theories and methodologies

Maritime Criticism and Theoretical Shipwrecks

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All visible objects, man, are but as pasteboard masks. But in each event—in the living act, the undoubted deed—there, some unknown but still reasoning thing puts forth the mouldings of its features from behind the unreasoning mask. If man will strike, strike through the mask! How can the prisoner reach outside except by thrusting through the wall? To me, the white whale is that wall, shoved near to me. Sometimes I think there's naught beyond. But 'tis enough.
—Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick; or, The Whale*

[I]

FAMILIAR LANDSCAPES ARE TODAY CHALLENGED BY ILLICIT SEA JOURNEYS. THE SOUTHERN SHORES OF OCCIDENTAL MODERNITY ARE beached by the uninvited guest, by the arrival of histories and cultures that exceed its desires and augment its fears. Like a nemesis from the sea, the interrogative presence of the migrant, who announces planetary processes that are not *ours* to manage and define, draws Europe and the rest of the West to the threshold of a modernity that exceeds itself. In Isaac Julien's video installation *Western Union: Small Boats* (2007), the cruel passage of northward migration—across the inhospitable desert and perilous sea—proposes a dramatic poetics that seeks to force apart the conclusive framings of existing political, cultural, and historical narratives. Contorted black bodies gasping in the foam, abandoned on the beach in silver body bags among the sunbathers or writhing on the palace floors of European hierarchies replay the black Atlantic, memories of slavery, and racial oppression in the modern-day Mediterranean.

What is the Mediterranean today: a solid sea or a liquid frontier, a bridge or a barrier? Seen from the north, it turns out increasingly to be a wall, a frontier, and a barrier.[1] Legal passage on its waters, restricted to military, mercantile, and tourist traffic, usually moves along the latitudes, while the south-north traffic, when not composed of authorized foodstuffs for the European Union, is largely illegal. A body of water that provided the principal gateway between

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Europe, Asia, and Africa, establishing many of the premises and practices of occidental modernity, has been shut down. Any reopening depends on European largesse or, rather, on European needs and the revival of a *mare nostrum*. Sedimented in this sea, sustained, as though in solution, are histories, intertwined narrations that have increasingly been veiled behind the homogeneous screen of occidental conceit. Still, the repressed always returns to haunt the present in one way or another.

While the southern European media are obsessed with clandestine sea crossings—all those bodies, often black and sometimes Islamic, pouring out of Africa and flooding Europe—almost ninety percent of so-called illegal immigrants to Italy, for example, arrive by other means: the vast majority come on international flights, armed with tourist visas.[2] The Mediterranean crossing provides a newsworthy, dramatic metonym for modern migration. A liquid medium without obvious confines and firm frontiers, the sea serves to underline the paranoia and amplify the moral panic that modern migration disseminates on the northern shore.

The largely unilateral European conception of the modern Mediterranean—reduced since the mid–eighteenth century to bucolic ruins of superseded origins, a crumbling and overgrown antiquity turned into the garden, museum, and tourist playground of northern industrial and postindustrial society—here becomes disquieting. The contemporary political, historical, and cultural import of the Mediterranean continually punctures its postcard image: the mortal dangers and denigration of maritime migration, the colonial insistence of Israel and the open wound of Palestine bleed incessantly into accounts of modernity. Once a largely disparaged, even "underdeveloped," version of Europe, the Mediterranean turns out to be a porous region that potentially provides a passage for other understandings of modernity, often arriving uninvited from elsewhere.

[II]

And then there is the sea: its liquidity, its seemingly anonymous materiality, resonates with a postrepresentational understanding, an anchorless image loaded with time. For Zygmunt Bauman, liquidity indicates the latest phenomenological forms of global capital, the unstable contours and forces of an object of sociological analysis, but the instability of waves and currents can also suggest critical depths. The liquid insistency of the sea can provide ontological criteria with which to reconfigure our theoretical prison house. No longer considered a merely instrumental adjunct—a source of food, a passage for trade and foreign conquest, a site of intercultural and international transport—the sea, as Derek Walcott puts it, is history ("Sea"). Against the metaphysical desire for certitude and control, rooted in terrestrial and territorial order, we find ourselves confronting the Nietzschean provocation of the marine horizon, where "every daring venture of knowledge is again permitted, the sea, *our* sea again lies there open before us . . ." (210). Contemplating undulating seascapes can lead to rethinking ideas of time, space, and change. Kären Wigen asks, "[Might seascapes] yield new constructs and new metanarratives to frame our social imaginations? Or will their value lie rather in replacing such fixed categories in favor of discrepant temporalities and amphibious identities (both inside and outside modernity, as well as on and off the sea)?" (17).

The idea of the sea as a potential "plane of immanence" proposes the laboratory of another modernity, in which the hegemonic time and space of capital are viewed askance, diverted, and subverted (Deleuze and Guattari). The sea becomes the countersite or heterotopia of modernity. As Cesare Casarino argues, the centrality of the sea and the ship to the making of occidental modernity propels us to set modernity on floating foundations. Folding modernity's assumed stability back on

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itself (reading the *Grundrisse* through *Moby-Dick* and vice versa) creates an "interference between representational and nonrepresentational practices" (11). In the wake of Melville's and Conrad's vessels, but also in the wake of the slave ships tacking between Europe, Africa, and the Americas on Paul Gilroy's black Atlantic, "the sea narrative questions not only its own foundations but also reaches beyond itself to question the foundations of a world that for several centuries had been run in all sorts of ways from ships—in questioning itself, it questions the whole world" (12). At the horizon's edge, the maritime passages and poetics of Coleridge, Turner, Poe, Melville, Conrad, and Walcott propose men at the limits of their provincial and patriarchal provenance. If the sea is framed by European desire and rendered masculine in intent, it is also a space, as Monica Centanni argues, that has hosted Polyphemus and Circe, Medea and Calypso, and Caliban and Sycorax, who have "spoken of reasons that are inexpressible in the rationale of the *logos* that triumphs in the Occident" (47; my trans.). Cleopatra and the Orient challenge the unilateral rationale of empire. The languages that frame the world remain susceptible to appropriation by monsters, slaves, blacks, women, and migrants—by the excluded who speak of overlooked, unexpected, displaced, and unauthorized matters. Today the mythical Mediterranean is brutally vernacularized in the fraught journeys of anonymous men, women, and children migrating across its waters: Caliban returns as an illegal immigrant, and Prospero's island, midway between Naples and Tunis in the sixteenth-century drama, becomes modern-day Lampedusa.

This ambiguous, heterotopic, uncontrollable space is what the implacable conservatism of Carl Schmitt sought to confront in *Land und Meer* (1942; *Land and Sea*). Through his brutally clear understanding of the economic, political, and legal order of European colonization and imperialism, Schmitt anticipates the planetary scale of the historical processes of globalization. In an essentialist, almost mythical, language, he examines the sharply contrasted roles of terrestrial and marine power in the making of the modern world and incisively argues that sea travel has led to a radically new understanding of planetary space. Still, omnipotent rationalism—Ulysses purposely plowing the waves, forever homeward bound—avoids the sea, even if mastered by technology. For when we travel in a ship on the open sea, home and the familiar ground beneath our feet slip away, reduced to a distant shore. Not to cross but to inhabit this space is to abandon the theoretical temptation to "strike through the mask."

[III]

The sea, in its spatial dimension, is a flat and homogeneous stretch of water. Yet, in its depth, it reveals the discontinuities of real time events.

—Cristina Lombardi-Diop (168)

To return to the sea, to a maritime discipline, is to unhook a particular language and its explanations from the chains of authority, allowing it to drift toward another shore, from where the locality and provincialism of its previous home can be registered. In such a prospect emerges a diverse cartography whose continual transformation into a multitude of places enables the resonance *and* the dissonance disseminated in a Mediterranean modernity to be recorded in the interleaving of historical, cultural, and ecological complexities. Inevitably, this leads to apprehending how this region, however fuzzy its limits and definitions may be, is a composite locality that is simultaneously part of a wider world—today, in the epoch of globalization, just as it once was in the extensions of Alexander's empire from Macedonia and Egypt to Afghanistan and the Hindu Kush or in the thirteenth-century world system overseen by

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Islam, which connected Spain and Sicily, via Cairo and Baghdad, to China, southern India, and the Asiatic steppes.

The centrality of sea to modernity promotes the adoption of a more fluid cartography in which the stability of the historical archive, together with the stability of its associated facts, territorial museums, and nationalist interpretations, is set afloat: susceptible to drift, unplanned contacts, even shipwreck. Histories and cultures are held in an indeterminate suspension in the sea, connected, rather than divided, by water.

> I saw them corals: brain, fire, sea-fans,
> dead-men's-fingers, and then, the dead men.
> I saw that the white powdery sand was their
> bones
> ground white from Senegal to San Salvador. . . .
> (Walcott, "Schooner" 349)

In this space, composed of the sedimented traces of uncharted histories, a hegemonic temporality intersects with other times, with the times of others, through bodies. Édouard Glissant reminds us that if, as Schmitt argues, the sea is the royal highway of the West, for the rest of the world the sea is more about depth than extension. On the invisible sea bottom we can follow an inconceivable passage marked by slavery, drowning, brutality, and the wrecked lives of ferocious migration today.

The sea provides both a passage and a bridge, a *póntos*, as Massimo Cacciari suggests, that links together a complex heterogeneity in an *arch-pélagos*: "The idea of the Archipelago is not that of a return to origins but rather that of a counter reply to the history-destiny of Europe" (35; my trans.). It is in this arduous combination of communication and difference, of encounters and distinctions, of resonance and dissonance, that the Mediterranean proposes a multiplicity. The overlapping histories of Islam and Europe, for example, negate locations that see in Europe the home of a homogeneous culture and a single monotheism. Islam is a part of the formation of Europe since the eighth century, first in Spain and the islands of the Mediterranean, then in the Balkans. The need to externalize Islam and Judaism and transform them into an enemy is perhaps the sharpest symptom of Europe's more turbulent and unruly formation (Anidjar). Food, language, religion, science, and musical sound betray the coordinates of understanding, suggesting that the transit and aperture afforded by the Mediterranean are of greater cultural and historical significance than the limited knowledge that seeks confirmation in a provincial locality.

This fluid matrix interrupts and interrogates the facile evaluations of a linear mapping disciplined by the landlocked desires of unilateral progress and a homogeneous modernity. We are invited to step off the land and consider inherited referents from elsewhere, through other eyes: the desperate vision of an immigrant riding the waves in a rubber dinghy or small boat, gazing hopefully northward, or, spiraling out of the skin of explanation, James Clifford's sea otter contemplating central Californian change from the waters of Monterey Bay (325–26), or the limitless opening of the world caught in the eyes of a dog:

> We know what is really out there only from
> the animal's gaze; for we take the very young
> child and force it around, so that it sees
> objects—not the Open, which is so
> deep in animals' faces. (Rilke 193)

This carries us beyond the human plane into a planetary space in which man and humanism are not the only measure. What is taken for granted as a terrestrial background can be foregrounded and lead, as Cary Wolfe suggests, to the dispersal of the liberal agenda, in which "ethical standing and civic inclusion are predicated upon rationality, autonomy and agency" (110). Inscribed in the land, sedimented in the sea, are historical configurations that precede and exceed the shape we

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believe we are bestowing on them. Like Ahab we seek to render the world transparent to our will and pretend that its opaqueness is a senseless resistance rather than an ontological challenge. In this sense, the sea is a screen, reflecting us back to ourselves while challenging our limits with its open horizon and the darkness of its depths. The sea, like the endless prairie and steppe, is traversed, farmed, and sacked, but its "dumb blankness, full of meaning," to quote Melville once again, speaks of a seeming indifference to our presence (278).

> Dangerous and indifferent ground: against its fixed mass the tragedies of people count for nothing although the signs of misadventure are everywhere. No past slaughter or cruelty, no accident nor murder that occurs on the little ranches or at isolated crossroads with their bare populations of three or seventeen, or in the reckless trailer courts of mining towns delays the flood of morning light. Fences, cattle, roads, refineries, mines, gravel pits, traffic lights, graffiti'd celebration of athletic victory on bridge overpass, crust of blood on the Wal-Mart loading dock, the sun-faded wreath of plastic flowers marking death on the highway are ephemeral. Other cultures have camped here a while and disappeared. Only earth and sky matter. Only the endlessly repeated flood of morning light. (Proulx 99)

[IV]

This mask, the screen of the sea, like the cinema screen theorized by Gilles Deleuze, proposes the dehumanization of images. As Claire Colebrook glosses Deleuze, the visual is freed from the subject and released to yield its autonomous powers (43). We are brought into the presence of a contingent, temporal relation and into the multiplicity of the present, which is irreducible to its representation. This proposes the Deleuzian prospect of a "more radical Elsewhere, outside homogeneous space and time" (17). Between perception and a response emerges a zone of feeling, a resonance, a vibration, a powerful affect that inaugurates the passionate geography evoked in Giuliana Bruno's "atlas of emotion." Here time exists beyond the linguistic act of nomination, beyond the subject that produces the image. This is why for Deleuze—and here we can return to the immediacy of Isaac Julien's work—art is not the expression of humanity, or of an underlying unity, but is rather the release of imagination from its human and functional home. Impossible, we might say, and yet a necessary threshold, which a nonrepresentational and affective art seeks endlessly to cross. The veracity of the image is now to be located elsewhere: it is no longer a simple support—realism, mimesis—for narration but is rather itself the narrating force. There are not images *of* life but images *as* life, a life already imagined, activated, and sustained in the image. There is not first the thought and then the image. The image itself is a modality of thinking. It does not represent, but rather proposes, thought. This is the potential dynamite that resides in the image: it both marks and explodes time. This is the unhomely insistence of the artwork, its critical cut, and its interruption. In the artwork, in the movement and migration of language, denomination is sundered from domination as it races on, along an unsuspected critical path through the folds of a depossessed modernity.

So we have traveled with the challenge of the sea to the critical cut of the artwork: both evoke an interruption in and potential exit from a humanism that seeks to secure the world of the subject. The perspective that arrives from the heterotopic site of the sea and from the artistic interval in representational reason provides the freedom for a critical piracy that raids a self-assured, stable thinking grounded in the provincial immediacies of a unique locale and language. This is to suggest an idea of history, indebted to the critical oeuvre of Walter Benjamin, in which knowledge, sustained by a search for new beginnings, proposes history not from a stable point but

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through a movement in which historians, no longer the source of knowledge, emerge as subjects who can never fully command or comprehend their language. Historians, as Georges Didi-Huberman argues, are set to float, called on to navigate languages, currents, and conditions not of their making (96).

From this Benjaminian revaluation of the historical vision elaborated in "Theses on the Philosophy of History," there emerges the posthumanist confirmation that what we see commences not from the eye but from the external light of the world that strikes it. Similiarly, we do not research the past; the past researches us (Didi-Huberman 97). This is to engage with a history composed of intervals, irruptions, and interruptions. It is a history that speaks of the past, of oblivion, while seeking to open the doors of justice on the future. This is a history delineated in the explosive explication of time rather than in the mental unity of an isolated intellect. All of which is to suggest a modernity that migrates, susceptible to unlicensed winds and currents: a modernity that seeds a discontinuous history, always out of joint with the synthesis required of an epoch that seeks only the self-confirmation of its will.

At Port Bou, in Spain, is a window on the sea. It is a memorial to Walter Benjamin, who is buried there, by the Israeli artist Dani Karavan, entitled *Passages–Walter Benjamin* (1990–94). Two steel walls, rusted red by the sea, plunge downward toward the rocks and blue of the Mediterranean. A glass panel suspended between the walls intersects our gaze; on it is inscribed a modified citation from "Theses on the Philosophy of History": "Schwerer ist es, das Gedächtnis der Namenlosen zu ehren als das Berühmten. Dem Gedächtnis der Namenlosen ist die historische Konstruktion geweiht" ("It is more arduous to honor the memory of the nameless than that of the renowned. Historical construction is devoted to the memory of the nameless" [my trans.]). A window on the sea, open to the storm blowing in from oblivion, sustains an aperture on a justice that has yet to come.

Notes

1. This is the theme of the multimedia installation *Solid Sea*, by the Milan-based collective Multiplicity, displayed in Kassel in 2002 at Documenta 11. The work can be viewed at www.multiplicity.it/home.swf.

2. Laura Boldrini, spokesperson for the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, states that ten percent of illegal immigrants to Italy cross the Mediterranean.

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