

Book Review: Serenella Iovino. Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation. Environmental Cultures. London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2016, 184 pp., 12 illustr., £ 72.00

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Serenella Iovino. *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation.* Environmental Cultures. London: Bloomsbury Academic Press, 2016, 184 pp., 12 illustr., £ 72.00.

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Scene One: In 2016, a series of massive earthquakes hit the Apennine mountain range in central Italy. The events violently brought to light how disasters encompass various dimensions that are not merely ‘natural’: the disaster prevention and emergency management were disorganized, while many buildings were not constructed to withstand the trembling earth in a seismic-prone environment. Some people lost their lives, many lost their homes, and, in turn, numerous communities were traumatized by the events. The shaking earth, the crumbling walls and mortar, the goods that were lost and lacking in the aftermath of the tremor – these aspects all added up to encompass the disaster’s physical-material dimension; but there were political, social, and discursive dimensions as well, the more so as the events were accompanied by extensive live media coverage.

Scene Two: In 1968, a massive earthquake hit Valle del Belice, leaving the old town center of Gibellina in Sicily completely destroyed. While Gibellina and its inhabitants were relocated, the ruins were left standing, bearing silent witness to the destruction imprinted on the land and its surroundings. It was left to Italian artist Alberto Burri to transform the desolate scene and to compact the town’s material remains inside one of the largest examples of open-space contemporary land art in the world. Covering the ruins under thick cement blocks, the artwork is at once a tombstone as well as a memorial, whose materiality enables an interactive, embodied experience of the place itself, since small fissures are carved

into the ensemble that wind their way through the area of roughly 20 acres, cutting small pathways that can be traversed by visitors.

Scene Three: A photo of Burri's artwork adorns the cover of Serenella Iovino's monography *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation*. It depicts the grey veil of concrete amidst the brown earth of the land, which shows signs of volcanic sedimentation. Arranged vegetation suggests new cultivation, an impression reinforced by a modern wind turbine towering up against a clear blue sky. The distanced perspective enables a view that is not completely detached nor completely indifferent, but rather analytical as well as narrative: it frames the landscape in both its natural and cultural dimensions. It illustrates how the artwork's concrete bears silent witness to the memory of a human settlement that once stood in this place, while the vegetation and the wind turbine attest to the inherent dynamic in nature-culture interactions. There are multiple agencies at work that make and re-make the landscape, while the cement's fissures suggest that the wounds of the past are ever-present, waiting to burst open and to bring to light new disasters, new stories.

It might seem idiosyncratic to start a book review this way, by linking three scenes that may be connected, but do not necessarily add to the contents or quality of the book in question. In our case, however, this is not only a stylistic exercise, but an approach warranted by the book itself: combining natural and cultural history, material agency and narrative text, landscapes of crisis and environmental justice, *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation* is itself a manifestation of the way in which ecological scenarios encompass nonhuman forces and presences, sociopolitical and ethical dimensions as well as aesthetic and scientific representations. By taking these multifactorial assemblages of agents and discourses and by transforming their inherent diversity into a coherent text, Iovino manages to show how the relationship between nature and culture is not a one-way street, but rather an interactive, multidimensional phenomenon that heeds ever new stories and configurations. Like the fissures in Burri's artwork, Iovino's book functions as a discursive rupture in Italy's environmental history and brings to light stories that are, in turn, analyzed with scholarly clarity and rendered with the imaginative force of a novelist. Iovino's *Ecocriticism and Italy* thereby becomes a major intervention in public debates and explores the trans-disciplinary quality of the Environmental Humanities, at once exemplifying and expanding the theoretical and methodological scope of the field.

The Environmental Humanities have evolved into one of the most important frameworks for interdisciplinary debate and innovative scholarship in the contemporary humanities, at once establishing new connecting links between disciplines with different methodologies and urging for relevance in an increasingly competitive intellectual climate and a sociohistorical moment when answers to

environmental issues can no longer solely be provided by the natural sciences. For years, Iovino has significantly contributed to this emerging field, especially with her theory of ‘material ecocriticism’ (co-developed with Serpil Oppermann). Incorporating the ‘material turn’ into classical ecocritical scholarship, which studies the relationship between nature and culture and its cultural mediatedness in texts and other media, material ecocriticism expands common notions of ‘text’ to matter and argues that nonhuman material forms and forces bring forth their own stories. As Iovino puts it, “a text, in this sense, emerges from the encounter of actions, discourses, imagination, and physical forces that congeal in material forms” (3). In her book, Italy and its landscapes are thus conceptualized as 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” (3). This renewed concept of text and material agency allows Iovino to understand the disasters referred to at the outset of this review as “embodied narratives” (3), which bring to light various human and nonhuman agents, and which interact to make meaning: earthquakes are the physical-material expression of geological forces that demand (creative) responses on part of the human communities affected by them. These responses, which are political, social, and aesthetic, are themselves entangled with natural and material frameworks and agencies, making up collectives that are interconnected and that can be interpreted. Taken together, they form modern Italy’s “embodied narrative”, a narrative whose inherent logic and permeability outstretches the situatedness in place and time: the different scenes described above thus comment on each other, they are part of the same story.

Connected to this theoretical outlook is a methodological approach that delves deep into Italy’s natural and cultural histories in a grand sweep that covers Italy’s urban ecologies (Naples and Venice), the sites that have become the scenes of disastrous earthquakes (from Sicily to the Apennine mountains), and the food and peasant culture of the Piedmont. This Grand Tour of Italy combines the country’s touristic sites, made famous in countless media projections from travel writings to modern postcards, as well as its marginalized, remote spaces. It does so by revisiting the canonized texts connected to these places (ranging all the way from Lucretius to Italo Calvino, from Goethe to Thomas Mann) as well as their hidden narratives and subtexts, engrained in the oral accounts of peasants and vernacular cultures (illustrated beautifully with the example of Italian writer Nutto Revelli). All the while, Iovino visits these sites together with her reader, but not in the position of a tour guide, but rather as a co-visitor. Her own discourse is co-emergent with the events she writes about and the texts she interprets, it becomes part of that which it describes. Thereby, Iovino’s own narrative scholarship turns into a manifestation of one of material ecocriticism’s key premises,

namely that matter is not only transformed into text, but rather that texts themselves “are matter and do matter” (5). In the vein of a *literature engagée*, Iovino sees “the role of the critic” as “that of shaping narrative paths of understanding”, in order “to intervene, to interfere, to be part of something that changes alongside with our awareness of it” (5). Accordingly, two key terms that have figured prominently in Italy’s political and cultural history, ‘resistance’ and ‘liberation’, are repeatedly touched upon in the course of the book – not only to show how they have, over the years, contributed to the way in which the people in various parts of the country have negotiated their relationship to the land and to each other, but also to expand their cultural meaning and political connotation in a time when the so-called ecomafia, economic regression, and political abuse, have become complicit in forms of environmental pollution, violence, and civic inequality. In tracing the destruction and the “slow violence” (see Nixon 2011) inflicted by an entanglement of politics, industry, and crime, Iovino places environmental issues amidst a broad social-natural canvas and turns her discourse into an inspired argument for environmental justice, culminating in the book’s premise that “the impersonal is political” (6). Social and natural issues cannot be neatly separated from one another; rather, they are interlaced. In consequence, it does not suffice to merely focus on political change, but rather it is necessary to include the nonhuman or more-than-human world in the picture.

The four chapters of the book’s main part all exemplify this approach. Iovino often begins with small anecdotes to introduce her reader to the cultural, material, and spatial setting of the respective chapter. This enables her to merge (auto)biographical and cultural memory, and to show how materiality has carved its traces onto the landscapes and bodies she writes about. Bringing a transhistorical approach to her subject also allows her to illustrate how text and matter have disseminated across space and time, forming an intertextual universe in which the local ties in with the global. This is true of the first chapter which renders the porous body of Naples as a landscape which has, over the course of history, not only been the scene of great geomorphological ruptures and events (the ruins of neighboring Pompeii give testament to this), but also of the criminal and polluting practices of ecomafia. Drawing on an array of texts ranging from antiquity to Curzio Malaparte as well as visual artists like Mario Amura, Iovino sketches out how the environmental history of Naples has always been interlaced with risk scenarios, worsened by the contaminated practices of (illegal) waste disposal and environmental pollution. But she also shows how people have resisted these practices both in organized community activism and personal storytelling and how the vulnerable bodies of Naples have marked out their own place in Italy’s history. In a similar vein, the second chapter, “Cognitive Justice and the Truth of Biology: Death (and Life) in Venice”, sketches out the hybrid morphology of the city against a

discussion of its toxic industries and the viral, imaginative force of authors that have rendered, in ever new ways, the urban ecology of the place in their literary texts: namely Thomas Mann, Andrea Zanzotto, and Marco Paolini. By demonstrating the transgeneric and intertextual imagination attached to Venice, Iovino makes clear how literature and art have dealt with the more-than-human dimension and presence of the city, and how the precarious relationship between built and natural environment applies to many urban communities all over the world.

The third chapter, “Three Earthquakes: Wounds, Signs, and Resisting Arts in Belice, Irpinia, and L’Aquila”, visits places that have become the sites of some of the worst seismic events in Italy’s history in the twentieth century. Although the events and places described are dispersed through space and time, they all share the common thread of the historical agency of a ‘natural’ disaster, making clear that these events were not merely geological phenomena, but rather anthropogenic occurrences uncovering long-lasting sociopolitical grievances that had tormented the land and its people for quite a while. Adapting the cultural framework of ‘catastrophe’ and especially of ‘apocalypse’ for an analysis of the lingering effects of the earthquakes enables Iovino to trace the psychological and material outcomes of the disaster and the social implications of what it means to live in a ‘risk society’ (see Beck 1992). In this sense, apocalypse does not only evoke religious connotations – an aspect that is ever present in the cultural history of Catholic Italy – but also a revelatory power of the world running its forceful course and of the material narratives written into Italy’s landscapes. This revelatory power is also present in the work of artists like Franco Arminio, Alberto Burri, and Mario Amura, who are all discussed in the course of the chapter. The final part of the book, “Slow: Piedmont’s Stories of Landscapes, Resistance, and Liberation”, is a magisterial account of the natural and cultural processes involved in Northern Italy’s food culture and its factories, making the book’s guiding thematic strands and theoretical thrust come full circle. Using Rob Nixon’s notion of “slow violence” for an analysis of the inequality, injustice and gendered social hierarchies immanent in Piedmont’s agricultural landscape, Iovino illustrates how the violence ingrained in the shifting history of the region found its material equivalent in the environmental pollution through asbestos brought about by industry. The chapter closes with the liberating potential of the narratives and practices connected to the now globe-spanning Slow Food movement and the oral history of the peasantry, who have resisted commodification and oppression.

All in all, Iovino’s *Ecocriticism and Italy* paints a colorful and vivid picture of Italian environmental history, the Italian people’s struggles for environmental justice, and the infinitely rich culture connected to a landscape whose diverse stories and aesthetic force lives in the imagination of the world. Combining theoretical innovation and analytic clarity with narrative skill, Iovino’s book is an

indispensable read for everyone interested in the Environmental Humanities, ecocriticism, ecophilosophy, comparative literary and cultural studies – best served with some good Italian wine.

Works Cited

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- Nixon, Rob. 2011. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.