

Imagining the Mediterranean Again and Again: Touristic Imaginaries of the Mediterranean Sea, and How It Appears from a Lebanese Literary Perspective

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In this article, I analyze the contemporary literary narratives that capture and (re)construct Lebanese imaginaries of the Mediterranean and compare these imaginaries to the ways in which tourists imagine and describe the Mediterranean and its coasts. My aim is to explore the Lebanese multifaceted local perceptions of the Mediterranean, which is viewed not only as sublime and life-giving but also as perilous and polluted. To this end, I analyze four texts: Lost in Beirut: A True Story (2021) by Ashe and Magdalena Stevens, Between Beirut and the Moon (2020) by A. Naji Bakhti, Spring Rain (2020) by Andy Warner, and "The Sea Closes at 7:00" (2022) by Sabah Ayoub. By juxtaposing these narratives with those constructed from a tourist perspective—or targeted toward tourists—I seek to illustrate how the generalized imaginary of the Mediterranean as a tourist haven fails to align with the Lebanese perspective, and how it is adapted to suit the unique reality of Lebanon. This reality often diverges significantly from the Mediterranean experience as rendered by the tourist industry of the Global North.

Keywords: travel fiction / imagology / Lebanon / the Mediterranean / touristic imaginaries / Lebanese identity

When landing at Beirut airport, I stare at the Mediterranean coast of Lebanon every time. From the plane window I see the blue waters of the Mediterranean Sea dotted with points and lines marked by the outlines of container ships, tankers, cutters, and boats. I stubbornly stare at the blue sea, looking for a sign that something is wrong with it. I just know it is. I have read dozens of articles about its pollution, and Lebanese friends have warned me many times against swimming in the sea in inappropriate places. But the sea looks completely ordinary, and its shades of blue and turquoise seem almost inviting. I have the overwhelming impression that what appears to me on a sensory level and what happens to me on an affective level does not fit at all with what I know on a rational level.

I must also add at the outset that I come from Poland—a Central and Eastern European country from the perspective of which the Mediterranean Sea has always seemed like a holiday paradise. As a child, my parents and I often went to the Mediterranean coast to swim in the sea, sunbathe, and snorkel. In my head, there is a whole archipelago of memories and associations related to the Mediterranean Sea. Almost all of them are positive—sunny, holiday-like, and soothing. The only one that disturbs them is the memory of a documentary about dolphins that I watched many times as a child, since I recorded it on a VHS tape. I remember that when the film mentioned the contemporary threats that dolphins face, the narrator mentioned pollution, adding that the most polluted sea in the world is the Mediterranean Sea. I never fact-checked this assertion, but it has stuck in my memory ever since. Every time I see the crystal waters of the Mediterranean Sea shining in the sun, I can no longer believe my eyes.

When I started conducting fieldwork in Beirut for my PhD degree, I still held that documentary fragment in my memory. However, I still felt a certain cognitive discomfort whenever what appeared to me did not fit aesthetically with what had shaped my consciousness and my imaginaries at an early age. I thought that what remained most conflicted in my mind in this context were precisely the imaginaries. So, I decided that it would be worth examining these imaginaries a little more closely. Starting from an autoethnographic perspective, which focused on my own imaginaries and sensations, I decided to look at different ideas about the Mediterranean Sea. I wanted to confront them with how this sea is perceived and thematized in the Lebanese context, which, according to my initial intuition, deviates from the most common patterns of perception and imaginaries of the Mediterranean Sea. Given that the Mediterranean coast is one of the

most important tourist areas in the world, I would like to devote special attention to tourist ideas. I also think that these are the notions that are most in conflict with how one might see the Mediterranean from a Lebanese perspective.

To this end, I would like to take a closer look at four contemporary (semi-)autobiographical literary texts: Ashe and Magdalena Stevens' novel *Lost in Beirut: A True Story* (2021), A. Naji Bakhti's novel *Between Beirut and the Moon* (2020), Andy Warner's comic book *Spring Rain* (2020), and Sabah Ayoub's essay "The Sea Closes at 7:00" (2022). The subjectivity of these texts is reflected in my article, written from a personal, embodied perspective and supplemented with an autoethnographic context. I believe that although literary texts after the death of the author, announced influentially by Roland Barthes, can be interpreted in a fairly free way without causing scandal, it is impossible to separate any kind of interpretation from the creator of the text (regardless of whether that creator is an embodied representative of any species or even a virtual, technological entity of the artificial intelligence type). Accordingly, I treat each text as a sky which is, in Barthes' words, "at once flat and smooth, deep, without edges and without landmarks" (Barthes 14). Moreover, the text of this article is also a sky in which the constellation is created by the analyzed texts, academic perspectives on the issue I discuss, contemporary neoliberal infrastructures of so-called knowledge production, and, above all, my embodied, affective perspective on what I write about. The structure of this article will therefore also be constellational, showing various possible, existing, and potential connections and relationships, and as an author, I will use texts as pretexts for thinking and thematizing rather than objects of detailed analysis. The texts discussed as wholes will therefore be rather marginal in the perspective of this article. What will interest me in particular are the *lexias*—"units of reading" (Barthes 13)—that is, certain arbitrarily selected fragments of the text which will become not only a pretext for reflection for me but also something with which I will think.

Mediterranean Sea(s)

The axis of this text is what I have been calling "the Mediterranean Sea" so far. In many texts, the term "Mediterranean Sea" appears basically without additional commentary that would explain what the author means. Most often, the term seems to refer to some area or territory marked on maps, which in turn are supposed to represent some material

space or its elements. It is difficult, however, to clearly indicate what actually falls within the semantic field of the Mediterranean Sea perceived in this way and what is a representation of what. Is it about—to put it somewhat colloquially—a hole in the ground in which water has gathered? Or maybe about the water itself, which nevertheless constantly mixes with water from elsewhere? Or maybe it is about combining both these elements into something that could be described—somewhat perversely in this context—as a landscape, at least in the new materialistic understanding? Finally, how does the area marked on the map relate to all these elements? These are just a few considerations that pop into my head when the term “Mediterranean Sea” is left alone and without explanation.

In this article, when writing about the Mediterranean Sea, I mean first and foremost the set of imaginaries associated with this term. I should emphasize at the outset that this is not in any sense a homogeneous or uniform set, nor is it finite. Above all, it is not without reason that people elaborate on so-called Mediterranean cultures; almost eighty years ago, Fernand Braudel argued that the Mediterranean Sea is what provided a certain unity or cultural integrity to the peoples inhabiting the entire Mediterranean coast. For thousands of years, the Mediterranean area was crossed by numerous trade and transport routes, which allowed the movement of not only goods and more-than-human entities, but also ideas. It is therefore not surprising that the imaginary of the Mediterranean Sea as a kind of connector or medium has been deeply embedded in the imagination of societies of the Global North (see Gabaccia and Hoerder; Isabella and Zanou).

Moreover, the Mediterranean Sea in the context of mobility can be understood even more broadly, considering the mobility of the very imaginaries of this sea and their influence on the perception of other seas and oceans. According to Philip E. Steinberg, the power of the idea nested in the Mediterranean Sea comes not only from the notions of unities and divisions, but also “from the idea’s existence as an ‘immutable mobile,’ ... an idea that travels” (Steinberg 26). Indeed, the imaginaries associated with the Mediterranean Sea still constitute a kind of template for entities or landscapes that appear similar to observers connected with the Global North.

This is possible primarily because the Mediterranean Sea and its adjacent areas are often understood as a whole, or—as Paolo Giaccaria and Claudio Minca bluntly state—“the cultural ‘containers’ imagined and celebrated in Orientalist colonial rhetoric and Romantic literature” (Giaccaria and Minca 353). When the Mediterranean Sea is perceived

as a kind of cognitive container, it can be easily compared to the concept of the world understood in the way Timothy Morton develops it in his seminal work on hyperobjects. In Morton's theory, the world provides an assumed background for perceived or experienced events in the perceiver's reality: "The world is more or less a container in which objectified things float or stand" (Morton 99). The Mediterranean, like the world, is supposed to be a transparent background for things and events; a background that does not require much explanation. But eventually, this transparent background begins to take shape and demands to be noticed—this is what Morton believes happened to the world in the face of climate change—which will no longer allow us to ignore things that previously seemed determined and devoid of more in-depth meaning, such as the weather. In a similar gesture, I would like to take a closer (and more suspicious) look at what is called the Mediterranean.

Returning to Steinberg's point, the Mediterranean Sea—even when perceived as a whole—is imagined simultaneously through connections, contacts, and relationships, as well as through antagonisms, frictions, and divisions. After all, ever since the seventh century, the Mediterranean Sea has separated Christian Europe from the so-called other, who both historically and currently (through the image of the terrorist and other Islamophobic contexts) constitutes a crucial element in the constant processes of emerging identities in the societies of the Global North (Steinberg 25). The issue of the otherness constitutive of these societies (particularly the European ones) separated by the waters of the Mediterranean Sea seems to be of key importance here because, as Giaccaria and Minca write, "what characterizes and differentiates the genesis of Mediterraneanist narratives—as compared to the constitution of a generic Orient as an-Other, subaltern space produced by European modernity—is the presumed 'objective' existence of a geographical object called the Mediterranean" (Giaccaria and Minca 348).

Thus, the image of the Mediterranean Sea in its ambivalence or even contradiction is also significant in the context of what Edward Said has theorized as Orientalism because the sea itself is both imaginary and real in its role of separating Europe from the Middle East and North Africa region, inhabited mostly by Muslims. This kind of materialization of an imagined division is closely tied to categories that are responsible for imperial violence in the twenty-first century, including, for example, Samuel Huntington's category of the clash of civilizations.

It is not without reason that I mention such figures as Said and Huntington. It is difficult to imagine contemporary reflection on what influences the perception of the Mediterranean Sea without considering

colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial contexts. All of these contexts can coexist, as Steinberg argues, because “the flexibility of the Mediterranean image—in which the fluidity of the sea both erases and magnifies difference—and the intensity of the ‘paradoxical interplay’ that results allow individuals to use the image to support very different political diagnoses” (Steinberg 31). On the one hand, this establishes a certain community, but on the other hand, it separates those who are our own from those who are others. What is more, the Mediterranean Sea may combine very different associations resulting from the colonial context: the Mediterranean Sea is perceived differently by a white, middle-class resident of Oslo who vacations on Italian or Spanish beaches twice a year than by a person on the move from Eritrea who sees the Mediterranean Sea primarily as a deadly obstacle on the road to a better life.

It is images similar to the latter that have inspired the Italian scholar Gabriele Proglío to critically discuss the notion of the Black Mediterranean—originally proposed by Alessandra di Maio—a term that attacks the dominance of the imaginary of the “white Italian–European sea” (Proglío 406). For Proglío, the Mediterranean “may be viewed as not only a sea but also an excess space, a site of accumulation of discourses largely revolving around Italy–Europe, among others” (408). The dominance of this Italian–European imaginary is based on both the influence of narratives generated by the Global North, and geography itself (understood as a field conceived within a white and Western conception of science). The Black Mediterranean resists the traditional understanding of geography, since it often refers to areas thousands of kilometers away from the shores of the Mediterranean, such as Massawa or Somaliland. The Black Mediterranean does not really have a simple referent in space; instead, it is a kind of look at the memory of those who managed to reach Europe by crossing the waters of the Mediterranean. According to Proglío, the Black Mediterranean is

a postcolonial and diasporic sea: it is postcolonial for trying to distance the black bodies from the instruments of biopolitics; it is diasporic because it is about imagined communities that, albeit fragmented in space, were never completely separated and are thus in constant dialogue with each other. Again, it is diasporic in terms of memory because of the movement of voices and memories over, across and beyond the borders of the Old Continent. (413)

The description by the Italian researcher clearly shows the distance that often separates the ideas that create what is called the Mediterranean Sea from the landscape or space that would seem to constitute it.

However, the perception of the Mediterranean Sea should not be limited to the imaginary layer, where the dimension of landscape is ignored. Specific landscapes and the assemblages that create them remain in close relation to imaginary elements—even if they are assumed and not directly experienced, such as the school of bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean Sea that I just thought of. Although I do not empirically and materially experience this school now, it can still appear in my imaginary layer, subsequently influencing my decisions and choices. It is important to remember that, for example, in the context of administrative policy, the Mediterranean Sea refers to a certain area—regardless of its level of imaginability. Specific (bio)political decisions can therefore have a significant impact on the more-than-human beings that create landscapes that have been incorporated into the area subsequently designated as the Mediterranean Sea. In other words, the fact that imaginaries seem less real than things experienced empirically or sensually does not mean that they are devoid of a performative dimension that can have a direct impact on what is empirically and sensually accessible.

In what follows, I will refer both to the imaginary dimension of the Mediterranean Sea and to landscapes directly intertwined with this dimension. I think that Iain Chambers is right when he says that the Mediterranean “is a ‘reality’ that is imaginatively constructed: the political and poetic articulation of a shifting, desired object and perpetually repressed realization” (Chambers 11). However, at the same time, the reality that Chambers speaks of has a direct bearing on more-than-human assemblages and landscapes, which means that any limitation of the term “Mediterranean” to a set of imaginaries—even if potentially true—should consider the performative potential of that set. Although the Mediterranean Sea is “more than an imagined surface,” and “the Mediterranean region is more than a trope for understanding (or performing) postcolonial dynamics of connection amidst division” (Steinberg 33), it is worth remembering that both the sea and the region are terms still used in politics, economics, legislation, and elsewhere.

Touristic imaginaries

The imaginaries I would like to focus on now are tourist imaginaries. The expectations resulting from them influence specific political and economic decisions. For example, the view of life jackets washed ashore from people on the move who lost their lives trying to cross the

Mediterranean Sea is not something that most tourists want to see (unless they seek dark tourism, which is a specific case). Obviously, local governments are aware of this, which in turn can influence their decisions and actions at various levels of government. So, what are touristic imaginaries of the Mediterranean Sea, if they probably do not include life jackets?

The very definition of a tourist contains a key element in this context, defining the main reason for becoming a tourist, namely pleasure as the driving force of tourism. In turn, following the logic of capitalism, tourism must both promise a pleasure to the potential consumer of a service or a product and generate or strengthen the need for pleasure itself and indicate its potential source. In the case of tourism, this source must be related to mobility, since tourists “travel from their usual living environment to the center-out-there” (Erem 685). Accordingly, various companies and institutions are tasked with presenting a trip to a place as a pleasant experience.

This task is most often carried out by tourism marketing, which is interested in tourists’ imaginaries of the possibilities of fulfilling the need for pleasure through tourism in specific contexts and spaces. Tourism marketing is therefore less interested in researching and defining ideas about selected holiday destinations, as its primary concern has to do with generating these imaginaries, or possibly modifying them. However, the tasks of tourism marketing defined in this way require certain procedures performed on representations of potential holiday destinations. As Hazel Andrews writes: “[M]arketing enacts a form of violence ... as it reduces people and places to bite-size representations for the easy digestion of potential tourists. Notions of the nature of destination places and peoples are informed by the images found in various forms of tourism-related discourses—travel brochures, TV programmes, guidebooks” (Andrews 32).

It is hence impossible to establish a simple trajectory for any touristic imaginary, as these imaginaries seem to circulate and constantly transform, depending less on individual preferences and more on class and social imaginaries. The famous anthropologist Noel B. Salazar writes about this, stating that touristic imaginaries “emerge not from the realm of the concrete, everyday experience but in the circulation of more collectively held imaginaries” (Salazar 871).

Tourist imaginaries of the Mediterranean Sea are essential for several reasons. Firstly, the Mediterranean coast is one of the most important tourist areas in the world (see Tresserras). Secondly, as was the case with more general imaginaries of the Mediterranean Sea, tourist

imaginaries of the Mediterranean coast also provide a model for other coastal regions of the world that wish to develop tourism. Thirdly, it was with Mediterranean tourism that the democratization of tourism itself was associated, which in the twentieth century became the domain of the middle and working classes (Gordon 224). For decades, Mediterranean tourism has rested on three s-words: sea, sun, and sand (Vidal-Pérez 79; Erem 689). The Mediterranean coast is still associated primarily with these three elements, despite the many factors that have made them much more problematic over the years. Chief among these factors are the climate crisis and migration (also largely a consequence of the climate crisis). Applying Achilles Mbembe's concept of the *deathscape*, Laura Lo Presti draws attention to a significant change in public discourse concerning the Mediterranean: "When the Mediterranean is mentioned in public discourse, it is, in fact, less often characterized as a contact zone generating conditions for vitality, cultural encounters, hybridizations, liquidity, or motion, as oceanic philosophy would have it, but rather feels like a motionless *deathscape*" (Lo Presti 54).

Indeed, recent years have brought about a notable increase in narratives concerning migration across the Mediterranean Sea. These narratives, however, have had little impact on tourists' ideas about the coast of this sea, which still revolve around relaxation and pleasure rather than any ethical decision regarding a highly problematic situation. The life jackets washed ashore can, on the other hand, significantly hinder or even prevent this oversight because—like the device of *estrangement* in Victor Shklovsky's theory of prose (Shklovsky 6–12)—they cause cognitive disruption of habits and established cognitive habits. It is therefore in the interest of the tourism industry to limit tourists' contact with objects that operate on the principle of *estrangement* as they question the polished, aesthetic, and established tourist image of the Mediterranean Sea. The basis of this image is described by Bertram M. Gordon, who writes: "The 'blue water' and the sun appear as continuous references throughout the past two centuries, if not before" (Gordon 225). The sight of life jackets washed ashore can transform the blue water shimmering in the sun into a large coffin, as these jackets bear witness to those who wore them.

Lebanon and the Mediterranean Sea

As I mentioned in the introduction, I am interested in the relationship between these generally outlined tourist ideas about the Mediterranean and how the sea appears in the context of Lebanon. I have the impression that confronting these two elements—tourist ideas and Lebanese contexts of the Mediterranean—can reveal a mechanism similar to Shklovsky's estrangement. In order to look at how this sea can be seen from a Lebanese perspective, I will look at literary texts in which the Mediterranean Sea appears from time to time but is mentioned and thematized on the margins rather than at the center of the narrative.

The idea for this way of approaching the problem came to me while reading Ashe and Magdalena Stevens' bestselling novel *Lost in Beirut: A True Story* (2021). The main character of this novel is an American traveling to Lebanon to organize a concert by one of the top musicians. The protagonist's numerous love affairs are accompanied by the outbreak of the July War of 2006, which ultimately forces the main character to flee the Middle East. But what is much more interesting from my perspective is the background for this rather clichéd love story. This background is rooted in the imaginaries of the Middle East, and mainly Lebanon, seen from the perspective of a wealthy white American. This is how he describes his trip to Jounieh: "The beach to my left is so close that I can see the sparkling blue waters of the Mediterranean. For one of the oldest settled lands in our human history, the waters are still stunningly clear. ... Yet humans have occupied these beaches here for thousands of years, and they still hold magic, looking untouched by benighted men" (A. Stevens and M. Stevens 39).

When I read this description, I had already visited Lebanon several times and was quite familiar with the Lebanese imaginaries related to the sea. I knew that these imaginaries consist of the grand, turgid, and sometimes poetic stories about the close relationship of the Lebanese with the sea. These imaginaries also incorporate beliefs and urban legends about the pollution of the Mediterranean Sea off the coast of Lebanon. I was reflecting on how strongly the general imaginaries of the Mediterranean must have impacted the perception of this sea by people outside the local communities. I thought that it would be worth collecting what I know about the imaginaries of this sea from a local, Lebanese perspective.

As I mentioned, the inhabitants of the Lebanese Republic remain closely connected to the sea on various levels. Firstly, there is a strong influence of geography itself, as the territory of contemporary Lebanon

stretches along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea for a length of about 210 kilometers (Gears-Matta et al. 1). Beirut, Tarabulus, Saida, Sur, Jounieh, and other major cities in Lebanon are located along the Mediterranean coast, and they are connected by the country's main highways. Secondly, the heritage with which a large part of the Lebanese identify is closely connected to the sea, as it concerns the Phoenicians, a people perceived as one of the most outstanding sailors of ancient times (Najem and Amore 241). Reference to the Phoenicians has played many important roles in the history of Lebanon, both during and before the time of independence. Initially, it was mainly Christians who referred to the Phoenician heritage, constantly fearing repression from successive authorities and the Muslim majority; they sought elements that would allow them to embed their identity in local landscapes, which could also affect their sense of security. Over time, however, the Phoenician heritage was also accepted by the non-Christian community inhabiting Lebanon: "Phoenicianism as the national, non-Arab, identity of Lebanon continued to be articulated by a select group of Christians in Beirut and in the Mountain. But at the same time, Phoenicianism for many non-Christians evolved to denote the history of the land no less than the history of its people" (Kaufman 245). References to the Phoenician identity were also intended to provide additional arguments for the integrity and autonomy of Lebanon during the conflicts with Syria (El-Husseini 199–200). Moreover, Phoenicianism was and remains a competing narrative to pan-Arab ambitions because it values the Phoenician heritage more than that associated with Arab conquests (Najem and Amore 241). The relationship between the Phoenician culture in the region of present-day Ash-Sham and the Mediterranean Sea was important primarily because it provided the Phoenicians with economic benefits but also with a constant flow of inventions from various cultures throughout the region.

In scholarly sources, the Phoenicians are also considered to be the people thanks to whom "for the first time in human history it was possible to speak about a 'Mediterranean civilization'" (Kaufman 3). In his Western-centric and anthropocentric narrative, Asher Kaufman draws attention to the dominance of the Phoenicians in most areas of the Mediterranean—mainly the Eastern and Central Mediterranean^{3/4} and to the colonies established by the Phoenicians. But he does not directly note that hegemony, the creation of a unified category of people, the establishment of settlements in areas inhabited by foreign peoples, or the exploitative use of the achievements of these peoples could be considered as the foundations of the later colonial system. However, I leave

these considerations aside and return to the issue of the relationship between the Phoenicians and the sea.

One of the most important promoters of this relationship is the francophone Lebanese nationalist Michel Chiha, who emphasized the role of the Mediterranean Sea in the creation of Lebanese identity (Kaufman 16). This role was to direct the process of constructing the Lebanese nation toward the West, toward the Mediterranean Basin, and not toward the Arab East. At the same time, this orientation toward the West, especially in the first half of the twentieth century, was described using racist and colonial language, as an orientation toward what is civilized, linking it with the heritage of the white man. This can be seen, for example, in the terms in which Pierre *Raphaël*, a Lebanese Jesuit, thought in 1924 about which colors should be on the Lebanese flag: “The blue, it is the sea that the Phoenicians introduced, through their vessels, to human history, and which they traversed along the maritime routes that civilized the world” (qtd. in Kaufman 21). The intertwining of the issues of Lebaneseness, the Mediterranean Sea, and Phoenician culture therefore has a strong political connotation—far from being a mere poetic reference or a picturesque metaphor, it expresses the political ambitions and directions of Lebanon’s development. In the view of the tourist, this political connotation is sometimes revealed in the perception of the Mediterranean Sea as the cradle of civilization as such, not one of many civilizations—the above passage from *Lost in Beirut* is revealing in that sense. Such a perception of civilization fits perfectly with colonial visions in which the colonialists civilize savage peoples—Rudyard Kipling’s 1899 poem “The White Man’s Burden,” which is often interpreted as a manifesto of the so-called civilizing mission, comes to mind in this context.

The Mediterranean Sea has yet another political dimension in Lebanon, one that primarily concerns the country’s recent neoliberal policies. This is clearly visible in Sabah Ayoub’s essay “The Sea Closes at 7:00” (2022). The author of the text describes her experience of visiting the “new corniche”—a coastal concrete promenade in Beirut, from where she is asked to leave by a security guard. Ayoub writes:

We tried to explain to him that the sea and the space is ours as well as his, and that the company that he worked for had no right to kick us out of it. ... Call it what you want, sir, but it is ours! The man nodded in agreement with everything we said but he insisted on accompanying us to the gate. ... It had really happened. The man closed the sea at 7:00. I never went back to this place.

Through this experience, Ayoub describes the problem of appropriation of public space in Lebanon by state-owned companies—such as well-known Solidere, responsible for the construction of the new cornice—as well as by private businessmen and large corporations. As a result, the Lebanese coast is appropriated, and access to it is limited, often against the law. Numerous resorts are built there as so many elite enclaves of luxury. Andrew Arsan addresses this problematic, noting that “[t]hose who wish to spend a day sunbathing or swimming must all too often pay a steep entrance fee to gain access to a rooftop pool or beach club—often, as investigative journalists and activists have found, built illegally on seafront land that belongs to the state” (Arsan 249). The fight for access to the sea in Lebanon thus becomes part of a larger battle for the right to public space, which is regularly appropriated. This appropriation is possible through a perception of landscape that Jala Makhzoumi describes as “a privileged, totalizing perception of the Lebanese countryside generally by neoliberal politics whereby land and scenic landscapes are conceived as a resource to be used for economic profit, ‘colonized’ for the enjoyment of a privileged few” (Makhzoumi 229). Such a perspective on landscape seems to enter a well-functioning symbiosis with the concepts described earlier that appear in connection with Phoenicianism.

However, this is not the only perspective on landscape that can be observed in Lebanon. According to Makhzoumi, there is also a second perspective that constantly clashes with the neoliberal one, in which there are “perceptions of the Lebanese public where mountains and sea are integral to Lebanese national identity” (Makhzoumi 229). However, when it comes to national identity, it should be noted that both ways of perceiving landscape derive from the same nationalist core, of which the sea is an element that can be positioned in various ways symbolically and semantically. In Makhzoumi’s text, it is clear that the author herself perceives landscape in accordance with the second perspective when she formulates assertions such as: “Land and people in Lebanon are products of mountain and sea” (230). In another place, she states that “the view from the motorway of verdant banana plantations against the Mediterranean Sea is evocative of traditional coastal landscapes in Lebanon before they were fragmented by piecemeal unregulated development” (233). Such statements as “traditional coastal landscape in Lebanon,” and above all the word “traditional,” show that for the author, the seascape appears as an integral element of local culture—an element from which this culture essentially emerges. The Mediterranean Sea then appears as a part of identity, which, however, takes on a slightly

different dimension when it is recognized as a direct product of the local landscape, and not of some ancient cultures. Ayoub's text, too, echoes nostalgia for this traditional Lebanese landscape that blends harmoniously with the sea. When the author visits the new corniche, she notices that "[i]ts heavy presence seemed incompatible with the sea" and that "there was a strange, unsettling feeling of not belonging, of only being invited" (Ayoub). Such reflections show that neoliberal policies targeting the Lebanese landscape lead to the severing of relationships and separation, thus disrupting the existing processes of identification.

In the passage from *Lost in Beirut* quoted above, the narrator looking at the sea says that "the waters are still stunningly clear" and that the beaches seem to be "untouched by benighted men" (A. Stevens and M. Stevens 39). When I first read this, I was so surprised that I drew a row of exclamation and question marks in the margins. I have often come across stories about how polluted the Mediterranean Sea is off the coast of Lebanon. I remember that when walking with Lebanese friends along the corniche, I often saw children bathing in the sea, happily jumping into the water from the coastal rocks. I always asked my companions whether it was safe to swim on the Beirut coast. The usual response was that it is dangerous, that the water is polluted, and that only kids from the poorer parts of the city swim there. In turn, when I suggested to my friends that we go to the beach on a day off, they usually suggested a trip to one of the private seaside resorts, not one of the few public beaches outside the capital. After spending time in Beirut, I became convinced that using the coast in Lebanon has a class character, which is often camouflaged by narratives about hygiene and pollution.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the waters off the coast of Lebanon are heavily polluted. One study from 2010 estimated 49 major sources of pollution of Lebanon's marine environment: "Most are related to uncontrolled human activities such as sewage outfalls, refineries and factories. Currently, 53 outfalls (very close to coast) are identified along the Lebanese coast" (Gears-Matta et al. 6). However, there is another factor contributing to the pollution of the sea in this area, namely the destruction associated with the numerous armed conflicts in the region. Perhaps the most famous example is the Israeli attack on the power plant in Lebanon, when Lebanon's Jiyeh power plant was attacked and about 15,000 tons of heavy fuel oil spilled into the Mediterranean Sea (see UNEP). The military conflict hindered any immediate response to the oil spill; as a result, the spill had a long-term impact on the ecosystems of the eastern Mediterranean Sea, and fuel oil reached the coasts of Syria and Cyprus (Pan et al. 7483). It is no wonder that the Mediterranean Sea

seems to be a potentially dangerous place for Lebanese people because of its pollution. When I was in Lebanon, I would regularly receive advice about where it is safe to swim and how much time one can spend in the water. These concerns of Lebanese people are also shared by researchers who note, for example, that municipal sewage is not properly treated, and its condition is not monitored. Instead, it is discharged “into the river system or directly into the Mediterranean Sea, ... raising a serious geo-environmental problem that might affect the coastal shoreline of the eastern Mediterranean Sea, threatening the coastal marine ecosystems” (Geara-Matta et al. 10).

When discussing this topic, it is also necessary to consider the very low level of legitimacy of the government in Lebanon, which was consolidated after the *thawra* revolution in 2019–2020 and the explosion in the Beirut port in August 2020. The uncertainty about the safety of bathing on the coast of Lebanon should thus not be surprising. An interesting description of this uncertainty and the attitude toward it can be found in A. Naji Bakhti’s autobiographical novel *Between Beirut and the Moon* (2020). In this novel, the narrator describes his youth spent in Beirut and the outbreak of the July War in 2006. In one of the chapters, he and one of his friends decide to become summer camp monitors, which is basically limited to taking care of children playing on the beach. The narrator reflects on his experience:

The oil from the Israeli warships, coupled with the waste from nearby factories and sewage plants, had severely damaged aquatic life along Lebanese shores. We had been instructed not to allow the children to swim for more than one hour a day in the sea. Alana and I ignored this. The sea was littered with empty bags of Fantasia chips and glass Pepsi bottles, and we reasoned that a bit of oil could not have done too much more harm. (Bakhti 187)

This description clearly illustrates the imaginary of the Mediterranean Sea, which differs greatly from tourist imaginaries of the Mediterranean. The sea is a potential source of hurt here, and its fluidity is the focus of an unknown danger, a threat invisible to the naked eye. The perspective of the author of the novel, on the other hand, emphasizes the storied Lebanese resilience, which is often described as almost a superpower that allows the inhabitants of Lebanon to survive in an environment so destroyed and uncertain that it seems almost impossible to live in. Many Lebanese authors write about this life in what Anna L. Tsing conceptualizes as capitalist ruins. One of the elements of this life is the relationship with the sea, which seems to be a source of identity and an indispensable element of local landscape, while also presenting a potential danger that

is difficult to identify. Moreover, the sea is a frontier dividing not only geographical entities such as lands and islands but also life perspectives and possibilities. In the words of the narrator of *Between Beirut and the Moon*: “Behind me was Cyprus, and behind Cyprus was Sicily and behind that was Valencia, and in between all of them and Beirut was the salty water of the Mediterranean, and me” (Bakhti 188).

In this approach, the Mediterranean Sea also seems to be a kind of reservoir in which meanings and senses are swarming, often clashing with each other. At the same time, this reservoir accumulates memories and stories, which is clearly visible in Andy Warner’s autobiographical comic book *Spring Rain* (2020). In this book, the American author and cartoonist tries to reflect his student years spent at the American University of Beirut, which coincided with the turbulent years of the assassination of Rafik Hariri, the outbreak of the Cedar Revolution, and the beginning of the July War. The comic book’s protagonist experiences life in Beirut in its various dimensions, including parties, protests, buzzing social life, and attacks. Although life in Beirut is dynamic and changing, and everyday life seems completely unpredictable, the sea seems to be an unchanging and, in some sense, universal element here, reminding the protagonist of his childhood (Warner 96). Finally, due to the outbreak of war, the protagonist is forced to leave Lebanon, but years later he returns, with the Mediterranean Sea bringing back memories as a body of water that seems to be unchanging in the dynamic environment of Beirut. The drawing of a man walking along the coast is accompanied by the description: “Down by the Corniche, the salt sprat still cooled my face in the afternoon sun” (191). Despite the many changes that have taken place in Lebanon since the July War, the sea is what anchors the author in a dynamic, changing environment, even if in reality the sea has changed beyond recognition due to the destruction caused by the armed conflict.

Conclusion

Does looking at the Mediterranean Sea from the Lebanese perspective really reveal something new? Do the four texts that constitute my starting point allow me to look at the Mediterranean from a novel perspective, one that could also respond to the challenges of postcolonial movements? I think that this perspective enables us to notice frictions that we would have otherwise ignored. In Lebanon, the ideas and meanings centered around the Mediterranean concern political, social, class,

economic, cultural, and other dimensions of life in Lebanon. In many regions, this friction seems to be much more difficult to reach because it is covered by a thick layer of tourist narratives that are supposed to construct ideas and desires that ensure the stability of local economies. In Lebanon, due to the high political dynamics, armed conflicts, and weak legitimization of power, the meanings and ideas about the Mediterranean are more distinct and dynamic. Alongside tourist ideas, those related to the birth of civilization (in the singular) and those related to migration and the Black Mediterranean, there is also the perspective that speaks of a difficult but constitutive relationship with the sea.

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Vedno nove podobe Sredozemlja: turistični imaginariji Sredozemskega morja in pogled nanj z libanonskega literarnega gledišča

Ključne besede: potopisno leposlovje / imagologija / Libanon / Sredozemlje / turistični imaginariji / libanonska identiteta

Članek obravnava sodobne literarne pripovedi, ki tematizirajo in (re)konstruirajo libanonske imaginarije Sredozemlja, in jih primerja s tem, kako si Sredozemlje in njegove obale zamišljajo turisti. V središču pozornosti so raznolika libanonska pojmovanja Sredozemlja, ki se kaže kot sublimno in oživljajoče, a hkrati tudi kot nevarno in onesnaženo. Članek analizira štiri tekste: *Lost in Beirut: A True Story* (Izgubljeno v Bejrutu: resnična zgodba, 2021) Asheja in Magdalene Stevens, *Between Beirut and the Moon* (Med Bejrutom in luno, 2020) A. Nadžija Bahtija, *Spring Rain* (Pomladni dež, 2020) Andyja Warnerja in »The Sea Closes at 7:00« (»Morje se zapre ob 7.00«, 2022) Sabe Ajub. Primerjava teh pripovedi s pripovedmi, ki prevzemajo turistično gledišče – ali ki so namenjene turistom – pokaže, kako se posplošeni imaginarij Sredozemlja kot turistične oaze, ki bistveno odstopa od libanonske perspektive, poskuša prilagajati specifični libanonski resničnosti. Ta resničnost se pogosto močno razlikuje od izkušnje Sredozemlja, kakršno proizvaja turistična industrija globalnega Severa.

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