

Italy and the Ecological Imagination

Ecocritical Theories and Practices

Edited by

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Series on Climate Change and Society



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Introduction

As we are writing this introduction in the early Summer of 2021, the Italian Parliament is in the process of voting on whether to amend article 9 of the Italian Constitution. This article is one of the twelve so-called fundamental principles posed at the very beginning of the document which expresses the major institutional framing behind the new Italian Republic. In particular, article 9 states that “the Republic promotes the development of culture and of scientific and technical research. It safeguards the natural landscape and the historical and artistic heritage of the Nation.” The amendment currently under discussion proposes to add at the end of the article both the safeguard of the environment and ecosystems, and the protection of biodiversity and nonhuman animals as fundamental duties of the Italian State. Moreover, it would specify that the safeguard of the environment must be grounded on carefulness, preventive action, and responsibility (“della precauzione, dell’azione preventiva, della responsabilità”), thus linking any future governmental interventions on the Italian territory to its environmental impact.

As cynical and disillusioned toward the practical significance of such legislative rephrasing as we can be in our age of socio-environmental distress, we cannot but recognize that the amendment at stake also highlights a crucial shift in the Italian approach to the nonhuman world for at least two main reasons. On the one hand, the Constitution of the new Italian Republic, written and then ratified in 1947, was as innovative and comprehensive as it could have been, but it did not have much space for environmental concerns. In fact, the lack of attention toward the environment as a distinct entity has often been recognized as a major flaw of the otherwise quite far-reaching document: this flaw is not surprising given the historical circumstances in which the new Constitution was written, but it is surely worth noticing. The most important mention of the nonhuman world comes precisely in article 9, but even there, it is referred to only in the form of the “natural landscape” of the Nation, i.e., through a concept already shaped by the two following adjectives, “historical” and “artistic.” In other words, environmental issues in Italy, have often been considered only when engaging with the category of landscape (“paesaggio”), a category that plays a crucial role in Italian history but also risks aestheticizing the human experience of the nonhuman world, leaving little to no agency to actants beside the *Anthropos*. The amendment would instead acknowledge the right of ecosystems and biodiversity to be worthy of consideration in themselves, even when there is no human subject to gaze upon them.¹ On the other hand, the second part of article 9 has a

definitive backward undertone, as the value of a landscape is anchored to its heritage, i.e., its past. Even in this case, this focus on the past is not surprising, as Italian culture—both as a national construction and a set of diverse engagements with the material reality of the world—has always had a strong tendency to think and experience the relationships between human communities and their surrounding environment within a historical frame. Yet, the amendment also stresses the importance of thinking ahead, of grounding our future encounters with the nonhuman world in terms of carefulness and responsibility. In other words, the amendment would somehow ask Italian citizens to imagine their long-term ecological impact and explore the possibility of non-anthropocentric, more-than-human ethics.

Italy and the Ecological Imagination: Ecocritical Theories and Practices engages with similar ethical concerns and cultural shifts, connecting the rich set of approaches that Italian culture has had toward the physical environment and its inhabitants to the urgent need to rethink our conceptual and practical relationships with the nonhuman world. Armiero and Iovino recently pointed out that the environmental humanities have, as its aim, to understand the "co-implication" between nature and culture (Armiero and Iovino 2020, 42); the present book originates from the same desire. Moreover, we believe that the humanities can play an important role in spreading an epistemic paradigm alternative to the one that has brought us to the current, and quite disastrous, ecological circumstances. This is one of the reasons why *Italy and the Ecological Imagination* focuses on the role imagination can play when it comes to our relationships with the nonhuman world. Unraveling the etymological origins of the terms in our title, we may actually say that all the essays that constitute the present volume engage with how our ability to form images and representations can help us to re-create, re-interpret, and—we hope—re-direct the biological and historical relationships pertaining to that specific dwelling of multispecies communities called Italy. In the Anthropocene, such ecological imagination not only performs an act of critical resistance "strongly rejecting the separation of 'the natural' from 'the cultural'" (Iovino et al. 2018, 2), but is also intrinsically political, as it "enables us to do things together politically: a new way of seeing the world can be a way of valuing it—a map of things worth saving, or of a future worth creating" (Purdy 2015, 7). Our book thus uses artistic, literary, and social representations as means to imagine more inclusive ways of living together, to search for knowledge capable of offering us alternative entanglements of places and species.

This last point inevitably leads us to the other key term in the title, i.e., Italy, and to the question about the relationships between the cultural and geographical boundaries of that socio-political entity called the Italian nation and a set of environmental concerns and issues that are often transnational

and intercultural. In other words: what is Italy in our title? And what is specifically Italian about the ecological imaginations as expressed by the essays included in this volume? As Armiero and Hall pointed out regarding environmental history, the relationships between environmental narratives and boundaries are not only complicated but also permeable, as they are made of the specific material and political circumstances through which “nature and nation have shaped each other” (Armiero and Hall 2010, 2). In the case of Italy—whose political independence and modernity have occurred through more circuitous trajectories than other European nations—we have what Roberto Esposito has called an intense “geophilosophical feature,” i.e., a land or territory that has not always or fully corresponded to a unified political entity but has instead often been characterized by its absence (Esposito 2010, 20). This tension gave birth to a radical geo-cultural plurality, in which Italian culture as a whole is better defined by a conglomerate of environmental, linguistic, and social characteristics that have indeed found their best signifier in the landscape as a concrete, material, and three-dimensional reality representing the encounter between a specific human community and its surrounding environment. It is thus unsurprising that Serenella Iovino, in her seminal work *Ecocriticism and Italy*, acknowledges how Italy has often been “synonymous with its landscape,” an overlap between historical, political, and ecological scenery that—as we have mentioned above—pertains to how Italy has been, and it is still perceived and represented from outsiders (since at least the *Grand Tour*) as much as it is embedded in the Italian Constitution. Yet, Iovino also points out that Italy’s landscapes are as much the transfer of our human dreams of beauty and harmony as “ecologically hybrid and environmentally ambivalent, [...] landscapes of social fragmentation, landscapes of struggle and contradictions” (Iovino 2016, 3).

What is Italian in the ecocritical theories and practices collected in this volume is thus precisely this contrast between a long-standing and admired anthropocentric representation of the land and its inhabitants as a harmonious pastoral whole and our contemporary more-than-human sensibility toward what is instead impure, diverging, hybrid, and entangled. Italian cultural and literary production is, in fact, rooted in a solid humanistic tradition that has made the human being the measure by which the multiplicity of life itself is judged. Yet, the specter of a “collapse of nature” and the awareness of the precariousness of human life on earth have always haunted the Italian imagination, as several thinkers, writers, and artists—from the Middle Ages to the contemporary period—have eschewed anthropocentric approaches as inadequate to account for the complexity of the relationships between humans and the natural world. We may say that what characterizes Italian approaches toward the nonhuman world since at least Francis of Assisi is as

much an abstract idea of a harmony, identity, and (self)regulation as an emphasis on immanence, relationality, and difference. As stated by Cimatti and Salzani in a recent book about *Animals in Contemporary Italian Philosophy*, when properly understood as a crucial dialectical element inside Italian culture, this emphasis deactivates the traditional metaphysic distinction between the human and the non-human through a series of restless material narratives that place humanity, not above the non-human world, but precisely “on the level of the life of the world” (Cimatti and Salzani 2020, 10; 26). The result is an image of Italy and Italian culture as “a compelling geo-cultural mesh of stories” (Iovino et al. 2018, 6-7). This more-than-human mesh does not necessarily erase or replace the more standard image of Italy as the country of beautiful landscapes and great historical enterprises. Rather, it contextualizes it, re-constructing alternative, less- or anti-anthropocentric trajectories of ecological resistance and liberation as they belong to and are still emerging within Italian dialectical entanglements of cultures and environments.²

Another crucial feature of *Italy and the Ecological Imagination* is highlighted in the subtitle: *Ecocritical Theories and Practices*. Ecocriticism as a scholarly field has been initially defined as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, xviii). To our contemporary sensibility accustomed to understanding ecocriticism as an umbrella term that stands for a variety of approaches, such a definition might appear too narrow. Yet, as Zapf has pointed out, the ultimate goal of any ecocritical inquiry is not limited to the literary but to the possibility of using literature as a tool to circulate awareness about society’s structures, unbalances, and future possibilities (Zapf 2016). Nonetheless, since its emergence in the 1980s, ecocriticism has also moved beyond literary criticism and, evolving as part of the larger interdisciplinary field of the environmental humanities, it has been shaped by two intertwined phenomena.

On the one hand, we have seen an expansion of the geographical range of ecocritical inquiries beyond the original Anglo-American frame.³ New research in cultural traditions that are not in English has also inevitably changed the set of socio-environmental themes that have been explored. As recently stated in the anniversary issue of *Ecozon@*, the European Journal of Literature, Culture, and Society, European ecocritics in particular “are not necessarily primarily interested in wilderness issues, which drive their American counterparts, and personal accounts of supposedly untouched landscapes, which appear in American ecocriticism as nature writing” (Goodbody et al. 2020, 2). Instead, European ecocritics tend to be more concerned with “relations between nature, culture, and literature” as they are developing “more disanthropocentric ecocultural frameworks,” thus revising the traditional concept of nature (ibid.). As readers will notice, even some of

the essays included in this volume explore non-anthropocentric modes of thinking and interacting with the environment in order to raise questions about the role of humans in a possible (or potentially) post-natural world. Moreover, as ecocriticism is still in the process of expanding its theoretical structure, so this publication also collects the research of new and established scholars who are further broadening the field.

On the other hand, the investigation of the complex intersections between environment and culture, how “human culture is connected to the physical world, affecting it and affected by it” (Glotfelty and Fromm 1996, xix), has increasingly been applying epistemologies beyond the boundaries of traditional disciplinary categories as well as of experiments with critical discourses that are alternative to canonical hermeneutical approaches. As stated by the editors of *Italy and the Environmental Humanities*, no single discipline can “provide satisfactory answers when the problems to be tackled are embedded in complex systems” such as the ecological ones (Iovino et al. 2018, 3). While an interest in the relationships between literature and the environment remains an important feature of contemporary ecocritical scholarship—including the present volume—in the last few years, we have registered a tendency to move beyond the traditional tools of literary criticism toward interdisciplinary or cross-disciplinary methodologies, more apt to engage with narratives and representations produced by and entangled with non-human agents and their semiosis. In fact, in this book, we embrace the idea that only a careful combination of the social sciences, the humanities, and the natural sciences can properly address “the current ecological crises from closely-knit ethical, cultural, philosophical, political, social, and biological perspectives” (Opperman and Iovino 2017, 1). In particular, in the last few decades, ecocritical inquiries have not only investigated the environmental quality of cultural artifacts coming from the visual arts and music—and thus applied the respective methodological tools—but they also incorporated into their analysis of the relationships between human and nonhuman ecologies the epistemological and methodological frameworks of disciplines such as geography, anthropology, semiotics, and gender studies among others. The outcome is a variety of theories and practices that perhaps are not always as rigorous as they should be, though they bear witness to the urgency of experimenting with languages, methods, and concepts, often bridging the alleged gap between academy and activism (cfr. Armiero and Iovino 2020, 43).

The two sections into which *Italy and the Ecological Imagination* is divided—“Theories” and “Practices”—attempt to mirror the landscape of the environmental humanities as a multi-faceted and yet deeply intertwined scholarly field. In the section “Theories,” readers can find essays that engage

with or are informed by one or more specific theoretical frameworks: in particular anti-speciesism, eco-theology, posthumanism, new materialism, eco-feminism, and animal philosophy. In the second section, “Practices,” authors engage instead with ecological questions that require a focus on material circumstances, from environmental degradation to the exploitation of labor, from human extinction to the tools implemented by art and cinema to foster an alternative ecological imagination. Yet, even if they are technically separated, the essays in these two sections are meant to converse and—to a certain extent—converge. In fact, the volume is organized both linearly and dialogically so that readers can decide to engage with the essays in a straight progression as well as move from each essay in the first section to the corresponding one in the second section. For example, the third essay of “Theories” explores eco-feminist discourses, while the third essay of “Practices” connects the exploitation of farmland with the abuses endured by female farm workers. These connections emerged organically during the editing process, which demonstrates how, inside the environmental humanities, while scholars use distinct theoretical frameworks and explore various environmental emergencies, different approaches intersect and dialogue. Again, the complexity of the issues compels a composite approach.

If we look at the linear structure of the volume, Massimo Lollini opens it with an essay exploring the genealogy of antispeciesism and posthumanist ethics. In Giordano Bruno’s philosophy, Lollini finds ideas that anticipate ecological posthumanism and can inspire alternative approaches to the current debate on the human/nature alleged dichotomy. He argues that Bruno’s concepts of soul and metempsychosis can further vitalize the ongoing discussion on eco-theology and enrich the discourse on the spiritual dimension of ecocriticism.

Lollini’s eco-theological investigation is followed by Serenella Iovino’s new materialistic examination of Primo Levi’s essay “Signs on Stone”. In her essay, Iovino delves into the concept of resistance, first discussing human resistance to the dramatic transformations occurring during the Anthropocene, and then pivoting toward the resistance of materials against fossilization and decay. More precisely, Iovino applies a material-ecosemiotic reading to Levi’s encounter with the layer of chewing gum covering Turin’s sidewalks. This stratum of anthropogenic material becomes representative of all those petrol-derived polymers that resist entropy longer than humanity expected, materials that will keep polluting both the environment and our bodies for eons.

Similar to Lollini and Iovino, Danila Cannamela also brings together theoretical, historical, and comparative perspectives. In her essay, Cannamela shows how Italian “feminism of sexual difference” was a precursor to ecofeminism, and she clarifies the historical role of feminism in the development of Italian ecocriticism. At the same time, Cannamela traces

transnational and transcultural relations across women's environmental philosophies and demonstrates how intersectionality and feminist discourse on language are crucial in understanding the fallacy of the nature/culture binary used to justify various systems of oppression of both humans and non-humans.

A comparative and interdisciplinary approach is also at the core of Alberto Baracco's essay, in which he puts the film *Dogman* by Matteo Garrone in dialogue with Jacques Derrida's animal philosophy. Through this intersection of cinema and philosophy, Baracco explores the ecocinematic features of Garrone's film, particularly its ability to produce alternative representations of biocentric ecophilosophical concepts. Baracco focuses predominantly on the animal question and the ways *Dogman* links the auto-reflexivity of the cinematic medium to the ontological auto-reflexivity induced by the encounter with the animal gaze. Baracco emphasizes that *Dogman* is a form of ecocinema because it allows the viewers to visualize and understand an ecosphere where the borders between humanity and animality are porous and unstable.

This first section of the book is closed by Paolo Saporito's reflection on the ecophilosophical dimension of the act of walking. After tracing the theoretical and artistic interpretations of the practice of walking by Situationists, Surrealists and Michel De Certeau, Saporito expands these discussions to incorporate a dis-anthropocentric dimension by analyzing the representations of walking in three different works: Antonioni's *La notte*, Wu Ming 2's *Il sentiero degli dei*, and Šaravanja, D'Emilia and Monacchi's *Dusk Chorus*. Through the lens of material ecocriticism, Saporito points out the presence of alternative representations of walking in these works that can inspire more sustainable forms of coexistence within the environment.

Serena Ferrando opens the second section of the book with a case study examining the negative environmental impact of mining operations, railroad infrastructure development, and solid waste disposal on the small northern Italian village of Cravasco. Building off Robert Nixon's concept of "slow violence" and implementing extensive archival research, Ferrando details the recent environmental history of the area and explores the fractured relationship between the locals and their environment. Ferrando's research on the environmental degradation in this bounded context exemplifies, on a small scale, issues that are prevalent across the entire Italian peninsula: the inability to understand the nature-culture entanglement, the failure of the anthropocentric economic development, and the inadequacy of political leadership facing ecological challenges.

In the next chapter, by establishing a fruitful connection between Giuseppe Penone's art and indigenous Andean mythology, Federico Luisetti expands the boundaries of this book beyond the Italian peninsula. Luisetti puts Penone's

work in dialogue with the notion of “earth beings”, the term anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena used to translate the Andean word *tirakuna*, which designates natural entities that embody both a physical and spiritual dimension. Luisetti argues that Penone’s art represents an extraordinary moment for these entities to be reactivated beyond Andean cosmo-visions so that they can remind humans of their coexistence with a nature that is unruly and, from an anthropocentric point of view, unintelligible. In Luisetti’s essay, the entanglement between Penone’s art and *tirakuna* produces a counter-narrative to the mainstream environmental logic of human control and care.

The environmental counter-narratives of Penone’s “earth beings” are followed by the counter-narratives of ecological resistance analyzed by Jessica Sciubba. Sciubba focuses on the stories of discrimination, exploitation, and violence toward both women and the environment of southern Italy collected by Marco Armiero in *Teresa e le altre* and by Stefania Prandi in *Oro rosso*. Sciubba follows the surge of a collective fight for better labor conditions that finds its identity in the entanglement between abused female bodies and damaged lands. In particular, her essay emphasizes how these previously untold stories possess both an ecocritical and a political message: they illustrate the constant interconnectedness between human and non-human bodies and make it impossible for readers to ignore the enduring cycle of social and ecological abuses present across the Mediterranean farmlands.

The moral and physical toxicity of the southern Italian countryside examined by Sciubba is counterbalanced, in Achille Castaldo’s essay, by the lyrical contemplation of the southern landscapes present in the film *Bella e perduta* by Pietro Marcello. After tracing the influence of Armenian-Soviet director Artavazd Peleshyan on the use of lyrical elements in Marcello’s previous films, Castaldo focuses on the filming techniques that allow Marcello to seemingly integrate these elements into a coherent cinematic narrative: the use of expired film stock to obtain a “memory effect”; the camera point-of-view that corresponds to the non-anthropocentric perspective of an animal gaze, and the voice-over of the same anthropomorphized animal used to narrate the main storyline. Castaldo points out how these three techniques constitute the dispositive that invites the spectator to deactivate a self-centered and self-absorbed filmic experience and engage with an aesthetic contemplation of the landscape that is open to a more-than-human dimension.

Another alternative gaze, a forensic one this time, is explored by Emiliano Guaraldo Rodriguez in his reading of Guido Morselli’s novel *Dissipatio H.G.* Guaraldo Rodriguez argues that the narratological strategy of the last-man narrator in a post-apocalyptic scenario anticipates the forensic logic present in the current debate on the ecological crimes that gave shape to the Anthropocene. Guaraldo Rodriguez also discusses why the novel should be

read as an eco-political manifesto since it presents human extinction not as a possible scenario but as the inevitable consequence of techno-capitalism and untamable human hubris.

Given the difficult pandemic time in which we are all living, it is somehow fitting that *Italy and the Ecological Imagination* ends with an apocalyptic narrative. However, this volume is not the fruit of our contemporary despair or discontent. Rather, it is meant to address ecological possibilities that have not been fully explored yet, to bear witness to those more-than-human forces embedded in our imagination that can be released only through a critical undertaking. Paraphrasing Walter Benjamin, we believe that each of the narratives explored in this volume had a weak ecological power waiting precisely for the kind of critical analysis provided by our contributors in their essays. Yet, as Benjamin also pointed out, this redemptive hermeneutical process is neither linear nor homogenous, but material and historical, i.e., based on encounters and collisions, communication and miscommunication. Therefore, one of the goals of this collection is to diffract the ecological powers of Italian imagination to an audience beyond Italian Studies so that the localized eco-material possibilities ingrained in the diverse narratives of this book will express the full range of their dialectical potentiality through the encounter with other realities and relationships. In a sense, by providing an international audience with Italian ecocritical theories and practices, we aim to trigger what Anna Tsing has called “friction,” that is to say, an epistemic tension between global trajectories of ecological progress and specific stories of socio-environmental engagement and resistance (cfr. Tsing 2004). As editors of this enterprise, we cannot but thank the contributors to this volume for the possibilities that they have given us to think through these issues and our readers for joining us in this collective effort to explore non-anthropocentric narratives and experiences of a multi-layered and interconnected more-than-human world.

Notes

¹ Although the idea of landscape as natural scenery has been prevalent, Italian culture has also produced alternative conceptualizations of this crucial category. For example, for an understanding of landscape as a shared three-dimensional reality, see the work of Eugenio Turri and, in particular Turri 2001.

² As pointed out by Iovino, Cesaretti, and Past (2018), in the past several years, Italian scholars and Italianists have been increasingly rethinking how stories are read from an ecocritical perspective. A complete list of new ecocritical research within Italian Studies is impossible, but the following are the most recent and influential works: Barron, Patrick, and Anna Re. 2008. *Italian Environmental Literature: An Anthology*. New York: Italica Press; Armiero, Marco, and Marcus Hall. 2010. *Nature and History in Modern Italy*. Athens: Ohio University Press; Past, Elena, and Deborah Amberson. 2014. *Thinking Italian Animals*:

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³ The bibliography is too vast to be quoted in its entirety. However, see at least these few recent titles on cultural traditions close to Italy: Finch-Race Daniel, and Stephanie Posthumus. 2017. *French Ecocriticism From the Early Modern Period to the Twenty-First Century*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang; Schaumann, Caroline and Heather Sullivan. 2017. *German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene*. London: Palgrave; Henríquez, José Manuel Marrero. 2019. *Hispanic Ecocriticism*. Berlin: Peter Lang; Mendes, Victor, and Patrícia Vieira. 2019. *Portuguese Literature and the Environment*. London: Lexington Books.

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