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## Book review: Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean crossings: the politics of an uninterrupted modernity*

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**Iain Chambers, *MEDITERRANEAN CROSSINGS: THE POLITICS OF AN INTERRUPTED MODERNITY*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008, 192 pages, £11.99 (paper).**

Iain Chambers's evocative volume argues that the Mediterranean, both as 'a concept and a historical and cultural formation', is 'imaginatively constructed' by the mutual interaction of the many cultures bordering its waters (p.10). *Mediterranean Crossings* focuses on the five hundred years from the early sixteenth century to the present: the period which marks the emergence and development of 'cartographies of power and knowledge that charted European expansion on a planetary scale' (p.2). In this respect the Mediterranean exemplifies global patterns of shared encounter, colonialism, trade and imperial ambition. Readers should not expect, however, a linear narrative or an exhaustive account of cultural encounters across the region. Instead, Chambers investigates what he calls the 'liquid materiality' of the area: the ways in which 'overlapping territories and intertwined histories' suggest 'the making of a more multiple Mediterranean', where borders are 'both transitory and zones of transit' (p.3-5). The purpose here is to cut through so-called 'thickets of provincialism'; in other words, to escape the narrow and restrictive identity politics of modern nationalism. Chambers is interested in the 'visible and invisible networks' between cultures and is scathing about the artificial separation of those connections by ideological and literal borders. In making this case, he employs a very wide range of material, though some of the discussions are regrettably brief. Among the eclectic topics mentioned are: thirteenth-century Jewish merchants; the Mediterranean slave trade; the Crusades; the Algerian novelist Assia Djebar; Neapolitan popular music; Mediterranean cuisine; the politics of the veil; the evolution of the Arabic 'oud into the lute and the guitar; Caravaggio; rubbish collection and the *Camorra*; and, crucially, the occlusion of Muslim culture from modern ideas about Europe. One of the book's declared projects is to challenge received understandings of European cultural history by questioning the comfortable certainties of classicism, nationalism, and relentless 'progress' (p. 40).

Chambers is a professor of postcolonial studies and this specialism allows him to reposition the Mediterranean in terms of what 'the West' has 'marginalised, culturally repressed [and] physically (and metaphysically) eradicated' (p. 26). Occasionally,

however, Chambers's arguments close down more sophisticated understandings of cultural encounter. He generalises very readily about 'the West', and sometimes uses the terms 'First World', 'Occidental', 'European' and 'modern state' apparently interchangeably. He mentions, for example, the 'global imminence of Occidental whiteness' and the 'essential violence on which the authority of the modern state depends to secure its legitimacy', specifically law courts, policing and education (p.5). These statements are methodologically problematic because they simplify or suppress more complex cultural interactions. Not only do they assume that 'the West' has been and remains homogenous, but they further assert that Western modernity is always and everywhere characterised by violent oppression, an idea which makes cultural encounters uncomfortably formulaic and shuts down other interpretative possibilities. Chambers argues, for instance, that Napoleon's invasion of Egypt exemplifies the 'civilising mission' with which 'Europe has taken possession of the rest of the world' (p.12). In some respects this is persuasive, but it also implies that cultural encounters and influences flow only in one direction, from a homogenous and appropriative 'Occident' to an equally uniform but passive 'Orient'. This risks oversimplification: Napoleon, after all, also 'laid claim' to Roman and Carolingian history with his European invasions and propaganda. Furthermore, Egypt was itself a rebellious province of the Ottoman Empire; the ruling Marmelukes had declared independence in 1786 before struggling bitterly against a Turkish army sent to recapture the territory. Napoleon's invasion certainly reveals an imperialist purpose, but it is also part of multi-faceted encounters between various transnational empires, colonised places, and different cultures in the Mediterranean. His proclamation to the people of Egypt, for example, mixes French Revolutionary and Islamic political language and thus exhibits a form of cultural interaction even at the moment of colonial appropriation.

The excellent chapter on Naples, however, avoids these problems by showing how different cultural traditions interact and morph in specific contexts. Naples, Chambers says, is a place 'of innumerable invasions and incursions' which 'embodies and incorporates foreign elements' while maintaining its initial form (p.81). This is the highlight of the book: Chambers illustrates the fluid malleability of cultures and histories, while simultaneously remaining grounded in the local and the concrete. He

usefully describes the Mediterranean, and the places within it, as 'composite localities', made unique by the wider negotiations of cultural encounters.

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