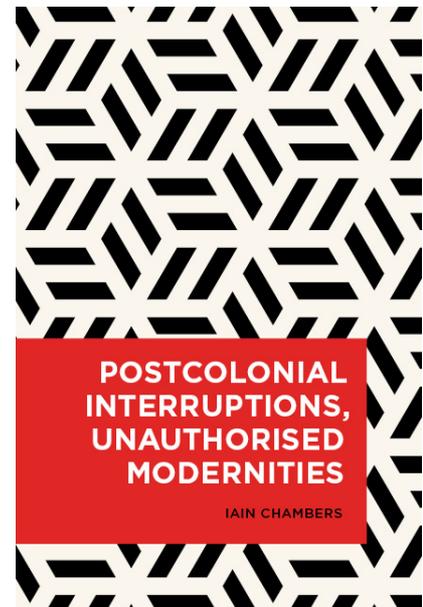


Iain Chambers, *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities*

(Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017)

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Much has been said and written about the current European migration phenomenon. In many cases, it has been described in fairly fantastical terms as a crisis of epic proportions, while migration itself has been depicted, and understood, as an overflow of Otherness onto European shores. In *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities*, Iain Chambers takes a decidedly different approach by not framing migration as some external event, but rather as deeply constitutive of European political and cultural development. Migration in its current form, according to Chambers, is the building block of European modernity, if modernity is understood as Occidental hegemony.



Throughout the volume, Chambers carefully and consistently turns his critical gaze inward, or around, towards the Occident, the West, Europe, ‘us’, making no claims ‘or pretence to explain or speak in the name of the non-Occidental world’.¹ The work therefore reads at all times as a critical confrontation with unacknowledged histories that have shaped, and continue to shape, the Occidental project. Importantly, this critical move requires a shift in how phenomena such as colonialism and migration are understood – from purely sociological or economic ‘problems’, to fundamentally ontological and epistemological realities. Thus, the question of how knowledge is acquired, produced, processed, disseminated, silenced and repressed in the creation of the Occidental archive is a central one, as is the insistence that the archive is now essentially broken. It was, of course, never whole, but the illusion of completeness falls apart in the face of ‘elsewhere’ now being ‘here’, which current migration to Europe is most indicative of.

In his arguably most critical and evocative move, Chambers turns his interrogative gaze towards the politics of scholarship, which in many respects still represents a privileged safe zone that produces but does not necessarily absorb or acknowledge critique. He begins his exploration of

¹ Iain Chambers, *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities*, Rowman & Littlefield, London & New York, 2017, p 3

the broken Occidental archive in the academic ivory tower that he claims is still stuck on ‘modalities of argument disciplined by the unquestioned sequentiality of language and illusions of transparency’.² Much like the belief in the development of the West according to the false linearity of an Enlightenment ideal, the language of neoliberal Occidental scholarship is still marked by the quest for objectivity and neutrality, which for Chambers represent colonial moves that disavow historical specificities and dissonances. When he proposes that there are ‘other languages’ with which to narrate history and modernity, he also means that academic scholarship itself must loosen its structural hold on certain modes of knowledge production that fall outside the academic register. Failing to do so means participating in a bordering enterprise that is directly linked to the racist and colonial legacies of Western exclusionism. At the same time, and Chambers stresses this point throughout, the aim is not simply to critique the dominant language of scholarly knowledge production as if it were inconsequential or redundant; this would be too simplistic a stance to take, and Chambers stresses his own indebtedness to the field. Rather, the crux of his argument lies in the urgent recognition that these dominant fields of knowledge are not enough (and never have been) to account for the complexities of the contemporary moment; the emphasis is therefore on the *expansion* of existing categories rather than *negation*.

Stressing the importance of expanding modes of narration to different languages, Chambers makes it clear that he understands language to be not merely a linguistic term, but a creative one as well, and hence turns to music and the visual arts as alternative modes of narration that break further apart and complexify the Occidental archive. This point is reminiscent of Rosi Braidotti’s call for creative engagement with twenty-first century politics:

The first thing I would recommend is to acknowledge the aporias and the aphasias of theoretical frameworks and look with hope in the direction of conceptual artistic creation. There is no question that the creative spirits have a head start over the masters of meta-discourse, even and especially of *deconstructive meta-discourse*. This is a very sobering prospect: after years of theoretical arrogance, philosophy lags behind art and fiction in the difficult struggle to keep up with today’s world. The point is to be able to create, invent and elaborate new conceptual frameworks. Creativity of thought is on the top of the twenty-first century agenda.³

Braidotti’s claim that the arts represent a more creative and disruptive politics than scholarly engagement, since the latter has to make use of language, terminology and structures

² Ibid, p 7

³ Rosi Braidotti, ‘Cyberfeminism with a Difference’, 1996, <http://webs.ucm.es/info/rqtr/biblioteca/ciberespacio%20glb/Cyberfeminism%20with%20a%20difference.pdf>, accessed 7 November 2018

that are steeped in a hegemonic logic, corresponds to Chamber's insistence that art and music represent an extension of language into unexpected, unruly and turbulent formations. However, as Chambers keeps reminding us, the point is not to generate 'alternative knowledge, but rather an alternative configuration of what constitutes knowledge – itself an ongoing process – as a profoundly political and historical question'.⁴ In other words, Chambers' insistence on alternative knowledge formations is not meant to be additive (including postcolonial art or subaltern voices into the historical canon) and thus potentially tokenistic. As he keeps stressing, the goal is not to think *about* excluded knowledges but *with* them. Stating that he can make no claim to speak from a non-Occidental viewpoint, Chambers is aware of his positionality and his project therefore represents an upsetting of the centrality of that location. To think *from* the position of the Occidental archive *with* unruly and disrupting knowledge formations (such as the postcolonial arts) means to upset the formation of that very archive, allowing it to signify differently.

Chambers' critical scope is vast; and while his focus is on a particular kind of Western epistemological and ontological hegemony, the self-legitimation of this logic makes it a global imposition. He strips seemingly self-evident values, such as democracy, freedom and progress, from their false neutralities by showcasing how their coming into existence rests on suppressed historical forms of violence that, if acknowledged fully, would disrupt the supposed universality of these phenomena and the centrality of Europe as a beacon of modernity. Breaking the archive open in this way allows him to insist on lessons to be recovered from the south, but where the latter does not so much signify a literal geopolitical location and, rather, points to those languages and areas of knowledge unrecognised by the Occidental world. Chambers balances the tremendous scope of his argument by continuing to speak only from the particularity of his own position, which in fact signifies the positionality of the broken European archive. Situating his voice, vision and knowledge⁵ in this way prevents him from falling into the trap of attempting to speak *from* or *for* the non-Occidental world, which would precisely be the kind of imperialist move that he sets out to map and transverse. Instead, the focus is 'on listening and learning from what arrives from the seemingly elsewhere to disrupt the securities of my language and the stabilities of my vision'.⁶

The book is divided into six chapters: 'The Algebra of Power', 'A Broken Archive', 'Migrating Modernities', 'Lessons from the South', 'Scarred Landscapes' and 'Folds in Time'.

⁴ Chambers, *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities*, op cit, p 14

⁵ See Donna Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective', *Feminist Studies*, vol 14 no 3, 1988, pp 575–599

⁶ Chambers, *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities*, op cit, p 30

While Chambers foregrounds the importance of thinking European modernity with other grammars, such as music and art, this happens most concretely in the final two chapters. The majority of the book, particularly its first half, is devoted to navigating the many facets of the ruptured archive of modern day Europe. Although this is critically justified (and Chambers provides his observations with ample theoretical connections and insights), I wonder whether instances of art and music as examples of ‘other’ languages of modernity, as the most innovative aspects of the book, could have had a more prominent position in the exposition of the argument. The second and third chapters, for instance, read as a more elaborate unpacking of aspects of an already thematically very thorough and conceptually and critically strong first chapter. Nevertheless, Chambers is successful in imbuing each chapter with impressive theoretical links, placing them in a complex conceptual network that does not make his insistence on thinking with other languages seem repetitive but, rather, critically urgent.

The first three chapters of the book seem to be structured in such a way as to contextualise the argument that the archive of the West needs to be rethought with other languages and histories, while in the book’s second half that argument is applied and legitimised. In the fourth chapter, Chambers already introduces a certain rhythmicity to his analysis by tracing the movement and moments of postcolonial diasporic spaces too heterogeneous and porous to be contained in the stale binaries of either ‘the West’ or ‘the rest’. Imbuing his observations with musicality makes his insistence on grammars of difference come truly alive, as in the following passage: ‘As the diasporic passages of music can teach us, the discourse and structures of democracy, religious faith and the public sphere can be duplicated, dubbed and remixed in multiple versions.’⁷ Here, musical registers are seamlessly brought together with diasporic movements as a challenge to the hegemony of the West.

The fifth and sixth chapters continue to navigate political and historical events through the optics of music and art, through which Chambers remaps existing coordinates into a more fluid landscape of cultural translation and transition. In doing so, he also starts to work with different metaphors: the fractured or broken archive from before now becomes a *liquid* archive. While this metaphor is particularly well-suited for discussing the Mediterranean as a complex zone of cultural, social, political and artistic exchange (which Chambers subsequently does), it also drives home the point once again that Chambers is not interested in a cancelling of a particular historical narrative of the West (a potentially violent move) but more in broadening it so that it may signify differently. He is not thinking (from) beyond the archive, but within it – a strategic move

⁷ Ibid, p 71

reminiscent of David Chioni Moore's argument that the postcolonial should be broadened beyond the centrality of the 'colonizing standard' of the Western world, without necessarily losing its critical edge.⁸ Chambers similarly insists on the critical potential of the postcolonial and broadens this to include non-institutionalised art, which, in turn, broadens both the archive and our understanding of it: 'To continue to insist on the questions disseminated by postcolonial criticism and practices is to stretch and rework our understanding of the archive and leave it open to the uninvited guest and her unrecognised histories.'⁹

Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities is a timely engagement with highly topical debates surrounding the question of migration in Europe. Considering the current reality of Europe as not a state of exception, Chambers traces the question of European modernity back to buried imperial and colonial histories that materialise in current patterns, politics and practices. Navigating this broken Occidental archive, Chambers does not propose overthrowing it but instead learning from and listening to other accounts of modernity and history that might not be recognised by or fit into the established canon. Chambers does this by introducing both music and (postcolonial) art as alternative grammars that critically engage with colonial and racist histories that might be silenced or too easily dismissed by official political, academic and art institutions. Impressively global in scope, the book never makes any pretence to speak from anywhere else but a position of Occidental modernity, yet one that is turned *towards* the 'south', raising important ontological and epistemological questions about who gets to narrate history and from where. The capability to listen to other languages that narrate this history differently becomes the key critical move, to be honed and cultivated, for the sake of disturbing, broadening and liquefying the archive. This strategy will be useful for anyone concerned with questions of Europe and migration, but particularly for those working from within the established political, academic and art institutions.

Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities by Iain Chambers is published by Rowman & Littlefield International as part of their Radical Cultural Studies series (London & New York, 2017: 152 pages)

⁸ David Chioni Moore, 'Is the Post- in Postcolonial the Post- in Post-Soviet? Toward a Global Postcolonial Critique', *PMLA*, vol 116 no 1, 2001, pp 111–128

⁹ Chambers, *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities*, op cit, p 86

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