OLD QUESTIONS AND NEW HORIZONS IN MEDITERRANEAN LITERARY STUDIES

Martino Lovato and C. Ceyhun Arslan*

The last decades of the twentieth century have witnessed a return of academic interest in Mediterranean Studies, after decades of Cold War interruption.[1] The most influential scholarship on the Mediterranean that evolved since then has focused on how to study the history of the Mediterranean. Fernand Braudel, whose main work centered on the "Mediterranean of the historian," is by now a reference figure for this new scholarship. Braudel paid great attention to the analysis of how space and geography affects human history over the *longue-durée*, and approached the Mediterranean as "a sum of individual histories."[2] Among the protagonists in the academic return of attention to Mediterranean history, Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell brought another seminal contribution to the field, differentiating "a history *in* the Mediterranean," which focuses solely on a fragment of the sea, from a "history *of* the Mediterranean," which pays attention to circulations and translations that affect the entire basin. Their emphasis on networks and connectivity aimed to generate a "history *of* the Mediterranean,"[3] and resonates with an age like ours, where the movement of people, goods and information became a main focus of scholarly attention. More classic in its structure yet innovative in its approach, David Abulafia's *The Great Sea* wants instead to be "a history of the Mediterranean Sea" itself; one that centers upon the region to reconstruct the interactions between its peoples, from the ancient period to the present day.[4] All these works have reflected on how to find the best methodology for studying the Mediterranean's complex and centuries-long history.

* American College of the Mediterranean (Florence)/Koç University

1 J.R. Henry, "Métamorphoses du mythe méditerranéen," J.R. Henry and G. Groc, eds., *Politiques méditerranéennes: entre logiques étatiques et espace civil: une réflexion franco-allemande* (Paris: Karthala, 2000), pp. 41-56.

2 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), I: 13.

3 Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, *The Corrupting Sea: A Study of Mediterranean History* (Oxford: Blackwell Publications, 2002), 2.

4 David Abulafia, *The Great Sea: A Human History of the Mediterranean* (London: Lane, 2011), xvii.

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While much of Mediterranean Studies has focused on the study of the history of the Mediterranean, around a decade ago Karla Mallette and Sharon Kinoshita called for more attention to the Mediterranean in literary studies: unlike historians and art historians, they argued, literary critics have not used the Mediterranean as a category of analysis mainly due to "the tenacity of the nation in literary studies."[5] As new publications such as Silvia Caserta's *Narratives of Mediterranean Spaces*[6] show that the Mediterranean is now receiving increasing attention in literary studies, the editors of the volume *Sea of Literatures: Towards a Theory of Mediterranean Literature*, Angela Fabris, Albert Göschl, and Steffen Schneider, recently confirmed that historical sciences "have already reached a high methodological standard of Mediterranean studies,"[7] but the emerging Mediterranean literary studies has not reached a particular consensus on its methodological approach. This current issue of *Interdisciplinary Studies on the Mediterranean* is devoted to the recent growth Mediterranean literary studies and originates from the desire to assess the current state of this scholarly debate. The essays included in this volume focus on texts that cultivate new politics of memory, counteract typical geopolitical assumptions, and question foundational narratives on selfhood and otherness in the region. Our attempt has not primarily been that of advancing on a definition or theorization of Mediterranean literary studies, but rather to intercept the new directions that this burgeoning field of studies is taking, as this academic debate coexists in dialogue with other academic and non-academic approaches to the Mediterranean. Distinguishing the institutional debate from the purely literary interest in the Mediterranean is not easy. Between the waning tide of the Cold War and Globalization's rising one, however, we document the growth in interest for the Mediterranean in writers and critics alike. Since then, the Herderian nation-state paradigm has been put under scrutiny due to the effects, among others, of migration and the diffusion of digital media. Mediterranean studies, in this

5 Sharon Kinoshita, "Mediterranean Literature." A Companion to Mediterranean History. Eds. Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita (West Sussex, UK: Wiley-Blackwell, 2014), 314-329.

6 Fabris, Göschl, and Schneider, eds., *Sea of Literatures*; Silvia Caserta, *Narratives of Mediterranean Spaces: Literature and Art Across Land and Sea* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

7 Angela Fabris, Albert Göschl, and Steffen Schneider, "Introduction: Mediterranean Literary Studies – Definitions, Purpose, and Applications," in *Sea of Literatures: Toward a Theory of Mediterranean Literature*, eds. Angela Fabris, Albert Göschl, and Steffen Schneider (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023), 6.

sense, further contributes to this growing tendency to move away from nationalistic paradigms in humanities.

Recent works in Mediterranean literary studies often approach the Mediterranean as a taxonomic category or as an "optic" or "lens" of interpretation. For example, Barbara Pezzotti has used "Mediterranean crime fiction" as a taxonomic category to discuss novels of crime fiction that are produced throughout the basin between the 1980s and 2010s.[8] Interestingly, when the Mediterranean is viewed as a taxonomic category, it steers attention to languages and literary traditions that current disciplinary frameworks often overlook. As Hilary Kilpatrick has shown, once we start to categorize both Greek and Arabic literatures as Mediterranean, we start to see similarities between the two traditions to which we have not paid attention before.[9] Studying the Mediterranean as a lens or optic generates new and creative interpretations on well-known artistic and narrative sources. For example, Cecile S. Hilsdale has called for adopting a Mediterranean lens for the study of Hagia Sophia, so that art historians pay attention to the different Mediterranean cultural and political interactions that shaped the construction and, ultimately, reception of this site, meaningful in the history of different religious traditions.[10] In this possibility of providing a different regional look even to otherwise familiar subjects lays that attractiveness of the Mediterranean as "a site of endless epistemological provocation."[11] The study of the Mediterranean allows to pay attention to the diverse ways in which artists and critics undertake what Kinoshita called "strategic regionalism," which allows us to "interrogate or displace otherwise settled or self-evident categories of analysis."[12] Critics have been again drawn to studies for the past few decades because, as Christopher Bush has put it,

8 Barbara Pezzotti, *Mediterranean Crime Fiction: Transcultural Narratives in and around the "Great Sea"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023).

9 Hilary Kilpatrick, "Eastern Mediterranean Literatures: Perspectives for Comparative Study," in *Understanding Near Eastern Literatures*, eds. V. Klemm and B. Gruendler (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000).

10 Cecile J. Hilsdale, "Visual Culture," in *A Companion to Mediterranean History*, eds. Peregrine Horden and Sharon Kinoshita (London: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 307.

11 Adrian Lahoud, "The Mediterranean, a New Imaginary," in *New Geographies, 5: The Mediterranean*, ed. Antonio Petrov (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Graduate School of Design, 2013), 83.

12 Sharon Kinoshita, "Negotiating the Corrupting Sea: Literature in and of the Medieval Mediterranean," in *Can We Talk Mediterranean?: Conversations on an Emerging Field in Medieval and Early Modern Societies*, eds. Brian A. Catlos and Sharon Kinoshita (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 33.

areas "break open the limits of the national while retaining enough specificity to allow for in-depth research and knowledge of the relevant languages."[13] As global approaches attempt to generate large "world-system theories," they can sometimes find the need to attain linguistic proficiency and develop a growing understanding for different historical contexts. Mediterranean studies can draw upon the strengths of both area studies and global studies. The regional scope of the field has inspired general literary approaches tailored upon the Mediterranean space, such as Dionýz Ďurišin and Armando Gnisci's "Interliterary Mediterranean,"[14] or that open to the possibilities of a multi-directional approach to memory by the focus on space such as Betrand Westphal's *geocriticism*.[15]

Our attempt is not to generate here a history of the sea, nor we do perceive the sea merely as a background in which different people circulate or literatures are translated into each other. Building upon Edwige Tamalet Talbayev and Yasser Elhariry's edited volume *Critically Mediterranean*, we intend to "foreground an alternative epistemology of time, one engaged in the subjective experience of temporal frames and dedicated to the reclaiming of historical agency in the quandary of current-day Mediterranean politics."[16] Our approach foregrounds the agency of authors and scholars that invoked the Mediterranean in the last few decades. We wish to understand how the sea serves not only as a passive object of representation but instead as a source for different literary, artistic, and political visions in Mediterranean narratives. After all, it is among the most exquisite specificities of literary studies that of focusing on individual voices and original authorial perspectives. Articles in this special issue, therefore, avoid generating "system-theories" for the Mediterranean that neatly divide the basin into centers and peripheries. They do not solely contribute to producing a theory of Mediterranean literature, but also show a deep knowledge of the geopolitical and historical contexts of the sources that they study. In so doing, they

13 Christopher Bush, "Areas: Bigger than the Nation, Smaller than the World," in *Futures of Comparative Literature: State of the Discipline Report* (London: Routledge, 2017), 172.

14 Charles Sabatos and C. Ceyhun Arslan, "Ďurišin's Interliterary Mediterranean as a Model for World Literature," in *Sea of Literatures: Toward a Theory of Mediterranean Literature*, edited by Angela Fabris, Albert Göschl, and Steffen Schneider, 1-16. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2023. 335-348.

15 Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces* (Berlin: Springer, 2011).

16 Yasser Elhariry and Edwige Tamalet Talbayev, "Critically Mediterranean: An Introduction," in *Critically Mediterranean: Temporalities, Aesthetics, and Deployments of a Sea in Crisis*, eds. Yasser Elhariry and Edwige Tamalet Talbayev (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 183.

demonstrate how the Mediterranean has served for the authors they study as a "significant geography," which, as Karima Laachir, Sara Marzagora, and Francesca Orsini put it, refers to "the conceptual, imaginative, and real geographies that texts, authors, and language communities inhabit, produce, and reach out to."[17] Literary authors do not necessarily stand at a distance from the Mediterranean, in order to represent the sea to either master or resist it. They draw upon the Mediterranean to rewrite the typical historiographies of their local and national communities, just as they reassess our typical understandings of the Mediterranean in the process. The Mediterranean functions as a geopolitical context through which these authors have defined who they are and what they wish to become. In the process, artists also reassess the Mediterranean and its complex history. When they write about the sea, they also start to question well-established historical narratives and understand that what one may count as the objective truth is ultimately a fictional and narrative construct. Literary critics should therefore not solely aim to use the Mediterranean as a taxonomic category under which all texts produced throughout the basin should be categorized. "Mediterranean literary studies" should not merely map out transcultural literary networks and translations; the field can also put emphasis on the agency of Mediterranean authors and artists, as the "literary Mediterranean" is not necessarily an object that one represents or maps out.

While mostly devoted to subjects and authors in the European South, where much of the scholarship in Mediterranean literary studies still focuses, the articles in this issue demonstrate that the Mediterranean inspired new concepts and metaphors at the turn of the century, and underscore the importance of studying together languages, literary traditions, and time periods that the Mediterranean studies has often overlooked. For example, both Alice Parrinello's and Roberta Micallef's articles in this volume reflect upon literary perspectives on modernity, resonating with the attention paid by Judith E. Tucker to the modernization process in the Mediterranean; a perspective, as Konstantina Zanou has pointed out, that "stirs the waters of Mediterranean studies by imagining the sea from the vantage point of its southern and eastern shores."[18] Whereas most of the essays here included center on the northern shore of the basin, the issue also hosts a contribution on Turkish Mediterranean works, and all the contributions reveal the diverse ways in which authors engaged with the Mediterranean. As a result,

17 Karima Laachir, Sara Marzagora, and Francesca Orsini, "Significant Geographies: In Lieu of World Literature," *Journal of World Literature* 3, no. 3 (2018), 290.

18 Judith E. Tucker, ed., in *Making of the Modern Mediterranean: Views from the South* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2019), back cover.

they contribute to a key aim that Giovanna Summerfield has pointed out for the field: that of "reconsidering the Mediterranean, appreciating and demarginalizing the peoples and cultures of this vast region, while considering the affinities and differences is a valuable part of the process of unframing and reframing the concept of the Mediterranean provided thus far."[19]

As Megan C. MacDonald and Claire Launcbhury suggest, to put emphasis on how the Mediterranean has served as a source of inspiration for artists throughout decades through the Mediterranean means to employ an "old name to launch a new concept."[20] We are aware of how the regional concept of the Mediterranean was born as a colonial construct, and that even Braudel's conception of Mediterranean history, as Manuel Borutta and Sakis Gekas put it, "was a by-product of colonial entanglements in the Mediterranean."[21] Michael Herzfeld's concept "Mediterraneanism" testifies to the impact of postcolonial studies, as in outlining the "two horns" of the Mediterranean dilemma he makes frequent comparisons between Orientalism and Mediterraneanism.[22] As the field pays attention to unequal power dynamics that have shaped "the colonial sea," postcolonial studies have warned critics against the tendency to romanticize Mediterranean sublime visions of co-existence. The articles in this special issue show a strong awareness about the lessons that postcolonial studies have taught us. Therefore, they frequently reflect on "the Orient" or "the Other" in the narrative sources that they study. More than forty years after the first publication of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), one relevant element appearing in the articles here included is the application of postcolonial critical tools on subjects internal to Europe itself. For example, as Giovanni Maria Dettori shows us, one needs to pay attention to the marginalization of Sardinia in the Italian official historiography or, as Paul Csillag demonstrates,

19 Giovanna Summerfield, "Introduction: Unframing and Reframing Mediterranean Spaces and Identities," in *Unframing and Reframing Mediterranean Spaces and Identities*, eds. Giovanna Summerfield and Rosario Pollicino (Leiden: Brill, 2023), 4.

20 Claire Launchbery and Megan C. MacDonald, "Introduction: Urban Bridges and Global Capital(s)," in *Urban Bridges, Global Capital(s): Trans-Mediterranean Francosphères*, eds. Claire Launchbury and Megan C. MacDonald (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2021), 4, emphasis in original.

21 Manuel Borutta and Sakis Gekas, "A Colonial Sea: The Mediterranean, 1798-1956," *European Review of History = Revue Européene d'Histoire* 19, no. 1 (2012), 2.

22 Michael Herzfeld, "The Horns of the Mediterraneanist Dilemma," *American Ethnologist* 11, no. 3 (1984): 439-454.

of the Byzantine Empire in much of the Western European historiography. Furthermore, some of the narratives that Dettori and Csillag discuss even view Sardinia and the Byzantine Empire as part of the Orient. While we should not overlook the colonial context in which the Mediterranean was first envisioned as a modern object of study, some of the articles in this special issue also demonstrate that many authors throughout the Mediterranean draw upon the Mediterranean to undermine typical and Orientalist assumptions about the sea. At the same time, these articles also demonstrate that Europe is not as monolithic as some works in the postcolonial tradition claim it to be.

To handle the contradictions and paradoxes inherent to this comparative perspective is another of the challenges that scholars in Mediterranean literary studies are facing. Therefore, the articles in this issue also complicate some of the Cold War binaries upon which early postcolonial scholarship was produced, as they no longer merely view "the East as the mirror image of the West."[23] The "strategic regionalism" that artists and scholars pursue makes them aware of the ongoing imperialistic uses of the Mediterranean and make a claim to the sea in order to contest entrenched assumptions and rewrite histories of their communities. Reading together Salvatore Pappalardo's study of Vincenzo Consolo's retrieval of Sicily's multiple genealogies, Jerikho Amores's study of Barcelona's reshaping as a Mediterranean metropolis through the ironic eyes of Eduardo Mendoza, and Jawad El-Annabi's analysis of power and representation between the US, Europe and the Mediterranean, also reminds of the long-dated divorce that occurred between postmodern and postcolonial criticisms during the 1980s and 1990s. On the one hand the realm of aesthetics and stylistic interrogation, on the other the investigation over the historical context literature interacts with, and to the imbalance of power existing between and within societies. This split emerged from the misunderstanding, nurtured by Edward Said himself in the heated controversies of those years,[24] that postcolonial studies would be interested only in history and politics. As Sangeeta Ray points out, however, postcolonial studies have always paid attention to aesthetics and the literary proper, without which the practice

23 Longxi Zhang, *Unexpected Affinities: Reading Across Cultures* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 11.

24 See, for example, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism*, where Said continued his polemic against the "denaturated and depoliticized" effects of postmodernism in academic politics. Edward Said, *Humanism and Democratic Criticism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 55

of literary criticism would be simply impossible.[25] The debate on Mediterranean literary studies shows that what is at stake in the field is the conception of literature and literary studies themselves, and that this debate is suitably positioned to address – and perhaps redress – the relevance of literary claims in today's Mediterranean.

As in the past invoking the Mediterranean served imperialist projects, returning to the Mediterranean in the age of globalization calls into question the awareness brought by postcolonial studies of the challenge for scholars who do not have access to financial and institutional resources in the Global South. It is no coincidence, for example, that some of the most influential monographs on the basin are written by scholars who are based in well-endowed institutions in Europe and North America. The methodological approaches that we articulate in this introduction and observe in the articles featured in this issue can cultivate a more inclusive Mediterranean studies, as the hopes raised by the Mediterranean as a potential horizon remain a relevant subject of investigation in the field. Even a single author can be studied for increasing our understanding of the diverse ways in which the Mediterranean has served as a source for different visions and hopes. Parrinello's reading of LGTBQA+ narratives constitutes another sign of the liveliness of this debate, while it also continues the longer trend of critical solidarity expressed between European, Mediterranean, and Global "Souths" discussed, among others, in Franco Cassano's *Southern Thought*.[26] Both elements contribute to the novel version of the Mediterranean emerged from this generation of authors and scholars.

The issue opens with Paul Csillag's study of "negative Byzantism" in nineteenth-century historical novels, with a particular focus on Abel-François Villemain's (1790-1870) works. As Csillag shows, most Western historiographical works – including historical novels – have tended to project the Eastern Roman Empire as a decadent remnant of its Western counterpart. In contrast, ancient Greece was viewed as the root from which an advanced Western Europe emerged. Identifying this negative Byzantism as a particular form of Mediterraneanism, Csillag provides an in-depth analysis of Villemain's novel *Lascaris*, which gives us a representation of the Greek War of Independence. The article demonstrates how "[n]egative Byzantinism functioned as a supplement to positive Philhellenism"

25 Sangeeta, Ray, "Postcolonially Speaking?" *Modern Language Quarterly* 81, no. 4 (2020): 553-566.

26 Franco Cassano, *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012).

(5). At the same time, Csillag complicates the binary between a decadent Byzantine and an enlightened ancient Greek past as he also shows how Russian Tzars viewed themselves as legitimate successors of the Byzantine Empire, pointing out that critics should not solely study French sources to understand shifting attitudes towards the Eastern Mediterranean. Although Villemain does not receive much attention in academic and cultural circles, his ideas continue to shape the popular imagination.

Jawad El-Annabi gives a close reading of Paul Theroux's (b. 1941) *Pillars of Hercules: A Grand Tour of the Mediterranean* to flesh out "Theroux's Mediterranean." In particular, he demonstrates how his text has resonated with a generation of American readers and continues a tradition of travelogues whose tradition dates back to the birth of the Grand Tour. Theroux fashions himself as a traveler who is able to grasp the essence of a place and of a people: "Theroux focused on encounters with ordinary people more than tourist attractions and beautiful landscapes. He sets himself apart from the tradition of the Grand Tour as well as the scenic descriptions other travel writers usually produce" (58). The text guides the American reader, as Theroux also enjoys a great sense of privilege as he moves across borders and enjoys exclusive access to different places. It also provides an American representation of the Mediterranean. As El-Annabi underscores, Theroux also expresses a strong desire to convey a sense of authentic Mediterranean to his readers, while serving as expression of "American exceptionalism" at the end of the 1990s.

Giovanni Maria Dettori examines the works of Sergio Atzeni (1952-1995) in order to contest conceptualizations of Sardinia as an island that has remained unaffected by historical transformations in the Italian peninsula and the Mediterranean. Numerous authors such as D. H. Lawrence (1885-1930) have reinforced orientalist assumptions about Sardinia as an unchanging space. However, Atzeni fleshes out Sardinia's Mediterranean connections; his works thus augur the multicultural character of Italy that is receiving more attention in Italian studies today. Atzeni, unlike authors such as Lawrence, does not aim to portray a romantic vision of Sardinia, and is rather interested in "presenting a cross-section of society in an urban Sardinian context at the end of the seventies and the beginning of the eighties" (87). Dettori also pays attention to the use of language in Atzeni's works in order to further demonstrate how the author posits Sardinia as a Mediterranean space.

In a similar vein, Salvatore Pappalardo examines the works of Vincenzo Consolo (1933-2012) to demonstrate how his writings, such as *Nottetempo, casa per casa*, *La ferita dell'aprile*, *L'olivo e l'olivastro*, and *Retablo*, flesh out Sicily's overlooked Mediterranean connections; in particular, the island's Jewish and Islamic heritages – or as Pappalardo puts it, "the Mediterranean of remnants" of the island. Pappalardo examines Consolo as a Mediterranean author who challenges traditional views about Sicily. His genealogical excavation is especially visible when Pappalardo notes: "Through his narrative archeology, Consolo unearths and reinterprets layers of Sicilian history, reimagining his own lineage in the process and challenging traditional views of Sicilian identity" (95). Consolo's works, therefore, challenge typical historiographical perspectives that have overlooked Sicily's Mediterranean connections. We also find Pappalardo's use of the concept of grafting inspiring, since "[f]or Consolo, grafting is not just a horticultural technique but a metaphor that epitomizes Sicilian civilization" (96).

Jerikho Ezzekiel Amores examines representations of Barcelona in the 1990s with a particular focus on Eduardo Mendoza's (b. 1943) novels, such as *Sin noticias de Gurb*, *La aventura del tocador de señoras*, and *El secreto de la modelo extraviada*. They all testify to sudden transformations occurred during Barcelona's transformation into a Mediterranean metropolis after the Olympic games, and the impact of global capitalist modernity on the city's urban and socioeconomic fabric. Mendoza's works use satire and humor in order to steer attention to the sense of displacement that their characters experience as they confront the city's sudden transformation. Amores also demonstrates how recent economic and infrastructural shifts in Barcelona resonate with other parts of the Mediterranean that are also characterized by a sense of displacement that the rise of global capitalism has caused. Mendoza's novels ultimately point to "alternative mapping of narratives about Barcelona and the Mediterranean around the Olympic Games of 1992" (121).

Likewise, Alice Parrinello has examined narratives regarding LGBTQIA+ communities and subjectivities. She pays attention to some recent publications that challenge homonationalist understandings such as Mario Desiati's (b. 1977) *Spatriati*, *Polveri sottili* and Emanuela Anechoum's (b. 1991) *Tangerinn*. While most narratives of migration regarding the LGBTQIA+ community adopt a homonationalist stance and hence project the Northern Italy and ultimately Northern Europe as the beacon of modernity towards which all queer people aspire to migrate, the novels that

Parinello study feature queer characters who migrate from north to south. Many studies of migration also project Southern Italy as morally, temporally, and economically backward and valorize what Parinello calls a "modern homosexuality" that contrasts with the "Mediterranean homosexuality" that one sees in Southern Italy and Islamic countries of the Mediterranean. The novels Parrinello studies complicate binary assumptions about north and south that we see in these narratives, and open new perspectives on this research paths across the sea.

Roberta Micallef points to the relative lack of attention to women's writing from the Eastern Mediterranean in Mediterranean studies. As a case study, she examines Ayla Kutlu's (1938-2010) *Sen de Gitme Triyandafilis* (Don't Leave Triyandafilis) and Bejan Matur's (b. 1968) poetry. Micallef demonstrates that these works can be categorized as Eastern Mediterranean works that capture the transition from empires to nation-states. Both Kutlu and Matur view the Mediterranean as a space that helps them rethink the national and political genealogy of spaces. They also add the voices of women, migrants, and minorities from the southern Turkish coast to the conversation about Mediterranean identities. Micallef ultimately demonstrates how these authors draw upon the Mediterranean to rewrite their histories.

Although these critics specialize in different languages and time periods, they all put emphasis on the agency of writers, and their creative ways of engaging with the Mediterranean. They show the relevance for the study of Mediterranean literature not only to map out what circulated in the basin but also to understand the diverse ways in which writers have engaged with the sea: just as writers redefine their communities, they help us rethink the sea anew.

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