

Introduction

PREDRAG MATVEJEVIĆ calls the Mediterranean “an intimate sea.” For centuries, determined flows of merchants and immigrants, warriors and crusaders, slaves and pirates, goods and ideas have crisscrossed its waters. Considering the multiplicity and variety of civilizations that look out onto that lake of cultures, a question immediately comes to mind. How did all those people communicate? Historians tell us that a pidgin language, often called *lingua franca*, first appeared in the eastern Mediterranean around the thirteenth century. Widely used for commerce and diplomacy, it drew its lexicon mainly from Romance languages (*lingua franca* meaning “Frankish language” in Latin) since the dominant powers in the east after the year 1000 were the Genovese and Venetian trading colonies. This common language later extended throughout much of northern Africa and the western Mediterranean, where its Romance lexicon instinctively adapted to a simplified Arabic syntax. *Lingua franca* was in such general use among slaves, Barbary Coast pirates, and European renegades—the characters who inhabit Massimo Carlotto’s fictional Algiers in this issue—that it was used in official records and trade contracts. By the nineteenth century, European settlers and the opening of regular schools brought this once widespread jargon to near extinction.

Another name for this Mediterranean vernacular was *sabir*, a noun that derives from the Latin root *sapere*, “to know.” This special issue brings into conversation the different dialects, languages, vernaculars of the Mediterranean in order to create a *sabir* of poetic, fictive, and artistic imagination displaying the plurality of Mediterranean identities. The texts included in the pages that follow do not pretend “to know” the Med, instead they trace the filigree of a *sabir* which can tell us only indirectly and vaguely what Mediterranean identity is. And if our *sabir* today succeeds as metaphoric testimony to the use of the ancient vernacular, we should also pay homage to the work done by our many translators,

without whom the cornucopia of Mediterranean cultures could not be brought to the attention of an Anglophone public. Navigating and translating have a lot in common.

Not simply a geographical area, “the Mediterranean” also stands for a plurality of representations, distinct ways of seeing, and varied forms of consciousness—hence our title, “Mediterraneans.” The Neapolitan writer Erri De Luca opens our issue by wondering whether “Being Medit” is simply nostalgia turned towards “an unpackaged past”; other writers included in the first section, “*genus loci*,” reflect on the persistence of Mediterranean roots in spite of the global economy (Serés), migrations (Scego), or wars (Handal and Bartana).

In “materials of culture,” we present stories and poems that narrate the Mediterranean from the viewpoint of the peripheral, the marginal, and the inconsequential. Here too, as in Fernand Braudel’s seminal *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, the donkey (Sacré) and the olive tree (Elmusa) are the real protagonists of our decentered history. Matvejević traces the many routes of bread and its Levantine legends, while Abu-Alhyyat’s poem recounts the legendary gift of a land where all things grow.

Our “histories” section tells the adventures of seafarers from the past who braved the sea and its many perils, driven by love (Maalouf’s troubadour), tempted by glory (Adonis’s Hannibal), impelled by greed (Katsaros’s Rimbaud), attracted by freedom (Carlotto’s pirates), or just forced, as the slaves from Barbary, to accompany Castilian *conquistadores* to the New World (Lalami). They also recount stories of death (Bonaviri) and imprisonment on secluded islands (Ganado).

The stunning photographs by Vanessa Winship bring our attention to focus on the province of Almería, one of the barest landscapes in the Mediterranean, inspired by Juan Goytisolo’s unparalleled prose. Winship’s photographic chronicle then continues eastward to the shores of the Black Sea, that “poor relative of its counterpart, the Mediterranean.”

In our own momentous time, the Arab and Turkish lands—with their compelling desire for change and revolution—are remaking Mediterranean history. Their youths take to the streets, swarm squares, fight *intifada* (Nye), are imprisoned and tortured (Khalifé), but never cease to believe in a better future (Gökçenur). One can easily recognize this burst of rebellion and creative energy in the writers (Lahbib, Fadel, Kachachi, and Saadawi) who were among this year’s short-listed selections for the International Prize for Arabic Fiction (IPAF), the most prestigious in the

Arab world. The IPAF winner, Ahmed Saadawi, reminds us what monsters are bred when great powers lose all reason. Egyptian street art, also on display here, documents that same creativity and urgency on city walls, during and after the 2011 Arab uprisings.

The other great story of the Mediterranean today is found in the tragic waves of migrants, washing from southeast to the northwest. Crossed by thousands of routes and littered with shipwrecks of undocumented immigrants (Ghermandi), today's Mediterranean contests the abstract distinctions that once made it possible for the West to justify colonial conquests and capitalistic economies. ID papers and legal fictions become meaningless signifiers of regimes that no longer exist (Mattawa) while uprootedness and nostalgia for the *bled seep* through the multicultural societies coming into existence in the Mediterranean north (Sebbar). And yet the Roma keep living their lives, at the margins of the modern Mediterranean, both touched and untouched by history (Trojanow and Muhrbeck).

Finally, the memoir of a Palestinian girl (Barakat) and the coming-of-age story of a Greek girl (Sotiropoulos) tell us how their protagonists experience exile and the plurality of Mediterranean identity. Kellum's memoir about her father's "journey to Italy" evokes the ghost of the Grand Tour, the lens through which Northern Europeans traditionally saw and thought they knew the Mediterranean.

Yet if we learn anything from this collection of stories and poems, it is that we cannot know the Mediterranean by reducing it to a single image: its *sabir* is a vernacular lending itself to many interpretations and forms of knowledge. As Marcello Fois reminds us, it is far too easy to betray Mediterranean identity. Betrayal occurs each time you believe yourself to be exceptionally and uniquely Mediterranean.

*Anna Botta and Michel Moushabeck,
for the editors*