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An Italian's Story (Part I)

Giulia Lepori¹

Abstract

This piece of creative prose is the first sequence of a triptych on Italian stories of social and environmental sustainability, recollected through the point of view of my intra-connection with other humans and non-humans. The intention is to represent the entangled chaos of the ecological system that is a human being, where each discursive and material moment of her/his story is the continuation, the end and the beginning of another one. For this purpose, the narration appears like a coiling composition of memories that does not strictly follow chronological order, nor does it claim a definite first-person narrator. The deliberate sense of confusion aims to provoke the feeling that a human life is a woven circularity created by multiple agencies. 'An Italian Story' is an affective glance at an evolving practice of environmental humanist investigation as a form of poetical activism. In this subjective dimension, life writing can become a creative autoethnographic action to tell different stories that narrate back this age of ecological disruption.

Keywords

Entanglement; Italy; Life Writing; Sustainability; Poetical Activism

Introductory Frame

The following piece was written from the perspective of the independent environmental humanist research that penetrates my life, 'Echoes of Ecologies.' It was originally born as a blog post to offer a narrative overview of people and activities that the research had engaged with, in Italy, over the past two years. Although it unfolded as an inventive process of remembrance highly influenced by my PhD studies. As the writing went on, I noticed the agency of recurring theories over a page that was becoming too intricate for a blog and decided to continue writing for my pleasure. Eventually, I envisioned a journal publication split into three sequences of stories, to be read in between the experience of a narrative blog post and a miniseries of instalments.

Italian Story

"It's Italy, you know...", *"the problem is that in Italy..."*, *"in Italy, what do you expect?"*

We often hear conversations that begin with such degrading as well as defensive phrases, and s/he wonders: how many times have we also started discussions like that? There's no time to count them, it's time to quit! I'm not sure whether it's our growing interest in Buddhist psychology or the fact that we've been listening to a different

music...all you know is that language affects the way we act, so I need to put in an effort to change the story of the world if you want to change how we live in it. Therefore, let me start with your country. Let me tell you the Italian stories of proactive regeneration, those that are creating new cultural ecosystems, those that s/he saw.

This piece is dedicated to the good practices that make Italy, among many things, sustainable, ecological, welcoming and economically resilient. I wish to acknowledge all the people who are acting to shed a warming light on the boot land plus isOlands.

Though first, I need to thank two in particular for their great influence in developing a new way of seeing. One is your mother because of her creatively tireless life manner – s/he taught me to keep the door open, your ears listening, hidden bags to collect rubbish, and the story telling so that wherever you go about in the world I can always wave the thread of my land and people; the other is the partner in action for showing me how beautiful Italy is. Really, I hadn't noticed before! S/he simply wasn't aware of it because, we suppose, I took it for granted.

It all began with Friuli, where we were both living, only I was so busy coming and going always somewhere else that I had no idea I was staying in such a wonderful region. With Michał s/he learnt the art of being happy for all the little big treasures that Italy has to offer every day. Together we realised that you just need to be ready to find them.

Today, when they think of Friuli, the first person that comes to mind is our friend Monika. S/he opened her door to us when we most needed it and, aside from her huge generosity, I am glad to remember her because s/he was probably their first close example of a mother experimenting with natural cuisine for our son, mainly to avoid industrial processed food. It was her who, in 2016, launched the great initiative of RISORSERIA-salviamo il cibo, to save exceeding-tooouglyfortheshops food from the wholesale fruit & veggie market. Those were the days of many bike travels with greens, bouncing up along the stony streets of Udine. So, you pause and ask me: how many more-than-human² journeys have we all had with plants for example? Imagine the vision: you are heading home from the nursery with a box full of seedlings, I'd be careful not to stress them. Certainly, this care comes from our intra-action³: it's your agency towards the green willbe food, but it's also the seedlings communicating that if I want to rejoice with them I shall care for them. Anyway, Monika wasn't much good with plants, nevertheless s/he took good care of ours when we explained, in other words, what they meant to you. It was also her who I met during her first visit to the non-profit Ospiti in Arrivo, which since 2014 has been assisting, living, supporting, accompanying, teaching Italian, feeding, organising shelter, raising awareness for and with asylum seekers and refugees, who arrive in Italy from all walks of life. If you want to find some revolutionaries in Udine, go pay them a visit at Miss Kappa ARCI association!

But really, as soon as you started thinking of Monika it was like having an epiphany: the moment of realisation of all the photographs s/he took and things we shared with her and because of her, and what a strong resilient woman you are!

It was also her who took them to Dordolla for the first time. That was Harvest 2016, a celebration of art, agriculture and community. That day we discovered this amazing village in Val Aupa and we fell in love! There we came back as much as we could for the peaceful sense of sharing and the magic that reside in one of Italy's semi-abandoned apparently isolated places. It's powerful to experience what a bunch of creACTIVE people (Kaspar and Marina from Drentus, who run their sustainable mountain project Tiere Viere; Christopher and Sarah, artists in residence) can do to reawaken the human interactions with a land that is still speaking.

Speaking of land, and mountains, I see our mind resting on the image of another Friulian friend, Margherita. S/he, someone else would have said, is like an angel – a terribly shy force of nature. S/he doesn't speak much, but when her mouth opens s/he blushes like the most beautiful rose s/he looks like and intense fire comes out! Hidden by her aura of quietness, this girl is a creature of extreme passion and determination, and a lover of her territories. An environmentalist, a cyclist, a volunteer, a litter-carrier from walks around, a day to day politician, a brave spokesperson, a supporter and helper of anyone in need. With the most incredible interests and knowledge, you could go on forever telling how much s/he meant for us. At some point, you may wonder *us, you, I, we: who is s/he talking about?* Who are you? And how are we doing in This World? Looking at you is a way to mirror myself and understand how to make this life a better place in this multi-world. For the time being, we can try to feel these pronouns like the Rastafari concept of I&I. We are one and as much as my subjectivity is pretty strong, I strive to feel the connection between my soul, the blue leggings I wear and the hands that now type these digital words that are possible only because you have given some food to my stomach. Food: that was also a frequent topic of conversation with Margherita. One day s/he asked Echoes of Ecologies⁴ to publicly contribute to the talks at the STOP TTIP gathering in Udine. Like today, it was raining much. It was raining so much that it was scary. It was an outdoor event in a *piazza*, but the agency of the showering water forced us to reunite under a *portico*. After all, they say, Udine is (or was?) Italy's pissoir. That time, we didn't make much of it, however if you consider it now in this present moment that is already gone: how much did the rain influence the months that came afterwards? Because of it, they held tight and listened to each other. Picture this: it could have been a stage and audience sort of talk, instead it became a shared performance of actors where we all had an opportunity to speak.

It was there that we met Loris, a great collaborator who introduced them to the association for seeds and biodiversity Civiltà Contadina, and the teenage couple of Kea e Alberto – our youngest soontobecome friends.

Them, backed by a fantastic mother who began a project of community supported bakery using the flour of recovered ancient seeds, quickly evolved into your source of in/(a)spiration. Active for environmental justice within their school, to see the light in the eyes of an urbanised 17yearold person when you talked about gardening and permaculture was like the wonderful light that passes through my window right now. I'm surrounded by light, you know that kind of full-on ray that we get after a storm? This is what we see when I look into their eyes. We said that they are the ones making big things in this world. But seriously, where would they be without play and our roots music? The fun time spent together holding your hands as we walked into their revolutionary thoughts was a huge source of energy.

They finished school this year and it sounds like they're coming down to Australia for their initial steps away from parental homes. They're looking for skills and ideas, along the path of wwoofing⁵, to build up their personal project of sustainability. So young, so great! Waiting for...

A step back into your mother's house,
they discovered another side of Sardinia.

One of the things that Kea and Alberto already understood was that you may spend many years out of my country looking for what you think you lack, they lack, we

lack, then realise you didn't know much about it in the first place. That's why – apart from the obvious reason that her old bedroom was helping us produce their ethnographic documentary on natural medicine in Paraguay – last year we spent 9 months of participatory life in her native region.

Not the touristy glocal inhabitant in proud return to salute their family from the beach during those summer, Christmas, Easter, Halloween (or was it All Saints and Souls day?!) holidays. Not that one, who I was.

I am, still, also, a little bit a fragment of that person, but this time we had our garden there. And that changed everything. One thing is working in readymade gardens, another is starting from scratch(es) and following the whole cycle all the way through the end of those cherry tomatoes' harvest. Mmh, so good!

Sardinia: what a paradise! Sardinia: what a surprise!

Your mum's village: what a torment!

Almost painful to describe the odietamo sensation that is attached to it. Certainly, that garden changed everything. It changed the way we walked from the village to the countryside. Each fig I picked from those wild trees was the swallowing of sedimented memories⁶ in her body. I wonder: where did your great aunt lay her feet as s/he walked all the way up the road to gather almonds for the festivities' sweets? Those almond trees are still there and so are her feet. I listen to the story of her chilblain every Winter through mine.

Having a garden changed the way they related to an apparently scattered community. The idea of sharing surplus led us to the action of a neighbourhood party called 'bring a flower to the street'. *Mamma* was the director, *la Carrera* 'the street' was the protagonist and we, all neighbours and passers-by, were the actors. Or was it the other way round? The street was the director, my mum was an actress and we were the protagonists? Well, what matters is the story. The storied matter⁷ of an evening of communal effort and celebration, which is now recounted by the colourful pots and flowers that inhabit the most joyful street of the village.

Wait a minute! It's not all about yourself!

For example, if I were to recount what and who is the House of Seeds of Sardinia no doubt I would tell you of our last encounter, when we met on the occasion of 'Make the Difference' – a day dedicated to the exchange of seeds and learn how to play with them through their mixing.

If I were to recount it, certainly I would describe a group of passionate people, spread out from various angles of the island to reunite under the shade of the olive trees, at the Montegranatico of Domusnovas Canales.

I would tell you that the stimulating reason for such meeting was the visit of Germana, a cultivator of Association Campi Aperti from Emilia Romagna, who reached us to share her experience with mixtures of seeds of barley, zucchini and tomatoes.

I would care to let you imagine how much dedication and preparation were needed to channel the energy to exchange seeds with ideas... with a smile I would speak of the best of the universe, which at every encounter dances on ever-welcoming ever-happy tables_of that little colourful house with green leaves, whose garden is now inhabited by new trees remembering fathers who are not there anymore_of a poem by one of the house's sons_of sweaty children playing_of chatting and discovering.

And of those who snored, rolled up in the sleep of a sleeping bag, after an intense day of study and participation, in preparation.

So, perhaps you could understand that, like Maurizio said, “they are all here with me, like having a bigger family”⁸.

Even if you had been there? Stopping to listen: what would have you heard?

Everyone a different emotion anyway. And if you had told them? One would not have excluded the other_all would have been included, all true.

As Germana said, mindful of geneticist Ceccarelli’s teaching, “we need both the seeds’ protection, and the experimentation with their mixtures”, the important thing is finding a balance to maintain biodiversity.

Yes to selection, bearing in mind that – particularly when creating a mix – even the weakest varieties help donating specificity and speciality. This is the fundamental lesson that seeds teach us: the greater the biodiversity, the better. We are just translating.

So how to promote diversity in life? Well, let’s make it!

Let us become cultivACTors, as in people who care to do. Here you are in agriculture evolving spontaneously into agroecology as in practices of cultivACTion that mutually interact with the ecosystems in which they develop.

And how do we collaborate for the agricultural ecology, if the very farmers have almost forgotten how to self-preserve/reproduce the seeds?

To reproduce a seed is the magical act that holds life.

Magic that cannot be reduced to the purchase of envelopes of unknown seeds.

To regenerate knowledge is at the basis of life.

It is her who, if we want to, takes us to conscience_to the awareness that without food sovereignty there is no independence, and that sovereignty is intended as having the freedom of self-management at least of the primal act that generates our energy.

ONE SEED-TWO SEEDS, THOUSANDS OF SEEDS, WHICH MAKE THE
DIVERSITY OF ALL WE CAN SEE AND FEEL AROUND US.

What if I were to recount this about the House of Seeds?

You would hear a different story anyway.

Maybe these stories are like the digressions in the narrative of Don Quixote’s adventures⁹. Maybe, like Don Alonso, we lost our sanity and that is why we wander in search of people who revive conviviality serving our land.

Maybe an intercalation is what I had in mind when s/he took a boat that from Sardinia took them to Sicily. Yes, because after spending so much time, you mean so.much.time?, I mean 4months, in the island it felt good to touch the soil of another island.

Why were you going there?

You were going there to look for signs of beauty and bounty in the southernmost region of Italy. The region where, they say it is full of immigrants, you say there is not (your expectation of) work, s/he says there is mafia, he says people are lazy, we say it is dirty, I say it is corrupted like anywhere in the world, yet I really want to go there!

Extract of the journey notes:

“Sitting on the floor of the little terrace I admire the landscape of the Sagana Valley. It’s a beautiful day of sunshine, heart and love. This morning, as the other ones, we cleaned under the grand olive trees that characterise this peculiar hilly landscape. Before lunch we met with mules Dondolo and Giorgiana and we fed them with

carob... on the table there were lentils, pasta, bread and salad. Our bellies were luckily full.

I change place, sitting on a sawed pine I contemplate the resin with eyes and nose, whilst little helicopters are buzzing around me. Good weather for a late October. The roosters are singing, the wind is swishing pleasingly, and we are here meeting the custodians of Thar Dö Ling or the land of those who long for peace.

A little further down there is a rosemary in full blooming and tonight we will harvest some to season the rice – tomorrow we are off towards Catania. [...]'

This is the story of the serpent that comes down from the mountain in search of the tail that s/he lost there. Could you tell me? Is it you that little piece of my tail?

Of course, it is me. And it is you at the same time in the collective mind of this earth.

It was Simona and Danilo who we bade farewell and it was Simona and Danilo who I found in Roberto's eyes, when you opened the gate of The Happy Hens' house.

To Be Continued...

Notes

¹ Giulia Lepori is a doctoral candidate in the School of Humanities, Languages and Social Science at Griffith University; her thesis is focused on Material Ecocriticism and Environmental Humanities.

² For the concept of 'more-than-human', within the Environmental Humanities, see: D. Abrams (1996), *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Pantheon, New York.

³ For the definition of 'intra-action' see: K. Barad (2007), *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, Duke University Press.

⁴ See: G. Lepori & M. Krawczyk (ongoing), <http://echoesofecologies.noblogs.org/>.

⁵ WWOOF (World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms, or Willing Workers on Organic Farms) is a hospitality service operated by a loose network of national organizations that facilitate homestays on organic farms. See: <http://wwooof.net/>.

⁶ For the concept of 'sedimented memory', within the Environmental Humanities, see for instance: W. Wheeler & L. Westling (2015), "Biosemiotics and culture: introduction", *Green Letters* 19, (3) pp. 215-226.

⁷ For the definition of 'storied matter' see: S. Iovino & S. Oppermann eds (2014), *Material Ecocriticism*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press.

⁸ This quote comes from an unpublished poem written on a wooden board, at the House of Seeds of Sardinia (2018), by agronomist and poet Maurizio Fadda.

⁹ Don Quixote de la Mancha is the protagonist of the Spanish novel published by M. de Cervantes Saavedra in two parts, in 1605 and 1615.