

INTERVIEW
WITH ANGELA FABRIS
AND STEFFEN SCHNEIDER
Giovanna Summerfield, Rosario Pollicino

ANGELA FABRIS is Associate Professor of Romance Literature at the University of Klagenfurt (Austria) and a visiting professor at University Ca' Foscari Venice (Italy). Her research touches on different themes and times in Italian, Spanish, French, and European literature, also from a comparative perspective, from Boccaccio to the Baroque novel of the Siglo de Oro, up to the genre of the «Spectators» and 18th-century journalistic production (*I giornali veneziani di Gasparo Gozzi. Tra dialogo e consenso sulla scia dello Spectator*, Biblioteca di «Lettere italiane», Florence: Olshchki, 2022). She is one of the leaders of the project *The Invention of the Lottery Fantasy – A Cultural, Transnational, and Transmedial History of European Lotteries*, funded by the Research Council of Norway (<https://www.ntnu.edu/lottery>). She has edited different volumes on various film genres, such as science fiction, horror, and eroticism. Since 2020, she is editor of the series AAIM with the publisher De Gruyter (Alpe Adria e dintorni, itinerari mediterranei (degruyter.com)) and has researched Mediterranean literature and film, to which she devoted the series of essays, *Sea of Literatures*, here discussed with the editors.

STEFFEN SCHNEIDER is a Full Professor of Italian and French Literature at the University of Graz. He is head of the Core research area *Transmediterranean Entanglements. Movements and relations in the Mediterranean and beyond* at the Faculty of Humanities/Graz and co-editor (with Angela Fabris and Albert Goeschl) of the volume *Sea of Literatures. Towards a Theory of Mediterranean Literature*. He has published numerous articles on the representation and the idea of the Mediterranean in French and Italian literature with a special focus on Sicily. Schneider is also a specialist of the Italian Renaissance. His book *Kosmos – Seele – Text. Formen der Partizipation und ihre literarische Vermittlung. Marsilio Ficino, Pierre de Ronsard, Giordano Bruno* (2012) received the Elisabeth-Richter Price of the Deutscher Romanistenverband – the Association of German scholars in romance studies. He spent two years studying in

Italy, one in Genoa and one in Rome, where he researched the works of Giordano Bruno.

Q. Tell us about the inspiration and need that prompt you to write such an interesting and pertinent volume.

A.F. My interest in Mediterranean literature arose in 2013 at a conference organized by the European Union for young doctoral students that was held in Koper. On that occasion, driven by the desire to find a common and, at the same time, distinct ground of analysis for young scholars from all over Europe, I chose to talk about the distinct forms of representation and trafficking of people, objects and cultures found in Mediterranean literature of antiquity. My lecture, entitled *Mediterranean settings and urban spaces in the Decameron*, attempted to elaborate a construction of the rhetoric of place. It met with considerable success with an extensive series of questions in presence and at a distance which encouraged me to develop a model of analysis, beginning with some fourteenth-century novellas and extending to more recent eras.

S.S. I have been fascinated by Mediterranean studies for a good decade now: I started by giving lectures on the representation of Mediterranean port cities in modern literature. In doing so, I was able to observe that, in addition to the specific national contexts in which such representations must be seen, there are also many transnational contexts that require a comparative perspective on these texts. This is of course because the authors I presented to my students do not limit themselves to their national horizons, but also communicate with each other across linguistic and national borders, thereby creating an international Mediterranean discourse. Furthermore, limiting the discussion to a purely national perspective would also be a complete misrepresentation of the subject matter, as the Mediterranean has always been a crossroads and a marketplace where people of different origins meet and mix since time immemorial. But as indisputable as this fact seemed to me, I could find little help in literary studies. Even ten years ago, there were already many essays and anthologies on Mediterranean literature, but they were mostly individual accounts in which this or that novel or author was examined. Methodological questions and theoretical concepts of Mediterranean literature across languages and countries were hardly dealt with. At the same time, however, interest in such questions was noticeable everywhere and the first essays did appear, for example by Karla Mallette and Sharon Kinoshita, who started to develop concepts for

the study of Mediterranean literature. That encouraged me, of course, but I have to say that the greatest source of inspiration was historical research, such as Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell's concept of 'connectivity', which has become very popular in literary studies in recent years. Despite these inspirations, it seemed to me that only the first steps towards Mediterranean literary studies had been taken and that a new level could only be reached in cooperation with international specialists. Fortunately, I found allies in my two co-editors who saw things in a similar way to me and so we decided to produce this book together.

Q. Oftentimes Mediterranean Studies and literature are not connected. We see more of a historical or geographical reading of the region. What is the reason, according to you?

A.F. School and university education, which is increasingly specialized, often unwittingly leads to a preference for one-sided readings of certain spaces, environments or historical realities. These are single readings that, in some cases, allow for real leaps forward, regarding a particular aspect. However, this is not the case with the Mediterranean and the narratives concerning it, which are the product of a close combination of the historical dimension, the space-related dimension and a number of comparative dynamics. For this reason, the approach to Mediterranean narratives requires a broader and more articulated view that, even while privileging one particular approach, does not neglect the others or a part of them.

S.S. I think that Mediterranean studies have to fight for recognition because they are partly competing with the very successful postcolonial studies. Finally, we must not forget that the fundamental works and ideas of Mediterranean studies – Fernand Braudel's opus magnum and Albert Camus's statements on 'pensée du midi' – are rooted in colonialism. By this I mean the idea that there is something like a Mediterranean cultural identity, a unity that encompasses the Mediterranean. This idea urgently needs to be decolonized: it not only obscures the existing cultural, religious, political, economic and linguistic differences in the Mediterranean region, but also obscures the unequal distribution of power.

Secondly, the traditional, but still extremely influential, idea of a Mediterranean unity has other disadvantages. It is used, again by Camus, but also by many of his modern followers, to distinguish it from Northern Europe (especially Germany and the United Kingdom) and the United States

and to represent an alternative to imperialism, capitalism and certain downsides of modernization. I think that many literary scholars are very skeptical of such identity claims, and rightly so. In our modern, globalized, social media-connected world, attempts to sharply distinguish cultures seem oddly antiquated. And finally, of course, the transnational approach of Mediterranean studies also poses a challenge, because most literary scholars tend to be specialists in the literature of a single country while looking across borders requires specific skills. The relevant training is rarely offered at our universities, so it is not easy to gain good access to Mediterranean studies.

Q. How do you think literature helps in the understanding of a multifaceted Mediterranean culture?

A.F. Literature employs an evocative use of words and varied narrative formulas that manage to bring people closer to space, history and the human being by generating synergies and convergences of different depths and giving rise to suggestions that manage to speak to the individual in a broad and specific way at the same time. Literature fosters a process of approaching different spaces and times on many levels, and this is even more true for a multifaceted and multidimensional reality such as the Mediterranean.

S.S. In general, literary texts are important agents of social communication. They play a major role in the self-reflection of societies, in the shaping of cultures and identities. Texts are essential media of cultural memory, in which communities decide which aspects of the past they want to remember and how these memories are to be evaluated. The study of literature therefore makes it possible to reconstruct the world of imagination and, more generally, the cultural 'knowledge' that is inscribed in it. Of course, this also applies to Mediterranean literature. It stores the experiences, ideas, values and desires of the people who created it and for whom it was written. The more of this literature we capture and the more we understand how this literature is interconnected, the better we will learn to understand Mediterranean cultures. Incidentally, I would prefer not to speak of a Mediterranean culture in the singular, but to use the plural in order to recognize the differences that actually exist. I would also see these Mediterranean cultures as historically changeable and emphasize that they have always been permeable to non-Mediterranean cultures. Therefore, we should always take into account the interactions between the Mediterranean and the rest of the world.

Q. Your book is divided into the three methodologies that you and your colleagues are introducing in the volume. Beside the comparative approach, you consider essential the use of appropriate spatial concepts when reading Mediterranean literature as well as a memory studies approach. Can you expand? Can/should we use one method at a time or more than one? Can you give us an example?

A.F. The three methodological approaches included in the book allow for individual critical paths while fostering fruitful exchanges on the analytical level. For example, in the volume, I address the Mediterranean crime narrative by bringing together two biographically distant authors, Amara Lakhous and Jean-Claude Izzo, who nevertheless have aspects in common: the recognition of crime as an obstacle that hinders the normal flow of life, in a heterotopic space marked by incommunicability and a multi-ethnic state of crisis, reflecting, on a smaller scale, the heterotopia par excellence represented by the Mediterranean. In this way, the essay combines a comparative path with the study of specific spatial components: for example, the urban spaces and the water surface of the Mediterranean are both places of crisis, where communication is disrupted, and spaces that are subjected to the control and exercise of power through continuous striations are incessantly reproduced as hegemonic forms of control.

S.S. I do indeed believe that we should start from suitable concepts of space and theoretically distinguish between them so that we avoid ambiguities in our terms and do not create methodological confusion. As far as concepts of space are concerned, in the introduction to the book, it was first important to distinguish between real space and its literary representation. This is not only to emphasize the difference between literature and reality, but also to show that real space can also become the subject of literary studies. By this we mean that literary production is often locally or regionally rooted, which is why it can be useful to examine the personal relationships between authors, readers, publishers, media and institutions on a local or regional level in order to better understand the emergence and dissemination of certain Mediterranean literatures or schools. Examples of this could include the translators in Toledo in the 12th and 13th centuries, who are exemplary of intercultural exchange in the Mediterranean region. Such centers and group formations are still important in the 20th century and in the present. There are many other circumstances of a political, social, cultural, linguistic or religious nature that have an impact on the production and reception of literature. In this

sense, a historical analysis of the conditions in the Mediterranean region plays a role in literary studies.

But unlike in history – and here I come to the imaginary space of the literary text – real space has no direct power to determine literature. Because literary fictions create their own imagined reality, extra-literary conditions have only a relative explanatory power. As I said earlier, the literary space of a text mixes the ideas of its author with the voices of a collective. The way in which the Mediterranean is presented to us in a literary text tells us a lot about values, cultural practices, political attitudes, fantasies and emotions. For the purposes of Mediterranean literary studies, the origin of the author is of secondary importance at this level of analysis. Mediterranean texts are interesting when the region does not merely appear as an interchangeable backdrop, but is itself an important object of action and reflection. Such texts generate a knowledge of the Mediterranean that reacts to earlier knowledge and that future texts can build on.

In this way, the third space, which we have termed conceptual space, finally emerges: Mediterranean literature forms something like an archive in which Mediterranean knowledge is gathered from a wide variety of sources, which every text draws on and into which every text adds new content. Ultimately, I believe that this conceptual space deserves our special attention because we can learn from it what meanings the Mediterranean has had for different cultures and individuals in different times. Finally, I would like to emphasize once again how important it is to mix and use all spatial concepts and methods. If we want to analyse an individual text, for example, we will look at the real contacts and networks in which the author was involved; we will come across numerous traces of conceptual space in his text and analyse their meaning, as well as the semantization and structure of the fictional space. Ultimately, all levels must be placed in relation to each other.

Q. The Mediterranean area has always been characterized by migratory waves. How does literature not only record these movements but reflect upon this important phenomenon and the cultural changes/reinventions stemmed from it?

A.F. I will use again some examples: on the one hand, the fiction in different languages of Amara Lakhous, in which the sufferings of migrants find space through the depiction of pacified and absolutely unhappy forms of coexistence. It seems to me that, in these terms, the fictional and/or testimonial power of literature can be an added value, that is, it is

a valuable asset that allows for an active immersion, including ethical immersion, in issues of stringent actuality. Takoua Ben Mohamed's Italian graphic novels are also, in my opinion, crucial for their ability to bring distinct narrative and visual forms into dialogue around the theme of migration and transculturality (for example, the case of recognizing aspects in common between distinct cultures as well as the case with *Sotto il velo* from 2016). Think also of the dissonant and heterotopic depiction of migrants in the glossy existence of the protagonists of Luca Guadagnino's psychological drama *A Bigger Splash* (2015).

S.S. The methodological distinction between the three spaces is also very useful to us when evaluating migration. First of all, because migration permanently changes the composition of the real space and thus also the literary scene. Newly immigrated authors bring with them new narrative structures, new linguistic phenomena and new content, they generate attention and initiate discussions. It can be shown, for example, how migrant authors or authors with migrant roots who have immigrated to Italy via the Mediterranean introduce completely new perspectives on Italy's connection to the Mediterranean. In their texts, they remeasure the sea, uncover hidden or veiled power structures and criticize them. I am thinking, for example, of Igiaba Scego, who discovered Bernini's elephant in front of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in Rome and followed this up with an intensive reflection on Italian colonial history in Africa, which was part of the fascist Mediterranean policy. She thus introduces new aspects into Italian cultural memory and changes the way Italians view the Mediterranean. This also changes the archive, our knowledge of the Mediterranean, and gives us a new, critical view of things, which is crucial in order to work towards a better future. Another text I would like to mention as an example is the novel *Leaving Tangier* (Partir) by Tahar ben Jelloun, which follows the migration story of a young man who fails in his adopted home of Barcelona. The reflective level to which you allude in your question is realized here precisely through failure. The hero's death illustrates the asymmetrical power relations between North and South that divide the Mediterranean. It can be read as an urgent appeal for a fairer economic order.

Q. Being Sicilians, we are very interested and happy to see not only the purposeful mention of Lampedusa's masterpiece *Il gattopardo*, in the introduction, and an essay on Terranova's *Addio fantasmi*, but Steffen's essay on Sciascia's *Il Consiglio d'Egitto*. How do they illustrate the challenges

and methods of literary Mediterranean Studies? Are these case studies that could open the way to reading other literary works that thus far have been analyzed with a more traditional and national approach?

A.F. Although my essay is not dedicated to Sicily I feel like answering the question in the affirmative. Think of Gesualdo Bufalino's *Diceria dell'untore* (1981) and the Rocca, where the hospital is not only a place of monastic seclusion but is above all a place of enchantment in which one lives suspended in a dimension outside of space and time, in a kind of condition of exceptionality, within Sicily and, in turn, within the Mediterranean. Such a reading allows for a different framing of space in a multi-layered and culturally dense place like Sicily.

S.S. Sicily is a particularly interesting case within Mediterranean studies. The island has produced an impressive series of important literary masterpieces since the national unification of Italy. For a long time, these texts revolved around the trauma of the unification process and were very much focused on a supposedly fixed, unchanging Sicilianity. The manifold Mediterranean and non-Mediterranean roots of Sicilian culture, on the other hand, were either ignored or rather negatively evaluated; in any case, they were marginalized. This is the reason why such texts pose a big challenge for a Mediterranean approach: they push aside the Mediterranean character of Sicily, focusing on the pain suffered, so that an interpretation that addresses the repressed aspects can initially seem alienating. Consequently, in these cases, Mediterranean studies bring up what has been excluded or marginalized, quite analogous to the approach of Serena Todesco, who in her essay on Nadia Terranova mixes gender studies and Mediterranean studies to make the repressed female voices of Sicily speak. Such an approach via the marginalized may be rather uncomfortable for traditional literary studies, but it has numerous advantages: after all, it opens up access to important aspects of Sicily's past, to the recognition of what has been split off from official culture and thus also to a completion and enrichment of Sicily's identity. There are certainly other texts besides the ones you mentioned that would also allow access via the margins, and I think that some of Pirandello's texts in particular lend themselves to this. I am thinking, for example, of *I vecchi e i giovani*, where the island's intercultural past is mentioned marginally a few times, but then immediately pushed aside again. However, a complete rethink is taking place in more recent texts from Sicily. This allows today's authors to address the island's connections to the Mediterranean and global societies, leaving the old myth of Sicily behind.

Q. Where do we go from here? What are your plans (or your plans for colleagues in the field) after *Sea of Literatures*?

A.F. The next volume planned in the open-access series I direct at De Gruyter publisher dealing with Mediterranean itineraries (AAIM <https://www.degruyter.com/document/isbn/9783111073644/html?lang=en>) is entitled *Fragili idilli. Per un'ecocritica del Mediterraneo*. Steffen Schneider and I are the editors. The volume aims to explore the image of the Mediterranean that has started to waver in recent decades following the drastic effects of climate change. This leads to conflicts between the traditional epistemology of the Mediterranean and new topics related to the fragile ecosystems of the region. The essays gathered in this volume discuss these topics and conflicts, bringing into dialog aspects of current ecocriticism with the most recent trends in Mediterranean Studies.

S.S. We continued to work on the Mediterranean after the volume was completed. The next book to be published will deal with ecopoetic readings of Mediterranean texts – this time starting with ancient texts – and will also include films and works of art. It is expected to appear next year in the same series as *Sea of Literatures* and is edited by Angela Fabris and myself. In the meantime, I have also succeeded in firmly establishing Mediterranean Studies at my faculty in Graz by launching an interdisciplinary research program together with some colleagues. It is called *Trans-Mediterranean Entanglements. Movements and Relations in the Mediterranean and beyond* and its special focus is on the global connections of the Mediterranean region in literature, but also in all other cultural areas.

Q. Please add anything that you would like to say about your volume, your research, or the field of Mediterranean Studies.

A.F. My research in the field of Mediterranean studies is actively continuing in the wake of this volume and the next one, which I hope and believe will be a stimulus to numerous scholars. When I think that the 2024 annual conference of the Association of Italianists held in Palermo chose as its title “Mediterranean Routes. Migrations and Hybridizations in Italian Literature” I think it is a booming field of study. Because we all, if we think about the variety of cultures, religions, travel, displacement, multiple perceptions between shores, water and sky, are children of the Mediterranean.

S.S. As far as my own research is concerned, I will be pursuing two projects in the near future: a book on literary Mediterranean port cities and a series of articles on constructions of the Mediterranean in Italian geophilosophy. Incidentally, I believe that Mediterranean studies will remain alive for a long time to come, because the Mediterranean region is also in a state of permanent upheaval and is constantly facing new challenges.