



**CRITICAL FORUM**



## Critical Forum Introduction: Cultural Encounters and Textual Speculations in the Mediterranean

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This issue's CRITICAL FORUM takes its point of departure from two paradigm shifts. The first one has already occurred in utopian studies, as attested by the increasingly evident interest in non-Western conceptions of utopianism and representations of speculative fiction. Scholars of utopian studies such as Lyman Tower Sargent and Jacqueline Dutton have been writing on utopias from other cultural traditions. The 2013 special issue of *Utopian Studies* (vol. 24, no. 1), which was introduced by Sargent and Dutton, included articles that reflected Iranian, Chinese, and Korean narratives and perspectives. During the first decade of the twenty-first century, monographs<sup>1</sup> and journal special issues<sup>2</sup> began examining literary and visual cultures of the Global South and transcultural expressions of the utopian imagination alongside a surge of speculative fiction from the Global South. A rising number of symposiums, anthologies, and critical works on Afrofuturism and Latinx and Arabic speculative fiction also contributed to today's widening discussions.<sup>3</sup> This special section in *Utopian Studies* advocates shifting from Western-centric approaches to more nuanced modes of interpretation with a specific focus

on the Mediterranean, which has itself been a contested discursive site in Mediterranean studies, demanding the formation of new critical paradigms.

According to Peregrine Horden and Nicholas Purcell, “It hardly needs stating that the Mediterranean, as an area seldom clearly defined but often subconsciously reduced to Italy and Greece, has been the perceived center of European civilization since the Renaissance, and in many respects since classical antiquity.”<sup>4</sup> Our set of articles challenges such reductionist views by exploring speculative configurations in the Mediterranean through literary representations of cultural encounters, social conflicts, and environmental crises. Offering analyses of various narratives that present dystopian articulations of the past and figurations of the present along with utopian aspirations for the future, the five contributions in this special section aim to expand the predominantly Eurocentric/Anglophone understanding of the Mediterranean by bringing together scholars and texts from diverse countries: Türkiye, Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia. They demonstrate the cultural interactions between different traditions, conventions, styles, and narratives, all within the broad domain of “speculative” visioning. As Franco Cassano points out, the Mediterranean “becomes the root that we need to rediscover today,” but one that is “constitutionally plural. . . . The Mediterranean that emerges is not a monolithic identity, but a multiverse that trains the mind to grasp the complexities of the world: hybridity, crossroads, and identities that do not love purity and cleanliness, but have been mixed for a long time.”<sup>5</sup> Cassano’s emphasis on plurality as much as rootedness is relevant to the scope and purposes of our contributions as well.

The articles here refrain from creating new hierarchies by simply inverting the East-West dichotomy, or by consolidating the center-margin debate within the context of the Mediterranean. While using familiar Western hermeneutical tools to understand utopian and/or dystopian narratives produced in the Mediterranean, this special section underscores historical, political, social, and literary particularities, engaging with various manifestations of power on both textual and contextual grounds. Gabriele Proglío’s introduction to *Decolonising the Mediterranean* (2016) informs the critical orientation of our approach. Decolonizing the Mediterranean “means deconstructing the power relations at play,” he writes, “viewing the Mediterranean as an excess space of signification in order to reconsider the past and present stories and subjectivities erased by Eurocentric, nationalist historical discourse.”<sup>6</sup> Such reconsiderations are essential to imagining future utopian possibilities not

only for fictional narratives but also for the many types of discursive practices shaping the material world.

Following Proglio's lead, Ceyhun Arslan examines utopian possibilities that the Mediterranean, whether taken as a context or as a framework, generates for artists and scholars. He argues for the utopian potential of the Mediterranean's *longue-durée* history, underlining the importance of identifying and resisting discriminatory notions and practices of Western imperialism throughout that history. Drawing on recent approaches to Mediterranean studies, he envisions what he calls a "disciplinary utopia," wherein critics, scholars, and artists carefully attend to linguistic and historical differences in their theorizing of Mediterranean complexities. For Arslan, the Mediterranean represents far more than a mere "site" of cultural narratives to be constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed.

Burcu Kayışıcı Akkoyun reads Kafka's *The Trial* (with a particular emphasis on the parable "Before the Law") against Turkish author Bilge Karasu's *Gece* (1985, *Night*, 1994) and Egyptian author Basma Abdel Aziz's *Al-Ṭābūr* (2013, *The Queue*, 2016) through a triadic hermeneutical structure. Karasu's *Night* engages with the national conflicts in the 1980s' Türkiye, whereas Aziz's *The Queue* addresses the aftermath of the 2011 Egyptian revolution. Kayışıcı Akkoyun situates the two works from the Mediterranean basin within the larger dynamics of world literature, arguing that the dystopian narratives of Kafka, Karasu, and Aziz problematize the arbitrariness of power by revealing the constructedness of oppressive structures and discursive conflicts. She identifies a common utopian vision in the authors' imaginative resistance against the totalizing forces of modernity's "combined and uneven development."<sup>7</sup>

Emrah Atasoy conducts a comprehensive survey of the landscape of Turkish speculative fiction over the past three decades, articulating the dreams, aspirations, anxieties, and fears within Türkiye, a pivotal Mediterranean country. Atasoy identifies a diverse range of speculative writing in Türkiye, including utopian and dystopian literature, science fiction, and climate fiction. Through his exploration of selected speculative narratives from this period, Atasoy illustrates how Turkish speculative fiction critically engages with pressing global problems such as the climate crisis, migration and refugee challenges, and power dynamics. His analysis concludes with an examination and discussion of Çağrı Aktaş's *Toprak Palas* (*Underground Station*, 2018), focusing on the utopian and/or dystopian elements within the underground city of Rahim. Atasoy contends that Aktaş's work conveys utopian impulses

within Rahim's dystopian setting, underscoring the importance of imagination, critical thinking, and perseverance.

Focusing on the south of the Mediterranean, Merve Tabur examines how urban futures are envisioned in contemporary Egyptian speculative fiction. Through close readings of Ahmed Naji's *Istikhdam al-Ḥayāh* (2014; *Using Life*, 2017), which is set in a near-future Cairo facing environmental disasters, Tabur analyzes the text's satiric view of the impact of historical and contemporary forms of techno-futurist utopianism (i.e., Saint Simonianism and Gulf futurism) on Mediterranean urbanism. She demonstrates how techno-futurist urbanism aims to control environmental and historical materialities through ambitious projects focused on settling the desert. She argues that *Using Life* challenges such techno-futurist imaginaries through a counter-futurist assemblage aesthetic, which offers an alternate conception of urban ecology. Moving away from the critical tendency to read post-Arab Spring speculative fiction as dystopian, Tabur prefers putting the novel into conversation with contemporary Arabfuturisms. *Using Life's* counter-futurist aesthetic responds to Arabfuturisms' call to challenge hegemonic narratives and to reexamine history—concerns that are also echoed in Ceyhun Arslan's conception of the Mediterranean as a disciplinary utopia.

Finally, in a *Research Note* contribution to the CRITICAL FORUM, Kawthar Ayed and Wajih Ayed offer a comparative overview of the history and thematic concerns of speculative fiction in the south of the Mediterranean. They point at how cultural encounters in the Mediterranean basin have contributed to the development of modern conceptions of science fiction in North Africa by tracing the SF roots to earlier texts that appeared during the Islamic Golden Age and Ottoman eras. In close readings of texts that tackle social, political, and environmental issues in Egypt, Morocco, and Tunisia, they argue that modern speculative fiction in these contexts displays primarily dystopian tendencies. They identify three primary causes for the predominance of dystopian imaginaries in the south of the Mediterranean: the history of imperialism; the development of authoritarian regimes; and the contemporary impacts of environmental crises. The dystopian tenor within these texts highlights, in the face of ongoing political, social, and environmental crises, the difficulty of sustaining historically utopian notions of the Mediterranean as a geographical location hosting peaceful cultural encounters and agreeable ecologies.

The selected texts and critical perspectives in this CRITICAL FORUM by no means represent a definitive theoretical position on our part. Fictional and

scholarly speculations on and in the Mediterranean will no doubt continue to generate enriching discussions concerning the past, the present, and the future on regional and global scales. We hope that our special section on “Cultural Encounters and Textual Speculations in the Mediterranean” will contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the dreams, aspirations, tensions, fears, and crises in the Mediterranean through the literary explorations featured in this group of essays. These narratives once again remind us of the importance of embracing more inclusive, earth-centered, and transformative approaches to shape the future justly and sustainably.

## Notes

1. Some examples include Taryn Jade Taylor, Grace L. Dillon, Isiah Lavender III, and Bodhisattva Chattopadhyay, ed., *The Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms* (New York: Routledge, 2023); Aisling Smith, Andrew Milner, Giulia Champion, and Zachary Kendal, ed., *Ethical Futures and Global Science Fiction* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2020); and Bill Ashcroft, *Utopianism in Postcolonial Literatures* (New York: Routledge, 2017).
2. For example, see *Utopian Studies* 33, no. 2 (2022), edited by Barnita Bagchi, and *Metacritic Journal for Comparative Studies and Theory* 8, no. 2 (2022), edited by Om Prakash Dwivedi and Roderick McGillis.
3. For example, see Ytasha L. Womack, *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 2013). *Latinx Rising*, edited by Matthew David Goodwin, is the first anthology of Latinx science fiction and fantasy (Athens: Ohio University Press, 2020). Wessam Elmelig’s recent *Dystopia in Arabic Speculative Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 2023), Jörg Matthias Determann’s *Islam, Science Fiction and Extraterrestrial Life* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2020), and Ian Campbell’s *Arabic Science Fiction* (London: Palgrave, 2018) are notable contributions.
4. “The Mediterranean and ‘the New Thalassology,’” *The American Historical Review*, 111, no. 3 (June 2006): 726.
5. Franco Cassano, ed., *Southern Thought and Other Essays on the Mediterranean*, trans. Nourma Bouchard and Valeiro Ferme (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 137.
6. Gabriele Proglgio, “Introduction,” in *Decolonising the Mediterranean: European Colonial Heritages in North Africa and the Middle East*, ed. Gabriele Proglgio (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2016), xii.
7. Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), 17.