

The historian, the activist, the ecocritic, and the writer: an undisciplined debate on the Italian environmental history

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EL HISTORIADOR, EL ACTIVISTA, EL ECOCRÍTICO Y EL ESCRITOR:
UN DEBATE INDISCIPLINADO SOBRE LA HISTORIA AMBIENTAL
ITALIANA

Resumen

Es difícil definir qué pertenece exclusivamente a la Historia Ambiental (HA) y aun más qué pertenece a la Historia Ambiental Italiana (HAI). Esta disciplina con frecuencia incluye investigaciones relacionadas con diferentes periodos cronológicos, cuestiones, aproximaciones y métodos. Esta pluralidad de perspectivas refleja las variadas y con frecuencia diferentes etiquetas relacionadas con estos estudios. Tal pluralidad de trayectorias y experiencias no debe ser considerada como un problema sino, más bien al contrario, como una oportunidad para superar las limitaciones de la actual hiperespecializada estructura de la investigación. Por esta razón, hemos decidido referirnos a esta área multidisciplinar de las humanidades ambientales como territorio común. Por otra parte, hemos elegido una nueva vía para presentar la HAI a un público internacional: la entrevista y, especialmente en la última parte, un diálogo multidisciplinar e híbrido.

Palabras clave

Historiador, activista, ecocrítico, historia ambiental italiana

Códigos JEL: N5, N54, Q15

Abstract

It is difficult to define what belongs exclusively to Environmental History (EH), and even more what belongs to Italian Environmental History (IEH). This discipline often includes research concerned with different chronological periods, issues, approaches, and methods. This plurality of perspectives reflects the varied and often contrasting labels attached to those studies. This plurality of paths and experiences should not be considered a problem, but an opportunity to overcome the limitations of the current hyperspecialized structuring of research. For this reason, we have chosen to refer to the multidisciplinary area of the environmental humanities as the common ground. On the other hand, we have chosen a new way to present IEH to an international public: the interview and, especially in the last part, the multidisciplinary and hybrid dialogue.

Keywords

Historian, activist, ecocritic, Italian environmental history

JEL codes: N5, N54, Q15

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Introduction

If there is a common element in all the fields of contemporary knowledge, it is, most likely, the high degree of specialization that characterizes both natural scientific and humanistic cultures of inquiry. This characterization also concerns relatively new disciplines such as environmental history (hereafter EH), and, thereby, also the Italian version of it (IEH).

Nonetheless, it is difficult to define what belongs exclusively to EH, and even more what belongs to IEH. This discipline often includes research concerned with different chronological periods, issues, approaches, and methods. This plurality of perspectives reflects the varied and often contrasting labels attached to those studies: environmental history, historical ecology, history of the environment, etc. In a context as the Italian one, where EH is rather weak, it is even more difficult to define the boundaries of IEH, separating it from other disciplines and subfields which have an established position within the Italian academy, such as historical geography, agrarian history, social and cultural history, economic history, just to list a few which also study the relationships between societies and the environment through time.

In our opinion, this plurality of paths and experiences should not be considered a problem, but an opportunity to overcome the limitations of the current hyperspecialized structuring of research, made up of micro-sectors restricted to a few "experts in the field".

A classical review of the evolution and current state of EH may give the impression that IEH is the result of the commitment of just a few researchers spread across the Italian universities. We do not deny that academics have contributed dramatically in introducing EH in Italy; nonetheless, we argue that in recent years it has gone far beyond the university walls. This implies that not only academic publications, but also re-

portages, documentaries, non-fiction books (for instance the so called unidentified narrative object¹), and community-based projects have been – and might be – extremely influential in the making of IEH.

Given these premises, we have chosen to challenge the classic model of the bibliographic review essay as the best tool in order to reflect on IEH. We think that the classic literature review would have been inevitably partial and incomplete, and doomed to become outdated within a few months – maybe even during the very process of getting this article published. We might be irreverent, but isn't it true that too often scholars search those articles basically to check whether their names and works are included or not?

Therefore, we have chosen another, hopefully more creative, way to present IEH to an international public.

First of all, we decided to make our field of vision as wide as possible. We aimed to preserve the polysemy of environmental history, thereby avoiding the trap of demarcating hard limits that would have erased everything that falls outside their borders. For this reason, we have chosen to refer to the multidisciplinary area of the environmental humanities as the common ground, the shared arena where environmental historians and other humanities scholars are interacting. Indeed, our article looks beyond scholarly communities and recognizes that knowledge can be co-produced by a variety of actors.

A second aspect - the key one, in our opinion - concerns the form of this paper: the interview and, especially in the last part, the dialogue. This dialogue is multidisciplinary - the two academics involved came to the environmental humanities through different paths - and hybrid - with the contributions of a writer and an activist who have long been involved in understanding and addressing environmental issues. We are

¹ On this definition see the New Italian Epic memorandum: http://www.wumin-gfoundation.com/italiano/WM1_saggio_sul_new_italian_epic.pdf (referenced 25 November 2015).

aware that this perspective, like that of a bibliographic review, is incomplete. Many other figures could be involved in this dialogue, as for instance journalists, filmmakers, or academic researchers with other backgrounds.

We have aimed for an experiment in which what matters is the novelty of the perspective rather than the completeness of its coverage. At the recent meeting of the European Society for Environmental History in Versailles (July 2015) Marcus Hall proposed "weirdness" as the key word for the new phase of the discipline. After too much debate and interest on the subject of wilderness, Hall reclaimed the space for experimentation, for challenging the usual paths. Our account of IEH proudly locates itself within the new "weirdness phase".

Finally, we have privileged questions that can show the plurality of possible itineraries and interconnections. As it will be clear in the end, the synthesis, rather than being the summary of these different paths, can result in new experiments that only such diversity can stimulate.

Biographical notes

Marco Armiero is an environmental historian and political ecologist. He is the director of the Environmental Humanities Laboratory at KTH Royal Institute of Technology in Stockholm. His most recent publications include *A Rugged Nation. Mountains and the Making of Modern Italy* (2011); *A History of Environmentalism with Lise Sedrez* (2014); and *Teresa e le altre* (2014).

Giacomo Bonan is a PhD student in history at the University of Bologna. His research analyzes the management of the forests in the Italian Alps during the 19th century and the conflicts that arose after the implementation of a silvicultural administration system.

Marica Di Pierri is a journalist and environmental activist. She is spokesperson for the "A Sud" association and, since 2007, director of the "Centro di Documentazione sui Conflitti Ambientali" in Rome. She is the author of articles and essays and co-author of several publications including *I Movimenti Indigeni Latinoamericani. Storia e prospettive* (2009), *Conflitti Ambientali, biodiversità e democrazia della Terra* (2011), *Il paese dei fuochi, viaggio nell'Italia del Biocidio* (2014), *Riconversione, un'utopia concreta* (2015). She works with newspapers, magazines, web portals, Tv and radio programs.

Serenella Iovino is an ecocritic and a professor of Comparative Literature at the University of Turin. A research fellow of the Alexander-von-Humboldt Foundation, she is author of numerous books and essays, and serves in the editorial boards of several international journals and publication series on environmental topics. Her recent works include *Material Ecocriticism* (co-edited with Serpil Oppermann, Indiana UP, 2014); *Ecologia letteraria* (Ed. Ambiente, 2nd ed. 2015); and *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation* (Bloomsbury, 2016).

Wu Ming 2 is part of the Wu Ming collective of writers. With the collective, he has published several novels including *Q* (under the former collective name: Luther Blissett), *54*, *Asce di Guerra*, *Manituana*, *L'armata dei sonnambuli* and *L'invisibile ovunque*. As a soloist, he has published *Guerra agli umani* and *Timira* (with Antar Mohamed). The website of Wu Ming is <http://www.wumingfoundation.com/>.

Q.: Could you define EH and explain how it enters into your work?

Marco Armiero: Being the only professional environmental historian at this (virtual) table, I feel the pressure to offer "the" definition. However, I do not want to spoil the planned and beautiful mess of this experiment. Hence, for me it is crucial to have an open and inclusive definition. The classical definition says that EH studies the relationships between human societies and the environment. While it still preserves its simplicity and utility, it seems to reinforce some kind of society vs. nature dichotomy that has been questioned by several environmental historians. Therefore another definition may be that EH studies socio-ecological formations in a historical perspective. I realize that this looks too academic, but on the other hand it is actually saying that the objects of EH are the hybrid formations of human societies and the environment, and this hybridity can be a very powerful antidote against easy dichotomies. Richard White, who was one of the first scholars insisting on this notion of hybridity, once said that environmental historians need to deal with hybridity because we inhabit a hybrid world. Purity will save neither us nor the world.

Marica Di Pierri: First of all, it is important to specify that I contribute to this debate from the perspective of an activist who has chosen, ten years ago, the field of environmental struggles and, in particular, to assist communities exposed to environmental risks to organize themselves and claim their rights. From this point of view, EH is an important tool for knowledge, which provides useful information to analyse and therefore understand the ways in which commercial policies, production or exploitation processes have influenced and often compromised the life of human communities and how these communities have - or have not - reacted to this "sacrifice". For the communities involved in these processes, EH is a way to rebuild the historical identity of localities, as well as the collective identity of those who live there. Even before I began working in this area, I remember the first time I met traces of EH on my path. I lived in Ecuador and, for a short period, I participated in a project of reforestation of mangroves in Muisne, on the northern coast of Ecuador, where the intensive farming of shrimps had severely disrupted the coastal ecosystem. In that area, large infrastructures had been built and strongly contaminating substances had been used; afterwards, a serious epidemic had affected the tubs in which the shrimp were farmed and led investors to abandon the region. In this situation, I came in contact for the first time with the EH of a community while, to redevelop the area, I mapped the remains of the large cement

tanks, walked the banks of rivers and resowed the mangroves along the littoral.

Serenella Iovino: I agree with Marco: hybridity is the keyword—and not only of EH, but of our worldly being in general. If we consider that 90% of the human micro-biome consists of “alien” DNA (fungi, bacteria, archaea, etc.), we will understand that humans are not alone in “making history”. Moreover, humans are not always in control of their environments, being in turn colonized by and hybridized with innumerable agents and forces, which might be either undetectable (germs, viruses, electromagnetic fields, etc.) or uncontrollable (climatic phenomena, earthquakes, floods, etc.). Besides this, there is the multitude of nonhuman others that have co-evolved with us and on which we rely for so much of our life and activities. EH for me is exactly this: a history that, encompassing more actors and factors, is able to go beyond the (frankly abstract and ungenerous) narrative canons of human exceptionalism. In other terms, EH breaks the silence about the *others* that, along with humans, determine historical processes. As an environmental humanities scholar and a teacher, EH plays an essential role in my work. It fundamentally grounds the way I approach my topics, providing a context—both historical and material—to the literary and cultural landscapes I investigate and try to narrate in my books. But the truth is that, whatever one’s field is, reading good EH studies is a preliminary act of intellectual honesty, because they convey a sense of reality (including the more-than-human, the hybrid, and multiple agents) which no other historical perspective can convey.

Wu Ming 2: I do not presume to really know what EH is, but I can point out one aspect that interests me, which is the history of conflicts over living space and, above all, conflicts related to the landscape. Hence, for me EH deals with conflicts involving different ways of perceiving and planning space, nature, landscape, and the environment. More generally, I see EH as a way to look at all the events of human history in their environmental implications. Just to give a few examples, EH can explain how World War I changed the Alpine landscape, how the peasant struggles of 1948-49 affected the plain between Bologna and Milan, how the culture of illegal technorave re-creates abandoned spaces, and so on.

Q.: If you should select one, which story about the Italian environment would you tell?

M.A.: Choosing one story is a risky business. In my work on the mountains, for instance, I have opted not to include stories all the way from the Susa Valley to the rebels in the South. However, if I must choose, my story would be the Vajont. It was 9 October 1963. About 300 million cubic metres of rock fell from Mount Toc into the Vajont reservoir; the landslide caused a fifty million cubic metre wave that partially overcame the dam and, moving at about 100 km/h, destroyed everything in its way. About 2000 people were killed. However, this was not an unexpected accident; for years local people had denoun-

ced the abuses of the hydroelectric corporation and foreseen the coming disaster, but nothing was done to prevent it. In my book I have written that the Vajont speaks of corruption, of connivances between political and economic powers and of the enslavement of science (indeed, all the academic establishment was more or less lined up with the corporation and the government). It seems to me a tragic and telling metaphor of Italian modernisation. Telling the story of the Vajont is the kind of EH I would like to see flourishing in Italy. And, by the way, it was an author/actor, Marco Paolini, who uncovered the story of the Vajont, breaking decades of silence in the public discourse.

M.D.P.: My choice is almost inevitable as it comes from my biography. I grew up in a small town in Basilicata, Viggiano, a mountain village of 3,000 people in the Agri Valley, historically oriented toward the rural economy and characterized by the presence of natural and religious tourism. For the past twenty years, Viggiano has been the core of the largest oil field in continental Europe whose environmental and social impacts are gradually emerging in spite of the absence, so far, of a continuous monitoring system. The irreversible change of the identity of the place is evident, however. A rural valley with a splendid view – and silent nights, full of stars–, has become a mining area where the continuous noise of the oil extraction disturbs residents and the flame of oil wells make the night sky a vague memory. Expanding from my biographical interest in the Agri Valley, I believe it is interesting to follow the geography of Italy’s industrial development, uncovering its long-term consequences on people and the environment. It is not a coincidence that so-called Siti di Interesse Nazionale, that is, the list of contaminated areas which the Italian government aims to reclaim, coincides with the centres of the so-called Italian economic miracle of the 1960s: Porto Marghera, Brescia, Taranto, Brindisi, Gela, Priolo, and Porto Torres, to name a few.

S.I.: Italy’s “ecological bodies” ooze stories, and many of these stories deserve to be told. These are stories of disasters—like the one of Vajont or of Seveso; stories of industrial “maldevelopment”—like in Venice/Marghera, Naples/Bagnoli or Taranto; stories in which environmental catastrophes occur within the context of corrupt politics—the earthquakes in Irpinia or L’Aquila are perfect cases in point. But there are also stories of resistance, transformation, and redemption. I live in the Cuneo area, the “most partisan” province of Italy (the region had a strong presence of partisans fighting against Nazism-Fascism). This region, now a Unesco World Heritage site (the “Vineyard Landscape of Piedmont: Langhe-Roero and Monferrato”), was a quite depressed place as recently as 20-25 years ago, populated by poor peasants and exploited women and children: even in the Sixties, girls in these mountains and valleys used to trade their hair for fabric. Poverty and, in some cases, forced (mal)development were felt as a destiny around here. Today, though, this is one of the most flourishing, rich, and beautiful corners of Italy. Why is it so? I believe this is because these “defeated” people, who used to see themselves as if they were scattered leaves or pebbles, were eventually soli-

cited to tell their stories, and so to become aware of themselves, of what they were and possessed. We owe all this mainly to Nuto Revelli (1919-2004), a former partisan chief, who, from the 1970s to the mid-1980s, collected several hundred testimonies and published them in two of his books, *Il mondo dei vinti e Lanello forte*. This oeuvre can be considered one of Italy's most significant archives of oral and environmental history. Revelli, whose presence is still very much alive in this area, has acted as a mirror for these people, inciting them to continue along a pathway of resistance they all knew very well. Slow Food, now globally so popular, is a discourse of liberation that emerges from exactly these roots.

Wu Ming 2: "Waterways" is the urban project that more than any other allowed Milan to overcome İzmir to win the right to host Expo 2015. At the beginning, the idea sounded beautiful and romantic: reopen the canals of the city, bring back the barges on the Navigli, remove the trucks from the ring road, and travel on the water from Lake Maggiore to Venice, passing through Ticinese Gate. After four years spent talking about traditions, slowness and Da Vinci's dreams, in 2012 Milan suddenly woke up with a completely different operative project: no longer the old water network, but a drain for the liquids of the exhibition site, camouflaged by Naviglio and intended to disrupt four city parks. A ten meter wide and 20 km long concrete casting. Yet, the tale of the barges close to the Dome continues to charm the newspapers and Expo supporters. Then, in October 2014, construction started and the lie could no longer be hidden. The populations of the neighborhoods began to organize themselves, especially at Pertini Park, a green area recovered by its inhabitants, tree after tree, bench after bench, since the mid 1980s. Activists quickly convinced the rest of Milan population that the planned canal was useless, harmful, expensive, and also unsightly. The city and regional councils changed their plans and proposed an alternative: a more conventional hydraulic work, completely underground. Thus, a project that in the summer of 2013 was indispensable and verdant, in February 2014 become a gray idiocy. Even the *Corriere della Sera*, the newspaper of the Milanese bourgeoisie, wrote: "it is not possible to impose from the top a so invasive project without listening to the citizens". It is worth remembering that the same newspaper, two weeks early, had derided the march of the "No Canal" committee, supporting in its articles "the jewel of the crown" of Expo 2015.

Q.: Is there a theme you would like to see developed by the Italian environmental historians?

M.A.: If I could list here my ideal table of contents for a new EH of Italy I would like to include a chapter on the Italian colonies, the impact of tourism, and an EH of the Catholic church. However, just to focus on one topic, I would like to see an EH of Italian migrations. One of the promises of EH was to go beyond national histories, to build a truly planetary history. I believe that migration can provide a special lens towards this planetary history, I would call it a global history from below.

Italians have migrated extensively, even if they have apparently almost forgotten their past as immigrants, and I think it is time to tell also the EH of this story. From Argentina to New York, from the mines in Belgium to the factories of Germany, there is an intertwined history of places, cultures, bodies, and labor that is waiting to be told. I am myself working on this topic, exploring the EH of Italian immigrants in the US. It is clear that Italians, together with other ethnic groups, have contributed in shaping the American landscape. Could California be the same without the hard work of Italians, Chinese, Japanese, and Vietnamese farmers? However, my idea of EH of migrations should not propose a greenwashed version of the usual pioneer tale, this time a bit more inclusive with Italians, Chinese and other non-Anglos. The EH of Italian migrations has to do with the capitalistic organization of labor, both in the farms and in the factory, and the hierarchical zoning of urban space. Italian immigrants were often at the very bottom of the industrial labor pyramid, paying with their health to the capitalistic ecology of the factory. Italian immigrants were also able to live within urban space in a different way, seeing and activating urban commons and negotiating means of self-sufficiency and leisure with their daily nature. I believe that an EH of Italian migration would offer a great opportunity to place the national case into a global framework, contributing to a broader discussion between EH and other historical subfields.

M.D.P.: I would like to read a detailed history of the environmental, health, social and migratory consequences of the extraction and production policies of the companies Eni and Enel² have produced not only in Italy but all over the world. Two examples: the liability of the Eni in the environmental disasters produced from oil extraction in the Niger Delta or in the Amazon; and the disputed hydroelectric megaprojects promoted by Enel in Latin America. These, after all, are also Italian stories.

S.I.: Yes, an environmental history of migrations would illuminate not only the internal and external political ecology of our country, but also the way our landscapes have changed as a result of these migrations. However, what I would like to see emphasized in a possible IEH research would be the more-than-human dimension of these stories. A history of the way the modification (and commodification) of Italian landscapes and ecosystems has knitted together social crises and the crisis of habitats for birds, mammals, and other animals. I would like to see more nonhuman presences and faces in our EH researches. A model, here, could be the great classic of the ecological humanities, Aldo Leopold's *A Sand County Almanac*. Here human history is one with the history (and, in many cases, the demise) of animal and plant species, and stories of pioneers and proto-capitalists intersect with ecological stories of droughts, of dormant acorns, of competing deer and rabbits, of quails and passenger pigeons... I would like to read a book on the hybrid populations of Italy, in which migrants have different

² The two main energy corporation in Italy; Eni for the oil sector Enel for the hydro-power sector, see. G. Galasso (ed.), *Storia dell'industria elettrica in Italia*, I-V, Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1993.

features than the ones we are used to seeing around us these days, but whose importance is not less momentous.

Wu Ming 2: I would like to read an EH of Italian colonialism and of international cooperation. I would like to understand how the mentality, the perception of the exotic landscape, and the objective to civilize wild lands have shaped the territory of the countries of the so-called Third World. Furthermore, I would like to compare this situation with what happened in Italy during the same period, to bring out similarities and differences. For instance, in which ways the construction of agricultural villages in fascist Libya differs - in impact and storytelling - from one of the new settlements in the Agro Pontino? What is the relationship between the construction of a power plant in Nicaragua and in the Island of Serafini (Po river)? To what extent could the "Great, Harmful, Imposed and Useless Public Works" be considered as "internal colonialism"?

Q.: Would you suggest a book, a movie, a song, or maybe a walk that could help the reader to approach the history of the Italian environment?

M.A.: I am not listing here a series of academic publications because I believe that this would contradict the spirit of this roundtable. Plus, I am sure that if I did so the only results would be to miss some very important books, create an immediately outdated bibliography, and increase - if it is even possible - academic rivalries. I also believe that this roundtable has the ambition to go beyond the scholarly community, trying to show the appeal that EH might have for the broader public. For these reasons, I have decided to direct your attention on a series of documentaries which I think can offer an engaging and more accessible narrative of the EH of Italy. Also in this case, I can only propose a rather short selection of titles. While I am aware that there are many more; I want just to make clear that these are by no means the best but rather those I happen to know best from my personal research interests. So, in my list there are a few documentaries on the waste crisis in Naples, Italy (Esmeralda Calabria and Andrea D'Onofrio, *Beautiful Country*, 2008; and Nicola Angrisano, *Una montagna di balle*), and two documentaries on work and the environment (Massimiliano Mazzotta, *Oil*, 2009; and Niccolò Bruna e Andrea Prandstraller, *Polvere*, 2011). Evidently, my suggestions focus mainly on what we might call environmental justice, that is, on the unequal distribution of costs. All the documentaries I am suggesting deal with subaltern groups and communities; they are extremely different from the usual nature documentaries and I believe that in proposing them I am also embracing a particular strand of EH, which, by the way, is also clear in the kind of research I have always done. However, if I could mention just one thing that can bring people nearer to Italian EH, I would suggest the movie *Il posto dell'anima* (the place of the soul). It tells the story of a group of workers fighting to keep their factory open while discovering that their job is making them sick. Many conflicts play out in parallel: city vs. countryside, global vs. local, women vs. men, youths vs. adults. I believe it presents a vivid account of EH in the global age, looking at nature at the intersection of social and environmental inequa-

lities. And, by the way, featuring amazing actors, the movie is a great blend of tragedy and comedy.

M.D.P.: One of the most interesting products of popular culture on these issues is the song *Il ragazzo della Via Gluck* by Adriano Celentano. This song is a nostalgic ballad that talks about the transition from a rural civilization to an urban reality through the abandonment of agricultural areas and the industrialization of the country. Instead, at the international level, I would cite the blockbuster *Avatar*. In the debate about the movie, no one has assigned to the film a sense of a metaphor of deep social analysis. Yet ultimately the movie tells the story of an indigenous population used to living in absolute harmony and empathy with their environment that suffers a violent attack by a corporation that wants to control strategic resources present on its territory. Even if it is a fairytale in Hollywood-style, it tells what happens whenever a community resists the uncontrolled exploitation policies of the local environment. If I had to recommend an instructive walk to reveal the ruin of the Italian landscape, I would recommend a promenade in Bagnoli, on the Neapolitan coast, or the Venetian lagoon in front of Porto Marghera, but there could be many other examples of this kind.

S.I.: For books and songs there is a problem that might prove insurmountable: translation. Not many books I would suggest are available in English (except for Marco's beautiful *A Rugged Nation*, which I continue giving and recommending to my English-only speaking friends). For movies and documentaries this problem might be overcome by the power of images. But, as an explorer and interpreter of "material textuality", I believe that places have an eloquence that cannot be dismissed. And here I have no doubts: if you want to understand the local and global dimensions of the ecological crisis using Italy as your standpoint, you should go (and soon) to Venice, as Marica also suggests. There you will understand that "death in Venice" is much more than a fictional theme. It has concrete faces: the threatening waters and fluxes of energy generated by global warming; unsustainable tourism and gigantic cruise ships; the anti-ecological engineering systems carried out to control the increasing high tides; or common human activities, interfering day by day with the delicate ecosystem of the lagoon. And, since we are speaking of environmental justice, this death has also the face of dioxin and hepatic angiosarcoma, spread here for decades by the Montedison petrochemical factory of Porto Marghera, just in front of San Marco Square. Venice really is, as Piero Bevilacqua wrote years ago, "a planetary metaphor". To be in close proximity with its moving, endangered beauty could be a good spur not to give up in our eco-cultural struggles.

Wu Ming 2: Among the various books, I would like to suggest the novels and the inquiries of Simona Baldanzi set in the Mugello area close to TAV infrastructures (the High Speed Train), in the Variante di Valico, Bilancino lake and Barberino Outlet - *Figlia di una vestaglia blu*, *Mugello sottosopra* and *Il Mugello è una trapunta di terra*. Then, undoubtedly, *Amianto* by Alberto Prunetti: the story, in autobiographical prospective,

of one of the deadliest toxic substances in Italy. A few years ago, Edizioni Ambiente launched a very interesting series: *Verdenero, noir di ecomafia*, in which Italian writers engaged environmental topics from the perspective of noir literature. I want at least to quote *Delta Blues* by Kai Zen, inspired by *Heart of Darkness* by Joseph Conrad and focused on ENI's business in Nigeria. I want to add *I minatori della Maremma* by Carlo Cassola and Luciano Bianciardi and *Marcovado* by Italo Calvino. Regarding films, there are lots of documentaries, but what about fictional productions? There are framings, interesting ideas, but it is not easy to find a complete work, maybe someone should try to arrange a thematic montage. I especially think about *Uomini e lupi* by Peppe de Sanctis, *La terra trema* by Luchino Visconti, and *Banditi a Orgosolo* by Vittorio De Seta. More generally, some episodes of the cartoon *Pimpa* are a good reflection of our EH. In Turin, since 1998 there has been a film festival on these issues: *CinemAmbiente*. It is possible to get an idea about the advancements of the field by scrolling through the titles of the past editions. Regarding music, I remember some old songs: *Eppure soffia* by Pierangelo Bertoli, *Noi non ci saremo* by Nomadi and *Il vecchio e il bambino* by Francesco Guccini. In more recent times songs on these topics have spread: I would like to recall *Venessia in afito* by Pitura Freska about the privatization of Venice and the Venetian lagoon. For walks, I suggest opening Openstreetmap and the Regional Geo-portal, searching on the map for a path of 20/25 km, from your own town to another through paths, embankments, *cavedagne*, and roads. Once you have traced the path, study the places you plan to visit, doing some research in newspaper archives or on the internet. I did it between Bologna and Florence, and especially between Bologna and Milan, with surprising results.

Q.: Can EH serve society?

M.A.: History, environmental or otherwise, is crucial to building collective identities. Naomi Klein offers a counter proof of the significance of history when she writes that erasing stories is a condition through which shock economies are imposed upon subaltern communities. In environmental justice struggles historians can help in building a legal allegation, giving back meanings to places, offering dignity to disenfranchised communities, and tracking back uses of land and other natural resources. I believe it is always useful to remember the slogan of the totalitarian party of George Orwell's 1984: who controls the past, controls the future. I can offer here a few examples. The mainstream interpretation of environmentalism says that only the elites have time and resources to be "green". Poor and ethnic minorities do not belong to that history. Equally, especially in countries as Italy with a historically strong leftist tradition, it has been said that there has always been an irreparable contradiction between environmentalists and leftist militants. In the face of this strategic occupation of the collective memory, the work of environmental historians is fundamental. It means telling the different stories of coalitions and solidarities; they might not be the only stories, of course, but

nonetheless, they should not be erased. In my research on the waste crisis in Naples, for instance, I am working on the longer history of resistance of local people against toxic contamination. In the mainstream narrative people became active only to oppose state's decisions, while they did not do anything in the past against the Mafia's contamination. Instead, we are uncovering the long history of resistance against toxic dumping by local activists, most of them from the leftist parties. EH, then, contributes to give dignity to the resisting communities and actually provides a counter argument to react to the accusations.

M.D.P.: EH is a useful, indeed essential, tool to reconstruct and preserve communities and places through history. EH allows for the reconstructing and reinforcing of collective identities and it shows the way through which certain economic, political and social dynamics recur in the process of land use and abuse. For instance, the concentration of polluting plants in areas already disadvantaged in socio-economic terms (what in political ecology terms is called environmental racism); or the systematic exclusion of any popular engagement process in decisions concerning the management of resources. The basis of any possibility for a community to organize resistance movements for the protection of its territory in the name of environmental justice must be the knowledge and awareness about the history of that territory.

S.I.: Again, I subscribe to Marco and Marica's words: environmental stories (and historians) can create coalitions, they can reinforce and recreate identities, helping people to see hidden connections across spaces and temporalities, and to reinforce their claims for justice. But I would like to add, again, that EH is the key to overcoming our "historic" solitude. Like literary and artistic imagination, it augments the population of our world, relocating the human dimension in a wider web of connections. But, unlike literary imagination, these connections with nonhuman beings and wounded places are real and concrete, and they reverberates across our own bodies and stories. For too long historians have seen the environment as mere scenery, as a place "out there". But the environment includes our bodies, our imagination, it is a life which intersects other life, including ours. How can we conceive of history without life? EH is history at ground zero: a history that is not ignorant of biology, and sees things living, in all their interrelated forms and manifold upshots.

Wu Ming 2: Above all to regain an alphabet, to re-read places and landscape, in order to write sentences that make sense in the book of the territory. Past struggles have taught this very clearly: if you cannot read and write, the owner of the spinning mill will always fool you. We need to learn how to read and write about places to gain power; indeed, we can absorb the "power of places". But the power of a person can be recognized primarily by his ability to hold back: If I can drink coffee whenever I want, but I cannot live without it, I am not really strong, I am addicted. We need to develop a power that knows how to stay latent and that can get justice for the most vulnerable forms of life: human, animal and vegetable.

Q.: Is there an EH project you would like to do together?

M.A.: I have been inspired by Naomi Oreskes who has just published a science fiction book, and I would like to write with my friends here a science fiction book. I see here the contribution of Wu Ming, the only proper writer in the group, the competence of Serenella, as a literary scholar, and the political creativity of Marica, while I could contribute with a historical perspective. It could be a novel imagining a series of possible present for Italy if...

Another project could be to edit together a collective book with texts, pictures, documents, etc. by grassroots organizations, something like a set of letters from another Italy.

Finally, I would also be happy to organize with all of you a collective work on toxic autobiographies, in which people who are or have been sick from what we would define as environmental injustice can write their stories.

M.D.P.: As a research group, two themes that seem to us very important and that, we believe, have not archived the visibility and centrality that they deserve are environmental migration and the political weight of environmental struggles.

Regarding the first issue, it would be useful to investigate and report the causes of migrations, helping to identify the legal means that can protect people forced to migrate due to the environmental deterioration of their territory or the effects of climate change. This provides a better understanding of the systemic dimension of migration flows, which is increasingly urgent given their dramatic actuality. Regarding the second issue, we would like to know more about the histories of the different experiences of resistance in which we are involved. Each struggle develops from its own specificity, nevertheless, all together they share a radical critique to the dominant economic model.

S.I.: I am interested in whatever project can allow us to narrate stories that need to be voiced. These can be stories of people, of places, of nonhuman creatures, of processes, of hyper-objects and collectives (such as climate change or socio-technological systems). One of the points of strength, in the environmental humanities, is the cooperation between scholars and authors in envisioning new forms of cultural politics. In different ways, each one of us—with our own means and personalities—tells stories. The impact of these stories on the public is enhanced if they can go outside the taut borders of the academy, while at the same time holding on the credibility that comes from scientific research. I dream of a combination of competences and perspectives that mutually enrich each other: as “humanists” (or post-humanists, or more-than-humanists...), we cannot compete with scientists. But science without critique is completely blind. By building more *humane* alliances, and keeping each other company, we can maybe work to shed a little light in these dark times.

Wu Ming 2: I would like to use fiction as a tool to tell a story of territorial resistance—hard, violent, and even contradictory (like every real resistance). I am tired of dystopian stories, fas-

cinating anti-heroes, aesthetics of violence - provided that it is not political -, scenarios where evil does not have the slightest opposition, storytellers unable to imagine a conflict that is not between rival gangs in a corrupt metropolis. In Italy, there is no shortage of stories for inspiration. What is missing is the will to tell these stories going beyond the specificities of the single struggle. I believe that fiction can be a useful tool to understand the universal meaning of specific and local stories.

M.A., M.D.P., S.I., Wu Ming 2: New experiments are happening in the fields of the environmental humanities, while a growing awareness of socio-environmental injustices has been mobilizing communities all over Italy. We see the combination of these two tensions as the basic inspiration for all our proposals for collaboration. The most natural project including the four of us would be to work on the histories of local resistance against contamination or mega-infrastructures. The challenge and opportunity would be to merge fiction and history, but also the human and the non-human. Definitely, we would like to explore ways which could make such a narrative project a collective experiment, envisioning the printed text only as one of a number of possible outcomes, together with others, open to the creative contributions of a larger community of co-authors. We are not so worried about topics, because we see so many interesting ideas coming from our common discussion, but rather about the meagre opportunities offered to conduct these kinds of experiments. We would need at least one year to work together and it is not easy to find funds and time for it. Maybe, if we want to think seriously about this, we should reflect on the extreme narrowness of funding schemes and the productivistic turn in the universities. After all, we should not forget that this is only a weird experiment; and weirdness does not pay well...

Conclusions

If there is one recurring topic in this debate, it is conflict. All the participants have stressed the centrality of conflict in their understanding of EH. Interestingly enough, they have evoked conflicts as both a distinct trait in IEH and a methodological tool to unpack socio-ecological relationships. Most of the examples mentioned in the debate deal with some form of conflict over infrastructures, contamination, or privatization. We are aware that this centrality of conflict is largely an effect of our choice of the participants in this debate; selecting other people would have led to a completely different result. We have also opted to engage with non-academic interlocutors, projecting EH beyond the universities' walls, and, obviously, this has affected the image of the discipline we are delivering. Out there, in the real world, the environment is basically a contested space where conflicts are enacted.

The other key concept of this debate relates to localities, places, and territories. All our contributors refer to the power of places, conforming a classical assumption of the environmental cultures, that is, the significance of the local in order to understand the global. However, one characteristic of IEH

is the awareness of the connection between conflicts and places. We could say that conflicts establish or define the localities. Recent research has stressed that localities are not natural elements, but rather they are constantly constructed or re-constructed by social actors³. This may seem obvious if we look at the major infrastructure projects and their effects on landscapes. Yet, at the same time, the environmental struggles that so often emerge in opposition to these projects are primarily the representation of an alternative way of perceiving the territory that creates new localities. From this point of view, environmental history can contribute to analyzing the production of new and often conflicting meanings for places that shape both community and the environment. It seems clear that the IEH proposed in this roundtable focuses neither on a supposed natural environment nor on an idealized local community. Environmental, cultural, and social dimensions merge together, and this seems inevitable in a country as Italy, where each tile of the landscape is so imbued with history.

³ A. Torre, Luoghi. *La produzione di località in età moderna e contemporanea*, Venezia, Marsilio, 2011.