

Haunted Sicilian Landscapes: Orazio Labbate's Petrovisions and the Italian Energy Hubris

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Abstract This paper explores the socio-environmental implications of energy extraction and production in Gela, Sicily. It examines narratives surrounding oil encounters and the manipulation of social and environmental consciousness by national energy companies. Two toxic narratives are examined: the formation of petrofictions and the use of myths and eco-efficiency rhetoric for greenwashing, drawing on environmental and energy humanities perspectives. Through a critical analysis of Orazio Labbate's novel *Suttaterra*, the paper explores the trauma induced by encounters with oil and environmental conflicts documented in Sicilian landscapes. It also examines the manipulation of public perception by national energy companies through mythological storytelling, using the example of Eni's offshore gas exploration project in Sicily. The paper points to the urgent need for a transition to sustainable energy practices and calls for greater environmental and energy justice in the region.

Keywords Energy. Toxic narratives. Sicily. Petrofictions. Environmental justice.

Summary 1 Questioning Gela: Exploring Environmental Impact and Energy Justice in Sicily. – 2 First Story: Oil Encounters and The Italian Petrofiction. – 3 Second Story: Energy *Hybris* and Eco-Transitions. – 4 Conclusion.



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1 Questioning Gela: Exploring Environmental Impact and Energy Justice in Sicily

What happened, my God, what happened in Gela, in the island, in the country in this dreadful time? What happened to the one who is here writing, is he an accomplice or an unaware killer? What happened to you who are reading?
(Vincenzo Consolo, *L'olivo e l'olivastro*, 1994)¹

What happened in Gela was that they discovered oil² and natural gas.³ And so, on the island, the dream of energy hubris dreamed by others happened. In this atrocious anthropogenic time of haunted geologies,⁴ writers craft narratives to make fuels tangible, visible, and readable, while readers witness the mourning of landscapes through oil-inked pages. Gela is in southern Sicily. It faces Africa. Yet materially, it is everywhere.

Gela is the omnipresence of petroleum-derived products in everyday life and the ubiquity of the movements they make possible. Its material and cultural body is multilayered: a gulf, a plain, an ancient Greek colony, the remains of concrete casemates,⁵ and unhealthy factories. A refinery and a petrochemical plant that constitute a chapter in epidemiological reports of national priority and an entry in the Environmental Justice Atlas. Talking about Gela means discussing the social significance of energy in the realms of climate justice and political commitments to an energy transition that addresses environmental concerns and promotes greater social justice. This is the main concern of this essay, which seeks to echo Consolo's call.

¹ "Cos'è successo, dio mio, cos'è successo a Gela, nell'isola, nel paese in questo atroce tempo? Cos'è successo a colui che qui scrive, complice o inconsapevole assassino? Cos'è successo a te che stai leggendo?" (Consolo 1994, 81). These penetrating questions, posed by the Sicilian writer Vincenzo Consolo, cut through the fabric of Gela's narrative, compelling readers to confront the repercussions of a collective environmental and social blindness. English translation in Bouchard, Lollini 2007, 34.

² "Oil fields, discovered in 1956, led to the construction of a petrochemical pole, in 1963" (cf. Di Mari et al. 2021, 486).

³ Between 2006 and 2008 Eni carries out exploration and drilling in the Sicilian channel and discovers undersea natural gas deposits just 20 km off the coast of Agrigento. Cf. Eni S.p.a. 2010.

⁴ On the concept of 'haunted landscapes' by forms of violence of technoscientific modernity, see Tsing et al. 2017, and especially the chapter on 'haunted geologies' by Nils Bubandt (2017).

⁵ At dawn on July 10, 1943, American and British soldiers of the Allied Army arrived in Gela, initiating the largest amphibious operation of World War II, the 'Operation Husky'. As soon as they landed on the Gela shores, they found the Axis troops entrenched in concrete bunkers and casemates, the remains of which can still be seen today. "They were built of 60-cm-thick concrete, equipped with three embrasures that allow the soldiers a 270° line of vision and moreover protected them from the splinters caused by bullets hitting the surface" (Salerno 2015, 185).

Sicily encompasses a wealth of extraordinary landscapes in which human and non-human agents share the same path of growth through addition and blending, as occurs in the material and temporal stratifications that make up the sedimentary rocks. It's no coincidence that the biological body of the island has been described as an "eloquent palimpsest" (Bufalino, Leone 1998, 24; transl. by P. Creagh). Its eloquence reveals the intimate intertwining of biological and literary elements that inspire people to connect with the natural world and seek a deeper understanding of their place within it. The metaphor of the palimpsest refers to the process of renewing the writing material (such as stone, metal, clay, parchment) by scraping. This suggests that both scars and new writings coexist within the fabric of the text, in our context, the fabric of the landscape. But what happens when we recognize that scars transcend resurgences? Quite simply, we are faced with an ecological conflict: a wide range of toxic practices and relationships that disproportionately affect already disadvantaged people while also altering the landscape. Gela and its surrounding archipelago of small towns in the province of Caltanissetta are privileged places to question the effects of an energy culture that feeds on sacrificed peripheries from the transdisciplinary perspective of the environmental humanities. Drawing from Marco Armiero's concept of "toxic narratives" (Armiero 2021), I explore two stories invoking energy crises and regimes spreading across the Mediterranean, whose consequences are visibly inscribed in the damaged body of Sicilian southern landscapes. Toxic narratives are tools of division and polarization as much in the natural and social body of damaged landscapes, fueling distrust, pessimism, and silencing injustice. They perpetuate a cycle of exploitation and oppression extending toxicity to social relations. My urge is to acknowledge the scars in a fabric that has been repeatedly scratched to make room for subsequent writings, as a philologist would do with a codex that has been altered but still bears visible traces of remains - and possibly of future remains. The first narrative deals with encounters with oil and the materialization of petrofictions. My interpretation illustrates the gradual infiltration of capitalist pollution into both social and geological realms, drawing inspiration from Amitav Ghosh's groundbreaking work "Petrofiction: The Oil Encounter and the Novel" (Ghosh 1992), a pivotal reference for understanding the intricate connections between literature and the oil industry. Ghosh's analysis highlights how the narratives surrounding oil extraction and consumption shape cultural and societal perceptions. This concept is particularly relevant to my analysis, as it provides a critical lens through which we can examine the socio-environmental implications of energy production. Ghosh's terminology, which originally focused on fiction explicitly about oil, has expanded within the burgeoning field of energy humanities, and

petrofiction now encompasses various genres and approaches that reflect on the impact of fossil fuel energy production on both society and our environmental imagination (Szeman 2012, 3). Scholars who have explored the presence of petrotxts in the field of Italian Studies, mainly with an ecocritical approach, have focused on the elemental nature of oil: viscous, omnipresent, but often invisible, as it appeared in the literature of the preindustrial and industrial age (Cesaretti 2020). More recent studies of petrotxts in Italian literature have tended to explore science fiction short stories, a less studied but fertile genre capable of imagining and embodying the invisibility of oil and fossil fuels (Malvestio 2023). When discussing the effects of oil on society, we often fall into the slippery trap of treating oil as a symbol or metonymy for energy rather than as an agentic substance. However, as Pinkus (2016) argues, a clear distinction between the two is crucial to dispelling the illusion that a transition to renewables alone will solve the problem of environmental justice. Our imagination should push us to approach texts where energy issues are not overtly addressed, and encounters with oil may not be immediately apparent, but gradually revealed through the web of relationships as the narrative unfolds. Born from the chthonic uprisings evoked by its title, Orazio Labbate's novel *Suttaterra* ('Underground', 2017) shines as a gothic outcry against the environmental devastation caused by the petrochemical industry in Gela. When read within the frameworks of material ecocriticism and energy humanities, Labbate's haunted landscapes strike me as a representation of the trauma induced by encounters with oil and documented environmental conflicts.

The second narrative deals with the manipulation of social and environmental awareness by the national energy company. These narratives use myths of the sea and the rhetoric of eco-efficiency to conceal greenwashing operations and environmental injustices, linking Mediterranean shores under the guise of the energy crisis. Indeed, they intersect with Europe's quest for gas autonomy from Russian suppliers and are intertwined with discussions around the UN Climate Change Conference COP28 and the Global Methane Pledge, positioning Sicily at the forefront of environmental commitments. The combined frameworks of energy humanities and material ecocriticism provide me with unique storytelling devices made of ruins of capital decay, such as the petrochemical complex of Gela and a web of futuristic techno-fossils buried under the Mediterranean Sea: gas pipelines and gathering manifolds, platforms, and a refinery. As Serenella Iovino elucidates, material ecocriticism is

an epistemological-critical project meant to both redesign the category of text and reframe the interpreter's role in the becoming of the examined reality. (Iovino 2016, 4)

Thus, landscapes and their landmarks emerge as protagonists of the narrative, illuminating the intertwined biological and literary dimensions within this narrative tapestry. The body of the landscape itself is where the energy hubris happens. Today, the palimpsest of the Sicilian landscape speaks eloquently of the uses and abuses of energy that have created a web of toxic narratives and biological relationships. As I write, Sicily is becoming an energy hub, connecting Europe to new sources of natural gas in North African countries. Despite the rapid decline in the cost of renewable energy technologies, Italy's energy plan continues to invest heavily in new gas infrastructure and storage technologies, reinforcing its presence in African regions rich in natural resources, including traditional fuels. This approach perpetuates a top-down scheme that masks the unsustainability of fossil fuels with ambiguous energy transition policies. Such a strategy raises environmental and energy justice concerns regarding new extraction activities in already damaged landscapes and the unequal distribution of the costs and benefits of energy access.

2 First Story: Oil Encounters and The Italian Petrofiction

The territory of Gela is a place of subterranean resurrection, bringing back all kinds of finds from the subsoil as well as from the sea. Pottery, coins, and Greek ships are associated with the first explorers from Rhodes and Crete who then inhabited Sicily. However, among these material remains that navigate us through the myths and logos of the ancient central Mediterranean, even more ancient fossils have plunged Gela into a 'dark pit', returning like something that could leap out of a petrofiction. The Great Acceleration, which made human agency a geological force, did not spare this deep southern corner of the island, which was shaken out of its internal resources. In 1956, the Italian National Oil Company (Agip) drilled crude oil from a pastoral landscape turning shepherds and farmers into workers. The oil was refined and poured out of the region, financing the industrial market of the north. From 1960, the refinery brought in specialized workers, doubled the population, built over the open countryside with cement, and contaminated the air with pet coke. By the end of the millennium, the city was known as the Texas of Italy. Sicily's oil had amazing potential, so its transformations fueled the production cycle of other chemical and synthetic substances, such as plastics, caustic soda, hydrochloric acid, and sulfuric acid. This is how, in 1963, the petrochemical complex, owned by Eni (National Hydrocarbon Agency), was born. Materially - and critically - speaking, the property of the material is not motionless, it tells us the outcome of the oil while exercising its agency. The distillation residue consists of steam gas and the

more tangible pet coke: defined as 'oil scum';⁶ this material was the fuel that fed the thermoelectric plant to produce electrical energy. Although the Ronchi Law (DL 22/1997) forbade the use of pet coke as a fuel to feed the refinery, along the way of capitalist progress, oil combustion had already started a slow transcorporeal contamination.⁷ Transcorporeality, as defined by Stacy Alaimo, refers to the interconnectedness and entanglement between human bodies and the larger material world, including biological, technological, economic, social, political, and other systems, processes, and events (Alaimo 2010). Since 1990, the cities of Gela, Niscemi, and Butera were declared as an Area at High Risk of Environmental Crisis. In 2000, a large portion of this territory was designated as a Reclamation Site of National Interest.⁸ The site includes a private industrial area, and public and marine areas, covering 51 km² (more than twice the area of Rome Municipality 1, which encompasses the city center, and 11 localities with a population of 167,300). Pollutants and chemical substances migrated into the exposed landscape and sedimented the perception of risk in carcinogenic corporeality. In 2002, the petrochemical plant was placed under seizure due to the high level of pollution found. The population was divided, on the one hand, between citizens who expressed their dissent and opposition and, on the other, between precarious workers who, in an event known as the 'pet coke revolt' demanded the dignity of their labor rights and the reopening of the plant. This is the schizophrenic outburst of a system that denies the destructive evidence of its poor landscape management. The ecological conflict is documented under the entry "Eni's Refinery in Gela" in the *EjAtlas*⁹ (Environmen-

6 Petroleum coke is the residue of petroleum refining, a toxic product containing carbon and other materials like sulfur and metals. The difference between coal and coke is that the latter emits between 30% and 80% more CO₂ per unit of weight. The Ronchi Law (DL 22/1997) regulated the management of waste, hazardous waste, and packaging waste and their classification to ensure high environmental protection. According to it, using pet coke as fuel to feed the refinery was defined as illegal, due to the high content of sulfur and heavy metals.

7 "Chemicals treated and emitted by Gela industries include sulfur dioxide, nitrogen oxide and dust related to refining activities, as well as ammonia, fluorine, phosphoric acid, dichloroethane, and cyanide" (Saitta, Pellizzoni 2010, 169).

8 Sites of National Interest (SIN) are "extensive portions of the national territory, of particular environmental value and understood in the various environmental matrices (including any surface water bodies and related sediments), identified by law, for the purposes of reclamation, on the basis of characteristics (of contamination and more) which involve a high health and ecological risk due to the population density or the extension of the site itself, as well as a significant socio-economic impact and risk for the assets of historical and cultural interest" (<https://bonifichesiticontaminati.mite.gov.it/sin/inquadramento/>). See <https://it.ejatlases.org/conflict/raffineria-eni-in-localita-piana-del-signore-gela>.

9 As described on the Atlas official website, the Atlas is directed by Leah Temper and Joan Martinez Alier and coordinated by Daniela Del Bene, at the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology (ICTA) at the Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona. It is

tal Justice Atlas) an international project that documents the material dimension of socio-environmental conflicts, not only in their economic consequences but especially in the systematic silencing of voices of dissent and to the exclusion of democratic participation and decision-making processes. In 2023 the update of the epidemiological evidence underlying the Sixth SENTIERI Report (Epidemiological Study of Residents in National Priority Contaminated Sites) promoted by the Italian Ministry of Health, highlighted an excess of mortality and hospitalization in populations living in proximity of contaminated sites of national interest (Zona et al. 2023). It also showed a higher risk of stomach, colorectal, and lung cancer sites, most closely associated with the principal pollutants in the Gela area, among citizens and workers (Zona et al. 2023, 256).

Until the late 1990s, low oil prices coincided with economic prosperity in Italy and Europe, with oil refining being Sicily's main economic activity. However, the financial crisis in 2008 marked a turning point, resulting in a fall in oil-based industrial production.¹⁰ This shift has certainly contributed to Eni turning its attention to offshore gas explorations, leading to the closure of many refineries, including the Gela refinery. The operations stopped in 2014 exposing the leftovers of this monstrous fire-breathing chimera. The giant gas flares of the refinery smokestacks disappeared, and from the still-burning embers of the Lord's Plain,¹¹ emerged a trilogy of black fire, the obscure fire of Orazio Labbate's petrofictions.

Wondering how to address resurgences from what's left out of these energy discourses and strategies led me to investigate critical readings that make the invisible bodily intimacy that connects our minds to a palpable place. These models give us visions of horrors we don't want to see, and landscapes we would rather like to forget. Stephanie LeMenager has powerfully explored the cultural dependence on oil and the ambiguous outcomes of encounters with oil in contemporary life. Her book *Living Oil: Petroleum Culture in the American Century* (LeMenager 2014) has quickly become a classic in energy humanities and environmental cultural studies for its striking methodology, which combines authorial writing with scholarly rigor. What is most striking about LeMenager's work is the act of bringing the "precedent outside" (LeMenager 2014, 2) into the academic

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10 Studies in energy and science engineering, as documented by Pagliaro, documented that "between 2008 and 2013 unemployment doubled because national income fell by 9%, per capita income by 11%, and industrial production by 25%" (Pagliaro, Meneguzzo 2020, 566).

11 The Lord's Plain is a parcel that is part of the floodplain of the Plain of Gela.

archive: oil people, oil culture, oil landscapes, and the oil that lives in people, culture, and landscapes. In her own words

we experience ourselves... every day in oil, living within oil, breathing it, and registering it with our senses. (LeMenager 2014, 6)

This observation underscores the deep and intricate relationship we have with a substance derived from fossilized matter that was once a vital component of life itself. Indeed, as scholar Jennifer Wenzel noted, oil exhibits a compelling agency “with the suggestive force of a form of life” (Wenzel 2015, 505). A striking case of the intertwining of lifelines with petrochemical history is Orazio Labbate's *Suttaterra* (2017), which recreates the unforgiven earthly symbiosis with a landscape deeply contaminated by oil. This novel is the second chapter of a trilogy that traces the spell of petromodernity, expanding the boundaries of environmental memory while preserving the experience of oil's externalities. The narrative journey evolves from the uprising of industrialization shadowed in the first novel, *Lo Scuru* ('The Dark', 2014), to the onset of naturalized toxicity affecting people, objects, and spirits in the concluding episode, *Spirdu* ('Spirit', 2021). In *Suttaterra*, the petrochemical presence, filtered through literature, takes the form of a dark temple and an emblematic totem representing the corruption of nature and human existence.

The narrative unfolds as a tale of monstrous apparitions, spectral entities, and idols of a distorted, demonized Catholic religion, creating a Gothic-style odyssey. The central human character, Giuseppe Buscemi, is a Sicilian American mortician living in West Virginia. He lives in the shadow of his father, Razziddu, the protagonist of the first novel, *Lo Scuru*, who was exorcised in Sicily and is now a Sunday preacher. His father's mournful religion consists of a death cult of idolatry and local folklore: a personal religion born of a landscape seemingly forgotten by its gods. Giuseppe, trapped by his father's obsessions, tries to make a life for himself by working with the cadavers. He goes into business and marries, only to fall back into mourning as a newlywed. From the dead bride, Maria Boccadifuoco, he receives a letter from Sicily, where the two had their wedding and a cursed honeymoon while

venti, saturi di intrugli chimici, sgretolavano le rocce del promontorio di Manfria e si facevano sentire fin dentro la cattedrale. (Labbate 2017, 33)

winds saturated with chemical concoctions crumbled the rocks of the Manfria promontory and were felt all the way to the cathedral.¹²

¹² These translations and the following are by the Author.

Driven by memories of his evil father and visions that have haunted his mind, he embarks on an oil ship to return to the island. In the 'kingdom of Gela', Giuseppe meets the dwarf Alfonsino Scibetta, a sort of prophet of the petrochemical temple, an apostle of an infernal Madonna who poisons land, water, soil, and air from the chimneys. It is he who narrates Giuseppe's encounters:

ci sono scheletri e catrame sotto la sabbia. Afrore di benzina vortica nell'aria... sostanze velenose da bere.

There are skeletons and tar under the sand. The stench of gasoline swirls in the air [...] poisonous substances to drink. (Labbate 2017, 5)

As the title suggests, this novel delves further into the wounds of the landscape, penetrating beneath the veil of suspended particulate matter in the air and the blackened sands of the Mediterranean, into the heart of living beings, reaching the depths of their consciousness. The image of the sea as a viscous quagmire, silenced from any call to life, is very eloquent, indicating the profound influence of oil and its agency in shaping even the soundscape:

Dal Mediterraneo non si odono più risalire le scricchiolanti ombre di pesce che giungevano alla corte dei miei sogni, elettriche e furiose, scatenandosi dall'acqua fino alla mente. (5)

From the Mediterranean you can no longer hear the creaking shadows of fish that came to the court of my dreams, electric and furious, unleashing themselves from the water to the mind.

The view of a blackened sea, silenced by the voices of birds and fish, looks like the retrospective of an oil spill when the sound of crashing waves is eerily muted by the thick layer of oil accumulated in the water. Ghostly animals beg the toxic Mother of the Temple:

Madre! Madre! Perché ci hai abbandonato? Madre! Perché ci hai avvelenato con il tuo latte? (6)

Mother! Mother! Why have you abandoned us? Mother! Why have you poisoned us with your milk?

In such a haunted environment, the sole conceivable homecoming is a bodily reunification with the toxic realm of the petrochemical plant, a sinister place of living oil and performing chemicals where everything reeks, and stinks. Giuseppe encapsulates the interconnectivity and mutual influence between human bodies and the wider

blackened landscape, as exemplified by the phrase “i nostri corpi sono assemblee” (our bodies are assemblies; Labbate 2017, 19). The narration of toxic transcorporeality takes shape as an equation, with the protagonist articulating it through short, lapidary sentences:

La benzina nei cuori. I barili di petrolio che contengono cuori. I cuori del Petrolchimico. (48)

Gasoline in hearts, oil barrels containing hearts. Petrochemical hearts.

Everything is poisoned by crude oil. Even the sacred emblems of Catholic iconography are not spared, rather, they become unwitting deities within the “castello metallico” (the metallic castle; 60). This transformation becomes evident in passages such as the following:

In capo a una torre d'alluminio [...] la Madonna esaminava il paed saggio con occhi di capra [...] si trovava lassù come un'immagine votiva dipinta a chiedere protezione sulla raffineria. (92)

On the top of an aluminum tower [...] Our Lady examined the landscape with goat's eyes [...] She stood up there like a painted votive image asking for protection over the refinery.

In resonance with Amitav Ghosh, oil encounters in this novel “verge on the unspeakable, the pornographic” (Ghosh 1992). This effect is reinforced by the language and style employed. Orazio Labbate inhabits the Sicilian language endowing the vernacular with an intimate and resurgent function. Throughout his trilogy, Sicilian serves as the language of ritual and spell, aiding to visualize how the landscape embodies mythologies of ancient and contemporary narratives, including toxic ones. Born in Mazzarino, and raised between Butera and Gela, Labbate experienced firsthand the physical dimension of the ecological disaster in 1990, when these cities were declared as areas at high risk of environmental risk. In his writing, there exists a kinship with the Southern Gothic tradition of Faulkner, O'Connor, and McCarthy within the same belt region of the US Deep South (Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Texas) where the term ‘environmental justice’ emerged in the 1980s. This term refers to events and resistance to pollution within primarily Black American communities, responding to the unjust practices of siting environmental hazards, such as landfills and chemical waste dumps, in already disadvantaged areas (Coolsaet 2021). Labbate chose to write about the Texan metamorphosis of Sicily, without neglecting the ecological cost of this metamorphosis and who paid for it. He chose to narrate and infuse his

literature with Sicilian because the dialect has a deep poetic connection to the landscapes he describes. The environmental memory of these places finds expression in the linguistic dimension, echoing Agamben's assertion that "before inhabiting a physical territory, people have their dwelling in a language" (transl. by the Author).¹³

Labbate's gothic imagery gives us an honest warning not to be complicit in energy-depriving policies. It is a "cautionary tale" (Iovino 2022, 11) against the myth of energy prosperity structured around fossil fuels. His narrative unravels a reality centered on the toxicity of a neglected locale, emphasizing the responsibility inherent in storytelling. It is noteworthy that the writer published his debut novel, *Lo Scuru*, amidst the cessations of petrochemical activities in 2014. However, the closure of the petrochemical operations does not mark the end of energy hubris, as history seems to repeat itself through new energy projects. *Suttaterra's* epilogue, where Giuseppe Buscemi repeatedly dies as he crashes from the petrochemical plant to the underground, symbolizes a relentless cycle of trauma induced by the encounter with oil and environmental conflict:

È da innumerevoli eoni che Giuseppe Buscemi si lancia dal Petrochimico. Cade senza cuore e dal mare gelido arriva senza cuore fin sottoterra [...] Misero, il suo corpo nel vuoto non si placherà di morire. (Labbate 2017, 121)

Countless eons have passed since Giuseppe Buscemi threw himself from the top of the Petrochemical. He falls heartlessly and comes to earth heartlessly from the icy sea. [...] Miserable, his body in the void will never rest from dying.

The end of Buscemi, an end that continues, is in perfect correspondence with the story of future events conveyed by the country's energy choices. Despite the closure of 2014, Eni obtained a favorable judgment of environmental compatibility for the 'Ibleo Offshore Project - Campi Gas Argo and Cassiopea'. This marks the beginning of the second story I want to tell. A story that revolves around the timeless dream of generating clean energy from nothing.

So, what remains? It is the ongoing task of continuing to tell our stories and organize our memories in a new chapter, much like Orazio Labbate did, trying to think better with and in the body of the landscape.

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZDg9UDfJtV4>.

3 Second Story: Energy *Hybris* and Eco-Transitions

The petrochemical complex that has been built on Gela's ancient shores created a human-disturbed landscape that today spreads its energy hold to the opposite shores of the Mediterranean, from Libya to Algeria passing through Tunisia. In a time of war and raging climate change, new gas discoveries offshore Sicily have catalyzed a dual response: a national, neurotic drive towards energy autarchy, and an international push to control energy trade dynamics, aimed to loosen Italian (and European) dependency upon Russia. This unfolding political agenda is reshaping the landscape as I write.

The EjaAtlas's database has another entry for ecologic conflicts in Gela. It's called "Eni's Ibleo offshore platform"¹⁴ and discusses a project first presented in 2010 by Eni based on the exploitation of fossil fuels offshore Licata (Agrigento) but also linked to the conversion of the Gela refinery into a biorefinery.¹⁵ In 2014, the aforementioned 'Ibleo Offshore Project', obtained a favorable judgment of environmental compatibility under the new name of 'Ibleo Offshore Project - Campi gas Argo e Cassiopea'. In the same year, Greenpeace, WWF, Sicilian municipalities, and other civil and environmental associations demonstrated that the project was located within protected areas such as an important natural bird reserve,¹⁶ and a Site of Community Interest (SIC).¹⁷ This chain of events, which should be understood as a distributional energy injustice against already affected communities, is a matter of procedural energy injustice as acknowledged by Rosie Day

in terms of lack of informed consent and lack of restorative justice, as marginalized communities struggle to get access to legal redress and compensation. (Day 2021, 162)

Indeed, the protests delayed new drilling operations. Over 10 years, the original project was updated and remodeled and today is known

¹⁴ Cf. <https://it.ejatlas.org/conflict/piattaforma-ibleo-eni-spa>.

¹⁵ For a complete reconstruction of the plant conversion and startup of the biorefinery cf. Giavarini, Trifirò 2021.

¹⁶ "The Biviere di Gela Nature Reserve was established to protect the largest natural coastal lake in Sicily, which is also a staging area for waterfowl of international importance. It constitutes one of the most important staging and wintering areas for numerous species of migratory birds" (transl. by the Author). Cf. <https://orbs.regione.sicilia.it/aree-protette/riserve-naturali-siciliane/208-riserva-naturale-biviere-di-gela.html>.

¹⁷ Sites of national interest are very large, contaminated areas with health and ecological risks and harm to cultural and environmental assets that require remediation. Sites are nominated, classified and regulated by the State, and of Article 252, paragraph 1 of Legislative Decree 152/06 and ss.mm.ii commonly referred to as the Consolidated Environmental Act (TUA).

by the elegant name of 'Cassiopea Project'. This submarine production facility includes: 1) the construction of a submarine production system (4 new wells in two offshore fields, Argo and Cassiopeia); 2) The laying of an underwater pipeline linking the wells to the coast up to the Gela Refinery where 3) the installation of a new gas treatment and compression plant is planned. From there the gas will be fed into the national network. To comply with the European Union directives,¹⁸ and to break free from dependence on Russian gas, one of the stated goals is to promote and greening of the transition along the entire energy supply chain. This includes extending the life of infrastructure through the eco-design of new facilities and the conversion and upgrading of existing ones. Eni used this objective to obtain state concessions for the onshore section of the Cassiopeia project, which involves the reuse of the Gela Refinery so that the construction of new gas processing and compression facilities remained in the background. The operation continued until January 2023, when Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni, accompanied by Eni's CEO Claudio Descalzi, visited some African countries. Meloni has announced an energy plan that would make Italy a European natural gas hub, and Sicily the first landing point for new supplies from African countries in exchange for a reduction in migratory flows. On January 28, 2023, visiting Libya, Giorgia Meloni not only signed agreements on gas and migration of energy resources but also assured the Libyan Coast Guard of five boats to intercept and repatriate migrants.¹⁹

Eni's choice to name the project Cassiopea and Argo carries significant symbolism borrowed from marine myths, shedding light on the company's energy policy around the Sicilian offshore platforms and its use of greenwashing rhetoric strategies. The name Argo, referencing Jason's legendary ship, plays on the association of the mythical vessel and the Argonauts' explorations, aligning with Eni's mobile

18 FIT FOR -55% - Ready for 55% refers to the EU's target of reducing net greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030. REPowerEU introduced new energy security measures after the outbreak of the Ukrainian war.

19 The Memorandum of Understanding between Italy and Libya, signed in 2017, was renewed for three years on February 2, 2023. The memorandum committed the two countries to curb immigration with a garrison strategy in mind. "While Italy is providing the North African country with investments to further economic development and stability as well as vessels and border security instruments, Libya is intercepting boats of migrants at sea and preventing people from departing its territory to reach Europe" (Vari 2020). Cf. https://repository.uchastings.edu/hastings_international_comparative_law_review/vol43/iss1/5. According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM): "Between the end of 2017 and the end of 2022, over one hundred thousand people were intercepted and brought back to Libya, many of whom were held in detention centers" (transl. by the Author). Cf. https://www.repubblica.it/solidarieta/profughi/2023/02/02/news/memorandum_italialibia_roma_aumenta_i_finanziamenti_per_respingere_i_migranti_verso_le_galere_di_tripoli_khoms_misurata-386168186/.

platforms searching for their 'fleece' – energy resources. Conversely, the name Cassiopeia subtly invokes pareidolia,²⁰ linking the placement of underwater wells with the disposition of stars in the homonym constellation. However, Eni's naming strategy for its energy installations is deceptive and toxic, both discursively and materially. While Cassiopeia may evoke marine myth for some,²¹ it serves as a cautionary tale of human arrogance, emphasizing the dangers of human exceptionalism. It reminds us of the Mediterranean as a place teeming with dynamic forces beyond human control and the awareness *hybris* means precisely arrogance.

Furthermore, the eco-efficiency paradigm advocated by Eni ought to "blur the distinctions between fuels and energy" (Pinkus 2016, 3). As Pinkus argued, fossil fuels, whether solid, liquid, or gaseous, are not an immanent manifestation of energy but are materials with a still latent agency. In them, we should recognize the "vibrancy" of the matter (Bennett 2010) rather than commodities and profit. Imagining these materials outside the marketization of energy could help alleviate dependence on them. However, in Italy, not only the names but also the narrative of constructing an umbilical cord connecting the Argos and Cassiopeia wells to the coast takes on a mythological scale. This epochal venture is portrayed as a solution to energy security and emissions issues, not only for Italy but also for other European countries, with Sicily as a pivotal energy hub.

Referring to Sicily as an international energy hub would result in a physical and memorial alteration of its places. This means not learning from the past, breaking the foundational link with places, persevering in *hybris*, and silencing the warning of myth. Nevertheless, it is effective... politically effective. Especially in legitimizing a narrative that silences environmental and humanitarian injustice in the name of emergency.

This story has its latest twist at the United Nations Climate Change Conference in Dubai (COP28),²² where it became clearer how energy, environmental, and social policies are intertwined under the banner

20 Pareidolia is the tendency to perceive familiar or meaningful images in random visual patterns, such as seeing shapes in clouds or recognizing faces or objects in constellations.

21 The story of such a beautiful queen who thinks she's exceptional. She overflows with pride, thinking that she alone can win the beauty of an entire group of nereids, but her arrogance sets in motion forces beyond her control. The punishment of the god from the bottom of the sea does not fall only on her but on her entire kingdom and puts at risk the innocent life of her daughter, Andromeda.

22 Held between 30 November and 13 December 2023 in Dubai, Arab Emirates, The COP28 UN Climate Change Conference was particularly important because countries responded with a decision on how to accelerate climate action across all areas by 2030, including a call on governments to speed up the transition away from fossil fuels to renewables such as wind and solar power; cf. <https://unfccc.int/cop28>.

of justice. During COP28, Prime Minister Mia Mottley of Barbados advocated for increased regulations of methane and other non-CO2 greenhouse gases (GHGs), emphasizing the need for both nations and oil and gas corporations to adhere to the established parameters of the Global Methane Pledge. This initiative commits participating countries to work together to achieve a collective reduction in methane emissions by at least 30% below 2020 levels by 2030. At the same time, the Prime Minister of Italy introduced the Mattei Plan, 70% funded by the Italian Climate Fund to finance projects in emerging and developing countries. The Meloni government's plan bears the name of Enrico Mattei, the historic founder of Eni from the ashes of the fascist Agip, whose philosophy was to share the benefits of resource exploitation with resource-rich and generally less developed countries. Although it is well known how this attitude in the company crashed along with the plane that was supposed to take Mattei back to Milan from Catania.. Rhetoric counts as much as facts. Eni will be a key player in the initiative to make Italy an energy hub for the transportation of natural gas supplies from Africa to the rest of Europe. The Mattei plan has five key pillars: education and training; agriculture; health; water; and energy. The prime minister stressed the vital need to train and educate African countries to develop a skilled workforce capable of building key infrastructure. She also reaffirmed Italy's commitments to providing technological support to expand arable land and the critical role of agriculture in terms of food security. The most eloquent comment on this 'partnership' plan came from the African Union Commission Chair, Moussa Faki:

Signora presidente del Consiglio, sul Piano Mattei che proponiamo avremmo auspicato di essere consultati. L'Africa è pronta a discutere contorni e modalità dell'attuazione. Insisto sulla necessità di passare dalle parole ai fatti, non ci possiamo più accontentare di promesse, spesso non mantenute.

Madam Prime Minister, on the Mattei Plan you propose we would have hoped to be consulted. Africa is ready to discuss the contours and modalities of implementation. I insist on the need to move from words to deeds, we can no longer be satisfied with promises, often broken.²³

Considering these negotiations, it seems clear that we are facing a plan prioritizing energy security over energy justice on both a regional and international scale.

²³ Transl. by the Author. These words were spoken by President Moussa Faki at the *Italy-Africa Summit* in January 2024, held in Rome; see https://finanza.repubblica.it/Pages/News/Item.aspx?ID=5_2024-01-30_TLB.

4 Conclusion

Silence in literature is a rhetorical act, not merely the absence of words. Toxic narratives surrounding energy use and abuse often silence environmental injustices, obscuring the recognition of pollution as a complex mix of harmful chemicals and damaging discourses (Iovino 2016). Conversely, Orazio Labbate's petrovisions in *Suttaterra* depict a landscape scarred by ecological conflicts, with each scar symbolizing both a gash in environmental justice and a suture in collective memory. Through Labbate's gothic imagery, the landscape is saturated with the presence of oil, offering a critical perspective on the lasting impact of the petrochemical industry on Gela's environment and its people. As such, Labbate's narrative presents a cautionary tale of energy hubris while acknowledging ongoing environmental challenges.

In this troubling context, the storied palimpsest of Sicily reveals both the toxicity and the empathy necessary to narrate a territory often considered marginal and sacrificial to energy politics' greed. As African dissent and environmental justice movements resurface, there is growing recognition that energy discourses must expand beyond industrial infrastructure. This expansion creates space for silenced histories to dismantle toxic narratives of oblivion and reimagine them within more sustainable frameworks.

Eventually, Sicily is once again becoming a narrative mangle, energizing international corridors and breaking the silence on the environmental injustices that recur cyclically in the Mediterranean Sea like tidal currents.

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