

Stories and Matter: An Environmental Humanities Debate

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This volume is the result of a 'giornata di studio' that took place in Venice in December 2023 devoted to the Environmental Humanities and in particular to ecocriticism topics organized in collaboration with NICHE (THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities) at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, and under the umbrella of the Master of Environmental Humanities. The main goal was to offer to the Ca' Foscari community an opportunity to exchange ideas about new trends in Ecocriticism particularly in relationship with two subfields: Blue Humanities and Food Studies. In the workshop participated writer and cook Fuchsia Dunlop, an expert on Chinese cuisine, in conversation with NICHE's director Francesca Tarocco and Enric Bou. Other participants included: Damiano Benvegnù (University of St. Andrews), Robert Davidson (University of Toronto), Rosi Song (University of Durham), and Neus Penalba (University of Cambridge). Only Paul Merchant (University of Bristol), Ignacio López Calvo (University of California - Merced), and Sasha Gora (University of Augsburg), along with Shaul Bassi, Santiago Alarcón-Tobón, Enric Bou, from Ca' Foscari University of Venice, could send an article to this volume which albeit incomplete

provides a good idea of the discussions held during two days in the windy venetian winter.

Inspired by the introduction of *Material Ecocriticism* (Iovino, Oppermann 2014), the meeting aimed to deepen and broaden the discussion surrounding the intricate entanglements between meaning and matter. The goal was to emphasize the significance of stories and imagination while outlining the vast network of agencies that shape our world. Specifically, we focused on two key entanglements: water and food, both of which serve as critical examples of how matter and meaning are intertwined. As Iovino and Oppermann state, “all matter, in other words, is a ‘storied matter’” (2014, 92). Additionally, the meeting sought to extend the dominant discussions from an English-speaking context to include perspectives from other geographical regions, such as Italy, Spain, and Latin America.

In the case of Italy, ecocriticism has gained significant traction over the past decade. The works of Serenella Iovino provide a notable example of this development. Her early work, *Ecologia letteraria: una strategia di sopravvivenza* (2006), drew on the conceptual frameworks developed within the English-speaking ecocriticism context. However, this approach evolved with the coining of the term “material ecocriticism” in collaboration with Serpil Oppermann (2012; 2014). A key example of this shift is her book *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation* (2016), where Iovino examines the “forces, signs, wounds, and messages of creativity dispersed on Italy’s body, always keeping in mind the link between the ecology, both cultural and physical, of this country and the world’s larger ecology of ideas and matter” (1). As Iovino demonstrates in the case of Italy, landscapes of crisis are profoundly intertwined with landscapes of imagination. This perspective has also inspired other collective volumes, such as *Italy and the Environmental Humanities: Landscapes, Natures, Ecologies* (2018), edited by Iovino, Cesaretti, and Past, which seeks to reimagine Italy as a hybrid, plural, and eloquent place, demonstrating the wide spectrum of approaches within the environmental humanities. Another example is the volume *Italy and the Ecological Imagination: Ecocritical Theories and Practices* (2022), edited by Damiano Benvegnù and Matteo Gilebbi, where the guiding question is: What lessons does Italy offer regarding the relationship between the non-human and the current socio-environmental crisis? As a recent study argues,

by listening to what Italian landscapes, minds, and ecologies have to say within the Environmental Humanities global conversation will not likely stop the melting of the ice caps or the destruction of rainforests, but it will certainly contribute to making such a conversation richer, more inclusive, and diverse. (Cesaretti, Biasillo, Benvegnù 2023, 3)

After a long period of little interest (or neglect) about ecocriticism in the Hispanic and Iberian world, recently the situation has changed dramatically in a positive way. Not too long-ago Luis Prádanos could write:

As of now, our field is failing miserably in addressing the cultural implications of the Anthropocene, largely ignoring it in a disturbing way. It seems that Spanish cultural and literary studies are in a state of unconscious denial, actively avoiding this debate or, still worse, not being able to notice these pervasive ‘hyperobjects,’ such as global warming, which Timothy Morton describes as being ‘massively distributed in time and space relative to humans’. (2016, 26)

In the case of the Iberian Peninsula, several crises coincide and overlap in the ecocritical discussion: climate change will likely affect dramatically due to its geographical location and climatic conditions; second, it has an overwhelming dependence on foreign fossil fuels; third, its soil depletion and water scarcity is quickly increasing due to European agricultural laws; and finally, over-construction of houses and useless macro-infrastructure (TGV network) shows conspicuous lack of planning that borders with collective insanity (Prádanos 2016). Beilin and Viestenz (2016a; 2016b) have worked on a similar direction to enhance the interest in eco issues. Beatriz Lindo Mañas has provided a short overview of interest about ecocriticism in Spain (2020). Two recent edited volumes, Prádanos *A Companion to Spanish Environmental Cultural Studies* (2023) and Afinoquénova, Anderson and Ingram’s, *Digestible Governance. Gastocracy and Spanish Foodways* (2024) are proof on the rapid changing nature of the field.

While the number of works addressing these topics continues to grow each year in the Italian and Iberian world, in the Latin American context, the field is experiencing a boom, expanding the scope and the limits of the field. As Lisa Blackmore and Gisella Heffes noted in the introduction to a recent dossier on the new directions of Environmental Humanities in Latin America, the field can be defined as

a rapidly consolidating discipline that cross-fertilises methods and perspectives stemming from the social sciences, arts and humanities, natural sciences, and Indigenous thought, to critically interrogate environmental histories and confront contemporary challenges. (2022, 105)

Notably, Latin American critics over the past decade have employed a wide range of theoretical frameworks to address regional environmental issues, with particular emphasis on the global anthropogenic impact and the interconnected dynamics of capitalism, colonialism,

and racism. One recent example is Gisella Heffes' *Visualizing Loss in Latin America: Biopolitics, Waste, and the Urban Environment* (2023) suggesting that "the aesthetic praxis that emerges in/from Latin America is permeated with a rhetoric of waste—a significant trait that overwhelmingly defines it" (9). Heffes' book illustrates how environmental humanities in Latin America have been moving towards developing their own conceptual and critical framework in recent years, overcoming Anglo-ecocriticism and taking into account the language, traditions, and perspectives of the continent. This trend is also particularly evident in the subfield of Blue Humanities, where new viewpoints have emerged from the Latin American perspective, such as "tidalectics" (DeLoughrey 2019), "liquid ecologies" (Blackmore, Gómez 2020), "liquid indigeneity" (Merchant 2020) or "hydrohumanities" (DeWolff, Faletti, López Calvo 2022).

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The starting point of the meeting was around what would happen if we turn our attention to the materiality of our world as new materialisms propose (for a panoramic overview: Emmett, Nye 2017, 139-63; Jones 2018, 244-7; Tuin 2018, 277-9). In general terms, the approach of new materialisms, are characterized by an attempt to decenter anthropocentric views of the world, turning a look at the materiality that surrounds us and proposing to understand non-human entities/bodies/objects as vibrant, vital or as participating in forms of distributive agency (Diener 2020, 2). In other words, new materialisms seek to abolish old distinctions between animate and inert matter, problematizing the binarisms that such anthropocentric vision has constructed: 'matter-meaning', 'body-mind', 'civilization-barbarism' or 'culture-nature'. For this very reason, according to Iris Van Der Tuin, new materialisms can be thought of as a research methodology "for the non-dualistic study of the world within, beside and among us, the world that precedes, includes and exceeds us" (2018, 277).

Although it is not easy to locate a starting point for new materialisms, these approaches owe much to the developments in the fields of Science and technology studies (STS), especially in their relationship with culture, in authors such as Donna Haraway or Bruno Latour. In addition, the approaches of new materialisms since that time have acquired multiple influences ranging from the revision of philosophical traditions (Lucretius, Spinoza, Bergson, Merleau-Ponty), feminist theory (Judith Butler, Elizabeth Grosz, Luce Irigaray), anthropology (Tim Ingold, Philippe Descola, Viveiros de Castro), cognitive sciences (Francisco Varela and Humberto Maturana, Gregory Bateson) to the revision of the ideas of ecological postmodernism (Alfred Whitehead). All of this has given rise to the proliferation of new concepts and

terms that explain why it is necessary the use of the plural instead of the singular to define the field.

Diane Coole and Samantha Frost, editors of the volume *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010), proposed in the introduction: “How could we ignore the power of matter and the ways it materializes in our ordinary experience or fail to acknowledge the primacy of matter in our theories?” (2010, 1). Undeniably, the materiality that opens up the Anthropocene era is reflected in the heterogeneity of the approaches that attempt to answer this question. Some key concepts are “viscous porosity” (Tuana 2008), “vibrant matter” (Bennett 2010) or “trans-corporeality” (Alaimo 2010). Despite the differences in the proposals and their philosophical origin, all these approaches propose in general a shift of attention towards all that is non-human within and outside of us. This observation is especially pertinent to the examples explored in this volume. As Stacy Alaimo explains, “perhaps the most palpable trans-corporeal substance is food, since eating transforms plants and animals into human flesh” (2010, 12). Although eating may appear to be a straightforward activity, various material agents can emerge throughout the process from dirt to mouth. In the case of water, one might argue that human bodies are bodies of water: “we leak and seethe, our borders always vulnerable to rupture and renegotiation” (Neimanis 2017, 2). This suggests that we are immersed in the world around us and within us. As Astrida Neimanis observes, the wateriness of human bodies verifies that “the human is always also more-than-human” (2017, 2), and we are inseparable from the ecological concerns that shape and define our world.

In this regard, Simon Diener observes in a recent review of books in the field of new materialisms: “heterogeneity is a defining characteristic of the conversation and perhaps one reason that it continues to produce such generative thought across the disciplines” (2020, 2). Likewise, new materialisms are not only heterogeneous, but have been constituted as a generative thought facilitating the constitution of new methods and terminologies that allow the creation of opportunities for applied work in different disciplines. In this regard, he adds that the multiple approaches of new materialisms are “an important reminder that we need not have settled all the theoretical conundrums of ontology to effect concrete” (2020, 4).

In other words, critical thinking in the context of the climate emergency cannot be confined to the idea that critique has been exhausted, nor can it be limited to its mere refinement for practical utility. Furthermore, new materialisms preserve the foundational activist component of modern ecological thought. As Oppermann asserts, it is the ethical responsibility embedded in such approaches that remains crucial in a world shaped by the consequences of the climate emergency (2023, 43). In this regard, aquatic issues are not merely

ecological concerns; they also carry ethical and socio-cultural imperatives shaped by discursive formations (Oppermann 2023, 11). As Steve Mentz proposes, a framework such as the “poetics of planetary water” (2023, 1) look to address the urgent global challenges of our ecocatastrophic era. On the topic of food, Stacy Alaimo argues that the food we consume transforms our bodies bite by bite; however, this process is far from one-sided, as it is deeply intertwined with social, economic, and political forces (2010, 13). Indeed, food systems can be understood as intricate networks – both global and local – that encompass people, processes, and products (Hubbell, Ryan 2021, 122).

Referring to this aspect, Tobias Skiveren adds that “the new materialist interest in ontology is driven also by a methodological aim: to reconfigure affective patterns of response and incite more positive engagements with the world” (2023, 191). Despite the criticisms that new materialisms have received for their citation politics and claims of innovation or the reading of a flat ontology in their presuppositions as posited by Marxist eco-theory in recent years (Diener 2020), the three arguments discussed above – heterogeneity, generativity, and ethical responsibility – show the potential of new materialisms’ line of thought. These characteristics resemble the proposals developed by Rosi Braidotti in her book *Posthuman Knowledge* (2019) regarding what she defines as posthuman convergence and which make posthuman knowledge possible: singularity, multiplicity, criticality and focus on justice. In addition, one can take into account what Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann observed: “questioning the dualistic paradigms of transcendental humanism, new materialisms rethink ontology, epistemology, and ethics – being, knowing, and acting – in terms of a radical immanence” (2012, 450).

Furthermore, as Iovino and Oppermann state, what is at the heart of the discussions on new materialisms is the search for new models that allow theorizing on the one hand the connections between matter and agency and on the other the entanglement between bodies, natures and meanings (2012, 450). In Donna Haraway’s words they are “semiotic-material generative nodes” (1992, 67), about how the dynamics of matter work and the configurations they assume. Karen Barad’s “theory of agential realism” formulated in her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) resonates with the above. Here the feminist thinker and quantum physicist shows the symmetrical entanglements between matter and discourse that allow her to develop an onto-epistemological vision of reality. Matter in Barad’s terms is not immutable, nor passive or independent, but matter “refers to phenomena in their ongoing materialization” (2007, 151). That is to say that matter has a power of determination that allows it to assume tangible forms (bodies) in constant interaction with each other. The configurations resulting from this exchange show how material processes occur from a constant and indissoluble interaction of agencies or

“intra-action”, i.e. “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” (2007, 33), where matter and meaning are reciprocal and co-implicated, to use Barad’s term. As a result, the intelligibility of reality is not a characteristic that depends on humans but “an ontological performance of the world in its ongoing articulation” (2007, 149). In a similar vein, Coole and Frost add that the crucial step is from “matter is” to “matter becomes”, i.e. “it is in these choreographies of becoming that we find cosmic forces assembling and disintegrating to forge more or less enduring patterns that may provisionally exhibit internally coherent, efficacious organization” (2010, 10).

This poses a direct challenge to the Cartesian illusion of seeing humans as something separate from the world around them, moving away from the idea of human exclusivity or superiority over those “others” that inhabit the planet. In this order of ideas, the presuppositions of new materialisms resonate with the notions of Tim Ingold whose works from anthropology propose that the conception of the human must start “not as a composite entity made up of separable but complementary parts, such as body, mind and culture, but rather as a singular locus of creative growth within a continually unfolding field of relationships” (2000, 4). This view allows him to develop his perspective of “dwelling” which suggests that humans “are brought into existence as organism-persons within a world that is inhabited by beings of manifold kinds, both humans and non-humans”, asserting that what we are accustomed to call as social relations (between humans) are only “a sub-set of ecological relations” (2000, 5). In conclusion, we could remind that “by moving from a subject/object epistemology to a human-nonhuman performative onto-epistemology, new materialism becomes a theory and practice of posthumanism” (Iovino, Opperman 2012, 456).

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During the meeting participants presented many different conceptions of materiality. The chapters included in this volume are witness to the variety on interests and approaches that provided ground for a fruitful discussion. Ignacio López Calvo in “The Hydrohumanities and Latin America” examines the state of the humanities with a focus on water issues in Latin America, establishing connections to indigeneity and social justice. He highlights Latin America’s leadership in best practices, sustainability, and water conservation projects. The essay reviews academic studies on the topic and analyzes how violence against environmental activists in the region is reflected in its cultural production, including literature, films, and documentaries. In the conclusion he advocates for the integration of humanities studies – specifically those centered on water – as a means to address current environmental crises.

Paul Merchant's "Constitutional and Ecological Entanglements in Contemporary Chile" reviews the outbreak of protests known as the *estallido social* in Chile in late 2019 and early 2020's that parked widespread demands for a new constitution to replace the one implemented by dictator Augusto Pinochet in 1980. While ultimately unsuccessful, many of these initiatives employed inventive and creative methods to challenge the role of the non-human environment within the country's constitutional framework. Engaging with thinkers such as Bruno Latour and Eduardo Gudynas, the chapter examines contemporary Chilean cultural production that advocates for a new, interconnected constitutional settlement.

Santiago Alarcón-Tobón's chapter "The Laden River: Ignacio Piedrahita's Geological Stories of the Magdalena River" focuses on the Magdalena River, considered the backbone of Colombia, a river that carries a multitude of material stories through its waters. Ignacio Piedrahita's work, particularly in his travel diary *Grávido río* (2019) and the essay *La verdad de los ríos* (2020), emphasizes the Magdalena not only as a geological agent that shapes the landscape through erosion and sediment deposition, but also as a product of human intervention. This perspective not only revalues the river as an active force in Colombia's reality – its agency and interconnectedness –, but also suggests, as Piedrahita does, the importance of the stories that the Magdalena tell us in the post-peace agreement context. In this regard, the river geological stories become a key element in reimagining social and environmental relations in Colombia.

Sasha Gora's "To Steal a Fish" focuses on Deborah Levy's novel *Hot Milk*, Sofia escorts her mother to Spain in search of a cure for her mother's paralysis, only for the doctor to suggest a cure for her. To remedy her lack of courage, the doctor prescribes that she steals a fish. At the market she eyes a tuna, but pronounces it 'too big,' before she slips a dorado into her basket. Gora asks about further meanings of stealing a fish, or if is tuna truly 'too big' to steal? In response to these questions, she approaches the topic of how 'stories come to matter' by weaving together notes about swimming with Atlantic bluefin tuna together with reflections on storytelling and structure, matter and meaning.

Enric Bou's "Taste and Flavor. Variations on the Paella" proposes a reflection on the foodways in the Hispanic world that are heterogeneous and conflicting and allow us to study how people think with food, using it to mark identities and establish power relations. Food is also related to memory and thus generates a grammar. The reflection culminates with the case of paella, a non-existent dish, which is demonstrated through a brief overview of its history and a reading of a chapter from *Los mares del Sur* by Manuel Vázquez Montalbán, a noted food critic and novelist.

Shaul Bassi's "Eating Under Water: Speculative Jewish Gastronomy in Venice" manages to mix the two main topics of the meeting: water

and food. The essay explores the intersections of food, culture, and resilience through the lens of speculative Jewish gastronomy in Venice. It begins with general reflections on the nexus between food, religion, and ecology, before examining the project *La cucina ebraica del futuro* (Future Jewish Cuisine), which reimagines traditional Jewish Venetian menus from an ecocritical perspective. The text reflects on how food serves as a site of cultural memory and environmental speculation, highlighting gastronomy's dual role as a material and symbolic medium for addressing environmental challenges, envisioning sustainable futures, and negotiating identity under precarious conditions.

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In closing we may remind what Fuchsia Dunlop explained about the materiality and strangeness of Chinese food:

In China, I would say that people generally experience eating as a really fully multi-sensory experience. And if you talk to someone Chinese about the pleasures of food, they almost always mention not only the flavour and the smell, but also the mouthfeel *kǒu gǎn*, the texture of the food. And that's an absolutely integral part of the quality of a dish and the enjoyment of food. And so I think in China, there's, you know, in England, people are very self-conscious about eating, relatively speaking. You know, you're not supposed to make any noise. You're meant to be a very quiet and polite and user knife and fork. But in China, it's much more, I think, a much more sensual engagement with food. You know, you can make little noises, you can spit out bones using chopsticks. It's very gentle and tactile. It's like an extension of the hand. And so people, I would say, you know, you can eat something like a *dux tongue* and it's not about the destination, the meat, it's about the journey, it's about the playful interaction of the food with your teeth and your tongue. And that's part of the *farm* of eating. So that's what I mean by the *grapple* factor. So that means that ingredients that a Westerner would simply throw in the bin become potentially exciting and interesting delicacies in China. And I would say that Europeans, historically, have looked down on Chinese people and have this idea that only desperate, you know, poor people would eat something like a chicken's fur. But this is simply not true because you have ingredients like this, like, you know, ducks, feets, duck tongues, imperial delicacies. You know, it's throughout society, people enjoy eating ingredients that are very puzzling for Europeans

[...]

And I think that, I mean, I'm always say to people, you don't have to enjoy texture. You don't have to enjoy eating unusual ingredients

and unfamiliar ingredients to love Chinese food. I mean, Chinese food is popular all over the world. And there are absolutely countless delicacies that anyone can eat from any background, you know. So, you know, roast duck, char siu pork, fantastic vegetarian cooking. There's something for everyone. So I think that, yeah, there are many all kinds of, I mean, in Italy, you have fantastic pasta. In Northern China, they have so many different kinds of noodle and that's a real point of contact. So I think there's plenty to share and plenty in common, but just if you want to fully experience Chinese food, which I highly recommend, it's worth considering texture differently and just trying to understand that it can be delightful in itself. And I find often with foreigners, you know, non-Chinese people that once they start thinking about this, it's like opening a door in the mind. And then, I mean, when I first went to China, I could not understand why anyone would bother eating a duck intestine, right? Slithery, no flavour. It's just, I thought it was like eating rubber bands. But after some time of eating them in China with friends who hugely enjoyed them. Now, I really enjoy this ingredient because of the lovely, slightly contradictory, slithery, crunchy mouthfeel. So I think it's a very interesting way of unlocking greater pleasure in food. (Dunlop 2023)

At a time of pressing changes, it is necessary to better define the role should literature, cultural studies, the Arts, and Humanities in general play when it comes to radically changing the imaginary of the dominant economic culture, and contributing to the design and promotion of the future. The Environmental Humanities must play a pivotal function in reshaping imaginaries and fostering new cultural narratives that are capable of making sense of our contemporary world. The challenging realities of the Anthropocene can be more effectively comprehended through stories that are grounded in a critical engagement with the subject matter.

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