MEDITERRANEAN IMAGINARIES: ON INHABITING VIOLENCE THROUGH LITERATURE

Federica Bueti

My research begins from a simple premise: the Mediterranean is not a bridge, but a question and a wound. It is where empires rehearsed their ambitions, where mobility is stratified, and where languages learned to survive across violence.

I study the Mediterranean not as a nostalgic geography of exchange, but as a historically contested terrain shaped by histories of violence and uneven exchange. My book, Imagination Besieged, considers the echoes of those histories on the lives and work of those who inhabit the "slow violence" of those geographies, how it has affected their ways of seeing, narrating, and remembering. At the same time, I am interested in how writers and artists, through fragmentation, polyvocality, delay, and refusal, interrupt this violent inheritance.

Postcolonial, feminist and Black feminist thoughts are central to my methodology. Thinkers such as Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, Gloria Anzaldua have taught me to read the archive against its own grammar, to understand the body as a site where history leaves its marks, and to treat opacity not as absence but as protection. Nawal El Saadawi, Etel Adnan, and Fatema Mernissi—alongside thinkers such as Leila Ahmed—have shaped how I approach Mediterranean histories of colonialism and migration. I am particularly attentive to how gendered and racialized subjects move—or are prevented from moving—across these geographies, and how aesthetic practices can recalibrate perception itself. For me, refusal is a modulation of tempo, a shift in visibility, a refusal to render suffering consumable.

Language is another axis of my research. In all of my writing the reflection returns to poetics, to writing, to the desire for a multilingual common. I am currently researching the long-form poem as a form of counter-archiving in the context of a hybrid mediterranean in which language is improvised in ports and marketplaces across asymmetrical exchanges of trade and empire. The long poem allows me to inhabit layered temporalities and multiple voices—echoing medieval Mediterranean lyric forms such as the Andalusian muwashshab, but also epic poetry, the muallaqat, while engaging contemporary histories of displacement. I am currently working on a series of poems that move through questions of love, loss, borders, and fractured geographies of the Mediterranean sea, and think with fragmentation and recurrence.

FEDERICA BUETI (1982) is the author of Imagination Besieged. Coloniality, Violence, and Feminism in "Mediterranean" Art and Literature (Routledge, 2025) and Critical Poetics of Feminist Refusals: Voicing Dissent Across Differences (Routledge, 2022). She is Senior Lecturer in Writing at the MA of Fine Art at Piet Zwart Institute. She has wide ranging interests in decolonial, feminist and Mediterranean literature, with particular focus in the poetics and aesthetics of refusal.

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By weaving personal experience, feminist theory, critical race studies, Mediterranean studies, multilingual poetics, and historical inquiry, my work asks how imagination survives siege—and how art and literature might reopen futures where empire sought closure.



Scilla, July 2024, the author.