

### *Fictions of Water: Refugees and the Sea*

The aim of this project titled *Fictions of Water: Refugees and the Sea* is to examine the aesthetic and political dimensions and effects of the relationship between refugees and the sea as it is represented in selected postcolonial literary and cinematic texts of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What will interest me, in other words, is the cultural investments in the sea as they are (re)negotiated by contemporary narratives about refugees, on one hand. On the other, my interest will lie in how a maritime optics may reveal political visions which could take us beyond the desire to re-define (and thus make more inclusive) the category of the refugee. This project starts with the premise that the way we think (about) the sea (in opposition to or together with the land) directly affects the way we perceive, understand, treat and imagine those who inhabit its realm. It departs from an understanding of the sea as a natural space beyond the political cultures of the land, whose only function is to provide a backdrop to unfolding events and processes. Likewise, it departs from approaches which de-naturalize the sea in a drive to metaphorise its material and visual properties. It will look at the sea as an entity with a material and symbolic agency able not only to shape but also to call into question some of the political categories which quite literally determine our lives. Doing so may be a prerequisite for an understanding of refugeehood which recognizes the inadequacy and futility of the category. Indeed, to approach the sea differently may reveal why democratization of refugeehood and its inevitable ontologies (who is/can be or is not/cannot be a refugee) can never solve the so called “refugee crisis” or put an end to its necropolitics; it may also reveal why a radical questioning of the category might help achieve this end.

Methodologically, this project is inspired by and draws upon the recent critical developments in the field of oceanic studies/maritime criticism, an interdisciplinary area of research which brings together scholars who share a methodological sensibility in not only privileging the sea and related maritime spaces but also in adopting a common *approach* to the sea as an object of critical inquiry. Following three major theoretical strands within this area of research (1. re-materialization of the sea; 2. focus on non-territorial spatial paradigms; 3. re-appropriation of the mobility and fluidity of the body of the sea), this project both follows *and* departs from these critical methodological interventions seeking, on one hand, to include the largely absent refugees whose presence on the map of oceanic studies might re-define some of the goals established by the field and the outcomes of its inquiries as well as push its methodologies towards other critical directions. On the other, it aims to problematise the field’s heavy investment in fluidity (and related concepts and qualities), and thus to sidestep its reliance on the ontological difference between the sea and the land understood as a locus of the sea’s critical potential. In this project, I will not attempt to read refugees at sea in order to valorize the material qualities of the maritime and its ontologies *vis-à-vis* the land. Instead I will examine what discourses, practices and valorizations have been inscribed into the difference between the sea and the land and what political and aesthetic readings this difference can yield once the maritime horizon is made to also include refugees. Such approach can tell us something about the political violence which goes into the making of refugees, as figures of (someone else’s) crisis, both in fact and in fiction.

There are two major impacts this project is expected to achieve. On one hand, it can help us **develop** more humane political visions with which to think the world and its spatio-political order differently. Agamben’s call to think “a political community to come” through the figure of the refugee should be supplemented with a shift of the critical lens from the terrestrial to the aquatic so that received political categories can come to be unsettled. On the other hand, reading literary and visual texts, this project aims to **theorize** the relationship between the sea and the refugees and thus open up conceptual space for novel modes of theoretical and literary inquiry. To do so seems especially pressing given both the political urgency of the current moment *and* the almost complete absence of research on how cultural production has envisioned and conceptualized the relation between the sea and the refugee. The innovative character of the proposed research lies in 1) its novel interpretations of a growing body of literature and films representing refugees which move away from the usually deployed concepts such as, among others, the camp, human rights, detention, hospitality, asylum, empathy, bare life; 2) its recognition and critique of the terrestrial bias of both the category of the refugee and its reflection in scholarship; 3) its search for alternative conceptions of political communities in which the refugee brings to light the political and ethical shortcomings of the territorial/terrestrial imagination organizing the spatial politics of the global order. By bringing the sea and the refugee into a critical proximity, the project will significantly enrich the existing scholarship within both the ocean studies and refugee studies, supplementing each of the two with what has been largely missing in their research