

# OCEAN / UNI

SESSION 4

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## A BREATHLESS SEA. THE INTRICACIES OF WATER POLLUTION

Wednesday, March 23, 2022  
18:00 - 19:30 CET

With:

**Tarek Elhaik**, anthropologist and curator. His work is based on participant observation in several domains of practice: visual arts, curation, cinematic arts, and experimental media.

**Lara Tabet**, a practicing medical doctor and visual artist. Her artistic practice is informed by her background in pathology and inspects the legacy of trauma in Lebanon.

Moderation:

**Justine Daquin**

Online session, spring semester 2022 of OCEAN / UNI:

"Imagine the Ocean Dry as Lavender".

The spring semester of **OCEAN / UNI 2021–2022** is curated and developed by **Barbara Casavecchia**, Leader of *The Current III* – "Mediterraneans: 'Thus waves come in pairs' (after Etel Adnan)"; **Pietro Consolandi**; **Justine Daquin** and **Zoé Le Voyer (Calypso 36°21)**, former Ocean Fellows; and **Beatrice Forchini**, Assistant Curator, TBA21; alongside **Petra Linhartova**, Head of Digital & Innovation, **Michal Kučerák**, Digital Content Manager; **Fiona Middleton**, Research & Community, and **Markus Reymann**, Director of TBA21–Academy. Graphic design: **Lana Jerichova**.

Produced with care by the TBA21–Academy team.



# A BREATHLESS SEA. THE INTRICACIES OF WATER POLLUTION

Since the beginning of 2020, the year following international climate conference COP25, the Mediterraneans have known several critical episodes of pollution and dramatic moments that have been discussed at a global level. Harmful algal blooms triggered by excessive anthropic nutrient discharge into the waters engulfed Mediterranean coasts in the form of "red tides", threatening the Northern Adriatic and the Nile Delta, but also the Aegean, Tunisian, Moroccan, French and Spanish coasts.<sup>1</sup> Toxic "red muds" – formed from hazardous byproducts of aluminium and bauxite-based industrial processes that emit toxic waste full of heavy metals and heightened radioactivity – reached critical levels in the South of France.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, dolphins were famously seen swimming in the Venice lagoon while a thick mucilage was "choking" Turkey's Marmara Sea.<sup>3</sup> Some underwater areas of the Mediterraneans, identified as "dead zones" - a consequence of algal blooms and hypoxia -, are even considered to be past the point of no return. In fact, global dead zones are doubling every decade,<sup>4</sup> and several areas of the Mediterranean are considered at high or very high risk - especially in the Nile Delta.<sup>5</sup>

The fourth session probes into the intricacies of water management and pollution throughout the Mediterranean Sea by inviting two guests whose practices lie at the intersection of arts, anthropology and marine biology: Tarek Elhaik and Lara Tabet. Their works expose the consequences of different kinds of man-caused alterations of water ecosystems, often allowed by deliberate political decisions, in areas understood as geo-political and geo-philosophical borders. This session's trajectory moves from the chemically infused Lebanese shores transformed by real estate speculation, to the imperilled future of the Alborán Sea (enclosed by the Iberian Peninsula, the strait of Gibraltar and the northern coasts of Morocco and Algeria), one of the most biodiverse marine areas in the Mediterraneans.<sup>6</sup> Both of these spaces historically host coastal communities that grew with their seas, and are now struggling to maintain this relationship.

How can we retain the benefits that come from the sea in local communities, without fundamentally harming the environment that supports them? "My river runs to thee - Blue Sea - Wilt welcome me?"<sup>7</sup> asked Emily Dickinson in a poem that embodies the cycle of water, nature and love. A delicate connection that can generate life, but needs to be preserved.

While the Mediterranean seas are subject to increasing touristic and fishing activities, the underwater levels of toxicity and fluxes of endemic and invasive species are shifting, and with them their coexistence. Together with climatic changes, direct human action also fundamentally alters these balances. However, new models are arising: in the Alborán Sea, more and more Marine Protected Areas (MPAs) are including local fishing communities into the process of developing a fishing model that keeps into consideration the local ecosystem and its food web, fighting damaging practices that were employed for decades.

Solutions are being discussed, and they must include local knowledge. The red flags of climate struggle – often literally red-colored in the case of "red tide" algae blooms – are understood as such by coastal inhabitants, and the desire to take action is soaring. Searching for an antidote to the shared feeling of powerlessness in the face of such phenomena, this session of OCEAN / UNI looks at what lies before and beyond environmental hazards, in order to envision new ways to heal (with) our seas.

THIRD ACTIVATION on MARCH 30 6–7:30 PM,  
in collaboration with Ca' Foscari and Venice International University, will be centered around *Eco-crimes and Ecocide at Sea: Toward a New Blue Criminology* by Ascensión García Ruiz, Nigel South and Avi Brisman accessible online exclusively for OCEAN / UNI students [HERE](#)

<sup>1</sup> Christina Tsikoti and Savvas Genitsaris, "Review of Harmful Algal Blooms in the Coastal Mediterranean Sea, with a Focus on Greek Waters", in *Diversity* 13, n. 8, 2021. Accessible online [HERE](#).

<sup>2</sup> Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature (GARN), *Red mud pollution in Marseille: Fifth and final case of European Rights of Nature Tribunal*, 2021. Accessible online [HERE](#).

<sup>3</sup> Jenna Catena, "Climate Change Is Going to Be Gross" in *The Atlantic*, 2021. Accessible online [HERE](#).

<sup>4</sup> Dahr Jamail / Truthout, Area of Global Dead Zones Doubling Every Decade, in *Gulf of Mexico Hypoxia*, 2018. Accessible online [HERE](#).

<sup>5</sup> See GRID-Arendal, Hypoxia in the Mediterranean Sea map, 2013. Accessible online [HERE](#)

<sup>6</sup> Mission Blue, *Declaration of Alborán Sea Hope Spot Coincides with Intercontinental Conservation Efforts*, 2018. Accessible online [HERE](#).

<sup>7</sup> Emily Dickinson, "My river runs to thee", in *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, Boston, Little Brown, 1924.

## // REFERENCES AND READINGS

Etel Adnan, *October 27, 2003*, poem, 2003, translated from French by Sarah Riggs. Accessible online [HERE](#)

Derya Akkaynak, *Climate Clarity / Confusion / Change*, lecture at Cove Park, 2021. Available on [Ocean Archive](#).

Jenna Catena, "Climate Change Is Going to Be Gross" in *The Atlantic*, 2021. Accessible online [HERE](#).

Claire Colebrook, *Death of the PostHuman: Essays on Extinction*, vol. 1, Open Humanities Press, 2014. "Introduction", p. 9-29. Accessible online [HERE](#)

Emily Dickinson, *My river runs to thee*, poem, 1924. Accessible online [HERE](#)

Tarek Elhaik, *Aesthetics, Anthropology, Cogitations*, New York: Routledge, 2022. Preface and Chapter 6 "Marine Cogitations" available exclusively for OCEAN / UNI students [HERE](#)

Tarek Elhaik, "Strait of Gibraltar: A Reverie in Blue", in *Cura. 35 The Changing World*, 2020. Accessible online [HERE](#)

Tarek Elhaik in conversation with Mohamed Malouli, *Alboran Sea*, Cogitation #10. Podcast, accessible with the rest of the programme [HERE](#)

Ascensión García Ruiz, Nigel South and Avi Brisman, "Eco-crimes and Ecocide at Sea: Toward a New Blue Criminology", in *International Journal of Offender Therapy and Comparative Criminology*, Vol. 66(4), 2022. Accessible online exclusively for OCEAN / UNI students [HERE](#)

Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature (GARN), *Red mud pollution in Marseille: Fifth and final case of European Rights of Nature Tribunal*, 2021. Accessible online [HERE](#)

Mission Blue, *Declaration of Alborán Sea Hope Spot Coincides with Intercontinental Conservation Efforts*, 2018. Accessible online [HERE](#)

Reem Shadid, Ala Tannir, Barbara Casavecchia & TBA21-Academy, *Aridity Lines: "Blood in the Water: interspecies alliances in the Mediterranean Sea"*. Podcast. Accessible online [HERE](#)

Lara Tabet, *Eleven Fragmented Seas*, 2020. Accessible online [HERE](#)

Lara Tabet, *Correspondent Species*, 2021. Part of *Water Weighs* by Savvy Contemporary and MAREBOX Project. Accessible online [HERE](#)

Christina Tsikoti and Savvas Genitsaris, "Review of Harmful Algal Blooms in the Coastal Mediterranean Sea, with a Focus on Greek Waters", in *Diversity* 13, n. 8, 2021. Accessible online [HERE](#)

## // BIOGRAPHIES

**Tarek Elhaik** is Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of California, Davis. He is the author of *The Incurable-Image: Curating Post-Mexican Film and Media Arts* (Edinburgh University Press, 2016) and of *Aesthetics and Anthropology: Cogitations* (Routledge, 2021). With Xavier Andrade, he co-edited a special dossier on "The Contemporary Image" for the journal *Antipoda: Revista de Antropología y Arqueología* (Universidad de los Andes, Bogota, 2018). He is also the founder of [AIL: Anthropology Image Lab](#), a venue and platform that hosts conversations about creative human life and ongoing mutations in the image of thought.

**Lara Tabet** (b. 1983 Achkout, Lebanon) is a practicing medical doctor and visual artist. In 2012, after finishing her residency in Clinical Pathology at the American University of Beirut Medical Center, Tabet completed a one-year full-time program at the International Center of Photography in New York and was the recipient of the Lisette Model scholarship. Her work has been featured throughout the Arab world, USA and Europe. Her exhibitions include *L'intrus*, Tabakalera International Centre for contemporary culture, San Sebastian (2018) *Underbelly*, Galerie Eulenspiegel, Basel, Switzerland (2018), *Notas Al Futuro*, Galeria Breve, Mexico (2017), *Regards sur Beyrouth*, La Friche Belle de Mai, Marseille (2016), *I spy with my little eye*, The Mosaic Rooms, London (2015), *Off the wall on the wall*, Rencontres Internationales de la Photographie, Arles (2014), *Exposure 5*, Beirut Art Center, Beirut (2013). Tabet received grants from AFAC (Arab Fund for Art and Culture) and Al-Mawred Al-Thaqafi; she was the recipient of the Daylight Photo Award Juror's Pick for her project *The Reeds* and was awarded the Arte East fellowship for the Art Omi residency. Her artistic practice is informed by her background in pathology and inspects the legacy of trauma in Lebanon and contemplates the relationship between the individual and public/private space in connection to gender, sexuality, and identity. Her more recent research, at the intersection of art, science and politics focuses on water as a site of political speculation as well as environmental queer symbiotic relations and interdependencies.