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Bodies of Naples

A Journey in the Landscapes of Porosity

In the heart of the city of Naples there is a place with a curious name: *Largo Corpo di Napoli*. This little square opens up like an oyster at a point where the *decumani*, the Greek main streets, become a tangle of narrow medieval lanes and heavy gray-and-white buildings. Like an oyster, this square has a pearl: An ancient statue of the Nile, popularly known as *Corpo di Napoli*, the body of Naples. The story of this statue is peculiar. Dating back to the second or third centuries, when it was erected to mark the presence of an Egyptian colony in the city, the statue disappeared for a long time and was rediscovered in the twelfth century. Its head was missing, and the presence of children lying at its breasts led people to believe that it represented Parthenope, the virgin nymph to whom the foundation of the city is mythically attributed. In 1657 the statue was restored, and a more suitable male head made it clear that the reclining figure symbolized the Egyptian river and the children personifications of its tributaries. In spite of evidence and philology, however, for the people the sculpture remained the symbol of their city's body. In this body, as sometimes happens in local rituals and legends, the boundaries of gender roles, like those of matter and spirit, present and past, are blurred and shifting.

Not far from the *Body of Naples*, concealed in a side lane, the city offers its corporeality again, this time in the overflowing baroque splendors of the San Severo Chapel. Here, other bodies appear: Bodies of marble, like the *Veiled Christ* and the *Veiled Modesty*, two emphatic eighteenth-century sculptures in which the presence of a shroud makes the corporeal dimension even more naked and exposed, and, stunningly displayed in a scientific cabinet, a man and a pregnant woman, known as "anatomic machines." These bodies, whose

Corpo di Napoli (2012). Courtesy of Christian Arpaia.

circulatory systems and internal organs have been carefully reconstructed with wax using real skeletons as a basis, have also been for centuries the subjects of legends and popular tales about alchemical transubstantiations and mysterious practices that would preserve matter from corruption.

In a few square meters, there is an accumulation of bodies: Of mythical bodies alluding to the elemental forces and intermediate divinities presiding over the birth of the city, of bodies used as “anatomical machines” for proto-scientific experiments, of marble bodies covered with marble veils to give the illusion of mystic weightlessness, and, most of all, of living human bodies. With three million residents in its metropolitan area, a volcanic region in coastal Campania, Naples is indeed one of the most densely populated Italian cities, and, within this overpopulated city, this quarter is one of the most filled with people, their emerging dynamics, their stories.¹ And these stories continue far from the center, becoming alarmingly dangerous in the outskirts, crisscrossed today by the magmatic trajectories of the ecomafia’s criminal traffic.

This chapter is about some of the many bodies of Naples and its turbulent surroundings and about how memories and meanings are materially carved on to them. These are bodies of humans and nonhumans, hybrid bodies that coalesce with the materiality of places and natural forces, interacting with flows of substances, imagination, and discourses. Via these reciprocal transformations, the lively matter of these bodies becomes a template for the stories of this region, a narrative agency, a “storied matter.”

Interpreting bodies—the bodies of Naples—as texts conveying the signs and wounds expressed by material forces and collective visions, we will shed light on the complexity of levels, at once ecological, political, telluric, artistic, cultural, that craft the life of this place. In the examination of three *tableaux*, taken from archaeological research, literature, and finally from the land itself, I will illustrate the Neapolitan territory as a fluid ensemble of forces in mutual determination in which every part congeals as a nexus of ongoing narratives, showing how deeply and tangibly human bodies and minds are “ensconced in material environments, which shape us just as vividly as we shape them” (Sullivan 2012: 528). Our three scenes constitute the elements of a “Vesuvian antipastoral,” a non-romantic journey across a pulsating and difficult landscape, in which the world and its significances are continuously

emerging through one another and continuously returning into the abyss of each other's porosity. In this dimension, made of hollows and matter coming from the recesses of the earth, of consciousness, or of our own cells, the reality is always a *mise en abyme* of itself. It is a fractal, a holographic replication and combination of agencies; these agencies materialize in bodies, and these bodies, in turn, materialize in stories. We will read these stories as bio-narratives of trauma, resilience, war, and resistance coming from a land that, expressing its voice through all of its bodies, is urgently struggling for its liberation.

A (pervious) frame: Porosity

Like many German intellectuals and artists of his age, Walter Benjamin visited Naples several times during the 1920s. In a short memoir he wrote with Asja Lacis, the Brechtian actress with whom he was in love, the city is described with excited impressionism and defined with a recurrent adjective: "Porous." In their Mitteleuropean eyes, Naples's porous texture involved forms and styles, gestures and behaviors, relationships and places.² Most of all, though, the city looked porous to them because of its predominant building material: A pale-yellow, spongy, and sandy stone called "toof" (in Italian, *tufo*). Naples's toof, whose scientific name is *Ignimbrite campana*—literally, Campania's "fiery rock dust cloud" (from the Latin *ignis*, "fire," and *imber*, "rain")—is a sedimentary formation of pyroclastic rock, resulting from deposits of ash and lapilli explosions, and lava flows.³ Toof exists in huge concentrations in the Campi Flegrei (literally, "Flaming Fields," from the Greek *phlégo*, "burn"), a vast volcanic area delimited at the southeast by Mount Vesuvius. In the middle of this land, suspended between the sea and the volcano, and erected on toof, is Naples, a porous, volcanic city built up with porous, volcanic rock.

Easy to work, light, resistant, and very abundant, toof is practically everywhere in Naples. Indeed, this rock is so copious that it has been used for almost every palace, church, house, fisherman's cave, or storage room fabricated here prior to the advent of reinforced concrete. Permeating the very soil of Naples, toof is also an immediately available material, and this creates one of the city's fascinating paradoxes. The majority of the buildings, in fact, lie

directly on the caves from where the construction materials were taken, giving the feeling of a city rising from its own womb. Thus, if Venice is erected upon an underwater forest of innumerable trees, Naples is founded on hollows, its bodies literally staying at the bottom of burning fields and living in houses and streets fabricated with volcanic rocks, whether toof or other kinds of lava formations. Developing in a vast network of subterranean tunnels, these hollows—used as catacombs, storage spaces, domestic dumps, and, during the Second World War, as anti-aircraft shelters—have filtered for centuries the matter and emotions of the city atop. Also today, with its underground mineral agency, this buried vacuum continues playing an active role in the city's life. A place of worship or a curiosity for tourists, these tunnels in fact are there to remind us that there is an invisible city below our feet, and that this subterranean anti- (or pre-) Naples breathes along with the one we see above.

Although intended to be more picturesque than scientific, Benjamin and Laci's definition of Naples as a "porous city" is very effective. Naples is porous in many ways. It is spatiotemporally porous—a city upon other cities, where traces of the Greek and Roman settlements, preserved in the underfoot layers, systematically overflow onto streets and corners, sharing transversal portions of space with medieval tribunals, Renaissance palaces, or baroque churches. Naples is porous because of its overall volcanic aura, a pervious agency that permeates the city's history. Indeed, eruptions have marked Naples's life for millennia. The last upsurge, in 1944, almost coincided with the entry of the Allied forces in the city. And telluric porosity also fills the city's cultural imagination: To the many intellectuals and artists who, like Benjamin or Goethe long before him, stopped here on their Grand Tour, Mount Vesuvius's lush and sulfurous landscape provided a vibrant and engulfing experience of "Plutonic" sublime. Courageously climbing to the mountain's cone with the painter Johann Heinrich Tischbein during an eruption, Goethe was struck by this nature "which again and again destroys itself and declares war to any sense of beauty," while at the same time luring with "the irresistible fascination of a rattlesnake" (Goethe 1970: 192, 145). In those very years, the majestic and dreadful view of the erupting volcano had also begun to appear in the paintings of another illustrious traveler, Joseph Wright of Derby, who had visited the region a decade before Goethe. The encounter with this absorbing and mesmerizing landscape deeply impregnated the British painter's mind,

re-emerging to sight in over thirty works specifically dedicated to the exploding Vesuvius (Egerton 1991).

But, examined more in depth, the porosity of these places replicates the porosity of all bodies taken as sites of “interchanges and transits” (Alaimo 2010: 2), crossroads of agencies, and “congregational” entities (Bennett 2010: 34): Permeable and compound systems, in which the alternation of plenum and void is the very condition of every possible existing thing. If, from a physical viewpoint, void is literally the site where particles of matter can move, combine, and carry on activity, from a more general perspective, all possible bodies emerge out of this interplay of emptiness and density. And it is this interplay that makes all bodies, from atoms and molecules to assemblages and collectives of humans and nonhumans, permeable to the world. This porosity occurs at many levels, both material and semiotic, allowing transformations, metabolism, and flows of matter, energy, and information.

It is interesting to notice that, before being proven by biologists and physicists, the permeability of matter had been a cornerstone of natural philosophy (more notably, of atomism) for millennia. In the first century BC, the Epicurean poet Lucretius, who lived and philosophized in Herculaneum, at the foothills of Mount Vesuvius, wrote in his lyrical treatise on *The Nature of Things* that “however solid things appear [...] even these are porous”:

In a cave of rocks the seep of moisture trickles
 And the whole place weeps its fat blobs of tears.
 Food is dispersed all through a creature's body;
 Young trees grow tall and yield their fruit in season,
 Drawing their sustenance from the lowest roots
 Through trunks and branches; voices penetrate
 Walls and closed doors; the seep of stiffening cold
 Permeates bone. Phenomena like these
 Would be impossible but for empty spaces
 Where particles can pass. (Lucretius 1969: 30)

Filtering through time and visions, these ideas resonate with a passage from *The Fold*, where, commenting on Leibniz's ontology, Gilles Deleuze writes that matter “offers an infinitely porous, spongy, or cavernous texture without emptiness, caverns endlessly contained in other caverns: no matter how small,

each body contains a world pierced with irregular passages” (Deleuze 1993: 5). This description seems to fit Naples’s reality perfectly.

Many centuries after Lucretius and Leibniz, today we know that every body, every corporeal entity, is intrinsically open, intrinsically “of and in the world” (Tuana 2008: 198). It is, as Levi Bryant has written, “a heterogeneous and complex network of entities that is itself an entity or unity,” a singularity that, in order to be what it is, has to be microscopically vast and to contain multitudes. Bodies, in other words, “are more like sponges than marbles”—also because, considered in their inner structure, “even marbles are a sort of sponge” (Bryant 2012: n.p.). Like every transformative or metabolic process of the world, thus, corporeality is always already open and trans-corporeal.⁴ This trans-corporeality expresses itself in the way material substances interfere and intermingle with each other, determining the world as a site of ongoing hybridizations, from evolutionary processes to environmentally related illness. Food consumption, too, as Lucretius reminds us, is a way through which bodies are reciprocally transformed. Eating is a mutual hybridization of bodily matters, and so are sweating, the chlorophyllian synthesis of plants, the physicochemical transformation of atoms into molecules with properties of their own, and the flowing of lava from the recesses of the earth to the “open” world up above.

All these are examples of the world’s metabolic porosity, accurately expressed by the German word for “metabolism,” *Stoffwechsel*: literally, an exchange of matter. This is also what determines, for instance, communication or reproduction; the presence of interstices in bodily structures is the very condition for the outer elements to interact with the body itself, and thus to make intimacy possible: “it is because bodies are characterized by this porosity that intimacy is an intimacy with a world beyond the boundaries of their membranes. [...] Entities flow through each other in all sorts of ways” (Bryant 2012: n.p.).

As bodies are what they are via their permeable boundaries (membranes that cause the flows of energy and matter), so, too, bigger entities and formations follow the same dynamics. A city, for example, is a porous body inhabited by other porous bodies, a mineral-vegetable-animal aggregate of porous bodies. Following the patterns of intra-action, cities are compounds of matter and energy in mutual transformation with human and nonhuman

beings, living and nonliving matter, thus participating in the world's "geochoreographies" (Cohen 2015a: 188). A convincing model for this porous geochoreography is provided by Manuel De Landa, who writes: "From the point of view of energetic and catalytic flows, human societies are very much like lava flows; and human-made structures (mineralized cities and institutions) are very much like mountains and rocks: accumulations of materials hardened and shaped by historical processes" (De Landa 1997: 55). There is a substantial—ontological and historical—continuity in the formation of cities and volcanic rocks. The rhythms of "mineralization" and "catalysis" of cities might differ from those of geological structures, but they are part of the unceasing morphing process that involves organisms, structures, genes, languages, or ideas: "Living creatures and their inorganic counterparts share a crucial dependence on intense flows of energy and materials. [...] Our organic bodies are, in this sense, nothing but temporary coagulations in these flows" (De Landa 1997: 104). Seen in this light, porosity is not only the basis of change, growth, and decay both on a geological and a human level, but the very condition of history: Of a history that is not a linear succession of events,

Città vegetale (2012). Courtesy of Christian Arpaia.

but rather a path emerging from the fluxes of matter and energy in which our organic bodies are “nothing but temporary coagulations,” as De Landa says.

In the vast landscape of porosity, cognition occupies an important part, too. As Varela, Thompson, and Rosch explain, cognition “depends on the kind of experience that comes from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities”—capacities that “are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context” (Varela et al. 1993: p. 173). As a set of embodied practices, knowledge consists “in the interface between mind, society, and culture, rather than in one or even in all of them” (Varela et al. 1993: 179). Knowledge—human and nonhuman informational interchange with the world—is a form of porosity; it is the way the world enters and conditions habits of living, thus determining the way living beings *in-habit* the world. To say that knowledge is “embodied” means that the world acts together with bodies, becoming sedimented in and filtered through cognitive practices. This is what N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman*, describes as a process of cognitive “embodiment.” Every cognitive experience, whether an “incorporated practice” (“an action that is encoded into bodily memory by repeated performances until it becomes habitual”; Hayles 1999: 199) or the enactive processes of “embodied knowledge,” is rooted in the mutual porosity of bodies and world. Embodied knowledge, in particular, is a process and a flux, “a mode of learning which is [...] different from that deriving from cogitation alone” (Hayles 1999: 201), and therefore “contextual, enmeshed with the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture” (Hayles 1999: 196). In other words, knowledge comes from the give-and-take between bodies and the world. It materializes the porous exchange of inside and outside, the progressive becoming-together of bodies and the world.

This discloses another important dimension of this permeability, which is also discursive and semiotic: The flow of information and discursive practices through bodies. Phenomena such as gender, sexuality, class, social practices, and *their narratives* are filtered through this porosity as forms of an “emergent interplay” of natural-cultural factors. This is the key of Alaimo’s trans-corporality and of what Nancy Tuana, following Alfred North Whitehead, calls an “interactionist ontology”: An ontology in which the social is considered in its materiality, in strict combination with the agency of the natural, thus

challenging essentialist visions and their normative constructions (see Tuana 2008: 188). “Porosity” means here the permeability not only “between our flesh and the flesh of the world we are of and in” (Tuana 2008: 198), but also between bodies and the discursive worlds in which they are located: Bodies “produc[e] culture at the same time that culture produces [...] bod[ies]” (Hayles 1999: 200). This “emergent interplay,” or, in Barad’s compelling term, intra-action of matter, discourses, and cognitions, shows that there are no clear-cut boundaries separating “the natural from the human-constructed, the biological from the cultural, genes from their environments, the material from the semiotic” (Tuana 2008: 198), but that every body is a crossing of flesh and meanings, a unique node in the stories of matter.⁵

The landscape of Naples and its region is not only materially and historically porous, alternating hollows and density in “a mosaic of ecological and semiotic processes” (Farina 2006: 64), but also, with its co-emerging bodies, epitomizes such a vision. Being themselves players in the making of the world, all of these bodies are in fact enactive and cognitive filters for agencies, which are natural and social, human and nonhuman, visible or invisible, foreseen or unpredictable. Their narrative porosity becomes therefore both the point where the world enters bodies and the point from which bodies deliver their stories to the world. It is this very junction, made of material, social, and cognitive mergings, that we are now heeding.

Tableau 1: (Absent) bodies

An interesting chapter in this story of bodies and porosity is to be found a few miles south of Naples, displayed in the dusty showcases of Pompeii’s *antiquarium*. It tells us about the eruption that in AD 79 affected a vast territory at the foothills of Mount Vesuvius comprising the cities of Herculaneum, Pompeii, and Oplontis, and modifying the life and landscape of the Neapolitan area.

Forgotten for many centuries, the site of ancient Pompeii had been rediscovered (and severely plundered) by the Bourbons, Naples’s Spanish sovereigns, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and finally identified in 1763. Over time, many bodies have emerged from the excavations. These were bodies that, covered with volcanic debris, had left their imprints in

the solidified lava, so that one could see “the full form of the dead, their clothing, and their hair” (Beard 2008: 6). But similarly eloquent were other kinds of bodies: the absent ones. Here, again, porosity is part of the picture. As cyberneticians know, information is not only embodied in the *presence* of the object, in its material density; absent objects can also convey a message and a meaning. In other words, the void also possesses a semiotic dimension. Similar to Naples’s buildings emerging from the hollows of the city, Pompeii’s bodies emerged from their own absence, from the hollows they left in the petrified ash after decomposing. These absent bodies started materializing around the 1860s, via a technique developed to obtain casts of wooden doors, shutters, furniture, and other perishable objects. Like a photonegative, this void was charged with information; combined with plaster, it made it possible to look into that historical moment, literally giving a face to the human and nonhuman victims of the eruption.

From an archaeological viewpoint, the combination of excavated and “photonegative” findings, of plenum and void, constitutes a site full of narratives: Narratives about social roles and gender practices, about what Bruno Latour calls assemblages and collectives, about human and nonhuman agents in ancient everyday life. Reading into the stratified natural-cultural ecologies of this place, the archaeological research has opened windows on more-than-human realities both in larger visions and in little but meaningful segments. From the many examples that can be quoted, one is the discovery of small breads left in an oven where they were being baked when the upsurge started. Baked twice, both by human and by volcanic heat, these breads remained suspended in the twilight zone where intentionality is overcome by the agency of things, thus turning into an involuntary *mise en abyme* of the town swallowed by lava. Another compelling snapshot on this world of confluent forces is offered by the cast of a guard dog, suffocated by the ash and pumice in the hopeless attempt to get rid of his chain. With his bronze studded collar and the excruciating fear still visible in his (absent) face, the dog shared the same fate of a man, probably a slave, who died while trying to unshackle his ankles from the iron bonds that tied them. Like material texts emerging from the void, these plaster casts render the agony of human and nonhuman bodies in a pitiless combination with the power of the elements and of socially constructed bindings.

But, following the tracks of porosity, I would like to focus now on another narrative, complementary to the one collected by archaeologists. In this narrative, the alternation of plenum and void—in terms of bodies, memory, and cognition—sheds light on the “emergent interplay” of agencies at work in the event of AD 79.

The surprise inscribed in these bodies is a key element of the story. When the German philosopher Karl Löwith saw the plaster casts in 1924, he commented:

The view of these people—surprised and immobilized by nature in the last acts of their life—is compelling. The fixity of their traits recalls the look of certain death masks. But the faces of these Pompeians, buried by lava, do not know the tranquil calm of the dead. Death took them in the middle of life, not leaving them, so to speak, the time of dying. (Löwith 2000: 63)

Although a perceptible astonishment might be obvious on the face of whoever is struck by a natural cataclysm, in Pompeii the people’s surprise reveals another important element of this story of presence/absence, density, and void. Considered on a cognitive level, the volcanic eruption is a breach, an epistemic rupture in the mind of this place. For a long time Vesuvius was believed to be a mountain. Some Roman writers had commented on its similarity to Mount Etna, an active volcano in Sicily, or conjectured about Vesuvius’s being a volcano. Strabo, for example, had written that the summit “shows pore-like cavities in masses of rock that [...] [look] as though they had been eaten out by fire; and hence one might infer that in earlier times this district was on fire and had craters of fire” (Strabo 1917–32: 453). However, Vesuvius had been dormant for eight hundred years: The memory of its agency had simply disappeared from the general narratives about this place—thus, the epistemic (and physical) shock. As Jeffrey Cohen says, nature’s elemental forces “surprise and then confound” (Cohen 2013a: xxiv).

In her essay “Landscape, Memory, and Forgetting,” Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands has expressed inspiring considerations on the ties between memory, body, and landscape. Drawing from the medical research about Alzheimer’s disease and from David Abram’s ecophenomenology, she writes:

Remembrance—the act of embodying an act or object or place or concept in some portion of the brain or another—is not solely a question of the

remembering subject. Both the written page and the storied landscape are warehouses of memory that are external to the individual body. [...] [T]he act of remembering involves a recognition of a relationship between the body/mind and the external world that is not only determined by internal forces. The experience of memory is thus always already social, technological, and physical in that the conditions of the relationship between brain and object cannot help but be located in a complex range of conditions that offer the subject to the experience, and experience to the subject. (Mortimer-Sandilands 2008: 274)

There is, in other words, a mutual porosity between individuals and their landscapes. This very porosity of matter and perception constitutes, as Abram suggests, the mind of place—something that is not simply an ensemble of cultural constructs or a repository of ideas *inside* a subject, but a “carnal” atmosphere, a permeable “awareness” transpiring back and forth from the earth to every single element and living being, including the human.⁶ Lacking the recognition of the way the “relationship between the body/mind and the external world” could be articulated, Pompeii’s bodies express the surprise in the place’s mind—a mind whose memory, Sandilands maintains, is “always already social, technological, and physical” (Mortimer-Sandilands 2008: 274).

But the place’s mind is, here, an oblivious mind. Ironically enough, already a couple of centuries after Pompeii had been buried by lava, there was almost no memory of its site anymore. The excavations and the emerging of these bodies from the hollows of space-time-matter represent therefore another epistemic rupture. This is a clear example of how material agency and discursive practices mingle in shaping the human and nonhuman world—bodies, landscape, and memory. The world is not simply “fabricated” by discourses and cultural memory. There is a strong, deep, and complex interrelation between the agency of natural forces and the agency of cultural practices. The landscape of discourses, words, and conceptual descriptors melts with the landscape of elements, of geology, of telluric and atmospheric agencies, of biotic and ecosystemic balances. The case of these bodies—and houses, and things, and forgotten places—emerging from the underground levels of a buried city is dialectically complementary to the surge of lava from the body of a mountain. Being rich with signs and meanings, and therefore with information, both these bodies and the lava create a material-semiotic

compound. In this compound, while the bodies inform (and narrate) about an almost forgotten complexity (the site of the ancient Pompeii), the lava informs (and narrates) about the forgotten orographic structure of this site, inhabited by volcanic and seismic agencies, even though it was believed to be “simply” a mountain.

The oblivion of the fact that every mountain has its own rhythms of motion, its telluric choreography, signals human amnesia regarding nature’s force. The material correlation of memory and forgetting, however, is meaningful evidence about how society and nature cooperate in shaping “a world of complex phenomena in dynamic relationality” (Tuana 2001: 239). If these bodies left their imprints and transmitted their narratives over time, it is because of the interstice opened by a combination of biochemical elements, environmental conditions, geophysical energies, and cultural frames over time. This interstice is filled with apersonal agency and is pervaded by forces that, as Jeffrey Cohen says, are inhuman per definition:

Inhuman means not human [...] and therefore includes a world of forces, objects, and nonhuman beings. But *in-human* also indicates the alien within (a human body is an ecosystem filled with strange organisms; a human collective is an ecosystem filled with strange objects), and requires as well a consideration of the violently *inhumane*. (Cohen 2013b: 271)

The “violently inhumane” can have many forms: a volcanic eruption, a virus, a falling asteroid, war, and even politics. Combined with human life, all these things shape “collectives” in which strange objects express their agency in pulsating porosity. What our reading suggests is that these collectives are dynamically contextual, their agency always porously “in the making” with an outside. Taken in their process of becoming with the world, bodies display “the importance of context to human cognition,” also in relation to memory: “Just as disembodiment require[s] that context be erased, so remembering embodiment means that context be put back into the picture” (Hayles 1999: 203).

In this pervious dimension in which bodies are absorbed by the world, and the world—in the form of lava or discourses—is absorbed by bodies, landscape is the material and cognitive context of memory. And it is, therefore, a transformative site of cognitive categories. If remembrance is “a recognition of a relationship between the body/mind and the external world that is not only determined by internal forces” (Mortimer-Sandilands 2008:

The Sleep of Reason (2012). Courtesy of Christian Arpaia.

274), then landscape is the deciding site where the relation of inside and outside, body/mind and world, gets reinforced or progressively erased. In the shadow of Vesuvius, an intra-action of multifarious elements produced an ironic phenomenon: Just as the “natural” body of a volcano was forgotten in the evolving human narratives, the “cultural” and more-than-human body of Pompeii was forgotten only a couple of centuries after it was buried by the eruption. The place’s mind had returned to its Plutonic sleep.

In the hollows and plenums of space-time-matter, the erratic emergences of natureculture always surprise, and then confound.

Tableau II: Skinned bodies

In 1944, just after the arrival of the Allied Army, another eruption hit the Vesuvian area. Curzio Malaparte (1898–1957), a former Fascist journalist who subsequently became a philo-American writer, described the event in his novel *La pelle* (*The Skin*):

The sky to the East was scarred by a huge, crimson gash, which tinged the sea blood-red [...]. Shaken by subterranean convulsions, the earth trembled; the houses rocked at their foundations [...]. Vesuvius was screaming in the night, spitting blood and fire. Never since the day that saw the final destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii, buried alive in their tomb of ashes and lava, had so dreadful a voice been heard in the heavens. (Malaparte 1952: 280)

The violence of nature and the violence of the humans over Naples's bodies go hand in hand in this controversial book, written immediately after the end of the war and published in 1949. Fiercely attacked by many Italian intellectuals of the time and even censored for the crudeness of its descriptions of Naples's "moral plagues" (in the English translation, several scenes and an entire chapter on an ancient ritual of "queer maternity" are missing), *The Skin* is a story about the "liberation" of Naples, freed from the Nazis but then occupied by the Allied Army in 1943–5.⁷ In a scenery dominated by ruin and pain, Naples appeared at that time as a completely annihilated city: severe bombing in the port area had left 200,000 people homeless, without water, and in desperate hygienic conditions. Soon, with the collusion of many levels of army command, the population fell at the mercy of criminal powers. As Paul Ginsborg reminds us, the city touched levels of "degradation and disease that it had not known since the great plagues of the seventeenth century. Most of the poorer women were forced into prostitution, and severe epidemics of typhus and venereal disease afflicted both the civilian and military population" (Ginsborg 2003: 37). All this was the concrete setting of Malaparte's stories.

More than a novel with a traditional plot, *The Skin* is a memoir-like succession of apparently autobiographic episodes taken from the author's experience as an officer of the Italian Army. Having the role of facilitating the "interchange" between the Americans and "liberated" Naples, Malaparte himself seems to act as a membrane, a filter between these two different worlds, something which is also evident from the recurring usage of English expressions emerging from the Italian text of the novel. With his dense and provocative prose, Malaparte—who had already represented the brutality of the Second World War in his previous novel *Kaputt* (1944)—scratches the surface of this world of liberators and victims, pointing out the penetration of the "violently inhumane" (volcanic eruptions, war, corruption) into the

city's flesh. *The Skin* is the narrative—strong, unpleasant, and powerful—of this penetration. Showing Naples's destroyed urban body and its innumerable wounded bodies (both human and nonhuman), Malaparte's novel represents how, coupled with the uncontrollable agency of nature, war and liberation create an unpredictable mixture of material and discursive elements that pierce the skin of people and the land, irremediably changing them, leaving them without protection, either from the outside or from the inside.

The quoted passage on the eruption of 1944 is exemplary in this respect. Here, as in several other similar episodes, the author's rhetorical artifice of depicting natural elements as sentient organisms is evident, even excessive: The sky is disfigured and bleeds into the sea; the earth trembles in convulsions, and houses rock; the volcano screams in the night, "spitting blood and fire"; its "dreadful voice" is "heard" in the heavens. This vision seems here to dynamically complement a description provided by Karl Löwith, who saw in the lava's "total inhumanity," an "irrevocable, naked, and speechless ruin, one that comes out the dark and black nothingness of an infernal crater" (Löwith 2000: 65). In spite of its apparent (at times naïve and grotesque) zoomorphism, however, the novel's passage conveys a complex vision of nature and history, themselves bordering the "black nothingness" of this crater.

In Malaparte's vision, the volcanic eruption and the scars on land act as a counterpoint to the discourse about the city being "liberated" by the Allied Army. Even if war—the "violently *inhumane*" per definition—is apparently over, there is no liberation from the "violently *inhuman*" force of the elements: A force so gruesome as to assault the body of the land itself and to make the elements "scream" in terror and convulsion. But one thing distinctly emerges in this place suffering the tremendous aftermaths of the conflict: In front of the violence of both war and nature, everything is a body, and everything is ripped and exposed. Like the bodies of people and animals, the land, the sea, the sky, and the volcano are also bodies. The eruption and the war affecting the land's body play a natural-cultural mirroring game—again, a *mise en abyme*—with the eruption and war affecting the bodies of Naples. Saturating this porous corporeal "collective," a dangerous—sometimes terrifying—interplay of agencies scratches every skin and enters every flesh.

In Malaparte's novel the skin is thus both a membrane and a metaphor; it is a medium for and a sign of the permeability of substances, a "dangerously

receptive place of contact and transmission, [...] of consciousness and agency” (Sandilands 2004: 33). Once the skin has been damaged, these substances—and elements, discourses, practices, and worldviews—collide with each other, leaving bodies fully exposed to the “violently inhumane.” As a result, all the oddities, the contradictions, and the “moral” ruins of this city are conjured up on the surface, materializing into Naples’s bodies and their stories.

Among these bodies, the most vulnerable to the violence of “History” (the capitalized “History” that figures as the magmatic and obscurely agentic background in Elsa Morante’s famous novel *La Storia*) are those of the “innocents”: children, virgins sold to American soldiers, animals, and even rare fish taken from the Aquarium to be served as a meal in surreal banquets. All of these bodies, in Malaparte’s book, are transformed into narrative agencies that testify to the entanglements of politics, violence, illness, moral discourses, and survival struggles in a city whose rich and glorious past seems to be turned into damnation.

Naples’s damnation, Malaparte suggests, is its failed transformation of the body politic into a real, modern, citizenry.⁸ In the imagination of the city, the body is therefore everything: It is language, it is money, it is food, it is a battlefield, an abyss, and a fate. It is even a convulsive proscenium for queer sexuality, as in the censored episode “Il figlio di Adamo,” “Adam’s child” (Malaparte 2010: 135–56). Invited by an American officer, Malaparte attends a secretly performed “Uranian ritual” of queer maternity (here dubbed “La figliata,” “The delivery”).¹⁰ In a villa at the foothills of Mount Vesuvius, a young man, disguised as a woman and surrounded by several other figures (Allied officers, male members of the local aristocracy, young peasants, and an old woman acting as a midwife), “gives birth” to a “little monster,” a baby-like wooden puppet (Malaparte 2010: 150). After this dramatic scene, in a climax of grotesque excitement, an orgy takes place. Here the puppet, which displays a huge phallus, similar to the augural priapic statuettes found in Pompeii, is taken in triumph and then dismembered.

Interesting comments could be made here, for example, on the connection between queerness, pre-Christian rituals of generation, and Fascist ideology.¹¹ But what this episode openly reminds us is that the bodies of Naples are intrinsically hybrid and queer. In the novel and in the city’s imagination, they are in fact male and female, human and nonhuman, sacred and impure. Seen in this

light, the *Corpo di Napoli* is also a queer statue—a male body apparently breast-feeding its children. Even Parthenope, the nymph or siren who, according to legends, founded the city, is a hybrid being, halfway between the human and the nonhuman. In Malaparte's novel, Naples itself emerges as city and noncity, a preurban dimension inhabited by a historically porous collective of human and nonhuman forces, in which the human part waits to “progress” toward citizenry and reason. Here victims and offenders, liberators and enemies are together, their roles often overlapping. In this world, whose history is always hybridized with mythos, and whose bodies are always interspersed with all sort of material-discursive agencies, the human “is determined in that no-one's land between myth and reason, in the ambiguous twilight where the living accepts to be confronted with the inanimate images delivered to it by historical memory, so that it can take them back to life,” as Giorgio Agamben says (Agamben 2007: 34–5). In *The Skin*, this queer and posthuman dimension is the other side of the Arcadian Mediterranean dream of (philosophical and physical) light and (natural and moral) lushness. Sinister, violent, and queer, Malaparte's Naples is a dark Arcadia; it is the Mediterranean's Underworld.

An uncanny continuity unifies the bodies that populate this porous Underworld. This is the continuity of blurred ontological boundaries: here all bodies, human and nonhuman, are metamorphoses of each other, blends of material elements in their formative and performative histories. But this porous interchange of substances is even more visible in the inescapably metabolic and quasi-cannibalistic dimension of life. As Malaparte insists, commensality and mutual ingestion are basic relations among Naples's bodies. An interesting episode in this respect is that of “General Cork's Banquet.” In a starving Naples, fishing in the bay has been prohibited due to the pollution caused by bombing (an element through which the trans-corporeal dimension of the environments of war is interestingly depicted). As a result, the Americans start eating fish from the Aquarium, and, in a gala dinner at the headquarters, a “siren” is served over a bed of lettuce and corals. In an expressionist crescendo of bodily details, this rare fish—here claimed to belong to the family of Sirenoidei—is described as having the look of a boiled little girl:

In the middle of the tray was a little girl, or something that resembled a little girl. She lay face upwards on a bed of green lettuce-leaves, encircled by a large wreath of pink coral stems. [...] She was naked; but her dark, shining skin [...]

was exactly like a well-fitting dress in the way in which it outlined her still callow yet already well-proportioned form, the gentle curve of her hips, her slightly protruding belly, her little virginal breasts, and her broad, plum shoulders. She might have been not more than eight or ten years old [...]. Here and there [...] the skin had been torn out or pulped by the process of cooking, and through the cracks and fissures a glimpse was afforded of the tender flesh, which in some places was silvery, in others golden [...]. She had short, fin-like arms, pointed at the ends and similar in shape to hands with no fingers. [...] Her flanks were long and slender, and terminated, exactly as Ovid says, *in piscem*—in a fish's tail. [...] It was the first time that I had even seen a little girl who had been cooked [...] and I was silent. [...] All the diners were pale with horror.

General Cork raised his eyes and looked at his guests. "But it isn't a fish ... It's a little girl!" he exclaimed in a trembling voice.

"No," I said, "it's a fish [...]. It's the famous Siren from the Aquarium."
(Malaparte 1952: 235–6)

Besides the trustworthiness of the episode, which is closer to surrealism than to scientific ichthyology and certainly a literary invention of the author's, in this context the idea of eating rare fish from an aquarium has a very powerful symbolic significance. It represents a whole library of evolution being served by war on plates of the finest porcelain. And this evolution is not simply a natural evolution, but also a symbolic-cultural one. The siren is part of the imagination of a city stemming from a "virginal" mermaid (the mythical Parthenope), and where even the virginity of the children's bodies is disrupted by the violence of war.

Eating the siren is a "naked lunch" disclosing a material-symbolic abyss: It means eating the substance and body of the city and ritually consuming its identity through a marine, evolutionary, and *gendered* Eucharist. The body of the fish, which seems to be already metamorphosing into a mammal, is in fact that of a female creature: We see "the gentle curve of *her* hips, her slightly protruding *belly*, her little virginal *breasts*" (emphases added). In this precultural cannibalistic dimension, this fish-mammal-female body is enmeshed with that of a human being. The outcome of this mesh is an intermediate and hybrid deity, which is here much more concrete, physically determined, and ontologically eloquent than the disembodied Spirit of transcendental theology. In a paradoxical ritual, metaphysics converts into metabolism. *Parousía*—the advent and presence of god—morphs into porosity.

The fact that the diners (among whom are military officers, a lady, and a Catholic priest) refuse to eat this meal, and the fact that, nevertheless, this womanlike fish is killed and cooked, recalls the dialectic antithesis between conscious and unconscious, totem and taboo.¹² It is a cultural self-censorship that clashes with war as a total openness and wildness, both corporeal and moral. And indeed, the territory, along with its bodies, is now wildly open. War opens the corporeal breach, which is the breach wide open in the body of land, society, and the city. Finally, there is no frontier in the attack to the bodies of Naples, even more if these bodies are sacred. Once sirens have been slaughtered, everything that happens afterward is simple corollary.

Tableau III: Resisting bodies

We started this journey with another siren, which proved in turn to be a river—the Nile—and finally a body: The legendary body of Naples in the shape of the ancient, enigmatic statue nestled in a “small piazza that in contradiction to its size is known as the Largo Corpo di Napoli” (Verdicchio 2007: 61).

As a philosophy student, in the early 1990s, I used to cross these narrow and grey streets almost every day. Amid the crowd of perpetually rushing people and eternally returning things, other bodies were visible there, at that time: Human-sized figures in sepia or black and white, mysteriously disseminated between old electoral posters and publicities. Creatively quoted from Caravaggio and other mannerist painters, they penetrated inside the massive trachyte walls of the Medieval and Renaissance buildings overlooking the *decumani*. A small epiphany limited in time, these figures were trompe-l'oeil serigraphs titled *Naples: La peau des murs*—*Naples: The Skin of Walls*—affixed to palaces and street corners by the French artist Ernest Pignon-Ernest.¹³ I often saw children playing ball near these scraping and ephemeral artworks that have now completely dissolved, maybe merging into the city's larger body and pervious volcanic membranes.

This was many years ago. But now, filtering through Naples's multilayered porosity, a question comes to mind, and this question is obviously about bodies: What happens to Naples' body, today? And what are, now, the stories

of its innumerable, peaceless, and persistently struggling bodies? The previous two tableaux have been chosen to partly answer this very issue. The stories they tell, in fact, are still carved on Naples's land and corporeal matter.

These are stories of forgetfulness, an amnesia that, despite the plethora of popular songs and rhetorical statements, is visible in the fissure between the Vesuvian people and their volcanic territory. This fissure is perceptible, and even measurable, in a visual art project titled *Napoli Explosion*, a suite of StopEmotion® pictures annually taken by photographer Mario Amura on New Year's Eve while standing on the other side of the Bay, on top of Mount Faito, by Castellammare di Stabia.¹⁴ The lights, which almost reach the edge of the crater, are fireworks. But let us not be deceived by the apparent *joie de vivre* of these glows and colors: The volcano's image is, in fact, a funereal one. Not only does it speak of the people who, as a consequence of these "cheerful" explosives, are maimed or even die every year in those precise moments and places as if in a theater of war, of all the animals—domestic and feral—terrified and killed by these fireworks, and of the ramified networks of illegality, exploitation, violence, and chemical pollution ensuing their production and usage.¹⁵ This picture is also saying how high real estate speculation has climbed on Vesuvius's slopes: As it distinctly appears from Amura's

Napoli Explosion (2015). Courtesy of Mario Amura.

images, houses completely surround the crater. This means that, regardless of physical evidence, embodied cognitions, and any precautionary principle, in the local imagination Mount Vesuvius has returned to being “simply” a mountain, and it is covered with a crust of (mainly unlawful) constructions. Its nature, along with its threatened living surroundings, has been, once again, disremembered.¹⁶

But the stories that filter through Naples’ porosity are also stories of violence, a violence pervading the flesh and skin of this land’s corporeal matter in many forms. The literary tableau on Malaparte’s novel illustrates the ripping of Naples’s skin, surprised and assaulted in all its vulnerable parts by the ferocity of elements and History. Today, however, the stories of violence and war inflicted on Naples’s bodies are also other ones. These bodies are often toxic, absorbing in their perviousness the millions of tons of pollutants illegally dumped in this region by the so-called ecomafia and its vast network of political complicities.¹⁷ Far from the city center, in the outsized and hideous non-place called “metropolitan city” or in the formerly verdant countryside, these embodied stories become “subterranean and subcutaneous,” violently disturbing and densely invisible, “easy (and convenient) to forget, or to disbelieve” (Past 2013: 607). Contamination, in certain areas, is so high that epidemiological studies report an alarming increase of toxic-related diseases due to an intermingling of substances such as arsenic in water supplies, lead, cadmium, and mercury in the ground, and dioxin in the residents’ blood (De Felip and Di Domenico 2010). And so, once the echo of the gorgeous architectures and picturesque Mediterranean chaos have dissolved, the bodies you encounter in the outskirts tell bio-narratives of pollution and marginality, of missed protection, of people and places chronically peripheral.¹⁸ If, as Véronique Bragard has noted, “material waste constitutes an archeological strata of information about a revolved past” (Bragard 2013: 481), this “revolved past” is here present in stories of crime and abandon, stories of violence and, sometimes, resistance. To these embodied narratives every one of us, near and far from this place, whether consciously or not, participates. Because violence, in the environment, “might be slow, but it is not still” (Cohen and Duckert 2015: 1).

The case of Naples is representative of a blend of historical factors that include decades of misrule, missed social integration, wrong development

policies, industrial toxicity, poor enforcement of environmental regulation, a prolonged need for jobs, and insufficient waste facilities for a growing population. Over the years this dangerous mix has led to a “waste crisis” culminating in 2008 with 400,000 tons of uncollected rubbish piled in the streets. To make this picture darker is the emergence of the ecomafia. Coined in 1994 by Legambiente, the major Italian environmental NGO, the term “ecomafia” describes a whole series of socio-ecologically lethal criminal activities, organized in networks that extend far beyond Italian borders. Among these crimes, the unlawful disposing of waste stands out as the most harmful but also as the most profitable, even more than the drug business. For ecomafia clans “trash is gold,” as Elena Past incisively titles her essay, quoting the confession of a camorra affiliate (Past 2013: 598). Even though a precise figure of this trafficking is clearly impossible due to the “subterranean” nature of criminal activities, it has been calculated that, in the decade 2002–12, 10 million tons of waste have been illegally dumped in the Campania region (Pergolizzi 2012: 94). Narrating ecomafia’s traffic in his novel *Gomorra*, Neapolitan writer Roberto Saviano has visualized this pile of rubbish as “the tallest mountain on earth” (Saviano 2007: 283), bigger than Mont Blanc and Everest put together, rising 14,600 meters (47,900 ft) from a base of three hectares.

What this orographic picture of an escalating toxicity recounts is also that the fault lines of pollution replicate the fault lines of Italy’s national identity. As Marco Armiero reminds us, “[i]n the dualistic structure of the Italian society, the South found its position within the capitalistic trade-mill of production, becoming the cheap trash can of the factories from the North” (Armiero 2014a: 171). Indeed, revealing the thick web of connivance between corrupt politicians and ecomafia clans, criminal investigations have strikingly delineated the north-south trajectory taken by toxic waste. For decades, healthy and fertile agricultural areas in the southern regions, and Campania in particular, have secretly absorbed all sorts of hazardous waste coming from the industrial poles of our more “developed” North, including for example Porto Marghera’s Petrolchimico or the notorious Cengio’s ACNA factory (see Chapters 2 and 4). It is “due to those criminal activities that Campania today has the largest contaminated areas in the entire nation, consisting in all of about 2,500 highly polluted sites” (Armiero 2014a: 172).

Targeted in detectable, but more often in undetectable ways, citizens can hardly avoid the risks of contamination, and their bodies, which here more than elsewhere in Italy develop all forms of cancerous tumors and endocrinal disorders (Bidoli et al. 2011), are the eloquent storytellers of this spiral of eco-social aggression and environmental crime for which Campania holds the national record (Legambiente, 2014). This is “slow violence” in Naples: An invisible, socially intersectional, and massive “slow motion slaughter” (Nixon 2011: 213), which takes place in the opaque necro-ecologies of power, illegality, and political slackness. Because Naples’s rubbish is of course an eminently political issue. What these bodily narratives expose is that there is a form of pollution just as infiltrating and dangerous as the material one. This is the pollution hiding in behaviors and words, in the hazy territory where political discourses and social life intermingle with environmentally lethal activities, some of which are illegal, some others perfectly within the bounds of the law and regulation.

In Naples’s case, one of these legal measures was the decreeing of an “emergency regime,” a typically authoritarian system generally based on the suspension of democratic rules. An ad hoc Committee for this “waste emergency” was also created, which, predictably, became a barrier against any improvement in waste disposal policies: “Instead of making it an instrument to solve the emergency, its extra-ordinary powers made it an instrument to avoid a dialogue with citizens and local administrations” (Iaculli 2008: 222). Its members were in some cases subsequently indicted. And so, apart from failing to resolve the situation, this waste emergency regime—strongly supported by the former Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi and his government—contributed to exacerbate Naples’s problems, revealing the much more profound crisis of citizenship and democracy lying beneath the ecological one.¹⁹

As this strange complicity of waste, ecology, and politics suggests, to read pollution as a merely material or physical phenomenon is to miss the big part of the picture. “Pollution and poisoning are mental as well as physical phenomena, subjective as well as objective phenomena,” Herbert Marcuse said (Marcuse 2005: 175). Confirming this view, Naples’s tangible narrative proves how the eco-social ruin of its land and bodies results from an intra-action of toxic material substances and toxic discourses and practices, whereby inadequate environmental policies, corruption, and criminal complicities

have cooperated with uncontrolled industrial activities and forms of maldevelopment in ripping the social fabric, creating unequal protection, thwarting citizenship, and damaging human and nonhuman life. All these elements merge into the flesh of the body politic, evincing how the health of biological systems is strictly connected to political, social, and ethical issues. But, as we see and understand our bodies as immersed “in the radically local and mobile environments that are always with us but never entirely under our conscious control” (Sullivan 2012: 528), the living narratives encumbered in Naples’s bodies suggest that contamination has also another important power: The power to concretely reveal abuses and inequalities. Reacting with the bodies of organisms and land as in a litmus test, it signals the stories of political failures, socio-ecological decline, and the discriminatory practices that infiltrate societies. The ethical message conveyed by this “‘language beneath the language’ [...] written in the fortunes of bodies” (Wheeler 2006: 111) is the truth of biology.²⁰

All of these stories, signs, and messages are inscribed on the living bodies of Naples. They are bodies in which, as in Pompeii’s plasters, an absence is often encapsulated: It is the absence of citizenship and of collective protection, the absence of a political ecology both of things and humans. Here the stories of matter veer into stories of justice. Here, as Marco Armiero and Giacomo D’Alisa write about Naples’ waste crisis, “the very frontier between surrounding and surrounded is blurred up [...] placing human body at the crossroad of this meeting” (Armiero and D’Alisa 2012: 56). In our perspective, it is not only the frontier between surrounding and surrounded to be blurred, but also the frontier of the text. The body is a semiotic agent in its very materiality. It is *in* the body that the formative agencies at work in a place’s life materialize and express themselves. Naples’s bodies are texts, the city itself is a text, and its texture is its own narrative. It is a narrative populated by substances, choices, voices, human presences, illness, scars, memory, forgetfulness, natural catastrophes, war, contamination, fear, death, and life.

From a more-than-human and archeological past to our trans-corporeal and postindustrial present, the narrative agency of Naples’s porous bodies conveys the matter and discourses of their formative histories. In so doing, this agency creates ties of awareness that, disclosing the processes at work in these bodies’ becoming, restore their political imagination. The role of

storytelling is essential: when human creativity “plays” together with the narrative agency of matter, intra-acting with it, it can generate stories and discourses that “diffract” the complexity of our porous collective, producing emergences of meanings that amplify reality, also affecting our cognitive response to this reality. Being a powerful antidote, in both ethical and political terms, against any authoritarian “narrative monopoly” (Nixon 2011: 170), this collective storytelling capacity is crucial for a practice of liberation.²¹

Naples’s waste emergency has been the subject of a number of documentaries, novels, films, dramas, and reportages.²² But there are also other stories coming from people—activists, grassroots committees, simple citizens—that have created coalitions aimed at making Naples’s bodily plots visible and audible, eventually defying the “normalizing” bio-political narrative imposed by the authorities. Taking their own bodies and their own land as the starting texts for their mutual pathway of knowledge, citizens have initiated social dynamics in which cognitive empowerment goes hand in hand with the battle for ecological health and participatory democracy. They have, in other words, created the conditions for cognitive justice, which is crucial to overcome the “abyssal” divide imposed by the hierarchical distribution of knowledges and powers (de Sousa Santos 2007). And so, after years of abuses, in Naples the eloquence of bodies has taken the face of activists and intellectuals struggling side by side for a radical decontamination of body politic and political discourse. For example, the project, led by the environmental historian Marco Armiero, to collect the voices of Naples’s activist women fighting against the mutation of their land and cells into the nation’s waste dump is one of the most meaningful forms of “guerrilla narrative” experimented in western countries’ actions for environmental justice.²³ Although operations like this one might not be sufficient to decontaminate territories and bodies, they are surely indispensable to decontaminate discourses.

(Extra-)frame

Mapping reality is a tricky operation; in this map, not only do the surface lines count, but also—and most of all—the pervious overlappings, the meshings of substances and places. A map of reality, in this sense, is always already

trans-local and trans-corporeal, and it is also trans-temporal: It is not said, in fact, that what starts *here* will finish *now*. Mapping reality is mapping the *longue durée* of combined forces and discourses, the subterranean rivers of cognitive processes, the lasting effects of violence, whether elemental or social. Mapping reality is always already a multidimensional journey in the landscapes of porosity.

I wrote this chapter because I grew up in a segment of these landscapes closer to the stories narrated in these pages. My birthplace, Torre Annunziata, anciently called Oplontis, was buried by the eruption of AD 79 along with Pompeii and Herculaneum. The watershed where I used to bathe as a child is the same one where Pliny the Elder observed and described Vesuvius's upsurge, giving his name to this type of pine tree-shaped eruptions, and thus transforming his own death into a geological classification. The shore where Goethe had a "lighthearted" company dinner, "with a delightful view of Castellammare and Sorrento" (Goethe 1970: 204) in March 1787 is practically, depending on the tides and on the periodically changing profile of the coast, my shore.²⁴ Ever since I was a child, I have been heeding these landscapes; ever since their individual uniqueness has morphed into concepts, the stories they tell have become visible to my eyes as models apt to interpret other stories, other dynamics, other places.

Torre Annunziata is part of the landscape of porosity for many reasons. It is so because it is bodily permeable and physically vulnerable, because it is one of those places where contamination is available in many—more or less detectable—forms, both social and environmental, and finally, because it is constantly exposed to the fluctuations of memory and forgetting, cognitive and material processes of unearthing and burying, which we have encountered in Pompeii's story. All these dynamics are visible in the landscape and expressed by the bodies living on this land. And these are the dynamics which involve, collectively, all the bodies of Naples.

I do not intend to superimpose my voice on the voice of the things, places, or authors collected and analyzed in these pages. Quite the contrary, I wish to show how scarcely unique and circumscribed is our own experience, in the world's landscapes of porosity. Individuals, in these landscapes at large, do not really exist as such. Their being is not encapsulated in itself, but it expands always already outside itself. If individuals exist, they are always

trans-posed, trans-acted, trans-sected, and trans-fused in collective and fluid dynamics, as Stacy Alaimo and Nancy Tuana among others have perfectly seen. Set in this landscape, the individuals' borders are receptive, their texture is viscous. Their "I" is always in a process of negotiation with a "non-I." In times of eco-ontological "hyperobjects" such as biospheric pollution or global warming, Timothy Morton writes,

No longer are my intimate impressions "personal" in the sense that they are "merely mine" or "subjective only" [...]. I become (and so do you) a litmus test [...]. I am scooped out from the inside. My situatedness and the rhetoric of situatedness in this case is not a place of defensive self-certainty but precisely its opposite. (Morton 2013: 5)

For this reason, the stories of these landscapes, which include myself as a narrating voice, do not belong strictly to me, but largely to everybody.

In these landscapes, I have seen the waste coming from peripheral industrial districts pouring millions of tons of pollutants in the watershed where Goethe had his agreeable dinner, that March afternoon of 1787. I have seen Vesuvius's orchards getting covered with rubbish, disposed building rubble, and mysterious substances, from which it was safer to stay distant. I have

E' il tuo cuore che sta bruciando (2009). Courtesy of Mario Amura.

seen friends, relatives, pets, developing cancer. I have seen, for years, the trash containers under my house burn, as if it was a gleeful midsummer bonfire, a collective liberating ceremony. What was burning, though, was the heart of this place.

But I have also seen people reacting to all this, and asking more from their public institutions. Their stories, bodily and discursively, are stories of resistance. And these stories are, bodily and discursively, our stories, whether or not we are waste activists; whether or not we have occupied dumping sites challenging Berlusconi's police. Unconditionally, these stories invest and concern us. They concern and invest us because there is no safe distance from the trajectory of contamination, and above all because they interweave a cognitive, ethical, and substantial bond with you, who are now reading this page, and with me, talking to you.

The novelist Roberto Saviano, who since 2006 has been under a government protection plan because of the threats he received from the criminal clans he described in *Gomorra*, has written:

Someone said that, after Primo Levi, and after his novel *If This is a Man*, nobody will be able any more to say that they haven't been in Auschwitz. Not that they weren't aware of it, but that they hadn't been there. Here is what the powers—the criminal one, and all the other—fear in literature. They fear the fact that readers perceive that issue as their issue, those dynamics as their dynamics. (Saviano 2008: n. p.)

I believe that Naples's embodied stories enter our memory, our visions, our discourses, exactly as the substances and elements they talk about enter the bodies of those who are *radically situated* in those places. If "the power" fears all this, it is because this identification process creates new roots, new ties. It creates alliances of bodies and stories.

Almost a hundred years have passed since Benjamin and Lacis defined Naples as "the porous city." Today more than ever, this porosity is open before our eyes. It is a porosity of matters, of practices, and of memories. In this porosity full of stories, there is us, too. Including you, Reader. You, who might have never been in these places, who might well have never crossed these streets, grounds, and outskirts, and never felt the toxic miasmas coming up from the ground on a rainy day, or the smell of the Vesuvian apricots in June. But, despite all this, you are part of this reality, because it is this reality to be

part of you. You, too, are permeable to its elements, chemicals, and narratives. Because there is no “outside” the landscape of porosity, in the map of reality. Because we—all—are part of the story.

Notes

- 1 See the website of the City of Naples, <http://www.comune.napoli.it/flex/cm/pages/ServeBLOB.php/L/IT/IDPagina/7> (accessed November 28, 2014).
- 2 See Benjamin and Lacis 2000: 33–9. See also Velardi 1992.
- 3 The term “ignimbrite” was coined by New Zealand geologist Patrick Marshall (1869–1950). See Marshall 1935: 1.
- 4 For the notion of “trans-corporeality” see Alaimo 2008 and 2010. For a discussion, Iovino 2012c.
- 5 A key tenet of Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism is that phenomena result from the intra-actions of material and discursive practices and agencies, which co-emerge at once and via each other (hence *intra* and not *interaction*), thus constituting the world “in its ongoing becoming.” Matter and meaning, Barad states, are “inextricably fused together, and no event, no matter how energetic, can tear them asunder [...]. Mattering is simultaneously a matter of substance and significance” (Barad 2007: 3). A theoretical physicist and feminist philosopher, Barad draws this notion from quantum physics and from the experimental practice of mutual determination between observer and observed. For an application of this notion to ecocriticism, see Iovino and Oppermann 2014, in particular 1–17.
- 6 As Abram poetically put it: “Is consciousness really the special possession of our species? Or is it, rather, a property of the breathing biosphere—a quality in which we, along with the woodpeckers and the spreading weeds, all participate? Perhaps the apparent ‘interiority’ we ascribe to the mind has less to do with a separate consciousness located somewhere *inside me* and another entirely separate and distinct consciousness that sits *inside you*, and more to do with the intuition that we are both situated *within it*—a recognition that we are carnally immersed in an awareness that is not, properly speaking, ours, but is rather the earth’s” (Abram 2014: 303). See also Abram 2010. For a bioregionalist application of this idea to the crisis of the Italian landscape, and of the Po Valley in particular, see Iovino 2012b.
- 7 As the English historian Paul Ginsborg notes, “In the South the British and Americans were greeted as liberators (as indeed they were), but all the

ambiguities of this liberation were soon revealed, and not only to the Italians. Harold Macmillan [...] Allied High Commissioner in southern Italy in 1944, wrote later that the Italians had had ‘the dual experience of being occupied by the Germans and liberated by the Allies ... It was difficult to say which of the two processes was more painful or upsetting’ (Ginsborg 2003: 38). See also Norman Lewis’s memoir *Naples* ’44.

- 8 On this point, see also Iovino 2009, in particular the discourse of “thwarted citizenship.”
- 9 In Italian “*Rito uraniano*.” The author is here referring to the Platonic myth of the Aphrodite Urania, or Heavenly Aphrodite, who presided over “celestial” love (*Symposium* 187 d–e), and therefore over homosexual love, considered purer because not aimed at reproduction. As we will see, this last reference in *The Skin* is intended to be ironic, having this ritual a clearly performed “reproductive” aspect. For the definition of gay people as “Uranists” under the Fascist regime, see Benadusi 2005: 7–8.
- 10 In the Neapolitan language the word “*figliata*” refers primarily to nonhuman animals, notably mammals that reproduce in large numbers. It can be also taken to indicate a large human family, or the act of delivering a child. In this latter sense, however, it may have a class connotation, in that it is mostly used for the poorer strata of the population.
- 11 For a reading of this scene in relation to the ancient gnostic cults once widespread in the region (Mithra, Zoroaster), see Albrile 2010: 17–18. Benadusi notes that these “Uranian rituals” (also performed as “queer weddings”) were widespread throughout Italy. However, while they were severely condemned in the northern areas of Italy, they were informally tolerated in the south. This difference of treatment signaled the bond, reinforced under the Fascism, of queerness and “race.” Southern Italians were in fact considered as “anthropologically” different from and “racially” inferior to northerners, and therefore more “corrupted” and prone to act “against nature” (see Benadusi 2005: 100).
- 12 Malaparte’s comment about his having seen a “cooked girl” for “the first time” is also noteworthy, implying that the serving up of the bodies of Naples will be repeated in future banquets. I thank Elena Past for drawing my attention to this element.
- 13 Pictures of these artworks are available online on Pignon-Ernest’s website: <http://pignon-ernest.com/> (accessed March 17, 2015). See also Pignon-Ernest 2010; Velter 2014.
- 14 See Amura’s website: http://mario-amura.com/?page_id=117 (accessed February 19, 2015). StopEmotion® is a project of live-set performance in which music

and hundreds of pictures are “played together,” generating each time a unique rhythm of motion.

- 15 A really illuminating account about fireworks from the point of view of ecocriticism and feminist environmental ethics has been given by Greta Gaard, who writes: “A feminist ecocritical perspective traces the branches of firearms and fireworks down to their shared root: down to the environmental injustices of the death-dealing slow violence inherent in child slavery, workplace injuries, and economic injustice; down through the material facts of environmental toxins, through the human-animal studies’ recognition of multiple species’ injuries and deaths, down to the root of multiple and linked toxic narratives celebrating hyperseparation and dominance” (Gaard 2013: 272–3). Even though her essay is specifically focused on the U.S. “fireworks culture,” Gaard adopts a larger socio-historical perspective, also taking into consideration Naples (272) and Vesuvius (260).
- 16 On Vesuvius as “Europe’s ticking time bomb,” see Katherine Barnes’s article on *Nature*, which is preceded by the following editorial caption: ‘Vesuvius is one of the most dangerous volcanoes in the world—but scientists and the civil authorities can’t agree on how to prepare for a future eruption’ (Barnes 2011: 140).
- 17 According to Legambiente, in 2013 the illegal activities related to waste business in Naples’ region can be quantified in 4,703 verified violations (over 16 per cent of all environmental crimes in Italy), fifty-one arrested persons, 4,072 legally suited person, 1,339 sequestered properties (Legambiente 2014: 19). Of course, these data refer to the cases effectively discovered by police forces. See Armiero 2008; Past 2013.
- 18 In her article “Trash is Gold” (2013), Elena Past effectively analyzes the tropes of periphery and invisibility both in the material reality of Campania’s waste crisis and in the filmic representations of this reality.
- 19 “As a matter of fact, the government granted special powers to the CWE which, in the name of the emergency, could violate European, national and regional rules and procedures, including environmental impact assessment. Due to the combination of extraordinary power and an almost unlimited availability of funds, the CWE affected not only the management of waste but also the politics and economies of the entire region for about twenty years” (Armiero 2014a: 170). On Naples’s waste crisis as an eco-social crisis of citizenship, see Iovino 2009.
- 20 As elsewhere in this book (see Chapter 2), I have in mind Wendy Wheeler’s groundbreaking account of biosemiotics. Here I refer in particular to her

analysis of epidemiology as a field of evidence “of the ways in which both cultural [...] and natural signs [...] can be written on bodies in the form of natural signs (disease in this case)” (Wheeler 2006: 111). In explaining how eco-social balances are “written in our bodies in terms of flourishing or [...] illness” (Wheeler 2006: 12), she also points out: “liberal ideology [...] has had the effect of placing responsibility for human flourishing [...] upon individuals, when, in fact, it is quite clear that flourishing (and its absence) is, at base, systemic, not individual. [...] [E]pidemiology has some very interesting things to teach us, not only about the importance of natural and social environments, and of our fundamentally social and collective nature, but also about the power, health, and life and death expectations which attach to social hubs” (Wheeler 2006: 30–1).

- 21 The political importance of an “ethics of narration” in the context of Naples’s waste crisis, seen as a crisis of environmental justice, is the thesis of my essay “Naples 2008, or, the Waste Land” (Iovino 2009). On this point, see also Armiero 2014a.
- 22 Let me just mention here Esmeralda Calabria’s *Biutiful Cauntri* (2007), Ivana Corsale’s *Campania Infelix/Unhappy Country* (2011), and Alessandro Casola’s prophetic comedy *A munnezza* (2002). For a recognition and discussion of the filmic production about Naples’ waste, see at least Angelone 2011; Johnson 2008; Past 2013. I have cursorily analyzed some of these literary and filmic works in Iovino 2012d: 458–9.
- 23 In 2014 this project became a book, entitled *Teresa e le altre (Teresa and the Others)*. As Armiero writes in the introduction: “Narrating means [here] counter-narrating, because environmental injustice is not only imposed by way of armored vehicles and truncheons, but also through a narrative which uproots any possible alternative, one which imposes an official truth and criminalizes whoever is against” (Armiero 2014b: 16). To this project I have also contributed a closing chapter (Iovino 2014). I am grateful to Marco and the other authors for this shared experience.
- 24 So Goethe wrote on March 13, 1787: “We met a company of lively Neapolitans, who were as natural and lighthearted as could be, and we all ate at the Torre dell’Annunziata. Our table was set close to the shore, with a delightful view of Castellammare and Sorrento, which seemed very near. One of the Neapolitans declared that, without a view of the sea, life would not be worth living” (Goethe 1970: 204). Scripted on a marble plaque, one can read this quote on a big trachyte wall facing the entrance of the ruins of the ancient Oplontis.