; ones not necessarily authorized in the grammar of Europe, the West and what the Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano called the coloniality of power as method.⁵ This is not to opt for the other shore in the search for a separate and distinctive view. One of us reads Arabic, and neither Turkish. We certainly cannot go “native,” nor do we pretend to speak for the other. Rather, what we seek to touch and *register* (rather than *represent*) are the subaltern and repressed histories that are sustained and suspended *within* the Mediterranean. It is there that we can trespass the existing frame and interrogate our language.

Taking hold of our language in this way equips us better to traverse what the Jamaican philosopher Lewis Gordon calls the “geography of reason.”⁶ Here, the archives are not limited to the textual traces of the past in what historians call “documents.” For the question that concerns us is what constitutes a document or an archive. What are the cultural and political forces that authorize their establishment and recognition? The recent African-diasporic languages deployed by Saidiya Hartman, Cristina Sharpe, Achille Mbembe and others help us to recover scraps of denied lives, and refocus the necropolitics of modernity through a “marine grammar which highlights the denied colonial and neocolonial connections between the Mediterranean and Atlantic world.”⁷ In the wake of Cedric Robinson, Robin Kelley, and more recently

² Denise Ferreira da Silva, “On Difference without Separability,” *Catalogue 32° Sao Paulo Bienal*, 2016. Available here: https://issuu.com/amilcarpacker/docs/denise_ferreira_da_silva

³ Hans Blumenberg, *Shipwreck with Spectator* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997).

⁴ Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory. The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* (Cambridge: Polity, 2007), 40. Connell is here criticizing Bourdieu, but the point can be extended to the social sciences in general.

⁵ Aníbal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America,” *Nepantla: Views from the South* 1, no. 3 (2000); Walter D. Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subalternity and Border Thinking* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2012).

⁶ Lewis R. Gordon, “Shifting the Geography of Reason in an Age of Disciplinary Decadence,” *TRANSMODERNITY: Journal of Peripheral Cultural Production of the Luso-Hispanic World* 1, no. 2 (2011): 95.

⁷ Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 2008); Cristina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016); Achille Mbembe, “Necropolitics,” translated by Libby Meintjes, *Public Culture* 15, no. 1 (Winter 2003): 11-40. The cited passage is from Jill H. Casid, “Necropolitics at Sea,” in *Migration and the Contemporary Mediterranean*, ed. Claudia Gualtieri (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2018), 290.

Alessandra Di Maio and Gabriele Proglia, we here also touch the critical depths of calling today's Mediterranean a Black Mediterranean. This, in turn, leads to further connections that tear the Mediterranean away from its usual position as a European backwater to re-situate it in the multiple souths of the world.⁸ The Euro-Mediterranean is not cancelled, but is now intercepted by its other shores. Reconfigured in histories and cultures that come from below and elsewhere, it leads to other narratives and another critical syntax.

Here the grammar of the blues, whose African-American roots today reverberate in global routes, helps us sound the daily inability of contemporary Europe to respond to the desperation and death of migrants crossing the Mediterranean.⁹ Black lives matter in the Mediterranean too. For racial biopolitics, which once justified European colonialism, slavery and planetary rule, continue to cast their shadows over the present. They produce deadly exercises in the illegal labor they exploit while disseminating white panic in each and every Occidental nation. They multiply the borders between the north and the rest of the globe. They fuel the immediacy of Brexit and the persistent and brutal archaism of settler colonialism in Palestine. Drawn into the depths, we now hear darker notes, where the unheard and unauthorized modalities of modernity indicate the blues as method.¹⁰ Here, other scales of interpretation bring into play the dissonance and glissando between official notes to interpret the imposed score in a different key. Listening to the lessons of the Black diaspora and its responses to the raw terrors of modernity, existing logics and languages are re-played. Disassembled, dubbed and rapped, the inherited world is reworked to release the unauthorized and unexpected.

So, moving beyond the familiar coordinates of migration studies, with their sociological verdicts shackled to a European framing of Mediterranean history, how might we challenge the presumptive unicity of our knowledge? Are there other ways of thinking, talking and practicing our understanding of modern migration and the Mediterranean? As a minimum, the question promotes a forking path. One takes us into current debates on postcoloniality, decoloniality and southern thought.¹¹ The other into languages that are rarely considered in constructing a critical apparatus where music, literature and the visual arts sustain a poetics that exceeds the political constraints of the present. So, for example, to think in terms of a transcultural Mediterranean literature would be, as Sharon Kinoshita points out, to construct an alternative category of

⁸ Luigi Cazzato, "Mediterranean: Coloniality, Migration and Decolonial Practices," *Politics. Rivista di studi politici* 5 no. 1 (2016); on the discourses, respectively, of "meridionism" and "mediterraneanism", see Manfred Pfister, *The Fatal Gift of Beauty: The Italies of British Travellers* (Amsterdam-Atlanta: Rodopi, 1996); Michael Herzfeld, "Practical Mediterraneanism: Excuses for Everything, from Epistemology to Eating," In *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, ed. William V. Harris (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2005), 45-63.

⁹ Iain Chambers, *Mediterraneo Blues* (Naples: Tamu Edizioni, 2020).

¹⁰ On the blues as method in the growing dusk of democracy, see Cornel West, "A Lesson from the Blues," ABP Speakers, July 27, 2017, video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w-u-Cxry4Jc>.

¹¹ Raewyn Connell, *Southern Theory. The Global Dynamics of Knowledge in Social Science* (Cambridge, Polity, 2007); Jean and John Comaroff, *Theory From The South. Or, How Euro-America is Evolving Towards Africa* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2012); Boaventura De Sousa Santos, *Epistemologies of the South. Justice against Epistemicide* (Boulder: Paradigm, 2014).

analysis, based on a deliberate deterritorialization that uncouples the poetical from the narrow political order imposed by the dominance of the nation state. “In the monolingual, diachronic, and frequently teleological frame within which literary studies are typically organized, texts are read (implicitly or explicitly) as links in a national literary tradition—set in relationship to earlier or later texts composed in the same language.”¹² It would clearly be impossible to engage fully with this linguistic and cultural complexity. The critical point lies in respecting it. To acknowledge this horizon is deliberately to recognize limits in our analytical journeys. The poetics that arises from postcolonial and decolonial criticism produces a politics that challenges the assumed autonomy of the knowing agent seemingly able to reign over the world and transform his (the gender is deliberate) subjectivity and aesthetic judgment into a universal objectivity.¹³

Thinking in proximity of the sea tempts us with the idea that it lies beyond the reach of terrestrial legislation. We know that is not true. Attempts to extract its resources and control movement on its waters increase every day. Still, something escapes, and, suspended in liquid opacity, that supplement or excess authorizes us to loosen the terrestrial bonds that bind us so violently to the bloodied genealogies of borders and soiled identities. The transitivity evoked in the very term *Medi-terranean* promotes a critical excursion beyond familiar shores. It is this in-between space, today most sharply and dramatically stitched together by contemporary migration, that sustains a suspension of conceptual temporalities. The regime of explanation, whether drawn from political science and legal studies, or from historical analysis and sociological enquiry, is brusquely interrupted precisely by the failure to accommodate the uninvited stranger. Ultimately dependent upon national consensus and the state for their application and authority, these regimes of truth are stymied. The signaling of progress and knowledge is profoundly queried, philosophical premises interrupted. “In the eyes of the State,” writes Donatella di Cesare,

the migrant constitutes an intolerable anomaly, an anonymous entity in both internal and international space, a challenge to its sovereignty. The migrant is not simply a lawless intruder, an illegal. Her very existence fragments the cardinal principle around which the State is constructed, undermines the precarious connection between the nation, soil and the monopoly of legislative power that is the basis of the world order. The migrant proposes the possibility of an alternative elaboration of the world, represents deterritorialization, the fluidity of transit, an autonomous passage, and the hybridization of identity.¹⁴

¹² Sharon Kinoshita, “Mediterranean Literature,” *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, eds. Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita (Sussex: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 315.

¹³ David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2018).

¹⁴ Donatella Di Cesare, *Stranieri residenti. Una filosofia della migrazione* (Torino: Bollati Boringhieri, 2017). Kindle Edition. Our translation.

Forced to respond to the unexpected and the unregistered, our chronology of understanding is side-tracked, deviated into unsuspected spaces that threaten to confound the conclusive impulse of our reason. Our very philosophy—both the discipline that secures our thought and the rationality that provides its conclusions—is exposed to questions that it structurally excludes. The assumed mirroring of history and reason in the exclusive parable of the Occident falls apart. To push that inheritance out of joint, and registering what fails to fit the established picture, amounts to a better critical understanding of the present.¹⁵

This is to suggest a theoretical shipwreck.¹⁶ And rather than retreat to the shelter of previous certainties—those disciplinary premises so deeply wrapped up in national narratives and Western hegemony—we could perhaps take the opportunity of our planetary privilege to drift into uncharted waters. We remain “safe” in the knowledge that the existing disciplinary confines are not going to be disappearing any day soon. Within the limits of this exercise, we confront a problematic. To retrieve an unfashionable language and apply it to the Mediterranean, here is Ben Brewster's gloss of Louis Althusser's use of the term: “A word or concept cannot be considered in isolation; it only exists in the theoretical or ideological framework in which it is used: its problematic.”¹⁷ To shift the framework is to produce another problematic. This is to engage with further angles and perspectives.

The concept of the archive to which we have become so accustomed in recent years continues to carry a historicist price. Although altogether more extensive in what it admits and registers, and more flexible in its premises and procedures, the archive continues to underwrite linear temporality, even when it sustains the complex skein of genealogies rather than the causality of chronology. Critically this grates with the historical instance of interpretation. We find ourselves constantly moving between the temporal axis furnished by the past and the contemporary space of our understanding. While we might adopt Walter Benjamin's observation that the past comes to us as a series of ruins to be illuminated in the interpretative constellation of the present, an elegant counter-proposal also lies in the concept of a critical *repertoire*. A repertoire, with its musical overtones of choice, collating, practice and execution, holds on to the idea of archive in an altogether more dynamic spacetime assemblage. The repertoire has to be performed. It involves selection and a positioning within its range of possibilities. Drawing upon seemingly disparate elements and unsuspected connections, it can sustain a conjunctural montage of possibilities and perspectives. It is without metaphysical guarantees. And then archives—both traditionally understood and radically re-conceived—are always embedded in narratives that sustain their truth claims through language. Subsequent knowledge seeks refuge in ahistorical

¹⁵ Giorgio Agamben, “What Is the Contemporary,” in *What is an Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2009); yasser elhariry and Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, “Critically Mediterranean: An Introduction,” *Critically Mediterranean. Temporalities, Aesthetics, and Deployments of a Sea in Crisis*, eds. yasser elhariry and Edwige Tamalet Talbayev (London: Palgrave-Macmillan 2018).

¹⁶ Iain Chambers, “Maritime Criticism and Theoretical Shipwrecks,” *PMLA* 125, no. 3 (2010).

¹⁷ Louis Althusser, *For Marx* (London and New York: Verso, 2006), 252.

and “scientific” protocols, in the presumed purity of a methodology guaranteed by the empirical facticity of the documents and the museums and libraries that house them. That, however, is only the commencement of the telling. For the very concept of the document, invariably considered autonomous and paradoxically ahistorical as though an Urtext and beyond the interpretative twists and twirls of interpretation, is again deeply problematic. The document, in being identified and classified, is always assembled, constructed and spoken for. It, too, is played and performed.

To introduce the concept of the repertoire is not to cancel that of the archive. Rather, it is to set the latter in a less guaranteed space and accentuate its character as a contested process. It becomes susceptible to interrogation by precisely those voices, cultures and lives it has institutionally framed: both captured and explained away through exclusion. More than a past that is appropriated, spoken for, represented and repressed, we would argue for the critical benefits of registering a necessary disturbance in the imperial order of a fictitious universality.¹⁸ This is precisely where historical and archival work is temporarily put on hold, suspended while the premises of its colonizing methods are re-examined.

Mediterranean Repertoires from Africa to Asia

For both Janet Abu-Lughod and Shlomo Dov Goitein, thirteenth-century Cairo was a global city and commercial hub in a world economy that stretched under the fluid federation of Muslim rule from the Atlantic to the borders of China. If both scholars considered it a Mediterranean city, today that certainly comes less to mind. What their pioneering works revealed, combined with the erudite interdisciplinary exposition by Marshall Hodgson in *The Venture of Islam* (1974), is an interpretative axis of the Mediterranean that runs horizontally across the hemisphere, or, as Hodgson insisted, from the rivers Nile to the Oxus. In other words, from the southern shore of the Mediterranean to the Iranian plateau and the deserts and steppes of central Asia we discover another perspective that breaks apart the present prevailing verticality of the north-south divide. This, of course, is not simply to say that historically the Mediterranean has been seen and framed diversely. It is also to shift the fulcrum of historical attention and cultural density further east. The point is not antiquarian. Rather, it invites us to consider the Mediterranean and Europe, both then and now, as a peninsular extension of the Asian land mass. Here is Hodgson’s carefully nuanced assessment:

The peculiar notion of some modern Western writers, that before the sixteenth century other societies, such as the Islamicate, were ‘isolated’ and were brought into the ‘mainstream’ of history only by such events as the Portuguese invasion of the Indian Ocean, is of course ridiculous: if there was a ‘mainstream’, it was the Portuguese who were coming into it, not the Muslims; the Muslims were already there. But the contrary notion, also found among Western writers, that in the High

¹⁸ Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History. Unlearning Imperialism* (London: Verso, 2019).

Caliphal Period Arab or Islamicate culture was the greatest in the world, that Córdoba or Baghdad were incomparable centres of wealth and learning, is almost as poorly founded. It springs equally from the unconsidered assumption that the Occident was the ‘mainstream’ of world history and culture. Compared with the Occident, in the High Caliphal Period, when the Occident was still rather a backwater, Islamdom looks magnificent; but such a comparison says nothing about its relative position in the world; the Baghdad of the caliphs was merely on a plane of relative equality with Constantinople in eastern Europe and with the metropolises of India or China [...] The well-known cultural superiority of Islamdom, then, was not absolute in the world at large (in the Earlier Middle Period, surely it was in China, if anywhere, that would be found the maximum economic and cultural prosperity); it was relative to the developing Occident.¹⁹

This is to draw into play altogether wider vistas and a more complex interchange than an autochthonous view of the “rise of the West” (and its subsequent appropriation of the Mediterranean) suggests.²⁰ Islam and the proximity of Arab and Ottoman culture to the making of modern Europe not only presses in on our understanding. With a modern eye for the creolization that accompanies all cultural processes and historical configurations, this further suggests that these supposedly external forces were actually intrinsic to European culture and history. Betrayed in music and cuisine, in linguistic and architectural traces, in scientific precedents and literary poetics, the Arab-Persian-Turkic conglomeration of Afro-Asiatic Islam was never merely a threat against which Europe measured itself. It was also directly woven into the fabric of its understanding of sophisticated civilization, cultural development and urbane living. Only since the sixteenth century has a door been closed on this ecumene complexity in favor of a strictly patrolled modernity whose progress is limited to the prison house of Occidental nationalism. As a perspicacious commentator on Hodgson’s work as an Islamic scholar and world historian has put it:

[...] for Hodgson, the study of Islam was critical to the rethinking of European history. It had the potential of leading the historian of Westernist persuasion to appreciate that Islam was molded of the same stuff as ‘the West’: the heritage of

¹⁹ Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam, Volume 2: The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). Kindle Edition. See also Jacques Derrida, *The Other Heading: Reflections on Today’s Europe* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992).

²⁰ It is important to note that Fernand Braudel’s history of the *longue durée* of the Mediterranean, while clearly fundamental to a “worlding” of the spacetime of the region, remains influenced by prospects rooted in the perspectives of French colonialism. A very interesting discussion of Braudel’s work and of the work of Arab geographers and scholars of the Mediterranean can be found in Matar, “The Mediterranean through Arab Eyes.” See also Edmund Burke “Toward a Comparative History of the Modern Mediterranean, 1790-1919,” *Journal of World History* vol. 23, n. 4 (December 2012): 907-39, and Allen Fromherz, “A Vertical Sea: North Africa and the Medieval Mediterranean,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 46, no. 1 (Summer 2012): 64-71.

West Asian prophetic monotheism, Hellenistic thought and agrarian-bureaucratic empires. In this sense, Islam too was “Western.”²¹

Geographically distanced in a presumed “Orient,” and ignoring the historical evidence of the Iberian peninsula, the Balearic Islands, Sicily and the Balkans from the eighth century onwards, Islam was externalized and expunged from the formation of Europe.²²

So, if we were to insist, without pretending to fill in the gaps or speak for the absences, on this other Mediterranean we are clearly identifying a problematic. This is to establish a set of questions that much existing historiography seems unwilling to acknowledge. It is also to pull the Mediterranean out of an exclusively European frame and begin to decolonize our understandings of its formation. Honing in on the present, we can continue to insist on considering the Mediterranean from its African and Asian shores. If, today, we are seemingly obsessed with migration arriving from the south, we all too easily forget that less than a 100 years ago there was a sizeable European population in Algeria, Tunisia and Libya, largely composed of uninvited French, Italian and Spanish immigrants.²³ In the Italian case, we could add the Horn of Africa as a further location of European migration following a colonial design, as all those Fascist modernist buildings in Asmara testify.²⁴ Further, we also forget that these colonial territories were politically controlled directly from Paris and Rome. Meanwhile, Egypt was administered from London. So, the whole of the African shore of the Mediterranean (along with Palestine, Lebanon and Syria in Asia) was under European rule. If, today, mass European migration southwards has completely vanished, the same cannot be said for the political legislation which continues to travel over the sea, south into Africa: from requirements for food produce entering the European market to the legal framing and control of the sea and the sub-contracting of migrant management and its necropolitical practices of blocking, dissuasion and refusal. It all continues to construct the colonial present.²⁵

The earlier moment of colonialism and direct European control provided the furnace that forged what Gabriele Proglia, speaking of the Italian conquest of Libya in 1911, calls a “colonial

²¹ Edmund Burke, “‘There Is No Orient’: Hodgson and Said,” *Review of Middle East Studies* 44, no. 1 (2010): 13-18.

²² This has been underlined in the long-running debate and diatribe over Islamic influences (in particular the *Kitab al-Miraj* or Book of the Ascension) in the composition and structure of Dante’s *Divine Comedy*. See Cesare Capone, ed., *Dante e la cultura islamica* (Milan: Jouvence, 2015). The volume includes an interview with Maria Corti who philologically insists on this connection. For more on the role of Islam within Europe, see Franco Cardini, *Europe and Islam* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1999), and Jack Goody, *Islam in Europe* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004).

²³ For more on the incredible mixture of what she calls “borderlands societies,” see Julia A. Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans: North Africa and Europe in an Age of Migration, c. 1800-1900*, (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011). The same author notes that in 1847 nearly 70% of the population of Algiers “were Europeans of one sort or another.” In 1939, 45% of the population of Tripoli was Italian.

²⁴ On the unsuspected consequences of this reversal of migration in the moment that the ex-colonized calls on the ex-colonizer, see Francesca Melandri’s *Il sangue giusto* (Milan: Rizzoli, 2017).

²⁵ Derek Gregory, *The Colonial Present* (Blackwell: Malden, 2004).

language.²⁶ This language continues to speak in the present. It molds our memory, provides much of the lexicon, semantics and imaginary that constitute the cultural tonality and texture for ranking, thereby racializing, and defining modernity.²⁷ It emerges from the making of the modern nation state in the procedures and practices of colonialism that are stitched into our individual and national identity. That history continues to speak through us in our ready reaction to the migrant and in her being structurally rendered subaltern to the necessities and directives of our world. It is presumed when speaking of ourselves and others, of “us” and “them.” As Patrick Wolfe so memorably pointed out, colonialism is not an isolated historical event but a structuring principle across time.²⁸

All of this comes home: from the unwelcomed migrant to the smells, sounds and signs in the streets. The city, too, is an archive. It consistently exhibits the power to nominate and narrate. Yet if history is inscribed in street names, monuments and squares, it is also present in the more transitory and subterranean cultural configurations of food, music and daily life. Despite appearances, no single entity, culture or history owns the city. At the same time, it is impossible to negate the evidence of the hegemonies that run through the grammar of its architecture.²⁹ Italian cities are full of these frozen memories tied to historical clusters around national unification and colonialism, while Fascism, if not in name, endures in the massive neo-classical public administration buildings and in its urban interventions that represented the biggest coordinated redevelopment in modern Italian history. Of course, the assumed stability of the past secured in the names, stones, cement, glass and steel of the city can always be read against the grain and reset in the currents of subaltern histories. Spaces can be crossed and contested: names can change and statues can fall. The city remains open to interpretation.³⁰

Naples, for example, is a veritable archive of this type, although its disturbing semantics pass largely unobserved by its inhabitants and intellectuals. This, of course, is largely true of all European cities sitting on the sedimented violence of their past. Let us remain under Vesuvius for a moment longer and consider the massive exhibition complex—Mostra d’Oltremare—that lies in the western part of the city. First opened in May 1940, with the title “Mostra Triennale delle Terre Italiane d’Oltremare” (Triennial Exhibition of Italian Territories Overseas), it was designed to exhibit Italy’s colonial authority, brought to fruition by Fascism. There exists a short film on the opening ceremony on YouTube.³¹ There we witness the triumphal tones of Italian power, presented as an uninterrupted narrative from the Roman Empire to the then recent

²⁶ Gabriele Proglia, *Libia 1911-1912. Immaginari coloniali e italianità* (Milan: Mondadori, 2016), 4.

²⁷ Proglia, *Libia 1911-1912*.

²⁸ Patrick Wolfe, “Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native,” *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006): 399.

²⁹ Even more marked in the “freedom” of colonial spaces, see Mia Fuller, *Moderns Abroad: Architecture, Cities and Italian Imperialism* (London: Routledge, 2006).

³⁰ Rino Bianchi and Igiaba Scelgo, *Roma negata. Percorsi postcoloniali nella città* (Rome: Ediesse, 2014).

³¹ “S.M. il Re Imperatore inaugura a Napoli la Mostra delle Terre Italiane d’Oltremare,” Istituto Luce Cinecittà, June 15, 2012, https://www.youtube.com/watch?time_continue=6&v=N10ILSIEVCo&feature=emb_logo.

conquest of Ethiopia, all wrapped up in the creation of Italian identity filtered through the formation of a “colonial consciousness”: “a phenomenon that conditioned not only the events of the countries subject to Italian domination, but Italy itself; and that interfered not only with the lives of the Libyans, the Somalis, the Eritreans and later the Ethiopians, but also with that of the Italians.”³²

As in the tradition of international exhibitions and fairs since the Great Exhibition at London’s Crystal Palace in 1851, this history of Occidental “progress” was accompanied by exhibits of objects, including human beings, sequestered from the rest of the world.³³ In the case of the Mostra d’Oltremare, East African villages, Libyan mosques and palm trees, native bodies and costume, underwrote imperial domination. With the Italian entrance into the Second World War, the exhibition was closed a month later. The Africans brought to be exhibited were subsequently deported in 1943 to the province of Macerata. Here three of them escaped to join the Italian resistance.³⁴ Black partisans, anti-fascism and anti-colonial struggles suggest the thread of a potential counter-history that disturbs the then prevalent view amongst antifascist forces that Italy as a “civilizing force” should retain its colonies in Africa after the war. From such details other histories emerge to challenge the consensus. To return to the exhibition is to consider the centrality of colonialism to the narration of the nation not simply in terms of military conquest and economic exploitation, but, above all, as a pedagogical practice both for the colonized *and* the colonizer.³⁵ A glance at the 1929 (or year VII of the Fascist Era) edition of the *Guida D’Italia del Touring Club Italiano. Possessions and Colonies, Aegean Islands, Tripolitania, Cyrenaica, Eritrea, Somalia*, captures the profound cultural interchange of European culture, colonialism and tourism extending across the Mediterranean documenting and dominating still unconquered territories:

Amongst the itineraries described here, some can only be followed by exceptional tourists. They require adequate preparation, caravans equipped with provisions, water and other materials. Other itineraries, such as those in southern Tripolitania,

³² Valeria Deplano, *Africa in casa. Propaganda e cultura coloniale nell’Italia fascista* (Milan: Modandori, 2015), Kindle Edition. Our translation.

³³ Guido Abbattista, *Umanità in mostra. Esposizioni etniche e invenzioni esotiche in Italia (1880-1940)* (Trieste: EUT Edizioni Università di Trieste, 2013). For an in-depth exploration of the Mostra d’Oltremare’s architecture and connections to the idea of the Mediterranean in the context of rationalist architecture and Futurism, see Claudio Fogu, “Futurist mediterraneità between Emporium and Imperium.” *Modernism/modernity* 15, no. 1 (2008): 25-43.

³⁴ Luigi Goglia, “Ascari partigiani. Il caso dei ‘neri’ della PAI raccolti a Villa Spada a Treia,” in *Colonia e postcolonia come spazi diasporici*, eds. Uoldelul Chelati Dirar, Silvana Palma, Alessandro Triulzi, and Alessandro Volterra (Rome: Carocci, 2011). For further details and photographic evidence, see: Wu Ming 2, Carlo Abbamagal e i cinquanta dell’Oltremare,” *Giap* (blog), January 13, 2015, <https://www.wumingfoundation.com/giap/2015/01/carlo-abbamagal-e-i-cinquanta-delloltremare/>

³⁵ Patrizia Palumbo, ed., *A Place in the Sun. Africa in Italian Colonial Culture from Post-Unification to the Present* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2003).

are described on the basis of available documents, as we believe that the incessant advance of our occupation will soon render them accessible.³⁶

Educating citizens to their role and position in the world, colonialism, not just in Italy, or under Fascism, but everywhere in Occidental society, disseminated the values of cultural and racial superiority, and hence the right to appropriate the rest of the planet. Unconsciously or inadvertently, many of us continue to live that narrative.

Perhaps, and remaining in the exhibition complex, we could cut the triumphalist continuum that establishes the natural superiority of the nation and stop for a moment with the life-sized replica of the galley of the Venetian commander Agostino Barbarigo installed in the exhibition. This is another detail that opens onto another history. Presented in terms of an Italian victory—this time as part of the Holy League that destroyed the Ottoman fleet at the Battle of Lepanto in 1571—the galley can actually take us on a very different route. The fleet of the Holy League, whose standard was consigned by the Spanish Viceroy of Naples to John of Austria in the Basilica of Santa Chiara in Naples on August 14, 1571, also included thirty Neapolitan galleys. Agostino Barbarigo in command of the left wing of the Christian fleet lost his life from an arrow wound in the battle. Invariably presented in textbook history and common knowledge as a major setback for the Ottoman Empire, and hence integral to the narrative of rolling back the threat to Europe of Islam and the Turks, historically it was only a temporary check for Istanbul.³⁷ Cyprus had just been captured from the Venetians and remained Turkish until ceded to Britain in 1878. Within a year of the Lepanto defeat, the Ottoman fleet had been rebuilt and returned to control the eastern Mediterranean. In alliance with France, the Turks also returned to the western part of the sea, seizing Tunis in 1574, and extended their influence to the Atlantic thanks to their assistance in the capture of Fez in Morocco. The Ottoman consolidation of the Balkans, reaching as far north as Ukraine, was to continue largely uncontested. Only after the failed siege of Vienna in 1683 is it possible to speak of the real beginning of the decline of the Ottoman Empire as a European power.

The point, of course, is less about getting the historical account right and rather more about complicating and thickening the narrative. This permits us to query the seeming inevitability of histories narcissistically mirroring a national and European teleology. The complications produce cracks in the mirror. The Mediterranean falls away from being only the southern border of Europe. It becomes the site of other borders and crossings. Turkish, Egyptian, Syrian and Algerian historians have critical rights here. If routing the national narrative through colonial spaces renders the latter essential to its constitution, routing that same narrative through the sea

³⁶ *Guida d'Italia del Touring Club Italiano. Possedimenti e Colonie. Isole Egee, Tripolitania, Cirenaica, Eritrea, Somalia* (Milan: Touring Club Italiano, 1929), 3-4. Our translation. At the time, southern Tripolitania was not effectively under Italian control. For more on this theme, see Stephania Malia Hom, "Empires of Tourism: Travel and Rhetoric in Italian Colonial Libya and Albania, 1911-1943," *Journal of Tourism History* 4, no. 3 (2012): 281-300.

³⁷ David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (London: Penguin, 2014).

and along the other shores of the Mediterranean undoes pretense to an exclusive and autochthonous history. It dispels the terrible myths of blood and soil to render Mediterranean “home” and belonging altogether more problematic.

Migration and the Black Hole of Democracy

If the Mediterranean constitutes a problematic, so too does our history and philosophy. How we choose to identify and interpret the Mediterranean is not only dependent on its position in a particular order of discourse; it also relies upon what is structurally excluded in order to confirm the borders that reproduce the authority of that discourse. The reach of migration—both of bodies, histories and cultures, but also of language, hope and desire—challenges such a settlement. As John Berger referred to migration so many decades ago: “The subject is European, its meaning is global. Its theme is unfreedom.”³⁸ To think of our language and disciplines, our definitions and conclusions, in terms of unfreedom is to overturn the boat and capsize its baggage. Our juridical and critical freedom is based on the structural unfreedom of others. Similarly, our understanding of the Mediterranean, its histories and cultures, is based on the refusal and negation of other histories and cultures. This cannot be corrected. We cannot scramble to fit the discarded pieces into the puzzle and complete the picture as though in a further imperial gesture. The wound rarely heals, it always leaves a scar. It refuses to heal. It is the site of the blues and counter-songs of political and historical orthodoxies. It cannot be represented and incorporated into a solution. It remains apart. It waits to be *registered*. Its difference reveals modernity otherwise, the modernity of others. It renders our location and authority not separate but integral to the problematic. Rather than a methodological weakness or flaw, this, like the open and inconclusive cycles of the blues, is a critical method.

From 2014 to 2020, migrant deaths at sea constituted seventy percent of global migrant deaths, and the Mediterranean Sea has become the deadliest passage ever with more than nineteen thousand estimated deaths since 2014, according to the International Organization for Migration. When the Mediterranean is evoked in public discourse, it is rarely characterized as a contact zone generating conditions of historical vitality, and the hybridization and liquidity of cultural encounters, as oceanic philosophy puts forward, but is rather proposed as a *motionless deathscape*: a static and viscous cartography of wet flesh. In other words, the “livingness” of the sea is transformed into a terraqueous “deathworld,” to cite Achille Mbembe. This conceptualization cruelly illustrates how when the politics of the land flirt with those of the water, legislated borders corrupt the sea in such a manner as to alter its spatiality with violent rules.³⁹

³⁸ John Berger and Jean Mohr, *A Seventh Man* (London: Verso, 2010), 11. (First published in 1975).

³⁹ Laura Lo Presti, “Like a Map Over Troubled Water: (Un)mapping the Mediterranean Sea’s Terraqueous Necropolitics,” *e-flux* no. 109 (May 2020), <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/109/330800/like-a-map-over-troubled-water-un-mapping-the-mediterranean-sea-s-terraqueous-necropolitics/>

To consider the deeper critical injunction posed to Europe and the West by contemporary migrations from the multiple souths of the planet is to engage with “the contested politics migrants themselves put in motion.”⁴⁰ It is to test the gap in the political and philosophical lexicon of liberal democracy; the gap that lies between the sovereignty of the modern state and human rights. Here we should recall, as Derrida reminds us, that the omnipotence and self-confirming power of sovereignty, whether of the state or the individual, necessarily repudiates alterity and the other in order to maintain its authority.⁴¹ This is where the migrant is rendered extraneous to the law and the demos; migrants are considered superfluous and stripped of the “right to have rights” in Hannah Arendt’s memorable phrase. As Donatella Di Cesare puts it, “to respond critically to migration is to rethink the state.”⁴² It implies considering community freed from the harness of the nation that collars its citizenship. Again, rather than reason in terms of an *external* force posing the threat of “invasion,” this is to understand migration as integral and internal to the mobile history and making of modernity over the last 500 years. This permits us to arrive at the heart of the matter which:

[...] takes migration as a vantage point from which to unpack the processes of subjectification emerging from (but also exceeding) the mechanisms for the regulation of migration, at the same time as allowing us to access the conditions through which political subjectivities emerge as “other” to the regular order of citizenship.⁴³

What is most evident, although studiously avoided, is that migration and the unprotected condition of statelessness radically exposes the existing political settlement. For the migrant poses a proximity—she and he work in our houses, hospitals and fields, live in our cities and streets—that annuls the distance of a presumed outside. The status of being reduced to the object of our subjectivity snaps. The migrant connects us to the world we refuse to take responsibility for. Whether this debt is acknowledged or not, she is part of the political calculus. Both the Kantian philosophy and liberal democracy that lie at the core of the modern nation-state are deeply scarred when the homeless and stateless become political subjects *within* the polity.⁴⁴ For the migrant is both unilaterally produced by *our* laws and the violence of our borders and is an autonomous expression of that polity. She is not merely traversing, but also translating and transforming, modernity. Thinking migration in terms of persistent mobilities and capitalist

⁴⁰ Glenda Garelli and Martina Tazziolo, “Challenging the Discipline of Migration: Militant Research in Migration Studies, An Introduction,” *Postcolonial Studies* 16, no. 3 (2013): 245.

⁴¹ In this context, Derrida’s arguments are most pertinently explored in Meyda Yegenonglu’s *Islam, Migrancy, and Hospitality in Europe* (London: Palgrave 2012).

⁴² Di Cesare, *Stranieri residenti*. (Our translation).

⁴³ Garelli and Tazziolo, “Challenging the Discipline of Migration,” 245.

⁴⁴ Judith Butler and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Who Sings the Nation State?* (Oxford, New York and Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2007).

momentum is to acknowledge a global insistence that displaces and unwinds the presumed stabilities of the Euro-American categories that seek to define and confine it.⁴⁵ Once again, this raises questions concerning geographies of knowledge, methodological nationalisms and the present-day global political order.⁴⁶ It renders central, rather than simply academic, the politics of interrupting the paradigm and its consensual semantics.

We are today immersed in “crisis”: economic, political, democratic, migrant, pandemic. It has become both a discursive regime and a modality of government. In its name, all types of change and reconfigurations are activated, purportedly to meet its demands while simultaneously exploring its exceptionality as an apparatus of power. Here the seemingly most disparate of social phenomena can be rapidly conjoined. From the remodeling of education and health services to religious discrimination and rendering migration “illegal,” the “hostile environment” of crisis pushes through “reforms” and a radical restructuring of the public sphere and private lives (of course, such distinctions really no longer hold in today’s emergent bio-political body).⁴⁷ Crises are more than emergencies. They reveal structural powers and logics. The so-called “migrant crisis” exposes the limits of the liberal nation state and its dependency on exclusionary politics for its legitimation.⁴⁸ Further, it also exposes the coloniality of power that persistently transforms the Mediterranean—whether aggressively in policing and push-back politics or in more humanitarian terms—into a renewed *mare nostrum*.⁴⁹ In other words, modern migration in marking the limits of an existing polity reopens a series of historical archives. The entwined power structures of colonialism and racism whereby others are consistently reduced to objects of our political, cultural, historical and intellectual will, is blatantly revisited and revived. This is accompanied by an unaccounted past that returns to haunt the present. To take responsibility at this point is not about retrieving older coordinates, but precisely about their undoing in order to clear a space for fresh configurations in an emerging repertoire of critical responses. For the “migration crisis” is not an accidental phenomenon, but is structural and constitutive of modernity itself. If we must confront migration as a crisis, we must do the same with modernity and its associated democracy.

⁴⁵ Kuan-Hsing Chen, *Asia as Method: Towards Deimperialization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

⁴⁶ Nicholas De Genova, *Working the Boundaries: Race, Space and ‘Illegality’ in Mexican Chicago* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005).

⁴⁷ The term “hostile environment” was coined by then British Home Secretary and future Prime Minister Theresa May in 2012 to be deployed as a structural response to migration. See Lorenzo Pezzani, “Hostile Environments,” *e-flux architecture* (May 15, 2020), <https://www.e-flux.com/architecture/at-the-border/325761/hostile-environments/>

⁴⁸ Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Harcourt Brace and Company, 1951).

⁴⁹ The term *mare nostrum*, of course, does not signify a peaceful common space, but rather, as Jean-Yves Moisseron and Manar Bayoumi write, a “victory cry [...] affirmed upon the still fuming ruins of violent divisions.” This connects its coinage in imperial Rome to its revival in Fascist Italy, and, not insignificantly, in the choice of *Mare Nostrum* as the code name for the Italian military surveillance and search-and-rescue operation of 2013-2014 (then replaced by Frontex’s Operation Triton). For a discussion of the history of the myth of the Mediterranean and of the idea of *mare nostrum*, see Moisseron and Bayoumi, “La Méditerranée Comme Concept et Représentation,” *Revue Tiers Monde*, no. 209 (January-March 2012): 181. Our translation.

Afloat

At this point, the assumed fixity of documents and archives, their material forms and institutions, unfold into altogether more fluid and extensive coordinates to be drawn upon and configured according to repertoires produced in precise historical circumstances. Your ID and national history, custodized in associated museums and curricula, turn out to be historical constructs, the product of processes that simultaneously legitimate some of us while delegitimizing others. The apparent neutrality of a piece of plastic with your name and a photo announces the asymmetrical powers that structure the modern world. To be without documents is to be without identity. What is not documented, catalogued and archived, yesterday in the record offices, today in digital clouds, somehow does not exist. For many individuals, this is a situation of statelessness, of being undocumented and without access to the public sphere and its services, of remaining a dumb witness to political procedures and promises. At the same time, the documenting of the undocumented continues at an accelerating tempo. Technology and the law combine in computerized panopticons to control our movement and theirs, exercising the flexible frontier between the “legal” and “illegal,” the inside and the exterior. The Mediterranean is scanned, measured and tracked. All movement is under surveillance, caught on screen, aided or left to die.

The immediacy of these political concerns—being stopped at the frontier, turned back in your leaking dinghy at sea, stripped for inspection in a camp—reaches into the heart of practices that we like to imagine are untouched by the cruelty of such dramatic encounters. The historian at work on documents in the archive is also exposed by such procedures. Both the documents that sustain a particular historical narrative and those tied to ensuring one’s identity are never simply given. In both cases they have to be put together, often violently, and classified. Further, they have to be interpreted and are therefore susceptible to contingency and change. They are fundamentally unstable. We may seek to externalize this instability by sub-contracting the management of migration beyond the immediate confines of Europe to Libya and Turkey. Similarly, we might also refuse the intellectual discomfort that historiography is an operation of writing, hence of language and interpretation, and is therefore always out of joint, anachronistic with respect to both past and present: it is always in danger of losing its disciplinary and institutional identity. For where does history conclude and the narrative take over? Or rather, being so intertwined, perhaps neither can speak without the other?⁵⁰ Rather than anchoring the telling in irrefutable facts, the documents (and their extending and mobile definitions) continue to provide evidence for yet further interpretation. The past is never closed and concluded, once and for all. Just like the present, it continues to be debated, discussed, played out and written up.

Both the interpretation of the present and the past are subject to the conjectural imperatives of critical work. Interpretation is an agonistic event. This is perhaps another way of saying that taking responsibility for the present means recognizing that the past has not passed away; the

⁵⁰ Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1973).

latter continues to interrogate and configure the contemporary. So, understanding migration, or the modern geopolitical configuration of the Mediterranean, means that we need to adopt an altogether wider and more flexible critical repertoire. There we can insert archives of identity into altogether more disparate and unruly assemblages than those contemplated by both contemporary politics and much of the social sciences. Here visible and invisible maps, counter-maps, contested cartographies and the refusal of existing confines and impositions, constitute the mobile political construction of the present. Breaching the barriers of the sea and the Balkans, or failing to do so, transforms a crisis into a critique. Here, the European Union and individual state policy of “left to die” not only reiterates the notorious necropolitics of colonial management but also takes us directly to the heart (of darkness) of Occidental democracy. The persistent slow violence of push back, surveillance, abandonment, ignoring, legal harassment and hostile environments, transforms the European border, including its most extensive one represented by the Mediterranean Sea, into an immobilizing series of camps, both terrestrial and aquatic.⁵¹ The border, its management and accounting, is a political device far more than a legal or geographical fact. Here the migrant is reduced to point zero, still to be identified and documented. A decision on whether she is to be allowed to live or die still to be taken.

Coming this far, the narration, however violent and abject, insists. The migrant’s exceptionality challenges the national narrative and the citizenship she is denied. Suddenly the stability of identity is rendered mobile. Claims of belonging, long assumed, now shuttle back and forth between hospitality and hostility.⁵² This is invariably accompanied by a mounting aggression of the host against the threat of losing the anchorage of one’s identity. This troubles the nation state’s tutelage of and monopoly on the question. The very presence of the migrant, if she or he is not simply to be cordoned off, even obliterated, requires another narrative. The latter opens out on to the world. It refuses parochial linguistic limits and cultural confines through an insistence on *modernity as migration*. It draws out of the periphery of a presumed transitory crisis—reduced to the terms of an economic or social phenomenon—the very centrality of migration to the making of the contemporary world. All that the modern nation state has sought to catalogue, identify and contain, all those institutions of legislation, surveillance and control, are now confronted by the unsuspected outcome of its own development and power. The political hypocrisy of praising the free movement of capital and markets crashes into the accompanying mobility of culture and peoples. One comes with the other. The tried colonial management of this mounting tension increasingly cracks, both along the frontiers and within the cities, streets and lives of the “democratic” nations that extend or, more frequently, withdraw hospitality. These are the geographies of racial capitalism.⁵³ Deep down, there is no disinterested

⁵¹ Lo Presti, “Like a Map Over Troubled Water.”

⁵² Jacques Derrida, *Of Hospitality* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2000).

⁵³ Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* (London: Zed Press, 1983); Ruth Wilson Gilmore, “Geographies of Racial Capitalism with Ruth Wilson Gilmore,” Antipode Online, Accessed June 20, 2020, <https://antipodeonline.org/geographies-of-racial-capitalism/>.

hospitality available. A previous liberal faith in “progress” is now overtaken by the dawning fear that those who were once invaded, looted, annihilated and sold, now insist on their rights to reroute and rework modernity. This is the time of the blues.