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## Mediterranean Ecocriticism

*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*

### Premise

*Two are the dominant images that come to one’s mind when the Mediterranean is mentioned. One is the crystallized perfection of ancient cultures and of landscapes of sea and land, celebrated by exquisite poets and populated by brotherhoods of bearded philosophers. Another is the appalling mass of migrants who struggle to reach Southern Europe on board of rickety and inhumanely crowded ships, feeding (if they survive) a humongous black market of new slaves. Reflecting on the clash between this painful reality and the often idealized cultural imagery that still influence the way this part of the world is perceived, I wrote this essay in the summer 2013 for a special issue of *Ecozon@ on Mediterranean Ecocriticism*. By definition a nodal point in the ecology of migrations across land and sea for both human and nonhuman beings, in those days the Mediterranean was emerging more and more as the biopolitical proscenium for the tragic aspects of these migrations, embodied by people from Africa, Syria, and other Middle Eastern countries who, fleeing conflicts, poverty, oppression, and environmental emergences in their*

homelands, were trying to relocate their lives in new spaces. The number of those who died—and still die—in the Mediterranean waters can indeed be counted by the hundreds of thousand: according to the records of the international journalist consortium The Migrants' Files, from 2000 to June 2016 739,800 people lost their lives in our coastal waters—and obviously this can only be an approximate count.<sup>1</sup>

*In a time when ecocriticism is hardly imaginable without a reference to matters of environmental justice, postcolonial studies, elemental materialism, more-than-human biopolitics, trans-corporeality, and trans-locality, these issues—an idealism of the roots and an unparalleled eco-humanitarian emergence—reveal new disclosures for our discipline, and demand to be conceptualized. The Mediterranean, indeed, is not only a place on maps. It is a category, indicating crossings, the inevitability of hybridization processes, the intersections of imagined pasts and possible futures, and a material-discursive site for new Orientalisms—something which involves all places where lands and seas are used to connect as well as to divide.*

*The decision to reprint this essay in our special cluster on “Migrant Ecologies in an (Un)bordered World,” with few changes and the insertion of this premise, is therefore motivated by the intent to provide both a concrete setting and a possible conceptual framework for the topic we are exploring. Our wish is to suggest cultural strategies and address ethical stances that involve our elementality, the coordinates of our being-in-the world, and the porous contact zones where history and imagination merge with the flesh of reality.*

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An earthly sea. An electromagnetic field. A miniature ocean contained by miniature continents. An imaginary framework 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 this region of land and sea is the insistence about a single question: “What is the Mediterranean?” Returning to this matter with a sort of ritual circularity, two influential authors, as diverse from each other as the French historian Braudel and the Croatian writer 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). The Jews name it *Yam Gadol*, the "Great Sea," and the Turks, as Oppermann recalls, *Akdeniz*, the White Sea—a more luminous and animated counterpoint to the Black Sea (Oppermann). 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 Westphal notes, "l'eau est une synecdoque de la terre," water is a synecdoche of land ("La Méditerranée ou la forme de l'eau," 27). As for the Mediterranean world, the historian 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).<sup>2</sup>

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 essay 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*, it is useful 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.<sup>3</sup> It is, one 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.

If the Mediterranean appears today as an extensive “collective,” it is hard, however, to bring together a region that has so many stories, so many centers, languages, and landscapes, and that even in terms of self-representation hesitated for a while before drawing a unitary map. Historical research can be quite helpful in providing coordinates for our discourse.<sup>4</sup> Building their vision of Mediterranean history around the concept of “connectivity,” in the opening pages of *The Corrupting Sea*, Horden and Purcell admit that, “Before the development of satellites, the Mediterranean as a whole was invisible. [ . . . ] Thus, although the Mediterranean has been a geographical expression for many centuries, the expression originates at a learned, somewhat abstract, level” (10). The only thing that, they maintain, would have concretely “connected” these waters and their “microecologies,” in a world whose geographical imagination was land- rather than sea-centered, was the practice of coastwise navigation, the *periplous*, which allowed for the maritime space to be perceived as a linear route of harbors and trade sites. The Mediterranean came then to be “regarded as like a great river. And so it appears on a late Roman map, the Peutinger Table, where the sea is grossly elongated” (11).<sup>5</sup> (See Fig. 1)

A river, a sea, a world. And, we might add, a wasteland. As 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 eighteenth 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-World War II reality and geopolitical settings.



**Figure 1.** Segment IV of Ortelius's "Tabula itineraria ex illustri Peutingerorum Bibliotheca quae Augustae Vindel. Est." Copperplate map in eight segments on four sheets, with added color, each segment 19 × 52 cm, on sheets 41 × 53 cm. From Petrus Bertius's *Theatrum geographiæ veteris, duobus tomis distinctum* (Amsterdam: Ex officina Iudoci Hondij, 1619).

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*, Grove and 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 actually “migrants” 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.<sup>6</sup>

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 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.<sup>7</sup> As 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.<sup>8</sup> 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 in fact 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 who are chiefly affected by the self-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.

Dismissing dangerous myths of purity, pristine perfection, and supremacy, a non-romanticized culture of the Mediterranean appears indeed necessary to descry in this sea a "form of interface" (Alcock 336), a setting of pervious boundaries for "intercultural and transcultural connections," as Prádanos puts it (43). 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 an instable "identity-entropy" (see Westphal, "La forme de l'eau" 27) rather than for the self-celebrations of an anti-historical purity. 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 this discourse.

As these remarks indicate, the goal here 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. Rather than an eco-literary map of the Mediterranean world, this is thus 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.<sup>9</sup> Echoing the "metonymical logic" adopted by Bertrand Westphal in his "literary Odyssey" titled *L'œil de la Méditerranée*, "[t]he part will replace the whole" (9), both in space and in time. Consequently, the fact that the Mediterranean is at the center of so much of the current cultural production, both in critical and creative terms, 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).<sup>10</sup> 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 *póleis* 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 Past writes, is never “an innocent enterprise” (“Island Hopping” 52).<sup>11</sup>

The Mediterranean is a material figure of complexity for ecocriticism. It is never a static setting or a fixed identity, but a cooperative agency which materially interferes in cultural production. 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, biopolitical 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 Latour in his “Attempt at a Compositionist Manifesto,” is particularly evocative here. “Composition,” Latour writes, underlines that elements are

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 ‘de-composition’ of many invisible agents. [ . . . ] What is to be composed may, at any point, be *decomposed*. (473–74)

With its many concurrent actors and dynamics, physical and constructed natures, the Mediterranean is both a scene and an 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 has not to 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 my proposal, a Mediterranean ecocriticism uses this “compositionist” perspective as a heuristic framework for examining every natural-cultural inter-formation and for theorizing figures of hybridity which involve identities as well as landscapes, politics as well as ecosystems. As Past notes, “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” (“Island Hopping” 50). 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 words, an approach that, by desacralizing fixed (and hierarchically ordered) identities, also undrapes the self-referential glories of West-centrism in its various forms.

The Mediterranean, it has been said, is “over-codified,” “surcodée” (Westphal, *L’œil 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 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 post-humanist 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. (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 ourselves 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. (Mentz, *At the Bottom* 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.<sup>12</sup> In its waves, “porous human borders correspond to the porous borders of other creatures; they are [ . . . ] the borders of the Schengen zone, more permeable for some than for others. They are the borders of global capital, global merchandise, and global labor” (Past, “Mediterranean Ecocriticism” 381). 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 seventh century BC, the Greek poet Archilochus sang of someone “having their lives in the arms of the waves” (Fr. 213, *psychàs échontes kymáton en ankálaías*). 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 dynamic 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.<sup>13</sup>

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 in fact this world might be an alien home to us. Aware of the risks of both land and water—two elements 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 disguise 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—are there, entering us with the richness of their 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” 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, in fact, to distinctly define a Mediterranean identity, this is for a very simple reason: Our “we” is full of Others.

## N O T E S

1. See <http://www.themigrantsfiles.com> (accessed 23 January 2017). Apart from the online reports of the major newspapers, monthly and weekly updates can be found on the website of the UN Refugee Agency ([www.unhcr.org](http://www.unhcr.org)).

2. A previous version of this article, titled “Introduction; Mediterranean Ecocriticism, or, A Blueprint for Cultural Amphibians” appeared in *Ecozon@ 4.2* (2013), Special Focus issue on Mediterranean Ecocriticism (ed. Serenella Iovino): 1–14. On these questions, see also Abulafia, *The Great Sea*, 344–54.

3. 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*.

4. A unitary approach to the Mediterranean is among the most controversial subjects of modern historiography, often suspended at the crossroad between “history of the Mediterranean” and “history in the Mediterranean.” An advocate of the first point, Braudel conceded that the “Mediterranean is not so much a single entity as a ‘complex of seas,’” nor is it “an autonomous world” (*The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World* 23, 17). His view of the

Mediterranean as an electro-magnetic field, quoted in the beginning, is very telling: “the Mediterranean must be accepted as a wide zone, extending well beyond the shores of the sea in all directions. We might compare it to an electric or magnetic field, or more simply to a radiant center whose light grows less as one moves away from it, without one’s being able to define the exact boundary between light and shade” (168). Although extremely important, the whole of this historiographical question clearly exceeds the scope of this essay.

5. On the Peutinger Map, see Albu’s accurate analysis, *The Medieval Peutinger Map: Imperial Roman Revival in the German Empire*, Cambridge UP, 2014.

6. 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” (733). This model is “intended to embrace the characteristic variability of Mediterranean human ecology” (733).

7. “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 result a “quasi-Orientalist desire to assert cultural superiority” (38). In her essay “Mirage of Greek Continuity,” Saïd also underlines “the systematic search [by eighteenth-century travelers] 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.

8. 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).

9. 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 [ . . . ]. 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 categorical setting is one of the primary targets of our discourse.

10. 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. A pathbreaking new addition to the ecocritical debate on the Mediterranean antiquity is Schliephake's *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity* (2017). A precursory article is Eric L. Ball's "Toward a Greek Ecocriticism."

11. Past is author of the recent "Mediterranean Ecocriticism: The Sea in the Middle" (2016), an excellent analysis of Italy's material texts, including migrants' bodies, through the lens of contemporary cinema.

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

13. See "250 Billion Plastic Fragments in Mediterranean," [www.phys.org](http://www.phys.org) (accessed 23 January 2017).

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