

## *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity*

IAIN CHAMBERS

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The essays that comprise Iain Chambers' new book are a heady mix. Indeed, I am tempted to describe the book as an effervescent cocktail of a work. Eclectic, evocatively written, often superficial, the author attempts to evoke a more plural Mediterranean in the way that certain drinks or musical mixes "evoke" the tropics or the Caribbean. The work aims not only to replot a northern Mediterranean history that (re)captures its absent, Southern other, but more importantly to give an open-ended account of Mediterranean modernity that does not employ a teleology of European progress. But the examples that the author uses for this purpose are not only heterogeneous and largely disconnected but also decontextualised. The result is one that unfortunately resembles a fruit cocktail with too much juice and too little punch.

The essays open with musings on the meaning of borders, "both transitory and zones of transit" (p. 5). Repeating the oft-invoked idea that critical theory is a "border discourse" (*ibid.*), Chambers lays out his aim to exhume what has been "historically marginalized and culturally excluded", "to recover the hidden dependency of Occidental modernity on what remains in the dark, over the frontier in the silenced territories of alterity" (p. 8). The book aims, then, to recover a more fluid past – hence the repeated invocation of the sea, as well as the reference in the title to "crossings". Chambers aims to do this by employing a number of metaphors – "the fold", "the baroque", "the arabesque" – all of which are intended to reclaim the unruly in history. With "the baroque logic of 'the fold'" (p. 17), Chambers refers to topology rather than geography, to the unpredictable deformations of the landscape rather than its writing. These he calls "uprooted geographies", in which local detail displaces an abstract universalism.

The aim of the book, then, is an admirable one, though hardly a new one. It has some resonances with the multicultural nostalgia that has grown in prevalence throughout the (especially eastern) Mediterranean in the past decade. But like the nostalgia for a prelapsarian multicultural past that we now find in places as disparate as Turkey, Egypt, and Tunisia, the author's romantic quest for a suppressed "other" never goes farther than a few verses of music or a few puffs on a metaphorical *nargile*. Instead, the author tends to repeat his good intentions throughout the book in different forms, as though the disparate examples that he presents in each instance may lead the reader closer to the heart of the matter. We skip through examples from the music of 'Oum Khulthum to the novels of Assia Djebar, from the film "Lion of the Desert" to the

ingredients of a pan-Mediterranean cuisine. None of these subjects is dealt with in any depth, becoming instead one more ingredient in the cocktail. We are given somewhat more detail when it comes to the cultural legacies and historical contradictions of Naples, the author's adopted home. But then, too, the "folds" seem more like tiny bubbles that burst before making a proper fizz.

The collection consists of five essays. After laying out his intention to describe "uprooted geographies" in the first chapter, "Many Voices," the author then moves, in "Postcolonial Sea," to a declaration of the need for a more fluid history. "The house of history", he notes, the site of the West's teleology, "is conceived not as a finished edifice but as a ruin" (p. 27). The past is not only what we have constructed but also what we have discarded, not only what we choose to remember but also what we have tried to forget. This is also why, he remarks, the sea may be a more fitting metaphor for describing history, in that it consists of an always receding horizon and boundaries that can never be fixed. The sea, he notes, is the site of mixing and encounters, of currents and crossings. He believes that we are accustomed to imagining the Mediterranean primarily through its northern and eastern shores, the sites of the nineteenth-century "Grand Tour", and he argues that correcting this view is not simply a matter of adding in what has been marginalised, i.e. the sea's south. "I am proposing to think", he remarks, "of the Mediterranean in a more malleable and unsettled manner, as a continual interweaving of cultural and historical currents" (p. 34).

So far, so good. But rather than adding substance to these claims, rather than giving us some specific historical accounts of such currents and mixing, the author instead gives us superficial examples and simply repeats his abstract point in numerous different ways. On p. 39, he remarks that "the Mediterranean as a sea of migrating cultures, power, and histories continues to propose a more fluid and unstable archive, a composite formation in the making, neither conclusive nor complete". And only two pages later he notes that "a fixed image of the Mediterranean disciplined by the Northern gaze – its romanticism, classicism, nationalism, and 'progress' – can unexpectedly open up to expose a series of interrogations that refuse to disappear". But the examples that he uses to demonstrate this are a few anecdotes from Braudel, a reference to the Crusades as an invasion by the undeveloped periphery, the novels of Assia Djebar (a recurring theme), and the possible Arab roots of Neapolitan song. The theme of music is one to which he then returns in the third chapter, as "a 'home' that fluctuates, travels, and is perpetually uprooted" (p. 55). Returning us again to Assia Djebar, as well as to Israeli/Palestinian cinema, Chambers then remarks yet again that he is "seeking here to propose a different geography; an *uprooted geography* articulated in the diverse currents and complex nodes of both visible and invisible networks, rather than one that merely follows the horizontal axis of borders, barriers, and allegedly separated unities" (p. 68).

The book, then, flits across the surface, never alighting anywhere long enough to give the reader a concrete sense of direction in this "uprooted geography". Food and music – recurrent themes of the book – are certainly ripe for understanding histories of knowledge and practice that produce habituses not easily reducible to national(ist) geographies. But in the form in which they are presented here, they become simply exotic buffets or compilations filed under "Mediterranean". "Both the African and the European shores are rendered proximate, and mutually translatable, as

subaltern musics (dub, reggae, Neopolitan dialect, rai, and urban Arab mixes) mingle in a shared sea of sounds" (p. 47), he remarks, in a characteristic romanticisation of the capacity for cross-cultural musical fertilisation. Or, "Dishes that are the distillation of centuries of cooking, of culture, of historical composition and combination not only evoke the aroma and tastes of a place; they also register what elsewhere has been brutally canceled and institutionally ignored" (p. 131). While as a statement this may be true, it does not address the complex cultural ways in which this erasure is reproduced. In Cyprus, for instance, the "national" cheese, *halloumi* or *hellim*, has Arab origins that are suppressed and denied in pursuit of a European patent and future. Simply to state the cheese's "Oriental" origin and history is hardly enough to achieve the displacement of Western hegemonic discourse that Chambers claims to want. Although I think most of us at this point can agree without argument that Orientalism and teleologies of European "progress" are discourses of power, Chambers provides no new insights to understand the workings of those power relations and hence no real clues as to how he thinks such a history can be rewritten once it is displaced.

Even the fourth and longest chapter on Naples only succeeds in giving us the sense that life under a volcano is precarious and tinged with both past and future catastrophes; that following Benjamin, the city is the space of the *flâneur*; and that the aesthetic and ethos of particular cities produce affects in those who live in them. More generally, one recurring theme of this chapter (and indeed, throughout the book) seems to be surprise that societies with histories of emigration should fail to appreciate the trials of immigrants to their own countries today. And this is where his failure to address real power relations becomes especially acute. It is not enough to claim that "the sea constantly mocks the erection of such barriers, exposing the pretensions of territorial premises and cultural prejudices" (p. 147). After all, as anyone at the border of the Greek-Turkish territorial waters would know, watery claims can be just as real as ones on shore. Pointing out musical cross-fertilisation or the historical trajectory of the aubergine is not enough to get us to a critical politics. While the project that Chambers sets out for himself is an admirable one, then, we never reach the point of "crossing" and instead are left staring at a horizon on the water with little notion of how we might reach it.

REBECCA BRYANT