



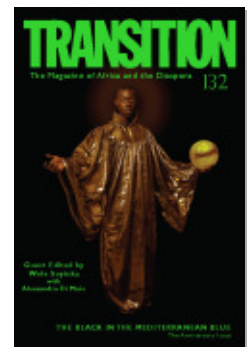
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Beneath the Sky, on the Sea, into the Blues: A Dub Version,
or B Side, of Mediterranean Modernity

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Transition, Issue 132, 2022, pp. 297-313 (Article)

Published by Indiana University Press



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Beneath the Sky, on the Sea, into the Blues: A Dub Version, or B Side, of Mediterranean Modernity

Iain Chambers

The Blues as Method

THE BLUES TAKES us down deep, deep into the heart of the matter. It accompanies the term “black”, proposed as a subordinate category of the human and minted in the hierarchical discriminations produced by Europe during its increasing grip on the planet after 1500. To speak today of the Black Mediterranean is to return us to that constitutive moment. As Cedric Robinson forcibly put it in his path-breaking book *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*:

With each historical moment, however, the rationale and cultural mechanisms of domination became more transparent. Race was its epistemology, its ordering principle, its organizing structure, its moral authority, its economy of justice, commerce, and power.

Below the surfaces of institutional histories and explanation, constantly trapped in the narcissism of the nation, we hear other notes and the movement of different rhythms. Seemingly separate times and spaces, conjoined and sustained in sounds, promote other understandings of temporality and place, of unregistered histories and lives. The language and grammar of the blues—born in the inhuman maritime abduction of the African diaspora, plantation brutality and state-endorsed violence, Bob Marley’s “bottomless pit”—continue to reverberate in the troubled soundtrack of planetary modernity. Insisting on the gaps in the official scoring of time, this is not merely a counter reply. It is

instead a critical return that muddies the illusory transparency of European reasoning. Digging deeper and following the bass line of histories from far below, the sounds of unauthorised cultures and lives interrupt the Occident and its occupation of the globe. Here is Markus Rediker in *The Slave Ship: A Human History*:

Sarah survived the Middle Passage and whatever punishment she may have gotten for her involvement in the insurrection. She was sold at Grenada, with almost three hundred others, in 1787. She was allowed to stay on the vessel longer than most, probably with the special permission of Captain Evans. When she went ashore, she carried African traditions of dance, song, and resistance with her.

From the brutalities of slavery and enforced migration, so central to the making of the blues, emerges the transit and transformation of culture. Not only do languages, rites and rhythms travel, but they transform and are transformed along the way. The threat of contamination becomes a renewal and reworking where origins are suspended, sustained, and subverted in transit. This is the lesson of Black Atlantic culture and its gift to our critical understanding of the promise of migrating modernity. Uprooted and rerouted experiences of culture are torn away from the tired romanticism of stabilities in the soil and come to float and fluctuate in altogether more extensive and less controlled currents.

So, the blues and the Mediterranean, as music and modernity, as a method, draw us into another critical space. More than merely a musical modality, the blues encourage us to consider an alternative take on modernity where the sounds of subaltern histories cannot simply be added to the existing narrative. Sounding out the world, they bring into play refused connections and repressed coordinates. They give rise to dissonance and cannot readily be accommodated. Sounds always hover beyond immediate social and commercial foreclosure to befuddle the objection that there is always incorporation and commercialisation just around the corner. They take us one step further and into the dimension that music subtracts from transparency and rationalisation. The bluesology of the marginalised, the refused, and what modernity seeks to forget insists and persists.

On the move between the continents of Africa, the Americas and Europe, the blues, as simultaneously music and an implicit critical groove, prepare the ground to register the potency of subaltern musical cultures and formations. These challenge existing explanations and mount a montage that momentarily unites cities, cultures, shores, and histories. Such evidence lies in listening to the singer and guitarist Pino Daniele cross the local tradition of the Neapolitan song with the urban blues as Naples meets New York. Or, again, in the vocal improvisations of the great Egyptian singer Uum Kalthum that resonate with urban improvisations elsewhere in the African American soundtracks of jazz, or in the intricacy and cross-fertilisation of such contemporary oud masters as Anouar Brahem, Rabih Abou-Khalil, Naseer Shamma and Kamilya Jubran. All propose the sensorial attrition of a single scoring of time and place.

If the blues, its genealogy and gestation, is profoundly associated with the cultures of the Black Atlantic, that history today resonates over other waters. Yesterday's Atlantic and today's Mediterranean are cruelly linked by the wretched of the sea: black bodies once thrown overboard and today those left to die. For all the singularities and differences, from the slave ship to the contemporary Occidental ship of state, there exist continuities of exploitation in the constant alienation of racially marked bodies reified as abstract labour and reduced to disposable lives. We are not talking of a parallel between two discrete moments. On the contrary, it is to insist on the coordinates of a shared constellation. Slavery and racial capitalism, as so many modern black writers and critics teach us, is not back there. It both constitutes and ghosts the ongoing formation of the present where black deaths at sea fold into a time that is still now. We are still in that wave. If there is no longer the

juridical recognition of slave property, what today exists runs that system a close second. If there are no longer lynching, legitimised rape and captivity, there are police killings, ghettos and racial enclosures. Things change, specificities alter, but not too much. The afterlife of slavery continues. The discipline of capital, overseen by white supremacy, sees to that.

Today's migrants, increasingly forced to flee as refugees of war, climate change and structural poverty—all induced by Occidental control and claims on the planet—have not been

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Street art mural of Pino Daniele, famous italian singer (Napoli, Italy). Photograph by Iain Chambers.

seized by slavers and marched to the coast in chains for transportation. However, they will encounter smugglers, traffickers and detention. For they, too, are sucked into the accumulative logic that requires the dispossession and cruel rearrangement of their lives. At sea, on the water where legalities are either brutally imposed or break down altogether, the temporal assurance of progress rapidly unwinds. We return to scenes of a more primitive accumulation that continues to accompany our present. Nothing passes away neatly and conclusively. In the water, deeper connections are sustained in the largely unregistered archives of the sea. Reading *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* by Christina Sharpe, we go down into the insistent temporalities of those depths sealed in the final words from Toni Morrison's *Beloved*:

What happened to the bodies? By which I mean, what happened to the components of their bodies in salt water? Anne Gardulski tells me that because nutrients cycle through the ocean (the process of organisms eating organisms is the cycling of nutrients through the ocean), the atoms of those people who were thrown overboard are out there in the ocean even today. They were eaten, organisms processed them, and those organisms were in turn eaten and processed, and the cycle continues. Around 90 to 95 percent of the tissues of things that are eaten in the water column get recycled. As Anne told me, "Nobody dies of old age in the ocean." The amount of time it takes for a substance to enter the ocean and then leave the ocean is called residence time. Human blood is salty, and sodium, Gardulski tells me, has a residence time of 260 million years. And what happens to the energy that is produced in the waters? It continues cycling like atoms in residence time. We, Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which "everything is now. It is all now".

In this molecular reactivation of the Atlantic slave trade within the contemporary necropolitical—see Achille Mbembe—supervision of modern Mediterranean migration, the historical weight of the adjective 'black' stretches back and forth across time and diverse bodies of water. It catches an acute sense of the critical moment that refuses to pass.

Temporal spirals traced in cartographies of asymmetrical power connect the colonial past to the colonial present. They expose the continuing racialisation of the planet, its colonial constitution and a white,

patriarchal order. To follow the blues is to hear in their sounds other histories that transport us well beyond the confines of local linguistic, cultural, and national frontiers. Music migrates and is always susceptible to translation. Whether acoustic or digital—and such separations are increasingly difficult to maintain—sounds consistently escape the immediate requirements of cultural control. The music emanating from the Black Atlantic, from urban clubs in northern cities or dance halls in the Caribbean, cross and sometimes confute cultural and physical divides, including class, gender, race and sexuality. This bending, dubbing, dissonant, dissenting repetition of the official score promotes a planetary soundtrack. From Luanda to Lisbon, Nairobi to Naples, the blues and its musical offspring (jazz, R&B, soul, disco, reggae, rap, dub...) have entered our ears, pirated leisure and the dance floor, proposed other bodies and other moves. The modern improvisations of jazz resonate in the older tonalities of the oud: local variations, digital music-making, and the European avant-garde weave into the Arabic and acoustic playing of Kamilya Jubran and Anouar Brahem. In the inconclusive paths of the mix, the dream of European rationalism, rendering all transparent to the calculations of its algorithmic will, is thwarted and subverted. This happens not by turning back the clock but rather by pushing the dominant will's metrics into the unauthorised time of LeRoi Jones/Amiri Baraka's blues people, the subaltern, the dispossessed. Some sixty years ago, the French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty in *The Prose of the World* succinctly caught the pertinency of this cultural and historical tension living on in the making of our increasingly computational present:

The algorithm, the project of a universal language, is a revolt against language in its existing state and a refusal to depend upon the confusion of everyday language. The algorithm is an attempt to construct language according to the standard of truth, to redefine it to match the divine mind, and to return to the very origins of speech, or rather to tear speech out of history.

Against the colonising spirit of the algorithm seeking 'to tear speech out of history', music from below, from the despised depths of the planetary archive, holds out another promise, sustains another space. Bodies, cultures, and histories are here altogether less recognised but also less fixed. Such sounds return us to our senses, reach into memories, sustain desires, propose futures. The sham of rational neutrality is subverted. For music maintains, while simultaneously sabotaging, the

bridge between the algorithm and the mystery of language. An abstract and unilateral universalism is breached in the cut, the beat, and the interval sustained in sound. Another more complicated and inconclusive world can be heard and felt.

Today, we find ourselves at sea beneath wider and wilder skies. The persistence of colonialism, which repeatedly returns in the racism that produces the violent grammar of contemporary inhospitality, is inscribed directly on the body of the modern migrant. The Mediterranean becomes black. Once a colonial lake, ruled directly from London, Paris and Rome, the seeming independence of its African and Asian shores are still colonised, subject to the economic and political prerogatives of the northern coast. The colonial trauma continues. The migrant is a recursive reminder of this repressed history. To bring that past into play, to allow it critical authority, how do we mess up the continuing colonial appropriation of the world? Black life continues to be reified on dispossessing seas where modernity's political and juridical boundaries are exposed. The epistemic foundations of Occidental democracy and philosophy go adrift between the Black Atlantic and the Black Mediterranean. Those on the water, the maritime damned, cannot source their identity in the territory of the nation-state. They are without rights. They have no social or human validity. They are without a place in the world. Yet, in punctuating the existing map, they simultaneously sustain holes of concentrated historical and cultural energy that exists and resists. They provoke the end of a particular political and philosophical settlement and the inauguration of another. They dub modernity, cut up its languages and remix the coordinates to leave a gap, a wound.

So-called “illegal” immigration is a form of *political hacking* that displays all the limits of liberal democracy and its concepts of citizenship. It suggests an alternative syntax, spoken by other bodies that matter, besides our own. Here, the cell phone and GPS technology are not merely instrumental and technological but have become a cultural and historical necessity, not an object but a process. Already developed in black music-making in North America and the Caribbean, technical tools—the microphone, the turntable, the mixing deck—become musical instruments and cultural lifelines in their own right. We find ourselves in far deeper waters, off-shore, considering other horizons. A deliberate drifting away from the concerns of Occidental philosophy and the colonial imperative is announced. Travelling in the archives of migration, acknowledging its centrality to the making of modernity, we encounter other continuities

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that now disseminate discontinuities in the violently imposed coherence of the present.

As the B side to the pretences of Occidental universalism, vibrant and hybrid musical formations consistently emerge from below, creating folds in the textures of modernity. Now moving along multiple axes, sounds that are neither simply archaic nor modern advance an unauthorised mix. Their material re-composition releases another telling of time and place. We hear it in the blues, in the marginalised maqams of Arab music, or the strikingly autonomous feminine paintings of the Algerian artist Baya Mahieddine (1931–1998). Discussing the Algerian artist in a text prepared for the exhibition catalogue of *Baya: Woman of Algiers* at the Grey Art Gallery, New York University, in 2018, Natasha Boas writes: “Baya’s work challenges national and cultural frames, as it is both connected to and disconnected from fading Maghrebi folk traditions and European modernism.”

Precisely: once again, the creolised gestation of sounds and signs draw us through the frame into another space. Situated beneath and beyond the hegemonic concerns of the Occidental metropole, we witness the emergent grammar of another language. The latter exceed confinement in an established history, museum display, anthropological definition, or educational syllabus. Its lexicon is not limited to a national narrative. Our existing syntax stutters before the unassimilable. And we begin to navigate the Mediterranean with an ear for sounds, signs and histories that disrupt and reconfigure habitual understandings. Here, as Paul Gilroy in *Darker than Blue: On the Moral Economies of Black Atlantic Culture* puts it: “the modern colonial telos of centre and periphery is being reversed.” Crossing these waters, trespassing the borders, and reconfiguring history are, citing Gilroy again, to expose the political and cultural clutch of capital by challenging “the geo-political architecture of North-South conflicts.”

At the same time, this is not merely about the empirical verification of black bodies on the move. It is not simply to register the historical resonance between the Atlantic slave trade and contemporary migration from sub-Saharan Africa towards Europe and their combinations in a counter-history of modernity. It is also about the ontological

The rapacious management of the planet depends on racist divisions of resources between the West and the Rest. construction of being “black”; that is, the racial constitution of the modern world that renders some subordinate and “inferior” to the Occidental measure installed by white supremacy. The rapacious management of the planet depends on racist divisions of resources between the West and the Rest. At this point, the deep web of ecological

aggression and the more immediate configurations of modern racism increasingly come to entwine.

In the simultaneous stretching and condensing of musical notes (that are never merely musical), we spiral down into the tempo of the unsaid and the indecipherable. As a recorded voice, the blues provide the timbre to tell the time at the heart of modernity. Here racial capitalism, slavery, and the systematic plundering of the planet are not incidental aberrations but rather constitute the coordinates of the making of the present. The bent notes, the mining of melody, the shifting rhythms and the persistent bass promote a repertoire of haunting melancholy. But in being sung, played, and worked through, the sound refuses victimhood to produce an aural autonomy and alternative subjecthood. In this mix, we confront a transformed understanding of roots. “Dirty” notes and microtonalities insert themselves into the tempered orchestration of modernity. These sustain other histories and other narrations of time and place and another sense of modernity. Belonging to the sounds of the diaspora of bodies of culture, histories and lives, sounds out both past, present and future. It is always underway, following in the wake of an impossible homecoming: both for the subaltern and the winners who consider themselves already at home. For melancholy is doubled: alongside the haunting sadness sedimented in the suffering of the oppressed, melancholy also lines a European and Occidental foreclosure that refuses to recognise and take responsibility for the colonial past. This blockage constitutes the political and cultural syntax of the present. It fuels white rage, malicious migration laws and vicious policing while refusing to give up the lost object of an earlier body of power.

Configuring histories and cultures around musical poles and mobile sonorities considers the Mediterranean (and modernity) in terms that the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan called *point de capiton*. In other words, anchoring energies stitch together and attach multiple materials into a shared fabric. To follow this intricate threading which commences from a cluster of notes, a riff, a sound or an instrument, it becomes possible to trace new cartographies and emergent histories of the Mediterranean. To follow the historical trajectory and modifications of a musical instrument, commencing from the sound and materiality of the oud, for example, it becomes possible to write another history of the world. Such mappings precede and exceed the logic of the nation-state (and its securing of cultural identity and historical belonging). This critical horizon—captured in the provocative proposal of the “Black Mediterranean”—is not advanced to augment or improve existing understandings but rather to confuse and refute them.

Pieces of wood, stretched gut, animal skin, an eagle feather: the components of the musical instruments—the oud, the lute, guitar,

banjo, and multiple variations—of the blues people. The sounds of marginalised histories play the world in minor keys of uncertain tonalities and shifting rhythms. Sounds survive in improvisation, distinct from the confident notation of a well-tempered rendition of time and space. But, of course, the differences are not so neat. In the auditory continuum, contamination and mutation mark the movement. The Arab oud in the Iberian Peninsula, subsequently fretted and transformed into a harmony instrument, gradually mutates into the modern guitar. It is then electrically amplified and travels the world. Islamic musical culture's multiple scales, shifting rhythms, and melodic wanderings are codified and coordinated by harmonic regularities in tone and execution. Complexities merge into another and complicate the reductive linearity of the European telos. But then the slides and slurs of tonal ambivalence and improvisation, the crossing of rhythm and the stratification of sound return. In the blues, in jazz, in contemporary Arab music, connections are remade; counter-histories and archives re-emerge. If moving from Cairo to Chicago, the micro-tonalities of Arab sounds echo in the scales of the blues, and these remain primarily unregistered circuits. But when such musical cartographies, triangulating Afro-Asia, Europe and the Americas, are retrieved and superimposed on the exclusively European mapping of modernity, then a deeper and more extensive archive emerges. Excluded sounds interrupt and interrogate the established harmony of the Occidental arrangement of spacetime. Other maps and music are also part of modernity's planetary score.

Insisting on the incalculable and what slips through the nets of ubiquitous positivism—that faith in the truth of the European human and social sciences—we encounter that we do not know what we thought we knew. It means to work with the *failure* of Occidental historiography, sociology, anthropology and philosophy and their faith in rendering the world transparent to their will. To seed critical language with the inconclusive and uncertainty, what the Afro-Brazilian philosopher Denise Ferreira da Silva has suggested as a knowing without incarceration in the categories of modernity, is to respond to and take responsibility for what Achille Mbembe has called the becoming black of the world. It is here, in subaltern formations, subterranean histories and marginalised cultures, that we encounter other knowledge, practices and politics in an emergent planetary formation that is without immediate resolution or reparation. In the Black Mediterranean, the potencies of the unsuspected and the unmapped survive and live on.

At this point, an unauthorised 'Mediterranean' arrives in our ears. Transnational sounds provide another map. New coordinates emerge from the Arab world in the microtonalities of the oud, or in Naples in the blue mixes of Pino Daniele, Almamegretta and Enzo Avitabile that

sift through and beyond local Neapolitan tradition; in the voice of the rebetiko singer Roza Eskenazi moving between Istanbul and Athens, and singing in Turkish, Greek, Armenian, Yiddish, Italian and Ladino; or in electronic arrangements when Jamaican dub takes up residence on the shores of the Bosphorus; or in the case of the well-known Palestinian trio Dam, who rap in Hebrew and Arabic about the aberrant daily conditions in the Occupied Territories. Such sounds produce other maps and a different arrangement of a seemingly familiar space, marking a very different sense of time. The presumed linearity of 'progress' breaks down into other tempos: these are also part of modernity and yet irreducible to a single version.

The lengthy improvised vocalisations of Umm Kalthum, broadcast on Egyptian radio in the 1950s, were not simply the mass media extension of an Arab musical tradition. They were simultaneously an integral part of the transformation of that tradition into the mutable syntax of the modern metropolis. Classical folk forms were explored and synthesised in her singing and musical performance. At the same time, the works of well-known contemporary poets (Ahmad Shawqi, Ahmad Rami) reached out through her voice to largely illiterate popular audiences. Like jazz, with its historical connections to field hollers, work songs, spirituals, gospel music, and especially the blues, modern Arabic music (where the generic term 'Arab', as a stereotypical oriental 'other', stands for multiple musical connections and belongings: Berber, Kurdish, Turkish, Jewish, Armenian, even Greek, as well as Arabic) is part of a mobile continent of sound. In both cases, the aesthetic and social distinctions of the Occident are scrambled, crossed and even ignored. If much of the music from large areas of this blue continent fail to reach our ears, it nevertheless endures and survives in another telling of time. Rock music emanating from the stony desert terrain of the Sahara—for example, with the Tuareg groups Tinariwen and Tamikrest—is not simply the sign of the Occidental clock of progress and its commodification of the globe. It is also the specific and fluid sound of the historical dissemination of a cultural difference and a historical dissonance. Sounds travel while marking a temporary location, providing a bridge, and registering a multiplicity. Insisting on a blue syntax, we hear other ways of sounding out the world while traversing an emerging Black Mediterranean.

At the Edge of Time

Seeking a different critical language, I propose intersecting the Mediterranean and contemporary migration by contemporary art. As the index and signature of the unexpected, the visual arts frequently push consensual images out of the frame. We are invited to reconsider what

we have not been able to see and hear. As the critic Boaventura de Sousa Santos puts it, this registers the line of abyssal thinking. It signals the rift between the presumed illumination of Western modernity and the darkness that sustains and concentrates its power. In the words of the historian François Hartog, it also involves breaking apart a world so overwhelmingly captured by the present that no other point of view is considered permissible. For breaking the continuum, splitting time from itself forces abstract universality into a location. In this opening, we can record other configurations. These invariably arrive from places and voices that we have not authorised. Nevertheless, they exist, persist, and resist.

The appearance of the migrant in the contemporary visual field deepens and spreads this disturbing and unsuspected quality. The modern migrant is not just a reminder of a European colonial past and its one-sided manner of sharing the world. Migrants also accompany us today like ghosts, disseminating what the prevailing sense of modernity tries to avoid, to guarantee its distinct sense of home, certainty and belonging. Art in this key, drawing on a global colonial heritage, deepens and insists on this broken condition.

Today, the cancellation of distance and the insistence of immediacy—of the repressed past, negated bodies and histories—is perhaps most persistently pursued in postcolonial art and poetics. Here an insistent mediation on uprooted cartographies, displaced objects, interrupted lives and shattered archives proposes another critical space. The

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proximity and prospects of other manners of worlding the world breach the premises of our vision; they interrogate our aesthetic grammar and expose the confines of our ethical frame. Cutting time and refusing established chronologies, this art returns us to histories we think are past and concluded. On the contrary, what we encounter is the contemporary insistence of those histories in the constitution of the present. The seeming anachronism of matter out of place, assumed to be safely back there, locked in a superseded time, becomes a contemporary critical interrogation. European humanism turns out to be fundamentally hostile to those it has structurally excluded—to those it has consigned to the abandoned places of a refused past that have become a necropolitical present.

This style of artistic activity reaches into archives that cross and interrupt institutional spaces and official memory with an eye for histories

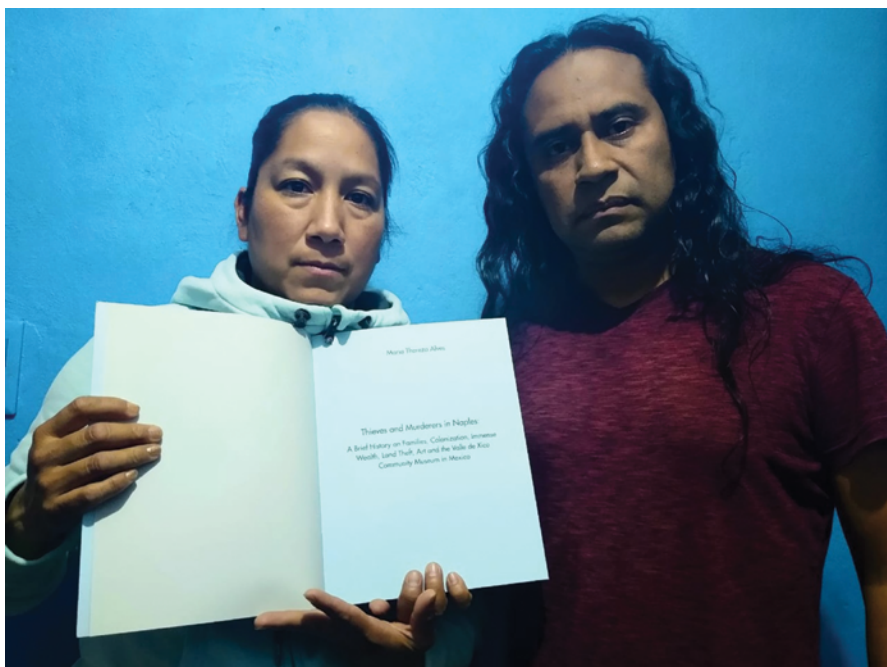
still to be told. At this point, the past comes to interrogate us from the future.

The Brazilian artist Maria Thereza Alves, commencing from the neo-classical Villa Pignatelli on Riviera di Chiaia in Naples, has deliberately linked colonial Mexico to the postcolonial Mediterranean. The full name of the villa is Villa Pignatelli Cortés. It is directly connected to Hernán Cortés's invasion of Mexico in 1519 and the genocidal colonisation of the Americas. It announces the 'connection and flows of monies from Mexico to Naples that began when Hernán's granddaughter, Catalina Vigil de Quinones, married Juan Alonso Pimentel who was Viceroy and Captain of Naples in 1602.' In the cloud of colonial amnesia that covers the present, the white neo-classical building is simply known as Villa Pignatelli. From the conquest of Mexico to the gold that adorns the Counter-Reformation and the baroque churches of Naples, the sacking and despoliation of Mexico, resulting in the immense riches that Cortés amassed, set the conditions for both modern European wealth and indigenous poverty. Maria Thereza Alves's artistic research project publication carries the blunt title *Thieves and Murderers in Naples: A Brief History on Families, Colonization, Immense Wealth, Land Theft, Art and the Valle de Xico Community Museum in Mexico*. Deep histories connect the destruction of indigenous culture and ecological damage across the centuries. These follow the dismantling of native land and water management to meet the needs of trans-Atlantic capital accumulation in the Sixteenth Century. The artist proposes the Valle Xico Community Museum—on land in the metropolitan area of Mexico City that was donated by the Spanish Crown to Cortés—as a critical counter-space. The local community seeks to maintain their rights and culture through the museum, which houses over 5,000 pre-invasion artefacts. Against the continuing colonisation of the present, this museum offers a brutal contrast to the placid European cosmopolitanism of the exhibits and musical concerts that regularly take place in Villa Pignatelli in contemporary Naples. Here is Maria Thereza Alves' response to the return of the past as a critical supplement:

The Villa Pignatelli is worth around 12 million euros. Instead of requesting that the Italian state sell it and use the monies as a symbolic act of colonial reparation payments, I propose that two members of the Valle de Xico Community Museum be invited every year for a research and artist in-residency grant of six.



Hermoso Cuesta, Exterior Villa Pignatelli



Tania Alicia Blancas Ávalos and Rolando Medina Jiménez. Photo by Maria Thereza Alves for her book and community project: "Thieves and Murderers in Naples: A Brief History on Families, Colonization, Immense Wealth, Land Theft, Art and the Valle de Xico Community Museum in Mexico."



Mohsen Lihidheb, from the series on the Sea Memory Musee, Zarzis, Tunisia.

Photo of plastic bottles recovered from the sea. "Since 1993, I took any opportunity to go to the sea. The sea is my natural environment because I grew up by the sea. When I started, it wasn't with an environmental goal. I started with bottles from the sea," (Photo © Alessandro Brasile)

Moving from Mexico through Naples to the Mediterranean, we can visit the Sea Memory Museum at Zarzis in Tunisia. Here the retired postman turned artist-curator Mohsen Lihidheb has collected the debris washed ashore from migrants' boats seeking to cross the sea towards Europe. Whether discarded and thrown overboard or washed away out of the hands of the dead and the dying in invisible shipwrecks, we will never know. On both sides of the sea, bodies on the beach speak of individual lives truncated by European law. They expose the hypocrisies of Europe, disobeying the liberal heritage that supposedly promotes its moral authority. They communicate to the future memory of the refusal of rights that will return to haunt Europe: monuments to a massacre, as Lihidheb himself puts it. The migrants are mobile reminders of a still colonised world that Europe seeks to erase and forget. And such work collates materials that insist against facile symbolisation. An entanglement of aesthetics and ethics cross and confute the borders that an art history or political analysis would impose. In what the black critic Tina Campt would call listening to the grammar of such an assemblage, another critical language emerges. The dismissed evidence of colonial violence, suspended in liquid archives, is now washed ashore to challenge the distance of objectivity and the reductive redemption of representation.



Mohsen Lihidheb, from the series on the Sea Memory Musee, Zarzis, Tunisia. Photo of Mohsen Lihidheb overlooking the installations at the museum. The Sea Memory Musee of Zarzis (Tunisia) is a museum created by Mohsen Lihidheb. It grew over decades, as a reflection on human society and systems. In 2002 Mohsen Lihidheb's Sea Memories Collection was included in the world Guinness record with 26,820 objects collected. (Photo © Alessandro Brasile)

Finally, turning to the Iranian-Canadian artist Gita Hashemi and following her performative art through south-eastern Europe and the eastern Mediterranean, we can also catch the aesthetical-ethical force of an artistic practice that simultaneously digs into the sediments of belonging while persistently on the move. In a series of site-specific interventions along the so-called “Balkan route” and Palestine, the artist explores the issues of rights, displacement and scarred landscapes. The work *Declarations* (2015–16) presents a diptych. *Declaration 1: On the Move* explores the hypocrisies of the existing exercise of European human rights that produces and subsequently punishes refugees and “illegal” migrants. Moving from Germany to Turkey against the migrants’ flow, through eight countries and twelve cities, Hashemi interacted with people on the move and the local artists and activists who aided them. Along the journey, she produced hand-crafted mail art and photographs. Samples of this work are available online. Combining an eye to detail and locality sustained in what the artist calls “enduring transience”, her work draws us across the troubled ground of national exclusivity and state violence: both in Europe and Israel. As snatched splinters of fractured lives, the art does not seek to explain or represent the condition of the refugees and the Palestinians. Instead, it confronts



Mohsen Lihidheb, from the series on the Sea Memory Musee, Zarzis, Tunisia.

Photo of Mamadou at Sunset. Thousands of people died in the Mediterranean Sea after leaving Libya. Mamadou is dressed with the clothes of three migrants whose bodies Mohsen Lihidheb has found on the shore. After giving them a burial, in memory of all migrants, he built Mamadou, facing the sea. (Photo © Alessandro Brasile)

our responsibility, our place in a world that provides our benefits while negating them to others. It interrogates that settlement. It leaves us on the edge of the abyss with the bitter taste of disavowal, there considering the cut of a festering wound. Once again, it draws us down into the worldly persistence of the inconclusive language of the blues. ●

NOTE: The first section of this essay reworks my contribution to Invernuto (ed), *Black Med*, Humboldt Books, Milan, 2022. I would also like to acknowledge the suggestive work of Tiziana Carlino on the Memory Museum at Zarzis (“Cultural Memory and Contemporary Migration. A Matter of Shoes?”, *Dialogoi*, 5/2018). Gita Hashemi’s work can be seen at: <http://declarations.subversivepress.org>.