

Introduction: Mediterranean Ecocriticism, or, A Blueprint for Cultural Amphibians*

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Our "we" is full of Others.
(Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought*)

"Living on land we sometimes forget the
sea's dominance of our physical and
cultural histories. We should remember."
(Steve Mentz, *At the Bottom of
Shakespeare's Ocean*)

An earthly sea. An electromagnetic field. A miniature ocean contained by miniature continents. An imaginary framework for linking "everything, from epistemology to eating." An obsession, a destiny, an over-codified, heteroclitic, and postmodern sea. What strikes me in reading some of the vast literature on the topic of this special issue of *Ecozon@* is the insistence on a single question: "What is the Mediterranean?" Returning to this matter with a sort of ritual circularity, two influential but very diverse authors, the French historian Fernand Braudel and the Croatian writer Predrag Matvejevic, provide good cases in point. In his famous breviary, for example, Matvejevic proceeds by exclusion, and insists that the Mediterranean "is not merely geography" (7) nor "merely history" (10). It is neither a space for "merely national cultures" (11) nor for "merely belonging" (12). The Mediterranean, he states, is rather "a vast archive, an immense grave" (23). Less emphatically, but not less problematically, Braudel muses: "Qu'est-ce que la Méditerranée? Mille choses à la fois. Non pas une mer, mais une succession de mers. Non pas une civilisation, mais des civilisations entassées les unes sur les autres" (*La Méditerranée: L'espace et l'histoire* 8). Somehow betraying the whispering mood of a negative theology, these observations reflect the complexity of the geo-historical (or, preferably, natural-cultural) compound we call "the Mediterranean world."

The many names that this "old" sea has received throughout the millennia testify to this complexity. Challenging the usual palette of ecological imagination, ancient Egyptians probably called it the "Great Green." For the Romans, it was "Mare Nostrum," and for the Greeks "the sea over by us" (*he hemetera thalassa*—Hecataeus F302c, with the variant *he kath'hemas thalassa*, "the sea in our part of the world," Hecataeus F18b).

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The Jews name it *Yam Gadol*, the "Great Sea," and the Turks (as Serpil Oppermann recalls in her article), *Akdeniz*, the White Sea—a more luminous and animated counterpoint to the Black Sea. Germans—who literally built a cult of its waters and shores—call it *Mittelmeer*, the "Middle Sea." But its denomination, in English and Romance languages, indicates it as a "Sea between the lands," *Medi-terraneum*: a term in which, as Bertrand Westphal notes in the opening essay, "water is a synecdoche of land." As for the Mediterranean *world*, the historian W. V. Harris observes, neither the Greek nor the Latin had a distinct designation for it: "Greek would call it the *oikoumene*, but they also used that word for the entire world, which of course they knew to be much larger" (15-16).¹

Like those ancient populations, we also know today that the *oikoumene*—a word which means our inhabited home, and therefore equates with the "eco-" (Gr. *oikos*) in "ecology"—is "much larger" than the vast borders of a sea. And we also know that these borders are permeable, open to fluxes of substances and discourses. The borders that delimit our "home," in fact, are not always simply settled "by nature," but are also discursively constructed, in a constant process of mutual determination which involves history and ecology, human societies and their innumerable nonhuman "affiliates and commensals" (Latour 477). The purpose of this *Ecozon@* special focus issue is to engage an exploration of the Mediterranean world as a natural-cultural compound, trying to connect stories and ideas, natures and discourses about this unique place which is at the same time a geographical site and a territory of imagination.

Seeing it as both a distinct portion and an integral part of the larger *oikoumene*, we want to scrutinize the Mediterranean both in what it is (or might be) and in what it represents (and might represent) for ecocriticism. On a geo-physical level the Mediterranean is a coalition of water and land, of mountains and abysses, of lush vegetation and arid deserts. On a geo-political level, it is the field of encounters (and clashes) between trans-Atlantic *Realpolitik* and the Global South, the East and the West of the world, and very often a theater of political and religious conflicts and of massive internal migrations. For reasons connected to its climatic features and comprehensive ecological and anthropic balances, the Mediterranean is one of the most ancient sites of development of ideas and cultural practices—including agriculture, which probably first appeared in the Mesopotamian Fertile Crescent between 13.000 and 10.000 years ago.² It is, we could say, a land/sea in which the metaphoric imagination *qua* environmental imagination found a particularly fertile ground, if we consider that the key-words used in European languages to denote intellectual practices were conceived in this area: "culture," coming from Lat. *colere*, "to cultivate," "logic" from the Gr. *logos*, "discourse," and from the Gr./Lat. *lego*, "to speak," but also "to collect in bounds," and therefore "to collect in bounds" of words and thought.

¹ On these questions see also Abulafia, *The Great Sea* loc. 344-354.

² The bibliography on the history of agriculture is exceptionally vast. See here at least Diamond, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, and Shepard, *Coming Home to the Pleistocene*.

A river, a sea, a world. And, we might add, a wasteland. As David Abulafia reminds us, there was a period when the Mediterranean, at that time an enclosed sea, was completely dry, "a deep and empty desert" (*The Great Sea* loc. 396). This happened between about 12 and 5 million years ago; then, "once breached by the Atlantic, it is thought to have been flooded with water in a couple of years" (396). Recurring cycles in the history of nature-culture, one could say paraphrasing Giambattista Vico, a Mediterranean philosopher of the 18th century. This picture of the Mediterranean "breached by the Atlantic" and "flooded" within a few years has indeed re-emerged with different meanings and implications in our post-WWII reality and geo-political settings. It became dramatically palpable at the end of August 2013, as Atlantic forces, in the form of the US Navy, threatened to re-enter the Mediterranean on a "peace-keeping" *armed* intervention in Syria. Had diplomacy not prevailed, probably we would have seen this sea rapidly turning once again into a wasteland.

All of these images and events suggest the fact that the Mediterranean is and has always been a sea—and a context—in an unremitting state of transformation. Its ecological history is a very good example. Effectively described as "a miniature ocean contained by miniature continents and subcontinents each of which contains smaller physical worlds separated by coastal ranges and accessible only through narrow valleys or difficult mountains" (Makhzoumi and Pungetti 15), the Mediterranean resists any easy generalization. As environmental historians well know, it has undergone climate changes, invasions of alien species, earthquakes, deluges, fires, and volcanic eruptions. In their massive study *The Nature of Mediterranean Europe*, A. T. Grove and Oliver Rackham demonstrate how profoundly, over the millennia, the Mediterranean ecosystems have been manipulated and progressively simplified, due to a mix of excessive clearing of woods and forests, population increase, land over-use, and geo-climatic events such as those that lead to the desertification of the Sahara. Flora and fauna were massively touched by these transformations. As Rackham notes in another essay, "people have been introducing plants and animals from outside their natural range of occurrence since the Neolithic period" ("Mountains, Woods, and Waters" 228). In this setting, even one of the most typical features of what is considered the Mediterranean landscape, namely, the Mediterranean maquis or macchia, is not completely indigenous or spontaneous, being instead a "semi-natural landscape" (Makhzoumi and Pungetti 17) in which sclerophyll forests and bushes have gradually mixed with the original vegetation. In this multilayered space-time, botanic species, along with civilizations, arrived and flourished, "becoming native," as bioregionalists would say. In the "historic home of *vitis vinifera* and *olea europaea*" (Harris 4), inhabitants such as oranges, citruses, figs, agave, aloe, eucalyptus, cypress, were "imported" from extra-Mediterranean lands, just like some of the pillars of Mediterranean cuisine: tomatoes, maize, rice, peppers, coffee... This is the sense of Braudel's definition of the Mediterranean as a "heteroclitite" or a "crossroad-sea" (*La Méditerranée: L'espace et l'histoire* 10). And this is also the rationale of Horden and Purcell's "microecologies": "fluid, mutable creations" ("The Mediterranean" 733) of

nature and culture, in variable exchange and constant alteration, withstanding any mapping.⁴

These transformations do not simply involve the physical setting of the Mediterranean, but also its representations. Such a dynamism, in fact, certainly challenges the idea of the Mediterranean as a "sea of the past," crystallized in the sublimity of former civilizations and landscapes. As Franco Cassano observes, "If the Mediterranean were a sea of the past [...] it is difficult to understand why the fleet of the United States, the symbol of the Atlantic empire, moves about restlessly in its waters" (xlvi). But there is something more. This natural, political, and intellectual vitality is also an eloquent disproof of what has been called "Mediterraneanism," namely, an essentialist discourse about the Mediterranean as a site of "origins" and "lost perfection," often due to an idealization of its classical times.⁵ As Michael Herzfeld has remarked, "To be a 'Mediterraneanist' [...] is to insert oneself in a global hierarchy of value, and to calibrate specific moments of experience to that hierarchy" (52). Clearly connected to a Western- and Euro-centric vision, this Mediterranean Orientalism is not a minor issue, being *de facto* instrumental to consolidated power balances.⁶ But the Mediterranean is not only its Olympic mythologies; it is not only Europe, and it is not only the "West." It is Africa and the Middle East, the Balkans as well as Turkey, *modern* Greece and *modern* Egypt; it is, in other words, a breeding ground for different cultures, religions, economies, and political systems. In this context, the implications of Mediterraneanism as a "global hierarchy of value" are therefore not to be underestimated. Its effects are evidently marked not only on the body of Mediterranean natures and landscapes, transformed into new markets for global capitalism; but also—bio-politically—on the migrants' bodies, masses of humans who die in the desperate attempt to escape the poverty and despotism of their (Mediterranean) countries, in order to reach more prosperous and democratic (Mediterranean) lands. It is these "Southern" people and their environments that are chiefly affected by the self-

⁴ A cornerstone of Horden and Purcell's vision, the term "microecologies" refers to the topographical fragmentation due to Mediterranean tectonics and it is strictly tied to their notion of "connectivity." It relates to the differentiation-in-connection of the Mediterranean basin: "[Microecologies] are interactive, both locally between people and environment and, more broadly between different microecologies [...]. Microecologies resist mapping" ("The Mediterranean" 733). This model is "intended to embrace the characteristic variability of Mediterranean human ecology" (733).

⁵ "A cousin of Orientalism" (Harris 2), Mediterraneanism can be defined as the doctrine that "there are distinctive characteristics which the cultures of the Mediterranean have, or have had, in common," thus resulting in a "quasi-Orientalist desire to assert cultural superiority" (38). In her essay "Mirage of Greek Continuity," Susan Saïd also underlines "the systematic search [by 18th century travellers] for survivals of ancient Greeks among the moderns, together with a repertoire of images and commonplaces, always positive, sometimes nearly idolatrous" (271) as an example of Mediterraneanism.

⁶ Herzfeld explains: "It was the imperial powers that spread what they interpreted as the Roman ideal of the civilization throughout the known world, reimporting it into the Mediterranean--not only into obviously colonial situations such as those of Cyprus, Malta, and Gibraltar, but also into countries like Greece [...]. This value hierarchy was thus less Mediterranean than an imposition on Mediterranean peoples of values that their self-appointed protectors from further north thought Mediterranean peoples should embrace. Much as classical Greek culture was filtered back to Greece through German philology and art history, so the civic morality of civilization came full circle through imperial recensions of an imagined ancient Rome" (54).

representations of the Mediterranean as a "Mare nostrum": a proprietary expression where "nostrum" clearly refers to a Euro-Atlantic collective of forces. In this very sense, Mediterraneanism is a material-discursive appropriation (and a global re-colonization) of the sea. And in this very sense, the Mediterranean adds novel, inescapable dimensions to both the discourses of postcolonialism and environmental justice, as Luis Prádanos' essay also evinces.⁷

Dismissing dangerous myths of purity, pristine perfection, and supremacy, a non-romanticized culture of the Mediterranean appears indeed necessary to describe in this sea a "form of interface" (Alcock 336), a setting of pervious boundaries for "intercultural and transcultural connections," as Prádanos puts it. In this context, Mediterranean centrality does not mean to "return to the center ancient lands, and reassign ownership of that sea to someone" (Cassano xlvi), but to cognize this sea as an *impure* crossroad for happenstances, relocations, and socio-environmental emergences. In other words, "[w]e do not go to the Mediterranean to seek the fullness of our origins but to experience our contingency" (xlvi). Challenged with all this, the first important step of ecocriticism is thus to de-essentialize the Mediterranean, and to see it as a place for "connectivity" and eco-cultural nomadism, for instable "identity-entropies" (Westphal, "La forme de l'eau") rather than for the self-celebrations of an *ab alto* appointed distinctiveness. Beyond the "tourist nostalgia" (Harris 38) of those quasi-Orientalist rhetorics, to see the Mediterranean as a living assemblage of multiple subjects and forces is therefore the *Leitmotiv* of our survey.

As these introductory remarks indicate, the aim of this special focus issue is to distinguish an ecocritical analysis of Mediterranean subjects from a Mediterranean ecocriticism, possibly adding new layers and categories to the paradigms of our discipline. For that reason, our readers will not find in the featured essays an eco-literary map of the Mediterranean world, but rather a blueprint for its exploration. If ecocriticism in general is a way to critically investigate the imagination of our *oikos*, the task of a Mediterranean ecocriticism is not simply to provide a collection of postcards from a nice area of the planet, but rather to enter this complex reality, examining its natures, discourses, and narratives, and using them in ways which might constitute a template for reading all the "Mediterraneans" of the globe.⁸ Echoing the "metonymical

⁷ The relevance of a postcolonial approach in this context has been stressed by Iain Chambers in his *Mediterraneo blues*. He writes: "anche il Mediterraneo è stato uno spazio essenzialmente coloniale e colonizzato [...]. Oggi, visto dalla sua sponda settentrionale, in particolare dall'Italia, esso appare come uno spazio generalmente sconfessato, associato alle vacanze e all'alimentazione, oppure come il luogo di un'eredità problematica e ambivalente; di un colonialismo dimenticato e contestato, per non parlare di una formazione interculturale esuberante e irrisconosciuta, che storicamente precede ed eccede l'inquadramento nazionale e occidentale conferito alle sue storie. La 'questione meridionale' e l'arretratezza' del Sud italiano sono qui parte integrante dell'interrogativo che proviene dal Sud del mondo" (18).

⁸ Presenting the Mediterranean as a "middle sea," a lens for visualizing "the ways in which the waters create links between diverse economies, cultures, and religions" ("Mediterraneans" 65), the historian David Abulafia writes that "'Mediterraneans' have played an essential role in the transformation of societies across the world by bringing into contact with one another diverse cultures, which have themselves emerged in very diverse environments. [...] [T]hese Mediterraneans are not necessarily seas

logic" adopted by Bertrand Westphal in his "literary Odyssey" titled *L'œil de la Méditerranée*, in our *Ecozon@* collection, too, "[t]he part will replace the whole" (9), both in space and in time. Consequently, the fact that the essays included here are prevalently about 20th century subjects can be read at once as the admission that "the Mediterranean discourages any all-encompassing effort by its own history" (10), and as a tribute to the challenging density of the Mediterranean's present—a present which "is not untarnished by history" (10).⁹ The history of this present includes civilizations past and their cultural achievements, as well as the violence of their conquests and wars—whether referred to the ancient Greek *poleis* or to the modern colonial states; it entails the encounters and rising of new populations and visions, as well as the host of social conflicts and environmental transformations that have accompanied these processes of renewal, as the cases of Egypt, Syria, Libya, or Lebanon currently show. Mediterranean ecocriticism seeks to do just this: to find ways to deal with the narratives and representations of this encumbered present, being aware that "telling the story of the sea," as Elena Past writes in her article, is never "an innocent enterprise."

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In spite of their different focuses and conceptual premises, all the essays included in this special focus issue share the same future-oriented outlook. They are not nostalgic; their vision of the Mediterranean is neither essentialist nor romanticized. Although with different degrees of intensity, they have in common a robust theoretical orientation, which they deploy to associate Mediterranean discourse with the discourse of natural-cultural ecologies, touching on such issues as postcolonialism, degrowth, and "slow movements" (Prádanos), the new materialisms and philosophical nomadism (Past, Donoso Aceituno), poetic metaphors, psychogeography, and embodiment theories (Cuadrado-Fernandez), insularity and eco-poetic forms of humanism (Lollini), Mediterraneanism and desert landscapes (Marroum), irony, hybridity, and natural-cultural creativeness (Westphal), and even eco-literary applications of quantum theory (Oppermann). In the many voices of the poets, artists, and theorists examined in these essays, the Mediterranean is never a static setting or a fixed identity, but a cooperative agency which materially interferes in cultural production.

The collection starts with a contribution by Bertrand Westphal, the founder of geocriticism, and one of the foremost experts in Mediterranean cultures.¹⁰ Examining writers, performers, and artists from different parts of the world, Westphal deconstructs and challenges such concepts as borders, identity, and tradition, ushering in a vision of

[...]. Space must also be found for the desert wastes that function like seas and are traversed by caravans, [...] bringing not just goods but ideas across inhospitable and empty areas of the earth" (65). To establish the Mediterranean as a categorial setting is one of the primary targets of our discourse.

⁹ Opening his book, Westphal notes: "l'influence de la Méditerranée franchit les bornes géographiques qu'on lui assigne d'habitude. [...] De même que par sa vastitude géographique, la Méditerranée dissuade l'effort totalisant par son histoire. Je m'en suis tenu au XXe siècle. C'était déjà excessif. Car le présent n'est pas vierge d'histoire" (*L'œil de la Méditerranée* 9-10). My translations in the text.

¹⁰ Published in 2007 and translated into English and Italian, Westphal's book *La Géocritique: Réel, Fiction, Espace*, has started a debate on the physical and fictional notion of space that can serve as an interesting complement to ecocritical theory.

the Mediterranean as an open space, a space without prefixed forms, constantly *performing* itself and its multiple identities. In the second essay, Luis Prádanos, moving from a Spanish standpoint, shapes his theoretical approach for a distinctive "Euro-Mediterranean Ecocriticism" elaborating on the assumptions of post-capitalist theories (Latouche, Petrini) and environmental justice. The space for the insular Mediterranean is open in a cluster of three essays. In the first one, Elena Past, using categories from material ecocriticism and posthumanism, interprets the world of hybrid encounters and "storied matter" of Lampedusa and Sicily through the diffractive lens of Emanuele Crialese's films. In the second essay, Arnaldo Donoso Aceituno analyzes Pablo Neruda's experience in Capri as a form of "poetic nomadism" and elemental re-enchantment, describing the confluence between the poet's imagination and the imagination of the Mediterranean elements as a game of creative porosity. Finally, Massimo Lollini examines the "poetic geography" of the Sardinian landscape in the works of three generations of writers, developing notions drawn from the philosophy of Vico and Deleuze and Guattari.

The exploration moves toward the East with Serpil Oppermann's essay. Combining material-ecocritical analysis with her interest in quantum physics, Oppermann focuses on the mutual reinvention of a place, Halicarnassus/Bodrum, and a writer, the Fisherman of Halicarnassus, in whose Mediterranean works she finds a poetic representation of quantum connectivity. The special issue is completed by two essays, focusing respectively on Lebanon's "greening imagination" and on Israeli/Palestinian poetry. In the first, Marianne Marroum scrutinizes the visions and cultural projects asserting Lebanese landscape and memory against the illusions of a Mediterraneanist nostalgia; in the second, Antonio Cuadrado-Fernandez concentrates on the cognitive potential of poetic metaphors and their role in restoring the imagination of places—Israel and Palestine—dominated by material conflicts and discursive juxtapositions.¹¹ Finally, the critical segment of this Mediterranean issue is interestingly complemented by a series of stimulating contributions in the section on Creative Writing and Arts.

As our collection indicates, the Mediterranean is a material figure of complexity for ecocriticism. Between the *longue durée* of geo-physical settings and the manifold cultural narratives, the Mediterranean acquires its unique "form" through its developing stories: co-emerging stories of changing ecosystems, interplays of migrations and extinctions, bio-political encounters, microecologies of culture, and macroecologies of memory. These stories tell us that the Mediterranean has many centers, and that its eco-political project need not be oriented to a "unity" but to a composition among its different elements. The concept of "composition," proposed by Bruno Latour in his "Attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto," is particularly evocative here. "Composition," Latour writes, underlines that elements are

¹¹ To our selection of essays I would like to add a reference to a precursory article, namely, Eric L. Ball's "Toward a Greek Ecocriticism."

put together while retaining their heterogeneity. Also, it is connected with composure; it has clear roots in art, painting, music, theater, dance, and thus is associated with choreography and scenography; it is not too far from 'compromise' and 'compromising,' retaining a certain diplomatic and prudential flavor. Speaking of flavor, it carries with it the pungent but ecologically correct smell of 'compost,' itself due to the active 'decomposition' of many invisible agents. [...] What is to be composed may, at any point, be *decomposed*. (473-474)

With its many concurrent actors and dynamics, physical and constructed natures, the Mediterranean is both a scene and the epitome of a "compositionist" perspective. In tune with Latour's insight, the Mediterranean is indeed a compound or collective of elements that retain their intrinsic diversity, and whose distinct features actively determine the character of the compound itself. The Mediterranean is, in other words, at once the site of "compromise" (connecting forces in variable balance), of expressive performance (enhanced by a creativity which includes the environmental imagination at play), and of "composting" (in which unities and identities are composed and decomposed). In this perspective, its often aestheticized past should not be regarded as a repertory of normative instructions. Devoid of romanticizations, Mediterranean history becomes instead a repository ("a vast archive," to quote Matvejevic) of agencies and narratives, of elements and people, of natural materialities and political forces, steadily co-evolving into an open aggregate of landscapes and imagination.

In our proposal, a Mediterranean ecocriticism uses this "compositionist" perspective as a heuristic framework for examining every natural-cultural interformation and for theorizing figures of hybridity which involve identities as well as landscapes, politics as well as ecosystems.¹² Recognizing the Mediterranean's contextual features, such an ecocriticism does, in other words, also envisage in the Mediterranean's hybridity elements of universality, "but without believing that this universality is already there, waiting to be unveiled and discovered," as Latour suggests (474). In cultural and ecological terms, this universality is a task to be pursued through all the endless encounters and eco-genetic contaminations that make life (as well as ideas) possible as the antithesis of any purity. This perspective applies to all the "Mediterranean" realities of the planet, following in this the example of historical research, where "Mediterraneans" as "middle places" provide a category for material and cultural mediation and *métissage* (see Abulafia, "Mediterraneans"). The usefulness of such an approach is that of being comparative and non-exclusionary, anti-normative and open to forms of social and ecological hope. It is, in other word, an approach that, by desacralizing fixed (and hierarchically ordered) identities, also undrapes the self-referential glories of West-centrism in its various forms.

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¹² As Elena Past writes in her essay, "To live in the bosom of the waters of the Mediterranean means to live the tension of a long, complex, cohabitation between human and nonhuman inhabitants, to experience an 'impure' hybridity."

The Mediterranean, it has been said, is "over-codified," "surcodée" (Westphal, *L'oeil de la Méditerranée* 8). This is understandable if one considers the time span of this "codification," which started before Homer's wine-dark sea and continues with the ecological codes of climate changes and environmental crisis. Such an expanded imagery, however, is also an incitement for ecocriticism to re-build the elemental memory underlying this cultural codification: ecocriticism should help us remember that the Mediterranean is, first of all, a sea. This speaks, in my opinion, in favor of a combination of Mediterranean ecocriticism with what the Shakespeare scholar Steve Mentz calls "blue cultural studies." Viewing the seas not simply "as bodies to be crossed, but as subjects in themselves" ("Blue Cultural Studies" 997), blue cultural studies reevaluates the actively co-extensive role played by oceanic environments in the creation of cultural images. Mentz maintains that, while "the story of how human meaning attaches to the oceans comprises a full history of Western culture" (*At the Bottom* 3), most of our codes are dominated by "ideologies of land ownership" (97). In my opinion, this perspective entails two things. The first is the need to complement a "terrestrial" imagination with a marine one, possibly fostering what, echoing posthumanist ideas, we could name a "post-terrestrial" imagination. The second is an awareness of the structural ambivalence of our relation to the marine element and to our "ecological other" in general:

Look at the world through salty eyeballs, remembering that the fluid in our eyes tastes like the sea. Most of our world is water. Most of that water is salt. No matter what it looks like, what it makes us feel, how our bodies float on its swells, the ocean is no place to live. [...] Long ago we crawled out of the water. We can't go back. (Mentz, *At the Bottom* 97)

The awareness of this ambivalence is a way to reconfigure both our cultural codes and our environmental-ethical systems. In this sense, the marine element reminds us that we need to address our relationships toward forms of otherness that are at once inassimilable and profoundly familiar. To conceptually and emotionally confront this "resident" alterity—an alterity which belongs in our selves as human beings—enables more empathetic ontologies and eco-diffusive moral perspectives, while at the same time warning us with important cautionary principles. This is, one could say, the real "truth of ecology": concord does not necessarily reign in our elemental "household."

Old tales of the God-sea and the climate of Enlightenment are fading, but our newer fables of ecological harmony can't keep us dry. The *oikos* of ecology too often gets imagined as a house built for people, a world fit for living in if not controlling. The sting of salt reminds us that the world isn't a happy story. (97)

In its "synecdochal" imagination of land and sea, the Mediterranean urges us to consider the existential intersections of the human and the non-terrestrial dimension of its life beyond all "fables of harmony," whether cultural or ecological. Composing (in Latour's sense) their efforts, Mediterranean ecocriticism and blue cultural studies are therefore instrumental to amend our human and terrestrial exceptionalism. Based on the assumption that our power is measured against the depth of our footprints on the solid

ground, this exceptionalism is contradicted by the very body of the world, which is not only land, and not only dry. The very presence of the sea "around us"—its "shocking, uncomfortable touch" (Mentz, *At the Bottom* 3)—is a good reminder of the dangers lurking in waters that ancient mythologies already described as perilous and capricious. Today Mediterranean waters are inhabited by all sorts of uncanny presences, which are neither Scylla and Charybdis, nor Ulysses' mermaids. These eerie beings are plastic and oil, humongous and invisible fishnets, toxic shipwrecks, "Sparrow target missiles," and the remains of the nameless migrants who failed to reach wealthier and more "peaceful" shores.¹³ Seen in this perspective, every medi-terranean sea, including *Akdeniz*, our White Sea, is always a black sea. Black, like oil, like death, like the contaminated waters that poison mammals and fish, or like the color of the skin of those oppressed humans who happened to be born on the wrong coasts. Politically, the "rich" and "Euro-Atlantic" Mediterranean is surrounded by a series of impending "Souths." Regardless of their geographical coordinates, these "Souths" encompass North Africa, the Balkans, Southern Italy, Greece, Portugal, the Middle East. Reframing Mediterranean discourse means to provide emancipation for these marginalized "Souths," which, in ecological terms, also include marginalized nonhuman subjects, starting with the sea and all of its life-forms. For all of them, we have to turn "the abuses of power [...] into communication, exchange, and coexistence" (Cassano xlvi).

In a fragment dated 7th century BC, the Greek poet Archilochus sang of someone "having their lives in the arms of the waves" (Fr. 213, *psychas echontes kymaton en ankalaiais*). The anthropomorphic image of the waves embracing those sailing creatures—whether humans or marine beings—is not simply a poetic artifice, but a powerful prompt about how intimately close and yet disproportioned our life is, compared to the wild and motherly materiality of the sea. The sea does have arms, if it can touch us, determining our fate in many ways. But this dynamics is mutual, because we—terrestrial beings—can determine the fate of the oceans, too. And in fact we did, transforming the Mediterranean into a suffering and exploited sea: over-fished, over-trafficked, over-cementified along its coastal lines; and polluted, as proven by the presence of billions of tons of contaminants and waste, including a Mediterranean "Garbage Patch" recently discovered by environmental scientists.¹⁴

Against any essentialism, which is instrumental in the effort to reduce history and memory to cultural ornaments through which the "Global North" celebrates and reassures itself, Mediterranean ecocriticism calls for us to see the world (*qua* land and land-power) *from the sea*. Which means, to borrow from Mentz's lyrical tone, to see the world with salty eyes. The "amphibian" approach of Mediterranean ecocriticism—its "amphibian" culture—is both a form of ethico-cultural criticism and a precautionary practice of life. Beyond exceptionalism in its various forms, it suggests that this world might be an alien home to us. Aware of the risks of both land and water—two elements

¹³ On the recent Israel-US conjoint missile testings, see Rudoren, "Israel Conducts Missile Test in the Mediterranean," *The New York Times*, Sept. 3, 2013.

¹⁴ See "250 Billion Plastic Fragments in Mediterranean," www.phys.org (Sept. 5, 2013).

to which we existentially belong—it suggests an ecological "heuristic" in a non-binary mode. We have to learn to see the world with the eyes of the castaways, realistically discerning in it "fewer gardens, and more shipwrecks," as Mentz says (*At the Bottom* 98). Or, we might add, with the eyes of tuna fish, for which these familiar waters may harbor hidden slaughterhouses. In this sense, we have to become "cultural amphibians": to become aware that *bios*, life—whether terrestrial or aquatic—possesses dimensions that we *are*, even if we *cannot* control them.

In addition to the elemental humility of blue cultural studies, Mediterranean ecocriticism also draws attention to a powerful eco-social and human element, calling us to reframe our discourses about "the human" outside of some of the treacherous generalizations of classic environmentalism. In fact, the otherness that we have to face, while detecting the shipwrecks of this marine ecology, is not only the withstanding alterity of the sea, but also the succumbing alterity of the other human—an Other that, Cassano also reminds us, does not arrive on Mediterranean coasts looking like a conqueror, but "hidden in the belly of ships, a clandestine escaping from old masters, [...] perhaps already in the vise of new ones" (xlvi-xlvii). Still, the Other—all these Others, whether humans, elements, or other natures—is there, entering us with the richness of its being and stories. It is this *imminent* otherness—this impure reciprocity of land and sea, of natives and newcomers—that makes the Mediterranean a practical dimension for a post-terrestrial imagination and for a more humane environmental ethics.

* * *

In his "Mediterranean breviary" Pedrag Matvejevic has written:

Anyone, regardless of place of birth or residence, can become a Mediterranean. Mediterraneanity is acquired, not inherited; it is a decision, not a privilege. [...] Being Mediterranean entails more than history or geography, tradition or memory, birthright or belief. The Mediterranean is a destiny. (93)

Mostly for professional reasons, I am trained to dismiss ideas (or ideologies) of destiny. But I find in these lines a word, "decision," which I would assume as a key concept of our Mediterranean discourse. To this word, I suggest adding two more: "openness" and "solidarity," terms to be meant in both a cognitive and an emotional sense. If anyone can become a native, becoming Mediterranean in theory and in practice means deciding to live in the "synecdoche," namely, attuning our concepts to our landscapes, setting them in the non-binary mode of inclusive compositions. It means learning to use our stories as membranes, not as shells, accepting to be the co-authors, not the masters, of our traditions. It means *translating* our values into the language of co-existence and humility, being ironic, non-self-centered, doubtful, open to multiple interpretations; it means consciously deciding to demilitarize and decolonize our identities, in ecological, cultural, and political terms. If it is so difficult, to distinctly define a Mediterranean identity, this is for a very simple reason: Our "we" is full of Others.

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