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Introduction

Ecocriticism and Italy

What you see on the cover of this book is the *Cretto di Gibellina* by Alberto Burri. Visible from satellites and extended over a surface of nearly ten hectares, this is one of the world's biggest works of land art. But the *Cretto*—literally a “cracked surface”—is also something else. It is the material narrative about an event—an earthquake—that affected western Sicily, one of Italy's poorest areas, in 1968. The story embedded in this work is powerful. Not only does the *Cretto* tell us about a physical breach in time, one rippling in a sequence of fissures and losses, but it also tells us about the dynamics of society and nature, of environment and politics, and about how the creative responses to these dynamics have become a part of Italy's bodily narratives. A similar combination of elements and signs emerge from the porous landscapes and bodies of Naples, from the amphibious beauty and contradictory fate of Venice, from the slow, enduring struggles of Piedmont's vineyards and asbestos factories. All these landscapes and more-than-human collectives are *texts* bearing material stories—stories of resistance and creativity that transcend their local reality, demanding to be read and thus liberated from their silence.

Ecocriticism and Italy will do exactly this: It will show and finally give a voice, via four exemplary cases, to the forces, signs, wounds, and messages of creativity dispersed on Italy's body, always keeping in mind the link between the ecology, both cultural and physical, of this country and the world's larger ecology of ideas and matter. Even though the narratives included here develop principally from this country, in fact, *Ecocriticism and Italy* is not simply a book *about* Italy. If a lesson has to be drawn from the environmental humanities debate of the last decade, then it is about how difficult it is to “locate” environmental phenomena. Notions like “ecoglobalization” and “ecocosmopolitanism,” and even more like “trans-locality” and “trans-corporeality,”

generate in our perception a sense of dissemination and continuity, of perviousness and transition, pointing at links and bonds that are as arduous to trace as they are impossible to delimit. In a sense, we are in a place, but the flows of energy, foods, money, pollutants, and other relevant matter and ideas mean that our being is the outcome of much more widespread and physically diffused systems. To put it in other terms, we are at once here and elsewhere; vice versa, what affects the life of other places and beings has unsuspected reverberations in space and time, eventually touching our bodies and backyards, too. This is the framework within which the explorations of *Ecocriticism and Italy* are conducted, and this is also the reason why an essential part of the title of our volume, along with “Italy” and “ecocriticism,” is the “and” connecting these two terms.

As environmental humanities scholars, we are trained to think that places should not be taken literally as they appear on maps: maps themselves are never neutral or innocent, being always the result of ideologically constructed topographies of power. At the same time, there are places that can gather experiences, dynamics, and symbols as to also enlighten the life of other places, of other collectives: places that, like Jorge Luis Borges’s Aleph, are “points in the space that contain all points” (Borges 2000: 126). These places are at once territory and map, individual sites and cognitive instruments. And this is what “our” Italy will be for ecocriticism. A combination of a critique and a country, *Ecocriticism and Italy* attempts to develop theoretical keys that transcend the untimely parochialism of fixed borders and immutable identities. Our world is pervious and fluid, and so must be the notions that help us to read and to describe its ecologies of ideas and bodies.

This is a perspective that has constantly oriented my research. By writing about the Po Valley as a “necroregion,” about Naples’s “waste land” and its narrative democracy, about Seveso’s “posthuman” dioxin, or about the Mediterranean as a site of elemental and biopolitical encounters, I have tried to draw attention to the fact that places, in all their complexity, can be assumed as generative of categories, and that these categories enrich and engage our disciplinary debate as a whole. Following these lines, the intention animating this book is not simply to offer ecocritical interpretations of Italian authors or sceneries, but rather to conceptually *frame* Italy and ecocriticism together, expounding notions that could be used on broader latitudes. *Ecocriticism and*

Italy is thus meant to sketch a map (one among the innumerable possible ones) of the landscapes of bodies and imagination through which a specific place becomes “all the places.” By way of this map we can finally see how the specific, individual stories of that first place mirror, involve, and meet those of countless other places and beings, just as it happens for the Niger Delta when observed via the lens of Rob Nixon’s “slow violence” or to the American country villages in Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring*. These singular places are at once a metaphor for recurring patterns, an interpretive key, and pieces in a puzzle which appears only when all its parts, near and far, are connected.

But what does it mean to “give a voice” to Italy’s “bodily narratives,” and in which sense can we say that landscapes are texts? A text is something that can be read: a book, an inscription on a wall, a musical score, a poem, a picture, a film, a theater play. But “text” can also be something else: for example, the *material texture* of meanings, experiences, processes, and substances that make the life of places and beings. A text, in this sense, emerges from the encounter of actions, discourses, imagination, and physical forces that congeal in material forms. Landscapes are texts, and so are bodies. They are texts, because through them we read embodied narratives of social and power relations, biological balances and imbalances, and the concrete shaping of spaces, territories, human, and nonhuman life.

That Italy’s embodied narratives begin or coincide with the natural-cultural features of its territory is obvious. This happens here just like in any other part of the world. Maybe more than other countries, however, Italy is almost inevitably synonymous with its landscape. Whether one has in mind the traditional representations of picturesque natural sceneries and classical architecture, or the antipastoral settings of urban waste crises, postindustrial deserts, and contaminated watersheds, Italy *talks* through its territories and ecologies. It is perceived and narrated by means of these texts. What these texts tell us, if considered beyond the usual clichés, is that there is no such thing as a “standard” or “canonical” Italian landscape. Italy’s landscapes are ecologically hybrid and environmentally ambivalent, halfway between unspeakable beauty and complete abandon. There are landscapes with factories in the middle of protected areas, landscapes of social fragmentation, landscapes of struggles and contradictions, often articulating political, cultural, ecological crises.¹

But these landscapes of crisis are also powerfully interlaced with landscapes of imagination. From the very combination of beauty and abandon, violence and liveliness, literary authors, theater performers, activists, photographers, artists, and filmmakers, have developed strategies to actively respond to this crisis. Their responses, co-emerging with the energies at work in the landscapes themselves, are at once counter-narratives about the status quo and creations of new ecologies: Ecologies of words, of ideas, and of new possible material realities.

This ensemble of interacting energies also reflects the style of the book: *Ecocriticism and Italy* in fact is not a neutral textual analysis, but a *narrative* research in which the author reflects her own experience of the texts she has analyzed. This is something that clearly resonates with the glorious tradition of “narrative scholarship” inside ecocriticism.² Accordingly, the goal is not just an insertion (or, if you wish, an intrusion) of the individual into the bigger picture, but rather an experimental reflection on the practice of our work as ecocritics, namely, as interpreters of ecologies of matter and ideas in their various contexts. In this volume, however, the conceptual grounds of such a stylistic choice depend more patently on the nature of the analyzed text. When the text we interpret is a material one, like when we take our country as a text, we cannot ignore that this text possesses a particular trait: it contains the interpreter herself. There is, in other words, no neutrality in experiencing, knowing, and telling a story: If, as Karen Barad says, “*we are part of that nature that we seek to understand*,” the ways we enact this understanding “contribute to, and are part of, the phenomena that we describe” (Barad 2007: 26, emphasis in the original).

The theory behind this whole vision is material ecocriticism, an epistemological-critical project meant to both redesign the category of text and reframe the interpreter’s role in the becoming of the examined reality. As Serpil Oppermann and I have explained in previous studies, material ecocriticism heeds the stories inbuilt in matter—in all matter, from cells to ecosystems, from historic landscapes to gendered bodies and their social constructions. All of these material things are creatively expressive: They are “storied matter” in which collectives of human and nonhuman actors intersect and whose existence is in mutual dependence and determination.³

But material ecocriticism is not only about the agency and textuality of matter. It is also about the permeability of matter and imagination. In other

words, it is not only about how matter is a text, but also about how texts (literary, artistic, and critical texts) are matter and *do* matter, and how they add new layers to a society's ecology of mind, thus supplementing its ethical and ontological vocabulary with new words.⁴ In so doing, material ecocriticism acts on our visions and cognitive categories. This is exactly what *Ecocriticism and Italy*—putting that theory into practice—wishes to do. By examining both material and cultural texts, the role of the critic will be that of shaping narrative paths of understanding, “intra-acting” not only with the interpreted subjects but also with the potential readers of both this book and this reality.

This is, after all, the main aspiration of ecocriticism: to intervene, to interfere, to be part of something that changes alongside with our awareness of it, becoming more and more eloquent, and hence not only changing *in* our perception, but also changing the way we perceive things. This is the continual tension between the individual and the whole, between resistance and liberation.

Ecology, resistance, and liberation

The chief categories used in this book are among the most relevant keywords of Italian history: Resistance and liberation. In proposing them as the leitmotifs of our discourse, however, my purpose is to stretch their ethical-political connotations to the discourse of the environmental humanities, thus expanding ecocriticism's lexicon. In *Ecocriticism and Italy*, therefore, “resistance” and “liberation” are not left to their conventional human-socio-centered domain, but are challenged and amplified. They are gently taken from the hands of human subjects and shared with the environment, the landscape, and all their eco-social bodies.

The reason why we need a more-than-human practice of resistance and liberation is evident. The harmful intersections of contamination, criminal activities, and political life, tell us how dangerous it has become to ignore that the landscapes in which we live are—at all levels—permeable to each other. A dying ecosystem, a disrupted territory, the increasing cancer rates in places where vulnerable people share the same fate of vulnerable land and life forms: All these phenomena are eloquent in expressing the way the personal

(namely, the human) is constantly mingled with the impersonal (namely, an extended nonhuman). In this dimension of interlacing players and presences, recognizing impersonal stories—stories of land, of things, of hybridity, of processes—is as important as recognizing personal stories, stories of people. These impersonal stories embody and articulate the dynamics of resistance and liberation that characterize our life. Now more than ever, *the impersonal is political*.

Narratives, either material or cultural, are forms of reaction and resistance. They create that interstice that allows the personal and the impersonal to merge into one another, and to find their way out in the world: to be acknowledged, recognized, socialized. To really see the stories of the impersonal, we do not have to rely merely on “the language of politics,” as Italo Calvino calls it, or on the words imposed by the forces that possess the “power of legitimate naming,” as Pierre Bourdieu would say.⁵ All we have to do is to heed the tacit voices of the world: environments, landscapes, molecules, foods, bodies, and all “naturecultures,” in Donna Haraway’s sense. A literature, an art, and a criticism that are able to transform these unexpressed voices into stories—into *our* stories—are not only ways to resist. They are a practice of liberation.

Another key element of this discourse is more properly tied to the social and political ecology of this country. As it will appear from all the chapters of *Ecocriticism and Italy*, we will never be able to understand the complexity of Italy’s material narratives if we do not filter this understanding through the prism of environmental justice.⁶ The environmental justice outlook establishes the connections between the wellbeing of the land and the wellbeing of its inhabitants, as well as between the destruction of the land and the discrimination and violence to which its inhabitants are subjected. In Italy, the threshold of discrimination and violence depends not so much on ethnic group, social class, or the color of one’s skin, but rather on corrupted uses of power. Talking of environmental justice in Italy means talking of *pollution in the use of power*, whether political power or an eco-comprehensive Foucaultian “biopower,” namely, a power over people (and other beings) in their biological sphere.

In Italy, this kind of pollution is, to paraphrase Ulrich Beck, more “democratic” than elsewhere: From a toxified (and politically unprotected) environment, one can die in the more opulent North as well as in the less

“developed” South; in Naples, plagued by illegal waste, as well as in Venice, with its (literally) breathtaking historic heritage and petrochemical factory. Many of these emergences are connected to the criminal activities of the so-called ecomafia, but distinctions in this discourse are not easily drawn. In numerous cases, due to insufficient legal enforcement or to transversal complicities, illicit practices have been not only tolerated, but even supported by laws. Ecomafia, in fact, has a pendant in Italy’s industrial politics and “state capitalism,” elements that often appear in this book. If ecomafia destroys landscapes with unlawful buildings and contaminates Naples’s bodies (Chapter 1), industrial politics and “state capitalism” created a petrochemical factory in the Venetian Lagoon (Chapter 2), the biocidal Cengio’s ACNA at the border of Piedmont and Liguria (Chapter 4), the post-seismic industrialization of mountain areas in the depressed southern Italy (Chapter 3), a gigantic dam under a collapsing mountain in Vajont, and other eco-social bombs such as Bagnoli’s Italsider in the Bay of Naples, or Taranto’s ILVA, to cite just few examples.

Although profoundly different from one another, ecomafia and these industrial politics have two things in common: The first is a misinterpretation of the material text of reality, taken not as a dynamic and porous complex of elements and life, but as a mere background for their activities; the second is their capacity to reconfigure the categories of environmental justice discourse, whose canons—from Bullard to Martinez Alier and Rob Nixon—are constituted by class, ethnic group, and race.⁷ In Italy, ecomafia and industrial “state capitalism” have expanded the environmental justice discourse beyond the “environmentalism of the poor,” coloring it with traits of social, cultural, and ethnic transversality. I am not saying that in Italy environmental racism or classism are nonexistent, but rather that no citizen is really immune from falling into the entanglements of *material and discursive* forms of pollution. Nobody’s personal stories are really safe from mingling with the stories of the impersonal, whether this impersonal is chemical pollution or polluted uses of power. The point is how to see all this.

The “resisting” and “liberating” function of ecocriticism is therefore that of countering any form of misinterpretation of the texts of reality, which is instrumental to a self-validation of polluted powers, and of contributing to enact practices of *cognitive justice*. I take this notion in a slightly different

way from the one in which it is more frequently deployed. Cognitive justice in my discourse does not refer to the recognition of subaltern paradigms of science or the counter-hegemonic plurality of knowledge forms, as theorized by important postcolonial studies scholars, such as Shiv Visvanathan (1997), or Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2007). I argue here for a more radical form of justice based on the right to know, and to choose accordingly. Like in many other countries, layers of missed cognitive justice in Italy involve the health of the land, as well as that of working places (Chapters 2 and 4). They entail lack of information about the levels of risk to which citizens are subjected in their living, the state of apprehension in which people find themselves not only in catastrophic and unpredictable situations such as earthquakes or landslides, but also in cases of food, water, and air contamination.

Reading the bodies of people, substances, and lands in their material connections as part of a collective narrative can provide evidence useful to confront this lack of cognitive justice, also enabling us to protect the nonhuman others involved in these dynamics. And reading all these bodies *together* with artistic and literary responses is a way to give our understanding a dimension of universality that enlightens and transcends the experience's situatedness. All this constitutes an *interpretive and material* practice of resistance and liberation.

In order to accomplish this task, taking Italy as a starting point, however, ecocriticism must clear up post-Arcadian stereotypes—whether positive or negative—about this country: Journalistic platitudes such as “Italy breaks your heart” (Bruni 2013), gloomy litanies tied to the idea of Italy as the “mafia land,” or romantic clichés modeled on Grand Tour experiences, à la “Do you know the land, where the lemon-trees grow,” sung by Mignon in Goethe’s *Wilhelm Meister*. Italy does break your heart, but it can also restore the material imagination of its places by way of creative responses and cognitive strategies. In this land, lemons grow from a ground contaminated by mafia and bad politics, but mafia and bad politics are not all and cannot be all.

Ecocriticism and Italy will try to see things, give them names, and trace their stories. If narratives are a form of resistance, to understand these interconnected stories is a possible path to liberation.

A map, postcards, and a compass

If the map of Italy's "storied matter" sketched in this book is one among the innumerable possible ones, the episodes you will find here cannot be more than fragments of this big narrative corpus. In my choice—which, like all responsible choices, is necessarily subjective, biased, and limited—I have tried to privilege stories that connect with each other, creating a sort of plot in the "mind" of this place. This produces a certain density in the fabric of this book. Therefore, instead of offering conventional summaries, I have decided to use this last paragraph for my final "credits." In mapping the places and voices that allowed me to narrate these stories, I provide you with some postcards and a compass.

The first postcard comes from Naples. It marks a beginning, because the places I see are the ones of my roots: Naples's porous ground, its ancient streets and walls, Mount Vesuvius and the volcanic landscape of Pompeii and Torre Annunziata. The stories I interpret here come from the city's natures and matters and from the lava upsurge of AD 79; they come from absent bodies that become eloquent over time; from the thick trans-corporeal entanglements of the present, overshadowed by ecomafia's threat. The voices that speak together with mine are those of Goethe, Lucretius, Curzio Malaparte, visual artists and visionary photographers, brave historians, and environmental activists. You can also sense here veiled presences of theorists such as Stacy Alaimo, Jeffrey Cohen, Nancy Tuana, Karen Barad, David Abram, Cate Sandilands, Bruno Latour, Donna Haraway, Jane Bennett, Elena Past, Serpil Oppermann, and the many others that influence my way of seeing things. Your compass points at a keyword: Porosity.

In the second postcard, you will recognize the Venetian Lagoon, and here you spot both Venice and Marghera, its eerie industrial alter ego. At a first glance, the picture may appear circumscribed, but the setting is larger, as you will see. The stories you find here come from the "geological unconscious" of this *hubristic* and delicate place, from the betrayed textuality of its amphibious natures, from its suffering elemental balances, and from the cells of the petrochemical workers. The voices that speak are those of Calvino, Goethe, Borges, Felice Casson, Thomas Mann, Andrea Zanzotto, Marco Paolini, and the innumerable invisible (and impersonal) presences that are in and around us,

whenever we wear, say, PVC boots. Here, too, you sense discreet companions that join the company—Wendy Wheeler and Heather Sullivan, for example—and also, silently present, Rob Nixon and Ursula Heise. The compass indicates two coordinates: Cognitive justice and material textuality.

The third postcard displays the rubble of three earthquakes. The setting is multiple: We see Irpinia (in internal Campania), Belice (in northwestern Sicily), and L'Aquila (in Abruzzo). The temporality is multiple, too. Geological time intersects here with the punctuality of the events, respectively taking place in 1980, 1968, and 2009. But the *longue durée* of the consequences of these seismic events opens another window on the manifold time (and violence) of environmental emergencies. The voices that speak in this story are debris, abandoned places, the victims seen and unseen, old houses, age-old places, dispersed communities, new houses, new places, and brand-new biopolitically induced isolations. There are philosophers under and around the ruins: Benedetto Croce and Ernesto De Martino. There are economists: Manlio Rossi Doria. There are writers, but not that many. There are, instead, many artists, too many to be listed here. There is even a “placeologist”: Franco Arminio. There is a filmmaker: Sabina Guzzanti. There is a Neapolitan photographer: Mario Amura. There is an Australian who dances with disasters: Kate Rigby. And there I am, too, as you see, in very good company. The compass indicates here a keyword, apocalypse, and an artwork's title: *Show Your Wound*, by Joseph Beuys.

The fourth postcard is gorgeous, because it comes from the spectacular vineyards of my Piedmont. The things it tells you, however, are not all happy. These grapes and this agricultural landscape speak indeed stories of violence, of war, of blood, of women, of defeated things and beings. The postcard also tells you of the factories that poisoned ecosystems and people, and of the time it takes for asbestos to settle in one's lungs. But it also introduces to you someone who decided to give voice to this “defeated world”: Nuto Revelli. Through his “collective” work, you are able to see the way narrative resistance transforms into potential forms of creative liberation, coming from “slow violence” to Slow Food. You will meet Carlo Petrini, Rob Nixon (this time less silent), Priscilla Wald, Hubert Zapf, and the spirit of food and environmental justice advocates, Joni Adamson for example. While the compass points at the title, we will consider together the developments of Italian environmental laws over a glass of Nebbiolo wine.

The postcards are over. And at this point, for a moment, the scattered fragments of this big bodily narrative appear together, as if they were the restored tiles of a picture that might now be seen, the chapters of a story that might now be read. If interpretation is a way to do justice to reality, our exploration of Italy's text is intended to partake in a temporary restoration of meaning, and this restoration is itself a strategy of resistance and liberation. Ecocriticism is this, too: a dream of narrative justice, which advocates for the political dimension of the personal as well as the impersonal, so as to give reality the chance to resonate in all its chords, from all its angles.

Notes

- 1 On the topic of Italian hybrid landscapes, see Seger 2015. Although Seger's book came out too late for me to include it in this discussion, it certainly constitutes a valid interlocutor for *Ecocriticism and Italy*.
- 2 Scott Slovic is the most prominent exponent of this lineage. See, among his many works, *Going Away to Think: Engagement, Retreat, and Ecocritical Responsibility*. Joni Adamson's *American Indian Literature, Environmental Justice, and Ecocriticism: The Middle Place* and John Elder's *Pilgrimage to Vallombrosa: From Vermont to Italy in the Footsteps of George Perkins Marsh* also deserve an important mention. For a connection between material ecocriticism and narrative scholarship, see Iovino and Oppermann 2014a: 9.
- 3 Essential partners in this conversation have been Jeffrey Cohen and Lowell Duckert, who developed a model confluent with material ecocriticism in their works on ecomaterialism, "elemental ecocriticism," and "prismatic ecology." See Cohen 2013a and 2015a, and Cohen and Duckert 2015.
- 4 On this point, see in particular Iovino 2012a: 61–6. About the theoretical foundations and features of material ecocriticism, see Iovino and Oppermann 2012, 2014a, and 2014b.
- 5 In *The Uses of Literature*, Italo Calvino writes that literature "gives a voice to whatever is without a voice, [...] especially to what the language of politics excludes or attempts to exclude" (Calvino 1986: 98). On the "power of legitimate naming," see Bourdieu 1989.
- 6 For the application of environmental justice categories to the Italian context, see Armiero 2014a; Armiero and D'Alisa 2012; S. Barca 2012; Iovino 2009 and 2013.

- 7 I refer here to some of the classics of environmental justice: Joan Martinez Alier's *The Environmentalism of the Poor* (2003), Robert Bullard's *Unequal Protection* (1990), and Nixon's *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (2011). The application of the environmental justice paradigm to ecocriticism has been pioneered by Joni Adamson (see Adamson 2001; Adamson et al. 2002). Implicit in the approach of this book, Adamson's studies have been a major source of inspiration for my own work.