

Mediterranean Fractures: Introduction

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It is Wednesday, the 6th of December 2017. Many across the world are celebrating the feast of Nicholas, or Santa Claus, the early Christian saint and bishop of Myra, deliverer of gifts to the good and the god-fearing. The President of the United States is holding a press conference at the White House and, in what appears to be a bizarre take on the spirit of the season, is delivering his own gift to the world. *Al-Quds*, Jerusalem, the Holy City, shall be formally recognised by the United States as the capital of the State of Israel. One could almost hear the shivers of shock and disbelief rippling across the planet. The effect of such a zero-sum move, I thought straightaway, may well turn out to exceed the range of connotation afforded within the space of the word ‘fracture’. Senior Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) member, scholar and activist Hanan Ashrawi rushed to point out that Trump’s stance ‘has totally ripped apart the very legal foundation for peace in the region’ (Ashrawi 2017). That the UN’s 21st December resolution (ES-10/L.22) to declare the US’s move ‘null and void’ received a strong backing in the General Assembly is significant — but the implications of Trump’s unilateral stance in both the shorter and longer terms have yet to be gauged.

This event invoked no ordinary fracture. Following hot on the heels of a devastating attack on the mosque of Al-Rawda in Egypt’s Northern Sinai, and ongoing reports of no-frills practices of slave trading just outside Libya’s Tripoli, Trump’s own gift reinforced a by-now widespread perception of what is and has for a long time been going on in the region. The East Mediterranean is today hemmed in by sharks, a level of backroom strategising without precedent, with various Arab states and Gulf potentates, Israel, the US, Iran and stakeholders further afield holding forth a menu of distractions that provides enough elbow space for the business of affluence and control to roll on ahead unhindered. Strong-arm tactics like Trump’s ‘gift of the season’ to the Palestinians is meant to afford more comfort and more arc of manoeuvre to this system. But whatever sense of omnipotence and associated interests may have driven the process that led to Trump’s and Israel’s move on the Holy City — the Abrahamic city — it has inflamed and galvanised wounded sentiment, and raised historic emotions that have never gone away, the way Edward W. Said himself used to insist that the Palestinians themselves have never gone away and will not go away (Said 1998).

Having their life and their future systematically determined behind closed doors, not knowing exactly who is the friend and who the enemy, and — worst of all, perhaps — having their voice written off without chance of appeal, is a story the Palestinians are very much acquainted with. It is one of those life processes that, as they themselves have learnt over more than a century of surviving backstabs and betrayals, takes a lot of resolve and must never go

unanswered. Echoing poet Robert Frost, memoirist and poet Mourid Barghouti has spoken of the ‘lump in the throat’ that he feels as he returns to occupied Palestine after thirty years of exile only to find an unrecognisably mangled homeland (Barghouti 2003: 43). The fracturing of consciousness induces the lump in the throat. The initial pain of losing the right to one’s homeland comes to be overshadowed by the affront to one’s dignity entailed in having to survive on the diet of historic loss, often in the absence of friends. It is a double bind and a historic anxiety that has, amongst other things, resulted in the corpus of poetry, with its sublime strength and earthy beauty — that Palestine possesses today. One requires a lot of strength to fight, in the same breath, towards the recovery of what has been lost, and for the sense of dignity violated in the process. The Palestinians know this feeling all too well.

The Mediterranean today is host to a number of contingencies and parallel stories of fracturing. In one way or another, we are all familiar with the stories and images, sometimes with direct, highly personal experiences. It is never a straightforward activity, for instance, to gaze at the Mediterranean Sea from March onwards each year and admire its intense azure colours without the parallel awareness that those self-same, tranquil waters also provide the right conditions for people-smugglers to thrive from the Mediterranean’s south-eastern shores, in many cases only to send hopeful migrants to their deaths on the high sea. It is always complicated to navigate these translucent depths as a matter of enjoyment — the seabed will never be easily decoupled from the subaqueous necropolis that nestles in its folds. The iconic sea of high-summer tourism harbours an exasperating co-existence of aesthetic gratification and grave-spaces ticking away on the seabed, often out of sight but not necessarily out of mind, and never easily exorcised from beer-consuming consciousness. The information media is often complicit in a quick-fix suturing of this fracture, continuously abetting the selling of the historic iconicity of the sea by re-packaging its migrant realities as, in Terence Wright’s phrase, an ‘iconography of predicament’ (Wright 2002: 64). It is a broad-spectrum domestication of mass exploitation and collective deaths into a more bearable arrangement of imagery, one which we can at once sympathise with and pay lip service to.¹

Within this sobering context, I was particularly gripped by an art installation from Lebanese-born, London-based visual artist Hania Farrell. Titled *Tondo I* (Figure 1), the installation is currently exhibited at the Cathedral Museum in the city of Mdina in Malta as part of the APS Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale.² *Tondo I* consists of a large circular light-box featuring digital collages and forming part of Farrell’s longer series of installations around the self-same motif, titled ‘Tondos’ (Farrell 2017). In Farrell’s complex arrangement of visuals, aspects of faith, cutting-edge scientific technology, spaces of worship and an interplay of varying levels of light and shade are placed in an illuminated and strategically intimate relation. *Tondo I*, for instance, presents to us a Christian figure from a painting on a cupola vault as it ‘gazes’ at the segment of a rotor from CERN’s Large Hadron Collider (LHC) housed near Geneva on the Franco-Swiss border. Another image segment from the LHC reveals cables attached to rivet-bound components on the side of the collider — almost resembling a stethoscope that is sounding the sacred painting as much as it ‘tests’ the fringes of leaves and branches sprouting from the Angkor Wat temple complex in Cambodia. The bolts holding together parts of the LHC tube blend almost seamlessly into the balcony surrounding a Catholic church cupola. An angel’s curved wing forms part of a continuum in which a cable connector echoes its celestial shape with equal grace. Yet another Christian biblical figure gazes down into a depth provided by a hole in the LHC — a depth of which we, as spectators, also partake as the gaze touches us. The rotor blades

from the LHC in a sense 'regulate' the temporal framework of the installation — they are both warning of *and* ensuring the shifting of our understanding of time, and the phenomena of flux (and turbulence) that we have all experienced organise, in their visually provocative ways, the *Tondo* composition.

Gazing intensely into it, one gets a sense that *Tondo I* is not handed over to us as some still or static *tableau vivant* — on the contrary, it marks a fracturing of stillness that is proportionally animate to the focus and faith committed into it, exposing fissures that cut transversally across the fixity of belief: a fracturing that allows enough hybridity of composition to come through without, however, any facile pandering to the rhetoric of cultural or inter-religious diversity. The continuum of belief as a narrative of flux is conveyed instead *as* the fissure itself — in resisting an essentialising of the iconographic, it opens up a way of approaching well-trodden pathways of belief through the compass of an intuitive and unexamined or 'serendipitous' humanity. The Large Hadron Collider itself qualifies as a ruin as much as it surveils the continuum of belief over time, even as its own yearning for another dimension of time and existence is organised in turn by a white dove in the centre of the composition: at once universal and monadic, it will not be easily legible within the parameters of subatomic dissection. Farrell's work is at once critical and serendipitous — a dialectical relation that, in this special issue of *JMS*, is incisively broached in conversation with Cypriot writer, scholar and documentary film-maker Stephanos Stephanides.



Tondo I (from the series: *Tondos*), 2017, Lightbox \varnothing 183 cm.

Installation view from the exhibition: 'The Mediterranean: A Sea of Conflicting Spiritualities' The APS Mdina Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale, Malta, 2017). Image courtesy of the artist, Hania Farrell.

When novelist and scholar Abdulrazak Gurnah, then Director of the Centre for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Kent, came up with the idea of a symposium around the questions of postcoloniality in the Mediterranean, it was an inspired thought, with its first successful outcome being a two-day symposium titled *Mediterranean Fractures*. Annalisa Oboe's equally inspired phrase ('Mediterranean Fractures') opened up a productive nexus between sea, region and notion, between the imagin(in)g and the experience of the fracture, which turned out to be a powerful rallying point for scholars around the topic and the field itself, as the international scholarly contributions presented at the symposium made amply clear. Held at the University of Kent in May of 2014, the first *Mediterranean Fractures* symposium was presented by the Centre for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies of the University of Kent in collaboration with the Centre for Studies in the Long Eighteenth Century of the University of Kent and the Associazione Italiana di Studi sulle Culture e Letterature di Lingua Inglese (AISCLI). The second two-day session of the *Mediterranean Fractures* symposium, held at the University of Malta Valletta Campus in November 2015, was organised by the Mediterranean Institute of the University of Malta in collaboration with the Centre for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies of the University of Kent and AISCLI. The symposium brought together more than forty scholars, creative writers, and activists to debate the Mediterranean, its urgencies, histories and fractures in a transdisciplinary spirit.

The seven scholarly essays presented in this 'Mediterranean Fractures' special issue of the *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, together with the interview with Stephanos Stephanides that ties up the issue, find their beginnings in the *Mediterranean Fractures* symposium. In tandem with the diverse line-up of contributions that characterised both sessions of the symposium, they affirm the sustained need to speak of the Mediterranean through and from the fractures that constitute it, and that account for the fraught dialectics of contingency and critique, the anxious conviviality of cultural and humanitarian concerns and realities that constitute it. Mediterranean Studies, as a trans-disciplinary field of inquiry into these tensions, owns a backlog of responsibilities and of critical engagements. In its own modest way, the present publication marks an effort in addressing a few of them.

Claudia Esposito's piece, titled 'Voids, Rifts and Straits: Kader Attia's Mediterranean Histories' incisively examines the roles of images and symbols in Maghrebi-Mediterranean sea crossings, with a focus on the poignant visual art of Franco Algerian artist Kader Attia, showing how the latter's work disrupts 'those histories that are regularly represented by internet memes of drowned migrants and Instagram trophies' (Esposito 2017). The question of Mediterranean crossings from Africa and the representation of migrancy is taken up in Stella Borg Barthet's 'After Africa: The representation of migrant lives in contemporary writing', in which Borg Barthet offers an insightful critique of postcolonial approaches to contemporary migration. Borg Barthet's essay puts forward engaging critical takes on work by Caryl Phillips, Dinaw Mengestu, Tahar ben Jelloun, Laila Lalami and Maria Giovanna Mirano, reflecting in the process on the representations of — and insights into — the experience of migrancy across continents. The relation between the fracture and the crossing is probed by Paola Zaccaria in her essay 'A Breach in the Wall: ARTivist No-Border Atlases of Mobility'. Here, Zaccaria proposes a 'Southern border critical thinking' that is shaped through a 'conversation-contamination'; in the process, Zaccaria proffers valuable insights into the Mediterranean through the context of trans-border mobility, and not least through close readings of some of graffiti artist MTO's works, as well as Gabriele Del Grande's writing (Zaccaria 2017).

Andreas Athanasiades' piece, titled 'Familial Conduits of Remembrance: Storytelling and Belonging in Fractured Cyprus' brings an important focus to the special issue from the aspect of the transmission and reception of memory and trauma. The author engages with his mother's stories as forming a constitutive part of his own fractured identification, in a poignant dialectical engagement with spaces of familial intimacy and remembrance. Luigi Cazzato's essay 'Fractured Mediterranean and Imperial Difference: Mediterraneanism, Meridionism and John Ruskin' broaches the question of the fracturing of the modern history of the Mediterranean, locating, through a decolonial purview, the 'fall' of the Mediterranean with(in) the rise of modern Europe (Cazzato 2017). Cazzato speaks of 'Meridionism' as a cultural implement in the foundation of European modernity and its identitarian practices, and places it within the context of John Ruskin's cult of the 'savage but righteous' Gothic — with its inherent ambivalences — on Italian soil.

In his essay 'Unbuilding pedagogies as recomposing practices: Teaching in postcolonial Italian literature', Pietro Deandrea reflects on the role of education in its relation to the traumas of migration in the present-day Mediterranean. Focusing on the context of Italy, Deandrea's essay looks at three texts preoccupied with the question of teaching in intercultural contexts, offering an insightful reading of associations with both teaching practices and theoretical stances put forward by foremost exponents of critical and postcolonial pedagogy. Nagihan Haliloğlu's essay 'Ottoman Chronotope for the Mediterranean in Evliya Çelebi's Seventeenth-Century Travelogue *Seyahatname*' investigates the ways in which Ottoman traveller Evliya Çelebi perceived and represented the various political powers and cultural heritages operating in the Mediterranean of his time. Arguing that Evliya's text partakes of imperial meaning-making processes and bids to legitimise Ottoman rule in the Mediterranean, Haliloğlu speaks engagingly of an 'Ottoman chronotope' in Evliya's writing that 'highlights the project of sustaining a commonwealth, through ties of commerce and faith' (Haliloğlu 2017).

The final item on this special issue of the *Journal of Mediterranean Studies* is a conversation that I have had the pleasure of conducting with poet, essayist and memoirist, translator, ethnographer and documentary filmmaker Stephanos Stephanides. Titled 'Poetics of a Sea', the conversation is as intriguing in its meditative scope as it is critical and thought-provoking in its intimacy, affording our readers unique and exciting insights into Stephanides' accomplished purview as well as his broad-ranging knowledge of the sea, its poetics, and further afield. The conversation marks the first instalment on a new initiative of the *Journal of Mediterranean Studies*, titled 'Mediterranean: Prospect and Retrospect'. Each session opens up a space of encounter with luminary scholars, writers and academic practitioners in and around the Mediterranean, with a view to sounding the current state of the Mediterranean through the corpus of knowledge being produced within it or attracted in its direction/s.

I trust this special issue of the *JMS* will have interesting resonances across our debates around the Mediterranean fractures that ongoingly engage our thought and scholarship. Moreover, I do hope that it will go some way in locating further purviews of the Mediterranean that will help, to invoke Stephanides' words in the concluding interview, 'reveal how disparate parts may connect and/or come into conflict, and may give agency to new performative interventions.'

Notes

1. In his own work on 'The Making of the Modern Refugee', Peter Gattrell cites Wright's scathing phrase, pointing out that this 'iconography' is 'framed in such a way as to stimulate compassion and loosen wallets' (Gattrell 2013: 11).
2. Themed 'The Mediterranean: A Sea of Conflicting Spiritualities', the APS Mдина Cathedral Contemporary Art Biennale ran from 13th November 2017 to 7th January 2018 at the Cathedral Museum in Mдина, Malta, under the artistic direction of Giuseppe Schembri Bonaci and the curatorship of Ms Nikki Petroni. www.mdinabiennale.com

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