SO NEAR, YET SO FAR
MIGRATION, THE MEDITERRANEAN, AND A MURDEROUS MODERNITY

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This article examines the interplay between distance and proximity through the maritime medium of the Mediterranean, today rendered immediate by the 'foreign' body of the migrant. What until recently was maintained at a physical and metaphysical distance: colonialism, racial hierarchies and historical-amnesia, has suddenly acquired a dramatic presence with an alarming proximity. This postcolonial return operates a cut in the existing epistemological fabric. Understandings of space and time are radically reconfigured. Refused archives emerge. Other genealogies of the present enter the frame. The legal and political premises of Occidental modernity, together with the very idea of liberal democracy and rights, are violently exposed in their brutal limits. In this scenario distance and proximities are measured through mediations drawn from the area of contemporary art and visual culture; these evoke critical considerations on the limits of representation and the politics of registration.

Feared proximities and controlled distance: such are our response to the threat of a virus and the modern migrant. We seek immunity from both. Here it would be suggestive to purse the ongoing shift from a liberal, humanitarian regime concerned with the protection of others, to an immune system and the neoliberal imperative to privilege and protect the self. The connection of viruses to migration is a superficial analogy, but it touches and exposes the complex mechanisms of the bio-political regimes of modern government. In both cases they can lead to death: our body invaded by a foreign force, the migrant subjected to the arbitrary violence of a foreign state and law and left to die. Neither the pandemic nor the migrant are natural or spontaneous. They require conditions of production and reproduction. The genesis of both lies in a cultural and political ecology that nurtures, constructs and seeks to control them. No one is born a migrant, viruses do not just happen. Both emerge from historical structures and processes that are lengthy and profound. This suggests that an eventual 'cure' requires a response that is not limited to a vaccine or a law.

Tracing some of the steps to an ecology of the present means to acknowledge the crucial voices of Donna Haraway, Afro-Futurism and future feminisms where 'the encounter with alterity expresses itself in the aesthetics of discontinuity and the interruption' (Haraway, 2016; Curti, 2019). It can even take us to the prospect of a 'future without us' (Chakrabarty, 2009). In this short piece, while listening to those voices, I will restrict my gaze to the migrant and the sea. The migrant has resurrected the unsuspected centrality of the latter: both as a multifarious border zone, and as an ontological challenge to our habitual terrestrial coordinates. The sea both divides and unites, it establishes distance while permitting proximities. It is here, as though written on water, that I wish to press the case of exiting from the distancing politics of representation (the act of darstellung, standing in for something else) and

reaching for the immediacy and altogether less controlled prospect of registration. This is to suggest less the idea of images testimonying a history and more of images as history.

In the challenge of the sea, in particular that posed by the Mediterranean in this particular conjuncture, beneath the surface of illicit sea passages and unauthorised migrations there exist altogether more fluid and irrepressible connections. For the sea renders diverse shores intersectional. It mixes and dilutes the separated-ness that a strictly local, terrestrial accommodation proposes. Here, life forms that are composed, decomposed and recomposed live on irrespective of the law, the state and the security apparatuses that seek to confine, capture and control. Distance is annihilated in molecular compositions, in material flows inhabited by past and future lives. This altogether deeper history, with its fluid archives sustained in the mari-time of stretched temporalities and deep rhythms, is loaded with political immediacies. Coordinated in the passage from the minutia of the microscopic to the sweep of the social, migration challenges the present state of political ontology. The premises, procedures and protocols of the latter are unable to accommodate the question and therefore refuse to contemplate the challenge. All the while, the sea mixes and dilutes the separated-ness that a strictly local, terrestrial accommodation proposes.

So history, for example that of art, is crossed again and loosened from its authorised moorings. The global political economy that secures its continuing appropriation of the world is unwound. The unacknowledged violence of the archive that has consigned the planet to a particular order of knowledge is challenged and disputed. The chained leg of a black slave, destined to slip beneath the waves forever, takes us into another narration of time and space. It literally sucks us out of the frame to confront other coordinates. This detail is drawn from the bottom right-hand corner of Joseph Mallord William Turner's *Slave Ship* (*Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and the Dying, Typhoon Coming On*) (1840). Similarly, Paul Gilroy's commentary on the picture casts us loose of the

Fig. 1 J.M.W. Turner, *The Slave Ship*, originally titled *Slavers Throwing overboard the Dead and Dying - Typhoon coming on*, 1840, Oil on canvas, 91 cm x 1.23 m, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, USA. Retrieved 5 August, 2020, from: https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/26/Slave-ship.jpg

complacent view that the Atlantic slave trade and the racial hierarchisation of the world that justified its exercise are now merely matters of the past (Gilroy, 1993). Against the closure of academic documentation, and being catalogued, classified and confined to the archive, they continue to constitute the present global order. The history and affects of that painting persist in promoting a very different perspective on the formation of modernity and the present.

Decomposed and recomposed in Kara Walker's watercolour *Terrible Vacation* (2014), the Turner original is ironically repeated and relayed to skew the chronology and render it contemporary.

The archive and its documents are set adrift, the 'imperial technology' of their colonial regime –confirming my history

and my self– snarls up in what it fails to digest and incorporate. For "scholars are caught in the circularity of the archive and continue not only to operate within it but to operate it. The documents they find were produced, classified, and preserved according to an imperial temporality, spatiality and body politic, but they are led to believe that these documents represent the missing pieces of incomplete puzzles, telling the true story of imperial regimes which only they can assemble after mastering the archive itself" (Azoulay, 2019, p. 556). Foreclosed in the coloniality of power we are unable to acknowledge those who refuse to be objects of our history. In this sense, history itself –as a discipline and modality of knowledge– turns out to be a colonial enterprise.

In the Italian-Ethiopian Dagmawi Yimer's video *Asmat*, the Tigrinya for names, we hear the steady intonation of the list of the dead; of those who were unsuccessful in their attempted crossing of the contemporary Mediterranean (Yimer, 2013). They are here rescued from anonymity. The names are etched in water. They are suspended, and float as a series of question marks. Why this death, why this destiny for lost lives? The work offers no explanation. It is not a documentary. Its testimony lies more in the aesthetics of the abject. We are drawn to listen and to look, but we can never completely understand or grasp the cruel materiality of the event. It evades reduction to a single point of view. Wider vistas of possible understanding, involving other histories, cultures, languages and lives, float into view. What is projected and portrayed are cyphers, names from a world registered in the statistics of death and drowning at sea: the mute objects of European policy and legislation. One can object that the initial 'push' to migrate and subsequently be caught in the dangerous meshes of European border control and legislation lies elsewhere (as though it is not the Occident that largely creates and cultivates these conditions). It is not our responsibility. But the violence, repression and blocked futures of North and sub-Saharan Africa, as in Syria, Afghanistan and Latin America, draw us into deeper historical time.

Fig. 2 Kara Walker, *Terrible Vacation*, 2014, Gouache on paper, 184,2 x 405,1 cm. Retrieved 5 August, 2020 from: https://www.facebook.com/

Here we confront the political economy in which our responsibility for the colonial making of the present reemerges in a dramatic immediacy. The dead bodies speak and relay another history. The entanglement of political, cultural and economic narratives exceeds the frame and the concepts that sustain our explanations. The abstract categories of the 'illegal' and the linear legislation of time –what we call history and progress– unwind, stripped of their authority in a planetary challenge that exceeds their claims. In the 'liquid violence' of the Mediterranean crossing or death the hypocrisies of Occidental humanism go adrift (Forensic Oceanography, 2011).

The ethical/aesthetic affect of Dagmawi Yimer's video is to disturb our understanding of the archive –our understanding of the past, present and possible futures– with unsolicited horizons and unwelcome questions. His work refuses to bear the burden of representing the migrant as simply a nameless, subaltern body, an authentic 'other', an excluded victim of the not yet modern world. Its terrible beauty requires us to listen to what has been silenced and removed from the accounting of time and place. For the migrant, with her or his name and history, is the modern world in all of its dreaded

consequences. It is this undoing and redoing of time, its doubling and dispersal with respect to a unique measure and explanation, that ensures the emergence of a new and amplified critical space. The dynamics of the archive shift from a conservation and linear accumulation that benchmarks progress to redistribution, reparation and reconfiguration in emerging repertoires of belonging and becoming. Here I inevitably encounter languages that do not necessarily respect and respond to my needs. Against the abstract violence of representing a unique past and consensual present –the national narrative, the museum display, the approved textbook– the archive breaks down. Other rights cross, contest and cut up legitimised explanations. Here the archive no longer contains the past, but rather distributes an excess that propels us beyond the categories have been prepared for us (Chambers, 2017, pp.125-126).

Considerations of death at sea, the corpses left to decompose in marine cemeteries –those of the slaves thrown overboard in the Atlantic, and those of today's migrants left to drown after being rebuffed and rendered non-persons by European law– has brought Christina Sharpe to write: "What happened to the bodies? By which I mean, what happened to the components of their bodies in salt water? Anne Gardulski tells me that because nutrients cycle through the ocean (the process of organisms eating organisms is the cycling of nutrients through the ocean), the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today. They were eaten, organisms processed them, and those organisms were in turn eaten and processed, and the cycle continues. Around 90 to 95 percent of the tissues of things that are eaten in the water column get recycled. As Anne told me, "Nobody dies of old age in the ocean." The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean is called residence time. Human blood is salty, and sodium, Gardulski tells me, has a residence time of 260 million years. And what happens to the energy that is produced in the waters? It continues cycling like atoms in residence time.

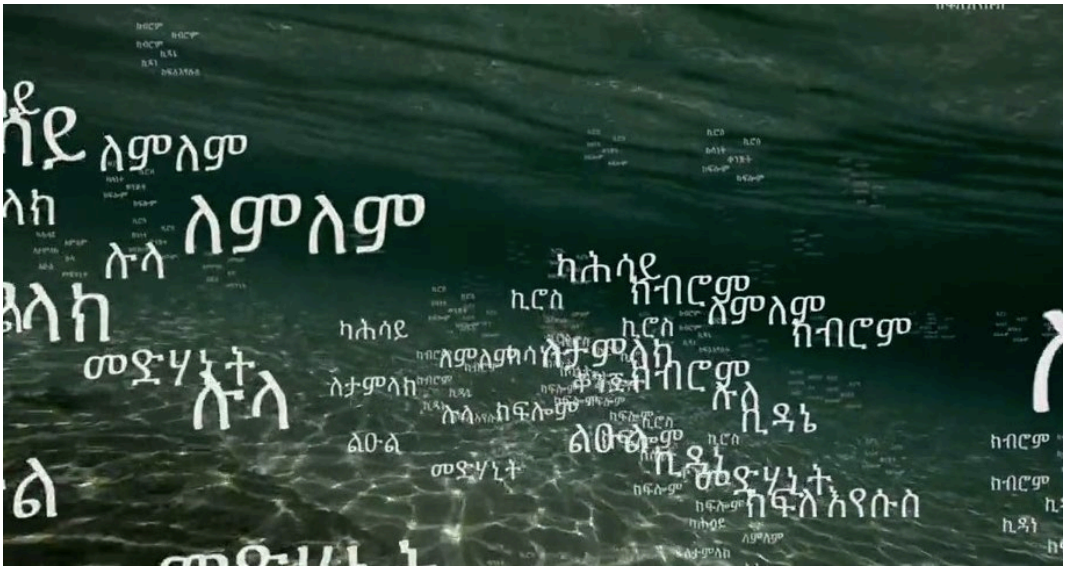

Fig. 3 Dagmawi Yimer, *Asmat-Names in memory of all victims of the sea*, 2013. Retrieved 16 November, 2020 from https://vimeo.com/114343040

We, Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which 'everything is now. It is all now" (Sharpe 2016, p.21; Morrison, 1987, p.198).

In this molecular reactivation of the Atlantic slave trade within the contemporary necro politics of modern Mediterranean migration, the historical weight of the adjective black stretches back and forth across time and diverse bodies of water and we catch the sharp sense of a temporality that refuses to pass (Mbembe, 2019). As Avery Gordon has put it: "How do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly?" (Gordon, 2008, p.18). Here the contemporary market economy and its dependence on subordinate labour, most dramatically rendered explicit in modern slavery (from Eighteenth century plantations in the Americas, to tomato pickers in southern Italy today), touches altogether deeper tempos and connections. The simultaneous decomposition of bodies and rights invite us to register the decay and decomposition of the modern liberal state. The latter is now increasing substituted, both juridically and politically, by aggressive agencies –contracted surveillance data, paramilitary

border policing, third party migrant mangement (Turkey, Libya)– that are increasingly autonmousm and unaccountable. Rights and democracy are here very much put on the back burner, or else serve as moral window dressing.

The present ubiquity of the 'migration crisis' reveals the ubiquity of the crisis of politics. The retreat to sovereignty and populism, is only the most obvious symptom. Further down in the tissues of the body politic we encounter structural contradictions and the stripping away of rhetorical hypocrisies that reveal the exhaustion of the liberal state. The migrant has become the critical cypher of our time. As put by Donatella De Cesare: "It is a destiny not dissimilar to that of the foreigner, always relegated to the margins, confined to the bidonville of metaphysics. The migrant is also atopos, without a place, an outsider like the foreigner. For the migrant is on the frontier, seeking to cross. She is neither a citizen nor a foreigner. Always too much, she is an intruder who explodes the barriers, cancels the confines, produces embarrassment. Here lies the difficulty in thinking the migrant without putting in question the conventional limits of the world, reviewing the long-established foundations of the city and citizenship, and without amending the consolidated pillars of the state and the sovereignty of the nation" (De Cesare, 2017).

This breaking of the order of discourse, both in philosophical and political terms, has extensive implications for our understanding of the images and representations that circulate in our everyday life. It also implicitly leads to a profound reconfiguration of the protocols and practices of the social and human sciences.

In the present moment, the break-up of distance and the insistence on proximity –of the repressed past, of negated bodies and histories– is most persistently pursued by postcolonial art. Here there is a continual mediation on uprooted cartographies, displaced objects and broken archives, as in the works of the Palestinian artists Mona Hatoum and Emily Jacir (Ianniciello, 2018). Elsewhere, imperial heritages are unwound and European certainties set adrift in the audio-visual

maelstrom of the Ghanian-British John Akomfrah's *Vertigo Sea*. In all cases the proximity and promise of other worlds breach the premises of our vision and annul our aesthetic grammar. Cutting time and refusing established chronologies, this art 'narrates' again the histories we consider past and concluded. It insists on their contemporary constitution of the present. These are the colonial ghosts that refuse to fade away. They haunt the establishment of a modernity that has violently incorporated the structural centrality of the colonised world to its formation through negation. In Ariella Aïsha Azoulay's language, this is a 'potential history' which "rejects endorsing the archive's mission of sanctioning people's actions as now records of past achievements that cannot be rewound". On the contrary: "Potential history is not the account of radical thinking, of explicit ideological struggles against imperialism, but a rejection of imperialism's conceptual apparatus altogether. The imperial apparatus presumes that such struggles exist only in the past, only as dusty records in the archive" (Azoulay, 2019, p.43).

To rewind the tape of history is therefore not merely to revisit the past, perhaps to uncover further evidence and fill in the holes of the existing account. Like recording tape, the past can also be cut and spliced into another mode of telling where precisely what has been excluded and negated in justifying the existing state of affairs can be further accented to insist in its persistence. Applying the scissors of the present to this tape, images can be isolated, taken out of place and reassembled to produce further connections and a critical montage in which anachronism promotes the modality of meaning. Matter seemingly out of place invites us to look and think again; another horizon comes into view: one not authorised by Occidental institutions, perhaps less stable but simultaneously more open in its prospects. This unspooling of the present leads to another mix where hybridity and creolisation supplant previous unities of belonging secured in segregated cultural, ethnic and racial categories (Lloyd, 2018). This means snapping the chains of existing explana-

tion. It involves stepping outside the cage of our presumed freedom to measure it against the unfreedom of others.

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