

# AT HISTORY'S EDGE: THE MEDITERRANEAN QUESTION

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*In memory of Lidia Curti*

‘Tout problème humain demand à être considéré à partir du temps.’

Frantz Fanon, *Peau Noire, Masques Blancs*

**Abstract:** This essay seeks to puncture prevalent European understandings of the Mediterranean. The colonising impulse inscribed in Occidental historiography cannot be undone simply by adding previously repressed and unacknowledged histories. Instead, a re-examination of the premises and procedures that produced such exclusions leads to a change in coordinates. A predominantly ocular order of knowledge that creates subaltern objects of study to reconfirm European centrality and subjectivity is interrogated. Insisting on a politics of registration and listening, further critical incentives drawn from literature, music and cinema are deployed to query existing representations. In conclusion, a more exposed, heterogeneous and turbulent Mediterranean is brought to bear on how today we might think with the Balkans.

**Keywords:** Mediterranean, migration, colonial archives, North Africa and Western Asia, poetics and politics, Balkans

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Let us open David Abulafia’s *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (2011). There we can read the following confident pronouncement: ‘The Mediterranean we now know was shaped by Phoenicians, Greeks and Etruscan in antiquity, by Genoese, Venetians and Catalans in the Middle Ages, by Dutch, English and Russian navies in the centuries before 1800...’<sup>1</sup>

Remove the Phoenicians and all the protagonists are Occidental. The Arab-Berber world, together with that of the Turks, Mongols and the Ottomans, are entirely marginalised, primarily restricted to their disruptive military incursions into the European narrative. But can we be so sure? Behind the screen of European modernity there was always an altogether more extensive formation, which continues to seed the present complexities. Only recently has the Mediterranean ‘we now know’ come to dominate perspectives and explanations. To accept the existing settlement of the Mediterranean as the only description available proposes a history immune to thinking about the problematic questions of modernity: colonialism, imperialism, the formation of the nation-state and the contemporary definitions of the very concept of

1. David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean*, Allen Lane 2011, p xviii.

'history'. 'Ontological realism' reaffirmed in 'common sense' leaves us with a geopolitical reconfirmation of the status quo.<sup>2</sup>

This essay confronts such European pretensions to explain the Mediterranean. After Derrida and Foucault, and more immediately after feminism and critical race studies, we know that definitions of such vital concepts as the archive and the document are open and debatable. We write and experience history in a 'time filled by the presence of the now'.<sup>3</sup> Archives are assembled, and documents are identified and interpreted.<sup>4</sup> The language is neither neutral nor transparent. Of course, the density of arguments that this perspective opens up is immense. But it establishes a fundamental interruption in the temporal linearity that endorses the status quo of historical truth. The past is not simply back there, safely separated from today's mess; it continues to haunt and intercede in the present. Time, as Benjamin famously insisted, is neither empty nor homogeneous (*Theses*, p263). We propose a Mediterranean where historical detail and cultural complexity push us to disconnect historical time from a single narrative. The resulting maps give us a different understanding of history. They lead to a deliberate undoing of Occidental chronology.

Maps themselves are about time. They explain spacetime from a privileged position. From that perspective, the world is appropriated. To think with the in-between maritime insistence of the Medi-terranean is to deflect the confident navigation of an established order. Intent on a conclusive homecoming, Ulysses is wrecked and left adrift. Charts are torn. Ocular hegemony is challenged by unauthorised voices and a politics of listening. Explanations stumble into complexities that refuse to cohere or translate. However, this involves more than ranting against the 'coloniality of knowledge' and listing a compendium of anti-colonial clichés. Instead, we seek to cross the Occidental hubris listening to languages and lives that such a hegemony has reduced to subaltern objectivity; that is, silence, sometimes oblivion. As Ariella Aïsha Azoulay would put it, this involves rewinding the historical tapes for a necessary renovation of the present, while listening to possible futures.<sup>5</sup>

These considerations respond to the Mediterranean as a global, marginally treated, hotspot. First, there is the persistence of so-called 'illegal' migration from the multiple souths of the planet, accompanied by the increasing draconian European policing of this contemporary middle passage on its waters. Then there was the outbreak and continuing fallout against the brutalities of the neo-liberal order on its African and Asian shores with the 'Arab Spring' in 2011. We need to add the continuing war waged by settler colonialism in Palestine. In its historical mishmash of borders, confines and identities, the Mediterranean is a critical laboratory of modernity. The margins fold in on the centre, and the irrepressible colonial past re-emerges via the migrant's story in the political present. Meanwhile, the violence of 'progress' unwinds into all sorts of ethno-nationalist avatars in the Balkans and across Europe.

2. Ethan Kleinberg, Joan Wallach Scott and Gary Wilder, 'Theses on Theory and History', *History of the Present*, 10:1, 2020, pp157-165.

3. Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, (trans.) Harry Zohn, edited and with an introduction by Hannah Arendt, Collins/Fontana Books 1973, p263. (Hereafter *Theses*).

4. Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*, Princeton University Press 2010.

5. Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, Verso 2019.

Today, the Mediterranean is overwhelmingly defined under Western eyes and through histories in which the nation is the fundamental semantic unit. Nevertheless, the specificities of its complex historical formation continue to shatter the European mirror of self-confirming conceits. We suggest it possible to reassemble the resulting shards in another constellation of understanding. To consider the procedures and premises that have produced the mechanisms of exclusion integral to the modern making of the Mediterranean, we look to ancient Greek colonisation in southern Italy, contemporary migration and the structural marginalisation of the Mediterranean's African and Asian shores. Subsequently, we analyse the exclusion of certain parts of Europe, in this case the Balkans, and touch on how cinema, music and the poetics of language disseminate the dissonance of an alternative historical order. We propose that the present spatial organisation, its geography, is the historical exercise of power integral to the political, cultural and philosophical administration of time. In this context, the south is a cartographical, colonial and temporal category. Historical forces have mapped structural inferiority and the 'backwardness' that justifies its colonisation.<sup>6</sup> Drawing on Antonio Gramsci's incomplete essay of 1926, subsequently known as 'The Southern Question', his considerations are extended to consider how modernity continues to map the Mediterranean and the diverse souths of the world.<sup>7</sup> The wealth of the northern Mediterranean and the poverty of its south are congealed in a historical and political paradigm. Rendering explicit the spatiality of power – where the presumed neutrality of measurement confirms a distance that guarantees the existing hierarchies – helps us understand how the Mediterranean is culturally and politically produced. It is never simply a geographical given or historical 'fact'.

To think *of* the Mediterranean invariably returns us to the considered roots of the West and its 'civilisation'. But to think *with* it exposes that trajectory to an altogether wider field of critical travel and historical movement. In their noted study, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History*, Nicholas Purcell and Peregrine Horden suggest that today's Mediterranean has lost analytical validity; it has been invaded and traversed by histories that exceed its provenance. Responding to their distinction of history in, as opposed to of, the Mediterranean, we propose holding the two together in a critical dynamic. They insist on the separation to concentrate on the history of the Mediterranean in the specificities of an ecological-driven understanding of the basin. We have opted for the tension that charges these poles. In our opinion, histories, cultures and lives can never be considered exclusively spatial or in autochthonous terms, even when acquiring specificities under Mediterranean skies. We have adopted to leave the historical and geo-philosophical definitions of the area deliberately loose in response to Merleau-Ponty's reprimand that 'every analysis that disentangles renders unintelligible'.<sup>8</sup> Opposed to the systematic identification of geopolitical borders and disciplinary confines drawn upon to establish a static object of

6. Evan Calder Williams and Alberto Toscano, 'The Southern Line: The «Meridione» and the Limits to Periodisation', *estetica. studi e ricerca*, 2, 2017, pp233-254.

7. Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question*, (trans.) Pasquale Verdicchio, Bordighera Press 2015.

8. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*, (trans.) Adolphe Lingis, North Western University Press 1968, p268.

study, we argue that the specificity of the Mediterranean ultimately lies in registering the diversity of the material practices and languages that resound in a shifting and stratified spacetime.<sup>9</sup> Insisting on the asymmetrical exercise of powers that confine and define the Mediterranean in the existing coloniality of research, we suggest a more open set of processes that sustain other definitions and directions. Rather than simply contesting marginalisation, this is about traversing the Mediterranean, listening to different voices, while adopting a diverse key and insisting on the instructive semantics of a certain opacity and refusal to mean.

9. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*, Zed Books 2012.

## SOUTHERN SHORES

In this spirit, a critical intensity can be drawn from the histories and cultures of the Asian and African dimensions of the Mediterranean. Against the prevalent background of its European management since 1800, this allows us to pose questions to the powers that have charted and explained its modern formation. Clearly, and to cite the Algerian author Assia Djebar, we do not pretend to speak for, or in the name of, the repressed histories we wish to register.<sup>10</sup> Paying attention and listening to these other shores, we are attempting to work the limits of a Euro-Mediterranean, recognising in our ignorance a critical light cast back upon our formation and the disciplines that sustain their explanations. Furthermore, we would argue that these more extensive and deeper histories interrupt modern historicism, consistently steering the Mediterranean in the direction indicated by the ‘progress’ of the Occident. Thus, we are arguing for a discontinuity where modernity and its categories can be rethought and reconfigured.

10. Assia Djebar, *Women of Algiers in their Apartments*, (trans.) Marjolijn De Jager, University of Virginia Press 1992, p2.

11. Nabil Matar, “The ‘Mediterranean’ through Arab Eyes in the Early Modern Period: From Rūmī to “White In-Between Sea””, in Judith E. Tucker (ed.), *The Making of the Modern Mediterranean: Views from the South*, University of California Press 2019, pp16-35.

The Mediterranean has been captured by contemporary European culture in a combination of judgments and geographies. The idea that this body of water is only defined by those who think they possess it emerges in its very name: for whom is the Mediterranean the ‘Mediterranean’, and not *bahr al-Rum* (the sea of the Romans), or *al-Bahr al-Shami* (the Syrian sea)? Perhaps an ‘Arabic Mediterranean’, in the manner we Europeans are accustomed to consider it, does not exist. The term *al-Muttawassit* only begins to circulate in the most extensive language of the area, Arabic, at the beginning of the twentieth century.<sup>11</sup> Europe has imposed unity on what, elsewhere, carried multiple names. This distinction draws our attention to a more open archive. Such complexities take us to the underside and unconscious dimensions of the Mediterranean, which, when laid out flat as a map, betrays all the limits of its modern European inscription. Further, it leads us to question what Europe is. Entangled through the Mediterranean to Asia and Africa, what Jacques Derrida called ‘heterogeneous foliations’, an assumed European autonomy cannot provide an answer.<sup>12</sup>

12. Jacques Derrida, ‘We Other Greeks’, (trans.) Pascale-Anne Brault and Michael Naas, in Miriam Leonard (ed.), *Derrida and Antiquity*, Oxford University Press 2010, p31. (Hereafter *We Other Greeks*); Engin F. Isin, ‘We, the Non-Europeans: Derrida with Said’, in Rosi Braidotti and Paul Gilroy (eds), *Conflicting Humanities*, Bloomsbury 2016, pp229-244.

At this point, the repressed archives of the making of the present can no longer be evaded. And then what happens when a land-locked *logos* is

13. Miriam Cooke, 'Mediterranean Thinking: From Netizen to Medizen', *Geographical Review*, 89:2, 1999, pp290-300.

14. Iain Chambers, 'Maritime Criticism and Theoretical Shipwrecks', *PMLA*, 125:3, 2011, pp678-684.

15. Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, (trans.) Betsy Wing, University of Michigan Press 1997.

16. Philip E. Steinberg, *The Social Construction of the Ocean*, Cambridge University Press 2001.

17. Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, (trans.) Graham Burchell and Hugh Tomlinson, Columbia University Press 1991, p87.

18. Martin Bernal, *Black Athena: The Afroasiatic Roots of Classical Civilization. Volume One: The Fabrication of Ancient Greece*, Vintage 1991.

19. Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, (trans.) Laurent Dubois, Duke University Press 2017. This leads into contemporary discussion on the 'Black Mediterranean' following the reverberations of Paul Gilroy's 'Black Atlantic'. See, for example, The Black Mediterranean Collective, *The Black Mediterranean*:

confronted with the liquid archives of the sea?<sup>13</sup> To register the sedimentation of bodies, cultures and histories that reside around, on and in Mediterranean waters is to trouble terrestrial certainties.<sup>14</sup> The sea withholds histories from the domination of a single narrative. It preserves, as Glissant would insist, the challenge of opacity.<sup>15</sup> The aquatic domain is both historical and heterogeneous.<sup>16</sup> Set adrift, the raft of Occidental philosophy is largely unwilling and frequently unable to engage with the non-European Mediterranean. Even for Deleuze and Guattari: 'Philosophers are strangers, but philosophy is Greek.'<sup>17</sup> Perhaps, we should add Derrida's more nuanced take on this inheritance where he insists that if we are still Greeks, we are now so with a difference, with a repetition that leads to alteration (*We Other Greeks*, pp27-8). Today, we know that other currents have always washed those philosophical and cultural 'origins' in the Greek archipelago. Nearly half of the nine books of Herodotus's *Histories* are occupied with the Egyptian and the Persian worlds and with Arabia, Libya, India and Scythia: an ancestral foretaste of Martin Bernal's *Black Athena*.<sup>18</sup>

The recent arrival of 'illegal' immigrants, accompanied by the ghosts of thousands of bodies consigned to a maritime cemetery, has dramatically pierced an exclusively European image of the Mediterranean. A refused complexity resurfaces. The unauthorised migrant has reopened negated archives. She has perforated the maps that had once confirmed precise limits and locations and firmly positioned her elsewhere, in the south, on the other side, certainly not in Europe. The 'becoming black' of the Mediterranean, to borrow Achille Mbembe's phrase, opens up 'our' modernity to a further series of unexpected enquiries.<sup>19</sup> We discover interrogations that insist not only in geopolitical terms, but also in definitions of citizenship and residence rights.<sup>20</sup> Along these borders, the constrictions of a strictly European frame fall apart. Other maps of belonging, both geographical and imaginative, emerge. The cartography of our geopolitics appears inadequate. In claiming to manage and explain these complex processes, it endorses only those who arrest history (and thus refuse it) to impose their point of view as unique.

Pushing time out of joint in this manner is to repurpose it. Transforming the past into a vital interrogation of the present opens up other possibilities, other versions of time. Dismantling what Denise Ferreira da Silva calls the 'lethal abstraction' of Western thought and its accumulative and extractive logic, we are not seeking to correct the record.<sup>21</sup> Instead, we return to recognising the intricate violence of the colonial proceedings of modernity and the nation-state. Moreover, opening this archive suggests an additional set of connections to navigate the African-Asian-European matrix of the Mediterranean. In the context of 'global history', Sebastian Conrad, for example, references the slave trade to 'underscore a different set of issues: the creation of a transatlantic space in the "Black Atlantic"; the repercussions of the trade on societies in West Africa; the connections of the Atlantic trade to complementary slave routes across the Sahara and the Indian Ocean ...'.<sup>22</sup>

With these more extensive considerations in mind, we need to attend to different temporalities that challenge the Occidental clock and its colonisation of time.<sup>23</sup> Such connections make the slave trade a contemporary issue, not one relegated to a fading past or historical footnote. Such a past remains ‘irrevocable’ and continues to echo across European history and today’s Mediterranean, both at sea and onshore.<sup>24</sup> In the afterlife of slavery, planetary links crumple the connections drawn on flat maps, short-circuit linear narratives and chronological disposal.<sup>25</sup> They support what Lisa Lowe calls the ‘intimacies of continents’.<sup>26</sup> Here the nation is not the only spacetime in which communities have organised themselves and interacted socially, politically, economically and culturally. Lowe’s argument to ‘read *across* the separate repositories’ is particularly relevant in attempting to respond to history by attending to connections and conversions that unsettle ‘discretely bounded objects, methods, and temporal frameworks canonised by a national history invested in isolated origins and independent progressive development’ (*Intimacies*, pp5-6).

Returning objects and processes to the thickness of their cultural constellations is to register the reverberation of historical memories in relationship to a time yet to come. The aim is to return history to another history and disband any naive link with scientific neutrality guaranteeing our language and knowledge.<sup>27</sup> As Jean-Luc Nancy once put it, it means to release history from the stranglehold of time and causality and return it ‘to community, or to being-in-common’.<sup>28</sup> This is to take responsibility for both language and memory. If, for example, we were to receive ancient Greek colonisation in the Mediterranean as an antique thalassocracy and as evidence of the diasporas and migrations from Greek cities that inaugurated a colonial enterprise, then a stitch in time is opened, rendering that past proximate to contemporary concerns. Establishing an emporium, practising colonisation, disciplining a territory according to a specific cultural order, experimenting, contesting and absorbing hybridisation: were all central to the experience of Greek settlements some two and a half thousand years ago, just as they are to modernity. In this manner, we can establish a critical archipelago that is not simply spatial and geographical but also temporal. It allows us to move through holes in time. In the undeniable singularities of each historical moment and locality, we acknowledge commonalities that compose a critical constellation. This permits the past to become comprehensible to present perspectives. And the souths become part of a historical formation rather than simply a geographical coordinate.

## THE MEDITERRANEAN LABORATORY

Thinking with the historical and cultural formation of the Mediterranean, we need to overcome not only disciplinary and national borders, but also change epistemological bearings. The Mediterranean provokes a series of prospects

*Bodies, Borders and Citizenship*, Palgrave Macmillan 2021. The concept was initially elaborated by Cedric Robinson in *Black Marxism. The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*, Zed Press 1983.

20. Donatella Di Cesare, *Resident Foreigners: A Philosophy of Migration*, Polity 2020.

21. Denise Ferreira da Silva in conversation with Maria Thereza Alves and Camila Marambio, ‘Cumbre Aconcagua: Part Two. El Robo (Theft)’, 25 August 2020, MOMA, New York: <https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/6683>.

22. Conrad Sebastian, *What is Global History?* Princeton University Press 2016, p12.

23. Léopold Lambert, ‘They Have Clocks, We Have Time: Introduction’, *The Funambulist*, 36, 2021.

24. Berber Bevernage, *History, Memory and State-Sponsored Violence: Time and Justice*, Routledge 2013.

25. Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route*, Farrar Straus and Giroux 2008.

26. Lisa Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*, Duke University Press 2015. (Hereafter *Intimacies*).

27. Roland Barthes, 'The Discourse of History', (trans.) Stephen Bann, in E.S. Shaffer (ed.) *Comparative Criticism: A Yearbook (Volume 3)*, Cambridge University Press 1981, pp3-20; Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth Century Europe*, Johns Hopkins Press 2015; Claudio Fogu, 'Figuring White in Metamodernity', *Storia della Storiografia*, 65:1, 2014, pp47-60.

28. Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Finite History', (trans.) Brian Holmes, in David Carroll (ed.), *The States of 'Theory': History, Art, and Critical Discourse*, Stanford University Press 1994, p143.

29. David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics*, Fordham University Press 2019.

30. Sylvia Wynter, 'Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation – An Argument,' *CR: The New Centennial Review*, 3:3, 2003, pp257-337.

31. For an example of erudite comparative analysis, clawing criticism back from the perceived maws of an all-encompassing postcoloniality, in order to restore authority to the disciplines and

that challenge the rationalising representation of Occidental reason as capable of making the world fully transparent to its will. A deliberate detour through the languages of the arts can, at this point, be chosen. It leads to unpacking the aesthetic attributes of the self-determination of Man, whose sensibilities ultimately constitute the Western subject and the 'regulative discourse of the human'.<sup>29</sup> Against the claims of the universal Subject, what Sylvia Wynter calls the 'coloniality of being', the persistence and resistance in multiple localities of other bodies challenge such a framing.<sup>30</sup>

At this point, the assumed dialectic of historical progress comes undone, not through erasure but rather in a multiplication of histories interrupting a single sequence. So, working with the material available, we find ourselves adopting a critical scepticism, fostered by awareness of the colonial construction and European invention of the Mediterranean that draws upon the *mare nostrum* myth of a Latin imperial order. Modern historical, political and imagined borders turn out to be exclusively European affairs. To recognise the crossing of the Mediterranean by further subaltern histories and cultures is to plumb the darker depths of this geo-historical constellation.

Deploying this perspective to unlock the hegemonic European shaping of the sea and its histories, does not mean to propose a single subaltern alternative. Other colonialisms, regimes of violence and subjugation, have always been part of its composition, for example, the modern Ottoman and Russian empires in the eastern Mediterranean. However, when the adjudicator of the comparison is not inserted into the analysis, the danger of a comparative approach is to lose sight of the asymmetrical powers involved. The territorial continuities of the Ottoman and Russian empires are not of the same scale and potency as their Western sea-borne counterparts contemporaneously establishing the planetary geometry of global capitalism.<sup>31</sup> If we add the increasingly insistent souths of the world to that scenario, then the disinterested reasoning and comparative rules of the liberal academy are left in intellectual tatters. To acknowledge that the European colonial imperative has become the template for a planetary order is to confront the normalisation of global hierarchies established by *that* hegemony and its claims to provide a universal measure.<sup>32</sup> It means recognising the location and limits of postcolonial criticism. Insisting on historical specificity and the non-universality of our languages is also to acknowledge forms of knowledge not necessarily yoked to the parable of Europe and its claims on the world. As a minimum, it pushes us to unpack the colonial constitution of the present.

Caught in the coloniality of power, we often cannot acknowledge the ontological challenge of those who refuse to be represented as objects of our history. In this sense, history itself is an Occidental discipline and institutional modality of knowledge and continues to be a colonial enterprise. For European 'historicity cannot dissipate its own effects of power; it cannot institute subjects that signify otherwise'.<sup>33</sup> Registering such limits and moving along the edges of authorised spacetime – what we call modernity and our

existing understanding of the Mediterranean – involves recognising that our inherited conceptual frame is robbed of its conclusions. A regime of representation, that guarantees universal neutrality separated from the heterogeneous and differentiated materiality of the world, is threatened by unplanned proximities. The will to categorise, classify and pathologise the rest of the planet is challenged. To reintroduce what existing maps and explanations of the Mediterranean have excluded is not to fall for the temptation of completing the picture. This would only permit a particular reason to continue to colonise historical and cultural explanations. Instead, it seeks to snap the chains of description that secure only our coordinates on the map. It is precisely here, in the intractable, in the refusal to assure me, us, them, as stable and formed, that we can seek to situate our analyses and develop our critical inquiry.

To think *with* the Mediterranean, rather than remain embroiled in debates on establishing its status as a stable research object for disciplinary verification, becomes the challenge. As a fluid, conceptual space, responding to mutable relations and practices, it constantly queries methodological nationalism and the knowledge formation of exclusively Occidental origin. Registering diverse moments in its multifarious history, when other concerns and prospects mobilised its organisation and fuelled its interpretation, suggests a more stratified and composite scenario. It also provides us with other languages to comprehend the current order. Bringing the past into the present in this manner brings attention to the critical force of anachronism. The intersecting of the present moment with the past implodes temporal linearities and the seeming neutrality of spatial coordinates. Historiography is not exercised, consciously and unconsciously, in ‘facts’, as if the latter were ‘pure’ and not already contaminated by our gaze, language and intellectual and political desire. Respecting the difficulties seeded in identifying and constructing such ‘facts’, we can appreciate the interpretative rigour of the present. Here the method lies in interpretative reason, sustained by a world that precedes and exceeds any conclusive discourse. The past is still possible. As Hannah Arendt noted, it persists like a language: potentially ready to speak what remains and is calling on us.<sup>34</sup>

The modern Mediterranean must be located in what Carmine Conelli calls the ‘global colonial archive’.<sup>35</sup> For the political settlement of the present is shadowed by other histories and cultures that continue to connect and shape it. The hundred-year occupation and war in Palestine/Israel, the similar obfuscation of the Kurdish question, the present-day European panic around immigration from Africa and Asia, and the events of 2010-12 gathered under the generic term ‘Arab Spring’. The Mediterranean acquires other histories from these cases where the marginalised and erased propose other arrangements. Since 2015, Europe has been interrogated by long lines of people fleeing war, hunger, poverty, blocked prospects and lives, and colonialism’s continuing fallout. The image of those attempting to

the academy, see Monika Albrecht’s introduction, in Monika Albrecht (ed.), *Postcolonialism Cross-Examined: Multidirectional Perspectives on Imperial and Colonial Pasts and the Neo-Colonial Present*, Routledge 2020.

32. David Scott, *Refashioning Futures: Criticism after Postcoloniality*, Princeton University Press 1999.

33. Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Towards a Global Idea of Race*, University of Minnesota Press 2007 (Kindle edition).

34. In an interview by Günther Gaus on German TV, known as ‘What Remains? The Language Remains?’, 16 September 1964. Later published in Hannah Arendt, *Essays in Understanding*, Jerome Kohn (ed.), Harcourt Brace 1994.

35. Carmine Conelli, ‘Challenging the Domestic Colonial Archive: Notes on the Racialization of the Italian Mezzogiorno’, in L. Jensen, J. Suárez-Krabb, C. Groes and Z. L. Pecic (eds), *Postcolonial Europe: Comparative Reflections after the Empires*, Rowman and Littlefield International 2017.



cross frontiers, carrying what possessions they can into the unforgiving cold, provokes an uncanny fold in the timeline upon which European nationalism and borders have been built. Not so long ago, the latter were considered superseded. They now return with a vengeance. Such confines are complex, shifting and painfully stratified. They are also the ghostly reminders of the past that haunts this winter's tale of the West. Lines of women, men and children entangled in European history probe, protest and pursue other geographies of belonging.

From Fernand Braudel, the fourteenth-century Arab historian Ibn Khaldūn, and more recently in the work of Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, we have learnt of the deeper temporalities and ecologies of the Mediterranean. The usual chronology of grand events and individuals come to be displaced by the complex rhythms of anonymous materialism and shifting configurations of power. Historically, the African and Asian shores were once considerably more 'developed' than the 'barbaric' European coast. We can follow the sweep of Shelomo Dov Goitein's studies of the Jewish merchant world of twelfth-century Cairo, the expansive universe of Islam proposed by Marshall Hodgson, and the world system before European hegemony with Janet Abu-Lughod. Or, to adopt the radically diverse language of the then-contemporary Arab observers of the Crusades and the European invasion of Western Asia in Amin Maalouf's *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, means to recognise historical processes that take us decisively into another frame of reference.<sup>36</sup> What is at stake is not a simple adjustment following the insertion of some missing pieces. Instead, the point is to trace in refused and marginalised histories the procedures and premises that have produced the mechanisms of exclusion that render the Mediterranean in its present form. As Gurminder K. Bhambra has recently argued, this means pursuing arguments of 'epistemological justice' to undo the 'colonial modern'.<sup>37</sup>

To register, for example, the existence and persistence of the 'missing pages' of women poets in this matrix, from the Sumerians and Babylonians to the pre-Islamic period, from Roman and Greek Antiquity across the Middle Ages to modernity and the contemporary, means to interrogate the institutional archives of history and writing, of politics and poetics, dictated by male hands.<sup>38</sup> Occidental definitions of public spaces and private spheres have invariably decided the inclusion or exclusion of specific subjectivities from the official archives of history. In the Mediterranean, patriarchal imperatives have bound women to the private sphere, negating until recently their rights to 'cultural citizenship' and political agency. As Ellen Greene notes, 'the emphasis on women's biographies and the seemingly "personal" nature of their literary achievements has occluded the highly intricate and complex character of ancient women's relationships not only to their largely patriarchal societies but also to literary traditions overwhelmingly dominated by male voices'.<sup>39</sup>

Registering the voices of women poets in the Mediterranean, other maps

36. Amin Maalouf, *The Crusades Through Arab Eyes*, Al Saqi Books 1984.

37. Gurminder K. Bhambra, 'Decolonizing Critical Theory? Epistemological Justice, Progress, Reparations', *Critical Times*, 4:1, April 2021, pp73-89.

38. On the modern iteration of this absence, see Ammiel Alcalay, *After Jews and Arabs. Remaking Levantine Culture*, University of Minnesota Press 1993.

39. Ellen Greene, 'Introduction', in Ellen Greene (ed.), *Women Poets in Ancient Greece and Rome*, University of Oklahoma Press 2005, pxi.

emerge to announce further histories. These disturb the temporality of the canon and the public arrangements of literature. The very production of knowledge is challenged, transformed and interrogated by such itineraries. In the reasoning of female poetry, we reconnect to other languages. We hear the intermittent echoes of different epistemologies. Borders are crossed, fractured and subverted, canons and classifications confused and confuted, archives reworked.<sup>40</sup> An emergent intersectional female cartography breaches a particular rationalisation of the world, snapping its lines of thought and dismantling the presumed neutrality of its history. Marwa Helal's poem 'the middle east is missing' is precisely a lesson in the critical language of poetry and maps confronting colonial violence:

say it in the coloniser's tongue. call it the cradle of civilisation  
 say dunyah say la illahah ila allah say jannah inscribe your  
 history inside every barren closet you once occupied say quickly  
*here we are now entertain us/ cartographers agitate us*  
 exact us      excise us<sup>41</sup>

#### THINKING WITH THE DIVER

He is dark skinned and defies the European version of Mediterranean figures like Jesus Christ, the Virgin Mary, and the Greek gods and heroes. His body descends gracefully through the air some 2500 years ago. This famous figure is painted on the coffin's inner lid, known as the Tomb of the Diver, and was destined for invisibility.<sup>42</sup> Unearthed and opened in 1968, we can see him surrounded on the four sides of the tomb's interior by reclining males gathered in a symposium. The sarcophagus comes from the Greek site of Poseidonia, better known by its Roman name, Paestum.

As a Greek colony, Paestum was part of the expansion of the city-states of the Peloponnese peninsula, that extended across Homer's 'wine-dark sea' to Asia Minor, north through the Black Sea to the steppes, and westwards through Sicily and southern Italy to the coasts of modern-day France and Spain. As with all colonialisms, there was the conquest, submission and enslavement of indigenous populations. The land was never empty. Control had to be wrought from local authorities: blood spilt, lives arbitrarily terminated.<sup>43</sup> Foreign memories, customs and culture were imported and politically imposed on the territory. Today, most of these details disappear behind modern Hellenism, lost in the myths of a European nostalgia for the presumed purity and nobility of its origins. Here the discipline of archaeology has often been enlisted to cleanse the past from later undesired accretions. In mimicry of the supposedly Greek roots of Europe, history is cancelled, while ruins and relics are transformed into resources as monuments for modern nation-building: from Athens to Jerusalem. The unwanted materials and sediments

40. Lidia Curti, 'Beyond the Canon: Women's Italian Writings of Migration', in Marie Orton, Graziella Parati and Ron Kubati (eds), *Contemporary Italian Diversity in Critical and Fictional Narratives*, Farleigh Dickinson University Press 2021.

41. Marwa Helal, 'the middle east is missing', in *Invasive Species*, Nightboat Books, New York 2020. Marwa Helal was born in Egypt and currently lives in Brooklyn, New York.

42. Paul Carter, *Metabolism: The Exhibition of the Unseen*, Lyon House Museum, Melbourne 2015.

43. Gabriel Zuchtriegel, *Colonization and Subalternity in Classical Greece: Experience of the Nonelite Population*, Cambridge University Press 2017.

left by the Ottomans or the Palestinians are purged in order to recount the imagined Greek or Israeli nation. Foreign bodies are expelled through an explicit racial framing of the past (and present).<sup>44</sup> It renders these areas of the eastern Mediterranean entirely ‘European’.<sup>45</sup> In Athens, Muslim tombstones and Arab inscriptions lie in the rubble cleared away to ascend to the pristine origins of the Acropolis as archaeology mirrors the national narrative. The recall of this white-washed past in modern imperial ambitions is constantly exposed in the neo-classical architecture of contemporary Occidental capitals: from London, Paris and Berlin to Washington and Rome. The authority of these buildings is constructed on the fictitious homogeneity of an invented past. The temples and structures of the Ancient World they seek to emulate were, in fact, never white but decorated in vivid, even garish, colours.<sup>46</sup>

Adopting other interpretative coordinates, we could commence from such medieval cities as Cairo or Baghdad: but then ‘medieval’ to whose measure of time? Or we could consider Islam as a European religion since the eighth century, rethink the Italian Renaissance and European humanism within a broader frame that includes Arab sciences and culture, or consider south-eastern Europe and the Mediterranean commencing from Istanbul at the height of the Ottoman Empire. In all these cases, a very different Mediterranean emerges compared to that proposed by modern Europe. Finally, relinquishing the idea that everything originates in Europe as if it were the point zero of progress, we might provocatively suggest that nothing commences in Europe: from the components of its ‘Mediterranean diet’ (whose ingredients primarily arrived from extra-European spaces, initially via the Arab world and subsequently through colonial gain in the Americas) and mathematical logic (from the decimal Hindu-Arabic numerical system to algebra and the computational sciences), to the architectural language of Gothic cathedrals, fan-vaulted ceilings and pointed arches ‘stolen from the Saracens’ according to Sir Christopher Wren.<sup>47</sup>

Take the question of perspective, the cornerstone of Renaissance humanism and the subsequent rationalisation of time (history) and space (geography). Its principles were first elaborated in eleventh-century Cairo by the scientist Ibn al-Haytham (965-1040) and then studied and applied centuries later in Florence by Brunelleschi. Reprised in Europe, a decisive epistemological operation occurs as the visual organisation and representation of the world now become the paradigm of knowledge. Thinking with Islamic art as a challenge to the existing Occidental history of art, Wendy Shaw writes: ‘the West remained mired in a monocular perspective of the world’ that produced ‘desire rooted in the eye rather than in the body’.<sup>48</sup> In an exercise of power, the specific European perspective has been violently established as universal and natural. Yet behind this history lies an altogether more complex web that spans the Mediterranean and leads to a profound interrogation of what we consider the inaugural moment of ‘our’ modernity. Configured as the ‘origin’ of Occidental progress, perspective frames and rationally controls

44. Yannis Hamilakis and Rafael Greenberg, *Modernity's Sacred Ruins: Colonialism, Archaeology and the National Imagination in Greece and Israel*, British School at Athens webinar, 11 March 2021: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C0qskcTK2Uw>. Of course, European affiliation poses a deep paradox for contemporary Israel, where the modern return to Palestine as homeland lies precisely in the claim of its being historically of the Middle East.

45. Nadia Abu El-Haj, *Facts on the Ground: Archaeological Practice and Territorial Self-Fashioning in Israeli Society*, University of Chicago Press 2001.

46. For examples see, ‘The Ancient World’s Best Kept Secret’, <https://blog.usejournal.com/the-ancient-worlds-best-kept-secret-5e7181ce27db>

47. Diana Darke, *Stealing from the Saracens: How Islamic Architecture Shaped Europe*, C Hurst and Co 2020.

48. Wendy M.K. Shaw, *What is Islamic Art? Between Religion and Perception*, Cambridge University Press 2019, pp306/314.

the world, unfolding in linear and imperial fashion from the subject towards infinity. History is limited to a unique view. This was crucial to the subsequent mapping of the globe and the unilateral appropriation of its resources. It permits a particular moral authority to colonise space and annihilate the time and prospects of others.

At this point, the cultural and political cartography of the Mediterranean plotted through the history of Europe reveals a coloniality of method. As Patrick Wolfe famously pointed out, colonialism is not an event but a power structure.<sup>49</sup> It cannot be confined to the past, for it also constitutes the present. It is inscribed in the very formation of modern liberalism and sedimented in the methods and languages of the social sciences, whose truth claims betray the parochial Occidental authority of their universal pronouncements. Rather than add these considerations to the existing picture, it again becomes more significant to fracture it. Time and space are folded into assembling another critical montage that escapes capture in the uniform expanse of an exclusive chronology.

In an altogether more worldly frame, Renaissance Europe and the rise of the West become part of the shared, however differentiated, history of Afro-Eurasia. The powerful axes of great trade routes across the Sahara and the steppes of Central Asia, together with nomadic invasions initially from the southern shores of the Mediterranean and subsequently from Transoxiana, only began to fade away at the beginning of the sixteenth century. As Marshall Hodgson suggested, the powers of Islamdom 'sent the Occidentals into all the oceans'.<sup>50</sup> Only at the end of the eighteenth century, Europe became the dominant protagonist on a world scale, exceeding the Ottomans and China. Sea-borne empires and the rise of nation-states then increasingly came to channel and control the flow of goods, culture and capital. Meanwhile, frontiers and the nationalisation of identity have progressively disciplined human traffic over the surfaces of the globe.

## BETWEEN THE ADRIATIC AND THE AEGEAN

Arguments about historical time, refused archives and marginalised cultures can take us to other parts of the Mediterranean. Looking southeast from Venice towards Istanbul, from the Adriatic towards the Aegean, we move along vectors of power contested in early modernity by the Ottoman Empire and the Venetian Republic, then joined by the Habsburg, Russian and Soviet empires and the recent undoing of state socialism for much of the region. In its midst, lies a largely overlooked area of Europe: the Balkans. How to think about the Balkans? Again, we mean not to identify a largely ignored object of study, but to consider the possible transformation of the historiographical, cultural and political languages that have identified, explained, constructed and primarily excluded this part of Europe.<sup>51</sup> Are we to consider this region in terms of a conceptual retrieval that now ties up the ragged edges of

49. Patrick Wolfe, 'Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native', *Journal of Genocide Research*, 8:4, 2006, pp387-409.

50. Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, Volume 2, University of Chicago Press 1974 (Kindle edition).

51. Larry Wolfe, *Inventing Eastern Europe: The Map of Civilization on the Mind of the Enlightenment*, University of Stanford Press 1994.

south-eastern Europe, or as a more fluid entity that precedes and exceeds narrow nationalisms? The promise of the second option is today throttled by militarised national borders, most dramatically signalled by a flip-flop brown foot in the snow belonging to a Syrian or Afghan refugee seeking a corridor into the European Union.<sup>52</sup> Again, this casts a critical light on the European model, interrogating its colonising perspectives and the unexamined premises of the national insistence of its political and cultural formation.

So, how to think *with* the Balkans? Exiting from their exotic construction, apparently cut off from modernity in the mountainous margins of southern Europe, home to archaic rites and tribal traditions, requires us to abandon a sub-genre of the othering and subordinating mechanism that Edward Said called Orientalism. The term itself points to more extensive concerns with the impact of colonialism on the political and intellectual making of the modern world.<sup>53</sup> Melodramatically proposed in Bram Stoker's novel *Dracula* (1897), this representation of the Balkans was seemingly reconfirmed more recently in the so-called ethnic wars in ex-Yugoslavia. So how do we respond to Maria Todorova's request to contest this frozen image that refuses to die as though it were a vampire? Insisting on the Balkans as a component of Europe means rejecting the simplicity of its presumed 'Oriental' character and underlining the historically heterogeneous and culturally unruly making of Europe itself. The question of 'Balkanism' then lies not in the abstract clash of the conflicting totalities of West and East, but with the concrete powers of Occidental hegemony framing and identifying what it seeks to dominate and discipline through definition and separation.<sup>54</sup> All of which emphasise the violent centrality of nationalism to the historical formation of modern Europe itself. It also permits us to bring into play arguments that have become significant to reconsidering the colonial constitution of modernity; for example, race and racism, and thereby breach the usual reduction of local realities to supposedly ingrained ethnic characteristics.<sup>55</sup> The implication is to reach for an alternative map, a more fluid counter-geography, that resists the possibility of establishing fixed coordinates at the local and transnational levels.<sup>56</sup> Understanding the desire for home and belonging cannot be arbitrarily set. It is complex, dense and open-ended. It is always in errancy across localities that offer a temporal, rather than timeless, accommodation.

Geographically, politically, historically and culturally, the Balkans are part of Europe. After all, they include the ur-civilisation of Greece. Why are they so rarely taken into consideration and rendered peripheral? Here, revisiting a historical and cultural formation in the light of its subordination acquires critical weight. More than stating the immediate colonial status of the region, historically crisscrossed by diverse empires and religions, we could concentrate on the exercise of power that permits particular centres to create margins in order politically and culturally to control and colonise them. Historically the Balkans were far less 'peripheral' to the Ottoman capital of Edirne (Adrianople) than they had been for the Occident. The peninsula

52. There is a savagely beautiful anticipation of this passage in Michael Winterbottom's 2002 film *In This World*.

53. Wael Hallaq, *Restating Orientalism: A Critique of Modern Knowledge*, Columbia University Press 2018.

54. Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans*, Oxford University Press 2009. (Hereafter *Imagining the Balkans*).

55. Catherine Baker, *Race and the Yugoslav Region: Postsocialist, Post-conflict, Postcolonial?*, Manchester University Press 2018.

56. Guido Snel, 'Levitating the Balkans: Outlines for a Literary Geography of Encounters', *Arcadia*, 55:1, 2020, pp64-82.

acquired its name from the Ottomans, and ‘it seems that the conclusion that the Balkans are the Ottoman legacy is not an overstatement’ (*Imagining the Balkans*, p12).

Today, with growing nationalism and a renewed drive to establish homogeneity and historical purity, such a heritage is deliberately ignored and deleted from textbooks and public recognition. Despite 500 years of Ottoman rule, there is only one recently inaugurated mosque in Athens and only one surviving in Sofia. In the Bulgarian capital, the minarets of more than forty other mosques were blown up by the military engineers of the Tsarist army in 1878. At that time, half the inhabitants of the new nation of Bulgaria were Muslim, 90 per cent of whom spoke Turkish. The latter remained an official language of the state, alongside Bulgarian, for another four decades.

In the winter of 1984-85, the names of 800,000 Turks were Bulgarianised by force, so that the last communist census, conducted in 1985, could ‘prove’ that only ethnic Bulgarians lived in communist Bulgaria and that no national or ethnic minorities remained.<sup>57</sup>

The following year, 370,000 Bulgarian Turks were expelled to Turkey (recognised by the Bulgarian parliament in 2012 as an act of ethnic cleansing) (*Bulgaria’s Denial*). Such mythical and homogenous nationalisms are fundamentally a modern European invention.

At the battle of Ankara in 1402, where the Timurid army overwhelmed the Ottomans, Sultan Bayezid I’s right wing was composed of Serbian forces in black armour under the command of Stefan Lazarević. Half a century later, Constantinople had become the Ottoman Empire’s new capital. From there, Sultan Mehmed II sent his friend and probably lover, Radu the Fair, against Radu’s elder brother Vlad III (more popularly known as Dracula) to bring Wallachia under Ottoman control. Both brothers had been brought up at the Ottoman court in Edirne. Radu was likely also with the Turks in taking Constantinople in 1453. This complex world is riven by power struggles and shifting alliances that confound attempts to establish sharp divisions between Occident and Orient, Christian and Muslim, Europe and Asia. Yet what emerges most forcefully, both in the historical perspectives of Maria Todorova and Mark Mazower and in the more personal and poetic, but also profoundly political, accounts of Daša Drndić and Kapka Kassabova, is the Occidental refusal to register and digest the Balkans’ Ottoman imprint and inheritance.<sup>58</sup> Complex historical and cultural permeabilities embedded in place and practices threaten the static simplicities of national identification and religious division.<sup>59</sup> Despite being considered the most powerful state in sixteenth-century Europe, the Ottoman Empire remains absent from the Occidental narrative of its formation and history. It is externalised and with it the Balkans. Recognising their internal presence produces a very different Europe and a very different understanding of modernity.

57. Tomasz Kamusella, *Ethnic Cleansing during the Cold War: The Forgotten 1989 Expulsion of Turks from Communist Bulgaria*, Routledge 2018. The details are drawn from Tomasz Kamusella, ‘Bulgaria’s Denial of its Ottoman Past and ‘Turkish Identity’ in *New Eastern Europe*: <https://neweasternurope.eu/2019/03/24/bulgarias-denial-of-its-ottoman-past-and-turkish-identity/>. (Hereafter *Bulgaria’s Denial*).

58. Mark Mazower, *The Balkans*, Modern Library 2000; Mark Mazower, *Salonica: City of Ghosts*, Vintage 2006; Daša Drndić, *Trieste*, (trans.) Ellen Elias-Bursac, MacLehose Press 2012; Kapka Kassabova, *Border: A Journey to the Edge of Europe*, Granta 2017; Kapka Kassabova, *To the Lake. A Balkan Journey of War and Peace*, Granta 2020.

59. Dionigi Albera and Maria Couroucli (eds), *Sharing Sacred Places in the Mediterranean: Christians, Muslims and Jews at Shrines and Sanctuaries*, Indiana University Press 2012.

If we were to consider the capitalist making of the present, not as an internal European affair, but, as Marx pointed out, requiring the whole world for its realisation, then we would need to understand how this runs through the Balkans and their histories. To trace the conflictual forces and inheritance of empire (Byzantine, Habsburg, Ottoman, Austro-Hungarian, Russian, Soviet), together with religious affiliations (the Eastern Orthodox Church, Islam, Catholicism, and with their innumerable splinters, sects and heterodoxies), is to acknowledge routes running north and south, east and west. Then there is the history of the Yugoslav experiment in non-aligned socialism, together with the widespread support for national liberation and anti-colonial struggles in the socialist countries of the post-1945 Balkans. Angela Davis visited and was fêted in Bulgaria in 1972. Such a situation was irreducible to simply Cold War politics.<sup>60</sup> In other words, even the most overlooked and under-considered region of south-eastern Europe turns out to be not so much a periphery as a nodal point in wider networks impacting both locally and far further afield.<sup>61</sup> At every border and frontier town, the question of Europe, the West and the planet's capitalisation is posed.<sup>62</sup>

And while it is relatively easy to identify older empires and their colonisations of southeast Europe, what is frequently overlooked is the insidious impact of more immediate powers: from Italian colonialism and Fascist tutelage running from Trieste all down the coast to Athens and Rhodes. Then there were Soviet and British empires (those tanks on the streets and planes in the air of Athens in 1944 ordered by London to crush left-wing Greek partisans), not to speak of the massive economic and political impact of the present-day European Union. If ethnonationalism has inevitably produced a string of minorities and is often the barely disguised cypher for heteronormative masculinity and ultimately white supremacy, this is hardly restricted to the Balkans. We need only consider post-Brexit Britain, anti-Islamic France, or the war on black lives in the United States: all part of the inheritance of the racial hierarchisation of the planet. What occurred in the breakdown of Yugoslavia in the 1990s poses a profound (if inevitably ignored) interrogation of Occidental philosophy and political science that thrusts 'against the limits of its western origins'.<sup>63</sup> Held together and sustained in a capitalist hubris where the only moral authority is ultimately secured in the metaphysics of the market, taking liberalism (and democracy) seriously exposes such scenarios to the dark side of their structural inequality and violence... everywhere. It undoes the hypocritical teleology (and theology) of Occidental 'progress'. In this breakdown, we can tap into horizontal assemblages, simultaneously linking and delinking historical legacies in a manner that cuts laterally into established archives and authorised identities. Here, interrupting the neoliberal mantra of 'no alternative' while living the global failure of liberalism, transnational and interdisciplinary practices sustain heterotopias through critical creativity and imaginative geographies. We look to another historical montage; to a politics of borders tied to processes, negotiation,

60. Zhivka Valiavicharska, 'Post-Stalinism's Uncanny Symbioses: Ethno-nationalism and the Global Orientations of Bulgarian Socialism during the 1960s and 1970s', pp79-99. This essay is in the important collection by Polina Manolova, Katarina Kušić and Philipp Lottholz (eds), *Decolonial Theory and Practice in Southeast Europe*, 3, 2019: <https://dialoguingposts.files.wordpress.com/2019/03/special-issue.pdf>.

61. Manuela Boatcă and Anca Parvulescu, 'Creolizing Transylvania: Notes on Coloniality and Inter-imperiality', *History of the Present*, 10:1, 2020, pp9-27.

62. Étienne Balibar, *We, the People of Europe?* Princeton University Press 2003.

63. Tom Nairn, 'The Modern Janus', *New Left Review*, 94, 1975, p27.

translations and transit, rather than to stable entities and the violence of confines and closure.<sup>64</sup>

Looking to transform the Balkans from a seeming periphery into a pertinent critical space, we could draw on the cultural fluidities proposed in the films of Theo Angelopoulos. Here we confront a twisting physical and metaphysical passage into modern Greece's historical and cultural archives, accompanied by the recall and reconfiguration of the Balkans as a whole. The journey renders visible the violence of catastrophic cartographies and deliberately unties the rigid confines of ethnonationalism.<sup>65</sup> Such an entwining of narratives, secured in a poetics that is also a politics, suggests an altogether more gregarious and freer unpacking of the peninsula. It proposes a remembering through resistance, assembling fragments where the return to the past spirals into another, unauthorised topography. It leads to an uncoupling of chronology from the nationalist clock and the implacable teleology of 'progress' accumulating capital from the extraction of time. Refused histories and subaltern temporalities exceed the empty prescriptions of modernity to produce discomfort in the established story. In the cinema of Angelopoulos, and thinking in particular of *Ulysses' Gaze* (1995), *Eternity and a Day* (1998) and *The Weeping Meadow* (2004), we move through bleak landscapes; for they figure the tempos of the oppression of those robbed of their history, of being colonised or eliminated by a unique finality.

Nationalist myths purport to comment on a natural coherence. Angelopoulos reminds us that there exist other tales of an altogether more jagged character. The deliberate slowness of his films unwrap time into another narrative. The peregrinations of the filmmaker and male poet, the female body, the ethnicised community and the racialised other continually queer any idea of neutrality. Incomplete and unredeemed, such critical spaces need to be set against the vicious grain of narrow nationalism, exclusionary geographies and illiberal regimes of citizenship: from the English Channel to the Black Sea.

Similarly, the sounds of the Balkans spill out of all attempts at national framing. Whether in dance, rebetika and Romani music, or the voice of the itinerant Sephardic singer Rosa Eskenazi who recorded songs in Greek, Turkish, Arabic, Hebrew, Italian, Ladino and Armenian in both Istanbul and Athens, we find musical cartographies that crisscross borders and stretch from Anatolia to the Danube. The passage of images and sounds touches local singularities ultimately suspended in wider networks and relations, in deeper histories and overlapping archives. The local turns out to be both deeper and more cosmopolitan than the nation; it challenges chauvinistic recruitment to the violence of the state seeking its place in the planetary management of economic inequalities and social injustice.

Such images and sounds propose other languages, leading to further narratives and diverse manners of analysis to navigate the nation's oppressive spaces. They transform understandings of place from localised stasis and

64. The points in this paragraph are drawn directly from comments by Dimitris Christopoulos, Ljubomir Frckoski, Christina Koulouri, Igor Štiks, Slavco Dimitrov, Gordan Georgiev, Viki Mladenova, Elena Tavani, Stamatia Portanova, Lorenzo Bernini and Massimo Prearo, among others, in a seminar in Athens, 12-15 July 2021, held as part of a European-funded project on the 'Geo-Philosophy of the Balkans'. See also, Srećko Horvat and Igor Štiks, *Welcome to the Desert of Post-Socialism: Radical Politics after Yugoslavia*, Verso 2015.

65. Dionne Brand, Christina Sharpe, Torkwase Dyson, Canisia Lubrin, Kevin Adonis Browne, Danaï Mupotsa and Dele Adeyemo, 'Catastrophe: Cartography', 30 April 2021, <https://www.thesojournerproject.org/sessions/catastrophe-cartography/>



nostalgia for what is seemingly lost, to affirm an alternative and agonistic way of belonging and living. Pathologised and subaltern worlds, cast into the shadows by the shiny allure of modernity, can refuse the diagnosis, insist and persist within alternative networks to produce other spaces. The singularities of locality, organised around feminism, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, ecological and minority rights, come to be linked in and through emergent complexities that resist the reductive rule of capital.

Of course, reasoning in this manner implies refuting, or at least complicating, the mono-dimensional logic of centre and periphery. Perhaps, it is more helpful to think beyond simple gradients of power and engage with polycentrism. Here, where the multiple 'peripheries' of the metropolises of Constantinople/Istanbul, Vienna, Budapest, Venice and even Moscow overlap, the local seemingly acquires all the density of a historical black hole: sucking histories, cultures and lives into a bewildering density. There is no simple stratification mirroring the chronological passage of time but volatile sedimentation. All further accentuated today by the nationalist separation of the histories of the Balkans into fiercely autochthonous units that, in refusing to converse with each other, have become suffocating straitjackets, each with an isolating narrative too heavy to bear.<sup>66</sup> Critically undoing these accounts, while simultaneously resisting the reduction of history to linear steps towards a European legislation of progress, we uncover unruly archives of creolisation and hybridisation. The national tale proposes the seeming security of stable identities. While unruly archives suggest belonging to the discomfort attendant on conflict and conviviality, where historical processes continually interrogate and register the limits of any conclusive accounting of time and place.

## THE EDGE

To bring the Balkans back into the picture then is to insist, against stereotypical figures of impenetrable mountain passes, blood feuds, Byzantine, Ottoman, Slavic, Albanian, Bulgarian and Hellenic violence, on the trans- and international coordinates of its composition. It is to steal away from the national *domus* and its mythical scaffolding and free the local into a more expansive, altogether less guaranteed, world. The refused margins and absent peripheries now acquire a sharper pertinence and impact the presumed centres of progress and development. Their claims on the narrative cut into, and cut up, Occidental ascendancy and its supposed rights on the world. In different ways and with diverse effects, the rural margins, the pale of Eastern Europe and the colonies around the globe, once considered external and subordinate to the West, enter the equation. Every urban centre needs a rural periphery, north a south, Occident an Orient, and metropole a colony. In that case, we are not talking simply of historical or cultural discrimination, but instead of the structural distribution of power. A closed understanding

66. This was pointed out to us by the Macedonian scholar Ljubomir Frckoski, in private correspondence. It was already much in evidence in Rebecca West's detailed 1941 Balkan travelogue, *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. See also Alexander Kiossev, 'The Dark Intimacy: Maps, Identities, Acts of Identification', in Dušan I. Bjelić and Obrad Savić (eds), *Balkan as Metaphor: Between Globalization and Fragmentation*, MIT Press 2002.

of modernity being endogenously generated solely on West European soil and then moving outwards to englobe the rest of the planet falls apart. The economic, cultural and historical conditions for the 'rise of the West' were always far more extensive. Africa, the Americas and Asia were always essential to the modern constitution of European culture, capitalism and power. As Frantz Fanon famously put it: 'Europe is literally a creation of the Third World'.<sup>67</sup>

The rise of capitalist enterprise and banking in Italy was connected to trades routes, mathematical principles, commercial practices and technological innovation that ran under Islamic hegemony from the Atlantic coast to south India and China. Unifying the Asian landmass under the *Pax Mongolica* promoted a developing world economy that shattered European insularity.<sup>68</sup> In Krakow, a bugle is still sounded on the hour from Saint Mary's Basilica. It signals the arrival of the Mongols under the city's walls in 1241 before being sacked. The sound ends abruptly, purportedly signalling the moment a Mongolian arrow pierced the trumpeter's throat. Here lie all the fears of the barbarians at the gates. Rather than consider this scenario in terms of the archaic phenomena of nomadic incursions threatening the developments of urban settlement, perhaps it is more significant to follow the fourteenth-century historian Ibn Khaldūn and consider such events in the ebb and flow of reconfigurations of power. 'Oriental' ascendancy – Arab, Mongolian, Ottoman – both initially facilitated and subsequently pushed a 'peripheral' but burgeoning Europe westwards to circumnavigate Asian hegemonies and accidentally 'discover' the Americas and establish the planetary conditions of the modern capitalist political economy. Factors coming from as far afield as the steppes of central Asia, the cities of China, the cultures, jungles, forests, savannahs and prairies of Africa and the Americas are involved. The heart of darkness of our civilisation lies both in the slave plantations of the New World and the factories of Manchester, in the illuminated arcades of Paris and the mountain passes of the Balkans.

Here we arrive at the noted question posed by Hannah Arendt in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*: who has the right to have rights?<sup>69</sup> Who in the present has the right to narrate the world, explain modernity and represent the Mediterranean? Seeking to reply, we inevitably find ourselves working in the shadows of fractured liberalism, no longer able to respond to the rights it is supposed to guarantee. On the threshold of this European formation, accustomed over the centuries to legislate both juridically and culturally, that is politically, for the planet, we encounter a revolt against the European 'I'.<sup>70</sup> Suppose we were to take the democratic promise of liberalism seriously. Its contemporary failure then opens up a debate on living that inheritance as a permanent breakdown while rerouting its global claims into more complicated renewals, and localities. Here, the unilateral exercise and coherence of the Occident as a template and universal measure is now traversed, translated

67. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, (trans.) Richard Philcox, Grove Press 2004.

68. Alexander Anievas and Kerem Nişancıoğlu, *How the West Came to Rule: The Geopolitical Origins of Capitalism*, Pluto 2015.

69. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Schocken Books 2004, p376.

70. Jeff Sacks, 'Fanon's insurgency', *Postcolonial Studies*, 24:2, 2021, pp234-250.

and transformed, by historical processes that precede, exceed and excavate the premises of its sovereignty.

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