

“Unity in Diversity:” Towards A Mediterranean Feminist Criticism

by

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**KOÇ
ÜNİVERSİTESİ**

July 29, 2024

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Koç University

Graduate School of Social Sciences and Humanities

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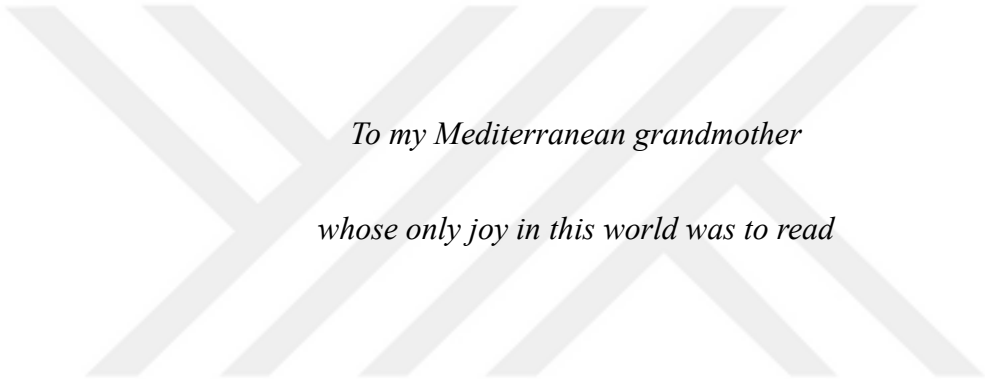
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*To my Mediterranean grandmother
whose only joy in this world was to read*

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ABSTRACT

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This thesis aims to lay the basis for a Mediterranean feminist criticism in literary studies inspired by Caribbean feminist criticism. Drawing upon the previous comparisons and contrasts discussed between the two seas made by both Mediterranean and Caribbean scholars, the introduction discusses the relevance and possibility of building a feminist oeuvre in the same way that anthologies of Caribbean women’s writing were constructed as a result of the collaborative effort of Caribbean feminists in the 1970s. In the three main chapters, this research aims to start the anthologizing practice by choosing and analyzing three books written by three authors across the Mediterranean that consider the sea a safe space and a sphere of opportunity for women. The first of these chapters focuses on the way Ece Temelkuran builds a trans-Mediterranean, feminist micro-community and appropriates the *longue durée* approach in her fictional writing by centralizing the relatively small number of women and driving the larger event of the Arab Spring into the peripheries of her narrative. The second chapter delves into Nina Bouraoui’s bicultural upbringing as the daughter of a French mother and an Algerian father, and the possibility of adopting a queer Mediterranean identity to overcome the identification crises she experiences when growing up. The third chapter turns to Mediterranean industrial spaces and their masculine cultures which are often overlooked by fiction, discussing the sea’s position as an alternative space for the emergence of a “female culture” as described by Luce Irigaray.

Keywords: Mediterranean Studies, Feminist Criticism, Contemporary Novel, Women’s Writing

ÖZETÇE
Farklılıklarda buluşmak: Akdeniz feminist eleştirisi modeli
Eylül Z. Belden
Karşılaştırmalı Edebiyat, Yüksek Lisans
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Bu tez Karayip feminizmi örneğinden yola çıkan bir Akdeniz feminizminin temellerini atmayı amaçlamaktadır. İlk bölümde 1970li yıllarda Karayipler'in farklı bölgelerinden kadın yazarların çalışmalarının bir araya getirilerek oluşturulan antolojilerden esinlenilerek Akdenizli kadın yazarların edebi eserlerinden oluşan bir antoloji oluşturma çabası ifade edilmekte, bu doğrultuda da önceki düşünür ve yazarların Karayipler ve Akdeniz arasında kurduğu paralellikler göz önüne alınmaktadır. Tezin üç ana bölümünde ise girişte bahsedilen antoloji çalışmasının örnekleri sunulmuş, Akdeniz'i kadınlar için güvenli bir bölge olarak ele alan ve Akdeniz'in farklı kıyılarından üç farklı kadın yazarın kaleme aldığı üç eser incelenmiştir. Bu bölümlerin ilki Ece Temelkuran'ın *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar* romanında kurguladığı Akdeniz-aşırı ve feminist mikro-devrimi konu almakta ve Braudel'in *longue durée* kavramından yola çıkarak metinde Arap Baharı olaylarının arka plana alınmasını incelemektedir. İkinci bölümde yarı Fransız, yarı Cezayirli yazar Nina Bouraoui'nin farklı ülkelerde kuir bir çocuk olarak deneyimlediği büyüme sancıları ve Akdenizli kuir bir kimliği sahiplenerek yaşadığı kimlik bunalımından kurtuluşu irdelenmektedir. Üçüncü bölümde ise Akdeniz'in kurguda fazla yer bulmayan endüstriyel yüzü ve bu bölgelerdeki erkeklik algılarının oluşumu ele alınmaktadır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Akdeniz çalışmaları, feminist eleştiri, kadın yazını, çağdaş roman

Contents

INTRODUCTION.....	1
1.1. Thinking of Mediterranean studies in tandem with Caribbean studies	3
1.2. Building a Mediterranean feminist criticism	4
1.3. Anthologizing a Mediterranean feminist oeuvre	6
ECE TEMELKURAN'S TRANS-MEDITERRANEAN FEMINIST COMMUNITY IN <i>DÜĞÜMLERE ÜFLEYEN KADINLAR</i>	8
2.1. Women and the Arab Spring protests: an alternative movement.....	10
2.2. A fictional, non-linear, feminist <i>longue durée</i> of Mediterranean women	12
2.3. <i>Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar</i> as a Mediterranean feminist novel	15
2.4. Imperialism and centralization	16
2.5. Orientalism, imaginative representations, and women's agency	17
2.6. Travel, trans-Mediterraneanism, and self-actualization.....	19
QUEERING THE MEDITERRANEAN: NINA BOURAOUT'S <i>GARÇON MANQUÉ</i>	23
3.1. Gender and sexuality in the ancient Mediterranean	25
3.2. The Roman Empire and Bouraoui's depictions of the Mediterranean	28
3.3. A look into gendered expressions in <i>Garçon manqué</i>	31
3.4. Reclaiming Rome's queer legacy as a Mediterranean queer woman.....	34
3.5. <i>Garçon manqué</i> as a Mediterranean queer feminist text	37
THE INDUSTRIAL MEDITERRANEAN: SILVIA AVALLONE'S <i>ACCIAIO</i>	40
4.1. Masculine and feminine spatialities in <i>Acciaio</i>	42
4.2. Women's corporeality and bodily agency	46
4.3. The sea as a space of female empowerment and the alternative reality	51
4.4. Misogyny, capitalism, poverty	54
CONCLUSION.....	56
REFERENCES	60

INTRODUCTION

Although several imperial states have monopolized the Mediterranean Sea for a long time, different nations and religious systems have peacefully or antagonistically coexisted in the area, whether within the empires or in the nation-states built in later centuries. Derived from the Latin *medius* (middle) and *terra* (earth), the literal translation for the name of the region is “the middle of the earth,” drawing attention to the area’s centrality and liminality. (Clement 114) In *The Transcontinental Maghreb* (2017), Edwige Tamalet Talbayev emphasizes the importance of reading the Mediterranean as a “liminal space” against an “embedded network of polarized reading grids” such as “Europe/Africa” or “Christianity/Islam.” (2) This deconstructive approach which considers the Mediterranean a contact zone that fluidizes and enmeshes different identities may come in handy when tackling other binaries related to race, religion, or even gender.

On the other hand, Linda T. Darling characterizes the Mediterranean as a “borderland” rather than a “frontier,” as she differentiates the former from the latter as a space where two distinct societies, namely the Northern and the Southern Mediterranean (with the former traditionally associated with Christianity and the latter with Islam) “meet and overlap.” (Darling 54) As applied to the Mediterranean context, the borderland paradigm provides an integrative and inclusive approach instead of the traditional view of the sea as the line separating Christendom from Muslim North Africa.

Emerging during and after the Cold War, the area studies programs aimed to learn more about distant geographies and strategize in accordance with the information collected about faraway lands via research. Working on Mediterranean areas such as “Europe,” “North Africa,” or “Middle East,” the area studies disciplines drew politically defined borders, regionalizing culturally and ethnically close geographies by studying them together. Motivated by imperialist urges, the research produced by these programs reinforced the conflicting, polarized images of the north and the south of the Mediterranean, positioning the sea as a curtain between the white, mainly Christian

North and the Muslim South after the Arab conquest of North Africa and Anatolia.
(Watkins 151)

In contrast, the emerging scholarly field of Mediterranean studies aims to take a step beyond traditional area studies disciplines that enjoyed their popularity during the Cold War era and analyzed areas contained by politically determined borders, making discoveries and analyses regarding their cultures, geographies, and economies. The goal of Mediterranean studies is to fluidize and stretch the borders as imposed by modern area studies, viewing the Mediterranean heritage as a whole. According to John Watkins, the field occupies a liminal space between area studies and global studies, as while the discipline employs a transborder approach that challenges the idea of the nation-state, it still locates itself in a certain region marked by the borders of the Mediterranean Sea. (Watkins 149)

However, the discourse of a unified Mediterranean has also been used by numerous imperialist and fascist states throughout centuries. The Romans referred to the sea as *Mare Nostrum*, colonizing all of its shores and eventually making it an internal sea. The Roman heritage (referred to as *latinité* in French and *romanità* in Italian) assumed by white Mediterranean states was later used as a justificatory discourse for their colonial activity in the North African shores by countries such as France and Italy, proclaiming themselves as natural heirs of the Romans and claiming rights on all Mediterranean lands that were once Roman. (Hom 107, Lorcin 300)

One of the significant goals and contributions of Mediterranean Studies is to build a bridge between the north and the south of the Mediterranean which has been politically and culturally polarized for a long time. The field, thus, rejects politically motivated continental borders and deconstructs identity-related binaries, creating a fluid and transitional dialogue between different Mediterranean spaces and temporalities. However, while the discipline aims to connect divergent spaces across the Mediterranean by finding common grounds within their cultures and histories, it has no interest in inventing a uniform Mediterranean identity. The Mediterranean identity in question functions as a common cultural heritage paving the way for interaction between sharp binaries, and it aims to make peaceful co-existence an option by softening the race, religion, or class-related binaries that have characterized the region for centuries.

1.1. Thinking of Mediterranean studies in tandem with Caribbean studies

The Caribbean shares a similar positionality with the Mediterranean as a “middle sea,” situated as a gateway between continents and a hub for different ethnic and racial identities. (Cahnman 209) To understand the transmarine relations between the Mediterranean and the Caribbean, the focus must first be shifted to colonial and post-colonial interactions between the two regions. Cuban author Alejo Carpentier theorized the Caribbean (especially, Haiti) as the “New World Mediterranean,” which referred to “a long-lost time of Mediterranean existence” to be resurrected in the Caribbean, treating the Caribbean as a New World echo of the old Mediterranean, using a magical realist image of the geography he named the “*real maravilloso*.” (Talbayev 17) Grown up in the Mediterranean and having lived most of his life in the Caribbean, Fernando Ortiz also drew attention to the inextricable link between the two regions through his idea of transculturation: Arguing that colonialism wiped the indigenous people of the Caribbean away during the initial settling of the colonizers and immigrants from both Europe and Africa inhabited the lands afterward and built a new culture, Ortiz took the juxtaposition between the Mediterranean and the Caribbean to an ethnic level from a mere geographic resemblance. (Stewart 241) Both regions have been exposed to colonial activity initiated by the same imperial powers, which lies behind the common languages and cultural elements shared by two distinct but culturally close spheres.

Caribbean literary works are often studied under Latin American literature or are associated with the languages they are written in, studied as Francophone, Hispanophone, or Anglophone literatures. Compiled of multilingual works penned across the sea, the Caribbean literary paradigm suppresses such linguistic or geographical boundaries as drawn by colonial activity, and decolonizes the region by helping characterize a Caribbean identity in the literary imagination that is located beyond national literary paradigms. Sharon Kinoshita argues that national literature paradigms also “distort and conceal as much as they reveal” in the Mediterranean context, due to the region’s cultural, historical, racial, and religious complexity. (315) Taking the centuries-long cultural interactions in the area into account, Kinoshita suggests reading and considering literary works from the Mediterranean side by side to trace the connectivity across the region and moving beyond the national literature paradigm to a Mediterranean literary polysystem to “produce revelatory new readings.”

(318) This idea of a Mediterranean literary paradigm resembles the effort to put together a Caribbean oeuvre by rejecting colonially imposed labels such as “Commonwealth” or area-based frameworks like “Latin American,” which is another area put together and studied by area studies disciplines like Europe, Asia, and Africa, the three continents surrounding the Mediterranean. Although not all theories and paradigms operating in the Caribbean context are applicable to the Mediterranean due to historical complexities and the differences between the two regions’ colonial/imperial baggage, tentatively considering the Caribbean literary oeuvre as an inspiration for the emerging studies of Mediterranean literature is likely to pave the way for innovative new readings and theories that may be relevant for the Mediterranean region.

1.2. Building a Mediterranean feminist criticism

The Caribbean literary paradigm also birthed its own feminist oeuvre and theory to represent the experiences of Caribbean women. Caribbean feminist criticism first emerged during the 1970s through the efforts of multiracial and multilingual female authors and critics across the region, at a stage when Euro-American theories of feminist criticism became inadequate in analyzing the multi-layered and retrospective writing style of Caribbean women writers. Compiled of the works of Anglophone, Hispanophone, Francophone, and Dutch-speaking Caribbean authors, the Caribbean feminist oeuvre places more attention on the characteristics of the Caribbean societies and the experiences of Caribbean women, creating a more useful alternative for Euro-American ideologies as well as moving beyond the “black/white” binary, honing the ethnic, racial, and cultural diversity prominent in the region. Caribbean feminist theory is interested in the Caribbean women’s experience above the identities brought from the Old World, decolonizing the region and creating a new culture based on solidarity. Taking the racially and ethnically mixed characteristics of the region into account and formulating a Caribbean umbrella identity that is aware of diversities, Caribbean feminism is interested in the shared experience of womanhood within the Caribbean community.

Considering the interactions and common points between the Caribbean and the Mediterranean, a paradigm resembling Caribbean feminist criticism can be appropriated into the Mediterranean context as a model. The emergence of Mediterranean studies and research on Mediterranean literature promises an interesting

framework for the gender-related theories and disciplines embarking in the area, pushing for a Mediterranean identity above racialized or nationalized classifications. Unlike Caribbean feminist theory that aims to find unity in diversity and takes a transcultural approach, feminisms that have been associated with the Mediterranean basin are mostly based on the regional borders as defined by traditional area studies disciplines, such as “third-world feminism” which is based on a post-Cold War classification of countries, or “Islamic feminism” mainly marketed towards Muslim women from MENA countries. These categorizations do not encompass the entirety of the Mediterranean region, and since they are only relevant to the southern shores of the sea, they also imply race by nature. These classifications reinforce the Mediterranean’s position as a frontier between the north and the south of the sea, separating supposedly distinct cultures and races.

However, like the Caribbean, racial and cultural interactions in the Mediterranean are more complex and difficult to classify. The emergence of a Mediterranean studies discipline that aims to dissolve imaginary borders across the region paves the way for a feminist criticism model that is set on the same basis as Caribbean feminist theory: A criticism model that does not search for a uniform Mediterranean woman in literature, but one that is aware of diversities like Caribbean feminism and that aims to trigger dialogue across different corners of the region by using the sea as a basis.

Unlike Caribbean feminist criticism, a theory of feminist criticism that encompasses the whole Mediterranean region has not been developed yet. The Caribbean is also a multiethnic and multicultural sphere with a colonial past like the Mediterranean, with literature operating in multiple languages and written by women of different racialized bodies. Simone A. James Alexander argues the effectiveness of the transnational approach adopted by Caribbean feminist criticism in overthrowing a “black/white dominated historical paradigm” that “overlooks the multicultural, multi-ethnic make-up of the Caribbean region.” (183-184) James Alexander emphasizes the importance of anthologizing to trace and “celebrate” the emergence of Caribbean feminist work, which fosters “reflection on ideas of unity in diversity” – a key argument for Caribbean feminist criticism. (184)

This research aims to juxtapose the main ideological frameworks of Mediterranean studies such as trans-continentality and the *longue durée* with feminist ideology and formulate a Mediterranean feminism emerging from transborder and transcultural dialogue. The primary goal of this thesis is to locate and examine autobiographical or fictional female experiences that identify with the Mediterranean rather than a specific nation. The works included in this thesis are chosen among contemporary Turkish, French, and Italian literature, and they suggest embracing a Mediterranean identity as a form of achieving liberation.

1.3. Anthologizing a Mediterranean feminist oeuvre

In this thesis, I follow the same method that Simone A. James Alexander advocates using in theorizing regional feminisms, as I aim to trigger an effort to anthologize feminist writing across the Mediterranean. I purposefully concentrate on works that take the Mediterranean as their focal point and that display the sea as a sphere of liberation and self-actualization for women, playing upon notions of fluidity and trans-continentality. In all three novels included in this research, the female protagonists use the sea physically and/or metaphorically to transcend borders that are defined by states, race, class, or gender roles. While all three of them seem to have very distinct plotlines and take place in different geographies and cultures, the issues they tackle are common, as all three of them use the Mediterranean Sea as an opportunity to branch out of oppressive societies and identities.

All three works are written by women authors across the Mediterranean, and they use multiple Mediterranean sceneries such as Tunisia, Algeria, Italy, Lebanon, Egypt, Libya, and France in the novels. The author of *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar*, Ece Temelkuran, is a left-wing Turkish journalist and author born in Izmir and lived in various countries across the Mediterranean including Lebanon and France. Born to an Algerian father and a French mother, Nina Bouraoui has lived both in Algeria and France growing up, and expressed her trouble belonging to each of them as a queer woman in *Garçon manqué*. *Acciaio*'s author Silvia Avallone, on the other hand, grew up in the port city of Piombino in Italy, which she chose as a setting for her debut novel. Thus, whether fictional or autobiographical, their works analyzed in this research are engaged with the authors' real lives to a certain extent. This engagement of the research with reality strengthens its relevance to the issues faced by real women inhabiting the Mediterranean. It prevents the theory formulated by the anthology being

detached from real life. Instead, it stresses the link between literature and daily life and adding to the productivity of building a feminist literary oeuvre to get a better understanding of the experiences and struggles of the women of the region, potentially finding inspiration for ways to overcome the issues faced by Mediterranean women on a daily basis.



ECE TEMELKURAN'S TRANS-MEDITERRANEAN FEMINIST COMMUNITY IN *DÜĞÜMLERE ÜFLEYEN KADINLAR*

In *History of the Social Sciences: The Longue Durée*, French historian Fernand Braudel proposes the *longue durée* approach as an alternative to event-based historical writing. (histoire événementielle) Braudel criticizes journalistic accounts based on reports of major “events” for neglecting historical elements that fail to fit into a political agenda and single-handedly focusing on history, unseeing the intersections between history and other disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, economics, and literature. The *longue durée* approach in historical writing, on the other hand, examines history from a larger perspective that focuses on longer periods and collective build-ups of information. At the same time, it also challenges the ultimate centrality of the big event, allowing the unseen and the peripheral to find their way into history. (Braudel 175) Considering the amount of historical big events that are concerned with the actions, wars, or treaties initiated by Euro-American, white men, it is safe to claim that the *longue durée* approach in historiography is more inclusive and friendly to a rather diverse range of experiences, accounts, and narrative voices. The *longue durée* centralizes the peripheral, altering the historical writing practice to include the life narratives of marginalized communities, including people of color and women.

The *longue durée* approach is useful for women's historical writing as it creates a chance to challenge men's hegemony over historical narratives. David Armitage defines the *longue durée* approach as the preference of the “telescope” over the “microscope,” which catches a wider lens of events and a longer period of time. (493) According to feminist historian Judith M. Bennett, on the other hand, the *longue durée* approach is useful in tracking continuities and changes during a longer time frame. Bennett argues that the women's liberation movement was more influenced by “slow-moving structural changes” than “by events,” the former emphasized and traced successfully within the *longue durée*. (61) Thus, it is also safe to claim that the *longue durée* is a useful theoretical framework when it comes to journaling progress and improvements in women's centuries-long battle and search for their rights.

A contemporary example of a “major event” as defined by Braudel that aims to improve human rights was the Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in late 2010 and spread across the Arab World during the first half of the 2010s. Although initially

received with a positive attitude in the Arab world as well as the Western media, the Arab people found themselves “subject to physical and psychological violence” due to the turmoil that took place after the military got in charge and totalitarian regimes reproduced themselves, when the innate goal of the movement was to revolutionize the Arab countries financially, socially, politically, and culturally. (Younas 128) While welcomed with hype at the first stages, the outcome of the movement was “rather disappointing,” as the Arab Spring paved the way for years of unsolved crises and chaos in the area and shattered the protesters’ initial hopes for a democratic future. (Younas 2) The protests also raised questions about women’s limited involvement: While the protests began with extensive participation and enthusiasm from Arab women especially on social media, the movement was criticized in its later stages for eventually becoming male-oriented and reproducing its own patriarchal figures which replaced the tyrants protested and overthrown by the public. According to Elham Manea, the protests and the motivation of the state-opposing groups appeared inclusive and pursued a progressive common agenda at the beginning; however, women were gradually and systematically excluded from the movement by the state as well as the opposition groups by sexual violence, denial of decision-making positions within the movement, and discourse spread about supposedly natural inequality between men and women. (Manea 83-87)

The Arab Spring became a media sensation during the 2010s, receiving interest from all over the world. While the Western enthusiasm for the Arab Spring and the idea of democratization in the Arab world can be interpreted as Orientalist at heart, the media followed the events with great attention, almost as instantly as they occurred due to the protesters’ extensive usage of social media. Moved by the topic’s popularity, numerous memoirs and fictional novels were published in the aftermath of the events. They received significant attention, getting translated into Western languages and finding themselves an invested audience abroad. In *Post-Arab Spring Narratives* (2023), Abida Younas argues that these works functioned as a medium for “the unseen and the silenced subjects” such as women and the members of the LGBTQIA+ community to “speak for themselves” and “protest against an authoritarian regime.” (3) Post-Arab Spring literature shifting its focus on the marginalized groups which were repressed and excluded from the movement during the event sheds light onto the *longue durée*, viewing the movement from a larger and more inclusive perspective that

would probably include a narrower and more uniform, likely more masculine view if they followed an event-based writing strategy.

In this chapter, I discuss Ece Temelkuran's *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar*'s (2013) (translated into English as *Women Who Blow on Knots*) role in the post-Arab Spring oeuvre as a feminist *longue durée*, drawing attention to the woman question across the Mediterranean while criticizing the Arab Spring for its failure to protect its female protestors' rights and improve women's condition as a result. In the novel, Temelkuran initiates a micro-revolt led by four Middle Eastern women that occurs simultaneously with a major, regional movement; and she proposes an alternative way of reclaiming women's rights and agency. Temelkuran prepares a journey for her small community of women in which they physically or figuratively encounter other women who have inhabited the Mediterranean throughout a long period, varying from contemporary-day female protestors from Libya to ancient goddesses and queens such as Tanit or Dido. Enlarging the time frame covered by the novel through its multiple dimensions and different narrative techniques, Temelkuran constructs a fictional and pseudo-historical narrative that resembles the *longue durée* method of historical writing.

2.1. Women and the Arab Spring protests: an alternative movement

The three protagonists of the novel, namely Amira, Maryam, and the unnamed narrator who is a journalist like Ece Temelkuran herself, are all oppressed by patriarchal governmental and cultural structures and let down by their male counterparts at the time of their meeting at the hotel rooftop, as their shared feelings of disappointment and defeat bring the women together and trigger their collective self-actualization journey.

The novel opens in Tunisia, the same place as where the events that triggered the Arab Spring protests began. Temelkuran's Turkish protagonist meets two Arab women, a Tunisian belly dancer, Amira; and an Egyptian historian, Maryam during her stay at the Dar-al Medina Hotel's terrace, and converses with them about their inclusion and experiences in the movement. In accordance with the oppression experienced by women within the protesting groups as reflected by Elham Manea in her 2014 article *The Arab Popular Uprisings from a Gender Perspective*, Temelkuran's Amira and Maryam also testify about their activity being confined to only the first stage of the

protests, as Amira had been a part of the hacker group “Anonymous” that threatened the Tunisian dictator Bin Ali, and as Maryam reflects on her memories in Tahrir Square, where she had been physically a part of the movement. As former protestors, Maryam and Amira muse about their initial hope and belief that the protests would lead to significant changes in society and improve women’s role and visibility in the public, and they express their disappointment caused by their exclusion in the later stages. (Temelkuran 23) The Arab Spring is depicted as a frozen slice of time, which gave women the hope of ending their oppression and promised their freedom, however, women’s prominence in society deteriorated back into its state before the movement once the revolts were over and new but repetitive governmental structures were reinstalled.

On the other hand, while Amira and Maryam voice their distasteful experiences with the Arab Spring protests, the Turkish narrator also faces politically motivated oppression in her native Turkey as a journalist. This fictional detail as mentioned by the protagonist resonates with Temelkuran’s real-life experience of her dismissal from Habertürk in 2012, for her columns which were critical of some of the actions initiated by the Turkish government at the time. Given that *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar* was published for the first time in 2013, it is very likely that Temelkuran could be referring to her own experience at Habertürk, since *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar*’s narrator is also fired from her job as a journalist in Turkey and is depicted as travelling across North Africa for this reason. This detail is another aspect of the novel that blurs the line between fact and fiction and is likely to raise expectations for a journalistic memoir about Temelkuran’s own time in the Middle East, since she is also known to have moved to Beirut and lived there during writing her novel after her dismissal from Habertürk. The novel never clearly states if the narrator is Temelkuran herself or not although the narrative is in first-person, however, the resemblances between the protagonist and the author adds another dimension to the book’s fictionality.

Pushing the Arab Spring to the peripheries of the narrative, (which is likely to be disappointing for the readers who reach for the novel hoping to receive more documentary insight into the events) the novel depicts the women’s journey as the “real” revolution that the Arab Spring protests are incapable of initiating, both for being patriarchal and imperialist at heart according to the author as well as the “divine feminine” character, Madame Lilla. Throughout the novel, there is only one instance

when the protestors and the group of women collide; and the Arab Spring events are mostly followed on social media or watched live on television for the rest of the novel. While the novel is mostly set away from the protests, the micro-event of the travels and the macro-event of Arab Spring meet in the book and the micro-narrative of women collides with the grander narrative when the four women visit the camp of a rebel group in the First Libyan Civil War. Although women are active in the rebellion and they take part in the camp, the narrator observes that the women are pacified and they do not engage in active and direct combat with the enemy, but instead they occupy the position of a caretaker for the male soldiers at the front, offering them emotional support by sending them sweets they have baked by attaching poetry and prayers on them. However, Temelkuran does not portray the passive resistance of these women as wrong or negative, as she romanticizes their effort by likening them to “çölün ortasında periler” (*fairies in the middle of the desert*) and embraces the long-debated nurturing and caring role attributed to the female psyche, reflecting it as the superiority rather than a weakness special to women against the man at the camp who are portrayed as child-like. (Temelkuran 145)

2.2.A fictional, non-linear, feminist *longue durée* of Mediterranean women

In *Toward a Women's Poetics* (1984), Josephine Donovan differentiates feminine narrative structures from masculine plotlines, as she defines feminine storytelling as “nuclear, webbed,” and “net-worked,” in contrast to “linear and progressive” stories of conquest and victory. (106) With its non-linear and often hard-to-follow structure, *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar* distorts and revises a masculine, Odyssey-esque narrative tradition of a linear, goal and victory-oriented “hero's journey” as the first-person narrator, who also muses about the writing choices she makes as she narrates, weaves the story in circles by playing back-and-forth with the time. Temelkuran herself theorizes about her own writing strategy, which she fictionalizes as a direct result of her having to write on toilet covers as they are stranded in a boat in the middle of the Mediterranean:

“Klozet kağıdı yuvarlak olduğu için böyle bir anlatımın yakışacağını düşündüm. Yuvarlak bir anlatım tarzı. Uçları kavuşmayan bir çember şeklinde. Zira kağıtları çekerken hepsi parçalandı, kavuşmuyor birbirine. Bence kadınlar hikayeleri bu sırayla anlatıyorlar. Ortasından bir yerinden başlıyorlar, sonra başa dönüyorlar, başladıkları yere gelip oradan devam edip sonunu anlatıyorlar.”

(Temelkuran 440-441)

(Seeing as these toilet covers are round I thought this kind of narrative would work. A circular narrative. A ring whose ends never touch. When I pulled one out it ripped into pieces and I couldn't patch it together. This is how women tell stories. They begin somewhere in the middle then go back to the start and from there they carry on till the end.)

Temelkuran thus alludes to Donovan's theory of women's narratives, explaining her tendency to write in circles as a characteristic of the common method women tell their stories. Some chapters begin with single paragraphs that are out of context at first reading and only fall into context once the rest of the chapter is read too, which is a stylistic choice deliberately made by the author. Temelkuran keeps travelling between temporalities as much as the characters travel among countries, as the narrative constantly lapses between elderly people's memories, Amira's letters from an ex-lover, and Maryam's letters of Dido which seem genuine at first, and are revealed to be written by Maryam herself later.

The narrative thus does not only jump between different temporalities, but also between fact and fiction, between historicity and imagination. Although Ece Temelkuran's fame as a journalist rather than an author in her native Turkey may have led to expectations of an insider account based on her real experiences of the Arab Spring, *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar* is no journalistic, documentary work, but a fictional piece that questions the boundaries of reality and fictionality. Towards the end of the novel, Temelkuran begins to refer to her writing process simultaneously with the occurrences of the events mentioned in the book, revealing her book's ending to the characters who are involved in the story: "Yazsam şöyle yazardım. Amira'nın hikayesinin sonunu anlattım..." *(I would write it like this. I told Amira the end of her story...)* (438) The tension between fact and fiction is also formulated through one of the main characters, Maryam, a historian and academic with a PhD from Princeton University. Before setting out on a journey with the other women, she introduces herself as a researcher who is staying in Tunisia for a research visit about Queen Dido. (Temelkuran 20) However, while she states she is in Tunisia "resmi olarak" *(ostensibly)* for the research, she also confides as "Kahire'deki kendi filmimden kaçıp geldiğimi itiraf edeyim" *(I'm also running away from my own movie, which is showing right now in Cairo.)* (Temelkuran 21) Maryam also turns to be a writer of historical fiction later in the novel, as the six tablets attributed to Queen Dido are shown as real historical evidence first, and only later the reader figures they are imagined by Maryam.

However, towards the end of the novel, the nameless narrator hints that she herself wrote Maryam's (and imaginarily, Dido's) tablets, "Son mektupları, son yazıtları da yazmadım bu yüzden. Yediye tamamlamadan bıraktım hikayelerini" (*You see that's why I didn't write Maryam's last tablet and Amira's last letter.*) (Temelkuran 508) Thus, the fictionality and narrative style becomes multilayered as the author admits to rewriting pseudo-historical tablets supposedly written by Maryam. Doing so, Temelkuran dwells on the intimate relationship between journalistic writing and historicism as well and uses fiction as a way to rewrite women's history, filling the blanks where women were either absent or unarchived with imagination.

Occupying a liminal space between journalism and authorship, Temelkuran applies the *longue durée* approach to her storytelling by ignoring the large, "central" event that keeps the world busy and focusing on the relatively minuscule group of women in contrast to organized protests. In accordance with Braudel's claim that event-based historiographic practices neglect the other contributing fields, *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar* also problematizes event-based and linear history on its own, for if it had been a novel focusing on the Arab Spring, the story of the women who had been pushed to the peripheries of the movement would most likely have been neglected. Comprised of a majority of female characters and narrating feminine experiences, *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar* constructs a feminist, Mediterranean *longue durée* in a liminal space between fact and fiction as it travels among temporalities. The novel also rejects historicism by drawing a clear-cut line between truth and fantasy, as historical letters attributed to Dido of Carthage turn out to be fiction, while Temelkuran fashions the entire novel in a way that reads like a real, journalistic memoir.

With its stress on the experience of women rather than the larger picture and the major events occurring in the background, its rejection and criticism of women's relegation to domestic and caretaking roles, and its non-linear narrative style, *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar*'s plotline largely resonates with the issues that have shaped women's collective and "traditional" experiences as named by Josephine Donovan in *Towards a Women's Poetics*: The main characters "share a condition of oppression, or otherness, that is imposed by governing patriarchal or androcentric ideologies" in their private and public lives, as they live under governmental persecution as much as they face social oppression. (Donovan 101) This intricate relationship between the non-linearity of the narrative and the peripherality of its

subjects exemplifies a link between Donovan's theory of women's writing and the *longue durée* approach in historical writing, appropriating the *longue durée* as a method of writing (or rewriting) feminist history.

2.3. *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar* as a Mediterranean feminist novel

A non-linear narrative as well as the idealization and appreciation of the ancient Mediterranean heritage and North African history makes up a crucial component of the novel. The women's desire to connect with ancient souls and goddesses that have inhabited the Mediterranean coast of North Africa in different ages unravels as they attempt to "cure their own souls" by visiting an ancient temple devoted to Tanit, the goddess of love and the chief deity of Carthage, in Maryam's fictional letters of Dido which address a certain "stranger" and narrate Dido's trans-Mediterranean voyage to Carthage from her native Phoenicia, and through the constant mention of Al-Kahina, an ancient queen famous for resisting the Muslimization of the Maghreb. The women seek shelter and identification in the old pages of history, as they unite around a singular Mediterranean identity, leaving their Tunisian, Egyptian, and Turkish national identities aside.

The narrative travels between temporalities, as it reads fictionalized letters written by Maryam in Dido of Carthage's perspective, jumps between the memories of old Madame Lilla, and flashbacks to recent memories of Amira and Maryam. One of the three women's major contacts with the past is Madame Lilla, who leads her small group during the journey and finds where to go next, instantly taking over the role of the matriarch. Although her true identity stays hidden and she remains a vague, secretive, and dream-like figure for a long time in the novel, she eventually introduces herself as an ex-courtesan born in Egypt and travelled all over the world. (Temelkuran 264) Referred with mystical names such as *Thirina* and *Tin Abutut* (which are made up words, as "Thirina" supposedly means "love") by Lilla's acquaintances met on the road, her multiple pseudonyms each of them known by a different set of people surround her with an air of mystery. Although Maryam is clearly stated as "Egyptian" and Amira as "Tunisian" in the novel, Madame Lilla is never granted a certain ethnicity or nationality other than the information about her birthplace, which is not adequate to assign her to a nation. Born in Egypt, raised in the Ottoman Empire, and headed out to France due to a last will and inheritance that told her to start anew in the West, Madame Lilla is the perfect embodiment of Mediterranean transcontinentality as a product of the

interaction between the three continents that enclose the Mediterranean Sea. She is usually clad with clothes “the color of the Judas tree,” (*erguvan rengi*) which is a plant native to the Mediterranean region as well as a hint about Madame Lilla’s life as a spy and a traitor, as she is known to have betrayed many people including her own daughter. The uncertainty about her name and ethnicity as well as her almost caricatured extravagance positions her as a supraethnic and supranational body, almost like that of an ancient, transborder, and transcontinental goddess known with a different name across different countries.

2.4. Imperialism and centralization

Having travelled all over the world and become “fluent in Arabic, French, and English,” Madame Lilla has made powerful acquaintances from France, Britain, the United States, and the Arab World, and she admits having spied and transferred information between the parties she had been equally close to. (Temelkuran 268) Madame Lilla’s ethereal body functions as an intermediary between different geographies and nations similar to the Mediterranean, a vast body of water that has served as an “intercultural network” between three continents and numberless communities throughout history. Equally close to each place she has visited, each lover she has had, and any party she has spied for, Madame Lilla’s Mediterranean is a *net* in Armando Gnisci’s terms of decentralization, as she refrains from ever settling down to a particular “center,” be it a city or a certain lover. (Gnisci 263)

While the ideal of the *net* depicts separate and equally powerful centres spread out across the Mediterranean, it is also anti-imperialist in the sense that it opposes the rule of the Mediterranean from one, glamorized centre. Complementing her free spirit that refuses to root in a certain place, Madame Lilla is also skeptical about the imperialist tendencies of major powers such as the United States and the United Kingdom unlike the Arab Spring protestors generally speak fondly of the imperial powers as they expect military and financial aid from the West. While the novel structures a juxtaposition between the Arab Spring and Madame Lilla’s community by muting the former and emphasizing the latter, the contrastive impressions of the two groups about the West also underline the difference between their expectations and perceptions of a social revolt, as Lilla expects boundless, debtless freedom and the protestors’ only focus is overthrowing their dictator. During the collision of the two alternative realms, namely the visit paid by Madame Lilla’s tribe to the protestors,

Madame Lilla expresses her disbelief in the movement by defining its victory as “a loss since it had been so easy to win,” and her skeptical sentiments towards the “allies” of the movement by stating “Yeniliyorsunuz. Yendiğiniz için yeniliyorsunuz. Bu zafer bu kadar kolay geldiği için yeniliyorsunuz. (...) Şimdi sadece yayvan ağızlı Amerikalılar ve her seferinde hiçbir şey yapmamış gibi günahlarından sıyrılan İngilizler kazanıyor,” (*You are losing. You are losing because you are winning. You are losing because your victory has come to you too easily. But now it's only drawing the Americans and the English in, who have wriggled out from under their sins as if they have done nothing wrong*) in response to one of the female protestors' expression of her expectations of collaboration with the United States and the United Kingdom. (Temelkuran 226)

Madame Lilla's comment is not received well among the protestors who focus on one particular enemy due to their immersion in the singular, grand event that blinds them to the other possible dangers awaiting their country.

2.5. Orientalism, imaginative representations, and women's agency

While the narrator, according to Maryam, has “left her journalist-self behind after passing the border,” she encounters her *doppelgänger*, another “KADIN GAZETECİ” (*WOMAN JOURNALIST*) (stylized deliberately in capital letters by Temelkuran, perhaps as a reference to her extravagant self-introduction) during their stay in Yafran, Libya. (Temelkuran 278) Polished, camera-worthy, and Hollywood-esque with her “bol cepli, haki pantolonu, safari rengi gömleği ve tanker gibi botları, Ray-Ban gözlükleri,” (*khaki cargo pants, a safari shirt, hiking boots the size of tankers and a pair of Ray-bans*) the young news reporter introduces herself as Allison Abu-Shaar from CNN International, her name indicating her Arab American identity. Stepping into the warzone like an actress entering a movie scene, Allison interviews the Libyan people in a comically formal and outdated register of Arabic accompanied by her heavy, typically relaxed American accent. Even though she has an Arabic last name and a dark complexion accentuating her half-Arab identity, Allison remains extremely out of place in the Middle Eastern context as a fully assimilated and Americanized persona. While her knowledge of a foreign language, an asset historically prioritized by imperialism and Orientalism, lands her to a significant job at CNN International, she embodies the Western imperialist tradition of prioritizing language education not for the sake of cultural immersion and interaction, but for political purposes such as collecting data and building representations.

In his 2013 article *The New Mediterranean Studies: A Mediator between Area Studies and Global Studies*, John Watkins refers to the increasing interest towards the Mediterranean in the United States, and compares the discipline of Mediterranean Studies to the area studies departments emerged all over the country during the Cold War due to anxiety about “military unpreparedness,” aiming to familiarize the American intelligence about foreign, unknown cultures and geographies. (Watkins 150) Featuring in only two pages in the novel, Allison Abu-Shaar is a very minor character, but she plays an important role in displaying the opportunistic approach of imperial countries towards the Arab world. With her comical, forced Arabic, Allison is the typical product of the “area studies” mentality, as the pride she takes in her knowledge of Arabic becomes overt in her conceited behavior as she speaks. However, no matter how much she believes to have “mastered” the language, she is confined to be perceived as a foreigner, outcasted and unwelcomed by Madame Lilla’s Middle Eastern women including the Turkish narrator, since while she is not a native Arabic speaker herself, she shares a Mediterranean heritage with her fellows in the group.

The Arab American news reporter does not only intimidate Madam Lilla’s women with her lax attitude and irritating pride, but she also “steals the scene” from the real subjects of the event by making use of her half-Arab identity and her proficiency in the Arabic language, and Americanizes their narrative as reflected in CNN International, a mass media platform accessible in and powerful enough to find an echo in all over the world. Her interference disrupts the Arab women’s narrative, portraying a Hollywood-esque version of reality and denying the Arab World the right to narrate its own story. Stealing the Arab women’s opportunity for self-representation, Allison contributes to the Westerners’ imaginary mental image of Oriental women by doing all the speaking for their sake and not leaving a word to them about their own authentic experience that may create an image in the Western collective consciousness that is closer to reality. As a passive resistance to Western discursive hegemony, Madame Lilla and her group enact a “theatre scene” to feed Allison a fake story and to reclaim the scene by pushing Allison’s Hollywood-like presence out of the frame. (Temelkuran 280-281) Refusing to provide the Western media with accurate stories they can disrupt and shape, the women disrupt the narrative by themselves, maintaining their agency on their voice as they get to decide for their representations on media, whether purposefully disrupted or not.

Allison's brief appearance is not the only case of the "Hollywood effect" that constructs a disrupted reflection of the Arab World in the West. Before they depart from the protest camp in Libya to visit the temple devoted to Tanit, the narrator observes a very West-influenced scene of three young Libyan women eating pizza and watching *Sex and the City 2*, the world-renowned American TV show's second spin-off movie that takes place in Abu Dhabi. Generally received with negative reviews when it was initially released, the movie was criticized for depicting an Orientalist, shallow, and condescending account of the Arab World and Islam by many. (Fisher) Temelkuran approaches this scene as a peculiar sight to behold: "Libyalı kadınlar, Hollywood'un yarattığı Arap kadınlara bakıyordu" (*Libyan women were looking at other Arab women created by Hollywood.*) (Temelkuran 200) Resembling the Lacanian mirror stage, the three Libyan women get to watch and perceive themselves from a distance, as observed by the Western eye. The encounter of their supposed reflection is likely to alter their perception of the self, and the scene displays the imperialist power of American mass media that arises from its availability and prominence in popular culture.

2.6. Travel, trans-Mediterraneanism, and self-actualization

Madame Lilla's women continuously travel from the beginning until the end of *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar*, visiting Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Lebanon. Led by Madame Lilla and comprised of four drastically different profiles, they build a multicultural, multilingual, and antihegemonic micro-community that encounters many other women on the road, all of them being from different walks of life. Unlike the imperialist understanding of travel which organizes "field trips" to collect useful data that may come in handy in any case of conflict, Temelkuran's micro-community travels to achieve self-actualization by listening, understanding, and supporting real or historical/fictional women they get to meet on the road. While it is pioneered by Madame Lilla's four women, the community is way more crowded than only four as it is accompanied by Mediterranean "goddesses and historical warriors" as well as fortune-tellers, protestors, guesthouse hostesses, and mothers; creating a collective zone open to all female experiences. (Akdoğan 103)

One function of Temelkuran's micro-community is the interactive space it opens for self-expression and rapport. Allowing Mediterranean women who share a similar cultural heritage to share and bond with each other, the feminist community reclaims Middle Eastern women's agency by offering an outlet where they can narrate their own

stories without the interference of third persons, in contrast to the Arab Spring protestors whom the novel depicts as Hollywood-influenced products of mass media and Western narrative.

Madame Lilla's libertine character echoes in the community she forms, as the four women spend their entire trans-Mediterranean journey accommodating at hotels, pensions, and guesthouses for women; but never a home. While a reason for their homelessness is their dismissal from the communities they used to belong in - as Amira is rejected by her family, the narrator is fired from her job, and Maryam has broken the dominant sexual boundaries in her society - they also consciously prevent attachment to any place or community and choose to enjoy and learn from their fierceness. Temelkuran speaks fondly of the women at the Libyan resistance camp who contently and willingly stay within the domestic sphere, however, she also does not hesitate to clearly differentiate her tribe from them by mentioning two types of women's defence mechanisms to ease pain, one of them being "kneading dough," and the other one being "setting out to a journey," the method she identifies with. (*Belli ki biz, acıdan hamur değil yol yapabilen tipleriz.*) (Temelkuran 182) Not having come to terms with their true selves yet due to the guilt they feel about their exile reasons, Madame Lilla's nomadic women are in a state of limbo, unable to build a home and settle down, as they are rewarded with a home and a "family" only once they finish their journey, as the birth of Maryam's baby tightens their bonds transforms them into a same-sex family than a community of women. The journey becomes complete, the lost voice gets reclaimed, and the feminine Amira and the masculine Maryam take over the parental roles for the newborn child, indicating that the outcomes of their journey will pass on to the next generation. The finish line of the *heroine's journey* is an indicator of success, and as all four women succeed in making peace with the insecurities about their past that haunt them, they prove that they "deserve" to become a part of an untraditional but supportive family comprised of women.

Having arrived in her native Tunisia, the belly dancer Amira implements the idea of opening her own dance school that had come to her while on the road. While she had been a misfit in society for belly dancing, she restores her love for her art during the journey and returns home unashamed of herself. Similar to the newborn baby, a school indicates the education of the next generations and the structuration of a set of values in the future of the society. Having defeated their self-doubt and guilt

during the trip, the protagonists become healthy women now capable of building homes, finding families, and raising children.

Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar reflects a strong belief on the impact of the cultural environment and experiences on the self, as the ultimate reward the novel offers to its characters, in the end, is acceptance and moving on. The characters' feelings of disappointment and resentment are directly related to being violated by the patriarchy, as the narrator loses her job due to a male-dominated workspace, and Amira and Maryam are outcasted from their societies for not conforming to the sexual roles assigned to them by men. During the journey, they imagine a new community without patriarchy and a strong and self-assured breed of women who grow freely, being loved, and without experiencing oppression. When they meet a six-year-old girl in Libya, they become astounded by her cheerfulness and confidence, musing about how she “sevilmeye muhtaç olmazdı” (*would not be as desperate to be loved as themselves*) if only she could grow up without being oppressed by the society. (Temelkuran 242) In their newly found family and school, the smallest components that make up the society and where education starts, they have the adequate environment to raise the fearless generation they had imagined and longed for during their encounter with the young girl in Libya.

Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar adopts a complex narrative strategy that tackles multi-layered, transborder, and transcontinental relationships and power dynamics across the Mediterranean. Written as a fictional and feminist *longue durée*, the novel aims to reflect the long-term history behind the Arab Spring as well as the situation of women in the Arab World, rather than providing a journalistic and chronologic report of the Arab Spring events. As she shifts her focal point to a relatively minuscule, imaginary movement, Temelkuran criticizes the over-glorification of the Arab Spring in the Arab World as well as in the West for the “event” based approach tends to result in the neglect of other dangers that are likely to be just as problematic as the antagonists of the Arab Spring, such as imperialism, Orientalism, and women's situation.

In order to break free from the one-sided discourse of the Arab nationalist movement, Temelkuran unites her main characters under the umbrella of Mediterraneanism as represented by Madame Lilla, the leader of the travel group. Depicted as an old, almost supernatural, and transborder creature with numerous

acquaintances and unsolved mysteries, Lilla embodies the Mediterranean *longue durée* itself which is a collective body of history compiled of connections and transfer between the scattered but equally prominent centres all over the Mediterranean space. Healing her companions wounded by patriarchy with a self-actualization journey through the Mediterranean shore of North Africa, Madame Lilla and Ece Temelkuran come up with an alternative path to women's salvation instead of the Arab Spring that has disappointed Amira and Maryam, and is depicted as self-Orientalizing and patriarchal.

Temelkuran's own identity as a journalist also turns the novel into a serious critique of the West-dominated media that alters the perception of the West on the Orient by circulating and imposing imaginary narratives unsupported by the real claims from the East, as well as the self-perception of the East by confronting the Easterner with their own crooked "reflection" represented in mass media. Temelkuran depicts the proneness to collaborate with the imperialist countries as increasing with increased exposure to Western popular culture and Western newswriting. Falling into a vicious cycle, imperialism creates Orientalism, Orientalism strips Eastern women of their agency by victimizing them, and the lack of women's agency, as in the case of the Arab Spring, pushes women to the edges in any decision-making process on the future of the country.

Liberated from their chains of societal conventions as well as their own guilt, the protagonists of *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar* successfully finish their journey of self-actualization not as a result of the Arab Spring, but through their own search for a Mediterranean identity between the pages of the *longue durée* accompanied by Mediterranean goddesses and queens. Granted the eligibility to pass their knowledge and wisdom to the next generation of women the same way they learned from their predecessors, they take their part as semi-fictional women in the *longue durée*, and a new cycle in time begins as they wait for their new students.

QUEERING THE MEDITERRANEAN: NINA BOURAOUT'S *GARÇON MANQUÉ*

How does one theorize Mediterranean *queer feminism*? The “birth” of queer expression is often attributed to the Ancient Greek civilization by modern scholarship, and there is an inclination to idealize the ancients as more inclusive and progressive on sex and gender issues in comparison with their successors, the Christians, who strongly despised and banned any reference of same-sex desire. While the claim about the ancients being more tolerant towards non-heterosexual desire is partially correct, such a claim is not enough to label ancient societies as egalitarian and anti-misogynistic. An adequate focus on the qualities of homosexual relationships in ancient cultures as well as their later echoes in Western literature is also necessary to come to such a conclusion. Questions regarding the identities of the individuals engaged in queer relationships become crucial for such an analysis: Are the relations in question mutual and consensual, or purely hierarchical and hegemonic like the heterosexual relationships enabled by patriarchy? Do other variables come into play when choosing a partner, such as wide age gaps or disparities among the parties’ social positions? Do both parties receive the same degree of tolerance from society, or does the active party reclaim their masculinity through the public degradation of the passive? The answers to these questions are crucial when theorizing about the contemporary echoes of the ancient, queer Mediterranean image.

The tendency to cite ancient Greek and Rome as the root of queerness also attributes a vital position to the Mediterranean within the queer culture as the historical area inhabited and cherished by both societies. The mental image of the queer Mediterranean is thus mostly shaped by Greco-Roman narratives of same-sex desire, which often reproduce colonial, imperial, and orientalist discourses in later works of queer fiction such as Thomas Mann’s *Death in Venice* (1911) and André Gide’s *The Immoralist* (1902). A Eurocentric point of view narrates both works, in which white European heroes travel to the Mediterranean shores (Mann’s Aschenbach to Venice and Gide’s Michel to French Algeria) and discover their hidden and suppressed queer desires towards foreign and “exotic” men during their stay. Both depictions of homoerotic desire displayed in the books match with ancient Greek and Roman traditions of homosexuality to a certain extent, as Aschenbach channels his queer desire to an underaged boy, which resembles Greek pederasty, while Michel’s desire is

directed towards foreign and colonized bodies, mirroring the Roman ideal of only engaging in homosexual relationships with “non-citizens” who were often slaves or free-born men from Roman colonies. In this case, the authors’ choice of Mediterranean shores as the setting becomes a metaphor for the marginality attributed to queer desire, defined by Edward Said as “exotic locales at or just beyond the boundaries of Europe.” (Said 192) This approach positions the Mediterranean as Europe’s frontier to the strange and exotic outside world, which can be defined as “non-Europe” from an orientalist perspective that centralizes Europe as the cradle of civilization and drives its peripheries to the margins.

The frontier approach, on the other hand, is metaphorically similar to the queer tension between the man and the “non-man.” Linda T. Darling differentiates the concept of the “frontier” from a “borderland,” claiming that while the former is characterized by the “outer edge of a society,” the latter is a space where “distinct societies meet and overlap.” (Darling 54) As applied to the Mediterranean context, the borderland paradigm provides an integrative and inclusive approach instead of the traditional view of the sea as the line separating Christendom from Muslim North Africa. The borderland paradigm is successfully appropriated to the Mediterranean to inspire dialogue among distinct cultures and ethnicities, however, the area is rarely considered a metaphorical contact zone for different gendered identities. The “queer Mediterranean” in the Western literary imagination relies mostly on the ancient depictions of homosexuality and later works inspired by Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, portraying the Mediterranean as the frontier that divides Europe from the rest of the world. These works operate within the “frontier paradigm,” however, the metaphorical idea of the Mediterranean borderland as a fluid and transitional space between genders promises a more egalitarian and less oppressive approach to the queer culture of the area. Thus, it is crucial to gather and analyze works across the Mediterranean that reimagine and decolonize same-sex desire to be able to speak of a Mediterranean queer feminist approach.

In this chapter, I provide a close reading of Nina Bouraoui’s 2000 autobiographical novel *Garçon manqué*, arguing that Bouraoui reverts gender-based as well as colonial hierarchies. Structured as a coming-of-age novel based on Bouraoui’s own experience of growing up as a queer individual across the Mediterranean, *Garçon manqué* portrays the confusion and hardships faced by Bouraoui in terms of her racial

and gendered identity. I use Bouraoui's novel as a basis for Mediterranean queer feminist criticism and discuss how the author appropriates the borderland paradigm into gender issues along with race and culture, using the Mediterranean as a metaphoric area that embodies fluidity. Bouraoui appropriates this fluidity between ethnic and gender identity into her life narrative and offers it as an alternative to the binaries related to her identity that confused her as a child. Doing so, she also reclaims the Mediterranean's Roman heritage and culture which is traditionally monopolized by white Europe, and formulates an inclusive identity accessible to everyone from the Mediterranean.

3.1. Gender and sexuality in the ancient Mediterranean

Same-sex desire was a common phenomenon in Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome. For this popular knowledge, the ancients enjoy a certain popularity in contemporary queer popular culture, as ancient myths and queer figures are common muses in contemporary queer art and fiction. However, before idealizing the ancients as progressive and tolerant towards different sexual and gendered expressions, it is crucial to distinguish the Greco-Roman norms of homosexual relationships from contemporary, egalitarian practices of homosexuality between men, where partnerships based on equality and mutual romantic love are encouraged and cherished.

Gender roles in Rome were determined by the active or passive character of the action initiated by each party rather than biological sex or gender performance. Masculinity was reinforced through penetrative action, and being penetrated stripped the individual of his masculinity and damaged his public image. An individual's position within the society had a direct impact on their sexual role, as only free-born men were considered men and slaves or non-citizens "non-men." (Williams 180) The idea of free-born men engaging in sexual relationships with other free men was disgraceful for both parties' reputations and was considered *stuprum*, a Latin term that entails all types of sexual offenses, including incest and adultery. The only acceptable role for free-born men in a homosexual relationship was the active one, with a passive partner who was either a slave or a non-citizen. This common pattern regarding homosexual relationships hints at inequality among the partners being the norm in Roman society, where the active counterpart exercises sexual as well as social domination over the passive, turning sexual relationships into a power game where the free man tests his masculinity on another, less privileged or less mature one's.

In Ancient Greece, on the other hand, the practice of pederasty was common among the elites and was observed as a pedagogical activity. Greeks viewed pederasty as the initiation of young boys into manhood under the supervision of an adult male citizen who becomes both a lover and a mentor for the youth he courts. While the Roman culture appropriated many elements from the Greeks that preceded them, the stigma around committing *stuprum* against a free-born Roman citizen's *virtus* (virtue) regardless of sex or age prevented pederasty from being incorporated into the Roman culture. (Lear 117, Williams 122) Thus, the image of the other became a "safer" option to channel homosexual desire, and Roman elites often took foreign lovers who were still significantly younger than themselves. For example, while Emperor Hadrian's lover Antinous of Bithynia was not a Roman citizen and thus "foreign enough" to be an acceptable love interest, he was still approximately thirty years Hadrian's junior. (Williams 65) Thus, in both Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome, we see a homosexual tradition of the stronger party's (in terms of maturity level or social positions) dominion over the other rather than equality and partnership.

For this reason, the modern tendency to celebrate the queer legacy of the ancient world and appropriate it to contemporary-day queer culture often becomes problematic. The common point of the Greek and Roman traditions is that they both seek a purportedly inferior quality in the passive counterpart, which is a stance rooted in the ancient societies' immense obsession with masculinity and their underestimation of the "non-man," equating the position of the slave or the non-citizen to that of a woman. Such an approach that takes femininity as an insult hints at women's disadvantaged position in society by default. In some of his works, Plato refers to pederasty as "superior to the love of women," and as a "second best option to philosophical love." (Lear 113) On the other hand, the Roman gaze on homosexual relationships disgraced the passive counterpart as effeminate, labeling them with derogatory words such as "*cinaedus*" or "*pathicus*." (Williams 191) These common discourses that glamorize aggressive (synonymous with "penetrative" in Roman sexual culture) masculinity and disregard the lack of it shows that the ancients were not as progressive as critics of Christianity might think. While modern scholarship often mistakes ancient homosexuality as an antidote to heteronormative patriarchy, the stigma surrounding homosexual passivity was rooted in misogyny.

The roots of the ancients' misogyny, on the other hand, was rooted in their obsession with aggressive masculinity and the equation they formed between masculinity and morality. The Greeks idealized the hypermasculine image of the moralist and warrior spirit while they shunned the *kinaidos*, which they described as the "soft" man "who wanted to lose, who couldn't control his appetites," and "who wanted to be sexually dominated and penetrated by other men." According to Mark Masterson, the Greeks implemented an "honor/shame" model at the root of the society in which the masculine man earned his honor at the cost of another's shame. (Masterson 20-21) This notion applies to traditions of homoeroticism in the ancient world and omits the option of mutual love from the context, as the active partner wins his masculinity (and thus, his honor) at the cost of destroying the passive partner's.

Another problem regarding queer culture in the ancient world was the exclusivity of same-sex desire, being available and socially acceptable for men only. While homosexual relationships between men were normative in Rome, same-sex relations between women were deemed abnormal and abject. In her 2009 book *Sapphistries: A Global History of Love Between Women*, Leila Rupp argues that "all sorts of sexual acts between men fell into the legal category" in the Roman Empire, "but all sex between women was unnatural" and "was something that should be controlled." (Rupp 39) This double standard is another result of the established hyper-fixation with masculinity in Roman homosexual culture, which viewed the position of the slave man/the passive partner as equivalent to those of women. Following the same logic, the idea of women taking the position of men and pleasuring each other in female same-sex relationships threatened this fragile and validation-seeking masculinity among free men. Disgracing lesbian desire in society, men eliminated potential rivals that might attract the love and affection of other females, which helped them exercise and maintain control over women.

Also, since women in the ancient world had little access to education and literacy, it is almost impossible to find an account of women's homosexuality written by women themselves, as most of the ancient oeuvre was penned by men. According to Rupp, "the knowledge about love between women from the perspective of women themselves" is very little, and modern scholarship gets to learn about the history of same-sex desire among women "only from the writings (or artistic productions) of men." (Rupp 29) Having the chance to write about women's homosexuality solely from

their point of view, men had a great opportunity to denounce or demonize lesbianism, using women's controlled illiteracy as a weapon to control their sexuality as well. In this manner, free men gained freedom over their sexual orientations and the vastness of their partner choices at the expense of women's agency.

The so-called queer but predominantly male legacy of the pre-Christian Mediterranean civilizations made the Mediterranean a locus of sexual "deviance" in the Western literary imagination after the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Having very little material about lesbian history in the ancient world, modern and contemporary lesbian authors often also had to turn to queer male figures as their muses. (Waters 212) This sudden interest in the queer culture of the Ancient Greeks and Romans paved the way for the "Aschenbach phenomenon," the image of the cold, serious European man visiting the Mediterranean shores and rediscovering his Dionysian, hedonistic side through an experience of homosexual desire. (Aldrich 8) Often inspired by the classicist movement, these works replicated the ancients' stance on homosexuality and reproduced the same power inequalities between their homosexual couples, this time from a Eurocentric and Orientalist approach that prioritizes European men and objectifies and exoticizes men or young boys outside or from the margins of Europe.

3.2. The Roman Empire and Bouraoui's depictions of the Mediterranean

In *Garçon manqué*, Nina Bouraoui associates the Mediterranean mainly with the Romans and she makes this association clear several times in the text, as she constantly mentions "les ruines romaines" (*the Roman ruins*) that surround the sea and as she openly refers to the Mediterranean as "Mare Nostrum" once, a term mainly used by the Romans. (Bouraoui 63) The first chapter, *Algiers*, opens at the Mediterranean shore of Algeria, and the nameless protagonist stands with her interlocutor, Amine, who is a French-Algerian child like Bouraoui herself and whose homosexual tendencies are also implied. Bouraoui tightly knots the Mediterranean to the Roman identity starting in the first few lines, as she describes herself and Amine "cours avec la mer qui monte et descend sous les ruines romaines" (*running with the sea that rises and falls between the Roman ruins*) in Algeria. (Bouraoui 3) The author recounts a sense of invisibility at the seashore and the feeling of becoming one with the sea that connects Algeria and France. However, the association of the self with the Mediterranean is hinted to be authentic to the two mixed-race children, as the four Arab men who cannot see Nina and Amine or Amine's French mother waiting in the car "reste à l'abri des vagues, du

vent, de la nostalgie des ruines romanes” (*protected from the waves, the wind, and the nostalgia of the Roman ruins*) are excluded from this experience. (Bouraoui 3) Using the Mediterranean as an intermediary body of water in conjunction with her and Amine’s own trans-Mediterranean and fluid identities, Bouraoui positions the bodies of the two children as organic bridges between the north and the south of the sea. By portraying the Roman ruins as an inextricable piece of the Mediterranean, the author also depicts the ruins as an almost organic feature of the shores naturalized by the ebb and flow throughout the centuries, losing their human-made quality. This way, Bouraoui materializes the Roman heritage and challenges the Roman Empire’s presumed white legacy, erasing the makers of the ruins from the discourse and adjusting the history to become accessible and common to anyone of Mediterranean descent.

However, it is also important to note how French colonizing forces used the integrative relationship between the Roman Empire and the Mediterranean as a justifying discourse for their invasions of North African shores. Roman imperialism has served as an example for later Western empires occupying the Mediterranean in terms of motivation and ideology, contributing to the European ideal of a modern-day, “whitewashed” Mediterranean empire. (Lorcin and Shepard 6) In the specific case of the French, the heavy Roman influence on their colonialist ideology can be traced back to the French educational system at the time almost completely based on the classics. Influenced by the Romans’ “Mare Nostrum” ideal, Napoleon I aspired to make “a French lake” out of the Mediterranean one day. This aspiration led to continuous invasions of North Africa by the French, initiated by Napoleon’s successors in the later years. (Lorcin and Shepard 7) As self-proclaimed heirs of the Roman Empire, the French claimed rights on all North African lands once occupied by the Romans. Edward Said cites Napoleon I’s Egyptian Campaign as the “birth of the modern notion of the Orient,” which the Occident observes as an underdeveloped area that requires “Western attention, reconstruction, even redemption.” (Hosford and Wojtkowski 1-2) European imperialist tendencies aimed to “reclaim” ex-Roman lands which they perceived as “in the grips of anarchy and barbaric methods since the fall of the Roman Empire.” The “barbaric grip” that took over the North African shores of the Mediterranean was no other than the growing Muslim and non-white population in the

perception of white Europe, which sought to Europeanize the area again to “return to the civilized world the bank of the Mediterranean.” (Lorcin 300)

Nina Bouraoui’s native Algeria, on the other hand, was invaded by the French approximately thirty years after the Egyptian Campaign. Algeria’s “Roman ruins” repeatedly mentioned by Bouraoui in the novel were shown by the French as proof of Algeria’s Roman (and thus, white) heritage. The archaeological sites became “rallying points” for the French colonizers, as they were used to create ideological ground for the French occupation of Algeria. (Lorcin 301) Bouraoui’s references to the Roman ruins and thus Algeria’s Roman heritage in *Garçon manqué* is thus attention-worthy, as the author points at two mixed-race Mediterranean children as the real heirs of the ruins and reclaims the Roman identity by denouncing Europe’s colonialist agenda surrounding the Roman heritage of Algeria.

One of the leading authors of the colony in Algeria, French-born author Louis Bertrand defined the Roman ruins at Tipaza as the “architectural, cultural, and historical manifestation of the ‘true’ North Africa,” and as clear evidence of Algeria’s historical *Latinité*. (Lorcin, *Pax Romana Transposed*, 415) Repeatedly mentioned in *Garçon manqué*, Tipaza is also a key location for Nina Bouraoui’s Algerian childhood. In the novel’s opening sequence, Bouraoui refers to the city among the ones frequented by her and Amine: “Je sais nos lieux, Chercell, Tipaza, Boufarik, des passages validés.” (*I know our places: Chercell, Tipaza, Boufarik. Treasured places.*) (Bouraoui 11) By referring to the city as “our,” hers and Amine’s, Bouraoui revisits Bertrand’s claim on Tipaza being a landmark of Algeria’s *Latinité*, however, she reverts the claim on the Roman heritage belonging to the French and the Western world. She does not change the narrative from an Algerian nationalist perspective, instead, she embraces and reappropriates the Roman identity as a half-French, half-Algerian individual, embodying trans-Mediterranean dialogue.

While Bouraoui’s narrative begins to interweave the Mediterranean and Rome very early, these allusions remain subtle throughout the text and the author’s identity crisis stays unresolved and incurable until the end of the novel. Only in the chapter that takes place in Tivoli, Rome, the historical “heart” of the *Mare Nostrum*, Bouraoui finally finds peace in her racial and sexual identity. Reading the novel as a testimony of the Mediterranean borderland, the author suggests embracing a Mediterranean queer-

feminist identity to solve the identity crisis she endured when growing up, staggering across the binaries of “French or Algerian” and “girl or boy.”

3.3. A look into gendered expressions in *Garçon manqué*

The colonial mentality has often associated colonizing lands with manhood as a penetrative force, and the colonized lands with women as a staple of virginity and obedience. This discourse is also Orientalist at heart, as it pictures a “purportedly wealthy and strong” image of the Occident powering over the “allegedly weaker and female” Orient according to Said. (Hosford and Wojtkowski 11) The Romans attributed such gendered roles to the north and the south of the Mediterranean themselves at the time when they only occupied the northern shores, associating Rome with overtly masculine heroes like Aeneas and Mark Antony, while impersonating southern Mediterranean states like Carthage and Egypt as savage queens, Dido and Cleopatra. (Hosford and Wojtkowski 15) *Garçon manqué* begins reconstructing gender in the Mediterranean by reversing the conventional gender roles attributed to the north and the south of the Mediterranean, referring to Algeria as “un homme” (*a man*) while emphasizing *le France*’s traditionally feminine qualities like delicacy and neatness. (Bouraoui 21) Growing up both in Algeria and France, the author expresses a deep-set confusion triggered by her need to perform in different genders in accordance with the cultures and expectations of each country.

Young Nina embodies a mixture of masculine identities in order to fit in the manly world of Algeria, where she presents the state of women as vulnerable and in need of protection. Her initial urge to protect a woman on the streets of Algeria emerges when she wanders through the streets of Algiers with her mother Maryvonne, whose foreignness is given away by her whiteness that maximizes the danger she is exposed to. Nina expresses an urgent and immense need for Amine and her to “remplaçon nos peres” (*replace our fathers*) and protect their foreign mothers on the street, and she refers to this experience as one that makes them “vrais Algériens.” (*true Algerians*) (Bouraoui 6) Nina’s Algerian male persona is referred to as Ahmed, the disguise of an Algerian boy that allows Nina to disappear and assimilate into “le pays des hommes.” (*the world of men*) (Bouraoui 8) Nina designs this character based on her observations of Algerian boys and men, including her father, Rachid. Her understanding of masculinity largely relies on her father, who “m’élève comme un garçon” (*raises her as a boy*) as he teaches her to play “le foot, le volley, le crawl. (...) plonger des rochers

bruns et luisants.” (*soccer, volleyball, how to swim the crawl, how to dive from the brown, shiny rocks*) (13) To become Ahmed, Nina “throws away her dresses, cuts her hair,” and “displaces her female self” to prevent getting her share of the fear instilled by Algerian men. (Bouraoui 8) To be able to enjoy the privileges enjoyed exclusively by men in Algerian society, Bouraoui learns to negotiate her gender performance at a very young age as a coping mechanism, which is a direct outcome of the extreme gender inequality that characterizes the society of which she is a part.

Growing up and getting closer to womanhood than girlhood, Nina finds herself as a new target for the same danger that was threatening her mother, and this time she embodies masculinity not to protect others, but to protect herself. Bouraoui shares her experience of being molested and almost kidnapped as a child by an Algerian man in Algiers, which causes her to give up on her feminine identity to be able to protect herself from all sorts of sexual violence. She also implies a deep-set feeling of shame, as she expresses an immense need to hide her feminine identity. This can even be interpreted as a PTSD response as the author presents these burdening feelings of fear and shame as feelings that will linger for a long time in her life. In her words, “being forgiven. Being a woman, becoming one finally” will take a lifelong battle of self-acknowledgment for her. (Bouraoui 8)

Contrasting with her depictions of the masculine Algeria, Bouraoui’s heteronormative and modest France demands femininity. The role of the French grandmother is attention-worthy in constructing Bouraoui’s perception of France, as the grandmother figure represents the older, more traditional, and conservative generation of French society. Bouraoui’s impressions of France mostly rely on her memories of her grandmother’s house, portrayed as a delicate and safe domestic space enveloped in the scents of the grandmother’s “rose-scented soap” and “brioches, chocolate, bread, and crepes.” The grandmother’s caretaking and nurturing nature is emphasized during the sisters’ visits to Rennes, as she carefully bathes and prepares “gargantuan breakfasts” for her granddaughters visiting from Algeria. (Bouraoui 75) Embodying delicacy and maternity, the image of Bouraoui’s grandmother contests traditional depictions of civilized lands as masculine and emphasizes more gentle and traditionally feminine qualities of civilization.

Even when Nina is in Algeria, the grandmother is always there through the “red plastic record player” she bought for her granddaughter and the records she keeps

sending to Algeria through airmail. (Bouraoui 29) The record player on which Nina listens to popular French songs is an item that keeps her in touch with France, French culture, and her French identity, yet it is the grandmother again that creates that invisible bond. Music and artistry, as well as the technology and economic liberty to be able to afford a non-urgent item like a record player are all indicators of civilization and well-being. Nina intrinsically associates music with France and Frenchness, as she refers to her deep appreciation towards music as her “very French side” and mentions that the Algerian doorman who brings her the records, Kader, does not enjoy the music when they listen to it together. (Bouraoui 30) Knowingly or not, the grandmother also supports Nina’s way of thinking, claiming that it was “the trip” that damaged the broken record player, leading Nina to assume that her grandmother is subconsciously bitter towards Algeria for “taking away her daughter, and then her two grandchildren, Jami and Nina, whom she really loves.” (Bouraoui 30) To keep her granddaughters culturally close to herself and her native France, she uses French music as a tool that keeps Nina from assimilating into becoming fully Algerian.

The idea of the French grandmother is not only with Nina in Algeria through the record player, but she is also in Nina’s head as a gaze. As she dresses significantly different from other girls her age in Algeria and acts like a boy, she hears her grandmother’s voice inside her head, saying “You’re a tomboy.” (Bouraoui 36) The grandmother figure represents the Eurocentric and heteronormative culture that views homosexuality as deviant and associated with the Orient, as something acceptable in Algeria but not in France. Due to her grandmother’s stance, Bouraoui expresses her need to “look presentable” and “well-groomed” during her summers in France since her grandmother likes “real girls.” (Bouraoui 55) Her androgynous looks, which she presents as a direct outcome of her half-Algerian identity make her look out of place and unwelcome in Rennes. She expresses her discomfort in “girly” clothes and her “Daniel Hechter suit,” both French creations and a faux “French skin” to make her look more adapted and fitted in her environment. In contrast with the coarse, brutal representations of Algeria, the author portrays France as a rather enveloping, delicate, and elegant space where children feel rather safe and represented as fragile, in contrast with Algerian children due to the comfort they grow up in. In this feminine zone, Nina is also expected to act femininely, but instead of making peace with her sexuality, she remembers her summers in France with distaste and misses her masculine identity back

in Algeria. Her grandmother's and society's expectations of femininity from her backlash severely, and instead of giving up on her masculinized gender performance, she finds new muses to feed her masculine ideal. Becoming familiar with Western popular culture in France, pop culture figures and Hollywood actors such as Steve McQueen begin to influence her masculine performance as young Nina testifies mimicking "Steve McQueen's walk, Steve's spirit, Steve's desire for a girl's body." (Bouraoui 73) Emphasizing the power of cultural imperialism and global media on developing gender performances, this Western addition to Nina's masculine persona complicates and enriches the character but does not help her in her search for her true identity. At the end of the day, she is still mimicking somebody else without "being born solely from her own eyes," as she will by the end of the novel. (Bouraoui 112)

Along with the racism she experiences and the difference she feels from fully Algerian or French children when growing up, Bouraoui also experiences significant confusion regarding her gender performance and ties this issue to her having to adapt to different gender norms in two different countries. A liminal space between the two, namely the Mediterranean Sea, becomes a magical space where Bouraoui finds solace and belonging. "The sea is cradled by two continents. I remain between these two countries. I am between two identities." (Bouraoui 13) Bouraoui positions her own transnational and queer body as a representative of the Mediterranean Sea that ties the two distinct and distant lands together. It is not only her ethnic identity that is impacted by this fluid framework but her gender performance too: She defines herself as "One and multiple. Strong and weak. [...] Girl and boy." (Bouraoui 34)

3.4. Reclaiming Rome's queer legacy as a Mediterranean queer woman

Staggering across the gender binary throughout her whole life as she travels between her two home countries, Bouraoui comes to terms with her sexual identity in an alternative but still Mediterranean third space which is neither France nor Algeria. Her choice of vacation spot is the historical heart of the Roman Empire and the Mare Nostrum, as she spends a holiday in Rome instead of Saint-Malo as she used to every summer. Approximately one hour from Rennes, Saint-Malo is a popular French holiday destination she has been visiting every summer since her childhood with her grandparents as she mentions her earlier vacations there in the book. Turning away from Saint-Malo entails, thus, giving up on childhood habits and French cultural dictations mostly represented by the grandmother image in the novel. Choosing a new

destination outside of France and Algeria, Nina retrieves her agency, takes off on a quest for the self at the historical center of the Mediterranean, and searches for a Mediterranean identity instead of a fully French or a fully Algerian one.

Although the two-page chapter is based on a trip to Rome, it is named “Tivoli” instead, narrowing down the focus of the excursion. During the chapter, the most frequently mentioned tourist attraction is the Tivoli Gardens. According to Claudia Esposito, the author’s insistence on Tivoli as a space for self-actualization is no coincidence and a direct allusion to Bouraoui’s queer identity. Tivoli’s best-known landmark is the *Villa Hadriana*, where Emperor Hadrian had built a temple devoted to his male lover, Antinous. Although the villa is never openly mentioned in the text along with the Tivoli Gardens, the Coliseum, and Trevi, which Bouraoui mentions visiting, Esposito interprets the reference to Tivoli as an allusion to Emperor Hadrian, who is “predominantly remembered for his cosmopolitanism, his extensive travel throughout the Mediterranean, and his relationship with a Greek boy, Antinous.” (78) An important figure in Mediterranean queer history, Hadrian and Antinous’ legendary relationship remains as a staple of homosexual relationships in the Roman Empire and has inspired many artists across disciplines. While there is an inclination to romanticize the story of Hadrian and Antinous in modern writing and contemporary queer culture, the dynamics between the couple carried pederastic elements and a hierarchical power imbalance, as Hadrian enjoyed the ultimate privileged role in Roman society as the emperor. Contrary to popular opinion that he was born into slavery, Antinous was born free in Bithynia and came from a respectable if not aristocratic family. (Waters 197) Although much about Antinous’ biography and his time with Hadrian remains unknown, his being approximately thirty years Hadrian’s junior and a Greek sustains ground to assume the pederastic quality of the relationship along with Hadrian’s well-known philhellenic views. According to Craig Williams, the significant age gap between the partners and Antinous’ Bithynian origins left him “safely” young and foreign enough to be considered by Hadrian as a lover, automatically placing the youth in the “non-men” category. (Williams 65)

Antinous became a queer icon in European imagination beginning in the eighteenth century. Many works inspired by Hadrian’s admiration of the young boy were penned by neo-classicist and queer-sympathetic authors across Europe. According to Sarah Waters, queer women authors such as Annie Adams Fields and Willa Cather

showed interest in Antinous as a literary muse as much as male authors, adopting “classical scenes of erotic male bonding” in their writing due to the lack of “recognized or prestigious historical models and traditions” in lesbian history. (Waters 212) However, Waters also differentiates queer women’s approaches to Antinous’ relationship with Hadrian from those of queer men, as while men’s writing focuses on Hadrian’s virility and the pederastic quality of the relationship, women’s writing elicits “masculine signifiers” and draws attention to love and Antinous’ androgynous beauty. (Waters 213) This noticeable deviation from men’s depictions of homosexuality can be explained as a result of the internalized misogyny of the queer male authors of the time, who reinforce the Greek and Roman ideal of same-sex love’s superiority over women’s love. Without a patriarchal approach to homosexuality, queer women’s depictions of Antinous and queer desire, in general, are rather egalitarian and delicate, compared to men’s violent and aggressive portrayals of powerful men courting youths.

Given the preceding works that focus on Roman homosexuality and especially the image of Antinous in lesbian authorship, Nina Bouraoui is far from being the first queer female author to reappropriate the myth surrounding Hadrian and Antinous into queer women’s history and fiction through the allusion to Tivoli. Bouraoui’s “Roman summer” carries a queer character, as she is accompanied by a potential romantic interest with whom she “stayed at the Grand Hotel.” (Bouraoui 109) Homoerotic desire between the author and her companion is implied, as Bouraoui speaks ambiguously of her self-discovery and her discovery of the female body. “I tied my hair back. We discovered a thin nape. Sensitive ties. A pretty face. Eyes that turned green in the sun. Female hands and gestures. A deeper and controlled voice.” (Bouraoui 112) Listing her discoveries regarding the female body, the author does not specify if these newly discovered characteristics belong to her own body or her partner’s. This implies genuine equality and a feeling of being one between the two partners, unlike the norm in traditional Roman homosexual relationships, where one party had ultimate sexual and social superiority over the other. In this fashion, Bouraoui also reimagines a healthier, more equal, and more inclusive alternative to the Roman (and traditional Mediterranean) understandings of homosexual relationships. Through this eye-opening experience, the author “sheds her old self and reclaims her identity,” finally making peace with her femininity as a queer individual, defeating her overwhelming feelings of

shame, guilt, and fear associated with her childhood, and hatching out of the masculine shell she has built as a child to protect herself.

While the Hadrian and Antinous myth made its way several times into lesbian writing before *Garçon manqué*, Bouraoui's novel is revolutionary for reclaiming Roman heritage from a both non-Eurocentric and lesbian perspective and decolonizing the Mediterranean's queer history. Regardless of their gender, the authors who wrote about Hadrian and Antinous were predominantly white and of Euro-American origin unlike Bouraoui, a tendency that contributed to the perception of the Roman heritage belonging to white Europe. However, Bouraoui successfully reverts this trope and declares the two mixed-raced and queer children, herself and Amine, as the real heirs of the queer Mediterranean heritage and excludes the other characters inhabiting the scene from the experience of the "waves and the nostalgia of the Roman ruins." (Bouraoui 3)

Bouraoui also positions the Mediterranean as a locus of queerness and self-acknowledgment like the preceding authors, but she makes the queer Mediterranean experience accessible to women by breaking the norm of male-oriented homosexuality in the Roman Empire. Instead of role-playing as a boy the way she got used to during her childhood, Bouraoui embraces her identity as a homosexual woman. Thus, following the preceding tropes that narrate the finding of the self through queer experiences in the Mediterranean, Bouraoui also achieves self-acknowledgment through homosexual love. However, successfully reappropriating the Aschenbach phenomenon, Bouraoui uniquely represents the Mediterranean as a space for queer female redemption as well as she reverts the direction of travel, bringing her passenger to Italy from the south rather than the north of the sea. By doing so, she challenges the famous Orientalist trope of European men discovering their homosexual desires through their relationships with passive partners specifically chosen from the margins of Europe, whom they perceive as inferior and not equal to themselves. Reverting the route and the genders, she makes the queer Mediterranean experience to any gender and any ethnicity across the sea.

3.5. *Garçon manqué* as a Mediterranean queer feminist text

Nina Bouraoui's oeuvre is usually categorized as "Francophone literature" or "literature from the Maghreb" by literary scholars. While these are technically valid categorizations given Bouraoui's ethnicity and her native language, *Garçon manqué*, in

particular, operates in a wider framework than France and Algeria and expands all over the Mediterranean. Considering *Garçon manqué* along with Francophone women's writing from Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific, and the Near East, offers the critic a framework that is based completely on the French effect since the only cultural element these spaces have in common is French colonialism. On the other hand, locating the novel in Maghrebi literature is also sensible, but it turns a blind eye to the novel's and the author's European background and traps Bouraoui within the scope of Algeria. Since her writing does not carry any Algerian nationalist sentiment and encourages building bridges across the north and the south of the Mediterranean, classifying her work as Maghrebi literature is also restrictive.

William Spurlin defines Bouraoui's autobiographical writing as testimonies of her "suspended" state between two national identities, being neither fully French nor fully Algerian. (113) This state of limbo makes it challenging to locate Bouraoui's works under national literature paradigms, requiring a larger framework to encapsulate the cultural versatility in her background and writing. For the reappropriation of Roman heritage and the focus on the transcontinental identity in *Garçon manqué*, handling the novel as a piece of Mediterranean literature may be beneficial for coming up with new approaches and opening new horizons for the book's criticism. By rewriting Roman gender roles and gendered hierarchies instead of completely denying them, Bouraoui takes an important step in decolonizing the perceptions regarding the ancient world and stands up against the whitewashing of the Roman Empire and its heritage.

However, it is also important to note the queer-feminist characteristic of *Garçon manqué* as a Bildungsroman about the upbringing of a queer and multinational woman. Since the ethnic and the gendered identities are intertwined in Bouraoui's experience and she uses the Mediterranean as a metaphor for the fluidity she experiences in her gendered performance, *Garçon manqué* is a key text for the concept I refer to as *Mediterranean feminism*. In the novel, Bouraoui pens a tale of self-actualization in which she offers a queer identity as an alternative to the gender binary, and a Mediterranean identity as an alternative to her two distinct national identities. She thus invents a safe, third space to come to an end with her identification crisis and uses the sea's fluidity as a metaphor for fluidity between genders and ethnicities, inspiring dialogue and transitivity among the people of the Mediterranean. Like Ece Temelkuran's *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar*, *Garçon manqué* also proves itself to be a

supranational text despite its monolingualism due to its transcontinental aspect. Both texts construct the Mediterranean identity through transmarine travel and the theme of “journeying,” elevating both physical and spiritual journeys for their female protagonists and using the Mediterranean as a playground for their characters who set out on self-actualization journeys across the sea. However, the novels do not only emphasize the theme of liberation through the physical mobility as made possible by the sea’s fluidity, but they also depict the Mediterranean as a symbolic body of water culturally loaded with the heritage of ancient women and queers.



THE INDUSTRIAL MEDITERRANEAN: SILVIA AVALLONE'S *ACCIAIO*

In Euro-American fiction, the Mediterranean shores often entail a holiday destination and natural spectacle, portrayed as a region with a rather laid-back and carefree attitude and culture. It thus functions as an alternative reality and a utopic space that contrasts with the images of Northern European settlements, which are often painted as colder, rigid, and serious hubs of industrialization. However, the image of the Mediterranean as a common destination for modern tourism is mainly a product of the “age of empire,” namely the nineteenth century, when “well-to-do Europeans grew curious about the larger world” after becoming informed about the “imperial exploits” abroad. (Baranowski et al. 101, Hom 93) Viewed as a frontier of Europe from the rest of the world, the Mediterranean shores were one of the exotic destinations that ignited curiosity in the European imagination. The European inclination to glamorize industriousness and modernity in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries also played a part in the popularity of the Mediterranean as a vacation destination, causing the Europeans to seek an alternative to the coarse and rigid spaces they industrialized and mechanized, searching for “aesthetic enjoyment or food for thought.” (Villa 9)

For this reason, travel writing or fiction taking place in more “exotic” and peripheral spaces enjoyed popularity among European readers. These works successfully fired the readers’ imagination about distant lands and raised curiosity by portraying Europe’s frontier as a land of opportunity, a distinct playground for the traveler where the impossible and the immoral according to European values were appropriated and normalized. However, this imaginary Mediterranean and its glamorized images distributed by its depictions in the media often failed to be realistic, coming off as rather idealized echoes of the real Mediterranean experience. The image of the tourist spot, on the other hand, has also been appropriated by the states occupying the Mediterranean shores themselves for the sake of material profit and advertising a cultural identity. (Hom 93) The states’ self-marketing along with the fictional portrayals created a stereotype and implanted a uniform image of the Mediterranean in the European collective imagination, as the industrial or semi-urban spaces in the Mediterranean became overlooked and rarely talked about.

Considering urban planning as artistic expression, Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of the "duality of the Apolline and the Dionysiac," namely the two artistic impulses that collide and create all art, becomes relevant in this discussion. To Nietzsche, the Apolline drive entails order, individuality, self-control, industry, and progress; while the Dionysiac drive represents chaos, excess, hedonism, and ecstasy. (14) The Apolline/Dionysiac dichotomy shows itself in studies of geographies and urbanism through the opposing images of the Citadel and the eternal Garden engraved in the Western collective consciousness; the former being traditionally viewed as Apolline as Apollo was known as the "patron of cities and city walls," and the latter being associated with the Dionysiac, due to nature's spontaneity and wilderness. (Akkerman 232-233)

However, the Apolline/Dionysiac dichotomy is also gendered in Nietzsche's framework, as he openly likens these two drives to the "way reproduction depends on there being two sexes which co-exist in a state of perpetual conflict interrupted only occasionally by periods of reconciliation." (14) With its strictly defined boundaries and opportunities of rapid industrialization, the urban space is considered Apolline and masculine, while nature is often referred to as a mother or likened to a womb for its fertility and "softness." (Akkerman 232) In this framework, industrial spaces are traditionally associated with masculinity due to the physically vigorous characteristics of the work undertaken in factories and mines, while touristic spaces are rather embroidered with traditionally feminine qualities such as beauty and delicacy.

Applying this logic to the conventional image of the Mediterranean, the stereotypical image of the area often encountered in European literature as touristic wonderlands thus turns out to be Dionysiac and feminine as defined by Nietzsche. Thus, modernist works influenced by the Apolline values embodied by Europe showed an inclination to view the Dionysiac Mediterranean as an immoral and primitive "exotic locale," backward in terms of civilization, a playground that enabled acting upon desires forbidden in mainland Europe. (Said 192) For this reason, the common trope regarding travel fiction in the modernist era often carried orientalist and colonial undertones as explained in the previous chapter, as Europe considered the Mediterranean its frontier from the rest of the world. However, the Apolline and the industrial spaces that came to be in the Mediterranean were largely ignored by fictional depictions, limiting Mediterranean representation and feeding stereotypes.

When theorizing about Mediterranean feminism from the standpoint of contemporary women's writing, looking deeper into the performances of contemporary Mediterranean masculinities is inevitable. To better understand the construction of masculinities in the area, it is logical to pay attention to the area's industrial, and traditionally masculine spaces that do not fit in the conventional, tourist-attracting image of the Mediterranean often included in fictional depictions. For this reason, this chapter is devoted to Silvia Avallone's 2010 novel *Acciaio* (translated as *Swimming to Elba* into English) as an example of the contrast between the touristic and the industrial spaces, focusing on a gender-based perspective that considers the way gendered bodies influence and become influenced by the spheres they inhabit. Taking place in the industrial Tuscan town of Piombino in 2001, *Acciaio* is concerned with the construction of masculine culture in industrial areas and the peripherality of women in a hypermasculine society. The novel displays severe gender-based inequalities and disparities among the Piombinesi, as much as it emphasizes the deeper contrast between the touristic havens of the Mediterranean and its industrial areas, the latter being usually overlooked by the conventional depictions of the region.

4.1. Masculine and feminine spatialities in *Acciaio*

Although located by the sea, Avallone's Piombino is no tourist destination, making the novel stand out among generic fictional descriptions of Italy and the rest of the Mediterranean. While the tourists are mentioned to frequent the islands of Elba and Sardinia which are accessible from Piombino, Avallone claims that it is impossible to see "l'ombra di un turista nemmeno per sbaglio" (*not even the shadow of a tourist, not even a lost tourist*) in Via Stalingrado, the street where *Acciaio*'s main characters live. (Avallone 55) Instead, Piombino is an industrial site, and the dominant culture in Avallone's depiction of the town is mainly shaped by its industrialism. An integral counterpart of the town is the Lucchini steel plant, where most of the male characters are employed and which receives significant textual attention through constant references to working conditions and employee culture in the mill. Making up most of the town, the Lucchini steel plant is an area reserved only for men, while the women are either confined to domestic spaces or seen dwelling in nature, especially swimming in the sea or playing at the beach. (Ross 250) Almost all the male characters mentioned in the novel are either employed in the steel plant or have been employed there at some point in their lives. This detail emphasizes the inevitability of the steel plant for the men

of the town, and it underlines the immensity of the mill's importance in the daily lives of the Piombinesi.

Although industrious and masculine, *Acciaio's* Piombino is also no Apolline utopia, as Avallone's depictions of the Lucchini steel plant are often grotesque and monstrous, portrayed as a gargantuan and lifelike industrial body. The author portrays Lucchini itself as a living body on its own; as she refers to the retired machinery in an abandoned part of the factory as “ramo morto della fabbrica si era ridotto a una carcassa di ruggine” (*a dead branch reduced to a carcass of rusted metal*) and a “cimitero industriale,” (*industrial cemetery*) preferring wording related to biological death and decay. (Avallone 34) The steel plant's monstrous body is not only ever-living, but it is also unsafe and ruthless as it metaphorically consumes other living beings to sustain itself. This tendency is first implied in the novel by one of the mill workers', Alessio's, traumatic and violent memory of a cat getting stuck in the engine and dying. (Avallone 48) The cat is both a metaphor for the workers' lives spent stuck in the factory and in the town, as well as a hint for the novel's ending, in which Alessio faces a similar death to the one he witnessed, dying tragically in a workplace accident. Portraying the steel plant as a living being that devours smaller prey, Avallone alludes to how the industrial system in the town sustains itself off of the inhabitants' lives. The workers pass away, parts of the factory metaphorically “die” as Anna and Francesca are said to visit a “dead part” of the steel plant that is no longer in use, but the presence of the steel plant never ceases as it keeps sustaining itself from the beginning until the end of the novel.

Subsuming a relevantly large portion of the town, the steel plant has a significant impact on the construction and expression of masculinities in Piombino as well. The male citizens of the town are depicted as hypermasculine and macho, with the men of the previous generation still worshipping “il mito di Al Capone e del Padrino, quelli di Francis Ford Coppola” (*the myth of Al Capone and Francis Ford Coppola's Godfather*) and the new generation of men having right-wing political tendencies, voting Berlusconi “perché non é sfigato” (*because he is no loser.*) (Avallone 19) Although they work under harsh conditions and are oppressed in a capitalist system, the right-wing ideology lays the basis of the hypermasculine working culture dominant in the town and the male workers of the steel plant are depicted as traditionally right-leaning. Idealizing hypermasculine images from popular culture including populist

right-wing politicians and equating power with masculinity, they also suppress the women of the town and find power by repressing women's freedom of expression and sexuality.

Given the masculine working culture encouraged by the steel plant, the relationship and impact between the steel plant and its workers can be interpreted as bilateral. The cycle is never-ending, the culture keeps reinventing itself, and the steel plant survives without ever changing. In *Notes Toward a Politics of Location* (1984), Adrienne Rich theorizes about the relationship between bodies and the spaces they inhabit and interact with, explaining a dynamic exchange between spaces and their inhabitants by arguing how places create and mold their inhabitants, and inhabitants on the places they occupy. The hypermasculine culture in Piombino thus survives through the mill's survival, the former creating the right conditions for the latter to thrive, and vice versa. The ever-consuming quality of the steel plant and its being depicted as spread all over the town also hints at the oppressive quality of the kind of masculinity prevalent in Piombino, raising questions about the spaces inhabited by women and how they influence and get influenced by such spaces. The oppression among the working class in Piombino is systematic and hierarchical: While the steel mill is described as devouring and overwhelming the male workers, the men of the town exert a similar kind of power on the women and the girls.

Rich defines the human body as the "closest geography" to women, a microcosmic space nearer and narrower than a "continent, country or a house." (Rich 212) To Rich, women's reclamation of spaces begins with the reclamation of the female body, which resonates with Acciaio's female protagonists' reclamation of the sea: Anna and Francesca are mostly seen at the beach and in the domestic spheres, which mostly entails their families' households where they are objected to oppression from their fathers or brothers. The girls' corporeal and sexual freedom is heavily restricted by paternal figures from their families, who keep them under control through physical and verbal violence in the household and by watching over them when they are outside. The only space where the two girls are relatively freed from the patriarchal gaze is the seashore: When they are not home, the pair is frequently depicted swimming at the beach, the sea offering the girls an escape spot from the oppressive and suffocating atmosphere of the town and the domestic space. The sea, with its fluidity and its positionality as Piombino's gateway to Elba Island, represents opportunity and hope for

the girls where they can distance themselves from the patriarchal culture of the town. In many instances, the idea of the possibility of freedom associated with the sea also entails female sexual desire uncontrolled and unleashed. This allusion is logical given that women's sexual activity and desire are the most repressed by the patriarchal figures in Piombino, who constantly worry about the chastity of the women of their family. Most of the erotic scenes as described or implied by the author in the novel occur by the beach, as the girls share their first kiss there and they are depicted as playing semi-erotic or flirty games with the boys when going swimming. The girls' sexual inclinations and levels of desire are also reinforced by the sea metaphor, as Anna, who is more sexually active than Francesca is described as "Appena vedeva l'acqua, Anna impazziva," (*The minute she saw the water, Anna would go crazy*) while Francesca is rather redundant when jumping into the sea and she is thrown into the sea with the pressure of the boys. (Avallone 53) This allusion is confirmed in the scene where Anna and Francesca visit an unused part of the factory with two boys, Nino and Massi, and they romantically and sexually interact with them. Although Nino confesses his love to Francesca, she does not feel genuinely attracted to him, as Avallone mentions "le dava fastidio toccarlo. Le faceva schifo il contatto. (...) La sua bellezza era inutile, non la poteva muovere." (*It repelled her to touch him. The contact disgusted her. His beauty was pointless; it couldn't move her*) (Avallone 37) She kisses him because Nino initiates the act, and she gives in only for she believes that "così era giusto." (*that's what was right*) (37) Anna, on the other hand, is described as kissing Massi out of genuine sexual desire in the next paragraph: "Anna lo faceva, con Massi: si baciavano in bocca." (*Anna did it, with Massi: They kissed each other, openmouthed*) Creating a comparison between the two girls' sexual behaviors, Avallone creates similar dynamics between their sexual drive and their reluctance by the sea, strengthening the position of the sea in the novel as a metaphor for sexuality.

The sea entails opportunity and freedom not only for the seclusion it offers from the town but also for being positioned as a gateway to the Island of Elba, which is a popular vacation destination and a delicate space that fits the image of the Mediterranean in European collective consciousness. Contrasting with the masculine and restrictive image of Piombino as painted by Avallone, the Island of Elba remains a vivid, luxurious object of desire throughout the novel for the two girls. The name of the English translation of the book, *Swimming to Elba*, is an allusion to the girls' fancy to

“swim” to the Island of Elba, which is barely a ferry ride away from Piombino. The girls are said to have never “laid eyes on” the “scheduled ferry service” from Piombino to Elba, most likely due to the oppression they receive from the restrictive male figures in their families, and also since they would not be able to afford the trip even if they were allowed. “Soltanto quattro chilometri” (*three miles away*) to Piombino, Elba is defined as “così vicina, eppure irraggiungibile” (*So near, yet unattainable*) for the girls. (Avallone 25) While the island is physically and theoretically attainable from Piombino, it is financially gatekept from their reach. Throughout the narrative, Elba constantly “glitters” and “gleams” from a distance, stressing its desirability and luxury for the Piombinesi as much as the rich tourists inhabiting the island. The glimpses of the island can be interpreted as allusions to the girls’ hopes for a better future, however, its inaccessibility stresses how the chance of a better future is denied to them due to poverty and lack of resources. Thus, Elba’s glamorous depictions come off as rather sarcastic and critical of the overall capitalistic system, inventing artificial centers and confining the poor in the peripheries, gatekeeping them from experiencing the freedom and joy experienced by the tourists at Elba. The author does not idealize Elba as a utopia that would solve the girls’ problems regarding gender and oppression the moment they lay a foot on it; instead, she criticizes the capitalist system that draws invisible and imagined boundaries between physically accessible spaces.

4.2. Women’s corporeality and bodily agency

Acciaio opens with the image of a concerned father, Enrico, watching over his daughter with binoculars as she swims in the sea. Enrico’s main concern is not the daughter’s physical safety but her revealing swimsuit and the attention she receives from the town’s boys. A worker in the Lucchini steel plant in Piombino, Enrico shows significant concern about her daughter Francesca turning into “una puttana” or becoming “incinta” more than he worries about her well-being or health, which is clearly stated by the author as the father figure does not show as much concern to his daughter’s suicide attempt. (Avallone 24, 32) The men of the community in Piombino carry the ultimate power over women’s bodies, deciding how they dress, how they present themselves, and at what age they are allowed to perform in a traditionally feminine manner, wearing makeup and dressing up in more mature clothes. Anna’s father Arturo, for instance, is seen throwing a “sceneggiata” (*tantrum*) after seeing his daughter wearing eyeliner before turning eighteen and “sembra una puttana.” (*looking*

like a whore) (Avallone 42-43) The patriarchal culture dominant in the town first reduces women's and young girls' "corporeality to object status" and then the men of Piombino aim to acquire full control over these objectified bodies through violence and intimidation. (Ross, *Spaces of Female Friendship and Sexuality*, 59)

However, having grown up in a severely patriarchal culture and having been exposed to such gender-based violence in their households; Anna, Francesca, and the other young girls from Piombino have internalized the male gaze that objectifies their bodies and accepted their favored passive role in their society where the male is the natural-born worker. The society in Piombino does not only restrict women's bodily freedom, but it is also frowned upon for women to be opinionated according to the culture they live in. Anna's mother, Sandra, is depicted as a left-wing woman interested in politics, defined as "forse l'unica donna dei palazzi a leggere un quotidiano ogni giorno," (*probably the only woman in the apartment buildings to read a newspaper every day*) which has people "veniva guardata con diffidenza." (*look at her with mistrust*) (Avallone 57) By educating herself about daily matters and the outside of the domestic sphere, Sandra breaks out of the housewife role assigned to her and loses people's sympathy for deviating from tradition and habit.

When it comes to looking for ways out of their poverty-struck and claustrophobic world, the only option Francesca can think of is "a diciott'anni partecipare a Miss Italia e essere notata da qualcuno." (*competing for Miss Italy at eighteen and being noticed by someone*) (Avallone 24) Francesca's idea of running for Miss Italy reinforces the girls' internalization of their bodies' objectification, expecting a potential reward in exchange of her physical beauty and viewing the beauty contest as her only chance of salvation. The "someone" that Francesca expects to be noticed by is likely to be a powerful male figure willing to marry a Miss Italy contestant, and this implies that the only saviors the girls can imagine are potential future husbands. The girls feel overtly delighted and empowered by the reception of male attention, an important component to survive in the social scene of the town as a female. The company of men, wrapping their arms around "a due uomini bellissimi" (*two beautiful men*) makes the girls feel "potenti," (*powerful*) implying how sexual desire comes second in their relations with the boys they are involved with, and the desire for power and popularity is prioritized for them. (Avallone 35)

Anna feels a similar kind of power and pride for having Alessio as her brother, given his popularity among girls, his toughness, and his good looks. The young girls of Piombino associate power with men and see the men around them as their only chance to reach power, whether they have them as their fathers, brothers, or boyfriends. The men's positions in the girls' lives are often not very well-defined, as Anna confides about seeing a boy she has a sexual relationship with as “non era il suo fidanzato, era un po' come un fratello maggiore.” (*not her boyfriend; he was more like an older brother*) (Avallone 39) Anna's relationship with Alessio is also problematic in this fashion, as Alessio thinks about how his fourteen-year-old sister turned into “una gran topa” (*a tremendous babe*) speaking of her beauty as a threat that puts Anna in need of his protection. (Avallone 31) The two siblings share a bed naked although Anna thinks “non va più bene” (*maybe it's not okay anymore*) due to her hitting puberty and no longer being a child. (31) She refers to her brother's body as “il suo scoglio,” (*her reef*) the choice of wording related to the sea implicating her both protective and subconsciously erotic feelings towards Alessio. (32) For Anna the two concepts are apparently intertwined, as she tends to confuse the desire for power and safety for erotic desire, and vice versa. In this framework, a brotherly, protective figure like Alessio and a romantic/erotic love interest like Massi get mixed up, blurring the lines between all male figures around her and reducing them to just “men” regardless of their roles in Anna's life.

The young Piombinese are portrayed as preoccupied with their looks and receiving attention from the boys to the point of unconsciously structuring a social hierarchy that relies on beauty and the reception of male attention. Another girl of Anna's and Francesca's age, Lisa, is openly described as “brutta, con quel muso appuntito, da topo, il naso troppo grande, all'ingiù, e i capelli fini, sbiaditi e radi.” (*And she was ugly, with her pointy, mousy little face, her oversized, downturned nose, and her thin, drab, sparse hair...*) (Avallone 22) Due to her physical unattractiveness and the lack of male attention around her as implied by the author, Lisa is perceived as a “loser” among the girls who are uninterested in befriending her. Lisa “guardava allo specchio, a lungo,” (*would study herself in the mirror at length*) often and “se sorprende un brufolo sulla fronte, avvertiva una fitta al petto” (*if she detected a zit on her forehead, she felt a sharp stab of fear in her chest*) which displays the pressure to fit in the beauty standards faced by the adolescent girls of Piombino when growing up.

Any minor detail that is deemed unattractive causes panic, for the girls see their physical attractiveness as their only asset and only exchangeable good for a better future.

Silvia Ross emphasizes the “excessive textual attention dedicated” to the girls’ physical appearances put in the text by the author, sharing a similar stance with the male gaze that objectifies the bodies of the women and young girls in their town. (*Spaces of Female Friendship and Sexuality*, 58) While the text indeed pays significant attention to its female characters’ physical features, this could also be a narrative strategy employed purposefully by the author to represent the girls’ views of themselves and their surroundings as induced by the male gaze they internalized, which makes up the patriarchal culture in Piombino. While making many allusions to female characters’ physical attractiveness, Avallone also is also aware of the temporariness of beauty and the impossibility of sustaining an image and popularity based on beauty forever: Speaking of Sonia, whom she describes as the “ex-Francesca” of Via Stalingrado, Avallone says “Adesso lavorava come commessa da Calzedonia, e nessuno si ricordava più del tempo in cui era bella.” (*Now she worked as a salesclerk at Calzedonia, selling stockings and beachwear, and no one remembered when she was pretty*) (Avallone 53) Thus, Avallone’s mentions of the girls’ beauty gain a sarcastic tone, implying how they will end up forgotten like Sonia, the girl who used to enjoy Francesca’s position and popularity. Instead of barely appreciating and prioritizing female beauty, the author stresses her protagonists’ attractiveness to draw attention to the problematic, overly physical, and shallow culture among the young Piombinesi. Having been born and raised in the same culture without any chance to experience a different space due to poverty, the girls of Piombino have no choice but to accept the traditional roles assigned to them by the patriarchy as either mothers and wives, or sexual objects that satisfy the male workers’ voyeuristic or physical desires.

However, the objectification of women’s bodies is also depicted as a tool in the bigger picture, a wider system that oppresses the working class inhabiting the town. Avallone draws attention to a widespread voyeur culture among the men working in Lucchini, as they are depicted as having sexualized images of women in their workplace, “la quantità spropositata di calendari sexy e poster di donne nude appesi da tutte le parti.” (*the disproportionate number of sexy calendars and posters of naked women hanging everywhere in the steel mill*) (Avallone 48) The mill workers also often

frequent the Gilda, the strip club near Piombino. Sex and women's bodies are merely a distraction offered to the male workers from the rough conditions of the work they do daily along with the drugs they are mentioned using. At one scene, Anna's older brother Alessio and his best friend Cristiano are seen in a Peugeot which "*ci aveva montato sopra tre alettoni stile Batman. L'aveva addirittura abbassata di dieci centimetri per renderla più aggressiva,*" (*he installed three Batman-style spoilers on the back. He'd even chopped and channeled it four inches lower to make it more aggressive*) which matches with the aggressive expression of masculinity widespread in the town.

(Avallone 46) While Cristiano does drugs and asks to go to the strip club to have access to sex more easily by paying for it, Alessio seems rather nonchalant and his mind is fixated on the memory of the cat's death, which he witnessed in the steel mill. The cat that got crushed under the machines is defined as one of those "*non hanno mai visto la luce del sole, non hanno idea di cosa sia un filo d'erba.*" (*cats that have never seen the light of day, cats that don't know what a blade of grass looks like*) (Avallone 47) These cats metaphorically represent the mill workers in Lucchini, who are trapped inside the factory like the cats and who are destined to work in the mill due to the lack of options and the impossibility of social mobility. Moved by the cat metaphor, Alessio experiences a moment of enlightenment in the car, and he shows disinterest in the drugs and Cristiano's offer of going to the Gilda to hire prostitutes. He thus rejects the mundane pleasures offered to mill workers to take their minds away from reality and chooses to focus on his working conditions and his future with a clear mind, unblurred by any distraction. He questions his existence as he asks if his future will be all about "*lavorare tutta la vita là dentro.*" (*working in there your whole life*) (Avallone 48)

Cristiano, on the other hand, "*invece non gliene fregava niente: né dei gatti né della Lucchini che vedeva ogni santo giorno*" (*didn't give a damn about the cats or about the Lucchini steel mill, which he saw every blessed day*) as he keeps indulging on the same old distractions offered to mill workers which prevent him from experiencing the same awakening as Alessio. (Avallone 48) Cristiano simply accepts the steel mill as an unchangeable fact of his life, and since he cannot imagine turning against the system, he chooses to make do with the insignificant attractions and pleasures offered to him. This instance hints that the oppression of the working class in Piombino is systemic and multi-dimensional, with the men being oppressed by their working conditions and the women by men. As women's bodies are only one of the few things that the working-class men of Piombino can control, the oppression of women becomes crucial for them

to feel in charge. However, the misogyny and the objectification of female bodies also help sustain the system by keeping the men under control and distracted from the harshness of their life conditions by offering them short-term bodily sensations.

4.3. The sea as a space of female empowerment and the alternative reality

A monstrous body that devours and eats its workers alive, the Lucchini steel plant physically and socially suffocates the Piombinesi. The deadliness of the steel mill is both literal and metaphorical, as Lucchini is depicted as an unsafe working place with poor conditions and overwhelming working hours. However, the overwhelming capitalist system symbolized by the factory does not only destroy and wreck its workers' lives, but it also indirectly influences the lives of women through its impact on the town's culture. Reproducing the same culture that is prominent in the mill, the domestic spheres also fail to offer a safe space for women and girls, as Anna, Francesca, and their mothers are victims of domestic violence in their households. The only safe zone remaining for the girls that the mill cannot metaphorically reach is the sea and the beach, where they are depicted as content and playing games or swimming with the young boys. Although judged by the rest of the town that is watching from afar, the beach still functions as a secluded space that protects the girls from patriarchal violence.

While the sea protects the women and girls from male violence to an extent, the male gaze prominent in the whole town also remains present at the beach. Although there are also often girls their age who are also there in the beach scenes, the two protagonists rarely spend time with them, instead, they are mostly seen with boys. Anna and Francesca's relationships with the other girls are rather tense, as the young girls and women of the town are depicted as having a hard time developing friendships due to jealousy and rivalry. The main characters, especially Francesca, are envied by the other girls for their beauty which is constantly emphasized by the author, as well as the amount of attention they receive from the boys, a direct result of their attractiveness. This rivalry at the heart of the girls' antagonism is a product of the male gaze internalized by women, which makes them compete for male attention and see each other as possible threats instead of peers. Frustrated with not being able to experience the same kind of attention, Lisa and the other girls who are not as popular as the protagonists brand Anna and Francesca as "due puttane" out of jealousy. In this scene,

Avallone strikingly expresses how slut-shaming among women is mostly a product of frustration and heartbreak. This way, the town's men's strategy of slut-shaming sexually active women in order to keep their sexuality under control becomes reinforced by other women as well and the prominent sex-negative discourse repeats itself.

In return, Anna and Francesca also think poorly of the other girls who slut-shame them. Lisa is perceived as a “loser” by the two girls for her often-mentioned unattractiveness, and her sister Donata is “non sarebbe dovuta esistere” (*shouldn't have existed at all*) (Avallone 24) in their opinion for she is physically handicapped and destined to die young. Francesca and Anna approach Donata with an ableist worldview, believing that people like her “non può stare al mondo.” (*can't live in this world*) (24) Donata's disability being only physical and not mental, as she is portrayed as able to engage in conversations with Anna and Francesca, emphasizes the physicality of the world the girls live in which is ableist by essence: Regardless of gender, the people of Piombino are used to making profit using their bodies, making their living out as blue-collared workers or getting a chance for upward social mobility through their physical attractiveness through beauty contests or marrying rich. In such a system that depends completely on corporeality, people like Donata cannot survive and cannot find a place. The ableism prevalent in Anna and Francesca's vision of Donata is also produced by the industrial and masculine culture of the town, which prioritizes physicality and leaves Donata twice as marginalized as a disabled woman. Unlike her more rigid opinions towards Lisa, Anna “le piaceva” (*liked*) Donata, because the girls likely view Donata outside their competition. The girls both pity her and feel more relaxed with her in comparison with their harsh feelings toward the other girls in the town, not considering Donata a threat.

Used to being “al centro della loro attenzione,” (*the center of the boys' attention*) Anna and Francesca “non potevano accettare di essere lasciate da parte. Si infiammavano e saltavano addosso a tutti.” (*couldn't take being sidelined. Inflamed, they leaped onto backs and shoulders, grabbed all the players*) (Avallone 53-54) The girls demand attention even when they cannot seem to receive it, and the lack of attention leaves them angry and heartbroken. While Anna's case is different as she is mentioned to feel heterosexual desire, the case of Francesca, who claims “non avrebbe potuto mai innamorarsi di un uomo” (*she could never fall in love with a man*) clarifies

that the girls' main motivation for demanding male attention is not the desire, but the social power it entails. (Avallone 38) Expressing her inability to feel sexual or romantic desire for men, Francesca's desire is channelled into her best friend Anna instead. However, Francesca still hangs out with the boys for the sake of her popularity in Via Stalingrado and eventually takes a job as a stripper at Gilda, a heterosexual strip club aimed at men, where she starts making real material profit out of her good looks. Francesca feels a need to ignore her homosexual nature and desire which is considered abnormal in the town and does not bring her any social or financial reward. She has internalized the abnormality attributed to lesbianism herself, as she refers to Anna's heterosexuality as her being "normale." (Avallone 55) The patriarchal culture denounces female homosexuality the same way it prevents female homosociality, positioning women as rivals over friends or lovers. Hindering any kind of meaningful and healthy relationships among women, the patriarchal system makes women even more dependent on men both financially and socially.

In *I Love to You: Sketch for a Felicity within History*, (1990) Luce Irigaray draws attention to the importance of building a "female culture" to overcome patriarchal tropes. (44) To Irigaray, the modern society is one that "excludes between-woman sociality, separates women from one another and does not have a female culture." (44) The excessively male-dominated culture in *Acciaio* where any female-to-female socialization is almost non-existent and where women's opinions of each other are based on the opinions of men reinforces Irigaray's take on society and the need for a female culture among the women and the girls, which is restricted from being founded due to rivalry and envy. In *Acciaio*, the only place that is available for the birth of such a counterculture is the beachside; and coincidentally or not, Anna and Francesca almost always encounter and communicate with Lisa, Donata, and the other girls by the sea. Constantly bringing the girls together, the beach could have been a space of female solidarity and homosociality if they could develop a meaningful relationship based on rapport and empathy, however, the male gaze internalized by the girls prevents any chance of intimacy among females and immediately turns their communication sour, stained by rivalry. Thus, the sea entails another missed opportunity outside of Elba, which is the chance to form a community of young women supporting each other without enmity. This time, the male gaze draws another invisible border between the girls, drawing them apart and preventing them from creating a

female culture. The lack of an alternative to the dominant patriarchal culture in Piombino makes it easier for patriarchy to repair and reproduce itself across generations, directly preventing change in the other spheres of the town including the domestic spaces and the mill itself.

4.4. Misogyny, capitalism, poverty

The novel starts and builds up by narrating the oppressive forces faced by both genders in Piombino, and it ends with Anna's older brother Alessio's death in a workplace accident. Alessio's tragic death in the Lucchini steel plant emphasizes that it is not only the women suffering from the capitalistic system that feeds itself from misogyny, but the men too. The spiral of oppression among the working class begins with the oppression of women and sexuality at its first step, the obsession with women both as daughters or sisters in need of protection or as objects of desire distracting the working men from thinking about their own condition. However, although the role of the protector or the seducer helps the men experience temporary feelings of being in charge, it is the Lucchini steel plant that has ultimate control and power over the men of Piombino, where they are destined to work and which puts their lives under danger with its poor working conditions. The mill controls every life in the town regardless of gender and overpowers its landscape, oppressing men through work, and women through men. In this fashion, the novel's ending with Alessio's tragic death in the mill and the girls' reconciliation to mourn for Anna's brother represents a possibility of change, when Alessio's death is interpreted as a metaphor for a class-based awakening and a blow on the patriarchal culture that encompasses the town. The girls are encouraged to fulfil their dream of visiting Elba after Alessio's death, and although the novel is hesitant in glamorizing Elba's touristic image, this instance suggests that the girls take steps for winning over their freedom of mobility.

Unlike the female characters in Ece Temelkuran's *Düğümlere Üfleyen Kadınlar* or Nina Bouraoui's *Garçon manqué*, *Acciaio*'s protagonists have little to no access to mobility until the end of the novel and thus little chance to change their surroundings and living conditions. The furthest destination from Piombino the characters are seen going is the Gilda, the strip club "situated between Grosseto and Livorno." (Ross 247) The immovability of the characters is best stressed by the unavailability of Elba Island, which is although deeply desired by the Piombinesi from afar, is denied from their accessibility. Although all borders are arbitrary, not all borders are politically or

ethnically defined by states; as some of them are determined by social or financial conditions. While *Acciaio* does not encompass a transnational narrative unlike the two other novels mentioned in previous chapters and its characters are strictly bound to an Italian context, the novel still embodies a trans-Mediterranean theme and encourages the trespassing of arbitrary borders. While Piombino and the Elba Island are technically in the same country, they are kept apart by a set of interconnected factors other than stately borders. In Anna and Francesca's case, an invisible border induced by class, poverty, and a hypermasculine culture keeps Elba out of their reach and leaves them stuck in Piombino. Displaying Piombino's Mediterranean shores as the girls' only sanctuary from the prevalent patriarchal ideology of the town and fictionalizing the seaside as a missed opportunity for a sphere of female solidarity and liberation, Silvia Avallone contributes to the image of the Mediterranean as a sphere of feminist awakening like Temelkuran and Bouraoui by using the sea as a metaphoric space for women's self-actualization and bonding. Avallone places women's oppression under the root of different kinds of inequalities such as class struggle, and offers solving the issue of women first to change the system from its core. Creating a failed image and making the reader think about what could have been different, Avallone refrains from offering the reader a utopic and idealized vision of the Mediterranean Sea or of female friendship, instead, she fires the readers' imaginations to envision a feminist community brought together by the sea themselves and question the problems of the working-class society by filling in the blanks.

CONCLUSION

The Mediterranean and the Caribbean, in a theoretical sense, seem similar in terms of positionality and the themes they entail in the Western imagination. They are both liminal spaces between different continents, with the Caribbean dividing North and South America and the Mediterranean being the gateway between Europe, Asia, and Africa. Both areas are multilingual, multiracial, and multicultural due to their colonial pasts, and both regions are represented as laidback, relaxed, and touristic in the Euro-American collective consciousness. However, to be able to theorize based on the comparison of the two areas, the contrasts between them also become crucial.

Regarding the similarities and differences between the Caribbean and the Mediterranean, Caribbean scholar Edouard Glissant argues that while the Mediterranean is an “inner sea surrounded by lands,” a fluid body that collects and brings continents and islands together, The Caribbean functions in the opposite direction: The Caribbean is “a sea that explodes the scattered lands into an arc. A sea that diffracts.” (33) Glissant claims that this geographic nuance is the main contrast between the two regions that cause a significant cultural difference, as Mediterranean being a sea that “concentrates” results in dominant ideologies in the area that imposes “the thought of One.” This issue of “oneness” can either be considered in terms of religion, given the religiously motivated conquests and wars that have occurred in the Mediterranean for centuries, or the dominance of various imperialist traditions such as the Romans and the Ottomans, inspiring another generation of empires willing to make the Mediterranean an inland sea.

Analyzing the relationship between the Caribbean and the Mediterranean from this perspective, literary and cultural theories developed in and for the Caribbean context become highly irrelevant to the Mediterranean. However, more contemporary theories of the Mediterranean denounce the discourse of unification regarding the Mediterranean strictly entailing colonialism and imperialism. Mediterranean studies seek different approaches for the area that aim to maintain solidarity while appreciating diversity.

There are two metaphors used by Mediterranean scholars to define the complex and intertwined relationships across the region, one of them being the “fishing net” and the other being the “spider web.” Claudio Fogu explains these metaphors in his book

The Fishing Net and the Spider Web, using Naples as an example for the former and the Roman Empire for the latter. (33, 59) The web metaphor implies the existence of a “spider,” a bigger power that weaves an interconnected web across the Mediterranean, all governed by the same supreme force. The spider web paradigm thus resonates with Glissant’s take on the Mediterranean, ruled by one center represented by the spider that imposes oneness across the rest of the region.

On the other hand, the fishing net approach decentralizes the Mediterranean, implying the scattering of various centers across the sea, all equally important and self-governing. In this regard, the fishing net metaphor in the Mediterranean context resembles Glissant’s theory of the Caribbean as a “sea that explodes and scatters,” not necessarily having to think of a uniform Mediterranean with one imperial power as its possessor. (33) Although the Mediterranean’s geopolitical position collects distinct lands around the sea, the Mediterranean becomes a connective power that allows space for intercultural dialogue instead of a tyrannical or opportunistic one.

The whole region has only been dominated by one empire in history, namely the Roman Empire, the only Mediterranean “spider” to encompass the entirety of the area and weave its web through its colonies. (Gnisci 263) After the downfall of the Roman Empire, Gnisci argues that the sea’s internality turned into *interconnectivity*, positioning the Mediterranean as a medium of exchange among a variety of nations and cultures that inhabit its shores. Gnisci uses this argument as evidence of the relevance of the fisher’s net paradigm over that of the spider web, creating ground to rethink Glissant’s take on the Mediterranean as a strictly imperial space. The Mediterranean is indeed an inland sea as described by Glissant, however, Gnisci describes this as a characteristic that makes it easier to construct “Mediterranneanness,” due to the lands surrounding the sea being “close to each other, accessible, communicating, facing each other, circularly continuous, through which is easy to travel because they all look out over the same sea, but which are lands of three different continents.” (262) Gnisci reimagines the same geographical conditions without hostility and imperialism unlike Glissant, who strictly associates the “easiness of travel” and “accessibility” with the desire of conquest and imposition of ideas. Although Glissant’s argument has been historically factual given the imperial traditions that idealized the Roman Empire after its downfall, the postcolonial age makes thinking of the Mediterranean as a fish net

rather than a spider web even more likely, and opens up more harmless, friendly channels of communication across the distinct centers spread all over the sea.

In this regard, the relevance of the fishnet paradigm as argued by Gnisci makes the concept of Mediterranean feminisms more possible and meaningful. Caribbean feminists created anthologies of Caribbean women's writing by compiling works across the sea, building an oeuvre of different experiences that do not achieve unity, but maintain solidarity through cross-reading. Considering the Mediterranean in accordance with the fish net model, a similar anthologizing practice that collects the works of women writers across the Mediterranean would talk about the women's experiences in each center of "the fish net" and use the sea as a space of intercultural dialogue among women.

The close readings of the three novels included in this research are merely a beginning in the attempt to anthologize an oeuvre of Mediterranean feminist writing. While women's writing from Mediterranean countries is a vast category that leaves a large amount of work to analyze, I specifically chose the works that focus on the literal Mediterranean body of water, displaying it as a space of opportunity for women. As three women authors across the Mediterranean from the contemporary period; Temelkuran, Bouraoui, and Avallone write about artificial borders that their female protagonists trespass or suffer for being unable to trespass. All three novels use the Mediterranean as an intermediary space that makes the borders easier to overcome with the fluidity it offers, as a body of water where the patriarchal rules valid in the land become inept.

Not every work penned by women is necessarily labelled as feminist, and some authors choose to denounce the "feminist" label themselves. In the Caribbean context, some authors like Maryse Condé and Simone Schwarz-Bart rejected being referred to as feminist writers, however, it did not prevent their work from being mentioned in the Caribbean feminist oeuvre. (James Alexander 190) Although they rejected the label, their work highly engaged with the experience of womanhood in the Caribbean and the day-to-day problems faced by Caribbean women. This research also does not follow a "narrowly defined" feminist framework, as it includes works across the Mediterranean that deal with women's oppression and identity issues, regardless of whether their authors refer to themselves or their work as "feminist" or not. (James Alexander 191)

All three authors mentioned in this research appropriate the Mediterranean in their works as a safe space for women that supports their self-actualization journeys and solidarity. Doing so, they also reverse the Homeric gender roles regarding the Mediterranean that associate maritime travel with men and stagnancy with women, allowing their protagonists to take a journey to “home,” which is, alluding to Adrienne Rich’s *Notes Toward a Politics of Location*, one’s own body.

As this multilingual and multicultural anthology of Mediterranean women’s writing grows and builds a Mediterranean feminist oeuvre, it is crucial to include feminist theorists and thinkers who have lived/or are living across the Mediterranean, who may have not received enough global interest due to a lack of translations and/or the peripherality of non-Anglophone academic traditions. Reading feminist theorists from the Mediterranean in tandem with the fish net paradigm of the sea would help contextualize their work and weave another net that encompasses the whole Mediterranean, brought into dialogue through multiple feminisms.

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