On the Trail of the Post-Colonial: Transcultural Spaces, Cosmopolitanism, and the Islands of the Mediterranean

Kevin Edelman, the bawab of Europe, and the gatekeeper to the orchards in the family courtyard, the same gate which had released the hordes that went out to consume the world and to which we have come shinning up to beg admittance. Refugee. Asylum-seeker: Mercy. Abdulrazak Gurnah

Cosmopolitanism isn't hard work: repudiating it is.
Anthony Kwame Appiah

Since the nineties, the need for a theorisation of new transcultural dialogic spaces has emerged in cultural and post-colonial studies. The rise of global socio-economic and political phenomena—such as the widening economic divide within the “world-system” (Wallerstein, passim), the escalation of migration and the drastic measures enforced by governments of overdeveloped countries in controlling their borders, together with the political and cultural fractures created by episodes of global terrorism—have all contributed to shift interest towards a theorisation of transcultural spaces. Such a shift has become particularly resonant in post-colonial debates about globalisation and neo-colonialism, debates which are especially relevant to the Mediterranean region today. Notwithstanding that in the past fifteen years, the islands of the Mediterranean have been the site of arrival for the majority of the refugees and migrants from both Asia and Africa attempting to enter the EU, their role as possible transcultural spaces has been largely overlooked within the scholarships of transculturation, Mediterranean and island studies. This paper attempts to redress such a gap.

The islands of the Mediterranean Sea share a long history as “contact zones,” which Mary Louise Pratt defines as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (33). Like the Cuban island context in which Fernando Ortiz theorised “transculturación,” Mediterranean islands share a history of many arrivals, conquests, pillages, and departures. The transcultural nature of the islands is mostly celebrated...
in archaeological books and evoked in historical discourses as a thing of the past. Mediterranean islands are predominantly represented in the media today as exotic abodes, tourist heavens, undeveloped regions, and, as such, sites of pure and uncontaminated nature and unique cultural traditions. Strengthened by common discourses on islands, in which ”isolation” and “boundedness” are among the main features, this overpowering narrative of uniqueness fails to elaborate on how such uniqueness has been achieved and exposes the erasure of the transcultural encounters that contributed to create it. In this paper, I want to remind us of the heterogeneous and transcultural nature of the Mediterranean islands and to add a new meaning to the predominant narrative of these islands that points to their strategic importance as examples of transcultural spaces. This is especially relevant in the context of immigration policies and uneven relationships, such as exist between the countries bordering on the northern and southern shores of the sea. I begin by underlining the amniotic-like connection between the Mediterranean Sea and its islands and then follow the trail of the post-colonial left behind by the many boats, barges, dinghies, rafts, tubs, and other vessels that traverse this enclosed space of water. I then touch upon the strategic importance of islands in the Western imaginary and suggest how the location, the layering of histories, and the transcultural narratives of the contact-zone favour a cosmopolitan reading of the Mediterranean region. I want to read these traces within a theoretical framework that acknowledges the importance of the Mediterranean region as a model of a “feasible alternative,” both on the political and cultural level, while foregrounding it as a geographical location for a multiethnic and plural society (see Cassano and Zolo). My contribution to this discourse goes a step further and intends to unearth a vocabulary and a narrative with which to begin to posit the islands of the Mediterranean as new transcultural spaces within what has become now such a space of disquiet.

I grew up on the second largest island in the Mediterranean Sea, Sardinia. Its profoundly heterogeneous culture, like that of all other islands in this region, has been enriched by the many interactions brought to its shores and indigenous people by the sea. Phoenicians, Carthaginians, Romans, Byzantines, Pisans, Catalan-Aragonese, Spaniards, and Piedmontese are among the major waves of people that one after another dominated Sardinia up to 1861, when under its then denomination as the Kingdom of Sardinia in the hands of the House of Savoy, it led the process of the unification of Italy. Before the settlement of the Phoenicians in c. 1000 BC, the population of Sardinia was already racially and culturally diverse. People came from “Ligury and Tuscany in Italy, the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, the Caucasus Region and the Middle East” (Contu 287), and though, contrary to Sicily, Sardinia was never conquered by the Berbers and the Arabs, incursions by the Moors were frequent affairs and their cultural and genetic imprints are still tangible today (Contu 287). Though hardly acknowledged as a positive contingency within the island’s collective memory—an old adage claims that all that comes from the sea is not to be trusted—legacies of the continuous contacts and interaction processes between the locals and the newcomers are readily available not only in the many archaeological remains and local architecture, but also in the food, the manufactures, the language, the names, and physical appearances of the people. Almond-shaped eyes and very dark olive complexities resurface as physiognomic evidence of the suppressed ghosts from the past when the Mauri, a Libyan-Berber population, settled in south-west Sardinia in the fifth century and became the Maureddinos, the “Little Mauri,” a denomination still common today in this area. Similarly, blue eyes and red hair are some of the genetic vestiges of Norman and Swabian Sicily, and Phoenician genetic imprints have now been discovered in a high proportion of individuals in the Southern Mediterranean region—predominantly coastal Lebanon, Cyprus, Crete, Malta, eastern Sicily, southern Sardinia, Ibiza, southern Spain, coastal Tunisia, and the city of Tngres in Morocco—in which one out of seventeen men may have Phoenician ancestry (Rincon).

Layers upon layers, histories after histories, wave upon wave, the islands of the Mediterranean have been shaped and defined by what the sea brought to their shores. Favoured by its intimate enclosure and the proximity of its coastline, the Mediterranean Sea—often referred to as a lake to remark on its definite boundaries and easy-to-navigate perimeters—has shaped its islands. Notwithstanding its denomination in the singular, the Mediterranean Sea is a complex and multifaceted entity, “a succession of small seas that communicate by means of wider or narrower entrances” to use Fernand Braudel’s words (72). The islands’ idiosyncrasies and sites as contact zones are dependent on this basin of water, which surrounds them but does not necessarily isolate them.

Contemporary western readings of the Mediterranean, subordinated to the political and economical benefits of the countries on its northern shores, tend to reduce the polyvocality of the region to a unitary voice. In an effort to manipulate and rewrite history, governments of these countries have set
rules prescribing the rights of belonging. I am of course referring to the long debate as to whether Turkey should be part of the European Union, when until the end of the nineteenth century it was commonly referred to as “the sick man of Europe” (Chambers 13) by the ministers of the European countries that now wish to exclude it. It is therefore fundamental to particularise and pluralise the abstract category of the “Mediterranean” and “its islands,” but also to conjure up the dialogues within this plurality. Unlike many other seas and oceans, the very geographical structure of the Mediterranean facilitates an easy connection between people rather than keeps them apart. The relatively short distances between the northern and southern shores, and the presence of islands with inviting harbours make travelling from one side to another a less arduous and risky task than elsewhere. While the Atlantic and Pacific are perceived as “seas of distance,” the Mediterranean is considered as a “sea of propinquity” and some parts of it—the Adriatic Sea—as a “sea of intimacy” (Matvejevic 14). The many islands and the sense of security provided by the closeness of their shores contribute to sustain and implement such descriptors. By its very liquid nature then the Mediterranean Sea can be considered not so much as a frontier or barrier between the north and the south or the east and the west, as contemporary political discourses lead us to believe, but rather as an intricate site of encounters and currents, involving the movement of peoples, the intermingling of their histories and cultures, and exchanges of ideas and conversations. Its fluid quality emphasises the continual sense of historical transformation and cultural translation, and promotes it as a space of incessant transit. It is after all with water that we bind elements together to transform them into something new. It also allows, I argue, for a reading of the Mediterranean islands as a holistic space, in which islands are seen “in the totality of their relationships” (Hau’ofa 88) with the sea and its histories. As such, the Mediterranean islands provide a strong example that contravenes today’s common generalisation of the term “island.” Not only is an “island” a tract of land entirely surrounded by water, but such water and the sustenance it brings contributes to the island’s definition and uniqueness. “Islandness” rather than insularity therefore defines islands and within island discourses, islandness “as an intervening variable” (Baladichino, “Coming of Age” 278) can reflect different things. A palimpsest-like narrative and a shared cultural discourse derived from the surrounding sea contribute some common ground to the “islandness” of the Mediterranean. Similarly, the interaction between the islands and the

three continental shores, which posit the islands as contact zones, provides a further determinant to the specificity and uniqueness of their islandness. Contemporary life on these islands is also defined and determined by new encounters from the sea and the formation of new narratives.

Islands and Immigration in a Post-Colonial Discourse

In his unsurpassed study of the Mediterranean, Braudel remarks on the importance of its islands as “indispensable landfalls on the sea routes” and underlines how they afford “stretches of comparatively calm water to which shipping is attracted” (149), favouring the view of this region as a constant medium of communication, a fluid hub allowing a sustained network of trans-cultural interconnections through which people, commodities, ideas, and meanings circulate. Braudel’s observation on the islands as “landfalls,” published in the 1960s, today has become a decisive factor in determining and favouring the crossings by “illegal” immigrants in the Mediterranean. In the past decade and increasingly so in the last two years, hundreds of “irregular” or “clandestine” migrants, mostly from central Africa and the Asian subcontinent, land on the islands. Most of these migrants have travelled for months through the desert in appalling conditions to reach the towns off the African shores from which smugglers overfill boats departing for Europe. What transformed the cities of Zuwarah, Tripoli and Benghazi (Libya), Monastir and Bisa (Tunisia), and Annaba (Algeria) into elected ports from which the traffic in human smuggling departs, is their specific geographical locations. All these cities lie more or less directly opposite one or two Mediterranean islands, whether Lampedusa or Panellera (Sicily), Malta or Sardinia. Not only do these islands lie on the routes connecting the northern and southern shores of the sea, but in most cases, because of their proximity to Africa, they have become the targeted destinations of the crossings.

The precarious means with which the crossings are undertaken require the smallest distances to ensure any chance of success. Though geographically nearer to the African continent, all of these islands are members of, or belong to countries that are members of, the European Union and adhere to the Schengen agreement, which provides for the removal of systematic border controls between the participating countries. For those who make the journey alive, the islands of Lampedusa, Linosa, Malta, and Sardinia become the embodiment of their longing for a better life. They represent the fulfilment of their dreams and aspirations to live,
work, and be on the rich northern shore of the Mediterranean, that is, Europe, “the land of plenty.” For those who perish at sea and whose bodies are recovered from the water, these islands become their ultimate resting place. Most of the people who attempt the crossing carry no documents, for fear of their identification with a nation they can be deported to, or, in the case of death, if a body is identified, the costs for having it returned to its families are very high.

Tragically, this might be the only way in which most of these migrants, citizens of countries to which European nations do not grant visas, will ever enter “Fortress Europe.” European legislation is tightening admissions and recent Italian legislation is in the process of further overwriting the narrative of these islands as contact zones and transcultural places. Impelled to put an end to illegal immigration by the pressures of the European elections in June 2009, the Italian Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his government put to a confidence vote a controversial bill that makes it a crime to enter or stay in Italy without permission. When interviewed on immigration matters, the Italian Prime Minister has repeatedly pointed out that neither he nor his allies wish for “Italy to become a multicultural society” and on these grounds his government has passed a bill that legalizes the creation of civilian anti-crime patrols to maintain higher levels of public safety. The fear of difference and of “the other” now means that the word “immigrant” in Italy has increasingly come to signify “criminal” and forces doctors and medical personnel to turn in any illegal immigrant who comes in for treatment. Most importantly though, and notwithstanding the outrages of the UN Refugee Agency, the Vatican, and several human rights organisations, the government has recently started to send back anyone intercepted in international waters without first screening them as possible asylum claimants. Once the boats are located, they are escorted to Libyan waters and left to be dealt with by Libyan authorities on the grounds of an agreement Berlusconi signed with Libyan head of state, Muammar Ghaddafi, in August 2008, reputedly, as a repayment for thirty two years of Italian colonial rule from 1911 to 1943. Contrary to the perception of this stipulation as a form of belated post-colonial apology, the agreement was actually instigated by Italy’s hopes of securing access to Libya’s oil and gas reserves and development contracts. In return for “some billion dollars” in compensation and $5 billion (£2.75 billion) in investments, including the construction of a highway from the Tunisian border to Egypt and a project to clear landmines dating back to the colonial era” (Delaney).

Libya has assured greater co-operation in controlling illegal immigration from Africa. The Italian government is not concerned with the ways in which such part of the bargain is carried out, notwithstanding the fact that international humanitarian organisations and NGOs, among which Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International have filed reports on the violation of human rights in Libyan prisons and detention centres. Libya is not a signatory to the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol (see Glennon; Hamood and Fortress Europe, 1 June 2009 and 24 September 2009).

The immigration question has become a central issue in the politics of the Mediterranean region and one deeply embedded in post-colonial discourse, not only because the human traffic that crosses the waters from the southern to the northern shores of the sea in the hope of a better life is primarily the result of past colonial histories of this area, but also because the stories we learn from the media about these crossings are only a small part of that sea of narratives this region has generated. If the Mediterranean is a sea that “speaks with many voices,” as Braudel defines it (13), the silences and indifference from the western media regarding the many disastrous shipwrecks that have happened in the past years and the inhuman treatment of those immigrants who manage to get ashore, are the contemporary version of the many silences that surround colonial history. In fact, the same European governments who are so eager to stop “illegal” immigration are those who are responsible for the conditions that force people to leave their home countries. In late March 2009, for instance, French President Nicolas Sarkozy made a working visit to Niger and assured the French nuclear technologies giant Areva that it would remain a strategic partner in uranium production until the year 2030. Ironically, it is also this uranium that fills the immigrant boats. “Thousands of young men from Niger are fleeing the war over control of the uranium deposits and they are all flocking to Libya” (Smolcicky) to attempt the crossing towards what they perceive as “the promised land,” one which might very well be their grave.

As it stands today, the Mediterranean region is very much embedded in both post-colonial and neo-colonial discourse. This fluid expanse is the epitome of the political, cultural, and epistemological space of struggle and resistance characterised by the inequity that persists between its shores. These shores represent the central and the peripheral areas of the world, or, to use the framework offered by Sardinian political theorist Antonio
Gramsci and widely used in post-colonial discourse, they represent the "hegemonic" and "subaltern" strands of society. Though the importance of a post-colonial reading of Mediterranean history and discourse has recently started to emerge especially in relation to a theorisation of a European identity, there is still an impending need to retrieve and promote the "many voices" and multiple histories that constitute such a strategic space, and find the vocabulary to express such heterogeneity. Some of these unheard voices and narratives come from the Mediterranean islands and though this is only in its early stages and the histories are very sparse, their presence needs to be acknowledged and preserved in order to counteract the discourses of xenophobia and the perceptions of "intrusion by the other" pushed by EU governments and embraced by some of its population. Islands, perceived by scholars of island studies as sites of innovative conceptualisations (Baldacchino, "Islands" 6), already hold the grounds to sustain these narratives.

Islands in Western Imagination
Islands have a "tenacious hold" on the imagination of the Western World (Yi-Fu 118). Along with other geographical concepts, they "provide metaphors" that help us give shape to the world: "Western culture not only thinks about islands, but thinks with them" (Gillis 1). Partaking of both earth and water, islands constitute third places, hybrid spaces, difficult to define but with/as oxymora (Saffiotti). Furthermore, as "liminal places, islands are frequently the location of rites of passage" (Gillis 4), thresholds to other worlds and new lives. Such an allure persists today in the "current fascination with deserted tropical islands" in which the relationship between "young Western continental" and islands is constructed within the parameters of the colonial process, maintaining its persistency and "mystification" (DeLoughrey, "Litany" 21). Other hybrid spaces such as borders and margins, and the construction of cross-cultural identities formed through diasporas that spring from such locations have been extensively theorised and their model applied in and to the post-colonial and cross-cultural contemporary reality. Theorists such as Frantz Fanon, Homi Bhabha, Paul Gilroy, and Gloria Anzaldúa, just to mention a few, have drawn heavily from their personal cultural backgrounds and geographical locations to provide starting points for their spatial and hybrid identity theorisations. While these frameworks have been grounded in continents, it is scholars of the Pacific, the Atlantic, and the Caribbean who have theorised the fluidity of waters, the interconnectivity of islands and their archipelagos, and the meanings of the sea (Gilroy; Hau‘ofa; DeLoughrey). Island narratives are diverse, ranging from the Odyssey to the postmodern, including Medieval religious islomania, and the adventure novel of the nineteenth century, such as Robert Louis Stevenson's Treasure Island (1883) and Robert Michael Ballantyne's Coral Island (1857). As Elizabeth DeLoughrey's Routes and Roots has shown, the intersections of isolated islands and the adventure genre have been popular since the publication of Daniel Defoe’s Robinson Crusoe, which led to the writing of over five hundred Robinsonades, or desert islands stories, throughout the nineteenth century (Carpenter 8). These adventure narratives were crucial to the indoctrination of young men to a particular form of imperial masculinity (Loxley; Moharan; DeLoughrey Routes). Islands were "mental stepping-stones in the age of discovery" (Gills 45) and discourses on islands and oceanic waters were closely linked to the development of European colonialism. Drawing from the historical work of Alfred Crosby, DeLoughrey has argued that the discoveries of islands were necessary for European economic development, but most of all it was the remoteness of these places were sought after for practical reasons linked to health and security issues. Their remoteness has been considered "central to the successful process of colonization" and has become in time a "near synonym for island," this way highlighting its construction in western discourse as "contingent upon the cultural and geographic centre that employs it" (DeLoughrey, "Litany" 26).

While islands were marked as colonial opportunities in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by European invaders, and with their remoteness and isolation still sought after and still central within the continental epistemology that defines them today, islanders themselves approach the representation and significance of their homelands differently. Their representations are re-appropriated and written on the map differently. As DeLoughrey has shown in the case of both the Caribbean and the Pacific, the concepts of seclusion and invasion, the ocean and the land, natives and migrants are incorporated dialectically ("Litany" 40). Examining islands as isolated entities elides dialectical considerations. But seen in the framework of their respective "archipelagography" ("Litany" 23), we can see that "each island embodies openness" (Glissant 139). Tongan writer Epeli Hau‘ofa underlines the primacy of the sea as an important theoretical framework with which to view the literatures of archipelagos. He suggests that there is a gulf between viewing the Pacific as "islands in a far sea" and as "a
sea of islands”. In the first instance, emphasis is given to the “dry surfaces in a vast ocean” and their location far from the centres of power stresses the smallness and remoteness of the islands. In the second, however, the perspective is more “holistic” and the totality of the relationship between land, sea, and movement shows these islands from a different perspective (91).

I argue that this model can also be applied to the Mediterranean Sea and its islands. DeLoughrey has argued that “islands can be seen as autonomous and geographically, politico- and culturally connected to their island neighbors” (“Litany” 40), a perspective that I apply to the islands of the Mediterranean. Given their historical role as landing places within the region, these islands, in which cultural stratification is visible not only in buildings, walls, and streets, but also in the faces, food, languages, and cultures of their inhabitants, can be perceived as representations of new models of cosmopolitanism, especially at such a politically crucial time as this.

Cosmopolitanism and the Mediterranean Region

Until recently, it has been a commonplace to suggest that modernity began with the rise of the Atlantic, and ideas about plurality, transculturality, and cosmopolitanism arise from this premise of colonialism, slavery, and the middle passage. However, long before that the Mediterranean had already been the location of several examples of “cosmopolitan” circles and cities: the Stoics of Athens, Hellenism, medieval Al-Andalus, the Norman kingdom of Sicily during the twelfth century, Renaissance Venice, and Costantinople during the long reign of Sultan Suleyman the Magnificent (Driessen 137). In her illuminating book Before European Hegemony, Janet Abu-Lughod confutes such a notion and reveals the Mediterranean as the site of a world system than stretched from Arab Spain to Southern India, one that exploited the financial and mercantile systems established in the Arab world from the eighth century onwards, and which was later copied once again in the Mediterranean by the Italian merchants of Venice and Genoa. This world system, linking the Mediterranean with the Indian Ocean, was an economic, political, and cultural organisation that favoured the exchange of ideas, cultures, histories, and people.

Mediterranean port cities such as Alexandria, Barcelona, Beirut, Izmir, Istanbul, Marseilles, Naples, Thessaloniki, and Tunis to name but a few, have played a strategic role as cradles of this early form of cosmopolitanism (Largèche et als.; Driessen; Chambers). The dense network of maritime connections spanning across the Mediterranean Sea for centuries not only provided these towns with opportunities for transcultural and economical exchanges, but contributed to widen the opposition between the coast and the interior. The former was associated with openness, sophistication, and progress. In contrast, the latter was characterised by isolation, backwardness, and stagnation. Mediterranean port cities were such places of ethnic plurality that what Abdelhamid Largèche, Julia Clancy-Smith, and Caroline Audet argue for the city of Izmir (i.e. that “urban cosmopolitanism was viewed as something very old and historically and intrinsically natural” [118]) was also true for most of the port cities that lay around the Mediterranean sea and its islands.

Given its protean nature, “cosmopolitanism” is an extremely elusive term referring to a set of historical, social, and cultural phenomena. As an anthropological concept, it refers to both the ethos and practice of individuals and groups who leave themselves open to the negotiations of cultural differences and strive towards mutual tolerance and respect. Cosmopolitans speak different languages, eat a variety of food, and draw on various life styles. In postmodernity, cosmopolitanism converges with the idea of multiculturalism in its celebration of diversity and promotion of pluralism. However, as a concept, it has also been criticised as a discursive construction of political and cultural elites, in that it hinges on class: only people with the wealth and leisure to travel and think can set the agenda for cosmopolitanism. Further, its emphasis on political tolerance as being central to democracy is based on the older idea of religious tolerance. Political tolerance can be smashed to pieces when people lose sympathy and acceptance for others practising a different religion, as recent and ongoing global political events show us. In short, Atlantic based ideas of cosmopolitanism are predicated on the uneasy tolerance of different notions of gender, body, religion, and the public and private of various communities.

Traditionally islands have always carried the meaning of secluded places, hard to reach and even harder to leave, ideal places for confinement, punishment, and ultimately exile. Gorgoe Island and San Tomé, Elba and St. Helena, Ellis Island, Robben Island, Alcatraz, and Norfolk Island have all become symbols of individual or collective exile, of a leap towards the unknown, the not familiar (the etymology of the word “exile” is from the Latin verb essilire, literally “to jump out”). The analogy between boundedness
and closure has been a long-established one. However, large or small, the
determination of islands through their geographic boundedness generates
a number of cultural characteristics which, according to me, could support
a shift in the analogy of boundedness to bondedness and of closure to one
of incorporation, characteristics demanded by both the small size and the
constant arrival and flow of difference within islands, the indeterminacy
such a difference can bring. The contours and frontiers of an island can be
designated or traced without difficulty, drawing a clear frontier between
zones of relative identity (recognised identity and established relations)
and the external world, a world of absolute foreignness. This, as I have
mentioned earlier, is not necessarily true for islands in the Mediterranean.

One trait that most islands share is the anticipation of things to come.
In his insightful book on the Mediterranean as a cultural landscape, Predrag
Matvejevic points out how even the smallest island looks forward to the
next boat, to the news it will bring, to some scene, some events. Islanders
have more time for waiting than others and “tend to accept newcomers
more readily than others, perhaps because when they crossed the channel
they too were newcomers and because they retain memories of their
formal selves” (Matvejevic 19). This shore-inland binary opposition has
played an important role in the social organisation of space, power, and
culture. Jonathan Bates suggests that Shakespeare was more aware of the
invaluable strategic importance that the Mediterranean islands played in
the sixteenth century than what he has been given credit for. According
To Bates, Shakespeare’s interest in them derives from the fact that, possibly
in a similar way in which theatres are enclosed spaces within the larger
environment of the city, islands constituted a special enclosed space within
the larger environment of geopolitics. As such, islands are experimental
places where opposing forces are brought together in dramatic confrontation
(290). In particular, for some of them, as Matvejevic has noted, “a glorious
past and the vanity ensuing there from have led larger and stronger islands
to compete with the mainland and measure up to the demands of the
present” (17).

Kwame Anthony Appiah has noted that cosmopolitanism, in its simpler
form, begins with “the need to develop habits of coexistence” within the
human community, in the same way in which we do with our national
communities. These involve “conversation in its older meaning, of living
together, association. And conversation in its modern sense too” (xix).
Cosmopolitanism is then, above all, a philosophy of open and respectful
conversations.

On a recent visit to Palazzo Reale in Palermo, I gazed in wonder at the
Palatine Chapel with its unique tesserae-mosaics. I walked into the Palace
with its sedimentation of various histories: Arabic, Norman, Spanish, re-
merging today as the Sicilian parliamentary present. Wandering through
the art gallery and then underground with its intertwining of Phoenician,
Roman, and Islamic pasts, I realised that this was an example of island
cosmopolitanism, this pride in revealing its entire genealogical past, this
startling realisation that Sicily as belonging to Italy was just another
moment in its cosmopolitan history. Unlike continental cosmopolitanism
that is predicated on an uneasy tolerance of difference and rupture in
social spaces, the Palazzo Reale showed genetic, genealogical, and bodily
incorporation of difference to re-emerge as Sicilian. This display of
cultural heterogeneity and diverse narratives informing the complexity of
the island’s identity is a remarkable example of a much needed discourse
able to embrace all layers enriching the island’s history, one able to accept
‘the other’, who, as it may turn out in transcultural environments such
as the Mediterranean islands, is already a part of us. We have only to
acknowledge this.

Conclusion
Island cosmopolitanism may represent one voice in the new vocabulary
needed to counteract the common discourse of xenophobia and racism,
or simply the indifference born by the lack of information on what lies
behind the (hi)stories and narratives that cross and link the two shores of
the Mediterranean. According to Appiah, two strands intertwine in the
notion of cosmopolitanism:

one is the idea we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch
beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or
even the more formal ties of a shared citizenship. The other is that we
take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human
lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs
that lend them significance. People are different, the cosmopolitan
knows, and there is much to learn from our differences. (xv)

Appiah then sees cosmopolitanism as an ethical commitment. One we
should all be conscious of and in turn make others be aware of. If we
accept the “cosmopolitan challenge,” Appiah exhorts us to “tell our
representatives that we want them to remember” the strangers that come to
our shores (174).

Appiah’s description of cosmopolitanism is not dissimilar to the old concept of “filoxenia” dear to the Greeks and celebrated in its literature, nor is it much different from the Sardinian traditional idea that a “guest is a sacred matter” and should be treated as such. Interestingly, Australian writer Arnold Zable dwells upon this concept in his collection of stories, The Fig Tree, inspired by real facts. “Filoxenia” literally translates as “friend of the stranger” and is the practice of welcoming the outsider, the traveller, the passing seafarer, the shipwrecked sailor. In ancient times it signified the sacred bond between host and guest which was ritualised by first welcoming the strangers, then bathing and feeding them, and finally inviting them to stay. Names and business were only asked once this welcoming ritual was over. Readers familiar with the stories of The Odyssey and The Iliad will recognise these as practices described in the narratives. However, Zable’s stories of filoxenia are set on the Mediterranean island of Zakynthos, a Greek island off the Peloponnesus peninsula in the Ionian Sea—really an artificial island since the building of the Isthmus of Corinth in 1893- and were inspired by a news story regarding “illegal” immigrants crossing the Mediterranean:

In the first week of November 2001, a Turkish-flagged boat, the Brenier, carrying 714 Iraqi Kurds and Afghan refugees, broke down in the Ionian Sea. Abandoned by its crew, the ship was rescued by the Greek coast guard. The Brenier was towed to Zakynthos town. As the crowded boat moved towards the port, the townsfolk lined the waterfront and cheered. The local baker was waiting with 700 sandwiches. Other residents brought clothes, food and blankets. Pregnant women and babies were ferried to hospital, or housed in hotels. Observers were stunned by this outpouring of empathy. It convinced wary Greek officials to treat the new arrivals humanely. A number of families who arrived on the Brenier have since been provided a home on the island. (167)

For Zable, like Matvejevic before him, the generosity of this gesture is borne out of the precarious nature of the islanders’ existence, who, given their history, “know that, with just an abrupt change in the winds, they too can become strangers” (167).

Inspired by this episode, Zable, who elsewhere provides examples of other practices of filoxenia in relation to the integration of and support for migrants in Australian society (see “Some are Friends”), is constantly inviting Australians to add the word “filoxenia” to their vocabulary and through that, the implementation of its practices (“Filoxenia”). Narratives of filoxenia can prove to be powerful counter-discursive agents in the dismantling of the more common ones of xenophobia, only if they become commonly available.

Italian journalists have started breaking the silences and have published some of the stories and accounts about the experiences of crossing the Mediterranean Sea, acknowledging the shipwrecks and the deaths that occur in “our” sea and the stories behind the individual crossings (see Bellu; Ottieri; Del Grande). Where possible, they give names and identities to the many nameless protagonists of these post-colonial crossings. By recounting their experiences they make them real and re-inscribe them in history. For example, Ampalagan Ganeshu was a young Sri-Lankan Tamil boy who, together with other 285 people from India, Sri Lanka, and Pakistan, perished on Boxing Day 1996 not far from Sicily in one of the worst shipwrecks in the recent history of the Mediterranean (see Bellu). Ebar Yekubu, a young immigrant from Sierra Leone, disembarked in Lampedusa in order to flee the violence of the civil war that has been devastating his country for years now (see Ottieri). These narratives also present the other many instances of filoxenia that doctors, soldiers, and priests carry out on a daily basis on the island, such as those organised by Biagio Conte, who, like St. Francis, has discarded everything in order to dedicate his existence to assist and support the immigrants and the poor in Palermo (see Ottieri). These stories are now out but they need to be echoed throughout, repeated, translated, adapted, be known. By re-inscribing the contrapuntal, these narratives from and about the islands not only implement the study of the Mediterranean and its islands in a post-colonial framework. They also offer the possibility of a new ethics of interconnection.

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Notes

1 See Elizabeth DeLoughrey’s Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures for how the sea impacts island literatures. Geoffrey Baldacchino discusses the possible consequences of the “allegedly insulating function of the sea” in respect to islands (“Coming of Age” 273).
Although in this paper I refer mostly to the islands that lie in the central Mediterranean region, a similar case can be made for those which lie in the eastern and western parts of the sea. Specific towns in Egypt, Turkey, and Albania target the islands of the Eastern Mediterranean, in particular Crete and Cyprus, while the Balearic Islands are reached mostly from the Spanish towns of Melilla and Ceuta on the Mediterranean shore of Morocco.

Thousands of migrants perish at sea every year during the crossings. Hardship, lack of food and water, hypothermia, diseases and shipwrecks are the most common causes of death. Their bodies are thrown overboard and in most cases no records of their existence remains. Accurate estimates are therefore impossible. However, the United Nations Refugee Agency speaks of about 500 people dying in the crossing of the Mediterranean in 2007 (UNHCR). The number has increased in the past years to at least 1000 a year. In 2008, 1099 people perished crossing the Mediterranean Sea, whilst 136 died in the Atlantic trying to reach the Canary Islands. For detailed and updated information on death on the European borders see Fortress Europe (01 July 2009).

The cost of repatriating a body is around 5000 euro and no family can afford to pay that sum especially as they would already have contributed more than half that sum for the price of a place on a boat crossing the Mediterranean (see Del Grande 21).

Confidence votes are taken to avoid any defeat which would bring about the government’s resignation.

The bill became law in July 2009, once approved by both chambers. The “crime” is punishable by a fine of €5,000—€10,000 (€4,500—€9,000) but with no prison penalty. However, anyone who rents housing to an illegal immigrant faces up to three years in jail. See “Italian MPs Back Crackdown on Illegal Migrants.”

According to the press reviews collected by Fortress Europe, 14,835 people have died since 1988 along the European frontiers. Among them 6,438 are missing at sea. 10,846 migrants died in both the Mediterranean Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. 4,176 people died in the channel of Sicily along the routes that from Libya, Egypt, and Tunisia go to Malta and Italy, including 3,056 missing; 138 drowned sailing from Algeria to Sardinia. Other thousands died along the routes from Mauritania, Morocco, Algeria towards Spain, and in the Aegean sea.

between Turkey and Greece—but also between Egypt and Greece, and in the Adriatic sea, between Albania, Montenegro, and Italy (Fortress Europe, 23 Sept. 2009).

See for example the work of Paul A. Silverstein, Itrad Malkin, Iain Chambers, and Chambers and Lidia Curti.

G.M. Bella’s book was adapted into a play by Giorgio Barberio Corsetti in 2006, and Maria Pace Ottieri’s into a movie by Marco Tullio Giordana in 2005.

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ANTHONY CARRIGAN

(Eco)Catastrophe, Reconstruction, and Representation: Montserrat and the Limits of Sustainability

My island goes up in smoke ... my heart is drowned in a blaze of fire.
– Yvonne Wekes

In constructing his well-known argument for the development of “nation language,” Barbadian poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite asserts the need to re-forged English in ways that “approximate ... the natural experience, the environmental experience” of the Caribbean (History 10 original emphasis). Famously asserting that “[t]he hurricane does not roar in pentameters” (History 10), his argument foregrounds the historically constitutive presence of natural hazards within the region’s ecology. As he puts it, “[t]he beauty of the Caribbean is (re)born out of the catastrophic origins of the Yucatan-Atlantis cordillera and the volcanoes & earthQuake flues & flows that rim & ruin the Caribbean sea” (“Preface” 7). For Brathwaite, such processes must be considered central to culture–nature interactions in the region, which also continue to be conditioned by centuries of western colonialism. This essay examines how such catastrophic histories intersect with the specific instance of disaster portrayed in diasporic Montserratian writer Yvonne Wekes’s memoir, Volcano (2006). Prefaced approvingly by Brathwaite, the text explores how tensions between politics, culture, and ecology have been brought to light by a series of volcanic eruptions that rocked the tiny Eastern Caribbean island of Montserrat over the last fifteen years. Historically, Montserrat has faced similar challenges to many other postcolonial island states, including the need to foster cultural growth in relation to lived experiences of diaspora and displacement, and to negotiate conflicts over land-use within topographically bounded space. However, the volcano has tested the limits of post-disaster sustainability—both social and environmental—as mass depopulation and flawed crisis management initiatives threatened to leave Montserrat a deserted isle. The depopulation and environmental devastation caused by ongoing volcanic activity could be seen as paradigmatic of how small islands’ supposed “fragility” is exposed by large-scale catastrophes, as limited resource bases, dependence on external aid, and inducements to migrate restrict capacity for recovery.