



White Panic

Iain Chambers

To cite this article: Iain Chambers (2018) White Panic, Third Text, 32:5-6, 638-645, DOI: [10.1080/09528822.2018.1558650](https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2018.1558650)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09528822.2018.1558650>



Published online: 15 Jan 2019.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 32



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

White Panic

Days of the Living Dead

Iain Chambers

History is not the past.
It is the present.
We carry our history with us.
We are our history.
If we pretend otherwise, we literally are criminals.
I attest to this:
the world is not white;
it never was white,
cannot be white.
White is a metaphor for power,
and that is simply a way of describing
Chase Manhattan Bank.

James Baldwin, 'Remember This House'¹

Let us try to think in terms of a political and poetical statement about the present, which means, I would suggest, to seek another modality of criticism, one that avoids simply repeating the assumed authority of the past to shore up the existing moment. Faced with institutions, languages and prospects that continue to run the present as though it were the past – a Britain that cannot give up its imperial imaginary, a Europe that refuses to break with nationalist deadlock – rational argument and disciplinary logic are pushed to the edge. Populism, seemingly giving voice to invisible people and hidden histories, becomes prominent. The provincial knives of racism, fear and hate cut easily into the supine and bloated body of increasingly unrepresentative democracies. As the oligarchies pull away to their off-shore wealth and guarded lifestyles, an abyss opens up to be filled by rhetorical fixes and institutional bluster. The facade of politics

1 James Baldwin's unfinished manuscript that became the basis of Raoul Peck's film *I'm Not Your Negro* (2016) and the subsequent publication: *I'm Not Your Negro*, Vintage, New York, 2017.



Isaac Julien, *Western Union Series No. 1 (Cast No Shadow)*, 2007, digital print from the multimedia installation *Western Union: Small Boats*, 2007), courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro gallery, London

- 2 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony*, University of California Press, Berkeley, London and Los Angeles, 2001
- 3 Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, Schocken Books, New York, 1971
- 4 Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*, Aunt Lute Books, San Francisco, 2012
- 5 Michel Foucault, 'Nietzsche, Genealogy, History', in Michel Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice: Selected Essays and Interviews*, D F Bouchard, ed, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1977; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Explanation and Culture: Marginalia', in *The Spivak Reader*, Routledge, London and New York, 1996; Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Minor Composition, London, 2013
- 6 Foucault, 'Nietzsche', op cit; Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intentions & Method*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1985
- 7 Catherine Hall et al, *Legacies of British Slave Ownership*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2014
- 8 Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1993
- 9 Sandro Mezzadra, 'The Topicality of Prehistory: A New Reading of Marx's Analysis of So-called "Primitive Accumulation"', *Rethinking Marxism*, vol 23, no 3, 2011
- 10 Giorgio Agamben, 'What Is the Contemporary?', in Giorgio Agamben, *What is an Apparatus?* Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 2009

is increasingly peopled by ghosts – both those subjected to the colonial terror once thought to have been laid to rest, and those who continue to direct and define the present.

In this scenario the contemporary migrant becomes the political question of our time. Despite the walls, barriers, emergency legislation and resulting necro-politics, she and he insist and persist.² Her presence reveals the Occidental 'heart of darkness': its vaunted humanist values and system of justice left to drown at sea or bleaching in the deserts of the Sahara and North America. Ideas of freedom and citizenship unravel and snarl up in the ever-narrowing path to the right to have rights.³ This fracture in the political and cultural edifice of the West, or, better still, this open wound, further suggests that the existing political economy of understanding is insufficient.⁴ Fossilised in a mercantile order of knowledge, its institutional apparatuses appear as the syncopated minions of a brutal and impugnable order.

Here a cut – to mix Foucault's definition of science with the musical practices of a DJ (the analogy was once proposed by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak) – suggests the necessity of a breakaway and subversive order of knowledge, an alternative undercommons.⁵ The emerging science lies not in revealing the truth, as though it were fixed, eternal and graspable, but in the practices of inaugurating new beginnings and unauthorised configurations.⁶

In 2015 the debt incurred by the British government to pay the £20 million compensation – the equivalent of £16.5 billion in 2013 – to slave owners juridically alienated of their 'property' through the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833 was finally paid off. This payout was the biggest effected in modern British government history prior to the more recent one incurred by the financial meltdown and banking crisis in 2008. In this lengthy payback of a debt to compensate the owners, not the slaves, there emerges a continuity traced in government debt and individual wealth that forcibly underlines that slavery was not simply a now superseded chapter in the rise of modern Britain and Europe.⁷ Rather, it turns out to be a constitutive reality. Slavery, not simply and most obviously as labour and profit but as racial subordination and cultural degradation, was central to the making of the modern Atlantic world, to its political economy and its political institutions and their cultural grammar.⁸ Furthermore, from the rationalisation of slave labour in eighteenth-century plantations of the Caribbean and the Americas to the present-day exploitation of illegal labour in modern agri-business – from southern California to southern Italy – we are constantly reminded that 'primitive accumulation' is, again, not simply back there in the 'origins' of capitalism but constantly being repropounded and renewed in our present.⁹ Insisting on this past that will not pass is to reorientate our understanding of history and propose the anachronism – material apparently out of time and place – as a critical tool. Cutting up prevalent chronologies and reassembling their turbulent elements into another telling of our time is to insist, to conjoin Shakespeare and Agamben, that it is precisely pushing time out of joint that promotes the contemporary critical condition.¹⁰ It leads to breaking apart the moribund rationality of the established archive that legislates the authority of the present. Historical detail, its assembling and interpretation, is ultimately about contemporary settlements.

Here the past comes to the aid of the present, not to confirm but to interrogate it. Let us be clear on this point. Brexit and Trump are not passing phenomenon. They are symptoms of a deeper molecular arrangement in the political body. We are not simply confronting the contingent triumph of insularity and right-wing populism, but rather one of the possible manifestations of a deeper political and cultural arrangement exhibited in a stage of exhaustion. In the decomposition of this historical body the protruding bones reveal the deep structure that has nurtured languages and logics that today brazenly take flight. As I have argued elsewhere, the present neoliberal moment with the triumph of individual self-management and the justification of personal inequalities and planetary injustice does not represent a complete break, but rather a deepening and radicalised elaboration of the inherited language of liberal politics.¹¹ This takes us back in the blink of an eye to the seventeenth century, to John Locke and the justification of colonialism, genocide, racism and slavery in the name of an emergent European-derived property-owning democracy.

In a profound sense, we have to learn history differently. Not simply a different history and associated accounting of the past, but a diverse modality for comprehending time and space in the constitution of the present. To continue to broadcast (all those BBC documentaries and costumed dramas, Churchill and Dunkirk) and unconsciously be burdened by the illusions of a superficially glorious past, rather than take responsibility for another, darker one inscribed in the violent triangulation of capitalism, colonialism and modernity, leaves us as puppets mimicking a dead show.

This is to suggest that we need to abandon existing maps and their particular framing of the world. It means to work from the underside and beyond the borders of the prevalent cartographies of sense. Here, for example, thinking of present-day Europe while registering its darker, repressed, histories, and commencing from its southern peripheries and coastal borderlands can add a critical edge and encourage a series of oblique glances that traverse and cut into the existing geography of power.

If we look at a map of the Mediterranean, everything is laid out flat. Borders are clearly defined; the topography rendered evident. 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 organisation of the world where all the actors and spaces are treated as though they are equal, permitting the analysis to remain 'balanced' and 'impartial' – something that is patently impossible to sustain when considering present-day relationships between the northern and southern shores of the Mediterranean, or, on a smaller scale, the dramatically unequal relations of power that sustain the violence in Palestine–Israel, or the globalised war that is presently being fought in Syria.

Nevertheless, although we may be aware of the more turbulent grids binding Asia and Africa to the political and cultural legislation of the European shore, we nevertheless continue to consider the cartography of the Mediterranean as the product of a measured, neutral view. But history insists and constantly breaches the flat logic of reasoning this space. For modernity, the definitions and location of the south have involved political and cultural definitions as much as a geographical

11 Iain Chambers,
*Postcolonial Interruptions,
Unauthorised Modernities*,
Rowman & Littlefield,
London and New York,
2017



Isaac Julien, *Western Union Series No. 10 (Sculpture for the New Millenium)*, 2007, duratrans in lightbox, 123 × 303 × 5 cm, edition of 6 + 1 A/P, courtesy the artist and Victoria Miro gallery, London

location. Interest, power and violence mapped the world, both then and now. In simply asking who does the mapping, and what the desire for geometrical transparency hides and obscures, we disturb the prevalent picture and capture the outline of another Mediterranean, of another Europe, of another modernity. For the power of our maps, where objective measurement confirms our subjective centrality, betrays a cartography of power. Our knowledge, once held up to the light, reveals the watermark of an indelible colonial formation and the deeply ingrained coloniality of our methods.¹²

If we were to think with the Mediterranean, we could consider the manner in which it constitutes an interrogative archive and counter-space to the prevalent understanding of modern Europe. Both in, but not completely of, Europe (after all, two-thirds of its coastline is constituted by its African and Asian shores), the making of the modern Mediterranean as a subaltern historical and cultural formation interrupts the logic that the world can simply be laid out, flat as a map, ripe for appropriation. If we were to reopen this archive, we would need to consider how the ongoing composition of its multiple histories and diverse cultural formations proposes a different series of views and coordinates. Such a return would permit a reiteration in which the past intersects, confuses and creolises what tends to be considered closed matters. To reassemble the fragments of the past in this manner is to construct an alternative sense of the present.

Of course, this is a lesson drawn from Walter Benjamin's insistence that the past does not simply pass but rather accumulates as an interrogative ruin in the present.¹³ In a more prosaic key, it is also a learning acquired from the Jamaican masters of dub music whereby fragments of sound and history are mixed into another sense of time and place.¹⁴ If we were willing to consider the Mediterranean in terms of such critical

12 Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 2009

13 Walter Benjamin, 'Theses on the Philosophy of History', in Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations and Reflections*, Schocken Books, New York, 1969

14 Julien Henriques, *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Technique and Ways of Knowing*, Continuum, London, 2011

archival work, then we would have to understand both it and Europe in terms of what is still to be registered and comes to meet us from the future. This is to turn the traditional and institutional understanding of the archive around and insist, with Jacques Derrida, that it is orientated towards posteriority precisely because the past as unacknowledged and refused matter, as detritus and ruins, has yet to be authorised in the configuration of the present.¹⁵

Such a multiplication of views, maps, cultures and histories undoes a unique explanation. It introduces a series of coordinates that disturbs the usual explanatory frame of the nation-state as the placeholder or location of a history, a literature, a language, an identity. And then the sea itself, as we have learnt from the poetics and critical practices of the Caribbean, is history, a liquid archive in which bodies, living and dead, negated narratives and cancelled cultures, are suspended, sedimented and transmitted. This more extensive and fluid space raises complicated questions about belonging – how and where? – and about what constitutes home in the dynamic of overlapping territories, intertwined histories and the elaboration of identities in transit.¹⁶ I would suggest that this mobile complexity is perhaps best captured in contemporary visual and sound cultures.

All of this brings us back to a consideration of the formation of the modern Mediterranean as a European and colonial formation. As a twentieth-century colonial lake – less than a hundred years ago its southern and Oriental coasts (with the exception of Turkey) were all directly administered from Paris, London and Rome – at the beginning of the nineteenth century it had initially witnessed the Anglo-French struggle for global hegemony. It was therefore simultaneously also the site for the making of modern European identities. Colonial spaces, where the instruments and techniques of modernity were most sharply exposed and honed – from racialised government and education to military techniques (all that early twentieth-century aerial bombing in Libya, Iraq and Ethiopia) and architecture – were, alongside the obvious extraction of human and material resources, central to the constitution of modernity; they were certainly not peripheral.

The reopening of this archive, excavating its subaltern southern locations (where the ‘south’ is a mobile signifier of structural peripheries and subjugations, as Antonio Gramsci pointed out), throws a diverse light on the present.¹⁷ It provides another key with which to read contemporary moral panics around migration and their fallout in the proposal of new walls and barriers (Brexit and Trump). If mass migration is modernity, and not something to be relegated to the periphery and the past, 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 transnational political economy and the worlding of the world by capital. At the beginning of the twentieth century the European population of Algeria (a vassal state of the Ottoman Empire, invaded and occupied by France in 1830) was close to a million, the majority French, alongside sizeable components of Spanish and Italians. Tunisia next door was home to a hundred thousand Italians, while in Libya (another Ottoman territory, invaded by Italy in 1911) had an Italian population that peaked in the 1930s at around thirteen per cent of the total population. What is occurring today with migration towards the over-developed north of the planet

15 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1998

16 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, Vintage, New York, 1994; Stuart Hall, ‘Cultural Identity and Diaspora’, in Jonathan Rutherford, ed, *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference*, Lawrence & Wishart, London, 1990

17 Antonio Gramsci, *The Southern Question*, Bordighera Press, New York, 2015



Roshini Kempadoo, from the artwork *Ghosting*, 2004, giclée print, image: courtesy of the artist

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 permit us to write the history of modernity as the history of migration.

This deepening and stratification of the archive of Europe from the subaltern south adds both temporal and spatial depth to our understanding of the present. This is to think with, and follow, the reverberations revealed in the critically honest *anachronism* of the historiographical operation. Such an undoing and reassembling of the fragments of the past allows us to challenge the coherence that guarantees the hierarchies that structure the contemporary world. Here the desire for a continuity that confirms present powers is crudely announced in public parades of imperial inheritance and white supremacy seeking to take back control and render Britain, America... 'great again'. In the planetary reach of the connections sought by Black Lives Matter between the institutional and quotidian racism of American society and the colonised condition of Palestine, we are forced to confront the dark economy that sustains the existing arrangement of powers and the morbid symptoms of Brexit and Donald Trump. Again, we return to 'Remember This House', and James Baldwin's disturbing question, which exposes the political economy of the present and its accumulation in increasingly violent combinations: 'What white people have to do is try and find out in their own hearts why it was necessary to have a "nigger" in the first place, because I'm not a nigger, I'm a man. But if you think I'm a nigger, it means you need him.' And, to add half a century later Achille Mbembe's voice: 'The color black has no

meaning. It exists only in reference to the power that invented it.¹⁸ All the structural asymmetries of the world are caught in these few words. Like those of Frantz Fanon and Malcolm X, they continue to echo in our hollow times. Registering the limits of an abstract freedom that has historically required the concrete subjugation of others in order to exercise that freedom and associated reason means to arrive at the borders of our vaunted humanism and reach beyond its monolingualism.¹⁹ If life in Kinshasa, Kabul or Gaza carries less weight than life in London, Paris or Rome, we have to ask ourselves what does it mean to be human? Who, in the necro-politics of a neoliberal order, is granted life and who refused? Who is human enough? This is to contest the colonial inheritance of apartheid that relegates the rest of the world to a footnote; that rest of the world for whom modernity is often simply a synonym for colonialism. It is to insist with Fanon and Aimé Césaire on a humanism no longer regulated and restricted by European concerns, but *à la mesure du monde*.²⁰

In the subsequent gap, while moving between the representations of such spaces and the repression that shadows the act of being represented, we find in postcolonial art an unsuspected anthropology, history and sociology of the present. Clearly, such art does not provide us with a stable object to analyse and explain according to the abstract logic of artistic canons, but rather proposes a critical means with which to live and interrogate the discursive order inscribed in aesthetics and art history. In this key, the past as an anachronistic disturbance proposes a diverse archaeology and a different manner of comprehending its presence in the present. The isolated and authentic object no longer exists; nor does a definitive explanation of the past. In the counter-histories and counter-memories that inhabit the image, we register that the image itself contains more time and horizons of meaning than any one of us can ever fully absorb or understand.²¹ We pass from a formal archaeology of objects to an ongoing genealogy composed in relations, ruptures and discontinuities, where the past works up new critical configurations of the present. For what counts is not so much the framing of the object as a registering of the processes exposed in the excavation.

Frontiers, borders and confines registered in steel walls, barbed wire, documents and bureaucracy produce a wound, a scar that will never heal, destined to remain open as an interrogation. Here postcolonial art – its literatures and visual arts, its sounds, signs and poetics – promotes the emergence of a very different critical landscape with which to confront this situation. The echoes and spectres sustained in these works cut up time and refuse the brutal linearity of ‘progress’ and the unilateral beat of the Occident. The dissolution of institutional tempo into multiple rhythms and accents sustains critical spaces that lie at our side; frequently unregistered and unrecognised. These are the heterotopias that a postcolonial art practices and promises. They propose a folding of time, its simultaneous deepening and extension to render proximate other places and bodies in a cartography that exceeds the punitive maps of modernity. Here, in the interruption and discontinuity of a uniform temporality and space, the deliverance of art announces an emergent world in its becoming.

18 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, Duke University Press, Durham, North Carolina, 2017

19 Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1997; Jacques Derrida, *Monolingualism of the Other: or, The Prosthesis of Origin*, Stanford University Press, Stanford, California, 1998

20 Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, Monthly Review Press, New York, 2000

21 Georges Didi-Huberman, *Devant le temps. Histoire de l'art et anachronisme des images*, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 2000