

## **Migration, the Mediterranean and the fluid archives of modernity**

*This talk will seek to use the centrality of the question of migration to the making of modernity, along with the fluid archives proposed and sustained in the Mediterranean, to open up a critical discussion on the colonial constitution of the present. It will go on to seek to suggest how such entangled and subaltern histories disturb and displace the colonially of existing methods in the social and human sciences.*

Of course, the Mediterranean is itself an invention, object of a regime of knowledge produced by historical and political forces that since 1800 have bound it into the particular economic and cultural economy that today dominates the globe (Chambers, 2008). Yet from its African and Asian shores the Mediterranean has rarely been constructed and conceived in the fashion we are presently accustomed to. Let us simply consider that the most widely spoken language in the Mediterranean basin; in all its dialects and variations, it is Arabic. Perhaps a singular ‘Arabic Mediterranean’, in the manner we Europeans are accustomed to consider it, does not exist. This possibility does not merely mirror a subaltern and repressed version of what we on the northern shore have elaborated. It exceeds our perspective. So, rather than propose a sharply separate and unregistered alternative, this perhaps means to consider the underside and the unconscious dimensions of a Mediterranean which, when laid out flat as a map, betrays the limits of its modern European inscription.

In a more oblique fashion other axes have traversed the Mediterranean and have proposed temporalities that are irreducible to the crushing linearity imposed by Occidental ‘progress’. I have in mind Goitien’s twelfth-century Mediterranean city of Fustat/Cairo, the fourteenth century journeys of Ibn Battuta from West Africa and the Atlantic coast to central Asia and China, and the temporal spirals of historical sociology elaborated by his slightly later contemporary Ibn Khaldun. In the present order of knowledge these examples, if considered at all, are ‘minor’ proposals, exotic curiosities in the margins of the modern knowledge formation and its self-assured epistemic order. Perhaps, following Walter Benjamin’s noted

theses on the philosophy of history, we could shift the historiographical axis 180° and subvert such a linear narrative within a constellation where the past does not simply pass but rather accumulates as a set of questions and possibilities in the present.

This would be to consider the structure of time not in terms of a flow in which events occur to be sequentially linked, but rather to consider time itself emerging from events. The latter can accelerate, slow and deviate the steady pulse of chronology. This intersects with the Gramscian invitation to consider time and space always in political, never in neutral, terms. It means, and now moving into our argument, to propose understandings of the Mediterranean that are always subject to contestation and reconfiguration; that is, to historical processes and their geographies of power.

Beneath the surface, beyond the purview of the intellectual panopticon that believes all can be rendered transparent to its will, we can consider the Mediterranean from below, from what is sustained and suspended in its waters. This suggests the strategical move of beginning to think *with* the sea; no longer a mute object or dumb accessory, but as a disturbance and interrogation in the political configuration of the world; no longer merely a physical space to be crossed and controlled, but a historical force that permitted modern sea-borne empires and the Occidental fashioning of the planet. What today pops up and floats on its waters – dead mammals (both human and non), together with other disappearing life forms – brusquely and brutally return these unregistered archives to the present. The human migrant, denied passage over its waters by an Occidental legal apparatus that unilaterally appropriates the right to universal law while frequently denying the ‘law of the sea’ to save and rescue, here provides a significant key with which to reopen and rerun the accredited narrative of Western modernity.

For a moment restricting ourselves to the human, but the ecology of life, migration and survival clearly precedes, exceeds and sustains the category, another history emerges from the depths of modernity. Human migration is transferred from a peripheral question, confined to the social and economic margins, and joins the mobility of goods and capital in the making of modernity. Migration now becomes the history of modernity. The global exploitation of human labour and the world-wide raiding of material resources that fuel progress not only persists, but now unavoidably insists. What was distanced, even hidden, far away in the colonial spaces of the plantations and the mines, the slave trade and subsequently in the politically refused slums of the metropolitan world, explicitly returns to triangulate our modernity with the constitutive coordinates of capitalism, colonialism and the moral justification of racism.



CHRISTINA SHARPE In the Wake  
On Blackness and Being

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:

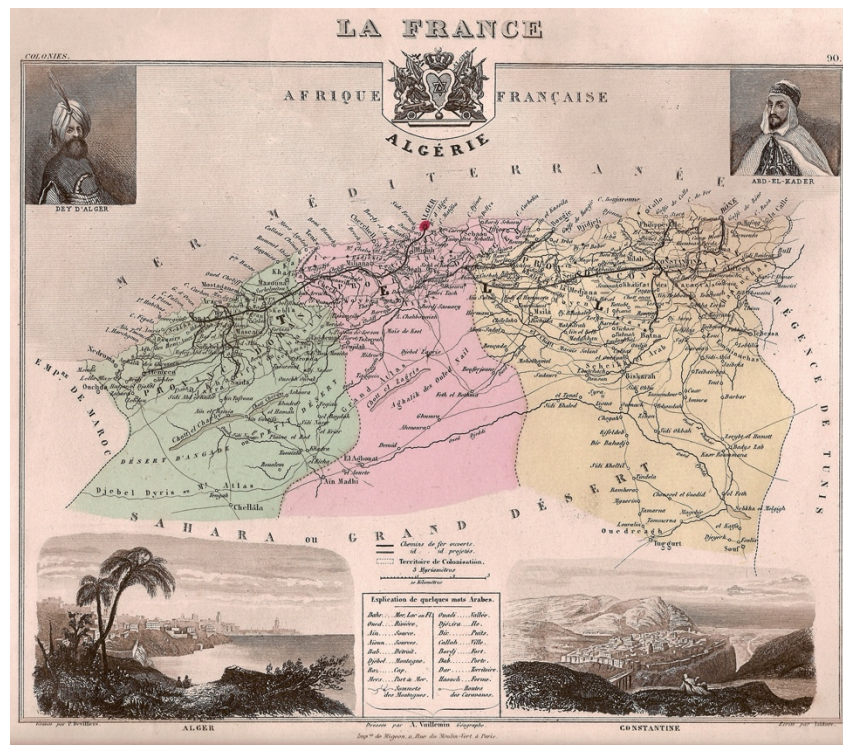
What happened to the bodies? By which I mean, what happened to the components of their bodies in salt water? Anne Gardulski tells me that because

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. We, Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which “everything is now. It is all now” (Morrison, 1987, p.198). (Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 2016, p.21).

In this molecular reactivation of the Atlantic slave trade within the contemporary necro-politics (Mbembe, 2019) of modern Mediterranean migration, where the historical weight of the adjective black stretches back and forth across the Atlantic and into the Mediterranean, we catch the sharp sense of a temporality that refuses to pass. As Avery Gordon has put it: ‘How do we reckon with what modern history has rendered ghostly?’ (Gordon, 2008, p.18). Here the modern 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 the deeper tempos of ecological decomposition and re-composition on time scales beyond the human.

The geopolitics and area studies, but also the sociology, historiography and anthropology, of the Mediterranean – all disciplines forged in the making of modern Europe and the West – can no longer pretend to maintain their previous

status as disinterested and neutral forms of knowledge. Their limits lie not in the failure to extend and further refine their knowledge, but rather in their insistence on extending their sovereignty over the world via the continuing violence of the colonisation of the planet. This, cancelling respect for alterity and refusing to engage with difference, is to exercise an exclusive knowledge over others and beyond the reach of nature. At the end of the day, like all colonialisms, as Albert Memmi pointed out, it adds up to intellectual fascism.



If mass migration is modernity, then the movement back and forth across Mediterranean waters, both south to north and north to south, is part of a common hubris motored by a trans-national political economy and the worlding of the world by capital. At the beginning of the Twentieth century the European population of Algeria (the Ottoman province militarily occupied by Paris in 1830) was close to one million, the majority French, alongside sizeable components of Spanish and Italians. Tunisia next door had an Italian population of 100,000, while in Libya (another Ottoman territory invaded by Italy in 1911) there was an Italian population that peaked in the 1930s at around 13% of the inhabitants.



What is occurring today with migrations towards the over-developed north of the planet is the latest episode in a long narrative. From the transatlantic slave trade to contemporary migrations there are clearly differences but also deep, underlying continuities that would permit us to write the social history of modernity, from its colonial inception down to the present, as essentially the history of migration and diasporas.

For if modernity – from voyages of discovery, foreign conquest, global trade and planetary financial flows – is all about mobility and the perpetual movement of goods and capital, it is equally, and inevitably, also about the migration of bodies, lives, cultures and histories. One comes with the other. The time-space communality of modernity has been in place for 500 years. Earlier periods also experienced such mobilities, but it is only when the whole world can be conceptually charted by the compass of capital resourcing its accumulation across the globe that we register the brutal specificity of modernity sustained between the charged poles of capitalism and colonialism juridically transforming the world into property and profit.



Today, with ports closed, walls raised, legal apparatuses creating illegality, the contemporary migrant becomes the cypher of our time. She involuntarily decodes

the asymmetrical relations of power that reveal the deadly restrictions and necropolitics of Occidental democracy, and all the limits of its vaunted humanism, liberty and rights. If we look at a map of the Mediterranean everything is laid out flat. Borders are clearly defined. All is seemingly captured by the eye, rendered measurable and knowable. This is the basis for the geopolitical chessboard where everything is put on the dissecting table. It apparently provides a neutral and disinterested (or scientific) rendering of reality. It appeals to a liberal organization of the world where all the actors are treated as though equal, permitting the analysis to remain ‘balanced’ and ‘impartial’ – something that is patently impossible to sustain when considering present-day relations between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, or, the dramatically unequal relations of power that sustain the colonial violence in Palestine-Israel.



But this is not merely a ‘political’ matter; it reveals the same epistemological hubris that configures the social and human sciences. They, too, in their scientific ‘neutrality’ and purported ‘objectivity’, are part of the complex and differentiated apparatus that produces that type of politics and that form of knowledge which also charges the practices of cataloguing, curating and conserving the materials and histories stored and narrated in the archive. This is not a blanket critique, but rather a registering of limits that might permit other perspectives and other possibilities to emerge.

To insist that modernity is itself composed through migratory processes, evidenced in the Atlantic slave trade, the mass migrations from rural poverty in

the European peripheries of the Nineteenth century, and the movements from the souths of the planet today, is radically to challenge our coordinates of comprehension. It is to register most acutely the limits of our rational grasp of the world. Here the levelling mechanisms of Occidental reason that ‘remain the productive weapons of global subjection’ sink in deeper waters (Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Towards a Global Idea of Race*, 2007). Here the ‘hegemony of the Kantian subject’, that objectifies and then obliterates the specificities of the lives whose very presence and persistence implicitly disturb our order of knowledge, is cast adrift. It is precisely the history of that manner of reasoning, apparently rendering the world fully knowable and transparent to a particular will to power, that today explain the ‘disregard for lives lost in the streets of the US and the Mediterranean Sea’ (Denise Ferreira da Silva, 2007).

This is to think with, and follow, the reverberations revealed in the critical honesty of registering the anachronism of the historiographical operation. Without abandoning the skilled, disciplinary competence that has brought this past to light in historical, archaeological and philological terms, this also means refusing to reduce its evidence to a single inventory of time. In a sort of archaeology of archaeology we are seeking to uncover another genealogy that does not merely mirror a European will to power. To insist on the anachronistic as method, and consider the ‘historical determination of time’ (Reinhart Koselleck), is to evidence the juxtapositions and entanglements that wrench the colonial constitution of modernity ‘from the terms in which they were once cast’. This is deliberately to unsettle an established consensus, where the conditions of semantic, cultural and... political production are consigned to sealed-off ‘origins’ in a separate past. Now they have constantly to re-negotiate their place in the world as an ongoing presence.



So, the flat taxonomy of time, everything in its assigned chronological and cultural place, is abruptly interrupted and cut up, ready for another collage of comprehension. (I know full well that this is not how sophisticated historians like yourselves think and work, but it is how ‘history’ passes for truth in the sound bites of the mass media and accompanying political rhetoric, not to speak of much education). Assembling the past in the present allows us to consider hidden and sedimented matters that propose other memories. This raises questions of property and ownership: who has the right to narrate and why? Under what sort of genealogy is memory owned and authorized? Seeking to reply brings us to propose a shift in the often positivist premises of the human and social sciences and their actual legislation on such questions and prospects. Breaking apart the instrumental rationality of linearity and reassembling its elements in another configuration invites us to take a deeper responsibility for our language; it is to recognize its transitory precariousness and its perpetual vulnerability to investment and translation by a past we can never fully recover nor own. A past, which is still being assembled and registered, comes to us from the future.

This means to return objects to the density of both their cultural lineage, their resonance in the echo chambers of historical memories and their archival connection to the future. Of course, this is to return history itself to another history and to cut the cord with the security of scientific neutrality as the guarantee of our language and knowledge.

To return to the considerations of an ‘Arabic Mediterranean’ with which I began, means immediately to shift semantic maps and register a body of water that does not necessarily signify in the same manner as it does for most people in this room. This, in turn, can also mean to begin to adopt other languages of critical comprehension and emotional entanglement where, for example, music (but it could also be the visual arts, poetry and literature) is no longer merely considered

in terms of additional historical testimony for events apparently occurring elsewhere, but rather provides a critical procedure in its own right: no longer the history or sociology of music, but music as sociology, as history. To bring these elements together for a moment and disseminate a hole in our reasoning and accounting of time is perhaps now the most fitting opening and conclusion:



Kamilya Jubran, “Qawafel”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EpQ79rcsRtI>