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Elusive Mediterraneans. Reading Beyond Nation

Abstract: Malta supposedly lies at the “heart” of the Mediterranean and Mediterraneanists expect its literature to be something like the very “essence” of the Mediterranean region, an expression, as it were, of its “rich culture and identity,” of Mediterranean connectivity. And yet, Maltese literature in Maltese has, all in all, contributed little to the Mediterranean imaginary. It has bought into European stereotypes of Mediterranean spirit, culture, identity, and unity deconstructed by Michael Herzfeld and others, with their roots in colonial perspectives of Mediterranean backwardness, unruliness, and seductiveness. The Maltese pre-Independence Romantics and the post-Independence Modernists were busy constructing, and recalibrating, the national imaginary, while the postnational, cosmopolitan generation that emerged in the 1990s, looked beyond the national and the regional. But there are notable exceptions, like poet Antoine Cassar, with his long poems *Passaport* and *Mappa tal-Mediterran*, and Walid Nabhan, the Amman born Palestinian Maltese writer with his prize-winning autobiographical novel, *L-Eżodu taċ-ČIkonji* (The Exodus of the Storks), who acknowledge the discursive nature of representations of the Mediterranean and engage with them critically. This paper explores Maltese literature’s engagement with the Mediterranean imaginary and asks whether this evaluation has anything significant to contribute towards a theory of Mediterranean literature.

Recent studies of the Mediterranean have given prominence to its fluid nature, a sea, surrounded by an ensemble of hinterlands, that is “polymorphic,” “elusive,” and “traversed by multiple perceptions” (Albera et al. 2016, 9). Ever since the invention of the Mediterranean as a region in the nineteenth century by Northern Europeans (Horden and Purcell 2000, 532–533; Albera et al. 2016, 11), literature has attempted to explore this diversity, to come to terms with the paradox of a unity that is marked by changeability. But it has also attempted to smooth over the differences, to search for a core that somehow sums up the Mediterranean experience of constant human and cultural interaction marked by both contact and conflict. A great deal of literature has dealt with the Mediterranean, constructing an imaginary in which fact and fiction are “inextricably entangled” (Albera et al. 2016, 10), both shaping and being shaped by what common people say about the Mediterranean in their everyday lives.

In the concluding paragraph of his *Human History of the Mediterranean Sea*, a book that offers an alternative to the interpretation of history determined by geography, canonized by Fernand Braudel in the mid-twentieth century, David Abulafia identifies “the unity” of Mediterranean history “in its swirling changeability” (2012, 648). He mentions that he is fully aware of the “paradox” in this statement because very often, in our idea of history, “unity” and “changeability” are seen as incompatible. But Abulafia frames this claim within his interpretation of a Mediterranean that “became probably the most vigorous place of interaction between different societies on the face of this planet.” The “opposing shores” of this sea “are close enough to permit easy contact, but far enough apart to allow societies to develop distinctively under the influence of their hinterland as well as of one another.” One of the implications of his important qualification that “those who cross its surface are often hardly typical of the societies from which they come” (2012, 648) is that our reading of the Mediterranean should resist the temptation to essentialize.

1 Outside Mediterranean Literature

Despite its geographical location at the “heart of the Mediterranean,” and the way it marries its fervent Catholicism with its language of Arabic origin in which the God of the Bible is “*Alla*,” there is not much to suggest that Maltese literature has participated convincingly in the project of defining a regional identity or even a “Mediterranean literature.” The study of literature in Malta, while taking into account the direct and indirect influences of other literatures, is almost exclusively confined to national literatures, and there are no “Mediterranean literary studies” that challenge the borders. Sharon Kinoshita writes about “the tenacity in literary studies of the nation—with its ideal, if rarely realized, presumptions about the homogeneity of language, ‘ethnicity,’ and religion,” and she proposes “Mediterranean literature” as “a project of reterritorialization” (2014, 314). There is an important example of this non-national or postnational approach in Antoine Cassar’s long poem *Passaport* (2009), a passionate plea against borders across the globe, including the Mediterranean. It is a rallying cry for freedom and human dignity and a manifesto that redefines physical space. *Passaport* exemplifies the ideas of Olivia C. Harrison who chooses to look at “the Mediterranean from a transcolonial perspective, moving from a critique of the term’s colonial genealogy to a reconceptualization of the Mediterranean as a site of (neo)colonial subjection and anti-(neo)colonial resistance” (2018, 202). Cassar’s stance implies the kind of “trans-regional South-South alliances” that she writes about in her conceptualization of a radical Mediterranean literature.

Oliver Friggieri (1947–2020), for decades the doyen of Maltese literary studies and a leading writer himself, is one of a few Maltese writers and intellectuals who have reflected on Malta's place in Mediterranean culture. Friggieri's Mediterranean is, in effect, a Malta writ large, an extension of Italy: European, Latin and Catholic (Grima 2018, 363). Braudel too was "in one sense a descendant of those Enlightenment and romantic Mediterraneanists for whom 'the Mediterranean' was really a metonym for 'Italy'" (Horden 2–3). Friggieri sees Maltese writing as a local variation on Italian literature (Grima 2018, 362–364), and only refers to the non-European Mediterranean when he writes about the origins of the Maltese language. The category of the nation dominates his conceptualization of culture and literature, and this is reflected in his definition of Mediterranean identity as a "deeper nationality," "*nazzjonalità aktar profonda*" (Grima 2018, 378), a kind of "*patrija ewlenija*" or primeval motherland (Friggieri 1995, 97; Grima 2018, 385). Maltese literature in Maltese was born in the mid-nineteenth century under the direct influence of the Italian Risorgimento; now, almost two centuries later, through the literature of Antoine Cassar and other postnationalist and cosmopolitan writers, it is starting to wean itself away from the call of the nation.

Very often Maltese literature refers to the Mediterranean as a physical entity and does not participate in discourse that constructs it as a cultural space. Ġorg Scicluna's Romantic historical novel *Il-Qassis Li Rebaħ* [The Victorious Priest] (1970), which narrates the story of the short-lived French occupation of the smaller island of Gozo in 1798 by Napoleon's fleet on its way to Egypt, mentions the Mediterranean five times: there are references to crossing "the Mediterranean" (Scicluna 2021, 118), and to the British fleet cruising or wandering in the Mediterranean, "*tiġġerra fil-Mediterran*" (Scicluna 2021, 330). The sea is a delimited expanse of water that can be crossed and explored. In Maltese, as in other languages, "*il-Mediterran*," which refers both to the region and to the sea, and the more specific "*il-Bahar Mediterran*" or "Mediterranean Sea" are established categories in popular discourse. Readers have no difficulty in recognizing these concepts, but they will have different views about the frontiers of the sea and the region, and the baggage that comes with them: Mediterranean literature thrives on this indefiniteness and elusiveness.

Towards the end of the novel, the heterodiegetic narrator speaks glowingly of Admiral Horatio Nelson and the way he had curbed French power in "the Mediterranean Sea" and cleared "the Mediterranean, the main artery," of all French ships (Scicluna 2021, 344). The artery metaphor is placed between commas and defines the novel's Mediterranean. This is a conventional body metaphor for geographical entities, and it works well because while arteries are channels of transportation, they are also parts of a body, the entire world, and can only function within it. The context is that of late eighteenth-century European politics in

which the two powers, Britain and France, were vying for supremacy in the Mediterranean region and beyond. David Abulafia uses the “artery” metaphor once in *The Great Sea* when he discusses what he calls “The Fifth Mediterranean, 1830–2010.” His book presents the history of the Mediterranean “as a series of phases in which the sea was, to a greater or lesser degree, integrated into a single economic and even political area” (Abulafia 2012, 573). In the nineteenth century, the falling productivity of the lands surrounding the Mediterranean and developments in other regions of the world changed “the whole character of this process,” and “the Mediterranean became the great artery through which goods, warships, migrants and other travelers reached the Indian Ocean from the Atlantic.” Up until the nineteenth century, the role of this artery was more intimately tied to the lands bordering the sea, creating an integrated whole. In the novel, Portugal is one of the ‘strongest’ or ‘largest’ (“*kbar*”) countries of “the Mediterranean” that had come together to rid “this sea” of the French (Scicluna 2021, 289). This comment suggests that the “Mediterranean” is being conceived of as both a distinct group of lands bordering the sea (even Braudel considered Portugal to be part of the Mediterranean, 1986, 228, see map on p. 232) and a confined body of water.

2 Postnationalism and a Polymorphic Mediterranean

When the Mediterranean was sidelined by developments in other regions of the world, according to Matvejević it retained its primacy only in the literature of the sea (1991, 106). Nevertheless, Maltese literature has had far less to say about the sea and seafaring than one would expect. One of the more notable exceptions that confirms the rule is an epic poem, *Il-Ġifen Tork* (The Turkish Galleon) written in 1842 and published ten years later (Aquilina 1975, “L-Awtur”) when literature in Maltese was still in its infancy. In it Ġan Anton Vassallo, the first major writer of literary Maltese who went on to become a professor of Italian at the University of Malta, celebrates the story of a mutiny in 1760 by Christian slaves on board an Ottoman galleon, *La Corona del Gran Signor*, or the *Corona Ottomana*, in what is today the harbor of Kos in Greece (Gauci 2018). Most of the mutineers were Maltese corsairs who were captured by the Ottomans when one of their raids on Crete went seriously wrong. The Ottomans had tied them to the oars of their powerful galleon to display them like trophies, as was the custom at the time, all around the Mediterranean (Gauci 2018).

There is some indication of the participation of Maltese seafarers in activity in the Mediterranean Sea in other Romantic texts, like Ĝużè Galea’s adventure novel

Raġel bil-Ġhaqal [A Prudent Man] (1948) and Gużè Bonnici's rather unusual *Lejn ix-Xemx* [Towards the Sun] (1940). If the mark of a Mediterranean novel is its engagement with the sea and the region, with the protagonist's eyes firmly on the sea, then Bonnici's novel set in 1701 fits the bill more than any other Romantic work of fiction in Maltese. The protagonist, Duminku Calleja, captain of a corsair ship, "sailed all the seas and visited half the world" (Bonnici 1974, 15), but he was never more at home than out at sea in the Mediterranean. At one point, the captain opens "a large map of the Mediterranean" in his cabin, spreads it out on the table in front of him, and after consulting it, folds it carefully and puts it back in its place (Bonnici 1974, 92). Like Diamantis in Izzo's *Les marins perdus*, Duminku is clearly very fond of his map, and his bond with the Mediterranean is expressed in the delicate way he handles it. His only home is literally his galleon, the *Nostra Señora*; his family is the crew that hail from different parts of the basin; his neighborhood is the Mediterranean Sea; and he is at home at sea even in the midst of a violent storm (Grima 2017a, 62–65).

Some more recent short stories in Maltese, like Walid Nabhan's "L-Art Mhux Imwieġħda" [The Unpromised Land] (2012) and Clare Azzopardi's "No Adjective Describe Story" (2006), narrate the precarious and often tragic voyage of migrants across the Mediterranean Sea: "*we leave Surt/to Italy/September/very calm/first night calm sea/then big wave/very big/many rain and wave/two day only wave and rain and wind/many wind/the eyes see people in sea/my eyes see this/shout/people cry/difficult explain sea/ [...]*" (2015, 30). Azzopardi presents two languages and many voices, but what is most striking is how broken and inadequate they are.

The only Maltese writer who has written about the sea from within, the Modernist bilingual poet Daniel Massa, titled his collection of poems in Maltese *Xibka-tuliss* (1989). It is a combination of the words "xibka" (net), "ta" (of), and "Ulisse," the quintessential Mediterranean hero. The title can be translated as "Ulysses' net" and suggests many of the images, themes and myths that feature prominently in his work. In his best-known lyric, "Delimara," the persona abandons land, the nation-mother, and slides into the sea-as-womb or "matrix," his ideal republic, to seek the freedom of the seas that wash away the marks of colonization and link up once again with the common womb of the Mediterranean Sea (Grima 2016). "Poetry Mediterranean," the subtitle of his collection of poems in English *Barefoot in the Saltpans* (2015), which features versions of many of his poems written in Maltese, suggests the identification of two nouns with each other, "Poetry" and "Mediterranean," rather than a noun followed by an adjective. The strangeness of the formula gives a new lease of life to these much used and abused concepts and immediately points to Massa's alternative "republic" of the Mediterranean Sea and coast. Most Maltese literature stands in awe of the sea and observes it from a distance, but Massa's persona comes to life in the sea. Jim Crace describes these poems as

“wind-blown, salty, sun-kissed and unambiguously Mediterranean” (2015, viii). Massa’s sensual, sensory and richly metaphorical and mythological sea poetry calls the Mediterranean Sea home.

Antoine Cassar’s long poem in Maltese *Mappa tal-Mediterran* (2013) [Map of the Mediterranean] is a provocation of sorts, a conscious manipulation of a Mediterranean that “has become an accumulation of commonplaces” (Albera et al. 2016, 9). It is a literary attempt to reshape and ultimately to rethink it. On every one of its pages, the 16-page booklet presents black and white images of parts of the map from different angles. They are visual interpretations that interpret the text and reinterpret not only our visual understanding of the region but also our complex conceptual and emotive relationship with it. Not only do some of the names given to the Mediterranean Sea become themselves physical bodies “rinsed and washed,” but also speech itself, with its “deepest crevice” (Cassar 2013, 3): “names upon names rinsed and washed / down to the deepest crevice of speech.” The poem thus constitutes discourse about the Mediterranean as object: like the sea and the lands that surround it, discourse acquires a physicality that allows the poem to explore and experience it. “Water trickles” between the names, and “the foam slides down the cuneiform wedges” and “circles the bulging consonants.” Cassar toys with the shape of the Mediterranean, constantly changing his angle of vision and reinventing it in ways that appear refreshing when one places it against the background of a literature that, as in Dun Frans Camilleri’s poem “Lill-Baħar Meditħarran” [To the Mediterranean Sea] (1952), often offers European and colonial historical perspectives.

The polymorphic approach in Cassar’s poem brings to mind Michael Herzfeld’s view of Mediterranean discourse: like facts themselves, “culture-area categories” such as the Mediterranean “have an existence by virtue of being articulated” (Herzfeld 2005, 47). The Herzfeldian post-modern approach acknowledges the centrality of discourse, and irony (Herzfeld 2014, 132), in the construction of the Mediterranean imaginary and implies that it is no less real than the facts about historical events or physical geography. Cassar disturbs our standard conceptualization and visual interpretation of the map of the Mediterranean and imposes his own imagination: seeing it as “The Middle Sea” depends on your angle of vision, “skont imnejn thares” (Cassar 2013, 4). Subjectivity is key and Cassar imposes his vision. There are figures from classical mythology, like Pelops, but also a grandmother, a farmeress who is possibly not too different from his own grandmother (about whom he wrote glowingly elsewhere in his poetry). It is a Mediterranean of constant movement and exchange: not a melting-pot but a vast array of peoples, cultures and places closely connected to each other ever since “with the force of half an ocean / the doors of the sea burst open” and flooded everything it found on its way “from Gibraltar / to Gaza” (Cassar 2013, 1). In *Mappa tal-Mediterran*,

as in previous works like his bilingual and multilingual poetry, Cassar distances himself from the kind of univocal Maltese literature that ignores its regional and global connections.

The physicality of Cassar's experience of the Mediterranean is expressed by the imaginative transformation of landmass into animal or human figures and by the alliterations, pauses, anaphoras, and other rhetorical devices that point to the physical experience of poetry. "For poetry is above all a physical experience. It is the stuff of sound and rhythm and speech, of muscle and voice box and vision and breath and pulse. It affects us physically when we speak it and listen to it. Without that physical basis there is no poetry" (Wormser and Cappella 2000, xviii). In this poem, sound, rhythm and breath communicate Cassar's experience of the Mediterranean, as in the first stanza: "*għal-lest, / mat-tielet, tektika, skiet*" ("at the ready; / with the third wave, a gentle knock, silence," alliterations lost in translation). Later on, in "*Minn Tangier, minn Tuneż, minn Tripli*" ["From Tangiers, from Tunis, from Tripoli"], the three T's and the many anaphoras in this line and in the lines before and after it connect us with these vibrant cities stretching across the North African coast and connecting them, through "vessels of all sizes, all shapes, / in all directions, with all sorts" (Cassar 2013, 9), with each other and with the rest of the Mediterranean.

3 Essentialism and Creative Engagement

At the human level, writes Abulafia, the "ethnic, linguistic, religious and political diversity" of the Mediterranean "was constantly subject to external influences from across the sea, and therefore in a constant state of flux" (2012, 641), but this diversity is not reflected in a Maltese literature that in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century was absorbed by a narrative shaped by Catholicism and Romantic Italian literature. It does not even tell the stories of the tens of thousands of Maltese economic migrants who were forced to go to North Africa and the Levant to try to earn a decent living: that narrative of emigration did not fit into the nationalist agenda of the writers who came largely from the privileged professional classes and the clergy, and represented a small minority of the population.

Maltese Romanticism portrayed the rural village, not the cosmopolitan port city, as the locus of Maltese national identity, and it was left to a handful of Realist, left-leaning writers of the early twentieth century to tell the everyday stories of poor and disenfranchised common people in both the rural villages and the urban areas. The Romantic novelists established the narrative of a strict moral code shaped by conservative Catholicism and a patriarchal ideology, and foreigners

or even returned Maltese migrants like Kelin Miksat in ġużże Ellul Mercer's iconic novel *Leli ta' Haż-Żgħir (Shadows of the Truth)* (1938) were seen as a threat to society and its order. This antipathy forces the enlightened but defeated atheist Kelin Miksat to return to French Algeria "to spend his last days with his distant relatives in Algiers" (Ellul Mercer 2003, 170). The narrator explains that in the 1920s, when Malta was granted self-rule by the British colonial government, "Some young people who returned to Malta from overseas incited the people against the clergy since they argued that they were the cause" of the "great social and political upheavals" that the country was going through (Ellul Mercer 2003, 211); but the parish priest warned the villagers "to open their eyes and to ignore those people who wanted to destroy their Religion" (Ellul Mercer 2003, 212). It is no coincidence that the fictitious name of the village, Haż-Żgħir, which roughly means "The Small Village," functions as a synecdoche (and metaphor) of the provincialism the novel grapples with. The novel ends with the defeat of the protagonist's critical mind and the victory of the beliefs, values and norms of the Catholic Church and the rabid capitalism of the Ta' Buċagħak brothers. Ellul Mercer was one of the few early twentieth-century novelists to at least acknowledge the suffering and structural injustice caused by poverty and widespread illiteracy and to refer to Maltese emigration and return migration from other Mediterranean lands. However, the novel is ultimately about the protagonist's spiritual and mental travails; although it engages with some of the classics of European literature and thought, it is essentially inward-looking, focusing on the Maltese in Malta. However, there is also much to explore in its references to the Mediterranean and beyond.

Works like *Leli ta' Haż-Żgħir* can be read from the perspective of a region in which "the varied shores, hinterlands and islands of the Mediterranean were linked by powerful cultural, economic and social bonds, even in the face of (and, to modern scholars, often invisible behind) those confessional and political divisions that formally separated them" (Catlos and Kinoshita 2017, viii). Despite the literary representation of Malta as an uncompromising bulwark of Christianity against Islam, history indicates that Malta was always active in the region. It was mostly history that conspired to create a Maltese language that bears testimony to the integration, over the centuries, of elements from different shores of the Mediterranean. With its origins in the repopulation of the Maltese Islands by the Arabs who came from Sicily in the mid-eleventh century, Maltese is not so much a "carrefour" (Vanhove 1994, 168) or crossroads where the Arabic of North Africa briefly meets Sicilian, Italian and English, but rather a Mediterranean "linguistic melting-pot" (Vanhove 2007, 1). In *The Bilingual Writer (Mediterranean-Maltese and English) as Janus*, Francis Ebejer sees the language as mirroring the culture when he talks about the "symbiosis" achieved in Maltese culture "out of a mixture of Latin, Mediterranean semitic and Anglo-Saxon languages and cultures" (1989, 11). Despite the

“distinct similarities between different Mediterranean constituencies,” Esposito focuses on the dynamism allowed by difference and plurality: “Seen through the medium of literature – and specifically of texts by writers who are at the very least bilingual and/or bicultural – homogeneity is impossible from the outset” (Esposito 2014, 163–164). The writing subjects themselves are “in perpetual translation and in-between languages and places.” At the same time, “there can be no ‘purity’ of idioms, of positionings, of values, transmitted through the works of writers who privilege alternate histories, transculturalism, the baroque and unfixed notions of gender”: language is always pregnant with multiple meanings and associations.

In Maltese the different linguistic elements integrate with one another to create a language with its own complex morphology that is based on the triconsonantal structure of Arabic and the stem formation of the Romance languages and English, and on the integration of the two systems. A word in Maltese of non-Arabic origin can create its own broken plural which is typical of Arabic, as in the case of “*skola*” (from Italian “*scuola*,” school), pl. “*skejjel*;” sometimes a word can have two plurals, with an Arabic and non-Arabic morphology, as in the case of “*bandiera*” (from the Italian “*bandiera*,” flag), pl. “*bandieri*,” or “*bnadar*.” And verbs of English origin, like the verb “*save*” in computer language, are conjugated in ways typical of Arabic and its dialects, “*jien nissejvja*” [I save]. Maltese is a language of the Mediterranean because it was made and continues to be shaped by the languages of and in the region. Maltese is not “the” language of the Mediterranean, which is characterized by a huge linguistic diversity full of similarities and connections; but having grown up in the region, Maltese has many resources to narrate that diversity. It is one of many varieties formed by predictable and unpredictable waves and events of history and marked by the various geographies of the region. In contrast to the Maltese language, the story of Maltese literature differs in some very important ways.

Literature written in a language that reflects the dynamic of relations and hybridity of the Mediterranean does not necessarily engage with the region, with its histories, narratives and mythologies. Predrag Matvejević has argued that “being Mediterranean is a decision you make; it is not something you inherit, but something you achieve; it is not an advantage, but a choice. Anyone could become Mediterranean; they say that there are increasingly less true Mediterraneans in the Mediterranean Sea” (1991, 106). It is not only a question of history and tradition, writes Matvejević in the aphoristic, lapidary style that distinguishes his *Mediterski brevijar* (1987), or about the past or geography, or memory or faith: the Mediterranean is also “destiny” (1991, 106). Not many Maltese writers and critics have made the Mediterranean their destiny.

I would argue that engaging with the sea and the region is a prerequisite for Mediterranean literature. The decision to talk about the Mediterranean may ap-

pear to compromise irremediably one's position because it implies "a framework that posits the space as homogeneous and unified" (Esposito 2014, 163). Whenever we talk about somebody's Mediterranean character and behavior, or about "Mediterranean music" and "Mediterranean diet," which Herzfeld describes memorably as "a fantasy of postmodern capitalism if ever there was one" (2014, 123), we run the risk of essentializing and ultimately believing the narrative ourselves. The point is to allow "the Mediterranean" to function, as Herzfeld (2005, 59) and Kinoshita (2017, 33) have suggested, as a "heuristic device," thus "enabling continual inquiry into ways of thinking of the present" (Esposito 2014, xiv). The question we need to ask is not whether the concept of the Mediterranean is ideologically innocent ("virginité idéologique") but rather how it can be heuristically useful (Albera et al. 2016, 14). Many scholars in Mediterranean literary studies are based in the so-called West and most of the literary texts they analyze were written in or translated into European languages. This might prompt scholars not based in the West to suspect that the Mediterranean is a subject (or perhaps a fetish) for Western scholars. If it is going to be a meaningful heuristic device, the project of reading and writing Mediterranean literature has to show that it is not another, albeit well-intentioned, *mission civilisatrice*.

Albera, Crivello and Tozy argue that despite its limits, "the Mediterranean comparative framework" retains great relevance (2016, 14). Its liquid dimension, so to speak, always constitutes an epistemological opportunity to grasp wider regional dynamics and escape the logic of the state which has always been identified with the land. This is what Malika Mokeddem does when she places her protagonist Nora adrift on a sailing boat in the Mediterranean Sea. This regional paradigm allows us to avoid the pitfalls of Eurocentrism and Arabocentrism and to build analytical bridges that surmount the barriers erected by religion and civilization, to capture the movements and influences that would remain invisible if we are made to adopt other angles (Albera et al. 2016, 14). Herzfeld argues that the idea of a "Mediterranean culture area, recast as a heuristic device," allows for "a sophisticated rethinking of globalization from the perspective of the regionalisms invoked by those who see various levels of local cultural unity as the only available source of resistance to domination by a few powers and cultures" (2005, 59). Esposito is interested in the "instances and differential moments" in which Mediterranean writers recreate and invent "their Mediterranean(s) often at odds with dominant historical and political discourses" (2014, xiv). This is a Mediterranean literature that engages creatively with individual features and events, but does not ignore the stereotypes that plague the Mediterranean.

4 Other Mediterraneans

Maltese literature and literary studies have not given much attention to the non-European and non-Christian cultures of the region. In what he describes as an “updated” Braudelian position paper on “the Mediterranean question” that introduces a collection of essays aptly entitled *L’alternativa mediterranea* (Zolo 2007, 19), a title which refers to an alternative position that aims to have both regional and global implications, Danilo Zolo writes about the “*‘pluriverso’ culturale mediterraneo*” (2007, 18), a “unity” of many universes, and then immediately goes on to talk about “the Arab-Islamic civilization of the Maghreb and Mashreq.” Works like the modern historical prose of Alfred Sant (b. 1948) and the prize-winning autobiographical novel *L-Eżodu taċ-Ċikonji* (2013) (*Exodus of the Storks*) by the Maltese poet and novelist of Palestinian-Jordanian origin Walid Nabhan (b. 1966), offer opportunities for Maltese literature and literary studies to break out of the stranglehold of its eurocentrism (Grima 2008a, 74).

The mass emigration of the Maltese to North Africa and the Levant in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries put the Maltese in contact with other peoples on other shores of their sea, yet Maltese literature has written precious little about a century and a half of migration. Concetta Brincat, the first known female author of literature in Maltese, who spent her childhood in Constantine, Algeria, between 1875 and 1885, wrote two unpublished novels, one about the French Revolution and another set in the time of the emperor Nero, but she did not deal with her experience of migration, even though her two brothers remained in Algeria. Most Maltese writers who stayed in Malta would have had family members or friends who emigrated, yet they never saw this as an important theme for them to write about.

The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 made Egypt the gateway to the East and heralded a new era in the history of the Mediterranean, Abulafia’s “Fifth Mediterranean that became a passage-way to the Indian Ocean” (2012, xvii) and René Albrecht-Carrié’s “capital highway of trade and strategy which cannot be isolated from the rest of the world” (1948, 613). There is no denying that a passageway, artery or highway is also a place in itself, but like a port one visits on one’s way to another destination, it is only a stop along the way. Abulafia’s narrative of the sea and the region, “a history of conflict as well as contact” (2012, 642), like Dun Frans Camilleri’s poem “Lill-Baħar Meditarran,” is one solidly rooted in historical events rather than in some elusive core identity molded by physical geography and climate.

A Maltese novelist who lived for 17 years in Alexandria between 1919 and 1946, and whose work would benefit from a reading with a Mediterranean and not sole-

ly national perspective, is Ivo Muscat Azzopardi (1893–1965). He was very active in the community and wrote two of his three detective novels there. Abulafia writes at length about Alexandria and the mixed identity it possessed from the very start. Some of the port cities of the Mediterranean like Alexandria “acted as vectors for the transmission of ideas,” and they only lost this identity in the second half of the twentieth century, when “rising nationalism destroyed the cosmopolitan communities of the Mediterranean” (Abulafia 2012, 643). Ivo Muscat Azzopardi’s protagonist is the Maltese detective Bendu Muskat who was born in Alexandria and whose stories can be read against the background of Abulafia’s portrayal of a city that over two millennia was more of the Mediterranean than of Egypt; “for much of that period it was the greatest city in the Mediterranean” (2012, 149–150). Another Maltese immigrant in Alexandria, between 1913 and 1921, was the Maltese novelist Juann Mamo, who offers a very bleak view of the Mediterranean and what he sees as its chronic backwardness in his genre-breaking and irreverent novel *Ulied in-Nanna Venut fl-Amerka* (1930–1931) (*Nanna Venut’s Children in America*) (see Grima and Callus 2017, 393). Mamo’s intrusive heterodiegetic narrator tells the story of a group of poor and uneducated Maltese villagers who emigrate to New York in the hope of making a fortune and returning to their villages to flaunt their new-found wealth. He may have been inspired by the story of his brother Giuseppe Maria Mamo, who emigrated to the US in the 1920s. The failure of the emigrants in the novel to embrace the modernity of the advanced metropolis condemns them to return to the “chaos,” backwardness, ignorance, superstition, and fanaticism that is the Mediterranean, to meet the fate that the novel has reserved for them (Grima 2008b, 196).

Students of Maltese Mediterranean literature that look beyond works written in Maltese might want to consider the novels and poetry of the self-proclaimed “Franco-Maltese” writer Laurent Ropa (1891–1967). Born in Gozo and brought up in colonial Algeria, he was strongly influenced in the 1930s by the literary and cultural movement of the École d’Alger. In his essays, Ropa saw the roots of Maltese culture firmly in Mediterranean humanism rather than in some soulless “*latinité*,” which Gabriel Audisio, Albert Camus and the other writers of the École d’Alger considered a threat to the marriage of East and West in the region. Mediterranean humanism is richer and vaster than the Latin culture that the French colonialists used to justify their hold over Algeria and other territories (Ropa 1938b, 3). Ropa romantically believes that “The soul of the Maltese, like their language, like their race, is the most complete synthesis of this humanism: this is what they must remain faithful to; this is what they come back to by reclaiming themselves, by giving themselves a literature” (Ropa 1938b, 3). In another article published in Tunisia in the Maltese weekly *Melita*, Ropa notes that the goals of like-minded Mediterranean humanists were “the union of the Greco-Latin, Christian, Jewish

and Islamic elites" and then "*la réconciliation des peuples*" (1938a, 1), reconciliation between all peoples.

The Mediterranean imaginary has roots in what Herzfeld has called "Mediterraneanism," a variation on Edward Said's "Orientalism" (2005, 48), and in European delusions of grandeur and superiority; but it's also an imaginary that some writers have sought to consciously reappropriate by problematizing and reconstructing it (Grima 2017b, 54). Novels like Malika Mokeddem's *N'zid* (2001), Massimo Carlotto's *Cristiani di Allah* [Christians of Allah] (2008) and Jean Claude Izzo's *Les marins perdus (The Lost Sailors)* (1997) can be read as works of Mediterranean literature, as can poems like "Les Mères et la Méditerranée" (2015) ("The Mothers and the Mediterranean") by Vénus Khoury-Ghata, and "Mediterraneo" (1925) by Eugenio Montale, to mention but a few. This attempt at reappropriation is evident not only in the construction of Nora, the protagonist of *N'zid*, as a female Ulysses, but also, and more explicitly, in Izzo's delineation of the "Mediterranean noir," which does not try to hide the fact that it is an invention. This genre is based on what Massimo Carlotto calls "a political intuition;" it recounts "great transformations," denounces organized crime and corrupt power structures, and proposes "the culture of solidarity as an alternative" (2013). It is first and foremost a narrative project but also a political one.

In an interesting example of a Mediterranean reading of national fiction, Mohamed-Salah Omri discusses the representation of the Mediterranean in five twentieth-century North African historical novels set in the early modern period, three written in Arabic, by al-Bashir Khurrayyif and Ahmed al-Tawfiq, and two in French, by Cukri Khodja and Abdelaziz Ferrah (Omri 2010, 280). These Tunisian, Algerian and Moroccan novels tell stories of "intensive contact, complex intermingling and multi-layered conflict within the Mediterranean" but also "engage historiography directly, attempting to intervene in the way the period is remembered." Omri argues that these novels reclaim the Mediterranean as a component of the "national myth-creation processes" in colonial and postcolonial North Africa that they are part of (2010, 296).

In everyday life, the Mediterranean can offer us its cheap images and narratives, but through its literature, it can be a constant act of creation that speaks to diversity and connectivities; it has the potential to construct and reconstruct the people and environment of the Mediterranean and beyond, without being restricted by political borders, religious beliefs, individual languages, national literatures, and even literary genres and traditions. Mediterranean literature need not be merely thematic, a literature about this or that; it has the potential to engage with similar 'texts,' like the experimental film *Méditerranée* (1963) by Jean-Daniel Pollet and the documentary *Notre mer à tous* [Our sea for all] (2014) by Yann Arthus-Bertrand and Michael Pitiot, but also with elements of popular culture, like

oral traditions, advertisements and songs, and constructs (or fads) like Mediterranean music. As an element of popular culture itself, the Mediterranean allows Mediterraneanist literature to engage with the popular narratives of the twenty-first century. Thinking Mediterranean when we read certain literary texts “expands the limits of our textual world and provides us with a repertoire of different questions” which allow us to get “closer to the mentalities of the cultures and agents that produced the texts we read” (Kinoshita 2017, 46); it also allows us to read in an interdisciplinary way, because “Mediterranean literature” is not simply literature written in the Mediterranean.

5 Conclusion: Thinking Mediterranean Maltese Literature

In this paper I have argued that Mediterranean literature engages with the Mediterranean Sea and the lands it connects, with its complex network of shared routes and spaces, and with its histories and cultures. Mediterranean literature is influenced by the Mediterranean imaginary, but it has also an important role in shaping it. I am tempted to replace “Mediterranean” with “Mediterraneans”: it would reflect better the different Mediterraneans at any one time, or in different places. Abulafia would argue that the Alexandria that emerged from the nationalist wave of the mid-twentieth century, when thousands of “foreigners,” including many Maltese, had to abandon the city, is significantly less “Mediterranean” than it was for most of its history. The plural would suit the argument about how different Mediterraneans were shaped over time and in different places by quite specific “acts of history” rather than by predetermined conditions. Abulafia identifies five Mediterraneans. But the case for sticking with the singular is very strong: it is what allows us to continue to deconstruct and reconstruct the Mediterranean; it is what makes this category an heuristic device, a shared discursive space of sorts. This is also why it might be counterproductive to abandon the concept because of its roots in Mediterraneanism and European colonialism, and because it continues to “thrive” in these stagnant, sometimes toxic waters of twenty-first century discourse. Despite its many skeletons, the Mediterranean continues to give us a language with which to speak to one another. This is a Mediterranean, or Mediterraneans, constantly forged by new ethnographies and histories, by new angles of vision and literary experiences.

If it can steer clear of the commodification of the Mediterranean “character” or “identity,” this conceptual frame and literary category can offer new dimensions to inform our reading and understanding; it can offer new perspectives and allow

us to appreciate literary strategies and techniques that enrich our experience and understanding as active readers. A work of Mediterranean literature engages critically with the Mediterranean imaginary, with the connections between stories, peoples, places, cultures, and images that continue to define the region and the discourse that constructs it.

Thinking Mediterranean opens the text to new dimensions, shades, and associations, but not with the aim of essentializing the Mediterranean, of unearthing or even defining its elusive “true identity” or “cultural core.” The Mediterranean is an imaginary, an infinite continuum of imaginaries, but a place to connect nonetheless: it is both a meticulous investigation of interconnected histories and a conjuring up of mental images, exploring associations in all directions, and stirring all kinds of emotions related with human beings encountering each other, with the physical environment they live in, and with the worlds that preceded them. Elhairy and Talbayev write about the conception of “the space of the sea as a principle of integration,” about the “wide-ranging forms of mobility, interconnectedness, and analytical fluidity” in an “adjustable Mediterranean model” (6). Mediterranean literature functions in similar ways. There seems to be no limit, writes Horden, “to the ways in which the Mediterranean region may be reimagined, as a sea, as an area involving physical movements, maritime spaces, territorial arrangements, and political processes that seek to transcend national boundaries and enmities (even as they often also reinforce them)” (2). This is the stuff of Mediterranean literature.

Our post-modern reading, which identifies not one but many Mediterraneans from different angles and across time and space, is elusive and in constant need of construction, deconstruction and reconstruction. It is not a given: it presents opportunities for the critical reader to interpret the diversity and complexities of a shared cultural space and to constantly reshape or reimagine the region. Thinking Mediterranean opens Maltese literature to a whole new discourse, to a multiplicity of regional connections and a plurality of perspectives. Harrison’s reconceptualization of the Mediterranean as a site of (neo)colonial subjection and anti-(neo)colonial resistance exposes the Mediterranean to the contradictory narratives that have allowed Maltese literature to imagine the Mediterranean as a locus of us and them, of good and evil, of belief and myth. Taking into account the wider perspective of Mediterranean literature allows us to reimagine Maltese literature, to redefine the Romanticism that gave birth to a literature in the vernacular in the early nineteenth century and to articulate a contested postnationalism and cosmopolitanism in the twenty-first.

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