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Dossier



Invisible Labor

The Sociomaterial Implications of More-Than-Human Work

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Abstract: Across Western intellectual traditions, labour has been treated as an exclusively human activity, grounding moral worth, property, subjectivity, and emancipation. Even when anthropology has demonstrated the historical and cultural contingency of such an idea, it has often left intact the human exceptionalism on which the concept rests. This special issue interrogates that assumption by engaging critically with the notion of nonhuman and more-than-human labour from an anthropological and interdisciplinary perspective. It investigates whether, and under what conditions, it is meaningful to speak of nonhuman labour, and when forms of doing and relating become configured as “work” within socio-ecological assemblages. Bringing together insights from anthropology, STS, multispecies ethnography, and labour theory, the papers collected in this issue explore how nonhuman beings – animals, plants, microbes, and other living and non-living entities – participate in processes of production, reproduction, and value creation. At the same time, the issue critically engages with the limits and risks of extending the category of labour beyond the human, questioning whether the category itself is an adequate analytical tool once the human/nonhuman divide is dismantled. The introduction, therefore, offers an overview of the current debate, the conceptual genealogies and the existing extensions beyond the human, addressing the resistances and frictions generated by posthuman approaches. The last part introduces the contributions of the special issue, which delineate empirical and theoretical accounts of multispecies work, labour, temporalities and responsibilities in a more-than-human world.

Keywords: More-than-human labour, Encounter value, Applied anthropology, (Re)production, Multispecies ethnography.

An Introduction

Across the Western tradition, labour has repeatedly been attributed a defining role in human life.¹ For Weber, it constitutes proof of moral and religious election, for Locke, the natural foundation of property and rights, for Hegel, a constitutive practice of subjectivity, and for Marx, a liberating activity and a vital essence of the human being. In each case, labour has been conceived as ontologically human; that is, as what distinguishes the human being from nature and from other species.² The rest of the living world has remained in the background: matter, resource, or at most, support. Although anthropological reflection has forcefully demonstrated the historical and cultural contingencies within which different conceptions of labour take shape – thus purging the concept of any supposed universalism – it has nevertheless struggled to radically question the human exceptionalism that underpins its formation.

This volume interrogates, from an anthropological and deliberately interdisciplinary perspective, the concept of nonhuman labour (Folz, Smith 2024). Its aim is to explore what happens when “labour,” historically considered by economic, sociological, and anthropological traditions as the exclusive prerogative of the human, is also recognised and legitimised in relation to other forms of living and non-living subjectivities (van Schendel 2023). Therefore, the arguments presented in this issue stem from the following questions: Can one meaningfully speak of nonhuman labour? And when does *doing* become *working* when relating to nonhuman beings?

Against this historical and theoretical backdrop, it becomes clear that questioning the human exceptionalism embedded in the category of labour requires both a conceptual reworking and an empirical widening of the field. Pursuing this trajectory might entail confronting critiques and tensions. On the one hand, for detractors of post-human turns, the subjectivation of the nonhuman

¹ While the reflections developed in this introductory article are the outcome of a collective effort, for the purposes of formal attribution *Section 1 – An Introduction* is credited to Massimiliano Fantò, *Section 2 – More-than-Human Labour* to Viola Di Tullio, and *Section 3 – Labourless Transformations* to Alessandro Guglielmo. The concluding section – *Articulating Nonhuman Labour: Contributions and Perspectives* was written jointly by the Authors.

² A fuller reconstruction of the conceptual history of labour exceeds the scope of this introduction. The debates evoked here are nonetheless entangled with key distinctions – such as those between labour and labour power, concrete and abstract labour, living and dead labour, and waged and forced labour – as well as with the genealogy of the “division of labour” across the human and biological sciences. These issues are central to Marxian analyses of capital and to contemporary discussions on the extension of labour to more-than-human processes. For useful overviews, see Narotzky (2018), Honneth (2022), and Zimmermann (2015).

implies a blurring of the methodological and epistemological boundaries of cultural anthropology. On the other hand, such subjectivation might, according to some, undermine the human's position itself, in a kind of tug of war that Jocelyne Porcher – one of the most prominent sociologists of animal labour – describes as “which aims to give to animals with one hand what it is taking from human beings with the other” (Porcher 2014 p. 2).

This, however, is a necessary risk if we are to revitalise the discussion on labour and move beyond the nature/culture and human/nonhuman dichotomies. As Porcher further underlines, the aim is to return to humans and animals “that which capitalism, scientism, and triumphalism have taken from us: knowledge of the broad but potentially profitable, intelligent, and sentimental composition of the ties between us” (Ivi, p. 2).

Recent studies in anthropology, STS, political ecology, cultural and political geography, critical plant studies, human-animal studies and labour theory have gone beyond the anthropocentric conception of labour to ask whether, and in what senses, nonhuman organisms *perform labour* or *are put to work*. While this debate has gained some traction in international scholarship (Mouret, Lainé 2023), it has received comparatively little attention in the Italian anthropological context, where discussions on labour have remained largely anthropocentric. For this reason, this special issue has been conceived to address these themes explicitly, situating them within both national and international scholarly debates and contributing to the ongoing theoretical reconfiguration of labour beyond human exceptionalism.

This introduction unfolds in three parts, each tracing a different contour of the terrain we are about to enter. The first lingers on the conceptual genealogies and shifting debates that, in recent years, have unsettled the boundaries of “labour” and drawn it into unexpected conversations across disciplines. The second turns to the shadows these debates cast – the resistances, the theoretical unease, the frictions that emerge when a concept so intimately tied to human history is extended to other forms of life. Finally, the third part offers an overview of the contributions to this special issue, highlighting their empirical richness and their capacity to open new avenues for thinking about labour beyond the human. Overall, the introduction offers a twofold approach to the debate: first, expanding the concept of labour to include more-than-human processes and, second, questioning whether labour remains an adequate analytical category. Starting from these premises, the special issue aims to contribute to a broader rethinking of the notions of “labour” and “work” through the lens of multispecies relationships, different forms of reproduction, more-than-human care, metabolic and ecological processes and generative encounters. The contributions explore how labour emerges across heterogeneous domains, offer-



ing a multi-scalar perspective on how life itself becomes implicated in processes of work and value production. Several articles also engage more directly with questions of political economy, examining how more-than-human forms of labour are enrolled within broader regimes of extraction, circulation, and accumulation. In doing so, they foreground the ways in which value is not only produced but distributed unevenly across species, infrastructures, and environments. Concurrently, the special issue mobilises the concept of labour in multiple, and at times divergent, ways. While some contributions analyse labour in a relatively classical sense – for instance, in relation to animal work in tourism or farming – others extend the term to encompass metabolic, ecological, or biological processes that are not easily captured by conventional definitions. The collection makes it visible, inviting readers to navigate these different analytical registers and to reflect on the possibilities and limits of “labour” as a category for thinking with more-than-human worlds.

More-than-Human Labour

Reflecting on nonhuman labour requires a careful conceptual analysis of such notions as process, relation, and/or value; attention to multiscalar socio-political and economic formations linked to capitalist valuation and resource exploitation; and critical reflection on anthropomorphic projections, while refusing to erase nonhuman agency. To advance this argument, it is crucial to situate the critique of anthropocentrism, which has historically relegated nonhuman beings to the domain of “Nature” while reserving for humans the exclusive participation in the spheres of society, language, and reason (Descola 2005). Such human/nonhuman separation resonates within the conceptual history of labour itself, where distinctions such as those between lively or dead, forced, concrete or abstract labour (Honneth 2022) have remained bound to human-centred economies of value. In this light, the persistent exclusion of nonhuman beings from such categories goes beyond the empirical oversight, by reflecting the reproduction of human exceptionalism embedded in the very genealogy of the concept (Blattner *et al.* 2019; Narotzky 2018).

On the contrary, the “nonhuman turn” argues that social, cultural, and economic practices and forms of life are constituted by multispecies assemblages, where nonhuman beings are not mere passive resources but *material participants* in processes of value and social reproduction (cf. Barua 2017; Mitman 2019; Nadal, Peers 2022). In this vein, Jason Hribal (2007; 2012) advocates for writing history “from below” for animals as well, revealing how they have been active labourers, indispensable to the agricultural, industrial, and urban devel-

opment of modern capitalism. Challenging a longstanding tradition that has conceived nonhuman beings as living machinery or fixed capital, Hribal underscores their material contribution to value production and calls for acknowledging the class relations within which they have historically been embedded. Addressing this issue thus requires a reconsideration of political and ethical categories – such as exploitation, value, care, and responsibility – particularly when relations of power and production entail nonhuman agents, as in agricultural, pastoral, urban, or infrastructural settings (Barca 2020; Moore 2017). A first step to reframe socio-ecological assemblages as co-productive contexts rather than merely “natural” (Scott 2011) is to analytically recognise and treat living organisms as active contributors to socio-ecological processes (such as soil formation, pollination, mycorrhizal nutrient exchange, and the reproductive work of animals). Secondly, it is necessary to politically recognise the nonhuman contribution to reformulate responsibility, justice, and governance: if animals or plants perform labour, what follows in terms of welfare, rights, valuation, and regulation? (cf. Ernwein *et al.* 2021). Finally, there is a need to theoretically challenge labour theory and Marxist categories to render visible the “more-than-human” contributions to value and reproduction (cf. Brice 2021; van Schendel 2023). These three stakes animate contemporary research, articulating the links between production, co-production, reproduction and value, as well as between agency, resistance, labour, exploitation and domination, from multispecies ethnography (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010) to animal studies (Blattner *et al.* 2019), critical plant studies (Di Paola 2024) and political ecology (Bennett 2010). It is precisely the unresolved tension between the historical determinations of the concept and its potential extension beyond the human that constitutes the problematic space within which the contemporary debate operates.

Anthropology, positioned at the intersection of these conceptual and empirical challenges, provides a crucial framework for exploring how such tensions play out in situated contexts. In this sense, it can make significant contributions by ethnographically documenting multispecies labour relations. Building on the works of Ingold (1974), Descola (2005) and Viveiros de Castro (2004), which extensively explored more-than-human forms of subjectivity, intelligence and social organisation, anthropological studies emphasise co-production, situated practice, and the mutual formation of capacities and lifeways (cf. also Haraway 2016; Scott 1998) as a lens to read human-nonhuman relations. Anna Tsing’s (2015) ethnography of matsutake mushrooms, for instance, illustrates how fungi, pines, foragers, traders, and markets co-constitute value in precarious ecologies. Her approach demonstrates how multispecies assemblages are central to economic life and the production of value,

even as they are frequently *rendered invisible* within formal economies (cf. also Barua 2017). Examining how such invisibility operates across domains, therefore, offers crucial insights into more-than-human participation in processes of value production and circulation.

The contributions of this issue provide a first understanding of how multiple forms of invisibility emerge within biological and ecological processes that remain largely unseen – such as microbial and vegetal activity (Agus; Comollo and Dellavalle); the metabolic generation of value without recognising nonhuman labour, as food production or biomass transformation (Volpicella, Uras, Coletta and Messina, Nivolo); or, often unknown forms of care as affective and relational work, as in touristic and digital economies (Benadusi and Tumidei). Practices that sustain value production (e.g., ecosystem services, animal cognitive labour in supply chains) are frequently appropriated and capitalised without acknowledgement, through processes that naturalise work itself (cf. Barua 2016; Brice 2021; Pellizzoni 2019). Responding to such dynamics of invisibilisation, van Schendel poses three key questions concerning the agency of animals, plants, and AI in order to extend the traditional boundaries of labour toward the idea of “socionatural working collectives” (2023, p. 195).

A practical example of the naturalisation of work is that of vegetal organisms. Plants participate fully in the generation of surplus through metabolic (Barua 2016) and reproductive work that is systematically rendered invisible. The functionalist paradigm that dominates the interpretation of plant tropisms and photosynthetic activities reduces plant agency to an efficient response to external stimuli, guided by cost-benefit and energy-optimisation logic (cf. Gerber, Hiernaux 2022). In this epistemic de-animation, plants become passive objects at the centre of devices of extraction, domestication and standardisation. On the contrary, Barua (2016) proposes a reconceptualisation of nonhuman labour that includes plants within an ecological, affective and metabolic organisation of production. In particular, ecological labour – understood as socio-ecological reproduction – challenges the dichotomies of economy/ecology and production/reproduction, making visible the non-standardised temporalities that emerge in the rhythms of plant growth. Using a vegetal lens thus imposes a radical reflection on the chrononormativity of work (Fournier 2020), challenging capitalist metrics of productivity and immediacy. The work of plants is therefore a part of a historically situated relationship of exploitation that transforms their vitality into natural capital. The plant “works” when it is put to work, i.e. when its metabolism is subsumed into the logic of value. Therefore, plants work when they are exploited, and their bodies are transformed into natural capital.

The example of vegetal organisms serves as a broader reflection on whether nonhuman processes and relations with humans, co-produce commodities or ecosystem services that create economic value (cf. Sullivan 2010; 2018). From the outset, it becomes clear that the historical production of “cheap nature” (Moore 2017) by capitalism, and the ways nonhuman contributions are undervalued, externalised, and made available for capitalist valorisation. Kažić, for instance, argues that the idea that society cannot exist without production is deeply rooted in contemporary societies and that “production” as an economic category tends to de-animate living beings, reducing them to mere resources and objects of exploitation, stripping away the complexity of relations (Kažić 2022). The emerging question is therefore: how does capitalism organise and give value (or, on the contrary, render “cheap”) the vital (metabolic) capacities of nonhumans? Is there a crucial shift from asking “can nonhumans work?” to “how are nonhuman contributions cheapened, hidden, or appropriated in contemporary economies?”

In this critical perspective, animal or vegetal labour is analysed as a source of appropriation, extraction, and accumulation, translating biological and socio-ecological behaviours into terms of economic circuits and power relations (Moore 2017; Sullivan 2018). Such approaches complicate the linear picture of work and remuneration – conceptually, the task is to trace how labour is inserted, commodified, or appropriated within circuits of accumulation (Barua 2016). This raises further questions about forms of repair, ecological restoration, and normative responsibility (Blattner *et al.* 2019). Therefore, reflections on nonhuman labour and environmental justice go hand in hand. A recently edited volume by Blattner *et al.* (2019) brings together essays that explicitly ask whether animal labour can be a site of justice, whether animals can be recognised as workers, and what “good work” might mean for them, rather than abolitionist perspectives that aim to exclude and de-animate them. This literature brings labour studies into conversation with animal ethics and legal theory, and raises practical issues such as consent, welfare standards, and representation (Špinka 2019). Moreover, the volume (Blattner *et al.* 2019) provides alternative scenarios of interspecies solidarity while warning of the risks of using the language of “good work” to justify exploitation. This happens because, in some cases, improved management and shared labour regimes (e.g., pastoralism or organic agriculture) align with nonhuman welfare, whereas in others (e.g., factory farming systems or monocultures), recognition risks normalising abusive extraction.

A second volume, edited by Ernwein *et al.* (2021), takes the argument further, asking whether not only animals but also plants (often considered quasi-objects, passive or mechanistic entities) can be conceptualised as workers. Plant

labour is identified in oxygen production, urban maintenance, and viticulture (Brice 2021), demonstrating how vegetal organisms constantly participate in the reproduction of social and ecological life and, thus, in value chains. The contributions interrogate what happens when we stop thinking of such metabolic and reproductive work as mere processes rather than proper labour, and what productive configurations emerge when human and nonhuman actors are not focused on providing services, but on reproducing the socio-ecological conditions of their very existence.

Similarly, building on his research on plants, Kažić takes a step back, highlighting in an interview that the relationship between humans and plants – especially in agricultural contexts – should not be framed in terms of production but rather of cooperation as a form of collective creations and action. Leaving aside the notion of production, alternative practices emerge as more attentive, slower paced and grounded in care and reciprocity. Further studies (cf. Barron, Hess 2020; Yamada 2022) extend the analysis of labour to include microbes, soils, pollinators, and machines as part of infrastructural ensembles that perform activities for cities and industries. The notion of “more-than-human labour” captures these sedimented and distributed contributions to production and maintenance, highlighting how technologies mediate and reconfigure the division of labour among species and non-biological agents (Muñoz Sanz, Katsikis 2023).

Thus, for the works presented here, treating nonhuman organisms as *workers* or *labourers* grasps the consequential, relational, and politically grounded contributions to production and reproduction. The most compelling works in this field combine careful biological/behavioural description with socio-ecological, political-economic analysis and ethnographic attention to situated practices (cf. Blattner *et al.* 2019; Ernwein *et al.* 2021). This opens the conceptual toolbox of labour studies while simultaneously forcing us to rethink its instruments, such as the notions of value, consent, exploitation, and rights, which must be reconfigured in a multispecies world, perhaps even in what Donaldson and Kymlicka (2019) call a “post-work” society. The result of this debate is both theoretical, providing a richer explanation of nonhuman work, value and agency and practical, offering new tools for interspecies and environmental justice and governance.

A crucial point in the debate is finding a concept of labour and work that applies to nonhuman beings without anthropomorphising them and forcing them into “too human” (Descola 2014) categories. On a fundamental level, there are two kinds of labour or “doing” when it comes to nonhuman beings. On the one hand, there is labour in a functional/behavioural sense: meaning that an organism does something that accomplishes a task (e.g., mycorrhizae



transport phosphorus; bees pollinate; trees produce oxygen). The term is descriptive and often lacks a dimension of nonhuman *agency*, focusing on capacities and mechanisms understood strictly in biological terms, such as the division of labour in ant communities or the capacity for signalling among plants. This approach frequently strips away the social meaning and political-cultural context in which nonhumans are embedded. On the other hand, labour in a broader relational and social sense is understood as a participation in social relations that produce value, sustain socio-ecological reproduction, or are subject to political-economic organisation (such as wages, coercion and exchange). Overall, the approaches that adopt one of these views on nonhuman labour hold that when nonhumans are functionally or intentionally involved in social production and are essential to the creation and reproduction of value, “labour” becomes a productive analytic category (Delon 2019). However, as we will see, the term labour also implies social relations of production specific to peculiar human assemblages of production (e.g. wage, class, accumulation). Therefore, extending the term may weaken analytic clarity. Furthermore, such an extension may reduce nonhumans’ lifeways into a grid of measured exchanges (labour-for-wage) that may be appropriate to describe capitalist relations of production, but miss the point of a broader analytical effort to define whether nonhuman labour exists, and if labour is a reasonable category to describe the reproductive activities of “animals” – both human and nonhuman. Once we get rid of such dualism, what really counts as labour? What do humans have in common with beavers, fungi, and bees? To answer these questions, the next section moves towards a more radical rethinking of the notion of labour, exploring more-than-human activities beyond such a concept in the frame of reproductive and care processes. In doing so, we aim to contribute to a broader discussion that redefines labour not merely as a mechanism for producing exploitable subjects, but as a terrain from which (more-than-human) care and reproductive practices can emerge as central to socio-environmental renewal.

Labourless Transformations

In *When Species Meet*, Donna Haraway (2008) critiqued the application of the category of “work” to nonhumans, as its very idea is premised on human socio-cultural frameworks, human economic structures, and affordances. To confuse hands with paws is then a poor gesture in her account and speaking about nonhuman labour in the frameworks of slavery or wage labour would be a dire mistake (Ivi, p. 55-56). Here, we wish to try a more radical gesture and allow

nonhumans to inspire us towards epistemic frameworks able to surpass labour as an analytic tool; to do so, we ask if labour is a reasonable category to employ once we get rid of the human-nonhuman divide.

Ecofeminist thought underlined how the (white, male) Master employs its subjects – Nature, and naturalized subjects such as nonhumans, slaves, women, etc. – and *puts them to work* in service of extractive capital (e.g. Plumwood 1993; Barca 2020): labour can thus be seen as a fundamental category to define the Other-than-the-master (Barca 2020), telling the exploiters from those who get ingested by the recursive phases of primitive accumulation (Federici 2019). This, of course, enforces the processes of invisibilization we previously referred to: the naturalisation of work amounts to the creation of a subject (or non-subject, e.g., plants) whose labour is *natural*, and thus freely exploitable by extractive powers. This process of naturalisation is, in fact, a form of ontological governance: by defining certain beings' activity as 'natural', the Master produces labour as a category. Seen from this perspective, labour would be the product of (geo)ontopower, defined as the power to name things into being (Povinelli 2016; Richardson 2024): labour is a cultural category employed to craft peculiar subjectivities and socioecological assemblages, ones in which both human and nonhuman entities are exploited for wealth accumulation.

For instance, when plants' reproductive processes are co-opted by extractive powers and their narratives, they become 'workers' in Co2 cleansing – thus helping Master powers to further their grasp on global socioecologies. Similarly, when bees' pollination is transformed into an agricultural *service*, their reproductive activity is transformed into labour-for-the-Master. In this way, not simply plants, but all of the Master's subjects can only work when they are *put to work*, i.e. when their lifeways and reproductive activities get incorporated into the Master's wider economic assemblages (the industry, the plantation, etc.).³

In other words, work only exists when lifeforms are captured within extractive or industrial systems that render their reproductive activities economically serviceable. Labour, then, is a cultural category with a precise intellectual and sociomaterial history and may already be unable to capture differences between cultures – not to mention species. Are we equipped at all to speak about labour in more-than-human terms? To answer this question, we may start by deconstructing the contemporary understanding of the concept of (wage) labour; to do so, however, we need to begin with another invention, foundational to later ideas about wages and labour: the invention of our current notion of time.

³ For a discussion at the intersection between labour, production, and ecocide, see as an example Guillibert 2025.

Time, in fact, can be experienced and thought about very differently across human cultures (Gell 2022; Sinha, Da Silva Sinha 2022), especially in its capacity to be “sold” (Graeber 2018, p. 88). The naturalisation of this notion of Time (cf. Spivak 1999, pp. 60-ss.) came through the interplay between power structures such as institutions and the exact sciences, and it propelled the rise of wage labour and the management of industrial production through a fixed grid – what Lauren Fournier (2020) calls *chrononormativity*. (Geo)ontopower deployed the notion of Time, and our socioeconomic structure exploited it by tying it with wages, thus crafting the contemporary notion of (wage) labour: suddenly, “the idea that [...] time truly did belong to the person who had bought it” (Graeber 2018, p. 92) took hold in workers, even if it “would have seemed perverse and outrageous to their great-grandparents, as, indeed, to most people who ever lived” (*ibidem*). In this way, the “uncivilized Other” (Barca 2020, p. 20), the peasants who were expelled from the commons and put to work in factories, had been “devoured of [their] own benefit–assimilated into capitalist/industrial modernity” (*ibidem*). This process produced an original concept of labour, one in which Time and outputs have to correspond; simultaneously, it produced new subjects – the civilised workers – and, with them, new socio-ecological assemblages. Conversely, let us consider peasants in feudal Europe, whose “work schedule was nothing remotely as regular or disciplined as the current nine-to-five” (Ivi, p. 87): they typically worked from dusk until dawn for about thirty days a year, just a few hours during normal days, and not at all during feast day – which were not infrequent at all (*ibidem*). Indeed, for the majority of our evolutionary history, work patterns alternated between intense bursts of energy, relaxation, and then “by slowly picking up again toward another intense bout” (Ivi, p. 86; cf. also Thompson 1967).

The transformation from “peasants” into workers (Federici 2019) was not limited to humans, though: nonhumans saw their very metabolism industrialised to accelerate outputs and gains. Their “metabolic processes such as fat synthesis were targeted for augmentation or acceleration” (Landecker 2023, p. 57), and a regime of chemically-enhanced feed was implemented “to make more animal products in less time with less input” (Ivi, p. 59). In this way, animal bodies and metabolism were discursively made into “converters made of protein components; animal nutrition science was charged with knowing just what was needed when to construct and run those converters most efficiently” (Ivi, p. 61). Let us take chickens for example: a steady supply of vitamin D allowed for their year-round indoor growth, minimizing costs while maximizing outputs. Then, arsenic-based medications came, as they were not only observed to fight off nasty viruses that stubbornly tried to cull the mass-packed creatures, but also to accelerate production (Ivi, p.72-73): healthy pullets fed with arsenic

grew quicker and more reliably into adulthood, improving the feed-to-egg (or meat) conversion rate (*ibidem*). Arsenic was just the precursor: antibiotics and hormones moved in shortly after to further exacerbate this mastery of metabolic time, an ability to speed, slow, augment or suppress biological processes. As a result, chickens' body mass is today five times the mass they had in the last Century: they are often unable to walk and flap their wings; their tissue growth is accelerated to the point that, when they reach the butcher, they are comparable to two-years babies who weight three-hundred kilograms (cf. Haraway 2008, pp. 266-267; Bennet, Thomas, Williams, *et al.* 2018). This is the process that *made* nonhumans into metabolic workers, rather than creatures reproducing in their own socioecologies in constant negotiation with other (human or otherwise) species.

If 'labour' is thus unable to fully cover what historically allowed more-than-human communities to reproduce themselves, and if the concept of labour, and indeed the sociomaterial practices that surrounded it, changed so drastically, labour may be both an ethnocentric (cf. Gagnier, Dupré 1995; Chakrabarty 2000) *and* an anthropocentric category. In the same way that, by considering production as a cultural category rooted in contemporary societies, we could say that "no farmer has ever produced anything" (Kažić 2022, p. 7), we could also suggest that no human or nonhuman subject ever worked, except after the invention of Time, labour, wages, and other Master discursive-material practices to exploit their reproductive activities. We may be treating the concept of labour as we treated the concept of religion (cf. Sinha, Da Silva Sinha 2022): as a sphere of activities separable from the flux of everyday lives of people, still assuming Time as the basis of our reasoning, and thus faintly employing a grid of time-wage-life exchange as the basis for our conception of what work is. And while this approach is extremely useful in some contexts (e.g. granting people a living wage and actually some time to live their lives), it falls short of imagination when it comes to defining how work should be conceived, especially beyond capitalism and "eco-capitalist realism" (Barca 2020, pp. 15-ss; cf. also Fisher 2014).

Silvia Federici defines the commons as "the gift of billions of years of labourless transformation" (Federici 2019, p. 30): past and present (and even future) local socioecologies have emerged not from wage labour, nor from work as we may understand it from the *perspective* of wage labour, but from innumerable generations of humans and nonhumans reproducing their own socioecology through sustainable configurations of mutual nourishment. What happens once we get rid of Time and labour as reasonable categories to understand the more-than-human activities that reproduce lifeways? If we really want to surpass dichotomies between human and nonhuman ani-

mals, and between work and leisure/idleness, maybe it is not about work that we should be thinking about; instead, we should think about reproduction. What does reproduce us, as more-than-human collectives? Most importantly, what disallows such reproduction? While offering her critique on the concept of the Anthropocene, Stefania Barca shows how the “Anthropos” implied in such concept “is an abstraction based on a white, male and heterosexual historical subject in possession of reason [...] and the means of production, by which tools it is entitled to extract labour and value from what it defines as the Other” (Barca 2020, p. 5). The Anthropos at the centre of the Anthropocene is then none other than the Master; the Other, instead, are women, nonhumans, and the racialized subjects that were *put to work* in service of capital accumulation: they are what Barca calls the forces of reproduction, those who “keep the world alive, yet their environmental agency goes largely unrecognized” (Ivi, p. 1).

Taking a step back from defining work and labour against a Westernised, neoliberal backdrop, and instead of defining work as opposite to leisure/idleness, we may suggest a dichotomy between reproduction and work itself. Reproduction, here, implies the activities that may be categorized as work (e.g. cooking, cleaning, repairing, building, teaching, etc.), those that may be seen as leisure (e.g. painting, singing, writing, dancing, etc.), and even those that can be surmised as idleness (laying on the couch, smoking a cigarette, even sleeping) (cf. Gagnier, Dupré 1995): all these activities, for a fairly wide audience of animal species, are comprised in the reproduction of the individual, its community, and/or its species. On the contrary, when these subjects are othered by the Master-Anthropos, and thus put to work to extract labour and value, these activities become split between those that can be exploited and those that cannot: this is where *doing* becomes *working*, and thus where more-than-human reproduction is discursively made exploitable for the Master-Anthropos.

To discuss labour within this frame means to accept that labour is indeed a natural category for both humans and nonhumans, and that we all have to split our time between (reproductive) work and leisure, or idleness. Undoubtedly, accepting nonhumans as legitimate workers has its own political importance, as it was for English workers in the Eighteenth Century to demand that “free time” was granted to them. However, if we truly wish to theorise multispecies justice (Chao, Bolender, Kirksey 2022) and liberation beyond eco-capitalist realism, a radical path towards a “post-work” society (Donaldson and Kumlicka 2019) should free both humans and nonhumans from both labour and the need to define (and defend) leisure and start discussing what reproduces us as more-than-human collectives.

Articulating Nonhuman Labour: Contributions and Perspectives

The idea for the following Special Issue arose from a panel we organised during the SIAA (Italian Society for Applied Anthropology) 2024 national conference, in which convenors investigated and brought into lively discussion questions about forms of nonhuman labour. Therefore, if our article above painted a broad picture of nonhuman labour, the following works will focus on ethnographic data, bringing together different frameworks to reflect on the issue of more-than-human work, including animals, plants, and bacteria. The issue does not claim to be systematic or exhaustive; it reflects the practices and considerations of authors and ethnographers who investigate more-than-human forms of interaction and reflect on different meanings of 'labour'. The contributions follow an order that groups similar cases close together so that the specificities of each context can come to life, while gradually shifting to different subjects and relationships. Consistent with the proposal, the first articles place particular emphasis on animal species expanding the classical notion of labour to animal beings. The second part moves on to bacteria and plants, rethinking the notion of labour through metabolic, ecological, and biological processes. Finally, the closing article will present a more theoretical reflection on the absence of labour and the notion of "non-work".

The articles collectively offer a multi-scalar perspective on how life itself becomes implicated in processes of work and generation of value across different contexts – such as tourism, farming, national and international food systems, fermentation processes, and digital economies. Several contributions also engage with questions of political economy, examining how nonhuman forms of labour become embedded within broader processes of value production while others challenge broader categories of "life" and "agency", tying nonhuman labour to processes of ecological, chemical and semiotic production.

Specifically, Mara Benadusi draws a detailed picture of the role of elephants within touristic economies in Sri Lanka's roadside riding camps, making a case for multispecies responsibility, effort, and well-being, and bringing to light the human-animal negotiation over how elephants should work and how their behaviours should be interpreted. In her contribution, elephants represent central subjects in the production and negotiation of a multispecies notion of labour. Benadusi engages with human-elephant labour through the notions of movement – understood as a circulation pattern that renegotiates care and authority – and "micro-sanctuarization" – used to depict the dimension of agency of captive elephants. Through elephants' circulation and micro-practices of care, the animals' responses set limits and reconfigure the process of labour definition and distribution. The concept of sanctuarization captures the reconfiguration

of elephant labour within changing regimes of care, welfare and tourism. Over time, these processes align with the conditions and needs of animal labour, prioritising their welfare and developing less exploitative, more ethical forms of value creation.

Moving away from awe-inspiring big mammals, this issue then focuses on far humbler companions – chickens. Given how chickens have long facilitated the reproduction of human societies and labour, and still continue to do so, we chose to give space to two different articles focusing on such long-standing multispecies relations. Domenico Volpicella's work focuses on his fieldwork among heritage and rare-breed Australian henhouses, where he observes chickens as active participants in agriculture, and dissects their life-sustaining affective, ecological, metabolic, and reproductive labour – a process which, through the hermeneutical tools he employs, emerges as engendering both co-dependence and ecological continuity. Hence, notwithstanding enduring power asymmetries between humans and nonhumans, his work aims to underscore how caring practices can emerge as devices to engender ethical, more-than-human resistance and regeneration that exceed any productivist ethos. In doing so, he unveils how such multispecies collectives contribute to reproducing the environment by focusing on keeping ecologies alive, rather than furthering wealth accumulation. Such commitment, he shows, allows us to imagine different conceptions of work and labour – ones grounded in mutuality and reproduction rather than extraction and accumulation.

Shifting regional focus, Francesco Coletta and Matilde Messina turn towards the Italian context by reflecting on a neo-rural farm in central Italy. Here, chickens live with no coop and in constant, direct contact with the local wild fauna, thus participating in a form of shared metabolic labour that eschews human control and allows them to express their situated ethology. The absence of confinement also improves both the chicken's social life and their possibility of making dangerous microbiological encounters, as relational and biological fragility mirror each other in coops also. In this way, the farm they describe emerges as a place where practices of care, by unsettling the divide between wild and domestic animals, allow us to witness forms of shared labour able to reproduce the local ecology. Thus, through their observation, they come to define nonhuman labour as a world-making practice, one that can be compensated only through attentiveness towards collective well-being.

Riccardo Uras' multispecies ethnography leads us into the marine milieu, tracing the global bluefin tuna supply chain through a *tonnara* in the Algarve, Portugal. Here, the tuna undergoes a gradual transfiguration, shifting from a wild fish into a *lively commodity* imbricated in the capture-based aquaculture. Uras seeks to demonstrate what form of value the tuna embodies for capital.

The issue at stake is not whether animals work, but how their vitality becomes productive. It is the tuna's metabolic work that is mobilised: the capacity to feed, to grow, to convert biomass into surplus value in a quota regime that calculates weight and anticipates destiny. Through a careful attention to the practice of feeding, diving, surveillance, and killing, Uras underlines how this vitality is first cultivated and rendered legible, then swiftly extinguished in a regulated death.

If the material and metabolic labour of animals has been addressed with some prominence throughout the special issue, Camilla Tumidei's contribution instead turns to the subtler and more ambiguous forms of affective labour associated with the cuteness of companion animals. In particular, Tumidei examines how the emotional and immaterial labour of animals becomes incorporated into human creative and entrepreneurial practices on digital platforms, where the boundary between sharing everyday life and producing content grows increasingly porous. Her analysis is anchored in the case of an Italian veterinarian who documents the euthanasia of her own dog on Instagram, showing how the animal's death is captured by the logics of the platform and attention economy, becoming an event capable of generating visibility and controversy. In this perspective, the video functions as a device that reveals the entanglement of digital labour, entrepreneurial activity, and gendered expectations, while the animal's affective contribution – its presence, vulnerability, and loss fueling audience engagement – largely remains invisible.

Caterina Agus' contribution takes a different angle on more subtle relationships between humans and microbiome in the production of natural wines through spontaneous fermentation. From her point of view, more-than-human labour is represented by yeast's role in shaping quality and territorial identity, highlighting the constant negotiation between microbial autonomy and human control. Agus demonstrates how yeast acts, responds, and enters into relationships with humans in the interaction among bodies, substances, and temperatures that co-produce wine. Therefore, fermentation plays a central role as a space for multispecies collaboration between humans and microbial activity. Through this observation, Agus argues for an ethics of uncertainty in which knowledge consists in being-with and participating in the becoming of others. At the same time, her contribution raises questions about who decides what counts, who speaks for nature, who remains invisible, and what kinds of interactions are valued.

Federico Comollo and Nicolò Dellavalle's work shifts the focus from non-human animals to the vegetal kingdom, and human-plant interactions in Rome's botanical gardens. Such an approach highlights a contrast between categories based on animals (such as intelligence, movement, or communica-



tion) and the difficulty of applying the same approach to plants. They question how to define vegetal labour, observe plants' activities and recognise their well-being. To do so, they accompany multispecies ethnography with biosemiotics frameworks. The paper argues that semiotic processes become crucial tools for conceptualising vegetal labour and plants as "working subjects" in more-than-human relationships, enabling their presence and activity to become visible.

To conclude this issue, we chose to give one last space not to work, but rather to its absence. Enrico Nivolo's article thus interweaves theory and ethnographic experience, especially on the industrial ruins in Piedmont, to frame (more-than-)human unemployment not only as a structural condition of exclusion, but also as a byproduct of systemic failures able to halt the mechanisms of value-production. Navigating a robust literature, his account challenges productivist conceptions of unemployment to underline it as a generative possibility for alternative lives and modes of being-together, thus freeing live and non-live entities from the rhythms of capitalist control and extraction. Humans, abandoned machinery, polluted rivers, and stray animals become partners in co-creation through gently unveiling a possible world beyond (more-than-) human labour and productivism. In this way, Nivolo's article not only touches on the possibility of future post-work societies, grounding them in commonality, but also gestures towards a more radical rethinking of the notion of labour and its ontological primacy.

Through different cases, the articles in this Special Issue explore the complexity of nonhuman labour, illuminating the multiple ways in which it is enacted, negotiated and valued across socio-material contexts. Bringing together emplaced ethnographic examples and broad theoretical discussions, they highlight the analytical richness of attending to more-than-human forms of works, while also reflecting on the practical, political and ethical implications arising from these entanglements. Collectively, the articles thus demonstrate that nonhuman labour is not a singular or stable category, but a heterogeneous field of relations shaped by situated practices and sociomaterial infrastructures. As such, we aim to contribute to and expand the contemporary discussion of nonhuman labour and hope the reader will find the works that follow fruitful and, maybe, analytically destabilising. Most importantly, we aim to highlight the discussion around more-than-human labour as profoundly important for Environmental Anthropology, and a deeply political endeavour: to explore these issues means, to us, tackling one of the deepest foundations of the so-called Anthropocene – productivism, extractivism, and the transformation of socio-ecologies into exploitable resources.



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Sanctuarization: Reworking Captive Elephant Labour in Sri Lanka

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Abstract: This article explores contemporary human-elephant relations in Sri Lanka's roadside riding camps through the lens of interspecies labour. Rather than opposing care to exploitation or tradition to reform, it argues that key ethical and political transformations become visible in the reorganization of work itself: who works, under what conditions, and with which forms of authority. Based on multi-sited research conducted between 2021 and 2024, the article focuses on a roadside riding camp where wider circuits of labour, welfare, and ethical claims are made visible and negotiated in practice. Through three ethnographic vignettes centred on chains, protective tubing, feeding devices, and debates over ritual participation, the article shows how compassionate care unfolds through material micro-adjustments that redistribute effort, vigilance, and limited autonomy across species. Building on these encounters, I develop the concept of sanctuarization to describe the gradual and uneven reconfiguration of captive elephant labour in the name of care. Sanctuarization operates both as material adjustment and as anticipatory imagination, animating visions of sanctuary that reshape present routines without dissolving captivity. In this sense, roadside camps emerge as provisional and contested "sanctuaries-in-the-making," where labour, freedom, and responsibility are continually renegotiated within enduring infrastructures of constraint. In doing so, the article reframes debates on elephant tourism by foregrounding labour as the primary terrain on which ethical transformation is materially negotiated.

Keywords: Captivity; Animal Sanctuary; Interspecies Labour; Circulation; Multispecies Ethnography

Prelude

Kamala¹ walks along the dusty path of a roadside riding camp in Sri Lanka's Sabaragamuwa Province. A foreign woman and her two children sit on her back, their hands pressed into the folds of her skin. The children shift between excitement and uncertainty as her body sways beneath them. Her movement follows a series of brief vocal cues from her *mahout*.² She slows, halts, stands still. At another instruction, she raises her trunk and curls it upward, holding the position while photographs are taken. When the signal changes, she lowers it and resumes walking. Around her, the camp proceeds through a familiar sequence: tourists waiting under a tin roof, fruit cut on a plastic table, a chain adjusted, phones and cameras lifted and lowered. Kamala walks a short distance, turns, pauses, enters the river. What feels exceptional to visitors unfolds here as routine. Her body structures the rhythm of the space.

Read in isolation, this scene appears to exemplify domination, discipline, and passive animal compliance – an image that has shaped much contemporary critique of elephant tourism. Yet such a frame proves incomplete once one follows elephants beyond the moment of display. Outside the visitors' gaze, interactions rarely unfold as a simple command-response sequence. Instead, they involve hesitation, adjustment, interruption, and negotiation among mahouts, elephants, tourists, and an increasingly visible range of actors engaged in animal welfare. It is in such less visible moments that the dynamics of elephant tourism become analytically legible. A few minutes later, the previous riders step aside and the routine begins again.

Kamala stands in the river between bathing sessions, her body half-submerged in the brown water. A couple of tourists linger nearby, waiting for their turn to enter the river with her. Close to the bank, the elephant welfare advocate with whom I am spending the day speaks informally with two mahouts. She explains that a foreign welfare expert is available to conduct target-training sessions at the camp. The proposal, she says, would introduce small adjustments into daily routines: more varied activity, fewer long stretches of standing still between rides, regular foot-care sessions. She shifts easily between technical terms –

¹ All names of people and elephants mentioned in this article are pseudonyms. Identifying details of camps, temples, and other workspaces have been anonymized to prevent identification. In some cases, contextual details have been altered or omitted to protect participants' privacy.

² A *mahout* is the primary human caregiver and handler of an elephant in South and Southeast Asia. Beyond training and control, the role involves daily forms of embodied coordination through which elephants are guided, cared for, and worked with. Mahouts rely on a repertoire of vocal cues, bodily gestures, and tactile signals to communicate with the animal and to manage its movements and behaviour in everyday routines (Hart, Sundar 2000).

positive reinforcement, enrichment, care protocols – and a softer vocabulary of attentiveness and bodily relief. As she speaks, Kamala begins a slow oscillation in the water, her body rocking forward and back in a steady rhythm. The advocate gestures toward the swaying and suggests it may indicate stress, something that could be mitigated through changes in routine and training. The mahouts listen without interrupting. One of them finally replies that Kamala has always moved like that – “since she was small. It is not distress”, he insists, “but habit. Part of her character”. The advocate notes that repetitive behaviours are often associated with restricted routines. The mahout shrugs slightly and repeats that this is simply how Kamala is. No one presses further. The difference in interpretation remains unresolved.

A few steps away, the couple slows at the edge of the river. They have overheard fragments of the exchange and now ask about the elephant’s swaying. For a moment, they do not descend the steps. The bathing, which a few minutes earlier had seemed like a simple tourist activity – scrubbing Kamala’s skin with coconut husks, laughing as she sprays water – now appears differently. They look back toward the advocate, as if reassessing what they are about to take part in. From the water, Kamala’s mahout calls to them and gestures for them to come down. After a brief hesitation, they step into the river. The brushing begins. Gradually, their bodies relax. The bathing continues. For a brief moment, however, the sequence falters, revealing the negotiations that sustain it. Welfare expertise, biographical knowledge of the elephant, economic necessity, tourist expectation, and the elephant’s own bodily gestures intersect in real time. What is at stake is not simply whether Kamala works, but how her work and even her movements are interpreted, organized, and justified. In these moments, what becomes visible is not simply domination or care, but the organization of interspecies labour. Here, labour refers not only to physical exertion but to the distributed coordination of bodies, affects, and routines through which human-elephant interactions are organized. Elephants do not simply occupy the position of labouring bodies, but actively shape the limits and possibilities of these arrangements through their movements, responses, and refusals. Ethical disagreement does not revolve solely around captivity as an abstract condition. It unfolds in the ongoing negotiation of how elephants should work and how their behaviour should be interpreted. At stake is the distribution of responsibility, effort, and well-being across human and animal participants.

The sections that follow trace these negotiations across longer histories of labour and capture, showing how new welfare paradigms reconfigure – rather than replace – earlier regimes of discipline and expertise. I use the term *sanc-tuarization* to describe the gradual and uneven process through which captive

elephant labour is reorganized in the name of care. Rather than denoting the creation of formal animal sanctuaries, sanctuarization refers to the incremental reshaping of labour relations, spatial arrangements, and ethical authority within ongoing regimes of captivity. What emerges is not a linear shift from exploitation to care, but a layered transformation of work in which older asymmetries persist even as new moral vocabularies gain force.³

This perspective challenges several common interpretations in the literature on elephant tourism. First, it complicates the view of tourism primarily as a site of exploitation, by showing how ethical reforms are negotiated through the reorganization of everyday work. Second, it questions the assumption that sanctuaries represent a definitive moral solution to captivity. Third, it moves beyond viewing welfare interventions as purely technical reforms. Rather, sanctuary logics reorganize how labour, care, and authority are distributed without dissolving the infrastructures of captivity in which elephants continue to live and work.

From Husbandry to Circulation: Transforming Elephant Labour

Ethnographic research on captive⁴ elephants has long examined the relationships between elephants and their mahouts through the lens of skilled, embodied, and culturally embedded labour. Scholars working in South and Southeast Asia describe how mahouts learn to read elephants' gaits, anticipate hesitation, sense fatigue, and respond to subtle shifts in breathing, posture, or trunk movement. Capture and training, whether in timber economies, village set-

³ The fieldwork for this article was supported by the RULNAT (ANR-19-CE03-0006) project, "Ruling on Nature: Animals and the Environment before the Court" (<https://rulnat.cnrs.fr/>), funded by the French National Research Agency (ANR). Additional research support was provided by the project "WildConnect: Wildlife Circulation and the Enactment of Civilization in Diachronic Perspective," funded by the University of Catania under PIA.CE.RI. 2024–2026, Linea 1 (CUP: 7D722212160).

⁴ In this study, I deliberately adopt "captive" to describe elephants engaged in labour in Sri Lanka. This choice does not reject local or regulatory categories such as "tamed," but foregrounds the structural constraints shaping these relationships. Importantly, captivity also affects humans: mahouts often work without long-term security, labour protections, or institutional support, and their lives are deeply entangled with the vulnerabilities and risks of the elephants they care for. Their labour unfolds under conditions that can threaten physical safety and social well-being, creating a shared – though asymmetrical – exposure to precarity. While "tamed" highlights cooperation and skill, it risks minimizing the unequal infrastructures sustaining human-elephant labour. By contrast, "captive" captures both the agency of elephants and the broader ecology of constraints shaping their work, highlighting how the relationship unfolds amid limited freedom, negotiation, and shared – though asymmetrical – vulnerability.

tings, or ritual contexts, are not treated merely as techniques of control but as forms of relational labour⁵ embedded in social, ecological, and ritual worlds (Lainé 2020a; 2020b; Locke 2016; 2017; Mar 2024). From this perspective, human-elephant work unfolds through apprenticeship, attunement, and long-term cohabitation. At the same time, animal justice scholarship and advocacy foreground the coercive and constraining dimensions of these same practices. Training methods, tethering, and behavioural conditioning are read as techniques that reshape elephant bodies and dispositions in order to render them compliant, often at significant physical and psychological cost (Green *et al.* 2025). During my fieldwork in Sri Lanka, several advocates described conventional training as effectively “crashing” elephants, producing lasting harm under the guise of discipline or care.



Figures 1 & 2. *Elephant Kraal, Alligator Pool* (left) and *Elephant Kraal, a Captive* (right), National Museum of Colombo, Sri Lanka. The term *kraal* refers here to the organized practice of elephant capture, which involved enclosing sections of jungle to confine and separate wild elephants. *Photo by the author*

Placed in dialogue, these perspectives illuminate a central tension: multispecies labour is both an arena of intimate skill and cultural continuity and a site of structural asymmetry and ethical conflict. Rather than resolving this tension by privileging either “care” or “exploitation,” this article approaches elephant labour as a contested and negotiated field in which moral vocabularies, embodied techniques, and power relations converge in everyday coordination. I argue

⁵ In human-animal studies, relational labour frames “work with, by, and for animals” as a shared, negotiated practice, highlighting how agency, care, and responsibility are co-produced across species (Coulter 2016; Mouret, Lainé 2023; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017).

that it is through the reorganization of labour – rather than solely through debates framed in terms of rights or welfare – that contemporary transformations in captive elephant life become analytically visible.

In Sri Lanka, this field has undergone significant transformation. Historically, elephants were embedded in royal sovereignty, temple institutions, and ritual performance (Jayewardene 1994; Santiapillai, Wijeyamohan 2016). Their labour materialized prestige, lineage, and authority in public ceremonies such as the Kandy Esala Perahera.⁶ Colonial regimes intensified capture and export, integrating elephants into imperial trade networks and plantation economies, reshaping both local livelihoods and ethical frameworks surrounding nonhuman life. Following economic liberalization in 1977 and especially after the end of the civil war in 2009, captive elephants were increasingly drawn into expanding circuits of tourism, festival economies, and global visibility.

This shift altered not only where elephants work, but how value is produced through their work. Whereas captive elephants once often remained embedded within long-term relations with particular families or temple institutions, many now circulate through leasing arrangements, festival contracts, and temporary transfers between facilities. During fieldwork between 2021 and 2024, I observed elephants moving between roadside camps, religious processions, private residences, hotels and safari parks, continually recalibrating routines in response to changing human companions and spatial configurations. Their economic and symbolic value lies not simply in possession, but in circulation: in the capacity to generate income, prestige, and affect across multiple sites (Whatmore, Thorne 2000). This circulation does not concern elephants alone. Mahouts increasingly move not only between facilities, but between elephants. Long-term attachments – in which a mahout remained paired with a single animal for decades – are becoming less common. As handlers shift from one elephant to another in response to market demand, seasonal contracts, or managerial decisions, the husbandry model premised on long-term attachment is destabilized. The assumption of durable, intergenerational bonds – central to much anthropological writing on mahout-elephant relations – no longer holds as a structural norm.

Following Barua's work (2014; 2016; 2017; 2018) on "lively commodities," this reorganization of circulation can be understood as a form of multispe-

⁶ Historically, elephants in this religious festival carried the sacred Buddha Tooth Relic and the insignia of various deities, adorned in elaborate garments and ritual paraphernalia, and accompanied by dancers, drummers, and tightrope walkers. Although the festival has evolved over time, these ceremonial elements continue to play a central role in contemporary processions.

cies capital. Value is generated not only through elephants' responsiveness, "charisma",⁷ and embodied presence, but also through the skilled mediation, mobility, and labour of mahouts and other actors who translate animal gestures into economically and affectively productive events. A ritual procession, a tourist photograph, or a structured enrichment session does not simply display elephant life; it mobilizes a distributed network of interspecies work. Labour, in this context, exceeds physical exertion and becomes affective, performative, and infrastructural, enacted through bodily discipline and spatial coordination. Yet this expansion does not dissolve asymmetry: elephants remain tethered, transported, and regulated, while mahouts operate within precarious and shifting labour arrangements.

At the same time, new ethical regimes have entered this landscape. These interventions do not simply regulate elephants; they reconfigure who holds interpretive authority over their bodies. Wildlife officials, veterinarians, foreign welfare experts, and transnational advocacy organizations increasingly intervene in feeding schedules, training protocols, movement regulations, and habitat design. Online publics scrutinize ritual processions and tourist encounters, amplifying debates about welfare, rights, and the legitimacy of captivity (Benadusi 2024). As a result, the once relatively bounded dyad of mahout and elephant is now embedded within wider networks of expertise, regulation, and moral evaluation. Care becomes distributed across heterogeneous actors, and labour is redefined through competing standards of what constitutes a "good life" for working elephants. In Sri Lanka, this reconfiguration has not taken the form of a proper institutional shift toward fully established sanctuaries. Rather, it unfolds gradually, through processes of imitation, adaptation, and selective incorporation of models developed elsewhere, particularly in Thailand and Cambodia, where elephant sanctuaries have become internationally visible. Local actors draw on these precedents unevenly: some adopt elements of "no-riding" policies, enrichment protocols, or volunteer-based care in response to tourist demand; others experiment cautiously with new welfare routines under the guidance of visiting experts. Activists, transnational trainers, and welfare professionals circulate between sites, carrying techniques, narra-

⁷ Lorimer (2007; 2015) distinguishes among ecological, aesthetic, and corporeal forms of nonhuman charisma. Ecological charisma derives from an animal's material properties, aesthetic charisma from its visual and behavioural appeal – often mediated through representation – and corporeal charisma from the affective intensity of close encounters. Charisma, in this account, is not an intrinsic attribute but a relational quality shaped through human perception and interaction. As such, it carries ethical and political effects, influencing conservation priorities and the symbolic and economic value attributed to particular species.

tives, and evaluative standards that are reinterpreted within Sri Lanka's specific legal and economic constraints. Sanctuarization, in this sense, operates not as a completed institutional form but as an ongoing, glocal process shaped by internal advocacy, external influence, and market adaptation. While existing scholarship has examined animal sanctuaries as institutional alternatives to exploitative regimes of captivity, this article develops sanctuarization as an analytic to trace how sanctuary logics are selectively incorporated within ongoing infrastructures of animal labour and control. A growing body of scholarship has analysed sanctuaries as ethical refuges, post-captivity environments, and sites where conservation, welfare governance, and tourist expectations intersect (Kopnina, Baker 2023; Sadashige 2024; Speiran 2025; Eason 2017). These studies focus primarily on sanctuary settings as distinct organizational forms. By contrast, sanctuarization draws attention to the gradual and uneven incorporation of sanctuary logics within ongoing regimes of animal labour and control, without presuming a fixed transition beyond captivity itself.

Across temples, roadside camps, orphanages, and other sites aspiring to sanctuary status, elephants thus navigate hybrid environments in which traditional routines coexist with newly institutionalized forms of welfare. Some facilities continue to structure daily life around rides, bathing sessions, and staged feeding for photography. Others reject riding and emphasize enrichment, observation, or volunteer-based care. Even in centres that aspire to ethical tourism or partial rewilding,⁸ elephant work is not eliminated but reconfigured. Animals are required to unlearn former routines and develop new patterns of movement, social interaction, and responsiveness suited to semi-natural or visitor-managed settings. Work persists, but its moral framing shifts.

To analyse these transformations, this article adopts a circulatory perspective. Building on interspecies ethnography (Locke 2013; Lainé 2016; 2018; Lainé, Keil, Rahmat 2023; Locke, Buckingham 2016) while questioning the assumption of stable, long-term mahout-elephant pairings, I trace how labour and care are negotiated across shifting sites and actors. Between 2021 and 2024, I conducted mobile, multi-sited ethnographic research in Sri Lanka, following elephants and the humans who engage with them – mahouts, owners, facility managers, volunteers, and welfare experts – across interconnected spaces. This circulatory human-elephant ethnography attends to how ethical judgements,

⁸ Rewilding generally refers to restoring species, ecological functions, and natural processes in human-modified landscapes to enhance biodiversity and nonhuman autonomy (Jørgensen 2015; Perino *et al.* 2019). As Lorimer *et al.* (2015) note, however, rewilding is also socially and ethically mediated, involving ongoing negotiation over animals' freedom and human responsibility rather than a simple withdrawal of care.



bodily techniques, and authority structures move across locations rather than residing within a single relational dyad or institutional setting.

Within this reconfigured landscape, captivity cannot be understood simply as spatial confinement. Rather, my ethnographic materials suggest a regime of infrastructural dependence and regulated mobility that shapes both elephants and the humans who work with them. As the vignettes that follow will show, restricted movement, contractual arrangements, managerial oversight, and commercial scheduling structure daily life, even as elephants cooperate, resist, pause, or redirect interactions. Such responses become moments through which labour is renegotiated and moral disagreement rendered visible. Captivity, in this sense, emerges not simply as the opposite of agency but as the condition within which agency and constraint are continuously worked out. It also shapes human precarity: many mahouts work without long-term security, moving between elephants and facilities as market demands shift. Interspecies labour thus unfolds within shared – though asymmetrical – conditions of infrastructural constraint.

What emerges from this landscape is not a linear transition from domination to care, nor a simple replacement of older practices with compassionate ones. Rather, elephant labour in contemporary Sri Lanka is being reorganized through circulation: of animals, of capital, of expertise, and of ethical claims. The vignettes that follow examine how this reorganization is enacted in practice. They treat labour not as a fixed category but as a relational and negotiated process, showing how elephants, mahouts, volunteers, and welfare advocates continually adjust routines in response to shifting public demands, market pressures, and moral expectations. In these negotiations, care, coercion, autonomy, and value emerge not as moral opposites but as effects of organized interspecies labour – recalibrated through circulation and constraint.

Negotiating Captive Elephant Labour

The following vignettes move inside these reorganized circuits of labour, not by mapping elephants' movements across the island, but by dwelling in one particularly dense nodal setting where circulations converge and become ethnographically visible. In roadside camps, shifting ethical visions, commercial pressures, and welfare interventions come together, making visible the infrastructures through which freedom, authority, and responsibility are negotiated in concrete encounters. Rather than illustrating abstract principles, the scenes attend to the situated adjustments through which interspecies work is recalibrated in practice.



Along the Links of the Chain: Shaping Freedom under Constraint

During the Thai Pongal festival in January 2022, with a Monday Poya extending the holiday period, the roads leading to Sigiriya are clogged with vehicles heading to the celebrations. At the first stop we return to a riding camp along the road, leased by a local manager who profits from renting out elephants. There we meet Saman again, a young male with a broad trunk and a pale grey head marked by faint pink spots, immediately recognisable to local handlers. He moves with an even, steady rhythm under the guidance of his mahout.

Before arriving at the Sigiriya camp, Saman spent part of his life as a “temple elephant,” living in and around a Buddhist shrine and participating in religious processions and ritual duties. At other times in his early years, he passed through hidden and hazardous networks: captured, leased, and redistributed by brokers, each transaction shaping the economic, symbolic, and performative roles elephants are made to fulfil. Within this underground system, Saman was reportedly involved in various forms of work, including elephant cricket matches – an account I received from local insiders. In these events, mahouts rode their elephants at speed, urging them to strike a ball. Held away from public scrutiny, these games unfold in the same shadowed terrain as other activities that move young males like Saman from one form of labour to another. Saman’s trajectory does not signal a linear shift from one form of labour to another but illustrates how elephant work is continuously reallocated across overlapping circuits of value, visibility, and regulation.

At the Sigiriya camp, Saman works within the tourist economy, posing by the roadside to attract passing vehicles, parading alongside restaurants with his mahout in search of clients, and interacting more fleetingly with visitors in transit, often just for a photograph before moving on. He also spends long hours bathing in the river below, while tourists watch from the veranda of a nearby café, often sipping drinks as they look on. These activities may appear slight when viewed from the outside, yet they compose a patterned rhythm of labour that takes shape through Saman’s body over the course of the day. Long intervals of waiting, the stillness under the midday sun between rides, the repeated pacing along the same short strip of asphalt, and even the extended immersion in the river each impose distinct demands. Together, they produce a specific bodily regimen: one that is neither incidental nor effortless, but central to the everyday operational tasks expected of elephants in roadside camps.



Figure 3. Saman, a male elephant, carrying tourists at a riding camp in the Sigiriya area, accompanied by his mahout. Visible on his right foreleg is rubber tubing, recently fitted around the ankle chain by a visiting welfare team to reduce friction and abrasions. *Photo by the author.*



Figure 4. Saman bathing in the river alongside a female elephant from another riding camp in the Sigiriya area. The mahout of the female elephant stands nearby. *Photo by the author.*

Saman's current mahout, Gamini, has eight years of experience working with elephants, though not exclusively with him, and comes from the Kandy region. Unlike traditional caregivers – trained from childhood by an older, usually family-related mahout and responsible for a single animal over the course of its life – Gamini did not inherit his role. Instead, he received rapid on-the-job training, assisting more experienced mahouts before taking full responsibility for elephants at temples and riding camps. This shift reflects a broader transformation in Sri Lanka's captive-elephant industry, where a new generation of mahouts moves quickly between religious premises, stables, and other facilities, seldom forming long-term attachments to the animals they oversee.⁹ Stability is no longer the background condition of this relationship; it becomes something that must be achieved, if only temporarily. Two of Saman's previous mahouts died from elephant-related injuries, a risk that remains common when managing young males, particularly within a working sector defined by the rapid circulation and turnover of animals, caregivers, and managers. Against this backdrop, Gamini takes particular pride in having established what he describes as a relationship of trust, friendship, and guidance with his animal, often emphasising to us that he can "handle" elephants like Saman where others could not.

Wages in camps such as this typically range from LKR 15,000 to 20,000 per month (€ 42-56), with very basic food and lodging provided, while state-run facilities offer higher pay, around LKR 30,000 (€ 84). The work is physically demanding and risky, with little meaningful compensation for mahouts or their families in cases of serious injury or death, rendering the occupation highly precarious. Yet younger mahouts, generally agile and strong, navigate these demands through a distinctive embodied style that intertwines technique, aesthetics, and social performance. This approach constitutes a corporeal repertoire – a technique of the body in Mauss's sense (1934) – through which the mahout's authority and identity become visible. The careful choreography of posture, the precise handling of the bull-hook – a traditional hooked stick used to guide and control elephants – and even the seemingly peripheral details, such as the draping of the sarong or the choice of headgear, function as performative markers of skill, authority, and identity. Through these practices of connotation, the mahout's labour is also transformed into a multispecies spectacle, visible to

⁹ In their systematic review of mahout-elephant research, Palanivelan *et al.* (2025) identify a similar trend toward younger and less experienced mahouts replacing traditional handlers, which risks undermining the transfer of specialised knowledge.



tourists, passersby, and social media audiences, making tangible the otherwise often-invisible work of care, guidance, and risk management. In this light, the mahout's body becomes simultaneously a medium of labour and a site of social display, negotiating perception, recognition, and economic value. Gamini's wife first noticed him riding Saman, guiding him steadily along the path – a moment that illustrates how corporeal expertise translates into relational and affective visibility, bridging technical competence, social attention, and personal encounters.

Following the work of elephants like Saman in the tourist circuit, our visiting team engages with individual animals to observe and support their care and daily routines, always with the consent of the mahouts and managers. One member of our group, Bob, is an experienced elephant caregiver – a foreign professional active across several Asian countries – who practices “compassionate care,” a globally recognized approach emphasizing positive reinforcement, attentive foot care, and enabling elephants to express behaviours closer to those they would naturally exhibit in forest environments. At each site, he works alongside mahouts, providing guidance and suggestions to gradually adapt local practices. The second member, Ashika, is a Sri Lankan elephant advocate campaigning against the exploitation and suffering of captive elephants. She operates both online and on the ground documenting welfare conditions, engaging mahouts and managers, and, in urgent cases, pressing for institutional action or relocation of animals. Together, Ashika and Bob are part of a transnational network of advocates supporting efforts to guide Asian elephants toward conditions more akin to “sanctuary” settings, following precedents in Thailand and Cambodia. My role in the team builds on trust developed through months of research with elephant experts in Sri Lanka, and for today's session I am tasked with documenting care and retraining practices through detailed filming.

As foot care begins, Saman is gently guided to lie partially reclining on the ground, Gamini seated across his broad belly, hands touching his body to keep him calm. One of Saman's front feet is carefully lifted and held in place, allowing Bob to kneel beside it, so close that he must tilt his head beneath the raised foot to reach its underside. In his hands, a heavy metal rasp – reminiscent of tools from iron workshops – moves with rapid, deliberate strokes. Every shift of Saman's weight makes the task feel precarious; even a subtle movement could send Bob sprawling. This is more than simple cleaning. Years of walking on asphalt and long hours chained have left Saman's feet and nails in a compromised state; untreated abscesses can quickly threaten his overall health. Throughout, Bob murmurs encouragement –



“Good boy, good job” – while patting Saman’s ankle in a steady, measured rhythm, responding to the animal’s signals and maintaining a sense of mutual attunement. With the rasp, he shapes the thick, ivory-coloured nails, and with a hooked tool, he carefully removes necrotic tissue or clears small perforations, each action attentive to Saman’s comfort, trust, and the precarious balance of safety.¹⁰

The mahout’s young assistant stands close to the animal, ready to intervene if needed, while Ashika keeps Saman focused with a complementary exercise: he extends his trunk to take the bananas she offers one by one from a safe distance. I move around the group, filming every gesture. Conversations flow in Sinhala and English: Bob asks questions, points out areas of concern on the feet and ankles, and explains to the mahout how to recognize early signs of abscesses or deeper scrapes and prevent complications. Pointing to the dry abrasions on Saman’s ankles, he says, “If an elephant stays too long in the water, the skin can get damaged – you see here?” He traces the rough patches lightly with his fingers. “How long does he usually spend in the river? Maybe you could try loosening the chain slightly, giving him a bit more freedom. That way he might decide for himself whether to go for a bath or stay on dry ground.” Saman’s body is the only one that actively engages with each of us. With his trunk, he prompts Ashika to offer bananas at a steady, deliberate pace; with his feet, he signals to Bob where he feels pain or when he needs a break; and with me, he carefully negotiates the space I occupy as I move around him for filming, responding to my movements without showing stress or defensiveness. His responsiveness to the calm presence of the mahout makes the work a continuous, dynamic negotiation of attention and movement, allowing a complex, seemingly improbable task to unfold smoothly.

¹⁰ Elephant foot care is a key aspect of welfare management, involving daily inspection, cleaning, and skilled trimming carried out with specific tools and veterinary-informed techniques. These practices, together with positive-reinforcement training, allow animals to participate voluntarily and safely. In this session, however, the full approach cannot be applied because essential safety supports – such as the stands normally used to stabilise the elephant’s feet during treatment – are not available, limiting both precision and the level of voluntary cooperation normally achievable.



Figure 5. Saman receiving foot care treatment from the visiting animal welfare expert at the riding camp. *Photo by the author.*

As the foot-care session unfolds, it is clear that it is only one element of a broader, interspecies exchange, grounded in the coordination of bodies, tools, and attentions among Bob, the mahout, Saman, and the rest of the team. Each visit addresses immediate health concerns while, through repeated, reciprocal interactions – touching, guiding, signalling, and responding – provisional and fragile trust is established. Bob's suggestions are offered as possibilities rather than directives, and the mahout, Saman, and the team negotiate these adjustments through movement, posture, and timing. Trust is enacted in concrete gestures: how Saman shifts his weight, how Gamini steadies him, and how we move around him for feeding, treating, and filming. Over time, these episodic interactions can shape routines and practices of work and care, though their outcomes remain contingent and never fully predictable.

Trust is also the result of ongoing negotiation. On this visit, we bring three objects that articulate shifting relations of labour, care, and attention among us, the mahouts, and Saman. The first is a new metal chain, purchased in Colombo and explicitly requested by Gamini during previous visits from Bob. In a context where “unchaining” names the very ethos of Bob's work, the chain is more than a tool: it is a probe into what is possible within the circuits of labour that structure Saman's life. Its presence signals a space where concessions are made and limits are tested. Along its links, centimetre by centimetre, movement is redistributed



as the chain is loosened or tightened: Saman's labour becomes both constrained and enabled, while the mahout's attentiveness, vigilance, and control are calibrated against the possibilities each link affords. Freedom here does not stand outside restraint; it is measured through it. In this small arena of material practice, care, authority, and autonomy are rendered visible through action.

The Tube and the Barrel: Organizing Care in Practice

The second object we brought with us this time is a length of perforated rubber tubing, designed to encase the chain around Saman's ankle and reduce abrasions. Its introduction follows the opening created by the chain: a provisional space of trust allows Saman and the mahout to engage in a more demanding training exercise. Saman repeatedly explores the unfamiliar tubing with his trunk, nudging and testing it, revealing both curiosity and the effort required to accommodate the novel object. Gamini observes Saman's reactions, gauging how far the elephant will accept the tubing and adjusting his guidance accordingly. Bob supervises throughout, offering incentives and suggestions to ensure that the interaction remains productive without overwhelming either elephant or mahout. In this triangular engagement, labour is both physical and relational, arising through anticipation and the gradual, effortful process of shared learning.

Once the tubing is in place, Saman's first steps are cautious and measured, as if recalibrating the subtle differences in pressure created by the rubber covering. The chain now moves differently, requiring a renewed attentiveness. He reaches toward it with his trunk, testing it. At moments the gestures suggest hesitation rather than curiosity. Gamini watches closely, weighing whether to intervene or allow the adjustment to unfold. For several minutes, the tubing remains an unsettled presence – neither fully rejected nor fully integrated. Such modifications depend not simply on technical insertion, but on bodies learning each other's limits, and on the recognition that change is rarely immediate or stable.

Building on this preparatory exercise, the third object – a tall plastic barrel suspended upside down from a tree and filled with foliage – requires a further escalation of effort and coordination. Saman must stretch his trunk, lift his body, and manipulate the foliage to feed, engaging muscles and problem-solving skills underused in his usual routines. For the mahout, the task is substantially more demanding than simply tossing greenery to an elephant's feet: he must insert the food into the barrel, attach it at the correct height on the tree trunk, and repeatedly lift or adjust it to refill or reposition it. Observing and responding to Saman's movements, the mahout negotiates how far he is willing to engage in this extra work, calibrating his actions to the elephant's

responses and the demands of the task. For Bob, the barrel serves as a site for demonstrating and modelling alternative forms of labour that integrate ethical concern, practical re-education, and shared effort. This is also a space of negotiation: not all mahouts are willing to undertake these additional tasks, and the “capable mahout” is evaluated precisely on his readiness to extend his practice in ways that give concrete meaning to the “ethical” principles associated with elephant ecotourism.¹¹



Figure 6. In a neighbouring riding camp, a female elephant (previously shown bathing with Saman) performs a foraging exercise, using her trunk to retrieve foliage from the barrel provided by the visiting welfare team. Similar enrichment practices circulate between camps in the area. *Photo by the author.*

Taken together, these objects make visible the entanglement of labour, care, and the negotiation of work. Each link in the chain, each movement of the rubber tubing, and each reach toward the suspended barrel represents a mo-

¹¹ In Sri Lanka new-generation mahouts tend to engage more readily with novel “compassionate” practices, such as barrel or tubing exercises. Their participation is shaped both by the growing demand for tourism experiences framed as ethical and by the proximity and competition between nearby camps, which encourages imitation: when one camp introduces new practices, others may follow. Traditional mahouts may approach these practices differently. Mahouts’ relationships with elephants thus vary in responsiveness and collaboration. Managers who rent elephants can also play a role in facilitating welfare-oriented approaches, balancing operational needs with tourist expectations.



ment where ethical possibilities, technical knowledge, and bodily agency intersect, requiring adaptation and learning from both humans and elephants. Through these small calibrations, the everyday labour of the roadside camp becomes a site where negotiated adjustments of freedom and constraint are enacted, producing incremental changes in routines, interactions, and the practical organization of work. Here, the relational labour between elephant and mahout becomes visible through the concrete compromises and efforts that both must make. The mahout tests how far Saman will accept new objects and tasks, while the elephant experiments, accommodates new requests, and sometimes resists. Meanwhile, the welfare expert guides and monitors this shared learning toward gradual transformations in care and practices. At the same time, Ashika, leveraging her local knowledge and contacts, negotiates these modifications with mahouts and managers across facilities, tracks the movement and condition of elephants, maintains connections throughout the network, and ensures that relationships and information flows remain active over time.

When the foot-care session ends, we walk slowly toward the strip of land behind the road leading to the river. The air is humid, carrying the faint scent of wet soil and leaves crushed underfoot. Bob suggests moving Saman's resting place away from the exposed roadside, into a small patch of vegetation where the shade is thicker, the soil softer, and movement less constrained. A nearby tree offers a practical anchor point for the elephant. Every additional metre of slack in the chain becomes a small gain in autonomy: the chance for Saman to choose among the vegetation for the most palatable leaves, to step onto looser soil rather than asphalt, to orient himself under a patch of shade – small, provisional freedoms negotiated through the very instrument of restraint. Gamini moves alongside Saman almost distractedly, not paying much attention to the elephant's movements. He carries the bull-hook hooked backwards over his shoulder, leaving the chain slack. There is a rhythm to their interaction, a choreography born of trust and repetition, yet conveyed without fanfare. Today, the mahout even leaves the bull-hook aside as they enter the undergrowth – an unspoken acknowledgment of the provisional autonomy the elephant is granted. The implications reach beyond Saman's immediate welfare. Every decision over where he stands, where he steps, and where shade falls unfolds within an intermediate space where local and external actors negotiate what is described as “more ethical” labour. These adjustments are not mere gestures of care – they are embedded in the social and economic circuits of the camp, acts of negotiation and provisional legitimation that entwine practical care with the everyday realities of human and elephant lives in captivity.



Figure 7. Saman moving through the foliage near the river during a brief loosening of the camp's usual spatial controls. *Photo by the author.*

Meanwhile, Saman moves a few steps closer to the river, now alone among the bushes, several meters from us, inhabiting the space with a degree of freedom unusual for a roadside elephant. It is a brief moment within the ongoing constraints of chains, roads, and human schedules. This temporary negotiation of space, what could be described as micro-sanctuarization,¹² highlights the narrow margins of agency afforded to captive elephants within the persistent structures of control that shape their lives. By the next day, he will return to the asphalt, more tightly chained, and begin to sway his head rhythmically. This movement has been learned over years in captivity and is deeply embedded in both memory and muscle. Bob observes that even in elephant sanctuaries, these stereotypes take years to fade. The body retains its history as indelibly as the mind.

The chain on one hind leg is tight around the tree, allowing only a few centimetres of give, while the front leg chain, anchored to the trunk supporting

¹² I use the term micro-sanctuarization to describe small, incremental changes in the working environment shared by elephants and mahouts, driven by practices of compassionate care and ethical tourism principles such as “no touch,” “no feed,” and “no ride.” These adjustments do not create a sanctuary outright but produce provisional “sanctuary-in-the-making” conditions within conventional work settings. The practical meaning of “sanctuary,” however, remains context-dependent and varies across facilities.

the mahouts' shelter, is longer but still under tension, permitting only minimal movement. From the managers' perspective, this placement optimizes visibility, accessibility, and control. It also allows the mahouts to remain in the shade beneath the shelter, talking and chewing *betel*¹³ as they wait for the next tourist, without needing to supervise the animal constantly. Saman remains mostly still, occasionally undulating his trunk among the foliage. His movements are constrained by the spatial limits of the pad. The blue barrel suspended from the high branches and the pink tubing secured around his ankle mark the previous day's interventions while remaining fully functional. Ethical intentions, provisional care, and minor gains in freedom exist only in tension with managerial decisions, the rhythms of roadside tourism, and the economic imperatives structuring daily life. What was possible yesterday in shade and soft soil now endures merely as a trace, a fleeting adjustment within the rigid geometry of chains, asphalt, and daily schedules.

Into the Darkness: Frictions in the Making of Sanctuary

As darkness falls, we drive along the roadside with Gamini to observe elephants emerging from the forest. These are not anonymous wild herds but usually solitary males – forest dwellers searching for food as they navigate a landscape already deeply shaped by human presence. They appear at night, when their captive counterparts – Saman and the others – are finally at rest after a day of work. Their nocturnal movements are acts of negotiation, reclaiming fragments of space and resources shaped by the rhythms of daytime tourism and human activity. In this liminal, contested zone, the close proximity and subtle overlaps of wild and captive lives become visible, revealing the contradictions at the heart of human-elephant landscapes.

In this threshold space, as we drive along, the conversation between Bob, Ashika, and Gamini intensifies, filled with rapid exchanges, overlapping ideas, and animated gestures. I find myself on the periphery, listening to the flow of plans, critiques, and ambitions – peering into a world just beyond my reach, present yet somehow excluded from the momentum of their shared vision of a sanctuary. In this vision, mahouts and other figures, such as Bob and Ashika, might work together to co-manage an elephant camp, assuming roles not only as caregivers but also as stewards of the elephants, guiding both their daily care and the broader well-being of the herd. Gamini imagines forming a “gang

¹³ *Betel* is a mildly stimulant leaf chewed in many parts of South Asia, often wrapped around areca nut and sometimes with lime, producing a red-stained saliva and mild psychoactive effects.

of like-minded mahouts,” creating a sanctuary free from the humiliations he endured during his apprenticeship. He recalls moments like the Esala Perahera in Kandy, when a ritual master publicly corrected him for mishandling an elephant’s chain – a vivid example of the hierarchies and pressures woven into this work. Ashika, too, envisions the opening of Sri Lanka’s first “true” elephant sanctuary, modelled on those that already exist in other Asian countries, where she, Gamini, Bob, and a network of “good mahouts”¹⁴ could collaboratively enact ethical care, build lasting bonds of trust with the elephants, and coordinate responsibilities across the team.

As the conversation about a future sanctuary intensifies, Gamini begins to outline his vision: a place where elephants could roam freely, no longer giving rides to tourists, a large forest compound devoted entirely to “ethical” tourism. Most importantly, it would be a space where he and “other mahouts like him” could work independently, free from a single owner, reclaiming control over their own lives as well as the lives of the elephants. He imagines that there, he could remain with Saman for the rest of his life, no longer forced to move from one elephant to another. Yet, there is one element he is unwilling to give up: the Kandy Esala Perahera. Turning to Bob, he asks directly what he thinks. For Gamini, this festival is the moment when mahouts are most publicly visible, taking centre stage in a nationally celebrated cultural event. It is not only a deeply significant moment of long-lasting tradition in the country, but also a time when leading their elephants adorned in full regalia is an act of immense personal and professional importance for them. A tense silence follows. The weight of the question hangs palpably in the air. Bob responds calmly but firmly: during the parade, the elephants suffer, and he cannot support their involvement. The misalignment is clear. The disagreement does not concern whether elephants should be cared for, but which forms of labour can be rendered ethically legitimate. Gamini’s ethical horizon remains anchored in the ritual worlds that shaped his work with elephants, while Bob’s approach – rooted in global welfare principles – cannot accommodate practices that entail suffering. Ashika softens the translation into Sinhala, reframing Bob’s disapproval as a general stance against animal distress while adding that “cultural traditions deserve respect and must be renegotiated by those who inhabit them.” Her translation does more than con-

¹⁴ Mumby’s study of mahouts working with captive Asian elephants in Nepal finds that mahouts themselves associate being a “good mahout” with specific skills, not just with technical tasks such as feeding and cleaning but with the ability to communicate effectively with their elephant, demonstrating attentiveness, respect, and a close understanding of the elephant’s behaviour, with responsiveness to verbal cues and polite interaction highlighted as key indicators (Mumby 2019).



vey words; it carefully recalibrates them, creating a narrow passage through which the conversation can continue. In that moment, what surfaces is unmistakable: the limits of ethical alignment, the point beyond which shared imaginaries cannot stretch without fraying.

As the car moves slowly, straining to spot an elephant in the dimming light, Ashika leans forward, almost teasingly, and asks, “Do you really know who I am, Gamini?” The weight of the question hangs in the air, probing whether the mahout truly grasps what it means to be an animal rights activist – the responsibilities, the stakes, and how her work intersects with, or even challenges, Gamini’s world. The mahout hesitates, words caught between thought and admission, then finally concedes, “Not exactly.” In that fleeting pause, the car feels smaller, the air taut with unspoken tensions. Though they share the same journey and conversations, the full contours of their moral and professional worlds remain shadowed, only partially illuminated by the dim road ahead.

Just then, an elephant appears, breaking the intensity of the moment. A car in the opposite lane stops to admire the animal: a large tusker only a few meters away. We continue slowly, reducing our speed to maintain a safe distance. At that point, Bob draws on his experience, explaining the elephant’s behaviour and showing us how to approach him safely. As the sight gradually eases, the conversation shifts to what Ashika, Gamini, and Bob know best together: the individual stories, personalities, and anecdotes of each elephant. Names pass between them – elephants transferred, reassigned, recovering, overstressed, in musth – each carrying its own histories of labour and vulnerability. Ashika shifts fluidly between English and Sinhala, conveying Bob’s observations to Gamini and rendering the mahout’s points back into English, keeping the dialogue moving across linguistic and cultural lines. I sit in the car, following the cascade of names and updates: some elephants I know well from months of observation, others are new to me. The conversation flows around habits, temperaments, and the care each elephant requires, with Gamini contributing enthusiastically. He gestures animatedly as he recounts episodes in which elephants have shown acts of insubordination or violence toward their caregivers or the crowd, lingering on the most gruesome details and subtly emphasizing his own skill and prowess as a mahout, having so far avoided such incidents himself. Ashika interjects continuously, weaving into the conversation insights from her ongoing informal animal policing work, collecting information on individual elephants in real time. Meanwhile, Bob repeatedly grounds the discussion in the realities of daily life, the animals’ suffering, and specific care practices, often revealing his preferences for working with certain mahouts he considers more responsive and taking every opportunity to commend Gamini’s attentiveness.



Seated together in the vehicle, intimacy and shared imagination are possible, but only within the narrow confines shaped by unspoken differences and the divergent priorities each brings, the tension of distinct perspectives pressing gently against the small space we share along this stretch of road at night. “Bubbles,” as Ashika would describe them to me the following morning at breakfast – each of these worlds presents itself to the others, yet only partially. Each bubble preserves its own internal logic and invisible boundaries. Much remains unspoken: experiences and knowledge that can only be observed or intuited at the edges, never fully accessible to those outside. In Strathern’s (1991) terms, these are “partial connections,” worlds that touch without ever fully merging. What circulates between these worlds is not consensus, but the practical negotiation of how elephants are to work, and under what ethical terms.

Meanwhile, other solitary forest elephants, briefly illuminated by the headlights of passing cars, move slowly along the roadside, sometimes pausing in the middle of the lane. Each halt forces us to stop, each careful step navigates the obstacles posed by vehicles. They appear as surreal, almost sculptural presences. In these moments, the supposed separation between freedom and captivity seems to collapse: human and elephant lives intersect, negotiated moment by moment, and continuously shaped by one another. As we drive on, the subtle micro-adjustments of the evening linger in our minds, a reminder that the boundaries between these worlds are always partial, never fully graspable, and defined within persistent constraints – highlighting the tensions and contradictions of the intertwined lives of humans and elephants in these hybrid landscapes.

Even in this provisional window of codetermination, the reality of “becoming an elephant” in the Anthropocene (Hathaway 2013; 2015; Bhat, Dundi, Praet, Marvin 2023; Lorimer 2010; 2015) never ends. Saman will soon be prepared for the next Perahera, and in a few months he will leave the camp to join a new temple, re-entering the familiar cycles of ritual work. Gamini will move on as well, taking charge of a female calf at another facility. Bob will follow his own path to Thailand, hopping from one elephant camp to another, country after country, tracing the networks of care and labour that connect these spaces. Ashika will remain in Sri Lanka, revisiting these and other sites, her phone always ready to track the movements of mahouts and elephants. I will follow alongside, drifting from one story to the next, collecting fragments of encounters, gestures, and whispered details. In this ongoing dispersal of humans and elephants alike, labour persists – redistributed, reattached, and redefined across shifting landscapes of captivity.

Conclusions

This article has traced a field of human-elephant labour increasingly defined by movement. Elephants circulate between temples, roadside camps, and tourist venues; mahouts move between animals and employers; and alongside them travel other figures who follow, intercept, and attempt to redirect these trajectories. Ashika tracks elephants and handlers through informal chains of information, positioning herself where transfers occur. Bob moves from one premise to another, carrying techniques, tools, and welfare proposals that depend on access and timing. Circulation here is not abstract mobility but patterned following – a field in which labour, care, and authority are constantly repositioned. Rather than mapping these movements across the island, this article has focused on one nodal site where such trajectories intersect and become visible in practice.

Under these intensified movements, continuity does not disappear, but it becomes unstable. Bonds between elephants and mahouts are forged within compressed temporalities and precarious contracts. Trust must be enacted quickly, sometimes under risk, and may be interrupted by injury, transfer, or managerial decision. What earlier accounts described as durable dyadic attachment (Klixbüll 2016) appears here as something provisional: not absent, but repeatedly reconstructed within infrastructures of ownership, tourism, and regulation. “Labouring together” becomes a situated achievement rather than a background condition.

Ethical transformation, in this landscape, does not arrive through declarative reform. It unfolds through material adjustments: a chain loosened by a few links; a rubber tube tested and resisted; a feeding barrel that redistributes effort between elephant and mahout; a ritual debated but not abandoned. Ashika’s translations keep disagreement in motion rather than resolving it. Bob’s proposals depend on mobility and access rather than institutional authority. Elephants’ responses – hesitation, compliance, refusal – set practical limits to what can be sustained. Sanctuarization does not replace captivity; it reconfigures it. It operates as a process through which labour is redistributed, ethical authority multiplied, and limited zones of autonomy experimentally produced within enduring regimes of infrastructural constraint. Rather than marking a linear shift from exploitation to freedom, sanctuarization intensifies negotiation, rendering visible the contested reorganization of work itself.

Attending to labour reveals that captivity here is less a fixed state than an infrastructural condition that binds actors asymmetrically yet together. Elephants remain tethered within regimes of ownership and visibility; mahouts navigate precarity and proliferating moral expectations; activists and experts



operate through partial, situational influence. Contemporary human-elephant life in Sri Lanka persists within this moving assemblage of constraint and negotiation. It is sustained not by the disappearance of control nor by the triumph of care, but by the ongoing work of staying in relation – link by link, transfer by transfer. These relations persist within the very constraints that make them possible.

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Labour in Flesh and Feathers

Multispecies Mutuality Against Agroindustrial Invisibility

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Abstract: This article explores “more-than-human labour” through multispecies ethnography among small-scale breeders of heritage and rare poultry in Australia. Animals are not passive recipients of care but active participants in agricultural processes, performing metabolic, reproductive, ecological, and affective work that sustains life. Based on one year of participant observation, conducted in Western Australia, Queensland, and New South Wales, the study shows how farmers recognise in their birds will, sensitivity, and agency. Chickens, ducks, and turkeys interact, resist, and shape human gestures, giving rise to hybrid and affective ecologies where care and control intertwine. Rereading rural husbandry through this lens questions the human monopoly over work and value, revealing relational and peripheral economies where humans and nonhumans co-produce life and meaning. Yet these relations remain ambivalent, traversed by asymmetries of domestication and dependency. Tracing six interwoven dimensions of more-than-human labour – metabolic, reproductive, affective, ecological, aesthetic, and political – the paper shows how slow, caring practices in small farms become forms of ethical resistance and regeneration. Valuing these fragile collectives invites us to imagine agricultural policies attentive to interdependence, post-anthropocentric educational paths, and multispecies economies that transform the ruins of capitalism into grounds for shared survival.

Keywords: Multispecies ethnography; More-than-human labour; Degrowth; Australia; Poultry breeds.

Introduction

At dawn, on a small farm near Byron Bay, on Australia’s eastern coast, the day begins with hens scratching among fallen guavas, ducks plunging their bills into the mud, and a rooster crowing into the rising light. These gestures embody the ordinary labour through which life sustains itself, often rendered in-

visible by industrial agriculture. One morning, while helping Lindsay – a poultry breeder whose farm lies near Byron Bay, in New South Wales, where I lived and worked for several months – to clean the pens, he decided to kill one of the roosters that had been selected out of the breeding flock, to be used for consumption. The gesture was quick, practiced, and embedded in routine. A moment earlier the bird had been foraging with other roosters, still performing its quiet metabolic work turning feed into warmth, feathers, and motion. Minutes later, its body would nourish Lindsay and his family, and the remaining parts would return to the compost heap, where heat and microbes would decompose them into fertile soil. In that scene, the continuity of the labour of life became tangible: what the animal had metabolically transformed in life continued to circulate in death, feeding bodies and soils alike.¹



Figure 1. Lindsay killing one rooster for food on his farm (*Photo by Domenico Volpicella*)

¹ Throughout the article, I use the term *animal* to refer to nonhuman animals, in line with the multispecies approach of Despret (2016); Haraway (2008); Kirksey, Helmreich (2010).



This article emerges from those mornings, months of shared routines, smells, and gestures on small farms in different parts of Australia, where humans and birds live and work together. Between 2021 and 2022, I conducted multispecies ethnography in Queensland, New South Wales, and Western Australia, following heritage and rare-breed poultry breeders. The aim of this essay is to reflect on the concept of “*more-than-human labour*” (Barua 2018; Mouret, Lainé 2023) as a lens through which to understand the forms of care, production, and regeneration that emerge within non-industrial farms. In such contexts, labour does not regard only humans but emerges as a process of co-creation that implies what Haraway (2016) calls “*response-ability*”: the capacity to respond and to become responsible together. I use “work” to refer to the broad set of situated practices through which beings sustain everyday life on the farm (feeding, scratching, resting, incubating, composting, cleaning, waiting). I use “labour” more narrowly to designate those practices as socially organized and value-generating activities, activities through which differences in agency, responsibility, and recognition are negotiated across species, and through which certain effects become legible as “productive”.

In this sense, “*more-than-human labour*” does not metaphorize animal life as human work; rather, it names the empirical fact that farm life depends on distributed, interdependent activity performed by birds, humans, soils, microbes, infrastructures, and seasons, and that such activity is actively interpreted, coordinated, and sometimes disciplined by farmers. Likewise, I define value not as a single measure (e.g., profit) but as the plural outcomes through which labour becomes meaningful and consequential in these farms: subsistence and food, soil fertility, continuity of breeds and genealogies, affective well-being, aesthetic distinction, and ethical-political commitments to slowness, care, and biodiversity. Importantly, these values are often invisible from the standpoint of agroindustrial production, where value is typically registered through standardized metrics (growth rate, feed conversion, uniformity, throughput) and through the spatial and temporal scales of integrated supply chains.

Methodological note: multispecies ethnography in practice

This article is based on twelve months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2021 and 2022 in Australia and Italy. The present analysis focuses exclusively on the Australian component of that research. In Australia, I carried out two extended periods of participant observation of approximately six months, living and working alongside heritage and rare-breed poultry breeders in Queensland, New South Wales, and Western Australia. The material pre-

sented here draws on fifteen semi-structured interviews, numerous informal conversations, and extensive fieldnotes produced through daily participation in farm routines (feeding, cleaning, composting, flock management, incubation, and show preparation). Over the course of fieldwork, I directly observed and worked among more than 2,000 individual birds across different farms, breeds, and life stages.

I describe this approach as multispecies ethnography not simply because animals are included in the field, but because they actively shaped research practice. Access to farms required learning to move with birds' rhythms, adjusting bodily gestures to flock dynamics, and participating in seasonal cycles of brooding, feeding, and reproduction. Animals were not treated as symbolic extensions of human narratives but as participants whose actions – resistance, habituation, aggression, cooperation – reoriented daily routines and researcher positioning. Rather than claiming access to animal interiority, the analysis is grounded in repeated observation of embodied interactions and in the material consequences of interspecies coordination.

The concept of “more-than-human labour” engages with scholarship on animal work and animal organization studies (Hamilton, Taylor 2013; Tallberg, Hamilton 2022), which has challenged the assumption that work is an exclusively human domain. This literature demonstrates how animals contribute to value creation and how power operates across species within organized systems of labour. At the same time, multispecies ethnography has foregrounded the methodological and political stakes of studying nonhuman lives (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010; van Dooren 2019). Situating “more-than-human labour” at the intersection of these debates allows this article to examine how labour, value, and agency emerge through interspecies coordination, negotiation, and discipline within small-scale husbandry. Against this background, the following section situates these practices within the broader historical transformation of poultry production under industrial capitalism.

From the ruins of modernization: poultry in the industrial era

The chicken is today the most farmed animal in the world, with over 33 billion individuals (FAO 2025). Since the 1950s, genetic standardization and vertical integration – whereby a small number of corporations control multiple stages of production, from breeding and feed supply to slaughtering and distribution – have reduced the diversity of breeds and practices, turning domestic poultry keeping into a highly concentrated industrial system (Blanchette 2019; Dixon 2004). More than half of the world's traditional poultry breeds have been lost,



replaced by commercial hybrids selected to maximize productive yield in intensive systems (Josephson 2020). This process signals the transformation of animal life into biological efficiency.

In Australia, this process has been particularly rapid and radical. The country has no native poultry breeds: all those existing today were introduced by European settlers starting in 1788 (Peters *et al.* 2022). In the twentieth century, breeders developed local varieties such as the Australorp and the Australian Langshan, now part of Australia's rural biodiversity.² Until the mid-twentieth century, poultry production took place mainly in home backyards and small farms, where hens provided eggs for household consumption and chicken meat was reserved for special occasions (Dixon 2004).³

After the Second World War, rising urban demand led to the adoption of the American model of vertical integration, which transformed poultry farming into an industrial, corporately controlled system (Blanchette 2019). Today, six major companies manage around 90% of the Australian chicken-meat industry, controlling every stage of production, from genetics to feed, slaughtering and packaging, while about 800 contract growers provide the infrastructure and labour.⁴ According to the latest government data, over 750 million chickens are slaughtered annually in Australia, producing more than 1.5 million tonnes of meat and confirming poultry as the country's most consumed animal protein (ABARES 2025). This growth reflects the consolidation of a vertically integrated industry in which a few corporations control most stages of production, leaving small breeders structurally marginal.

In this model, animals are raised as biological machines. Imported commercial genetic lines (like Ross or Cobb) are designed to grow at record speed and convert feed into meat or eggs with maximum efficiency.⁵ Broiler chickens reach slaughter weight – around 2.6-3 kg – in 35-65 days, while laying hens are culled after just over a year, when their productivity declines (RSPCA 2020). Male chicks, having no commercial value, are killed immediately after hatching. Industrial poultry farming reflects a paradigm of agricultural intensification based on genetic standardization, confinement, and technological control, a system that turns living beings into production units and reduces life to a

² See Rare Breeds Trust of Australia, *Poultry Watchlist*, <https://rarebreedstrust.com.au/poultry> (accessed 26/10/2025).

³ See Australian Chicken Meat Federation, *The History of Chicken Meat Production in Australia*, <https://chicken.org.au/history> (accessed 26/10/2025).

⁴ See *Industry Overview*, <https://www.poultryhub.org> (accessed 26/10/2025).

⁵ See *Broiler Production Facts*, <https://chicken.org.au/broiler-production-facts> (accessed 26/10/2025).

measurable flow of inputs and outputs (RSPCA 2022).⁶ Animals become parts of an extractive chain where vitality is pushed to its limit. Yet, at the margins of this productive machine, other stories survive: genealogies of animals and people who continue to work together according to different logics. These are forms of life that resist homogenization and keep alive relations, bodies, and rhythms irreconcilable with the rationality of efficiency. It is from within this agroindustrial capitalism that my research begins; places where life, though embedded within structures of extraction, continues to labour for its own regeneration.

Breeds, genealogies and resistances

Within a poultry sector increasingly shaped by industrial standardization, some poultry breeds still carry the memory of older worlds. They are not the result of recent industrial genetic engineering or corporate-controlled hybridization, but descend from historical lines shaped through long-term selective breeding practices implemented by generations of farmers. While these breeds are also products of artificial selection, they differ from contemporary industrial hybrids in terms of temporal scale, ownership regimes, and the speed and intensity of genetic standardization. These are the poultry populations commonly referred “heritage” and “rare poultry breeds”.

In the *Dictionary of Agroecology* (Derrouch *et al.* 2016), a “breed” is defined as a domestic subspecies selected by humans, whose individuals share similar genotypic and phenotypic characteristics. The term “heritage” refers to those breeds kept before the expansion of industrial agriculture in the 1950s and maintained by breeders who recognize in them ethical, aesthetic, affective, and modest economic value, though one not structured around productivity maximization. “Rare breeds”, instead, are those considered at risk of extinction, regardless of their geographical origin or historical presence in a given country. It is important to note that some breeds, or even specific colour varieties within the same breed, may be rare or endangered in one national context but relatively common in another. This depends on their history of import and export, as well as on the interest and number of breeders who maintain them in a given region. A telling example is that of the *Sicilian chicken*, a native Italian breed still relatively widespread in its country of origin but currently endangered in Australia due

⁶ See *Chicken Farming in Australia*, <https://www.peta.org.au/issues/chicken-farming> (accessed 26/10/2025).



to the extremely small number of breeding individuals and caretakers. In 2024, the *Rare Breeds Trust of Australia* recorded, through its national *Poultry Watchlist* programme, fifteen poultry breeds in the “Critical” category and forty-nine in the “Of Concern” category. These represent the most vulnerable populations within Australia’s poultry heritage, characterized by extremely low reproductive ratios and an almost total dependence on networks of amateur and small-scale breeders. This data reflects the growing fragility of traditional breeding practices, now exposed to the pressure of standardized production models that erode biological diversity and the technical memory of local breeds.

During my fieldwork across Australia, I met breeders of heritage and rare breeds in various regions, from Western Australia to New South Wales and Queensland. They live in rural or peri-urban contexts, caring for animals excluded by modern agriculture. Their motivations vary: preserving biodiversity, love of living forms, connection to land, or resistance to agroindustry. Many of them have another occupations and breeding is often a second activity or a family commitment carried out more for passion than for profit. Their farms are small, their economic margins limited, and their market modest, yet the goal is not growth but continuity: to keep genetic lines, relationships, and landscapes alive. In these spaces one finds geese, ducks, chickens, guinea fowls, turkeys, and other birds that have lived for years alongside their breeders. During fieldwork I worked with various heritage breeds, Australorp, Cochín, Legbar, Frizzle, and others. Together, these animals and their breeders are the protagonists of this article.

Entangled lives: ethnography of shared labour

My research took place within the everyday life of small Australian farms, where I lived and worked alongside the farmers. Every morning I opened pens, scattered feed, and cleaned sheds in the damp darkness, amid the smell of grain and wings. Doing ethnography, in this context, meant participating in work rather than observing it: moving cages, collecting eggs, learning to follow the animals’ rhythm, to know when to wait and when to act. As the days went by, my gestures fell into step with theirs, with the hens scratching in the mud, the ducks moving as a group, the slow breathing of the farms coming to life.

Through this daily work, I began to recognize that what was happening around me was not merely “human work with animals”, but a broader entanglement of actions, energies, and transformations. Work was not simply a productive activity, but a relationship that joined bodies, rhythms, and environments in a vital cooperation, what Barua (2018) and Mouret and Lainé (2023) describe as

more-than-human labour: a metabolic and ecological process in which matter, time, and care move across species, generating forms of continuity and co-dependence. Using the term “labour” here is analytically significant. It foregrounds the fact that these interspecies relations are not merely affective or symbolic, but materially consequential for subsistence, ecological maintenance, and the continuity of breeds. Calling them “labour” makes visible how value and responsibility are distributed across species, and how certain activities come to be recognized – or obscured – as productive.

Following Porcher (2011), animal labour can be understood as a moral and affective cooperation, a shared activity that produces bonds as much as material goods. During my fieldwork, I could observe how this cooperation unfolded in the smallest gestures of daily life. When I entered the pens carrying the feed bucket, the hens would gather around me, following my movements with an almost choreographed precision. Some came close, pecking at my boots or tilting their heads as if to read my intentions; others kept a cautious distance, observing in silence. Over time, the initial wariness gave way to a form of mutual recognition, a tacit understanding of each other’s roles and rhythms. This slow transformation from distance to familiarity made visible what Porcher calls moral and affective cooperation: a relationship built not through language but through repetition, gestures, and shared attention.

Each morning, as I opened and closed the pens, I learned to anticipate their movements, knowing which hen would rush to the gate first, which would wait behind until I stepped aside. The animals, in turn, seemed to read my signals, my posture, my tone of voice, the rhythm of my steps. This mutual attunement was not a symbolic exchange but a form of labour itself: a choreography of care that allowed the fragile system of the farm to hold together. As Despret (2016) reminds us, understanding such relations requires thinking with animals, allowing their presence and initiative to reshape our ways of moving, perceiving, and knowing. I experienced this daily: learning to slow down, to move gently, to respect the temporal and spatial distances that the birds established. Through these small adjustments, work became a shared form of knowledge, a reciprocal learning process in which my gestures were continuously redefined through theirs. In this sense, to speak of animal labour is not to use a metaphor but to make an ethnographic statement: in the farms I observed, animals are not mere biological resources but subjects who, through their actions and responses, actively participate in the material, affective, and moral construction of shared work. It is within this interweaving of practices, times, and relations that more-than-human labour becomes ethnographically tangible: a way of conceiving and living work as co-production of life.



From this perspective, the analysis is articulated around six interdependent dimensions of more-than-human labour that emerged from ethnographic observation, each illuminating a different way in which life works: metabolizing, reproducing, caring, regenerating, representing, and resisting. The first concerns metabolic labour, which sustains life through the transformation of energy and matter, revealing the interdependence of bodies, soils, and nutrients. The second is reproductive labour, in which mating, incubation, and selection shape the genealogical continuity of species and the shared temporalities of care. Affective and therapeutic labour refers to the processes of attention, companionship, and comfort that bind humans and animals, turning the relationship itself into a productive force. Ecological and regenerative labour highlights the active contribution of animals to the repair and maintenance of the environment, while aesthetic and symbolic labour shows how beauty, distinction, and mutual recognition are co-produced by both species. Finally, political and ethical labour embodies slow forms of resistance to agroindustrial time, framing husbandry as a practice of daily opposition to extraction and productive acceleration.

Taken together, these dimensions delineate an ethnography of shared vitality: a way of understanding labour not as an act of domination or appropriation but as a relational practice of coexistence and co-creation. In this view, value – understood as the plural outcomes through which labour becomes consequential in these farms – does not reside in the capacity to produce or extract but in the quality of the relationships that allow life to continue, in the reciprocity, dependency, and care that make the common world possible.

Metabolic labour

In this section I focus on metabolic labour, an often invisible yet fundamental dimension of life within the farms I visited. As Barua (2018) notes, metabolic labour concerns the ways in which life itself, eating, growing, reproducing, and even dying, becomes a productive force. Metabolism, therefore, is not merely a biological process: it is a form of work that transforms matter and energy into forms of value – edible flesh, fertile soil, bodily warmth, reproductive continuity – through which life becomes materially consequential on the farm. This becomes particularly evident in Australian farms dedicated to heritage and rare breeds, where I carried out my fieldwork. The birds were constantly at work, though their labour rarely appeared as such. From the first light of dawn, they scattered across the paddocks and gardens. They scratched the soil for worms, seeds, and scraps, selecting with surprising discernment what to eat. Around the compost

pile, they competed for kitchen scraps, again displaying a selective discernment about what to eat and what to leave. Their movements expressed a subtle intelligence: a hierarchy of preferences shaped by taste, habit, and the social dynamics of the flock. When I threw a handful of grain, the group reacted as one living body, rushing forward, wings half open, beaks clicking against the ground, then gradually dispersing again into individual rhythms. After feeding, they drank, then rested or took dust baths in the shade. These moments of apparent idleness were also forms of labour: through rest, digestion, and preening, the birds transformed what they had consumed into flesh, bone, feathers, and heat. Even sleep was part of this rhythm through which energy circulated and life sustained itself. Tas, a rare poultry breeder in Western Australia, put it simply: “They eat feed, pick at insects and grass, and they have everything” (Harvey, 22/07/2022). Yet this “everything” was not mere consumption but an active collaboration with the land. By grazing and scratching, the birds aerated and fertilized the soil. Their metabolism was also social, shaped by proximity, imitation, and constant negotiation for food and shade. Each gesture, pecking, scratching, bathing, resting, contributed to the circulation of matter and energy across the farm. This activity intertwined with that of other agents – earthworms, microbes, moisture, heat – forming what Barua (2018) calls the “vital work of the earth”, a continuous, distributed transformation through which life itself becomes productive. In my terms, this vital work becomes labour when it is socially organized, recognized, and made consequential within the farm’s regimes of value. Metabolism here is not only physiological but ecological and relational, an ongoing cooperation through which animals, humans, and materials co-produce fertility and energy. This labour, however, is never one-sided.

In common representations, the farmer appears as the sole productive agent, the one who provides care, feed, and infrastructure. Certainly, human work is essential: breeders supply grain, scraps, or space for foraging, water, and medical care. Yet what I observed was a system of co-labour, in which birds worked together with humans, soils, microbes, and plants. Through their own work, they sustained not only their lives but also those of others. From the first days of a chick’s life, metabolism was visible as a transformative force: what entered its body – grain, grass, insects, kitchen scraps – returned as movement, heat, sound, manure, meat, eggs, and, eventually, death and decomposition. While this metabolic process is common to all living beings, what differs across farming systems is the way it is organized, accelerated, or made visible. In small-scale farms, these transformations remain perceptible as cycles of exchange within the farm’s ecology; in industrial systems, they are reorganized within tightly controlled regimes of growth and efficiency, where metabolic processes are intensified and largely abstracted from their ecological contexts.



Figure 2. Heritage turkeys foraging freely around Lindsay's farm (*Photo by Domenico Volpicella*)

Among all expressions of metabolic labour, manure is an everyday and paradigmatic form. For these breeders, manure is not waste but a vital resource that keeps the entire system alive. "The manure goes back into our garden", said Liz, a breeder from Perth. In this simple sentence lies an agricultural logic

grounded in localized cycles of return: manure is composted with plant residues, producing heat and fermentation; after weeks or months, the resulting compost is spread over the same fields and family gardens from which feed and food are drawn.

Of course, manure is also valorized within industrial systems, where it may be processed, transported, sold as fertilizer, or used in biogas production. The difference, therefore, is not whether manure generates value, but at what scale and under which organizational regime this transformation occurs. In small-scale farms, metabolic circulation tends to remain spatially proximate and temporally visible, embedded in cycles that connect birds, soil, crops, and household subsistence. In industrial contexts, by contrast, manure enters extended supply chains and infrastructural systems, where its metabolic transformations are intensified, displaced, and often abstracted from the ecological relations in which they originate. From a theoretical point of view, manure embodies what Barua (2018) calls “metabolic value”: a form of value generated through the flow of matter and energy rather than monetary transaction. Even faeces, therefore, participate in the regenerative labour of life, an invisible but essential work performed by animals, microbes, heat, and decay, which restores fertility to the soil. In this sense, as Krzywoszynska (2020) suggests, microorganisms too perform a kind of microbial “labour”, transforming matter and renewing the soil’s vitality, a cooperation often invisible yet essential to agriculture. This process also unsettles conventional distinctions between waste and resource. In industrial settings, manure is often treated as a management problem to be contained, transported, or processed at scale. Here, by contrast, it is reintegrated into visible cycles of fertility. As Douglas (2002) reminds us, dirt is “matter out of place”: manure becomes “waste” only within specific classificatory regimes. In these farms, its reclassification as compost reveals how metabolic labour depends not only on biological transformation but also on symbolic and organizational arrangements that define what counts as value and what counts as excess.

Metabolic labour, however, does not end with life but continues after death. I recall an episode one morning at Lindsay’s farm, the breeder in New South Wales with whom I lived and worked for three months. That day we were to clean the henhouses near the main house, where Lindsay kept his most beautiful specimens. Yet he had noticed for some time that one old rooster was unwell. Old and weak, he was pushed down by a younger male. As we cleaned one of the pens, Lindsay took the old rooster and decided to kill him to make space and avoid wasting feed. He laid the body on a large pile of manure and straw that we had accumulated in previous days. In the following days, smoke rose from the pile as the rooster’s body decomposed. Lindsay knew that in a



few weeks it would have turned into compost, later used to fertilize his vegetable garden, which provided most of his fruit and vegetables for the year. The animal's body returns to the earth, merging with other organic matter and once again participating in the world's metabolic labour. Composting becomes a practice of "becoming-with" (Haraway 2016), through which death re-enters the metabolism of life. Through this daily and corporeal metabolism – the transformation of waste into life, of decay into nourishment – animals enact what Barua (2018) calls "the vital work of the earth".

Reproductive labour

In farms dedicated to heritage and rare breeds, reproduction represents one of the most complex and shared forms of labour between humans and animals: a vital process that intertwines control and contingency, technique and affection. In this sense, reproductive labour can be read not only as the generation of new life, but as part of what Stefania Barca (2020) calls the "forces of reproduction": those practices that sustain the biophysical and relational conditions of life itself, often marginalized within capitalist regimes centered on productivity and growth.

Breeding flocks are typically composed of one or two roosters and around ten hens per male. The dominant rooster constantly supervises the group, calling the hens when he finds food, chasing away intruders, and maintaining order among rivals. His labour is incessant: he mates in turn with the hens of his harem, spending his days in a choreography of vigilance, fatigue, and assertion. The subordinate males linger at the margins of the pen, waiting for a brief lapse in attention – a shadow, a distraction – to attempt a furtive copulation. Sometimes they succeed: a flurry of wings, a sharp cry, and the dominant rooster dashes across the yard, chasing the offender until he retreats to the edge of the fence. These moments – brief, bodily, intense – are also part of reproductive labour: energy spent, hierarchies negotiated, and the social fabric of the flock continually remade through conflict and desire. Desire here does not simply denote instinctual drive, but what Andreas Weber (2019) describes as the inherent tendency of living beings to unfold through relational encounter – a vital tension through which life seeks connection and transformation.

Farmers observe these dynamics with interest and precision. In many farms, individuals are separated by breed and selected according to morphological standards – colour, size, posture, feather quality. Roosters deemed unfit for reproduction are isolated in separate pens awaiting slaughter, while genealogical lines are carefully recorded, forming a living archive that runs through bodies

and generations. Most breeders rely on incubators, which allow them to control temperature, humidity, and hatching times, making birth more predictable and reducing losses. As Franklin (2007) notes, the generation of life is thus partially displaced from bodies to infrastructures: the incubator becomes a technology of governance that imitates maternal warmth and the cyclical rhythms of life, transforming reproduction into a manageable process, though not one devoid of relation.

Liz, who runs a heritage-breed farm near Perth, perfectly embodies this technical rationality. Each morning she collects the eggs, cleans them, catalogues them, and places them in incubators, meticulously noting data and genealogies. Her work is made of methodical gestures repeated every day. Reproduction here is a labour of precision and attentiveness, in which life is carefully attended to rather than simply controlled. Following Ingold (2022), to attend is not merely to monitor but to place oneself in exposure to what unfolds, allowing action to be guided by the rhythms and responses of the living beings involved. The breeders' vocabulary itself reflects this genealogical attention: line breeding, bloodline, strain. Each knows their lines as the branches of a family tree. Every choice – which rooster to pair, which egg to keep or discard – requires time, sensitivity, and observation, but also endurance, loss, and failure. As Wilkie (2010) notes, animal breeding belongs to a moral economy in which efficiency and care are tightly interwoven. A hen that stops laying, a rooster that fails to fertilize, a chick born weak, each of these moments opens a negotiation with the limits of life. Yet even within this architecture of control, animals maintain a degree of autonomy. Some hens, especially among traditional breeds, still retain their brooding instinct, whereas commercial hybrids have largely lost it. Egg laying is a daily work dependent on bodily and environmental factors rather than any human schedule. In small farms devoted to heritage breeds, reproduction is not a strictly programmed process but one largely entrusted to the rhythms and volitions of the animals themselves.

Within this panorama of practices and controls, the case of Kevin shows a different approach. Kevin told me he does not use incubators because he wants reproduction to occur naturally, through the hens' brooding. "I do one sitting a year", he said, explaining that he lets the hens brood only once a year, without forcing them or resorting to artificial means. "Mine would only lay a group of eggs to sit on, then I stop. I don't use incubators. I want them to raise their chickens naturally". He admitted that it is not always easy – "It's difficult sometimes" – but he prefers to respect the seasonal and biological rhythms of the animals. "They make 15 eggs over a month and I make them sit on six. The other 11 months they don't lay" (Harvey, 23/07/2022). He ac-



Figure 3. Orpington chickens forming a small breeding flock from which Lindsay will raise all future generations of the breed (*Photo by Domenico Volpicella*)

cepts that the hens determine the timing of reproduction rather than himself. The refusal of the incubator, in his case, is not merely an ethical choice but a way of giving voice to the hens, allowing them to “say when” and “how” to reproduce, as Despret (2016) would suggest, inviting us to consider animals not as objects of production but as subjects capable of responding and co-determining the situations in which they live. In Kevin’s practice, reproduction becomes a form of interspecific dialogue, a subtle coordination between bodies, seasons, and intentions.

At the same time, his approach embodies what Porcher and Estebanez (2019) define as “co-reproductive labour”: a shared work between humans and animals in which the breeder does not control production but accompanies it, accepting failures and slowness as integral parts of the vital process. Reproduction can be read as a hybrid practice in which human, animal, and environment cooperate in an ecological and domesticated form of technique. Temperature, light, seasonal rhythm, and food availability become part of the labour itself, configuring a relational system that binds matter, care, and time. Overall, reproductive labour in these farms reveals the constant tension between control and participation, between the human desire to guarantee breed continuity and the autonomous vitality of animals that eludes all planning. As Besky and Blanchette (2023) observe, this fragility of work is the very condition of multi-species labour: reproduction is an activity exposed to risk, loss, and unpredictability, yet precisely for that reason capable of generating meaning and relation. Within this shared precarity between incubators, bodies, and seasons life continues to produce itself as collaboration, despite (and through) the human attempt to govern it, revealing reproduction not merely as a technical process but as a contested terrain between forces of production and forces of reproduction (Barca 2020).

Affective and care labour

The affective and caring labour of animals reveals itself in the smallest details of everyday coexistence. On the farms I visited, hens, ducks, and sheep are not merely recipients of care but agents of reciprocal attention. Danniell, a middle-aged breeder from Western Australia, told me that her ducks became vital companions when she fell ill. “They give you something to get up for”, she said. During that difficult period, it was the ducks – their calls and movements – that restored her desire to rise. “If I didn’t have them, I probably wouldn’t have got up from bed”, she told me. “Once I was outside, I felt better... They’re good for your mental health; if I didn’t have them, it would have been harder”.

Now working again as a nurse, she contrasts the noise of the ward with the quiet rhythm of her animals: “Too many people, too much pain. I prefer the company of nature and myself” (Harvey, 03/07/2022). In this daily exchange, made of ordinary gestures and silent presences, the ducks not only depend on her but also sustain her emotionally, giving back balance and a sense of purpose. Coulter (2016) describes this interdependence as a continuum of human-animal labour, in which affective work is shared and staying alive becomes a collective activity. Danniell’s ducks work in the full sense of the term: their vitality, their demand for attention, the daily obligation they impose on their caretaker all constitute a form of affective labour that produces tangible effects, the movement of the body, the return to light, the continuity of living. They are not passive, they actively participate in maintaining the relationship, taking care of the human as much as she takes care of them.

Danniell’s experience is not unique. Stuart, a forty-five-year-old breeder from Karrakup, told me something strikingly similar. After years of illness and personal loss, his birds kept him anchored. “When I got very sick, it was the birds that stopped me from giving up”, he said. “They gave me purpose to get up” (Karrakup, 19/07/2022). His words echo Danniell’s: the daily demands of feeding, cleaning, and checking on the animals turn care into a form of therapy. As Barua (2018) reminds us, animals too labour affectively: they generate energy, meaning, and value through circuits of attention, companionship, and comfort. Their capacity to affect and be affected is itself productive, a way of keeping the world in motion. Care thus becomes a more-than-human productive force: a mode of inhabiting the economy of life that refuses the separation between material and emotional production. Niki, a breeder of Fayoumi chickens in Western Australia, speaks of her flock in a tone of deep familiarity: “They are my family... My animals are my joy, my passion, my life” (Harvey, 03/07/2022). When she says that “they purr when you massage their combs”, an embodied intimacy emerges, in which care is not one-directional. The animals respond, recognize, and demand. Their reactions, the vibrating, the approaching, the seeking of contact, are acts of care, genuine gestures of attention toward those who look after them. As Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) writes, these practices constitute matters of care: material and affective forms of sustaining life that generate shared worlds of vulnerability and tenderness. Animals not only receive care but also exercise it, through presence and relation, transforming dependence into reciprocity. As feminist theorists remind us (Federici 2012; Mies 1986), invisible care sustains all production. Extending this insight beyond the human, these farms show how care itself becomes multispecies work, a continuum of attention and maintenance that holds life together.



Figure 4. CJ (Judy's friend) playing with ducks (*Photo by Domenico Volpicella*)

Yet this affective proximity is not universal. Not all farmers see animals as companions or healers. Even in the most affectively charged relationships, animals remain embedded in systems of ownership, hierarchy, and mortality. The difference lies not in the absence of production or death, but in how these conditions are negotiated, justified, and lived. In my research I showed that relations between humans and animals unfold along a continuum of conviviality (Volpicella 2024): at one end, animals are resources; at the other, they are kin. Most farms fall somewhere in between, where affection, utility, and power coexist. Breeders often describe their role as stewardship or responsibility: they provide food, space, and protection; the animals, in turn, provide companionship and rhythm. Yet this reciprocity is never symmetrical.

As Wilkie (2010) notes, the social contract between humans and livestock is unequal, though within it forms of recognition and care still emerge. Many breeders are aware of this ambivalence. The same gestures that express care – feeding, protecting, naming – also reinforce dependence and hierarchy. As several told me, their animals “deserve a good life” yet remain “under our responsibility”. Even where affection and respect are central, agency is still drawn by human hands. These examples reveal the moral complexity of care. Within relationships of affection, power never disappears: it is reconfigured through routine and maintenance. The farmer decides the conditions of life and reproduction. Love and control coexist within the same ethical landscape. As Haraway (2008) observes, to care is to become entangled in obligations that never guarantee equality. In this sense, affective and care labour among these multispecies collectives does not erase power but reconfigures it.

The examples of Danniell and Stuart show how animals participate in sustaining human life affectively; response-ability, however, points to a broader ethical orientation: a commitment to remain accountable to the vulnerabilities and dependencies that structure these relations (Haraway 2016). It is not simply mutual comfort, but an ongoing negotiation of obligation and care within unequal conditions. The farm becomes a space where labour and care merge, sustaining life through mutual yet uneven acts of giving and receiving. Daily care is thus not only maintenance but kin-making: a way of creating situated relations that hold worlds together through response. “We become-with each other or not at all”, writes Haraway (Ivi, p. 4). Animals that work affectively teach humans how to respond, how to pay attention, how to stay. In their willingness to share life and participate in its daily maintenance, they become true companion species, co-creators of families and connections built on the ongoing practice of making life together.

Ecological and regenerative labour

In the Australian farms I visited, ecological labour is not an abstract concept but a daily practice embodied in the relationships between humans and animals. Ducks, hens, and turkeys actively participate in the maintenance of the land, transforming production into a regenerative process. The farmers do not simply describe an agricultural activity, but a coexistence: a way of working *with* animals, in which care, fertility, and survival are shared. In this sense, animal labour manifests itself as a form of “*ecological cooperation*”, an entanglement of gestures, sensitivities, and intelligences that keep the landscape alive.

Judy walks with me along the fence as her hens scratch the moist earth, opening small furrows between sheep manure and blades of grass. She talks without stopping, pointing out with her hand the rotation of the paddocks, the coexistence of other animals (cattle and sheep) and poultry, the almost choreographic precision with which the animals move in space. “With the rotation it gets fertilized and they get rested. Also multispecies: we have cattle and sheep, you can keep much lower worm population. The chooks when you let them out they scratch the manure, it all works together” (Glenlyon, 27/05/2022). Her description is not that of a production process, but of a moving ecosystem. The animals do not work *for* her, but *with* her. In their actions – grazing, scratching, fertilizing – a shared labour emerges, one that maintains the vital cycles of the soil. In Tsing’s (2015) terms, one could say that what is produced here is “*life in the ruins*”: an economy of reciprocal survival, where regeneration arises from multispecies collaboration rather than total human control. In Judy’s words, animal labour appears as a daily activity of ecological repair. The hens “scratching the manure” break the soil’s crust and reactivate the cycle of matter; the sheep and cows, alternating on the pastures, maintain a microbial balance that regenerates grass and reduces parasites.

This ecological cooperation takes different forms across farms. In Megan’s farm, too, animal vitality is part of a regenerative economy. “The turkeys... They free range all the time, they never get locked up. They do eat a lot of grass, eat bugs. I have no ticks on the dogs since I had the turkeys”, she tells me with a smile, as a group of ducks slowly crosses the orchard. “Utilizing ducks in orchard, they eat the bugs, you’re not feeding them with commercially grown grain crops. It’s fabulous. It cuts down a lot of things. You don’t poison anything”. In this landscape, animals perform an invisible yet essential labour: they hold together economy, ecology, and affectivity. Their presence reduces pesticide use, increases soil fertility, and contributes to a form of *situated sustainability*, rooted in the rhythms of the land and in species behaviour.

Here, ecological labour is not delegated to technology but distributed among organisms acting in synergy. Animal actions – eating, grazing, digging – are not viewed as instinctive behaviours but as forms of *agency*, a capacity to modify the world in intentional and creative ways. As Despret (2016) argues, animals not only respond, they propose worlds taking part in a shared construction of possibilities. Megan’s ducks, turkeys, and hens, through their habits and preferences, actively shape the form of the farm. What emerges is a network of productive and affective co-dependencies that recalls a conception of labour as *relation*, not as command.



Figure 5. Guinea fowls in Stuart’s garden. They are highly valued for their ability to naturally control ticks and other pests (Photo by Domenico Volpicella)

As mentioned earlier, many of these farms also reuse animal manure as compost for gardens and vegetable plots, closing the cycle of fertility and reinforcing the metabolic continuity between bodies, soil, and food. This practice recalls what Krzywoszynska (2019) calls soil care: an ecology of regeneration in which living beings, human and nonhuman alike, participate in the maintenance and renewal of the earth through material and ethical forms of cooperation. These animals, by transforming waste into humus, embody this form of *care work* that unites maintenance, the refusal of waste, and the construction of a future. The animals teach, through their gestures, that to work does not mean to extract value but to maintain the conditions for life. As Tsing (2015) suggests, collaboration is work across difference, without a promise of harmony. This differential and imperfect labour – between human hands and hooves, between feathers and roots – is what holds the world together each day, in silent cooperation.

Aesthetic and Symbolic Labour

Australian poultry shows are not merely rural spectacles but spaces where life becomes visible through the joint work of humans and animals. It is still dark when Niki leaves home: “I came with a lot of birds today... I’ve driven a couple of hours, started at 5am. It’s a day out and it’s enjoyable”. Behind the lightness of their words lies a process of preparation that lasts weeks: feathers washed, legs cleaned, cages polished. Yet the final form is not solely the work of human hands. “They’re getting used to the show prep now, with the bathing”, Niki explains (Harvey, 03/07/2022). The animals learn to be touched, to remain still, to collaborate. Their calm is a learned response, a form of labour that translates relationship into gesture. During the shows, animal work becomes manifest. The bodies, lined up in rows, breathe under artificial lights; every taut feather, every maintained posture is the result of continuous activity.

Kevin, who breeds Modern Game Bantams, states clearly: “I feed mine strict diet to stop them getting fatter and to keep their feathers in good condition... They know who I am, they wait for me in the morning, if they see me the roosters would crow” (Harvey, 23/07/2022). The hens and roosters work with him, regulating their metabolism, learning to display themselves, adapting their senses and muscles to the human rhythm. This *labour of appearance* – the work of seeming – is performed by their living bodies: feathers that regenerate, calluses that form, resistances that adapt to the cage. Unlike metabolic labour, which concerns the transformation of matter and energy within ecological cycles, aesthetic labour operates at the level of visibility and recognition. It is the work through which living bodies become legible, evaluated, and distinguished

within shared regimes of taste and judgment. As Bennett (2010) suggests, matter does not simply exist but exerts force and presence; in poultry shows, this vitality becomes oriented toward display and evaluation. The animal body here is not only metabolically active but aesthetically disciplined and publicly exposed as a bearer of value.



Figure 6. Niki with one of her Egyptian Fayoumi rooster (*Photo by Domenico Volpicella*)

The shows, held across every Australian state, represent the peak of this entanglement. Judges and breeders gather to evaluate which animal best embodies the breed standard. The prize measures not only the breeder's skill but also the animal's ability to sustain the form, to embody it until it becomes a way of being. To reach that point, many birds travel for hours, often on an empty stomach: "They can't have a drink or eat until the judging is finished. For such a small bird with high metabolism they need to drink and eat all the time" (Harvey, 23/07/2022), Kevin continues. Their beauty is muscular and sensory labour, a form of embodied discipline. As in care labour, here too the relation materializes through the body: a choreography of training, trust, and endurance. Grosz (2008) writes that aesthetics, in nature, is a "generative excess of life", a vital energy that expresses itself as form. In this sense, the glossy feathers or proud bearing are not ornaments but the result of a biological and behavioural work that makes survival itself possible.

Tas, eighty years old, breeder of Cochins and Leghorns, proudly shows me his creations: "I created the Silver Duckwing Leghorns... By years and years of in-breeding I managed to have yellow legs in my Cochins" (Harvey, 22/07/2022). Yet that genealogy, which for him is a work of dedication and patience, is also the work of the animals. They are the ones who brood, who generate, who transmit. Every bloodline is a bodily archive, a heritage made of feathers, bones, and life cycles.

Drawing on Van Dooren's (2014) reflections on the generational work required to keep species going, we might understand this as a labour of continuity, that is the daily work of keeping life going, of making it endure through relationships, care, and repetition. In this sense, genealogy is not merely a tree extending through time but a multispecies knot of shared temporalities (Rose 2011). Rather than a fixed structure branching from an origin, genealogy can be understood – following Ingold (2007; 2011; 2015) – as a line in movement: a trajectory continuously generated through practice, attention, and embodied engagement. Lines, for Ingold, are not abstract connections but lived paths formed through the ongoing activity of beings. Each new clutch, then, is not simply the extension of a pedigree but the continuation of a line that must be actively sustained – through mating, brooding, feeding, selecting, and exhibiting. Genealogy becomes less a diagram of descent than a weaving of interdependent life-lines, where humans and animals co-produce temporal continuity through shared labour. Extinction, conversely, represents the breaking of these threads – the loss of a temporal coexistence that sustains the living world. The breeds that survive are those able to persist through time, keeping their relational lines active. To be standard is not only to be beautiful, but to continue



Figure 7. Rare breed poultry show in Western Australia (*Photo by Domenico Volpicella*)



participating in this shared knot of life, ensuring the persistence of the species within the human world.

In this context, the survival of rare breeds depends on their aesthetic conformity. To be beautiful, to adhere to the standard, means to continue existing. Animals that best embody the form are preserved, reproduced, exhibited; the others are excluded or eliminated. Aesthetics thus becomes an ontological condition, a criterion of life and death. Aesthetic evaluation thus becomes a selective force, shaping which lines are allowed to continue and which are allowed to disappear. “To be beautiful” is therefore not a privilege but a form of labour that allows one to remain in the world. Life itself, as Rose (2011) suggests, defends its continuity through relations of care and attention toward others, and in these fairs, animals turn toward life through form, through the language of colour, posture, and song. This genealogical and sensorial work is not simply a celebration of form but a negotiation between vitality and standardization. The ideal does not pre-exist in nature; it is a projection articulated through human regimes of evaluation and desire. Yet it cannot be realized without the active participation of animal bodies. As Ingold (2013) reminds us, form does not pre-exist making, but emerges through process. In poultry shows, this process unfolds within a selective and hierarchical framework: animals co-produce the form through their embodied capacities, even as that form is measured, disciplined, and constrained by human standards. Their labour, then, is neither pure autonomy nor mere submission, but participation within a regime that both enables and limits their continuity.

Political Labour

On the farms I visited, politics was not expressed through protest or discourse but through gestures, through the slow work of keeping beings alive. Every act of feeding, cleaning, or composting became an act of resistance to the logic of industrial productivity. Judy, a breeder from Queensland, put it simply:

My work on the farm, my goal is... It's not all about money and life should not be all about money. Of course money is important, but mostly it's teaching other people about these old breeds. I get a lot of satisfaction from helping people start up new breeds, or just being able to eat my own produce and animals (Glenlyon, 27/07/2022).

Her words capture a form of political labour grounded in care and sufficiency. Yet “care” here is not univocal. It is directed both toward individual animals – their well-being, rhythm, and life conditions – and toward the continuity of the

breed as an ideal and collective form. This dual orientation reveals an inherent tension: caring for living beings sometimes overlaps with caring for lineage, standard, and preservation. Political labour, in this context, does not resolve this tension but inhabits it, negotiating between affection for singular animals and commitment to the survival of the breed. Together with her sheep and chickens, Judy builds what Gibson-Graham (2006) call an economy of enough: a livelihood based on maintenance rather than extraction. Her hens, through their eggs and compost, work with her and with the land – a small alliance of survival and reciprocity. In these worlds, as Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) and Tronto (2013) remind us, care is not a private disposition but a form of political work, a practice of maintaining the conditions for collective life.

Danniell, who breeds endangered ducks, told me: “They’re endangered, critically. We don’t want the breed to disappear and not be around anymore” (Harvey, 03/07/2022). Yet what disappears is never an abstract breed as such, but the ongoing chain of living individuals who embody it. A breed exists only insofar as successive bodies hatch, grow, reproduce, and die. The preservation of a breed is therefore always enacted through the lives – and deaths – of particular animals. In this reciprocity of survival, animal labour becomes ethical not in an abstract sense of “life” as such, but in the effort to sustain a particular lineage through time. What is kept going is not life in general, but a specific configuration of life, a breed shaped by human selection, attachment, and standardization. The ethical claim thus lies in the attempt to prevent disappearance, even though this prevention unfolds through the selective reproduction and culling of individual bodies. Care becomes an ethical attention, a politics of living-with (van Dooren 2019). Yet this work is never only human.

The animals themselves, through their gestures and temporalities, subvert the logic of efficiency. On small-scale farms, the rhythms of feeding, brooding, dying, and decomposing introduce other temporalities – those of compost, rest, and slowness. Here animal labour becomes political in the deepest sense: it produces alternative ontologies of value. Slow-growing breeds such as Australorps or Leghorns embody this temporal resistance, challenging industrial obsession with speed and profit. In intensive systems, value is measured in days: a commercial broiler reaches slaughter weight in five weeks; here, a traditional chicken takes six or seven months. This slowness is not inefficiency but a moral choice: a way to resist extraction and stay within care. “Our birds take their time”, Judy told me. “They’re slower, but they live well. They have a life, they grow with the seasons” (Glenlyon, 27/07/2022). This temporal generosity, however, does not apply equally to all bodies. Birds that fail to meet the breed standard are often separated and eventually slaughtered. Yet even in these cases, their life unfolds over months rather than

weeks, within open paddocks rather than industrial sheds. This slowness, as Kallis (2018) notes, produces a form of temporal justice: value measured by duration rather than speed, by regenerative rather than extractive rhythms. As Povinelli (2016) argues, late liberal capitalism governs the distinction between life and nonlife by controlling biological time – shortening it, optimizing it, accelerating it. Slow-growing animals, on the other hand, inhabit time as resistance: they stretch its duration, forcing humans to wait, to follow the rhythm of breath and brooding. In these practices of waiting and letting go, the political labour of animals takes the form of mutual education: humans learn to work *with* time, not against it. Yet these scenes of care and coexistence should not be mistaken for harmony.

As Fair and McMullen (2023) remind us, nonhuman labour can be profoundly alienating: it unfolds within asymmetric relationships in which affection and discipline are intertwined. Animal labour is often sustained by subtle forms of control – confinement, selection, culling – practices that express both care and domination. Hribal (2010) has shown that animals can also resist these structures, refusing commands, escaping enclosures, disrupting productivity. Even in affective or small-scale contexts, living together requires negotiation, and sometimes, conflict. There is tenderness in these relationships, but also fatigue, repetition, and loss. Mies (1986) already warned that reproductive and affective labours – whether human or nonhuman – can become the hidden foundations of extractive systems. Recognizing these contradictions does not negate the ethical strength of multispecies mutuality but sees it as a fragile achievement: a daily balance between care and coercion, dependence and freedom. As Fair and McMullen (2023) argue, animal labour unfolds within alienated conditions of control and confinement. Yet the breeders I met inhabit its margins, recomposing alienation through care and slowness, transforming necessity into ethical attention. Their animals continue to work – they lay, reproduce, die – but in ways that re-establish a partial relationship between life and value.

In this partial reappropriation, one can recognize an ethics of *degrowth*: a moral economy that separates value from output, and life from the imperative of growth (D’Alisa, Demaria, Kallis 2015; Kallis 2018). As Mouret and Lainé (2023) write, more-than-human labour makes the limits of productivity visible and opens the possibility of slow economies founded on co-dependence and maintenance. Within this alternative temporality – made of seasons, brooding, and composting cycles – emerges an ethics of reciprocity: animals are not resources to be optimized, but companions in shared labour against the cult of productivity. It is a fertile, not passive, slowness, a rhythm that generates attention, relationship, and vitality. Haraway (2016)



invites us to “*stay with the trouble*”: to remain with the difficulties, to keep weaving ties even within collapse. The political labour of animals resides precisely here, in this uneasy co-presence. Their shared world is made of moral choices and daily gestures, but also of micropolitics of degrowth and sufficiency: recycling, self-production, mutual maintenance, reduction of ecological impact. “I just want to leave zero footprint”, says one of the farmers, “be self-sufficient”. Here, sustainability is not an abstract project but a lived relationship, a domestic economy of interdependence. Within this network, animals are not objects but political workers. Through their resistance, their slowness, their unruly vitality, they disrupt the logic of profit. Their ethical labour lies in keeping a common world open, however small or fragile. Tsing (2015) states that living is collaborative survival in the ruins of capitalism. Precisely among those ruins – amid clean cages, manure, nests, and heaps of compost – the political labour of animals takes shape, a practice of coexistence that builds the future, one slow life at a time. If invisibility is the fate of animal labour under industrial capitalism, these farms make it tangible again, transforming the hidden work of life into a visible practice of care, resistance, and regeneration.

Conclusion

Writing about *more-than-human* labour means returning to what keeps life moving, to the gestures, rhythms, and residues that hold the world together. In the Australian farms where I carried out my research, labour takes forms that elude economic and productivist language. It is not labour that generates surplus, but that which keeps the soil alive, accompanies the slow growth of a breed, transforms waste into fertility, creates bonds and families. In these peripheral worlds, where capital arrives mostly through its absence, labour becomes metabolism: a circulation of energy, matter, and care among humans, animals, and microbes. Farmers, and the hundreds of birds around them, form collectives of survival. Their daily gestures do not reproduce the logic of production: they silently deactivate it. Their hens occupy an ambivalent position: they are at once biological instruments within projects of breed preservation and living partners in regenerative ecologies.

It is precisely this tension – between instrumentality and relationality – that defines the political stakes of more-than-human labour. Manure, brooding, the death of a rooster, everything enters a choreography of life in which nothing is wasted. It is the invisible labour that allows life to continue, it is diffuse, unquantified, yet vital. Reflecting on more-than-human labour reveals that

human work has always been shared, porous, and dependent. These experiences make it visible: human bodies depend on the rhythm of eggs, the warmth of compost, the slow metabolism of others, the presence and beauty of the nonhumans. Living among animals, accepting slowness, sharing the fatigue of daily care, these are not metaphors but forms of work. *To stay with the trouble*, as Haraway (2016) writes, means learning to live and think with the heat, the smell, and the friction of matter. During fieldwork, my own body also became part of this metabolism. I carried cages, cleaned waterers, felt the same fatigue that shaped the breeders' gestures. Ethnography, then, is not just a description of labour but a continuation of labour by other means, another form of invisible work that transforms observation into relation, note-taking into care. Writing, too, is composting: letting words ferment with memories, smells, and affections until they return as stories capable of nourishing thought.

What these farmers and their animals do is neither romantic nor nostalgic, it is political. Within their silent persistence lies an alternative economy, one that rejects accumulation and invests instead in continuity. They preserve breeds, repair soils, transform decay into nourishment. Through them, animal labour becomes a politics of maintenance: the art of keeping life alive. Against a system that extracts value from every living and nonliving thing (Povinelli 2016), their worlds insist on another form of vitality, slower, more fragile, yet enduring. In the end, *more-than-human* labour is not an extension of human labour: it is its foundation. It is the silent effort of bodies and elements that keep the world in motion even when no one is watching, even when no one pays. Invisible not because it lacks value, but because it unsettles the very categories through which value is seen. Against the abstraction of agro-industrial economy, these farms make visible what usually remains hidden: the incessant labour of living and dying well together.

Perhaps anthropology, by staying close to these lives, can learn to work in the same way, not to dominate or to explain, but to repair, to give back, and to remind us that life, in its material density, never ceases to work upon us as well. Working with nonhumans in these peripheral worlds also means inheriting and reworking the ruins of plantation time, the long histories of extraction that have disciplined both species and soils. Yet what I observed are not purified escapes from these histories, but new entanglements in the making: gestures through which humans and nonhumans, compost and care, transform ruins into habitable grounds.

As Tsing (2015) writes, in the ruins of capitalism, ferality becomes a form of labour, the labour of living otherwise within domination. By valuing these fragile collectives of humans and animals, we can also begin to imagine other futures



of work, futures where labour is no longer defined by extraction, efficiency, or accumulation, but by reciprocity, maintenance, and shared endurance. The multispecies assemblages described here show that political imagination does not only emerge from resistance or protest, but from the material and affective negotiations that sustain life in the everyday. Their practices invite us to rethink the very boundaries of economy and ecology, revealing that production is always co-production, that every act of labour is also a relation. In this sense, more-than-human labour provides not only an analytical lens but a practical horizon for reconfiguring the sociomaterial conditions of coexistence. These small Australian farms demonstrate that value can be generated through care, slowness, and repair, through the ethical attention that binds living beings and landscapes. Recognizing this opens concrete possibilities for transformation: new agricultural policies attentive to interdependence and to the metabolic work of animals, new educational and institutional frameworks capable of acknowledging nonhumans as co-workers, and alternative economies grounded in regeneration rather than accumulation. These multispecies collectives remind us that regeneration – ecological, ethical, and political – always begins from the shared labour of living together. Through these slow and interdependent practices, mutuality itself becomes a form of political imagination, a way of envisioning economies grounded in repair, reciprocity, and shared endurance. In doing so, anthropology can act as a practice of public care, making visible the fragile labours that sustain the world and opening spaces for alternative, multispecies economies of the future.

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Outside the Henhouse

Ethnography of poultry labour on a neo-rural farm

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Abstract: In industrial poultry systems, animal subjectivity is fully subordinated to the logic of productive efficiency: hens are confined, monitored, hybridized, and rendered vulnerable on multiple levels – immunological, spatial, and reproductive. According to Keck (2020), the biopolitical infrastructures created in the name of biosecurity often generate the very crises they claim to prevent, as in the case of avian influenza. While epidemics expose the limits of such systems, the concept of spillover has been used in anthropology to emphasize the entanglement among companion species (Barad 2007; Haraway 2003).

Building on this paradigm, the article presents an ethnographic reflection on a neo-rural farm (van der Ploeg 2009) in the Sabina region of central Italy, where laying hens live outdoors day and night, without a coop and in contact with wild fauna. The absence of centralized control allows animals to reclaim body, time, and space, expressing a situated ethology that enables a form of autonomous, recognized labor. Within a broader inquiry into contemporary neo-rurality (Giancristofaro, Villa 2023), this study explores the practical implications of an ontological reconfiguration of non-human labor (Povinelli 2016).

By blurring the boundaries between domestic and wild, the farmers cultivate practices of care extended to all species inhabiting the landscape – plants, predators, microbes – assuming responsibility for the local biocenosis. Participant observation reveals how non-human work operates as a relational and metabolic process, challenging anthropocentric notions of productivity and efficiency. Ethnography thus returns non-human labor as an ethological re-emergence that interweaves affective, ecological, and metabolic dimensions of production, suggesting applications in agro-ecology, animal welfare, and multispecies cohabitation policies.

Keywords: Multispecies; Poultry; Avian; Biocenosis; Ecology



Introduction

Gallus gallus domesticus – the avian species we encounter daily in multiple forms, from the free-ranging bird to the packaged commodity – today stands as a privileged prism through which to observe the posture of human activities and their environmental consequences (Bennett *et al.* 2018). Its evolution, biology, geographical distribution, and the archaeology of its bones¹ compose a vibrant archive that powerfully reveals the socio-spatial dynamics of extraction, overproduction, and exploitation that sustain the current agricultural and ecological crisis (Coles 2022; Guthman 2015; Schrager 2022) on a global scale (Nally, Taylor 2015; Patel 2013).

It is unsurprising that anthropology finds in this bird a fertile object of inquiry, as well as in the multiple relational forms through which we engage with it (Whyte 2022). Historically, the chicken has participated in networks of exchange among humans, mediated relations between the human and the divine, and – thanks to the epistemological impulses of the ontological turn – can now be conceived as a relational partner within a fully interspecific framework. This relationship extends beyond mere value extraction, highlighting the implications of coexistence based on reciprocity and co-dependence.

Within current debates about the definition of our historical-cultural (and geological) epoch, turning our gaze to the internal metabolism of the chicken – with its specific vulnerabilities, pathologies, and possibilities for life or disease – becomes a way to interrogate the external metabolisms that envelop it. The chicken thus operates as a mirror reflecting the extractivist and neo-colonial modalities through which we continue to relate to nonhuman alterity (Bennett *et al.* 2018; Coles 2022). Such alterity, implicated in metabolic, productive, and consumptive services, exists not only in relation to the human but as a bearer of its own multiple and irreducible identities.

Aligning ourselves with this perspective means, for anthropologists, continuing the work of deconstructing categories built through anthropocentric frameworks; it requires interrogating the notion of “species” as a fluid category, to avoid essentialist drifts and to orient reflection toward an idea of life as interspecific cooperation – a non-alienated, universal multispecies condition.

To approach alterity – animal, vegetal, fungal, or bacterial – with rigor means accepting to be destabilized by it (Lawrence 2021; Tsing 2015). Each encoun-

¹ Among the materials that could define the Anthropocene, the “super-sized” bones of broiler chickens rank first (cfr. Bennett *et al.* 2018; Zalasiewicz 2020).

ter produces knowledge, a form of knowing that unsettles anthropocentric epistemologies, reveals their partiality and, rather than denying other subjectivities, stimulates new modes of communication and affordance with the world (Dubeau 2018; Gibson 1996; Haraway 2003). There is no “outside” of the human that is pure or untouched nature: every living form is entangled in relations of co-production that shape landscapes, identities, economies, and sensibilities (Haraway 2008).

In this direction, the commitment is not merely theoretical but methodological: to outline and explore authentically multispecies modes of investigation (Gibbs 2021), capable of restoring the complexity of the relationships that constitute our external and internal environment (Raffaetà 2021).

Questioning animal suffering and the sustainability of the agri-food industry means describing chains of relations between humans and animals in the production of food that are systemically obscured. Humans and nonhumans labor – and suffer – within the same productivist logic of contemporary hypercapitalism. Human alienation cannot be understood without recognizing that animals too are severed from their own worlds of meaning, their bodies molded by the demands of extractive violence. Nonhuman *species-beings* (Fair, McMullen 2023) have historically co-produced value, resisted exploitation, and participated in the material and symbolic processes of world-making: alive or dead, they feed us; they assist us in rural tasks; industries experiment on them to create medicines; and, not least, as pets, they are care workers, offering solace to lonely humans (ivi, p. 1). The distinction between companion animals and companion species (Haraway 2003) thus reveals, on one side, the utilitarian dimension, and on the other, the possibility of true coexistence and alliance. When reduced to livestock, these species cease to be companions – in both Haraway’s and the political sense of the term – becoming instead consumable products.

With this awareness, two interpretative horizons open before researchers: either to reject and denounce exploitation, or to trace the signs of a possible multispecies flourishing (Haraway 2016; Thom van Dooren *et al.* 2016; Tsing 2017), towards a paradigm shift grounded in shared resistance and transformation (Bird Rose 2011; Escobar 2018; Kirksey 2015; Haraway 2016; Somers, Soldatic 2020 Tsing 2015; Whyte 2018).

In this article, we attempt to illustrate this latter path, presenting a fragment of the study we are pursuing.² This ethnographic fragment reflects and ex-

² Investigating the new ontological postures in the neo-rural spaces is the common research area of the authors on which the master’s thesis at the university of Turin called “Sociability of margins and refugia multispecie. A multisited ethnography among four neo-rural experiences”.

emplifies an approach that is spreading in the countryside, focused on mutual need satisfaction (Davies, Riach 2018; Latouche 2004), in an effort to overcome the bias that frames more-than-human beings as “natural systems that support life on Earth” (Brundtland 1987, pp. 41-42). The Covid-19 pandemic has underscored the zoonotic and ecosystemic origins of interdependence (Bonilla-Aldana *et al.* 2020): even extremophile species are part of complex food webs and trophic cascades (Govenar 2012) that make the world an immense rotating banquet in the cosmos.

Drawing on insights from medical anthropology on public health, this work recognizes how intensive labor – human and nonhuman – generates structural forms of suffering and pathologies that cross species boundaries. Zoonoses emerge as symptoms of a productive system that, in seeking to maximize efficiency, overexposes bodies and metabolisms (Petryna 2002). From this perspective, health itself becomes an indicator of the ecological and social crisis produced by turbocapitalism – an order that, in attempting to control life, accelerates its collapse, generating metabolic “monsters” and “ghosts” (Keck 2020; Tsing *et al.* 2017).

From these theoretical premises, the paper moves to the ethnographic level, presenting a case study of a laying-hen farm in the Sabina region of Lazio (Italy).

This limited field of study, extrapolated from the larger one on neo-rural communities, allows us to observe a “small laboratory” in which to closely visualize the relationships between species and the consequences on the production level. Through an inductive approach, therefore, we have obtained data on the posture of this farm to formulate more general theories or principles that are linked to the most recent themes developed within the ontological turn in anthropology. However, by virtue of these quantitative limitations, the aim of the article is not to derive an absolute truth about all neo-rural farms involving non-human labor but suggests some conclusions that will have to be compared with further research.

In this perspective, the paper offers a reflection on forms of nonhuman labor as practices of exchange and ontological co-responsibility, in which value is not measured in terms of performance or productivity but in participation and vital continuity (Povinelli 2016).

Subsequently, the results of the investigations found a home in some publications, cfr. Coletta e Messina 2024; Messina 2025; Coletta e Messina 2025, but also non-academic returns such as a short videodocumentary (available on <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TqiZX2Ve-C2Y&t=26s&pp=ygU1dGVsZSBwb250ZSBkaSBsZWdubyBjYW1iaWFtZW50byBjbGltYXRpY-28gYXBpY3VsdHVyYSA%3D>).

A methodological note for a small-scale field

The case presented in this paper forms part of a broader investigation into contemporary neo-rurality – a phenomenon that is reshaping rural and peri-urban landscapes through the infusion of new cultural capital and translocal networks of knowledge and sensibilities (Coletta, Messina 2025; Giancristofaro, Villa 2023). The research, which began in 2023, involved the authors in around ten research sites – farms or agro-forestry areas managed using regenerative approaches – which were visited periodically for periods ranging from two to five weeks. This article presents the results of a preliminary exploratory inquiry. Rather than a concluded study, it aims to map the “bio-cenotic” principles and ethico-political foundations of “La Gallina Selvatica”. We acknowledge that our presence on the field was not continuous and that direct interactions with the poultry were limited. However, we contend that this reflects a deliberate methodological choice that accepts the “limit” as an act of witnessing (Rutt *et al.* 2024).

Adopting a posture of “polite inquiry” (Despret 2016), we chose to respect the hens’ agency of withdrawal, relying on “proxy interviewing” (Hamilton, Taylor 2017) to bridge the interspecies gap. By treating the farmers as “bio-social sensors”, we accessed their situated knowledge: a longitudinal translation of animal work (Coulter 2016) rooted in years of cohabitation. This approach, which continues through serial digital encounters, shifts the ethnographic focus toward the multispecies relationship itself, validating the farmers as legitimate epistemic mediators.

From an epistemological perspective, our entry into the field was not guided by pre-existing ethological expertise, but by what Vinciane Despret (2016) defines as “active openness”: our technical inexperience regarding poultry farming is the very source of our openness to an ethnographic encounter that is not limited to “looking”, but is first and foremost a capacity for “attunement” and “corporeal empathy” (*Ibid.*). It means entering a field where the hens are co-authors of the research, and it is necessary to know how to ask the *right* questions (*Ibid.*). As Candea (2010) argues, the non-human’s agency emerges through “friction” or the frustration of human expectations. In our field, the hens’ refusal to use provided shelters or their unpredictable movement through the woods provided the very epistemic resistance necessary to treat them as subjects rather than objects of study.

Recognising the limitations of short-term observation of a group, we adopted a methodology of *mediated listening*. We drew on the situated knowledge (Haraway 1988) of the managers, Lorenzo and Daniela, who acted as interspecific mediators (Hamilton, Taylor 2017). Their accounts of ethological behaviours were treated

as “ethnographic proxies”: data validated by their daily practice of cooperation and cohabitation. This process of “interspecific translation” is a cornerstone of multispecies epistemology: knowing an animal is always a matter of “becoming with” (Haraway 2008) through shared work and creative potential of play (Graeber 2014). Humans and non-humans inhabit what Kohn (2013) defines as an “ecology of selves”, a shared semiotic field where meanings are negotiated beyond human language. In this forest setting, communication occurs through indexical signs – change in posture, specific sounds, the choice of a particular place – which both humans and non-humans interpret to coordinate their coexistence. Recognizing this shared semiosis means acknowledging that the forest itself “thinks” through the relational interactions of its inhabitants.

This approach responds to the need to understand animal subjectivity through the affective and relational work of the humans who share their daily lives with them (Porcher 2017). Consequently, we adapted the methods of participant observation to interspecific coexistence, using field diaries, visual recordings, sensory descriptions and micro-ethnographies of the architectures of domestication (Anderson *et al.* 2017). Such an approach aligns with the principles of “ethno-ethology” (Lestel *et al.* 2006), a field that combines ethological rigor with ethnographic sensivity to study hybrid communities. By observing the hens’ spatial choices not just as biological instincts but as cultural expressions within a specific farm setting, we bridge the gap between natural and social sciences, acknowledging that animal behaviour is always situated and relational. During the fieldwork, we observed a widespread community of hens whose members were sometimes visible, sometimes hidden amongst trees and bushes, or busy nesting in the brooders or resting on the raised perches designed by Lorenzo to offer privacy and protection. These structures are not mere zootechnical objects, but devices that recognise the animal’s spatial agency. In being absent from our sight, the members were present in their wild dimension, manifesting their own being and power. Our first impressions did not evoke the docile animal of the zootechnical imagination, but an agile and alert body: “a terrestrial raptor, composed and swift on reptilian legs”.³

We chose Lorenzo and Daniela because their project diverges from business-as-usual livestock management, taking the form of an agro-forestry coexistence aligned with the principles of permaculture (Coletta, Messina 2025), although they are keen to further distinguish their unique project from the broader agro-ecological and permaculture context.⁴

³ Field Notes (July 2023).

⁴ The farm focuses on restoring local ecosystems by carefully promoting biodiversity. In particular, the agro-silvo-pastoral system follows the principles of “biocenotropism”: a term coined by the

The farm's name is a programmatic statement: hens, however domesticated, are recognised as agents capable of activating latent behavioural memories – “They remember being wild”,⁵ says Daniela. We have therefore reformulated our primary research question: how is the relationship between humans and non-humans negotiated, in practical terms, within neo-rural approaches? If this alliance is established in domestic contexts (*companion species*, Haraway 2008), how does it take shape in a productive context? And furthermore: how does animal labour (Coulter 2016) transform if the focus of farming shifts away from extraction?

To answer these questions, before examining the ethnographic case, we will draw on studies concerning the ontology of industrial livestock farming and the health risks (such as avian influenza) arising from animal exploitation, in order to contextualise the stance of the founders of “La Gallina Selvatica”.

To critically situate our case study and validate the methodological approach adopted, it is necessary to compare the neo-rural reality of “La Gallina Selvatica” with the established multi-species literature on intensive farming spaces. Authors such as Alex Blanchette (2020) have extensively documented how the infrastructure of contemporary animal husbandry brings about a radical standardisation of animal life, reducing non-human lives to mere cogs in an assembly line.

In the specific context of industrial poultry farming, Les Beldo (2017) through the crucial concept of “metabolic labour”, demonstrates how, in broiler chickens, exploitation extends down to the cellular level, extracting surplus value from the simple physiological act of growing and digesting. In these extractive regimes, as Timothy Pachirat (2011) points out, the animal undergoes a process of systematic invisibilisation that erases its individuality, making it almost impossible to conduct participant observation that does not result in an ethnography of trauma or testimony (Rutt *et al.* 2024).

By contrast, our study explores animal geographies within a context of emancipation from extractive dogma. In this respect, our research aligns with the methodological efforts of Kathryn Gillespie (2018), who emphasises the epistemological urgency of reconstructing the biographies of individual farm ani-

farm that encapsulates the core principles of their approach. With respect for local ecosystems, the aim is to support the entire food chain by promoting every element, starting with endangered wild species such as orchids, reptiles and amphibians. The complete freedom granted to the animals introduced by Lorenzo and Daniela (chickens and goats) goes beyond the controversial concept of “animal welfare”, focusing instead on the dignity of the species.

⁵ Field Notes (July 2023).

mals (moving beyond the abstraction of the “herd”) through careful observation of their routines and preferences. By observing the hens of “La Gallina Selvatica” self-managing their spaces between the woodland and the brooding houses, we find direct empirical corroboration in Catherine Oliver’s (2021) studies on liberated poultry geographies and in the research by Blattner, Donaldson and Wilcox (2020) on agency in post-productive spaces. These case studies empirically demonstrate how, once freed from the regime of forced metabolic labour, farm animals exhibit complex forms of spatial agency, social organisation and resilience.

Beyond the Ontology of the Cage: Escaping Ontological Confinement

In recent decades,⁶ the breeding of laying hens has undergone profound transformations, driven by social and political pressures to improve animal welfare (IEEP 2020). In 2012, EU Directive 1999/74 banned conventional cages, replacing them with extensive housing systems—on the ground, outdoors, in aviaries, or under organic regimes⁷ – believed to better respect the species-specific behavior of hens. However, the freedom promoted by these systems remains partial: even “free-range” or “barn” systems reproduce forms of confinement, where spatial unevenness and high density generate overcrowding and behavioral stress (Adlhoj *et al.* 2023).

The “cage” as a physical device evolves and becomes “enriched,” yet its biopolitical function remains in more capillary forms. In Foucauldian theory, it becomes a metaphor for any apparatus of power that disciplines bodies. Still it is necessary to distinguish, as suggested by Foucault (1975), between the model of leprosy (*enfermement*) and that of plague (*surveillance*). If the old chicken battery operated by massive exclusion and segregation (leprosy model), extensive and “enriched” systems – monitored by sensors and algorithms – implement the plague model: an analytical quadrillage where

⁶ Since the 1980s, animal rights movements and the first European directives (EEC 88/166; EU 1999/74) have attempted to reform the system by introducing so-called “enriched cages” with nests, perches, and scratching areas. However, criticism (CIWF 2018) has highlighted the inadequacy of these measures: scratching on plastic mats or perching on wire mesh does not restore ethological freedom.

⁷ Lorenzo and Daniela’s farm, which they describe as “wild”, is supposedly organic on paper: the same label under which companies of very different quality, sometimes of questionable quality, and even involved in scandals. Cfr. Report’s Rai <https://www.rai.it/programmi/report/inchieste/Chepolli-3fab37d4-8b06-4a50-b9d8-6f1403dbbe6a.html> (Ultima consultazione 18/10/2025).

space is not only closed, but parceled out, and any inappropriate behavior can be inhibited. In this context, “confinement” – a term that can take a spatial and an ontological value here – does not act by denying life, but by meticulously managing every biological parameter to make it “docile” and productive (Wadiwel 2015).

The transition from the disciplined body to “bare life” requires critical attention to the philosophy of Giorgio Agamben (2007). So the industrial animal would not be a “sacrificed” being because sacrifice belongs to a ritual and legal sphere that recognizes a transcendence of the dying, as well as a sacred value. On the contrary, following Cary Wolfe’s (2013) analysis of the architecture of biopolitics, the animal is reduced to *Homo Sacer*: the one who can be killed but not sacrificed. His death is a mere technical event, devoid of moral or political value, placed in a permanent “state of exception” which is intensive farming itself. If Klasky and Butt (2023) propose the archetype of the *bovis sacer*, it is precisely to highlight this condition of “unpunished killability” where life is preserved (foster life) only as a function of its total consumability (Chrulaw 2013, pp. 70-75).

Therefore, this condition of deadening life (Stanescu 2013) is not a simple deprivation of freedom, but an “ontology of life directed towards consumption” (ivi, p. 73), where the animal exists in a suspended temporality, oriented exclusively towards its future decomposition into a commodity. It is a form of “animal capital” (Shukin 2009) that circulates both as physical matter and as a hegemonic sign of human domination. In this framework, suffering is not an accident of path, but the epistemological core of a system that requires the denial of agency to function.

In her critique of anthropocentric regimes of power, Donna Haraway (2015) calls attention to the complexity of multispecies relations, moving beyond hierarchical comparisons between humans and animals and the simplistic culture-nature divide. For Haraway, technological and scientific control over species is an extension of human domination that fragments and instrumentalizes life. She therefore advocates a politics of co-resistance and care – *making kin* – in defiance of the traditional anthropocentric order (*Ibid*; 2016).

The shared history of *Homo sapiens* and *Gallus gallus* – their long co-domestication – began over 8,000 years ago and for centuries took the form of an interspecific negotiation, in which both species benefited from proximity (Zalasiewicz 2020). Only with industrialization and the logic of competition was *Gallus gallus domesticus* reduced to a mere means of production, losing its subjective and ecological value. This ontological reduction severed the animal from its agency, transforming the relationship into one of functional exploitation.

In 2021, the European Commission announced its intention to gradually ban cages by 2027.⁸ Yet “enriched” and “barn” systems remain dominant. The promise of technological welfare often translates into a new paradigm of techno-efficiency, where sensors and machine-learning algorithms monitor animal behavior (Milosevic *et al.* 2019) without altering the relational structure of the farm.

Anthropology has long evaded the issue of animal suffering, privileging symbolic systems over the material and structural dimensions of violence (Mancuso 2021). Yet suffering – as an “epistemological discomfort” (Beneduce 2008) – may serve as a key to understanding the dissolution of cultural systems founded on the separation of human and animal (Dei 2005). Sentience and the capacity to feel pain, now recognized across many species (Aaltola 2012; Mancuso 2023), demand an ecosystemic approach that transcends the pain/suffering dichotomy. Aaltola (*Ibid.*) defines suffering as the manifestation of denied agency: not merely physical pain, but the deprivation of the power to act within one’s environment.

In our ethnographic case, the farmers running an agro-forestry laying-hen system have abolished the “cage” as well as all forms of confinement such as coops or shelters. The hens do not traverse closed spaces but live outdoors day and night, freely ranging across three hectares of terrain, roosting in trees or on perches to protect themselves autonomously from other wild subjectivities. In this context, their ethological activities-scratching, socializing, nesting, seed dispersal – constitute ecological transformations that personalize the integrity of the landscape.

Among the first hypotheses, it seems that what happens in this farm represents a reversal of the technological paradigm for improving animal health and ethological freedom: not simply removing the cage or expanding the available space but rather creating space for the animal’s own action. Furthermore, Lorenzo and Daniela seem to understand the role of farmers as ecological mediators, practicing a more than human form of advocacy that reconfigures the very meaning of agriculture, well-being, and work. Their practices, the result of continuous study and experimentation, seem to be seeking a dynamic balance between control and coexistence, care and attention to the multiple rhythms of (re)production (Kallio, LaFleur 2023).

These initial assumptions, however, must also consider current biosecurity restrictions. Our analysis of the working conditions of laying hens also inte-

⁸ https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/commission-propose-phasing-out-cages-farm-animals_und_en (accessed 2/3/2026)

grates a reflection on the health conditions and risks of these off-grid workers. If there are health risks, how are they assessed by farmers? What solutions do they adopt define their paradigm?

These issues are relevant but also urgent considering the zoonotic phenomena of recent years and the related measures adopted by governments and public health agencies. The management of “naked life”, caged and killed, finds its maximum technical and regulatory expression in the biosafety paradigm. If Foucault’s model of the “plague” was based on constant surveillance, contemporary biosafety operates as a true immunological device (Esposito 2002): to protect the social (and productive) body from infection, it imposes a clear and aseptic separation between the “controlled” interior of the farm and the “wild” and potentially pathogenic exterior. Consequently, the agency and freedom of movement that characterize Lorenzo and Daniela’s experience are not only ethical choices, but become, in the eyes of the healthcare system, dangerous vulnerabilities. Is the avian influenza (HPAI) spectrum the ultimate breaking point in the balance between ecological care and regulatory control?

Zoonosis as the Disease of Labour

In this contribution, we recall studies on zoonotic epidemics because they represent one of the most evident expressions of the industrial subjugation of animal life (Haraway 2008) and as such may be considered a sanitary risk for non-human workers implicated in intensive farms. In particular, avian influenza manifests the inadequacy of biopolitical dispositions that claim to govern species’ vitality in the name of bio-security (Keck 2020; 2025; Davis 2025). The intensive systems, founded on high densities, genetic selection and confinement, generate the very conditions they intend to prevent: immunological stress, viral instability and inter-specific vulnerability.

Direct contact between domestic poultry and wild birds represents one of the main critical points in global sanitary management of the poultry supply chain. Migratory species – especially anatid waterfowl (geese, ducks, swans) – act as privileged vectors of Influenza A viruses, hosting low-pathogenicity strains (LPAI) which, once introduced into intensive farms, may mutate into highly pathogenic forms (HPAI) due to high density and inter-specific contact (Webster *et al.* 2007; Keck 2020; Adlhoch *et al.* 2023). Overcoming the purely medical-veterinary vision, the analysis of contemporary zoonotic pandemics requires a critique of political ecology and surveillance devices.

According to Frédéric Keck (2020), the concept of “avian reservoir” is not a simple biological entity, but a complex socio-technical configuration. The pri-

mary reservoir consists of wild aquatic birds (Anseriformes), in which influenza viruses have always circulated in low-pathogenic forms. However, the reservoir becomes a biopolitical category the moment it comes into contact with human infrastructure: live animal markets and large farms become “mixing zones” where the virus can mutate. This ecological configuration finds its most toxic and “monstrous” declination in the structure of industrial agribusiness (Davis 2025).

If Keck analyzes the mutation through propagation sites, Davis identifies its structural driver: intensive farming acts as a true biological reactor. The extreme density of thousands of heads in confined spaces, combined with complete genetic uniformity (which eliminates natural resistance from populations), provides the avian virus with an ideal culture medium to accelerate its evolution towards highly pathogenic forms. For Davis, the toxicity of livestock farming lies not only in physical pollution, but in the creation of an evolutionary “perfect storm”: the meat industry has torn down ecological buffers between wild and domestic (lakes and forests), accelerating the leap in species (spillovers) through a profit logic that systematically ignores global biological costs.

From an anthropological perspective, the concern for the nonhuman is not limited to interest in a subordinated alterity, but involves a sanitary dimension: public health depends on the biological integrity of the animals we consume and of the ecological environments we share.

In these contexts, can an intensive poultry farm be considered a workplace where hens are employed as workers? What mechanisms of power exploit the animal’s biological metabolism? Without well-being no effort is sustainable, but if the effort continues then the work becomes coercion. As Abulafia (2010) observes, the slave does not exist by nature: he is produced. The process begins with uprooting from one’s environment, proceeds through depersonalisation, one loses subject-status and becomes the property of others. What follows is reification and a juridical-ontological subjection in which life is reduced to mere labour-force, deprived of rights, relationships and agency. This sequence transforms humans into slaves – and returns, with different devices and intensities, the treatment of animals in intensive farming. Their existence – and their death – is regulated by a slow, institutionalised violence (Nixon 2011), a necropolitical regime that decides who may live and who may be left to die (Mbembe 2023).

Anthropology has interpreted spillover not simply as viral passage from one species to another, but as the material expression of the entanglement among living beings (Barad 2007; Haraway 2008). Zoonosis thus reveals the biological closeness between humans and non-humans, showing that the immune system

itself is a natur-culture affair (Haraway 2013). In ecological terms, the radical separation between domestic and wild is a fiction, because viruses circulate in bodies and ecosystems, not in categories. When this proximity is distorted by a productive paradigm, co-evolution becomes co-vulnerability.

Environmental anthropology has expanded its capacity to register the link between human health and environmental health by incorporating other “ways of seeing”. Roberta Raffaetà (2021) has shown how narratives about bacteria act as analytical devices capable of unveiling the visceral links of symbiotic health between species: the global health system is in a phase of instability because metagenomic discoveries challenge the categories of culture, nature, individual, relation and health. Though it remains complex to determine causal links in environmental disasters (Ravenda 2018), the impact of agro-chemical multinationals produces cascade effects: “health is not the property of a body, but an emergent property from an ecosystem of relations” (Raffaetà 2021, p. 17).

Faced with this catastrophic risk scenario, Keck (2025) proposes a necessary paradigm shift: the transition from repressive control to “solidarity between species” mediated by the sentinel concept. While traditional biosafety responds to the virus with mass culling and sterilization (pastoral logic of exclusion), the sentinel paradigm invites us to consider the animal as an epistemological ally. Sentinels are those birds – domestic or wild – that, living near viral borders, first show signs of infection. Recognizing the usefulness of sentries means accepting a shared vulnerability: instead of preemptively killing the animal “reservoir” to protect the human, one learns to listen to the signals the animal communicates. Global health protocols such as “One World, One Health” (OWOH), born after Covid, confirm this interconnected vision between animal, environmental, and human health, but they can have an authoritarian drift in the name of biosafety (Consigliere *et al.* 2022). The attempt to centrally control the pathogen’s migratory flows and the immunological response (vaccines, culling) does not call into question extractive capitalism and the ecological relationship with which humans produce food and inhabit the Earth.

The risk of the “One World” paradigm is that standardized “top-down” responses (lockdowns, disciplinary protocols, legal consequences) are adopted that do not take into account local specificities and “ecocosmologies” other than the capitalist one. Therefore, health remains founded on the preventive elimination of biological otherness rather than on the transformation of relationships that favor epidemics. The immunological dichotomy between a “self” to be defended and a “non-self” to be expelled fuels a bellicose conception of existence and a widespread germophobia (Raffaetà 2020, p. 52) that has been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic (Consigliere *et al.* 2022) characterized by pollution of disinformation (Pan *et al.* 2023). This has created a climate of disorientation

and generalized alertness that has obscured non-human action: what could be ecological interlocutors, biosystemic health indicators, or sentinel devices become fenced enemies (Lakoff, Keck 2013; Coletta, Messina 2024). Mass alert, rather than an opportunity for ecological and cultural education, becomes a technology of governance.

As Alliegro (2020) observes, the state of an environment-in-crisis signals wounds that simultaneously tear ecosystems and corrode the sociocultural apparatuses of the communities inhabiting them. In this scenario, medical anthropology is called upon to interrogate health and suffering – human and non-human – as joint phenomena linked by inextricable etiological and relational webs. To repoliticise lives, labour and research, giving voice to those silenced, becomes practice of resistance and lever for destabilising the future (Quaranta 2018), refusing to “stand by and wait for the next disastrous zoonotic epidemic” (Calisher *et al.* 2008, p. 540).

Human action shapes biological processes: every local phenomenon, every situated biology, is a node of a bio-social assemblage (Quaranta 2018), outcome of global processes whose effects reverberate across multiple scales. The “scapes” of capital, technology, bodies, ideas and more expose the entanglement of temporalities and spatialities even across distances, obliging us to rethink the challenges of the present (Appadurai 1996).

The non-human entities of the everyday – even those microscopic and invisible, like viruses and bacteria – escape our control and, in their emergence, reveal the vulnerability of infrastructures and anthropocentric categories.⁹ Today the environment is studded with spectral traces that haunt more-than-human geographies: the Anthropocene is inhabited by ghosts, by vestiges and bones (Zalasiewicz 2020) of the more-than-human ecologies through which new futures unravel and re-configure. Landscapes thus emerge from spectral intertwinings, from multiple life-and-death histories (Mathews in Tsing *et al.* 2017, p. G5). What prospects of coexistence are possible with these assemblages of life that know how to inhabit the biological world better than anyone else? Sym-biosis – “living with” – implies mutual vulnerability and responsibility, it also implies confronting “dying with” as the only ethical form of multispecies coexistence

⁹ The true dominators of this world are microscopic organisms: bacteria, fungi, holobionts and other assemblies that for over 3.5 billion years have inhabited the Earth undisturbed. These complex, spectral, monstrous entities embody “the marvels of symbiosis and the threats of ecological destruction” (Tsing *et al.* 2021, p. M2). They remind us to remember: testifying living landscapes where presence, time and futures intertwine even when we are no longer here to observe, disturb or traverse them. Lichens, fungi and other holobionts show radically other ways of “being in time” (Ivi: G143). If we aim to cultivate landscapes in which humans and other species adapt reciprocally, we must recognise the “discrepant multispecies rhythms” (*Ibid.*) that cross us.

(Raffaetà 2022). Life forms at the edge of their biological boundaries return as monsters (Tsing *et al.* 2019): hybrid and unexpected entities emerging from ecological ruins and interspecies relationships. They are material and ghostly witnesses to the damage caused by man, indelible traces of processes that precede and surpass us.

In this scenario, avian influenza configures itself as the flip side of the poultry economy: a biological sign of exploitation. When the hen is reduced to a reproductive machine, the virus acts as an index of its suffering – a biological echo that escapes human control, a pathology of forced labour. Avian influenza is the biological product of today's economic model and the agro-industrial system that treats animals as instruments; eggs, meat and virus are all by-products of the same process. The virus itself, treated as “wild invasion”, “disease of nature”, or “fault/weakness” rather than as a warning message, is allowed to proliferate in the conditions most fertile for its reproduction – until, eventually, a pathogen jumps species and reaches humans, triggering a new pandemic. Pandemics are treated as “natural calamities” – inevitable and unforeseeable accidents – rather than as “unintended consequences of our actions” (Quammen 1996). From one side, the environmental pressure caused by our species; from the other, our technologies and social models contribute to rapidly and systemically spreading pathogens. (Ivi, p. 31)

Reading avian influenza in this key, it becomes the biological metaphor of a broader condition of exploitation. It is the sign of a labour-pathology traversing species and bodies, human and non-human alike: a slow poisoning contracted “on the job,” where production intensification coincides with risk exposure. Recognising hens as workers thus also means admitting to the pathological conditions of their employment – and with them the urgency of an ontological redesign of the workspace and of the meaning of labour itself – from production of value to reproduction of life.

These considerations will be useful to us in critically investigating the ethnographic field, where the confinement between domestic and wild is deliberately broken down. If this biocenotropic breeding is based on coexistence, ecological proximity, and the renunciation of biosafety barriers, how is the health risk configured? What effects do these choices have on the well-being of the animal (and our food chain)?

Multispecies Ethnography in a “Wild” Farm

Keck (2020) observes that the ontological turn in anthropology can also be read as an animal turn, insofar as it attributes to animals an agency that classical

humanism reserved exclusively for humans. From this arises a double requirement for the social sciences: on the one hand, to rethink their own ontological premises – an epistemic and methodological issue – and, on the other, to confront the political and juridical implications of recognising animal subjectivity within social relations.

Only recently ethnographies have begun to grant analytical attention to non-human actors in their ontological positioning. Whereas in the past animals were analysed as symbolic or material devices through which categories of thought were articulated (Lévi-Strauss 1962; Shanklin 1985; Mullin 1999), the multispecies perspective (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010) has restored to them an active presence within relational networks, showing how, in the era of climate crisis, they can become strategic interlocutors for imagining new alliances and forms of kinship (Haraway 2016; Alber *et al.* 2023).

Within this theoretical horizon, the present contribution offers an ethnography of an experiment in multispecies cohabitation and collaboration situated in the Sabina region of central Italy: a neo-rural farm (Giancristofaro, Villa 2023; van der Ploeg 2009) where laying hens live outdoors, without a henhouse, immersed in a landscape permeable to wild fauna. The absence of control infrastructures – fences, sheds, automatic feeders – allows animals to reclaim body, time, and space, shaping a situated ethology in which nonhuman labour takes the form of relational and symbiotic practice (Haraway 2016; Tsing 2015). In this sense, the daily care of the farmers is not a productive investment but a form of shared ecological design (Tsing *et al.* 2020; Zola 2021), in which interspecies negotiation actively shapes the common space.

Compared to Belbo's (2017) ethnography on a small group of broiler chickens, our "field" consisted of almost three hectares of semi-wooded landscape inhabited by approximately 249 laying hens, divided into family groups that the farmer defines as *harems*, each characterised by the presence of an alpha rooster. This territorial division is not imposed nor conflictual but emerges through processes of self-management among subjectivities: under conditions of "free will", each hen traces variable trajectories, choosing where to position herself, with whom to interact, and which substrate to frequent. As Latour (2009) suggests, the social sciences should not define a priori what counts as "nature" or "society", but rather observe how these categories are redefined through local practices of recomposition. This is precisely what happens in the Sabina field, where environmental management becomes a *naturcultural* question shared across species.

As Anderson *et al.* (2017) note, understanding interspecies relations requires moving beyond the dichotomy between domination and mutualism. Their notion of "architectures of domestication" shows how material artefacts – fences,

barriers, perches – are relational devices mediating cooperation between species. In the case they analyse – that of falconers – the hood placed on a raptor's head before hunting acts as a shared signal: “once placed on the falcon's head, it indicates the beginning of the journey to hunt, and its removal marks the imminent moment of free flight” (Anderson *et al.* 2017, p. 36). Far from being symbols of coercion, such artefacts structure social interaction between humans and animals “through comfort and security rather than through force or threat” (*Ibid.*). The approach proposed by Anderson *et al.* (2017) offers a valuable key to reading the landscape of “La Gallina Selvatica”:¹⁰ three rugged hectares on the slope of a river valley facing north-west. Here, alongside the previously mentioned relational infrastructures – water points, forest margins, natural terraces – a radical element emerges, introducing a conceptual and methodological shift: the absence of the henhouse. Without an enclosed structure for nocturnal shelter, the hens roost in trees or on perches made by Lorenzo.

This spatial configuration is based on the hens' ability to clearly distinguish between disturbances that lead to a chronic deterioration in living conditions (Paul *et al.* 2023) and transient ecological hazards. The former, defined as aversive physical stimuli, include water sprays (*Ibid.*), inadequate lighting or flickering (Kristensen *et al.* 2007; McPhee *et al.* 2024), loud and sudden noises (Campo *et al.* 2005) and, more generally, an unhealthy environment (Dawkins 2004). These factors differ markedly from the “ecological disturbances” typical of the natural environment, such as wind, rain or predator attacks (Paul *et al.* 2023). Whilst the former are characteristic of intensive indoor farming (sheds) and represent constant or repeated disturbances from which the animal cannot escape, the events that hens encounter in the environment designed at “La Gallina Selvatica” are dynamics with which the individual actively interacts, deciding on a case-by-case basis how to respond. The wide availability of varied shaded and sunny areas (hedges, trees, tall grass, nesting boxes) and structured shelters (protected perches, ecotones), together with a living soil rich in loose material (Yu *et al.* 2023) and the distribution of food along long lines on the ground, constitute an ecosystem that drastically reduces stress, parasites and environmental shocks. This complexity ensures that the animal's biological desires and needs are fully met (Dawkins 2008; Olsson, Keeling 2002; Paul *et al.* 2023; Widowski, Duncan 2000;).

¹⁰ This theoretical concept has also been fertile in other breeding contexts. Zola (2021), in his ethnography of donkeys for social hiking, reworks Davydov's (2014) example of the Evenki of Siberia, where mobile breeding structures serve as communication infrastructures between herders and reindeer, allowing them to negotiate proximity, movement, and landscape. Similarly, Zola identifies actual “architetture asinine” that enable shared ethologies between species (2021, p. 6).

In this context, Lorenzo and Daniela's decision not to hinder any incursions by predators – whilst monitored by the presence of two Maremmano sheep-dogs – allows the hens to manage the encounter autonomously. This approach avoids the suppression of primal flight or fight instincts, preventing the form of cognitive deprivation that would result from a sterile and totally over-protected environment. During our time in the field, the owners accompanied our interpretation of the landscape with detailed explanations of the implications of every management decision. Every environmental element, in fact, responds to a precise design, the result of years of study and direct observation. Their intervention is kept to a minimum and focused primarily on monitoring an environment that is not static, but constantly evolving through the introduction of new areas, plant species and animals.

To highlight the innovative features of this farm, we draw on the words of Lorenzo, the owner, who in 2024 published two informative articles outlining his applied research for poultry farming. Supported by direct observation and scientific literature (biology, microbiology, preventive medicine), his proposal does not merely document an alternative experience but advances – with surprising clarity – “definitive solutions to the most common problems observable in all types of henhouses, from the backyard to the industrial” (our translation from Italian).¹¹

In particular, the birds' health and stress levels are constantly assessed through observations of their natural behaviour. Behaviours such as aggression, feather pecking, prolonged states of alertness with immobility, head-shaking, lameness, hesitation in decision-making and the systematic avoidance of certain places act as indicators of distress (Dawkins 2004; Paul *et al.* 2022; Son *et al.* 2022). Conversely, high foraging frequency, loyalty to favourite locations and the formation of small, stable social groups – comprising a dominant male, several females and sometimes young males – represent positive feedback. Confirming that the *harems* observed in the field correspond to the social learning units described in literature, the potential in such groups, the potential for social learning, behavioural synchronisation, effective communication, and conflict mediation by the cock (Dawkins 2004; Nicol 2015; Paul *et al.* 2023) confirms the existence of living conditions capable of guaranteeing genuine dignity for the animals.

Lorenzo's reflection begins with a simple premise: the henhouse, as a confinement device, generates social pathologies even before biological ones. Re-

¹¹ Lorenzo's paper: <https://magazine.5lb.eu/2023/11/allevamento-galline-selvatiche-nuova-medicina-hamer-5458.html> (consultato il 08/05/2026).

counting his experience with hens kept in restricted spaces, he reconstructs the aetiological genealogy of many common infections. Under conditions of captivity, the proliferation of parasites (es. *Dermanyssus gallinae*) depends not only on environmental factors but on the animal's social position within the group: the most vulnerable hens become preferred targets of the pathogen not because of physiological weakness, but because of relational fragility – due, he writes, to “impossibility of escape, unwanted contact, resentment over food or vital space”.¹²

In nature, he observes, these conflicts dissipate rapidly. In captivity, however, “activating conditions can persist for long periods with dramatic effects”,¹³ establishing a structural violence that is invisible yet persistent. Renouncing the henhouse, from this perspective, is not a romantic gesture but an eminently biopolitical one: removing animals from the infrastructures of control means redistributing agency and enabling the construction of an open relational architecture capable of coevolving with the rhythms and postures of the animals themselves. By observing behavioural symptoms, a farmer can determine who is under parasite attack: “itching, heat and metabolic acceleration” are accompanied by psychological stress and repeated attempts to escape – for instance, sleeping far from the group. When social stress is prolonged within a confined group, the conditions for mobbing arise:

When new hens arrive, they will be mobbed at once, by the roosters who will try repeatedly to mount them and by the other hens. They will be driven away from food, water and even the perches, receiving merciless pecks and blows, chased and plucked.¹⁴

Whereas in nature such turmoil lasts only hours, until the newcomers are “worthy” of joining the group – like a painful rite of initiation (Van Gennep 2012) – in confined spaces the same dynamic may continue for days or “potentially endless periods”, as the available space is inadequate for social resolution. With an example, Lorenzo clarifies the correlation between biological pressure and social pressure. After a violent attack, a young hen showed signs of weight loss contiguous with infestation by the red mite. Did the infestation cause the weight loss, or did the abuse by three roosters cause it? According to Lorenzo, the rapid weight loss was a reflex of the impossibility of escape: the organism entered a terminal state in which metabolic acceleration gener-

¹² *ibidem*.

¹³ *ibidem*.

¹⁴ *ibidem*.

ated internal heat that attracted the mites. In other words, the anthropogenic architecture – built on geometries of protection (paternalism) and capital safeguarding (capitalism) – imposes an internal proximity inadequate to the hens’ experiential ethos.

We use these fragments to deepen the ethnographic field and, later, to address the question: what does it mean to redistribute the proceeds of the metabolic labour of laying hens?

Although microorganisms are often considered “bad to think” (Raffaetà 2021, 11), they represent a fertile category for anthropological reflection: highly metabolic beings capable of reproducing and mutating rapidly, endowed with an ecological agency that can be beneficial or harmful depending on the frictions between specific biologies. In this ethnographic perspective, microorganisms participate in shaping the ecological architecture of the henhouse, where the local bacterial flora affects the psychosomatic well-being of individuals and the avian population. The henhouse – not yet the intensive shed – is already a paternalistic form of domestication: an enclosed, bounded place for shelter and laying, but also a space of complex conviviality that can turn into forced cohabitation, producing structural violence (Farmer 2006).

Lorenzo questioned the utility of the henhouse in 2017. After his first youthful experiments, he decided to abandon the structure when he realised that both he and the hens could do without it. In his view, the emergence of parasites is not an accidental biological event but a symptom of the socio-spatial constraints typical of confinement, which prevent the natural dissipation of social friction. The link between parasites and health constitutes a contingent equilibrium of situated proximity. “From an ecological point of view, one might observe that the presence of parasites conditions the ethology of species living in natural contexts,” but the parasite often acts as an incentive for movement: “in the case of hens, if they were free to move and not enclosed within four walls, it is easy to imagine they would change roost.”¹⁵

Bateson (2000) reminds us of the impossibility of separating organism and environment. Phenomena, even immaterial ones, are indissolubly tied to the material substrate with which they interact. At the core of the ecology of mind – as well as of the principles we observed in the poultry field and, more broadly, of discourses on well-being and symptom meaning – lies the intention to adopt a holistic vision able to integrate fluctuating contextual stimuli and connections that nourish every relationship. Ignoring these deeper, invisible parts of the environment

¹⁵ <https://magazine.5lb.eu/2023/11/allevamento-galline-selvatiche-nuova-medicina-hammer-5458.html>

and of ourselves means exposing ourselves to conflicts and unexpected reactions that strike us with unforeseen violence. Those who act within ecosystems while ignoring the deep connections in which they are immersed create mephitic environments, the paroxysm of a human society whose ideas are not ecological. As Raffaetà (2021) observes, acknowledging ecosystemic connections does not automatically lead to harmony or health with oneself or the environment; reality cannot be adapted according to criteria of utility and interest alone. It is not sensible to act directly on a symptom (an infection, for instance) without exploring the invisible network of relations that constitutes the field of forces to which it belongs. In anthropological terms, the absence of the henhouse – and the consequent expansion of traversable space – produces among the animals a more relaxed social climate, in which inter and intraspecies relations are negotiated to distribute a sense of “dwelling” within the landscape.

Like any individual or human community, animals are specific designers who reshape the landscape through actions and behaviours that modify its elements. Without a henhouse, the hens develop the intentionality to experience the place by crossing and negotiating proximities, trajectories, solitude, and intimacy – fulfilling their social and personal needs, living fully the sociability of the environment they inhabit.

The concept of “architecture of domestication” (Anderson *et al.* 2017) questions the kinds of dialogue that emerge among species and through which supports. Lorenzo’s textual contribution, informed by his experimental expertise, reveals the possibility of reconstructing a deeper aetiology of animal malaise, attentive to its physio-socio-specific processes: reducing tension among hens results in less availability of inflamed tissues and maintains spatial equilibrium with pathogens (still present). Here, notions such as biodiversity and biosecurity fade into a continuum that finds new possibilities of cohabitative balance. If one chooses to co-live with hens, the care required entails attentiveness also to the microbiome that informs them and to becoming familiar with their specific social ecology.

In this setting, animal subjectivity is not suppressed by coercive devices but recognised as an active component of socio-environmental organisation. The hens participate in defining their *Umwelt* (von Uexküll 2001), constructing micro-architectures of cover, pathways of shade, and informal geographies of rest and vigilance. This practice recalls Graeber’s (2011; 2018) reflections on labour as an intrinsically relational activity, irreducible to the mere production of value: to work, for hens as for humans, is to take part in a common world. In this sense, the ethnographic results invite us to expand the notion of environmental stakeholders to include other living beings – those who, through their metabolism, participate in the system’s ongoing reproducibility.

Released from Duty: Hens at Their Own Service

What happens when labour is emancipated from its reduction to mere productive activity and restored to the broader horizon of practices through which we reproduce our eco-social existence—our ways of weaving relationships, inhabiting places, and articulating meaning? From this perspective, working conditions can no longer be separated from quality of life, perceived well-being, or the affective density of relationships with our human and non-human neighbours.

In the Sabina fieldsite, participant observation reveals a configuration that overturns common expectations about laying-hen farming. The roughly 249 hens spread across nearly three hectares are not simple productive units. They display complex behavioural repertoires, dynamic internal relations, and ecological contributions that transcend the mere production of eggs. Their daily activities participate in the reproduction of the landscape within a social organisation that emerges through practices of autonomy and negotiation rather than through top-down imposition.

These observations lead back to a central question in the debate on nonhuman labour: if laying hens can be granted the status of workers, what kind of contractuality do they possess? More precisely, from an anthropological standpoint: to what ontological position are they assigned in order to perform the metabolic task proper to their species?

To address this question, our ethnographic case invites a relational definition of labour – one distant from extractive or exploitative models of workforce use and closer to collective participation, measured through the specific agency of the actors involved. Under this light, the Sabina hens engage in recognised forms of work: their metabolism and behaviour contribute to soil maintenance, biological regulation, and the co-production of a habitable environment, including the redistribution of guano across the land.

Welden's (2021) reflections on "working with nature" are particularly relevant here, as they intertwine the symbolic, political, and ecological dimensions of nonhuman labour. He identifies three modalities of interspecies collaboration: (beaver) as labourer, as coworker, and as community. In the first, the nonhuman is an ecological agent valued for producing ecosystem services for human ends – the animal as workforce, to whom labour is imposed within the extractive logic that renders "nature" a productive infrastructure. In the second, the nonhuman is a "coworker," recognised as an ecosystem engineer, a competent subject with whom to cooperate ecologically, negotiate working conditions, and co-design the landscape. In the third, it is part of a multispecies collectivity, an ecological kin with whom one co-lives rather than works; here, the very

concept of labour dissolves into a broader weave of relationships, affections, and shared responsibilities. In this sense, the categories of labour, care, and coexistence overlap, since “working with” is also “living with,” a mutual awareness of our shared role in redefining the world and its conditions of livability. “Working with nature” thus signifies recognising the nonhuman as a companion species, respecting its knowledge, limits, needs, and agency – an agency whose value is also political (Latour 2007; Stengers 2005).

Ethnographic findings show that Lorenzo and Daniela do not treat animals as productive forces from which to extract market value. Instead, they cultivate a complex ecosystem capable of hosting other animal species – insects, amphibians, predators, microbes. Their daily practices – arboreal management, removal of the henhouse, maintenance of movable perches, and care of landscape margins as meeting spaces – establish a form of spatial “contractuality” grounded in shared dwelling. The reward is neither juridical nor monetary but binding through reciprocal practice and expectation. This contract involves four observable elements: (1) spatial autonomy – the choice of resting place; (2) temporal autonomy – the modulation of activity and rest; (3) recognition of agency – farmers interpret and respond to hens’ behaviours; (4) protection and care – targeted interventions to reduce stress and disease without the impositions typical of intensive systems.

Such practical contractuality produces effective rights over living conditions: not legal rights, but rights embodied in daily routines and management. The hens enjoy protections over their bodies (lower density, natural shelters), their time (unforced rhythms), and their space (freedom of choice and escape). Farmers, conversely, assume obligations – often informal – of observation, interpretation, and adaptation. The recognition of animal subjectivity here is not rhetorical; it directly influences technical decisions (placement of waterers, preservation of margins) and informs health interventions oriented toward prevention through improved relational conditions.

This contractual symmetry, however, consists of a system of mutual expectations, within which we identify specific duties and tasks required of the hens. Their “duty” is not limited to the production of eggs, but is rather active ecological labour (Tsing 2015): through foraging (Lavigne, Lavigne 2013), scratching (Paul *et al.* 2021) and defecation (Soudet 2021), the hens act as “landscape designers”. In this context, the egg consequently emerges not as the sole purpose of the contract, but as one of the many “benefits” of a shared metabolic life.

When the hens’ “productivity” declines due to illness or old age, the bond is not severed through the culling typical of industrial systems. On Lorenzo and Daniela’s farm, older hens, even when they stop laying, continue to play a crucial social role: they act as “keepers of social memory” (Nicol 2015), stabilising

the *harems*, guiding younger individuals to safe perches and mediating group conflicts. Their duty remains a relational service that maintains stability and cohesion at a social level.

Consequently, the expectation does not concern a standardised output, but the system's ongoing reproducibility. If a hen is ill, the obligation to "care" for her (Zola 2021) takes precedence over the expectation of yield, precisely because a sick hen is seen as a flaw in the ecological architecture of the park. The "payment" that the owners receive is the creation of a "living" landscape, which in many respects has reached such a level of complexity that it is self-managing and self-reproducing, where the health of humans, birds and all other elements of the field are inextricably linked.

Hens are not passive recipients of conditions but subjects capable of refusal, withdrawal, or group reformation. These acts have tangible effects on the functioning of the farm: choosing to roost in trees rather than on perches, temporary isolation, or avoidance of certain areas all shape parasite distribution, collective stress, and even health indicators. The ethnography also highlights how many pathologies are not primarily biological but arise from dysfunctional socio-ecological dynamics. Management strategies privileging spatial redistribution and biological variability thus prove more effective in mitigating these phenomena. Biodiversity and biosecurity, once opposed, merge into a continuum of coexistence and adaptive balance. Living with hens entails deciphering the microbiome that informs them and attuning to their specific social ecology. This model, however, should not be idealised. Freedom entails costs and vulnerabilities. Exposure to predators and contact with wild birds can introduce spillover risks and livestock losses, while management demands skill, time, and a reconfigured economy of risk. Here, nonhuman labour is not secured behind bars or filtered systems but re-situated within its ecosystemic dimension, implicating each individual's immune integrity. Such an approach resists standardisation, production remains situated and contingent upon internal living conditions.

Normatively and politically, this framework raises crucial questions. If nonhuman labour exists and its contractuality is practical and relational, animal welfare policies should include qualitative and relational indicators – behavioural autonomy, microbiotic diversity, and freedom of choice – alongside spatial and quantitative measures. Recognising "practical rights" could translate into incentives for farming models that embody safety, autonomy, and shared care, and into training programmes that enable farmers to interpret and negotiate animal behaviour as management input rather than as malfunction.

Ultimately, the Sabina case offers a wider theoretical-political insight: nonhuman labour can be acknowledged beyond extractive and compensatory logics;

contractuality can be effective even when informal; and recognising animal subjectivity is not a moral gesture but a managerial practice producing better living conditions and greater ecological resilience. If the challenge is to rethink how capital organises living metabolisms, then experiments such as Lorenzo and Daniela's are not eccentric but prototypical of a multispecies politics as-signing practical rights and corresponding duties – transforming animal labour into a question of social and ecological justice (Barron, Hess 2020).

Conclusions: Applied Insights

The research highlights a fundamental ontological transition: the overcoming of the animal understood as a “bio-metabolic machine” in favor of a co-constituent subject of the landscape. In the context of Sabina, Lorenzo and Daniela's neo-rural approach replaces the nature/culture binomial with a kinship practice that recognizes animal agency as the core of ecosystem regeneration. Here, the hen ceases to be “bare life” (Agamben 2007) to become an active interlocutor whose metabolic work (fertilization, biological control, soil aeration) is valued as a fundamental contribution to the “weaving of life” (Consigliere *et al.* 2022).

As ethnographers engaged in the analysis of human-nonhuman relationships, we explored Daniela and Lorenzo's breeding to observe the practical and relational tools capable of triggering landscape regeneration. The restoration of *refugia* capable of hosting species diversity and transcending the division between wild and domestic emerges as a way to restore kinship relationships that fuel ecosystem abundance (Tsing 2015) – not without contradictions.

Ethnography presents nonhuman work as an ethological re-emergence that intertwines the affective, ecological, and metabolic dimensions of production. This indicates an ontological paradigm shift: the transition from the nature/culture binomial to kinship and co-production practices that recognize other living beings as interlocutors and collaborators. This shift is not merely theoretical; it guides concrete interventions: designing agro-silvo-pastoral landscapes that value animals' metabolic contributions (soil fertility, pollination, biological control) rather than neutralizing them; reformulating animal welfare through relational indicators (behavioral autonomy, choice, microbiome variability); rethinking biosafety as relational management and solidarity; and promoting participatory territorial governance in which farmers, technicians, politicians and anthropologists negotiate shared care protocols.

However, this experimental choice is not without risks and highlights what Anna Tsing (2005) would define as a friction between divergent epistemolo-

gies. On the one hand, the farm practices a “biocenotropic” approach that valorizes every metabolic contribution while minimizing human or technological intervention; on the other, the biosafety device imposes an immunological model based on separation and denial of contact (Esposito 2002). The presence of bodies of water and the absence of physical barriers, although functional to ethological health and the reduction of social stress, directly conflict with sanitary regulations. Here the friction emerges between the sentinel paradigm (Keck 2020), which sees the animal in the open as an ally for monitoring environmental signals, and that of the reservoir, which reduces it to a mere risk of contagion to be isolated through the “plague model” (Foucault 1975).

Recognizing nonhuman labor as a co-production of the world (Haraway 2008) requires redefining the concepts of responsibility and remuneration. In the case of “La Gallin Selvatica”, the wage paid is not the feed (the mere maintenance of the animal-machine), but the restoration of spatial sovereignty, time and ontological dignity. Not hindering their needs and desires is what allows us to rethink security not as exclusion or isolation, but as the management of shared immune relationships: an invitation to take responsibility for common vulnerability, seeing health as a field of resistance and solidarity against a rhetoric that risks emptying it for multinational interests (Consigliere *et al.* 2022).

The final paradox of this ethnography lies in the company’s response to pressure from the local health authority (ASL).¹⁶ The demand for the installation of “sparrow nets” – the latest attempt to impose ontological confinement (Wadiwel 2013) – has pushed farmers toward a paradoxical act of resistance: reducing production loads to safeguard the relational structure. Transforming from an egg production company to a plant nursery, Lorenzo and Daniela chose to step back to ensure the project (and the chickens) stay alive.¹⁷ Since 2025, the livestock farm has been reconfigured as an “Agro-naturalistic Park”, evolving into an agro-silvo-pastoral and nursery project. In this new multispecies ar-

¹⁶ In 2022, the national health authority implemented the National Surveillance Plan for Avian Influenza, which will be implemented by the Lazio Region in 2023. At the end of 2024, after several attempts to negotiate with the authorities, Lorenzo and Daniela decided to close the poultry company (cfr. *Piano nazionale di sorveglianza per l’influenza aviaria*: https://www.fnovi.it/sites/default/files/PN_SORVEGLIANZA_INFLUENZA_AVIARIA_2022.pdf).

¹⁷ Attrition with the biosafety regime reached its peak in the confrontation with health authorities (ASL), leading to a radical structural metamorphosis of the company. Faced with the regulatory obligation to install physical roofing (sparrow nets) over an area of several hectares – an operation that was technically unsustainable, as well as ontologically contrary to the “open” principle pursued by the project – the managers chose to cease the sale of eggs, which for seven years had been the sole source of income. The need to comply with the new restrictions on avian influenza forced a drastic reduction in the number of heads, from around 250 to 49, prompting Lorenzo and Daniela to refound the settlement’s very identity.

chitecture, the reduced presence of hens was complemented by that of dwarf goats, while the economic income was transferred to a collection of resilient native and alien plants, selected for their ability to adapt to critical environmental conditions with reduced maintenance. These are, for the most part, herbaceous perennials that are affected by the abandonment of traditional livestock practices, such as free grazing. This step does not represent a surrender, but a collaborative survival strategy (Tsing 2015): by abandoning the intensive production of commodities, the company preserved its “relational sovereignty”, confirming that the chickens were not gears of a machine, but individuals whose dignity had to be preserved within the soil.

Recognizing the interspecific intertwining of our existences carries a simple but radical consequence: social justice can only be multispecies justice. If the relationships that make up the world are multispecies, then the future must be too (Sakakibara 2025). The production of knowledge brings with it the responsibility to illuminate this shared existence (Haraway 2008), this subtle becoming-with that sustains us (Lorimer 2010, p. 73). Adopting this research posture involves expanding the senses, refining the ability to perceive and feel (Hamilton, Taylor 2017), cultivating the “art of noting” (Sakakibara 2025, p. 3; Tsing 2015) beyond conventional academic protocols. It is an exercise in epistemic humility: a recognition of our cognitive limitations and the will to be guided towards other situated languages and practices (Urbanik 2018).

Ethnographic analysis thus becomes a strategic terrain for observing how ecological reproduction replaces capitalist production, restoring meaning and agency to the more-than-human subjects who participate in collective life. Recognizing living things as “matters of concern” (Latour 2004) and “matters of care” (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017) means orienting action towards an ethic of “respons-ability” (Barad 2010), promoting the regeneration of multispecies assemblages as ways of living in the midst of disturbance (Tsing 2015). A sympoietic intertwining capable of generating new narratives for the future (Haraway 2016), in which living is not a solitary act but a choral practice of continuity and metamorphosis.

In light of quantitative limitations, this research does not presume to have exhausted the complexity of interspecific dynamics in neurural and productive contexts, nor does it intend to provide conclusive answers to questions that remain open and stratified. This work is rather configured as an exploratory contribution aimed at tracing new analytical trajectories from a necessarily multidisciplinary perspective. For example, the long-term implications of such “ontological resistances” in the face of global tightening of biosafety policies remain to be explored, as does the scalability of models based on interspecies solidarity (Keck 2025) in less marginal territories than the one observed. The



hope is that this ethnography can stimulate further investigations capable of integrating political ecology with situated practice, pushing the discipline toward an increasingly accurate understanding of how social and environmental justice are intertwined in the shared destinies of humans and nonhumans. Far from wanting to close the debate, this study aims to be an invitation to multiply our gaze on those “multispecies assemblages” (Tsing 2015) which, despite the disturbance of the present, continue to generate alternative ways of inhabiting the world.

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Putting life to work: Metabolic labour and value production in the global bluefin tuna supply chain

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Abstract: Drawing on ongoing multi-sited ethnographic research on the tuna trap fishery between Sardinia and Portugal, this article focuses on a tuna trap in Algarve, examining how bluefin tuna is transformed into a lively commodity within capture-based aquaculture. Moving beyond the question of whether animals work, it aims to investigate the value animals hold for capital by analysing the new forms of labour mobilized in the global tuna supply chain. The study traces the everyday practices of feeding, monitoring, and killing through which tuna vitality is sustained, managed, and ultimately extinguished for market purposes. It argues that value is generated not merely from the fish's flesh but through the controlled exploitation of its biological capacity to grow: a process enabled by a quota system that converts biomass into surplus value. This process, which can be conceptualized as metabolic labour, represents a significant reconfiguration of work under contemporary capitalism and reveals the tuna as an active, though exploited, participant in its own valorisation. By focusing on the fragile interspecies relations and opaque metabolic processes involved, the article shows how this form of production, which depends on rendering life legible and controllable, ultimately requires that same vitality to be erased in a rapid, standardized death to preserve its commodity value.

Keywords: Metabolic labour; Lively commodities; Bluefin tuna; Multispecies ethnography; Supply chain capitalism.



Introduction

*En el mercado verde,
bala
del profundo
océano,
proyectil
natatorio,
te vi,
muerto.*

(P. Neruda, *Oda a un gran atún en el mercado*)

Algarve. 28th August. 5 am.

I leave the house before dawn. At a brisk pace, I walk through the city centre towards the industrial port. I reach the docks, the lights from the administrative office spotlight on the concrete wet with morning dew. When I enter the office, two fishers are already stamping their timecards. I greet Mateus, the captain of the tuna trap, who agreed to take me out to see the feeding of two thousand tuna held in cages off the coast. The fishing season is about to end. Many of the tuna had been captured with the trap in early May. They were then transferred to cages, where they are fattened for a few months. Mateus puts on his jacket and tells me to wait a moment. Waiting in the office at dawn, watching the fishermen clock in, I realized I was about to witness something fundamentally different from the fishing practices I had encountered before. Here, the productive process does not end with capture. It continues long after the fish are taken from the open sea, in a system that is neither fully fishing nor fully aquaculture, but something in between: a hybrid production system that sustains life in order to extract value from it.

This article¹ examines the logic of this hybrid regime through ethnographic research conducted in southern Portugal, focusing on the tuna trap of Vila Formosa.² Located on the eastern coast of the Algarve, Vila Formosa hosts one of the few active tuna traps in Portugal. Today, however, the trap operates within

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² Vila Formosa is a pseudonym used to protect the confidentiality of the people who shared part of their lives and work with me. All the names of the people in this text have also been anonymized.

a profoundly transformed global industry. Alongside the seasonal fixed-net capture of migratory bluefin tuna, the company maintains offshore cages where live fish are held, fed, monitored, and ultimately killed for export, primarily to the Japanese sashimi market. What appears as a small-scale coastal fishery is in fact a crucial node within the global bluefin tuna supply chain. The analysis presented here is based on two and a half months of ethnographic fieldwork conducted during the final phase of the tuna fishing season. During this period, I carried out participant observation both onshore and at sea, joining fishers on multiple feeding operations in the offshore cages and accompanying the crew during a full day of the final killing operation. Fieldwork included observation of everyday work routines in the port and cage installations, as well as informal conversations and semi-structured interviews with fishers, divers, the trap captain, and administrative staff. My aim is to investigate how contemporary capitalism reorganizes relations between nature and value by enrolling animal vitality within controlled regimes of production. Focusing on capture-based aquaculture, I explore how bluefin tuna are transformed into *lively commodities* (Collard, Dempsey 2013), whose value derives not only from their flesh but from their biological capacity to grow after capture. Under the quota system regulating Atlantic bluefin tuna, biomass is calculated at the moment fish are transferred into cages. Any subsequent increase in weight produced through feeding exceeds the officially registered catch. This post-capture growth becomes a source of surplus value for the fishing companies. What is valued here is not simply animal flesh, but the fish's own metabolic capacity to convert food into biomass within a temporally extended regime of accumulation. To conceptualize this process, I draw on the notion of *metabolic labour* (Beldo 2017). I use this concept not to anthropomorphize tuna or compare their activities with human wage labour, but to describe how their capacity to eat, metabolize, and generate biomass becomes directly productive of value.

The sections that follow situate this ethnographic case within anthropological debates on non-human labour, introducing metabolic labour as a framework to analyse how non-human vitality becomes a source of value within the bluefin tuna supply chain. I then trace the historical transformations of the bluefin tuna fishery, from fixed traps to capture-based aquaculture, to show how the sea becomes a space where metabolic processes are increasingly managed as productive forces. Finally, I dive into the everyday practices through which tuna vitality is nourished, controlled, and suppressed: feeding, underwater monitoring, and killing. Through these situated encounters, I argue, anthropology can help us understand how contemporary capitalism reorganizes not only labour, but the very conditions of life upon which accumulation depends.



Metabolic labour: putting vitality to work

Over the past decades, anthropology has developed a renewed interest in the relationships between human and non-human subjects in the Anthropocene. Starting from the theorisation of multispecies ethnographies (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010), the discipline has increasingly moved beyond the notion of nature as a passive backdrop for human activity, examining instead how capitalist production depends upon the productive capacities of living organisms themselves.

In this article, I begin my analysis from a specific category of animals that are *put to work* (Moore 2015) in contemporary capitalism: the category of food animals, that is, the different varieties of non-humans that are raised and killed to feed human beings. Most social science research on food animals have focused on terrestrial species raised within industrial farming regimes: namely pigs (Blanchette 2020), chickens (Beldo 2017), and cattle (Gillespie 2020). Aquatic life, by contrast, has remained at the margins of this debate. While it has been examined in research of oceanic bioeconomies and technoscientific knowledge production (Helmreich 2009), and studies of aquaculture have illustrated how fish such as salmon become incorporated into industrial regimes of production (Lien 2015), less attention has been paid to forms of capitalist valorisation that operate at the interface between wild capture and farming. Capture-based aquaculture of bluefin tuna exposes a distinct configuration of value production. Here, wild animals are not bred within controlled environments from birth, nor are they simply extracted as finite resources. Instead, they are captured and subsequently inserted into a regime that depends on their continued metabolic activity. Surplus value emerges not only from extraction, but from the management of life itself. By following this process, I argue that bluefin tuna reveal a frontier of accumulation in which value production is reorganized around non-human bodies. Such a configuration invites a reframing of how labour is understood. Starting from Wadiwel's (2018, p. 531) proposal that the most relevant question for analysing the role of food animals is not so much whether animals work, but rather what specific value animals hold for capital, I approach this shift ethnographically. When referring to the *specific* value of food animals, I do not intend to follow the author in his analysis of animals as a distinct working class within the capitalist economy, but rather to focus on a contingent socio-ecological assemblage in which value emerges in relationships between humans and more-than-humans. If, as Marx (1976) argued, the relation between labour and nature is the source of value, then the lively practices of nonhumans complicate the equation. What happens when vitality itself becomes commodified? How do humans and non-humans become

entangled in situated practices through which value is produced? Animals are not simply inputs transformed by human labour. They grow, metabolize, and convert matter into biomass. As Barua argues, the animal body “becomes an accumulation strategy, where conditions for its growth are intensified to realize relative surplus value” (Barua 2019, p. 654). To conceptualise this specific contribution, I adopt the notion of *metabolic labour*. This concept, as proposed by Beldo (2017), refers to the value-generating work performed by the vital processes of living beings (such as growth, digestion, and cellular transformation) once these are enrolled within relations of capitalist production. I use this concept to analyse how animal vitality, specifically its organic capacity to eat, metabolize, and develop biomass, becomes a direct source of value creation within capitalist production. Within this framework, metabolic labour can be understood as what “remains after human labour is subtracted from the equation of the ‘production’ of animal flesh” (Ivi, p. 112).

As Wadiwel (2018, p. 535) argues, food animals play a peculiar role in capitalist production. They “enter the production process as a hybrid of both constant and variable capital. Food animals are deployed as both a raw material that will be ‘finished’ as a product by the production process and simultaneously labour that must work on itself through a ‘metabolic’ self-generative production”. This reflection invites us to consider the temporal discrepancy between metabolic labour and human work. In metabolic labour, “bodily growth and the work done to produce commodities” (Barua 2025, p. 5), “are no longer separable in time.” The rhythms of this non-human labour “are not sidereal and extrinsic to social relations, but immanent to the labouring activities themselves, emerging from dynamic movement and growth” (Barua 2016, p. 280). Haraway (2007) warns that when we label the practices of non-humans as “work” we risk reinscribing anthropocentric categories that flatten the difference among non-human experiences. As she reminds us, animals “are not human slaves or wage labourers, and it would be a serious mistake to theorize their labour within those frameworks. They are paws, not hands” (Ivi, p. 55-56). The animal engagement with production unfolds within distinct socio-ecologies and resists easy equivalence with human labour, for it is “characterised by intentionality and functionality being immanent in the labour process” (Barua 2017, p. 280). To speak of metabolic labour, therefore, is not to translate animal activity into human terms, but to unsettle and denaturalize the boundaries that capitalist production draws between human and non-human contributions in production. Why, then, retain the term labour? Because it allows us to overcome the invisibility of tuna as a passive object, a raw material on which human labour will build value, and to recognise non-humans as active participants in production. As Beldo points out:



Within the existing vocabulary of capitalist production, labour is the term that best approximates the contributions of broiler chickens to the process of chicken farming. [...] The image of the labouring broiler chicken at least inoculates against the temptation to view these immature and passive birds as wholly determined by external forces and instead recognizes their originary role in production, the adverse effects of which they would seem to experience every moment of their lives (Beldo 2017, pp. 124-25).

By foregrounding metabolic labor, this article asks how marine industrial food production reorganize living processes to produce value. In the following sections, I will focus on how metabolic labor unfolds in the tuna trap of Vila Formosa: through feeding activities that intensify growth, monitoring techniques that measure and manage vitality, and killing practices that ultimately extinguish the very life force upon which value depends. But before exploring these interactions in detail, we need to frame tuna farming within what Tsing (2009) calls *supply chain capitalism*: complex and inhomogeneous networks that characterises contemporary capitalistic production. Supply chains connect heterogeneous sites through flexible subcontracting, standardisation, and the production of value across unequal ecological and social contexts. In this regard, the global bluefin tuna industry exemplifies a form of supply chain capitalism, in which “labor, nature, and capital are mobilized in fragmented but linked economic niches” (Ivi, p. 149). I will now situate this labor regime within the history of bluefin tuna fishing, whose transformation set the stage for contemporary capture-based aquaculture. In this chain, metabolic labor constitutes a crucial link. What is accumulated is not simply fish, but non-human vitality reorganized into value. Understanding the dynamics of metabolic labour in contemporary tuna farming requires situating these practices within the longer historical trajectories that shaped the Atlantic bluefin tuna supply chain.

A brief history of the Atlantic bluefin tuna supply chain

Bluefin tuna fishing has been documented since Phoenician and Roman times (Di Natale 2018), although the specific techniques used in antiquity remain unclear. Gradually, however, a new system emerged which, beyond its probable Arab origins, found its most extensive refined application in Sicily: the tuna trap. Spaniards exported this new fishing technique to the rest of the Mediterranean: this prompted the migration of sailors, fishers, and specialized personnel to the Iberian, Provençal, and Sardinian coasts to establish new tuna fisheries and spread the more complex and profitable fishing system (Doneddu 2019).

The tuna trap or *tonnara di corsa* is named for its role in capturing tuna during their reproductive migration from the Atlantic Ocean to the Mediterranean Sea in spring. This fishing technique relies on a fixed system of nets, divided into multiple chambers, positioned at specific points along the coast to intercept the migrating tuna. It is thus a seasonal fishing system, deployable only during the period when tuna migrate to the Mediterranean for reproduction and pass through the areas where the traps are set. It is also a passive system, in that the nets remain fixed along the coast while tuna are guided naturally into the chambers along their migratory routes. Tuna traps remained the primary fishing gear for bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean for hundreds of years, harvesting tuna along their migration routes with minimal changes to the equipment used (Addis, Locci, Cau 2009). The traps became the backbone of local maritime economies, which sustained numerous communities throughout the centuries. Ben-Yehoyada (2017) shows that the tuna trap organized a regime in which cross-channel movements of fishers and commodities coexisted with the territorial fixity of the labor process itself, producing a historically specific configuration of Mediterranean mobility. Yet by the mid-twentieth century, this system began to collapse.

The establishment of ICCAT (the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas) in 1969 marked a turning point for the regulation of tuna fisheries. Created in response to the collapses of the North Atlantic tuna fishery due to overexploitation, ICCAT became the main supranational authority regulating tuna fisheries in both the Atlantic and the Mediterranean. What followed was a period of rapid industrialization and globalization of the bluefin tuna trade. By the late twentieth century, bluefin tuna had become a global luxury commodity, highly prized in the Japanese sashimi market and circulated as a symbol of status and refinement (Bestor 2001). Technological innovations, combined with the expansion of the Japanese sashimi market, transformed bluefin tuna from a mostly local, seasonal food into a high-value commodity. Central to this transformation was the development of purse-seine fishing. Unlike fixed traps, purse seines operate in open water: immense nets, sometimes extending up to two kilometres, encircle entire schools of tuna before closing at the bottom “like a bag” (hence the name). The efficiency of this technique far surpassed that of the traps, enabling massive catches driven by global demand.

In the 1990s, the bluefin tuna supply chain underwent another major transformation with the emergence of tuna farming, or capture-based aquaculture. Instead of killing the fish at sea, purse-seine fleets began capturing live tuna and transferring them to offshore cages for fattening. This innovation enabled producers to stabilize supply and better synchronize fishing with market demands,

aligning biological cycles with commercial rhythms. The Mediterranean became a fertile ground for the application of this new technique, with Spain and Malta turning out as the main hubs of this novel industry, hosting large-scale operations that are mostly connected to the Japanese markets. As Tsing (2012) would put it, it represents an attempt to make production *scalable*: to turn the irregular rhythms of the sea into a predictable, continuous flow of value.

These transformations occurred alongside the development of new transnational conservation policies. In 1998, ICCAT introduced national quotas aimed at reducing overfishing; however, this system initially failed to prevent the ongoing crisis, as allocated quotas often exceeded the recommendations of the ICCAT Scientific Committee. By 2007, facing a severe stock collapse, ICCAT launched a multi-year recovery plan that combined quota reductions, stricter catch monitoring, and new traceability systems. As a result, tuna traps, increasingly marginalized within the global supply chain, had to adapt in order to survive. While these policies aimed to ensure sustainability, they also enacted an epistemological shift: tuna came to be understood primarily as populations to be managed, a biological resource, rather than part of a discrete socio-ecology. This shift exemplifies the biopolitical logic of modern fisheries management. Yet the biological abstraction inherent in “stock” management obscures the histories, practices, and socio-ecological relations that shaped local fisheries (Campling, Havice, Howard 2012).

Garrett Hardin’s (1968) *tragedy of the commons* theory permeated almost all political discourse on the exploitation of natural resources. According to Hardin, the overexploitation of shared resources results from individual rational calculations and competing interests, which leads to depletion; his proposed solution was privatization and regulation. This narrative had a profound influence on fisheries management, providing the ideological foundation for the quota systems still in place today. However, Longo and Clausen (2011) argue that the crisis of bluefin tuna fisheries is better understood not as a tragedy of the commons but as a *tragedy of the commodity*. The overfishing of bluefin tuna, alongside the simultaneous decline of traditional techniques such as fixed traps, cannot be explained by the mere lack of regulation; rather, it stems from the commodification of tuna itself. As Telesca (2020) argues, ICCAT’s management of bluefin tuna has not primarily aimed to protect the species, but rather to maximize export revenues and support the economic growth of maritime powers, establishing a regime of value that turns the fish into a commodity and facilitates its “legal” extermination under the guise of conservation.

The processes described above had profound material consequences across the Atlantic and the Mediterranean: all tuna traps along the Portuguese coast were closed around the 1970s, as migration routes shifted and local catches dwined.

dled. The trap at Vila Formosa was opened in the 1990s by a foreign investor as an attempt to re-introduce tuna traps as a technique for fishing tuna in the Atlantic and integrate it into the emerging global tuna market. This articulation between local fishing practices and global production reflects the broader transformation of the Mediterranean and Atlantic fisheries in which tuna farming and fattening have assumed an increasingly central role.

The rise of capture-based aquaculture it is not merely a technological or economic shift, but a reconfiguration of the relations between labour and life. The transition from traps to fattening farms marks a deeper historical transformation in the bluefin tuna supply chain, a move from fishing practices to a more subtle labour regime, one that entails the “rendition of metabolism into work” (Barua 2025, p. 7). The tuna farm thus stands as the latest stage in a long history of technologically mediated encounters between humans and tuna, while it also reveals the contradictions at the heart of the blue economy governance frameworks: sustainability achieved through intensified control over life. This brief foray into the reconfiguration of the bluefin tuna fishery lays the historical groundwork for the ethnographic analysis that follows, exploring how, in the waters of Southern Portugal, the vitality and the metabolism of tuna become the very core of a process of value extraction.

A morning feeding: nourishing the lively commodity



Figure 1. A trawler used for feeding surrounded by seagulls inside a tuna cage (Photo by the author).



The daily morning feeding of tuna in the cages exemplifies the everyday practices of a labour regime in which tuna is not simply caught but becomes the focus of a process of nourishment and control, aimed at maintaining its life and growth. In order to do this, the tuna “must be severed from its home and family. Its former life must be nearly extinguished” (Collard 2014, p. 158). Here, I aim to emphasise not the idea of the eradication of tuna from the “natural world”, but rather the production of a particular type of nature (Smith 1984). Within this site, a specific nature emerges, one that is “controllable” and “manageable”. This is tied to the logic of the blue economy, where tuna is measured and quantified as part of an economic calculation to generate value.

The quota system described above underpins this entire configuration. Bluefin tuna quotas are not defined by the number of fish caught, but by their total weight. When tuna are transferred from the trap to the cages, their biomass is measured using stereoscopic cameras and verified by an observer appointed by the national fisheries authority. Quotas are calculated at transfer, based on the total weight entering the cages; any growth during the fattening period is not accounted for and thus represents additional biomass the company can sell. The temporal gap between capture and harvest is crucial. It is within this interval that the sustaining of life becomes a productive operation. By feeding the tuna and maintaining their metabolic activity, companies are able to generate weight that exceeds the officially registered catch. In other words, value is not extracted despite the fish being kept alive, but through the very processes that allow them to live and grow. For instance, a tuna weighing sixty kilograms when caged that reaches eighty kilograms at harvest produces twenty kilograms of surplus beyond the officially registered catch. Biological growth, the fish’s capacity to eat, metabolize, and fatten, is thus directly converted into surplus value.

As I have already mentioned, in the transition from fishing to tuna fattening, the fish become as a valuable commodity on the global market. But what kind of commodity is tuna? Game? A domesticated animal? Following Castree (2003), we might instead ask: what kind of nature is being commodified in this process? Tuna is transformed from an animal captured to be sold as meat into a *lively commodity* (Collard, Dempsey 2013), whose value is not represented so much by simply being alive, but more specifically by the fact that they “retain their ‘vital or generative qualities’, qualities that can produce capitalist value as long as they *remain alive and/or promise future life*” (ivi, p. 2684). However, the tuna’s value does not lie in their spectacular, encounterable “wildness” (Barua 2017) or in their construction as “companions” that “live in prolonged, controlled, and intimate contact

with their ‘owners’” (Collard 2014, p. 154), but from an encounter that allows monitoring his metabolism and growth. This is particularly evident in the case of tuna: its ability to eat and consequently develop biomass become the fundamental processes through which economic gain is generated within this fishery. What is commodified, then, is not life in the abstract, but metabolic labour itself: the tuna’s own bodily activity, through which additional biomass is produced beyond the moment of capture. To understand how this metabolic labour unfolds in everyday practice, let us return to that early morning at the port.

Other workers begin to arrive. They are mostly silent, while some of them get coffee from the machine. As we leave the port, the sky starts to fade from black to a pinkish grey. The trawler slides on the surface of the sea, in a silence broken only by the tinny sound of the engine. As soon as we reach the cages, the boat is tied to a rope that secures it to the middle of the cage structure.

Using a large hand-held net, the fishers lift the mackerel from the tank and dump them onto the side of the boat, where they are pushed into the water through small openings along the gunwale, with the aid of an electric pump. I ask why they do not throw everything in at once. One of the workers explains: “We cannot give much food together. They have to eat slowly”. The tuna, however, remain practically invisible. Every now and then you can see occasional shadows floating on the surface, but it is difficult to spot them because of the opacity of the water itself. As soon as they start throwing the fish, dozens of seagulls arrive and begin circling around us, screeching. The sun rises behind the cages. For a moment, the surface clears and I see the tuna: huge, fast, metallic. The speed of their movements is startling. They appear and vanish in seconds, their bodies cutting through the water with rapid sweeps. At that moment, I realize how little of this process is actually visible. Watching them, I understand that everything depends on what happens beneath the water, in a space that resists human observation. Metabolic labour occurs out of sight: it is the tuna’s own bodily work (eating, digesting, fattening) that generates surplus value. Yet this labour cannot be fully controlled. The process of converting biological growth into surplus value is fragile and uncertain. Tuna are not machines: their bodies and metabolisms are not fully controllable and manageable. They are living animals susceptible to stress, disease, and that can behave unpredictably. A tuna that stops eating, shows signs of sickness, or becomes overly stressed poses a threat to the accumulation of surplus biomass. Production therefore depends inextricably on a process that is barely visible to the human eye.



Figure 2. Turbulent waters, with tuna fins visible at the surface (Photo by the author).

As shown in the morning feeding, the conversion of mackerel into tuna biomass through metabolic labour that enables and sustains its bodily growth, occurs in an opaque environment below the refractive surface of water, largely shielded from direct human observation. As Swanson, Lien, and Ween (2018) observe, domestication should be understood not as a state of total control, but as a relational practice that unfolds through “unexpected combinations of cooperation and coercion and of asymmetry and intimacy” (ivi, p. 20). The unpredictable vitality of tuna exemplifies this very tension, revealing a form of domestication where the process of managing life remains fundamentally contingent upon the same vital forces it seeks to control. This opacity and unpredictability make it clear that external management alone cannot suffice: sustaining and understanding the tuna requires direct, close presence, allowing humans to observe and interpret the signals that emerge beneath the water’s surface. A more in-depth encounter is required, one that attempts to establish some kind of relationship with this elusive life form through immersion in its aquatic environment. Its vitality must be translated from a wild unencounterable force into a series of decipherable individual behaviours and physiological signals: a *readable* life that must be managed to produce value. In the tuna fishery of Vila Formosa, this task falls to a distinctive category of workers: scuba divers.

The daily dive: “dealing” with tuna

The divers perform several tasks during their work. Their first responsibility is to guide the transfer of tuna from the trap chambers to the offshore cages, pushing the fish from behind as they pass through the nets. They also dive during other fishing operations, to correctly position the nets or ensure that the tuna or other fish caught for the local market do not get entangled in the nets. Their work, however, does not end there. Once the tuna are in the cages, they dive every day with them: checking the nets, ensuring the fish eats, and monitoring for stressed or unusual behaviour. Later in the season, as we shall see, it will be these same divers who enter the cages again to kill the tuna one by one. Among the divers in Vila Formosa, João is the most experienced. I met him one morning, just after he had returned from the sea while rinsing his gear, and he explained about what it means to him to “deal with” the fish:

João: “That’s one of those things you learn over the years, working with them every day. It’s not just with tuna, with all the fish that enter the trap, you learn how to deal with them. You know how you’re going to work with them, you know what their behaviour will be like, right?”

Author: “And is there a difference between fish like sea bream, mackerel, and tuna?”

João: “Of course, obviously, right? Sea bream and mackerel... it’s a different behaviour; it has nothing to do with it. We’re talking about big fish, right? That’s where you can really deal with a fish’s behaviour, because they are unique fish. Mackerel is a school. With a big fish, it’s a... It’s like when you have a dog, you know how to deal with the dog. For example, you see a dog, you’re looking at a dog. It belongs to a friend of yours. But you’ve never been with the dog, you don’t know the dog, but it belongs to your friend. You pet it first, you reach out your hand, you don’t just throw your hand out, right? First you see how the dog is, the dog’s behaviour, and then you go... The fish is the same. Tuna is the same, with sharks, with bigger fish, which are unique and singular. You learn the behaviour, you’ll learn how to deal with it. Look, the water is like this, and it will do this. The water is like that, and it will do that. You more or less know how to deal with the thing, right?”

(Conversation with João, 03/09/2025)

João’s account is at once practical and slightly disorienting. He insists on the radical difference between tuna and other fish (correcting my attempt to group them with sea bream or mackerel) yet moments later compares them to dogs. The apparent contradiction is revealing. Tuna are not interchangeable units within a “school” but singular beings whose behaviour must be individually assessed. The analogy with the dog does it illustrates a mode of cautious relationality. One does not simply “grab” a dog; one observes, approaches slowly,

reads signs, waits for a response. Through this comparison, João gestures toward a practical engagement grounded in experience rather than abstraction. To work with tuna is to develop a capacity to anticipate movement, to sense agitation before it becomes visible, to interpret subtle shifts in the water itself. His knowledge is built through repeated immersion in the same environment as the fish. In this sense, João's immersion in the water is not merely physical but also a form of what Tsing (2024) describes as *attunement*: an "attempt to get to know, through alignment, how others express themselves in the world". In Portuguese, João used the verb *lidar com* to describe his relationship with the tuna: a phrase that I've translated as *to deal with*. This saying, however, means not only *to deal with* but also *to care for* and *to work hard at something*. This polysemy captures precisely the ambiguity of this engagement: a practice that is simultaneously relational and work-oriented, embodied and technical. To *lidar com* the tuna is not simply to manage them, but to enter a shared medium: the watery world that properly belongs to the fish; yet one that humans attempt to reorganize through enclosure, regulated feeding, and monitoring, in order to harness their metabolic capacities for value production. Through his immersion, the diver learns to perceive and interpret their movements, developing a situated understanding of their behaviour that makes control, and ultimately value production, possible. Observing this daily immersion makes visible a crucial dimension of metabolic labour. The tuna's bodily activity generates surplus value, but that activity must be sustained, interpreted, and stabilised through human forms of attentiveness. Value does not emerge from human control alone, nor from tuna vitality in isolation, but from this asymmetrical and ongoing interspecies encounter. In other words, the commodity status of tuna is only part of the story. Tuna is not, in fact, an inert material to be managed, but it is precisely through this encounter – odd, challenging, always partial – that we can begin to reflect on its capacity to act within these relationships. Recognising its subjectivity allow us to recover its role as an active participant in economic production (Barua 2016, p. 275).

Narratives about food animals usually emphasise their capacity to act as a form of "resistance" against the conditions of production (e.g. Wadiwel 2018). However, this approach is partial and limiting. As Pearson critically notes,

describing animal behaviour as resistance is problematic. It risks projecting human motivations onto animals, thereby humanising animals. The 'nonhuman as resister' model is therefore deeply anthropomorphic and perhaps says more about human desires for animal liberation than the animals themselves. Furthermore, turning animals into resisters downplays the specificity of human resistance and politics, in particular the ability of humans to collectively assess current conditions and imagine

and articulate a vision for the future and how to achieve it. [...] Moreover, the focus on resistance overlooks other – and often less dramatic – forms of nonhuman agency and activity. The focus on nonhuman resistance therefore fails to capture the full extent of nonhuman agency (Pearson 2015, p. 713).

Following this critique, we might seek agency elsewhere. The agency of farmed tuna is not to be found only in struggling against capture but also in its biological capacity to act as a productive force. We can then speak of animal agency “even when farms function normally and efficiently and when animals ‘comply’ with the wishes of industry”. (Beldo, 2017, p. 110). The agency of tuna is therefore manifested not only in opposition to the regime of control, but also through its vital capacity and metabolic labour which the fattening cages simultaneously depend on and attempt to manage. Yet there comes a point at which the tuna’s vitality, the very foundation of its value, must be halted in order for that value to be realised. The metabolic labour through which tuna produce additional biomass during the fattening period cannot continue indefinitely: the surplus it generates only becomes economically meaningful once it is secured in flesh. In this sense, the shift from feeding and monitoring to killing does not interrupt the management of metabolic labour but marks its final stage. The next section examines how the killing of tuna is practically organised and enacted as part of this process.

***Matança*: the value of a “good” death**

In the Vila Formosa trap and cages, biological growth is not the endpoint of the productive process. Instead, it finds its climax in death. Yet this death cannot be chaotic or excessively violent. It must be technically controlled, calibrated, and efficient. The value generated through months of feeding depends on the capacity to extinguish life without compromising flesh. In this regime, a “good” death is not external to production; it secures in flesh the value generated through metabolic labour and the subsequent biomass increase. The *matança*, the final slaughter of the season, makes this logic visible. Here, months of feeding and monitoring converge in a carefully orchestrated operation in which metabolic labour is brought to a calculated halt. What appears as a moment of termination is in fact the culmination of a prolonged process of value production.

One month later, in mid-September, I am back at the port: this time to observe the killing of fattened tuna, which will bring the tuna fishing season to an end. Inside the office the workers are already having coffee. Two men sit



at a table covered with boxes marked in Japanese characters, alongside crates of beer with the same unfamiliar writing. Mateus, the captain, tells me that they hope to finish the tuna fishing season in the next two days, depending on how many tuna they can process today. He says he does not want to rush, though; everyone is tired, and when fatigue sets in, accidents can happen. We leave the dock just before dawn. The sea is flat, the air dense with salt and diesel. After half an hour of navigation a ship appears on the horizon: a Japanese factory ship. It is immense, almost like a ferry, anchored and waiting not too far from the cages. At eight o'clock, the divers begin preparing to enter the water. The company has provided for everything for the working day: water, snacks, energy drinks. Two small boats are lowered inside the cage with a crane. When the divers finally enter the water, the operation becomes eerily silent. Two divers carry pneumatic guns mounted on cane spears. As soon as they hit the tuna, the guns fire a projectile into the fish's head, killing it instantly. From where I stand, I can see only the flashes of movement beneath the surface. Each tuna is shot individually. As soon as the body floats up, two men on the small boats hook them with ropes so that they can then be lifted by the crane onto the main boat.



Figure 3. A tuna is lifted aboard as workers prepare to bleed it out (Photo by the author).

The body is lifted quickly onto the main vessel, where two workers stab them in the flank with a knife and cut their gills so that they bleed out as quickly as possible. The tuna is then transferred, still hanging, onto another vessel that will ferry them to the Japanese ship. Mateus asks me if they have cranes in Sardinia too. I reply that they don't. "Here we are in the future," he replies.

The Japanese buyers want the fish to suffer as little as possible, because muscular contraction and the stress hormone generated at the moment of death would induce the production of lactic acid, which would discolour the flesh and therefore ruin the quality of the meat. For the company, stressed fish means a loss: the buyers would reject them, forcing them to sell on the local market at a lower price. To ensure this, a rigid and well-defined operational chain is necessary. If, during the months of fattening, human work revolves around keeping the tuna alive and eating, the *matança* reorients that knowledge toward a different form of labour: one that must end life without damaging the flesh. A few fishes that reach the deck still arrive alive are immediately subjected to *ikejime*: a Japanese technique in which a thin metal wire is inserted into the brain to cause instant death and prevent muscle movements. Then all the tuna are bled to prevent residual blood in the body from spoiling the meat. As the day goes on, the process becomes almost mechanical: bodies rise, are pierced, bled, lifted, and passed on.

All these actions are aimed at the extinguishment of the tuna vitality: the same vitality that, through metabolism, has produced surplus value, but which in death must be suppressed to preserve the flesh.

Even the language used to describe the event reflects this transformation. While the fishers refer to the event as *matança*, a Portuguese term meaning slaughter and evoking the violent taking of life (akin to the Italian *mattanza*), the technical language employed in policy documents and by ICCAT observers is "harvesting." The contrast is not merely semantic. Whereas *matança* foregrounds death as a forceful interruption of life, harvesting draws on an agricultural vocabulary associated with the collection of a crop. This shift in terminology moves the semantic field from the ocean to the farm, reframing the killing of tuna as the gathering of a cultivated resource. Yet the movement is more complex. In wild fisheries, "harvest" is usually used to describe the capture of fish, borrowing from agrarian language to naturalize extraction from the sea. In the case of capture-based aquaculture, however, the term operates twice over. Tuna are first "harvested" from the wild when captured in the trap; months later, the *matança* is again described as a "harvest," even though value has been significantly augmented through controlled feeding and metabolic growth. By calling the *matança* a harvest, the language not only softens the violence of slaughter but also obscures the metabolic labour that has taken place

in the meantime. The term collapses the distinction between capture and fattening, presenting the final killing as the simple collection of a resource rather than the culmination of months of managed biological transformation. In doing so, it contributes to masking the accumulation of surplus value generated through the fattening of the tuna after the fish's initial capture. The silence and calm of this practice mirror the technical and technological advances that have rendered the agency of tuna null at the moment of its death, transforming a living, vital animal into a dead commodity. When Mateus declares "here we are in the future" he is pointing precisely to these technical innovations that mark what Barua (2025) calls a *metabolic shift*: from the chaotic struggle of trap fishing to a regime of control over tuna metabolism, where life is converted into value through a "clean", controlled death. But this process also reshapes the relationship between tuna and humans, as we can see again from João's words:

João: The *matança*, before, here in the company, it wasn't like this. It was more manual; it was like in the old days. [...]

Author: And it's better as...

João: It's better in everything. It's better in everything. Speed, quality of the product. Safety, too, despite being with a firearm, the safety too and... In that aspect. It's hard for the diver, very hard.

[...] But in terms of quality, speed and safety it's better. For the tuna it's better. It doesn't suffer. It's quick. It's quick, of course. It's how everything has to be. For me, every animal, every animal that is going to die for some purpose, has to die quickly. It has to die quickly. And I'm also completely against killing animals, killing something that has no commercial value, or that is good for nothing.

(Conversation with João, 03/09/2025)

For the divers like João, killing tuna quickly also carries a moral dimension. A fast, less painful death becomes a way to respect the tuna as a living being, even as it is being transformed into a commodity. Death "as it should be" ensures not only product quality but also the recognition of having respected the animal by not imposing unnecessary suffering, a moral consideration emerging from within the logic of commercial exploitation.

When the dead tuna land on the ship, they are immediately cut into pieces and frozen at -60 degrees, preserving them as if fresh throughout the journey. Here, the transformation is complete: from a vitality to be managed and nourished, to a vitality to be extinguished, to a dead commodity circulating in the global market. The Japanese factory ship on the horizon is but the next stage of the tuna's journey in the supply chain, a point where the vitality of the tuna, domesticated and then extinguished, finally enters the global market.

Coda: vitality, labour, and value in the making of global commodities

The journey of the bluefin tuna, from capture to fattening in offshore cages, represents more than a mere technological or economic transformation. It embodies a reconfiguration of the relationships between humans and non-humans, vitality and value, in contemporary food production. Although this article only aims to offer a few insights from a broader ethnography that is still in progress, the exploration of the Vila Formosa trap has attempted to trace how the tuna transforms, from a fish caught to be sold, into a *lively commodity* (Collard, Dempsey 2013), whose value is produced and extracted through the control and exploitation of its own metabolism.

This ethnographic account shows that the tuna's value lies not simply in its flesh, but in its biological capacity to grow and convert biomass, a process enabled by the quota system that transforms biological growth into surplus value. This process of valorisation, however, is inherently fragile and opaque, dependent on a non-human vitality that escapes total control and on the construction of an asymmetrical interspecies relation. To analyse this specific non-human contribution to production, I have adopted the notion of *metabolic labour* (Beldo 2017). This concept allows us to recognize the tuna not as a passive raw material, but as an active, though exploited, participant in value generation, whose agency is manifested not only in a resistential behaviour but, notably, in its productive capacity to live, eat, and grow. The moment of the *matança*, the harvesting, represents the climax of the exploitation of this vitality and, at the same time, its negation: the vital force that created value must be suppressed in a rapid, controlled manner to preserve the quality of the once-lively commodity.

The case of bluefin tuna is but one instance of a broader phenomenon. From industrial aquaculture to livestock farming and plantation agriculture, supply chains are increasingly organized around the direct exploitation of metabolic and generative processes. This represents a fundamental shift in the frontier of accumulation, one that demands a corresponding shift in our analytical frameworks. For anthropology, therefore, the challenge is to explore, through ethnography, the specific ways in which lives are reconfigured and rendered productive. This requires immersing oneself into the practices and spaces in which humans and nonhumans intersect, tracing how global production chains depend on contingent and everyday relations. By paying closer attention to these encounters, anthropology can reveal the contradictions of a productive system that seeks to render vitality legible and profitable, while simultaneously erasing the difference and instability that constitute life itself. Rather than



searching for a universal definition of nonhuman labour, we might instead ask: what kinds of value are produced through specific ecologies of work, and for whom? How do material multispecies entanglements transform, adapt, or resist when enlisted into global circuits of capital? How is the very category of labour stretched when we attend to the vital, often invisible, activities of non-humans within capitalist production? And what can an ethnography teach us about the ways practices of extraction and accumulation continue to reorganise not only human labour, but the very conditions of life on earth? Engaging with these questions is to reflect upon anthropology's pivotal role as a practice of situated attention: a practice that makes visible the intertwining between humans and non-humans. As João reminded me, this relation never appears fully legible. Just as the divers learn, through immersion, to sense the presence of tuna that remain largely concealed beneath the water, ethnography too proceeds through partial glimpses and situated attunements. Both diver and ethnographer depend on moments in which what lies below the surface becomes momentarily visible. In this sense, to study tuna's metabolic labour is to learn how to attend to the submerged processes through which value is generated. It is within these shared yet asymmetrical encounters that anthropology can grasp how contemporary capitalism reorganises not only labour, but the living worlds on which it depends.

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When Euthanasia Goes Viral: Death and Multispecies Work in the Shadow of the Platform Economy

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Abstract: This article examines how the emotional, immaterial work of animals becomes part of human creative and entrepreneurial labor on digital platforms – spaces where the line between sharing daily life and exploiting it to generate content increasingly blurs. It discusses how cuteness, as a performative aesthetic designed to highlight the animal's sweetness and perceived vulnerability, hides its active role in boosting views, user engagement, and social interactions. Between the genuine desire to share and the pursuit of trending content, even the animal's death is also caught up in these dynamics. To illustrate how digital culture relies on multispecies forms of labor in digital spaces, this article presents the case of an Italian female veterinarian recording the euthanasia of her own dog, which goes viral on Instagram and sparks negative comments and disapproval, revealing a complex web of contradictions. The precariousness of the veterinary profession is also analysed, emphasizing how sharing medical knowledge is intertwined with strategies of self-branding and gendered labor; meanwhile, the animal's emotional, immaterial work is overshadowed, and its death commodified as a tool for engagement. Ultimately, the article suggests that an animal's death does not interrupt the creation of value but instead becomes a key component in a system that spectacularizes multispecies intimacy.

Keywords: Euthanasia; Instagram; Animal death; Multispecies work; Veterinarians

“I have bad news to tell you”

On December 2, 2023, I found myself heartbroken while watching an Instagram Reel¹ in which an Italian veterinarian with almost 200,000 followers

¹ Instagram Reels can last from 15 to 90 seconds, and the platform provides several editing tools to cut and merge clips make them more dynamic, well-structured creative and engaging. Reels appear on individual users' profiles but can also be featured on the Explore page, increasing their visibility.



documents the final moments of her dog's life. The video montage, slightly increased in speed to fit the video time format, accompanied by a voiceover explaining what happened, shows a series of scenes filmed to capture the event. In the opening frames, the veterinarian is at home on her sofa. Distraught, she says, "I have bad news to tell you, in fact, terrible news".

The voiceover explains how she decided to initially film the dog in the backyard, with video frames integrated into the storytelling. From the kitchen, she notices the animal lying outside. Based on its breathing alone, she immediately senses the seriousness of the situation: "irregular breathing, weakness, and white mucous membranes. In a few seconds, I already knew what it was". Aiming to document the symptoms of a deadly tumor affecting several dog breeds, she shows herself palpating the swollen abdomen to confirm abdominal bleeding. The next scene shows her in the clinic, wearing a lab coat. She proceeds with the pre-operative anesthesia herself. Anesthetist and owner, she first kisses the dog and shortly afterward intubates him.

I took him to the clinic quickly, did an abdominal ultrasound, and immediately attached a blood bag because he was very ill and had significant abdominal bleeding. The ultrasound revealed that the spleen was definitely cancerous. We also noticed something on the liver, but we hoped it wasn't cancerous. I took him into surgery with a small hope of being able to stop the internal bleeding. When we actually opened the abdomen, we realized that the bleeding wasn't from the spleen but from the liver, and the liver was in worse shape than the spleen.

Confronted with the severe bleeding caused by the rapid growth of hemangiosarcoma, an extremely aggressive tumor, she realized that the dog's death was inevitable. "I decided to close him up and take him on one last trip to the mountains, where he is happy. He saw my parents again, all of us. We gave him lots of cuddles before euthanizing him at 3:15 p.m. So today, D. rests in peace and is no longer with us. I'm sorry" (IG Reel, December 2023).² The video caption emphasizes the deep pain and frustration of not being able to save the animal. The veterinarian shares the challenges of her job in these moments:

I'm angry, sad, and I don't know who to blame.

I couldn't even keep him alive for one more day. There was no way. There was nothing I could do.

² The original text is in Italian. All translations and transcriptions are my own and have been slightly adapted to balance accuracy and readability.



The hard part about being a vet is that no one tactfully tells you what's happening. No one guides you step by step. You have to figure it out on your own. In just a few moments. It's like a slap in the face. You realize everything immediately. You already understand in a second that it's a disaster.

At least he didn't suffer. Until the night before, he ate and went out for his usual walk. Now he's running happily in heaven with [our two other dogs].

We will miss him so much.

I thank all my colleagues who were so kind and supported me during those terrible moments.

#farewell #funeral #rip.³

With 2.6 million views, the Reel went viral and currently has 8,902 comments. Amid numerous messages of condolence and solidarity, the decision to record the process and euthanize the dog generated a series of comments expressing strong disapproval. This criticism arises from her seemingly detached explanation of the events and the act of filming the animal in its final moments of life; the choice, according to some commentators, to euthanize the dog when it could have died "naturally", suggesting euthanasia was the easiest way to "get rid of the nuisance". The veterinarian chooses to grieve privately and returns publicly after a week's absence to engage with her followers and address some of the negative comments, thereby reaffirming the correctness of her actions. There are many reasons behind the publication of this Reel. The veterinarian aims to share her personal experience and inform her audience that the dog whom they had grown fond of by following her page had passed away. Yet, as attention becomes a limited commodity in a world that is overloaded with information (Goldhaber 1997), sharing become a performative act. Content creators and influencers strive to convey authenticity and disclose personal vulnerability to attract views and gain followers (Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023). The best ways to obtain, manage, and maintain attention is often through emotional content and controversy. As I will explain later, in the case of social media veterinarians, knowledge itself becomes a narrative resource designed to attract and entertain audiences who then become important assets to be re-directed toward e-commerce sites or attract brand partnerships and collaborations.

Animal presence in digital spaces play an equally important role. Animal imagery has served as both an affective and economic force in a society where the professional and recreational spheres have collapsed into one another, and eve-

³ I have retained the original formatting of the caption and removed the last hashtag containing the dog's name.



rything is work (Page 2016). As Page argues, the cuteness of small, baby-like animals offers comfort and makes them a source of entertainment for workers exhausted by the precariousness of neoliberal capitalism, providing them with a reason to keep going (2016). This emotional comfort sustains productivity (for those who watch), yet it is also driven by the commodification of personal and intimate experiences of those who work on platforms. Human creative labor becomes inseparable from the affective and bodily work of the animal's partner, so what happens when those same animals, protagonists of these videos are immortalized by their human companions during the final stages of their lives, and intimate aspects of life are shared and commodified to foster empathy? On this note, Porcher's proposal to draw the attention of the social sciences to the work animals do and how they can change the very nature of work pushed me to follow her along her most provocative question: "What place does [animal] death have in work?" (2014, p. 8). Can the (dying) animal be considered as a digital worker himself?

The current debate on animal work has already highlighted the need to distinguish between socially accepted forms of animal work – such as those involving so-called "working animals" (Coulter 2018) – and forms of emotional labor that occur in less formal settings. As Coulter notes, animals used for institutional roles (among others, guide dogs, police dogs, therapy dogs, or police and therapy horses) are seen as equivalent to human workers because of their clearly defined physical tasks, specific training, and partnerships with humans. In these formal environments, animal work mostly consists in regulating both their own emotional states and those of the humans they interact with (Warda 2022; Dashper 2019). Even in these settings, however, identifying such work requires knowledge of the animal's behaviour and advanced interpretive skills that encompass the ability to recognize agency and initiative. In the context of digital platforms, animal labor becomes more difficult to recognize, as watching a human-curated digital profile makes it hard to assess the animal's active contribution. Despite this challenge, animal labor understood through corporeal presence and ethological registers reveals that bodies are not inert and animals are not simply raw material but active participants in processes of meaning and value-making.

Following recent efforts to theorize animals as protagonists in economic and digital processes by drawing on Donna Haraway's notion of "*encounter value*" and "lively commodities" (2008) as extended by Barua (2016) my aim is to show how animals' affective and bodily work co-produces surplus within capitalist economies. Barua emphasizes that encounter value shifts analysis beyond human-centered understandings of labor but also "that it conceptualizes political economies as constituted by liveliness from the outset" (Barua 2016, p. 13). As Barua notes, liveliness and encounter value emerge through multimodal, mul-

tispecies forms of labor that might be rendered into commodities and circulated for purposes of valorization. “Encounter value,” he writes, “can be thought of as that *process* of value generation where bodies, ethologies, and liveliness of an animal *make a difference to*, and *is constitutive* of, those very relations that render or mobilize it as a commodity” (ivi, p. 4, original italics).

More so, labor is not inherent to the animal but derives from people who stage these encounters. Indeed, “nonhuman labour is porous, for it is not the attribute of individuals closed in on themselves but an activity enmeshed in heterogeneous entanglements” (ivi, p. 10). Therefore, “as much as humans set up conditions for animals to work, the latter too have bearings on human economic activity and its organisation” (*ibid.*). Turnbull *et al.* (2023) further adapted this concept into “*digital encounter value*” to describe online human-animal interactions not proximate in time or space, thereby transforming how value is produced (ivi, p. 12). These digital encounters generate affective and economic value through multispecies entanglements and technological agencies through media-based content and spectacle.

Building on these authors, this paper explores what happens when euthanasia becomes the focus of a digitally mediated and valued encounter – an otherwise unseen event by those without companion animals – whose circulation reveals both ethical tensions and various forms of care, especially if conducted by a female veterinarian influencer, someone who works for, with, and possibly through the animal. By expanding the idea of encounter value to include moments of loss and ethical exposure in the digital age, I analyze how transspecies relations are spectacularized and mediated through digital infrastructure that transforms experience into reproducible, exchangeable formats, such as videos that can be watched repeatedly, accumulating views and extracting value from the encounter with death as the spectacle of a (once)-lively animal. The spectacle of death thus marks the moment where liveliness is commodified, with the human and animal material and immaterial labor sustaining these relations becoming obscured. In fact, the analysis will also show how the invisible affective work animals perform in digital spaces intertwines with the unique precarity of the veterinary profession (Irvine, Vermilya 2010) and platform labor conditions (Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023).

This work is part of my doctoral research on practices and rituals involving companion animals’ death, conducted at a pet cemetery and crematorium in Sardinia (Italy) and on Instagram (IG). Almost simultaneously with the start of my PhD (2022), I observed how digital spaces were becoming central venues for expressing grief over companion animals, revealing several tensions. From that point, I expanded my primarily ‘analog’ fieldwork to include digital spaces to understand how they mediate the phenomenon I was studying.



The digital component of my research was carried out on Instagram through my personal profile and developed in a diversified, loosely structured manner. From a methodological perspective, following Caliendo (2018), my aim has not been to adapt ethnographic methods to virtual environments but to understand the features that shape social interaction and expression within platforms (hashtags, retweets, Instagram stories, algorithms), which are always latent and relational. This shifts the focus from what technology does to users toward the mutual ways users shape platform practices, emphasizing that these affordances only materialize through specific cultural practices and social interactions, rather than being intrinsic features of the technology (Costa 2018). This, in turn, alters the strategies and options available to the researcher. Therefore, I did not pre-select profiles or collect specific data through established protocols; instead, I observed and welcomed the creative insights shared by both famous and ordinary users who usually don't focus on animal death but live with companion animals, sharing their daily lives and experiences with loss. Consequently, the data in this article comprises multimodal user-generated content, including text, audio, videos, and images collected between November 2022 and January 2025. Although this research is part of a broader investigation that includes various practices related to the theme of animal death, the current focus is mainly on a single profile; and the analysis of Reels, Instagram stories, and live broadcasts created under various circumstances before and after the veterinarian's dog's death, which she chose to share, post, and archive; and more specifically, the Reel documenting her dog's euthanasia, the follow-up IG Live, related stories, and a purposive sample of comments. All materials analyzed were posted publicly and remain accessible to the public. However, names and direct identifiers have been removed.

Cute economy, affective labor and death

The presence of animals in digital spaces is pervasive. From corporate logos in the 1960s to stickers and mobile phone accessories in the 1990s, and today's pet influencers, animals maintain a ubiquitous presence in the digital realm (Berland 2019; Lupton 2023). To trace how animals have been integrated into the contemporary platform economy, I initially analyze the online presence of animals and the emotional labor they perform within the "cute economy" by examining the Internet with its participatory and experimental nature, characterized by anonymity, collective creativity, and its amateurl media production (Meese 2014); then, and most importantly, I focus on the

Social Web. No longer a peripheral environment frequented by specialists or nerds, but an extension of everyday life open to a wide variety of people and its emphasis on the construction of personal identity and content monetization that has altered economic, political, and social balances (Thibaut, Marino 2018).⁴

The link between these spheres is represented by various multimedia content (texts, images, sounds, and animations), which are communicative acts where animals serve as key figures in web aesthetics and visual culture. In this context, animals act as mediators of values, aesthetic and social codes, and also co-produce human labor and economic outputs. First, during the era of webcams and personal blogs (1995-2004), the largest webcam on the Internet was “KittyCam”, dedicated to watching Kitty, a cat owned by an advertising agency in California. The camera took a single still image every two minutes, and Kitty only appeared when she wandered in front of the fixed camera. In 1998, KittyCam received over a million visits. Then, during the meme era (2005-2011), animals acted as linguistic and semiotic symbols, as famous images with humorous captions; now, during the era of celebrity pets (2011 to present), pet influencers are major players in the digital market (White 2020, pp. 76-106). To understand the value generated by digital encounters with animals, note that with YouTube’s rise in 2005, Maru, the first Japanese cat known for playing with boxes, set a Guinness World Record in 2016 for the most viewed videos of a single animal on YouTube: over 325 million views by 2020 (ivi, p. 93).

Behind these cheerful performances lies an ambivalent dynamic: while animals appear as symbols of joy and care, they become part of various networks at the intersection of the cute economy (Maddox 2021) and a hidden infrastructure of affective work (Barua, 2018). Cuteness functions as a performative aesthetic that aims to emphasize the animal’s sweetness and vulnerability. Features like large eyes, a round face, and a small nose and mouth evoke infantile traits that reinforce human nurturing behavior toward animals, thereby eliciting compassion and empathetic responses. However, the same aesthetic that promises tenderness and empathy conceals a deeper reliance on the immaterial labor of animals: supporting and caring for humans in their daily lives within a complex power dynamic embedded in neoliberal capitalism. Indeed, Allison Page has suggested that watching cute animal videos is a “cruel relief” to escape from loneliness and demanding work environments (2016). While examining the

⁴ The distinction between these two configurations is useful for navigating the complexity of the issues addressed, but it should not be understood as a clear-cut separation (Thibault, Marino 2018).

rhetoric used to frame cute animal media, she argued that such videos serve as a tool for procrastination against the imperative of productivity and offer a means of coping with the conflation of work and leisure (2016).

The shift from the participatory web to platform-based environments exacerbates many of these issues, especially the tension caused by sharing personal and intimate experiences on platforms designed to maximize audience engagement, where joy, empathy, and the entrepreneurial dynamics of social media intertwine. With the emergence of Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok, animals have evolved into prominent influencers, maintaining personalized profiles, rather than a decontextualized meme, with followers and sponsorships that establish them as influential figures within the digital marketplace (e.g., Jiffpom or Nala Cat).

Pet influencers easily become true celebrities because of their distinctive morphological or expressive traits. This is one reason why more pet owners are creating YouTube and Instagram accounts for their pets, hoping to gain fame and fortune through followers, likes, and shares (White 2020). Animals enhance views, user engagement, and social interactions; moreover, the joy they elicit also constitutes a form of invisible labor (Maddox 2021). Cute images evoke feelings of innocence or helpfulness, which contribute to creating “an indexicality of wanting to care for the animal in question” (ivi, p. 3335). Nonetheless, the desire to care remains ambivalent: it can have positive outcomes for animals, as social media effectively raises awareness of issues such as increasing adoptions in shelters while this same sweetness can lead to the exploitation of companion species entangled in this peculiar economy. As Maddox argues, “This complicates the cute economy by allowing it to simultaneously exist as a metaphorical cultural exchange and attempted actual financial transactions, thereby problematizing the cute aesthetics’ ‘purity’ and ‘innocence’” (*ibid.*).

The hyper-visibility gained through cuteness is deeply connected to the more or less ethical and consensual exposure of the animal’s body, which – in the absence of language – plays a crucial role in all the activities performed. The animal’s contribution comes from its presence, vitality, expressiveness, postures, and interactions with other animals or humans. Physical features such as breed, size, distinctive traits, emblematic gestures, and recognizable reactions help create a coherent and stable identity, turning the animal into a “character” with legible intentionality and narrative continuity. Whereas looking at the camera to simulate eye contact, approaching the lens, and affiliative gestures like wagging the tail or resting the muzzle on the owner’s legs can build a parasocial relationship with the user in a virtual encounter that mimics a mutual bond. Even behaviors like resting, slow breathing,

purring, scratching surfaces, or eating bones can serve as emotional regulation devices, providing comfort to the user⁵ who fails to notice signs of stress, discomfort, or fear.

The animal's work on digital platforms is even more subtle to identify because it's impossible to assess what happens before or after the recorded moment, nor the extent to which animals might face repeated demands, whether they are executing "funny" or trained actions, or are compelled or rewarded to stay or be positioned for filming. There are also many aspects that escape us, such as behavioral repertoires that are more or less acceptable or desirable, which influence how we perceive an animal's cuteness and charm. In this way, cuteness acts as an ambivalent device: while it makes the animal visible and sustains continuous engagement, it obscures the working dimension of its actions, reducing them to mere spontaneous expressions or harmless entertainment. This issue becomes even more evident in times of illness or the end of life which evoke feelings of helplessness, and extreme vulnerability. Here, the animal body becomes a vehicle for further work: it mobilizes practices of care, ethical reflections, and emotional participation, reorganizing the decisions and moral stance of humans. The death of the animal also affects the content that surrounds the creative human labor involved; it can generate shares, comments, and newspaper articles (Solon 2018). The popularity that many profiles are able to achieve encourages owners to keep their followers updated on the circumstances of the pet's death, to publish photographs, and to dedicate messages, with the risk of falling back into the logic of commodifying grief, as is the case of human death.⁶

Mourning is shaped by platform logics than incentives emotional responses, negative or positive, but at the crossroads of spontaneity and strategy, memory and entertainment, online spaces have helped create new rituals

⁵ Within so-called ASMR (Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response) formats, a genre of audio-visual media designed to elicit pleasurable sensory responses (e.g., relaxation) through amplified sounds, chewing, cracking, and other bodily noises produced by the animal which is in front of a camera eating specific meals are not incidental but become content.

⁶ In the case of studies on human death, among many examples, Abidin's (2022) research among Singaporean influencers shows how hashtags related to tragic global events are exploited to gain visibility. This behavior highlights the shift from authentic sharing of grief (*public grieving*) to its commodification for the sake of notoriety (*publicity grieving*). This is done both to attract visibility in order to increase one's notoriety on social media and to promote or sell products. Often, personal failures and pain are not only documented but also heavily re-narrated and hyper-visualized to elicit mutual empathy from their followers. On the phenomenon of grief influencers, who base their expertise on personal experience of grief to sell products, guides, and courses, see Harju, Peintikainen (2025).



and imaginaries around animal death and afterlives. Internet culture has intercepted the need for social spaces where people with similar experiences can connect, reducing the sense of disapproval present in other public settings (Desmond 2011). Virtual cemeteries, forums, and online memorials have grown and diversified, continuing to provide ways to keep animal memories alive (Tumidei 2025). They have helped facilitate grief expression, sometimes replacing or supplementing institutions like pet cemeteries (Brandes 2017), and have made the death of companion animals mournable (Demello 2016; Redmalm 2019). In pet-loss forums, images play a deeper emotional role, serving as symbols of affection, memory, and mourning. Here, the depiction of the animal gains emotional and commemorative significance, creating a shared space of intimacy. Following what occurs in the case of human death, the widespread sharing of various content types – such as elegies, poems, stories, video montages, background music, filters, captions, and off-screen narrations – helps propagate and expand vernacular practices like the idea of a shared otherworldly horizon embodied by the Rainbow Bridge. The Rainbow Bridge, now widely understood as an imaginary space where certain animals wait to be reunited with humans before moving on to a shared afterlife, is extremely common in the English-speaking world. Partly due to the unique iconography – frequently evoking animal cuteness – created through video montages, images, and drawings by artists, it takes on various forms and can also serve as a trademark for those offering counseling and support services.

The cute aesthetic category, designed to evoke responses that engage audiences and generate affective economies, fits well into the realm of animal death. That cute aesthetic which initially attracts people's attention, continues to be monetized when the animal dies because such death can also become content capable of concealing the emotional work of that same animal. This dynamic commodifies human personal experiences while simultaneously reinforcing an aura of authenticity that helps sustain emotional relationships with followers (Bainet-Weiser 2021; Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023). Seemingly opposed, cuteness and death ambivalently rely on a shared logic of vulnerability and affect to elicit emotional responses but both exploit and obscure the affective, bodily, and emotional work through which the animal's life, and its loss, generate value. The commensurability of cuteness and death can be seen as a shift in how digital culture leverages human-animal relationships. The emotional, immaterial work of animals becomes part of human creative and material labor, revealing how digital culture relies on "interspecies intimacy" (Chua 2018) that circulate for value in digital spaces.

Social media veterinarians

Platforms driven by visibility and monetization dynamics contribute to the exploitation of animals as entertainment objects within digital spaces where creativity and freedom exist in a conflicting relationship. This also intersects with the precarity of the veterinary profession, especially for female veterinarians, a highly vulnerable group of workers who, according to Tomasi *et al.*, “were 3.4 and 5.0 times as likely to die by suicide as the general population” in both clinical and non-clinical roles (p. 109). Veterinary medicine has become increasingly feminized over recent decades; however, women veterinarians in private practice earn about 75% of what men do, partly because they are less likely to own their clinics and tend to charge lower fees (Irvine, Vermilya 2010, p. 58). Female veterinarians mainly work with companion animals and more often engage with clients facing emotional and costly decisions. As a result, women often handle most of the gendered – and unpaid – work of communicating with clients (ivi, p. 63). This means the profession benefits from the “invisible work” that many women veterinarians may see as a “natural” part of their identity.

For veterinarians, increasing job instability – especially among women – makes the transformation of knowledge into an economic resource an opportunity. Students and established professionals use platforms to promote their services, increase public awareness of daily work in clinics, and conduct educational activities. Online work can be done alongside veterinary visits or consultations, or, in some cases, platform-based entrepreneurial activities become the main source of income. Unlike traditional influencers who mainly promote products or lifestyles, veterinarians are more likely to fit into a broader trend related to “knowledge influencers” and entrepreneurial ventures on social media (Maddox 2022). Knowledge influencers combine their professional authority with the dynamics of digital visibility and craft their identity and communication around their expertise (Maddox 2022). They view themselves as content to be consumed, reflecting the wider commodification of skills as people are encouraged to turn every aspect of their lives, including their professional expertise, into a branding opportunity. This trend clearly raises ethical questions, especially when the dissemination of knowledge is linked with sponsorship strategies and the goal of maximizing views and audience interaction.

Academic credentials and scientific authority are emphasized as persuasive tools. However, as Maddox (2022) explains, unlike “calibrated amateurism”, where influencers pretend to be inexperienced to appear more relatable, experts use digital platforms to share knowledge while keeping credibility, representing a form of “calibrated expertise”. Indeed, a key aspect is creating a sense



of authenticity, because, unlike celebrities in entertainment, knowledge influencers are seen as more similar to ordinary people in terms of status and experience. This means that experts have to compete with less qualified but more skilled influencers in engaging the public, risking oversimplifying information to fit the dynamics of the web. According to Maddox (2022), knowledge influencers must find a balance between credibility and accessibility, adjusting their communication style to fit the platform's dynamics. For instance, responding directly to comments and using engaging narrative formats make the informational content more effective and immediate.

The veterinarian in question is clearly aware of these issues and makes no secret of her fruitful collaboration with a social media strategist. Her profile, which began in 2017 as a blog, has gained popularity and now functions as a platform for sponsorships of online medical services, her own pet food line, and on-demand courses. In her professional role, she debunks myths, offers advice, and responds to questions from followers. Besides sharing her personal life, she doesn't just share information; she does so strategically, utilizing the visual and interactive features of each platform. Her knowledge of trending formats, along with her ability to cross-post content across platforms like Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Telegram, helps her tap into trending topics, comment on current events, and repost viral content to maximize her audience's engagement. On Instagram, her stories – filmed in her car, at clinics where she still works as a freelancer, in her office, at home, at her parents' house, or on vacation – bring her followers closer by sharing more personal aspects of her life, which are carefully curated. Her communication style and environment have adapted to her needs and evolved over time. In earlier videos, her tone was softer and more discreet, and her attitude was friendlier. Today, with greater familiarity with digital tools, she adopts a more direct and often deliberately provocative approach.

Another interesting aspect is the diverse makeup of her followers, which comprises young veterinary students, colleagues, and pet owners. Through her strategic utilization of the platform, the veterinarian fosters a high degree of engagement with her audience. For instance, in her stories, she frequently posts polls or 'question boxes' directed at her followers, which are subsequently reposted anonymously as overlays within her stories. The responses to these questions, especially those from students and colleagues, underscore common challenges in veterinary medicine, including equitable hourly wages, the difficulties associated with outpatient work, burnout, and numerous ethical dilemmas related to more complex procedures such as euthanasia. In this context, her extensive digital archive of featured stories includes a collection entitled "euthanasia." The initial segments of these stories begin with several questions



“from veterinarian to veterinarian” and underscore internal dialogues, ethical conflicts, and uncertainties surrounding the profession.

The veterinarian’s presentation offers a clinical perspective with the aim of educating a broad audience. In the flow of stories, she shows a video explanation: the camera stays fixed on a patient’s⁷ electrocardiogram (ECG) monitor, and the doctor explains the procedure verbally in a voiceover. First, deep sedation, then the administration of the drug that will lead to painless cardiac arrest. To focus the attention on the change in the patient’s vital signs following the procedure, she uses inserts, so-called “stickers”, in this case flashing colored circles that indicate “look here”. Downplaying the emotional effort involved almost as a professional duty, the veterinarian warmly invites users to ask questions or share curiosities about euthanasia, emphasizing how comfortable she feels discussing the topic. Using IG stories she responds directly, sitting on the sofa in her home, reposting comments and questions she received that appear overlaid on the screen. In this setting, she explains her approach and addresses questions from colleagues and students. Regarding her approach to euthanasia, the veterinarian states:

Well, as a veterinarian, I am quite used to euthanasia, so I don’t experience it as badly as many owners might. In fact, euthanasia gives me a great sense of peace and liberation. So, it actually has a calming effect, in the sense that when I finally put an end to the animal’s suffering, I experience it as ‘Finally, it’s no longer suffering’. So, for me, euthanasia is not something shocking. Of course, it’s much harder to make this decision for your own animals than for other people’s animals (IG stories, November 2022).

Questions from students or colleagues highlight the frustration caused by the contradictions inherent in a financially unstable profession with a very high burnout rate. This career is pursued due to a strong desire to care for animals and a naturalized vocation to save them. Among many other issues, her approach to ethical dilemmas is notable because her points are anything but objective and are the most difficult to evaluate.

When can a vet refuse to perform euthanasia?

This is also a good question, because we veterinarians can only perform euthanasia if we believe that the animal is suffering and has no chance of improvement or recovery. Basically, we assess the quality of life. That is always the point of reference. Does it have a good quality of life or not? If it does not have a good quality of life and cannot

⁷ The term used by veterinarians to refer to the animal in their care.



improve, then there are grounds for euthanasia. Of course, it is very important... I want you all to know that no one can force a veterinarian to perform euthanasia if there are no grounds for it. It is not as if euthanasia is performed on demand: the owner arrives with a dog with a broken leg, asks you to perform euthanasia, and you do it. No, eh! The veterinarian must only perform euthanasia if they deem it appropriate, so it is true that the owner has the final say, but they cannot in any way force a veterinarian to perform euthanasia if there is no real need for it, clear? (IG stories, November 14, 2022).

Indeed, euthanasia remains a contentious issue among veterinarians. Significant disagreements persist as increased animal life expectancy and expanded treatment options complicate the recognition of pain, the assessment of the animal's emotional distress, the determination of the quality of life, the understanding of what constitutes suffering, and the appropriate timing for euthanasia (Hurn, Badman-king 2019). During my research, I met people who decided to cease practicing due to euthanasia. For veterinarians, euthanizing their own animals is nearly taboo, often leading them to seek assistance from colleagues. These issues arise from various reasons that are frequently challenging to evaluate. Generally, the veterinarians I engaged with during my fieldwork explained that the primary factors contributing to these differences include university training, lack of preparation for owners' emotional reactions, religious beliefs, fears of retaliation in the event of mistakes, and the overarching goal of saving animals. Since veterinarians are committed to treating their patients, euthanasia can be perceived as a failure to cure the animal, particularly among younger generations. For all these reasons, images or videos depicting an animal being euthanized are rare, not only because they are seen as an intimate and sensitive act but also because they are often associated with pain and suffering.⁸

⁸ Nonetheless, one of the most widely viewed videos I came across while casually browsing Instagram shows exactly those painful elements that are usually avoided in discussions about euthanasia. The video has now received 202,000 mostly supportive comments and over 85 million views. The original footage, recorded by a woman with a YouTube channel and split into part one and part two, was reposted by an Instagram account that shared only segments of those longer videos to fit the platform's video format. In the clip, a large Rottweiler is positioned on a veterinarians' table. In the opening shots, the dog owner – talks with the veterinarians, sobbing and saying, "I feel I just need a moment". Seconds later, she is leaning over the dog, holding its head as the animal loses consciousness and likely takes its final breath. Visibly distressed, the woman begins to scream and cry, exclaiming, "Oh God, Oh God". The scene is profoundly upsetting, given the intense emotional stakes involved. It is hard to determine exactly what caused the video to go viral (the second of the two original ones on YouTube, as well, with 3.4 million views). On Instagram, it is more common to post carousels of images showing key moments from the animal's life or photos taken just before euthanasia at the clinic, often with touching captions. Sometimes, owners post a Reel or other formats weeks later to explain



The aftermath: working for, with, and through animals

On December 10, 2023, a week after publishing the Reel of her dog's death, the veterinarian decides to go live on Instagram. Unlike the previous video, she appears wearing makeup and smiling. The first few minutes are spent promoting a newly published Reel.

This week, I thought about what to say to you when I returned, and I decided to start with a Reel, with a message of help for those who are facing this moment like me. So, a few thoughts on what mourning a dog or cat means, how to deal with it and process it, and how to dodge the questions that are asked, such as 'Ah, but you'll get another one', etc. (IG live, 10 December 2023).

Aware that the high number of views has brought in new followers, she continues by welcoming them. She feels the need to downplay the situation by stating that sadness is temporary and that the profile is usually different.

Many new people have also arrived at a time of pain, arriving at a time when they will say, 'My goodness, I arrive on this new profile and there is an air of crisis, there is an air of sadness...' Well, it's a moment, it will pass. Now, little by little, we are all starting again together and you will certainly see ups and downs, but we have to move forward, so in some way we will. Maybe I'll struggle to make some particularly cheerful videos at first, [nervous smile] but I'll try.⁹

Then she moves on to let the public know that she has felt people's closeness and how much their messages of affection have been appreciated. "I didn't think you could feel so much affection through a screen – because after all, we don't know each other in person – but I really spent at least the first three days collecting messages of condolence everywhere". She is pleased that this is a sign of affection for her dog "because he was a very good dog anyway" (IG Live, December 10, 2023). Then, she openly addresses the criticism she has

what happened or to remember the animal. More generally, however, death tends to be displayed differently among platforms. Certainly, different policies and affordances play a role pointing to culturally appropriate ways of showing and consuming (animal) death on social media, as well as social expectations around expressing grief and depicting suffering (both of those who remain and those no longer here) but answering these questions would require a comparative analysis I cannot address in this paper. What I find notable is that the veterinarian has received more disapproving comments than the dog owner described above, highlighting, as I will explain later, the gendered professional expectations in tension with platform creators' work.

⁹ Shortly afterwards, she adds that she has already scheduled an appointment with a video maker to make two YouTube videos. One of them is dedicated to explaining what happened to the dog.



received. As shares increase, the video reaches a large, unfamiliar audience. Its viral nature causes unsuspecting viewers to feel uneasy about her explanation of the event, as she films all stages of what happened and then posts the video on social media. To share her side of the story, the veterinarian spends considerable time replying to negative comments that challenge her decisions and medical authority. Her initial response is directed at those who oppose euthanasia.

[Among the comments] there was obviously a group of people who were against euthanasia, and I wanted to clarify this... I performed euthanasia on D. because he was already dying. The situation was that once the surgery was done, which was a desperate surgery, I already knew from the ultrasound that the situation was not great, but we were hopeful. I was still convinced that by removing his spleen, he would live for a few more months. When we saw his liver, we realized that was not possible. So, my fellow surgeon said to me, 'There's nothing we can do. Either we euthanize him now, or we close him up, but you have to euthanize him by this evening. I mean, let's be clear, he won't make it until tomorrow'. So... it was [him] who gave me... gave me, how can I put it, a shock, right? The shocking news. Even though I already understood that the situation was bad, I performed the euthanasia at that moment when – not because, as someone wrote... there was a total idiot who said to me, 'It's easier to give him the injection, euthanasia, than to treat him'. So, to someone who comments like that, I mean, what do you say? (IG live, December 10, 2023)

The veterinarian continues resentfully:

I'm a veterinarian, my job is to treat animals. Do you think it's easier for me to give him the injection than to treat him? I mean, let me understand, I don't know. And then I would have done anything to keep my dog alive for another week or two. My other dog – who died for the same reason – survived for a month. So, he had the surgery anyway – his liver wasn't affected – and as a result, he lived a wonderful month. I spoiled him, pampered him, fed him all kinds of delicacies, and we went on beautiful walks. After a month, [the tumor] recurred, obviously in the abdomen, as we know these tumors do, and at that point, I euthanized him. But unfortunately, D. was already dying, so we put him down, I stuffed him with drugs, so rest assured that he didn't suffer, he was heavily drugged with methadone, fentanyl, and every anti-inflammatory imaginable. He was just conscious, happy to see us. When we got to the mountains, I said to him, 'Hey, we're in the mountains!' He even pulled himself up, but he couldn't stand, so we carried him to the fireplace, laid him down there, and he spent a few hours with us, watching us scratch his ears, happy to see us. Then he collapsed again. He was pale white again because I had given him a transfusion, so I had given him some blood, but he had already lost it all. White again, collapsed again. That's it.



At that point, you euthanize him. If I hadn't euthanized him, he would have died an hour later, two hours later... in a bad way, because dying of internal bleeding is really bad (IG Live, December 10, 2023).

Some commentators seem to forget the mourner and its vulnerability. In response to the violation of an implicit social norm, the veterinarian thanks those who defended her, by replying to the most offensive comments. As someone in pain, the veterinarian says she can only talk rationally about the event while recording the live broadcast, a week later, but reading those comments initially triggered deep anger. In fact, she says: "I even responded rudely to someone, I said two or three nasty things to one person, because how can you do that? I mean, anything goes, but at that moment, you can't do that to me". The reference is again to the people who accuse her of excessive coldness and detachment in her decision to recount the event.

Some people even said to me, 'it's too easy to euthanize'. Well, yes, you're an idiot. Do you think it was easy for me to euthanize my dog? Do you think I wasn't crying at that moment? In fact, I was grateful that he collapsed again, because otherwise, if he had been standing there with his ears up, looking at me, I probably wouldn't have had the courage to do it. So, in a way, I was grateful that he gave me the signal that it was time to do it (IG Live, December 10, 2023).

The professional role of the veterinarian and the personal experience of practicing euthanasia generate numerous tensions as she faces social pressure in a digital environment. Although from her perspective the video is useful and faithful to the intent of the veterinary education profile, the vulnerability of the animal, its body, and its bodily work is captured between life and death. A combination of subtle signals from the dog's dying body, such as pain from hemorrhage and systemic organ compromise, faster breathing, a dull gaze, exhaustion, and the body's adaptation to compensate, becomes content. Unlike the stories mentioned above, where euthanasia is only seen through a monitor and turned into a moment of collective reflection, the raw, urgent narrative in which the animal goes from being a living companion to a dying patient raises questions about the video – whether it is right to watch it, share it, and whether filming was appropriate. The potential objectification of the dog serves as a critical tool: the animal's affective and bodily work moves, incites, and arouses perplexity.

The veterinarian's medical expertise seems to justify her decision in the eyes of her audience. However, this claim to authority conflicts with the highly dramatized narrative structure of her story – marked by key moments like the an-



nouncement, diagnosis, turning points, decision, and farewell – which makes it morally questionable. Still, from a medical-scientific perspective, she believes that filming aligns with her professional role, which is not without contradictions. She aims to project the image of a rational and decisive doctor, yet this medical detachment conflicts with the image of a compassionate veterinarian wholeheartedly dedicated to the profession. As shown by Irvine and Vermilya (2010), gendered expectations play a significant role. Female veterinarians primarily working with companion animals are expected to be “responsible not only for the medical care of the animal patient, but also for the emotional well-being of the human client” (Irvine, p. 65), especially in cases of euthanasia and grief over the loss of an animal. However, the female veterinarians interviewed by Irvine and Vermilya strategically distance themselves from stereotypically feminine characteristics and emphasize their interest in science as “a discursive strategy” to present themselves as professionals because some of them “found that clients could sometimes see caring and communication as unprofessional” (Irvine, Vermilya 2010). In their interviews, Irvine and Vermilya (2010) found that female veterinarians believe that “emotional” and “professional” do not go well together, thus they strive to appear calm and in control. Changing their emotions is seen as a necessary part of projecting a professional image. In sum, the women veterinarians diminish the emotional qualities and interpersonal skills that, within the same field, are recognized as valuable aspects (Irvine, Vermilya 2010). Distancing from the feminine represents a form of “gender work” through which women create space for themselves within veterinary medicine. The gender work of women veterinarians involves constructing a professional identity within a masculine system of meanings that sustains inequality by upholding the masculine ethic of veterinary medicine, despite the fact that the profession is mostly female. Concurrently, while on platforms, self-branding strategies aim to present oneself as authentic to encourage parasocial identification and enhance reputation through network management practices (Caliandro 2018), also “the compulsion to share intimate, even uncomfortable moments” becomes “a strategy for community-building and accruing followers” (Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023, p. 14). Visibility again introduces vulnerability in the form of harmful comments and negative responses that require additional emotional work, entangled with the unique precarity of platform labor conditions, since neither creators nor influencers are considered legal employees of platform companies, leaving them without the protections granted to other vulnerable workers (Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023).

The numerous intertwined plots in this successful narrative create friction among the same constructions. First, there is the variety of roles and types of work embodied by a single individual, whose priorities conflict with the



expectations of a vast audience: on one side, the detached female veterinarian who challenges gendered expectations; the communicator aiming to showcase the symptoms of a severe and rapidly progressing disease to help others; the entrepreneur who monetizes her expertise filming the dying body of her dog, which involves editing the video, assembling different scenes to fit the timing of the reel format, and then sharing it on her page; and the owner who can rationalize the prognosis, accept its consequences, and face the moral dilemma of euthanasia without hesitation. The same applies to the animal, whose death is consumed, contested, or mourned through the platform. In this case, the dog is simultaneously a life partner capable of working alongside its human; a victim of an incurable disease nearing the end of life; an object of medical-scientific observation, endlessly scrutinized to understand symptoms like abdominal hemorrhage; and, once again, a patient whose death cannot be prevented and whose spectacularized death becomes a lively commodity (Barua 2016).

Returning to Porcher's question, the way animal life and death are captured and transformed into a valuable digital encounter can be seen as a form of labor that continues to draw attention, evoke emotions, and generate monetizable engagement. However, the line between care, cooperation, and exploitation of the animal remains blurry when examining digitally curated profiles. Speaking of "work" is not meant to resolve this ambiguity but to foreground a way to critically recognize how the animal's emotional effort, its role in fostering parasocial bonds, and its liveliness are both embodied and hidden within specific physical features or repertoires such as "cuteness" or "being a good dog". These features operate within complex infrastructures, expectations, and power dynamics that make them productive in eliciting care, attachment, or disapproval.

Conclusion

Sharing images of animals might seem like a light-hearted and trivial act, but it is deeply connected to larger social, economic, and political issues (Maddox 2021). Pictures of cute and helpless animals become a valuable form of currency in the social media visual economy for an audience looking for lighthearted content. However, the use of such technology can, perhaps or less consciously, contribute to animal exploitation and reinforce the capitalist system that promotes the consumption of this content. With the rise of platforms, the boundary between sharing personal experiences and using content for monetary gain has become blurred; what started as the circulation of cuteness for connection and joy can be expanded to sharing death as a way to evoke emotions and



generate views. In this context, the affective work of animals, often filmed or photographed in various situations, becomes invisible and unmeasurable as it is difficult to assess how exposure to cameras, visibility, or other factors negatively affect their bodies and well-being.

Within this context, the example aims to illustrate how “encounter value shifts the emphasis on *trans-actions* between human and non-human labor enmeshed in the commodity and forming part of a porous exchange” (Barua 2017, p. 11, original italics) and how the recognition of animals as subjects endowed with individuality and companions in meaningful relationships are entangled within “specifics of value-generation processes [...] configured by particular animal bodies and ethologies” (Barua 2016, p. 5) that transform them into consumer objects while affirming their importance as significant partners.

The value of this staged encounter lies both in the desire to care for the vulnerable animal and in the spectacle created by its death, amplified by platforms designed to promote affective content that sparks controversy. The virality and critical comments regarding the decision to film and euthanize the dog underscore how deeply intertwined the tensions are among personal, social, and platform vulnerabilities (Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023), which are embedded in human-animal relationships encapsulated and fractured within digital encounters (Turnbull *et al.* 2023) that such spectacle and images depend on. This process is closely connected to human labor, especially the work of veterinarians, which often entails end-of-life decisions and the emotional turmoil for clients they are tasked to care for (Irvine, Vermilya 2010). In this context, the affective work and vulnerabilities of both humans and animals become blurred, sometimes invisible or indistinguishable from the creative and gendered labor that support platform-dependent vulnerabilities (Duffy, Ononye, Sawey 2023).

To conclude, the veterinarian euthanizing her own dog reveals a complex entanglement: both cuteness and death contribute to the attention economy and caring responses, thanks to the digital infrastructure that prizes engagement through the interdependence of humans and animals work, both material and immaterial. The animal’s invisible labor of dying intersects with the knowledge-influencer’s creative labor and the veterinarian’s unseen care work. The encounter becomes doubly productive, as digital value arises through liveliness and loss of the animal bodily work that supports contemporary economies of visibility and emotion. In fact, the spectacle of death becomes the very site where liveliness is commodified: the circulation of the video reanimates death as a source of vitality and value. Digital infrastructures transform the act of dying into a durable, repeatable form, generating value after death through the continuous reverberation of the message beyond time and space, blurring



the boundaries between public and private spheres. The animal's death, then, does not mark the end of (human-animal) labor or value but instead becomes a process through which liveliness is reconfigured as a commodity, extracted and circulated in digital economies.

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Heroic Fermentations: Multispecies Symbiosis in the Vineyards of the Susa Valley

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Abstract: In the context of the Susa Valley, an Alpine area in Western Piedmont where so-called “heroic viticulture” is practiced – characterised by steep slopes and complex, entirely manual agricultural labour – this paper explores the invisible role of yeasts in the production of natural wines through spontaneous fermentation. Adopting a multispecies ethnographic approach based on interviews, participant observation, analysis of production practices, and sensory narratives, the essay investigates the interconnections among humans, microbes, environments, and local knowledge that co-produce wine. Integrating the perspective of *zymurpolitics* (Furness 2022; 2023), fermentation is interpreted as an ontopolitical space of negotiation between microbial autonomy and human control.

The research highlights the tensions between oenological standardisation, disciplinary constraints, and the desire to maintain a living relationality with the cellar’s microbiome, showing how the “heroic” viticulture of the Susa Valley constitutes a form of epistemic and ecological resistance in which yeasts participate in shaping quality, territorial identity, and more-than-human labour.

Keywords: Susa Valley; Heroic viticulture; Spontaneous fermentation; Yeast; Zymurpolitics; Non-human labour



“Working the land every day is a true curse of God [...]
Old Murica stood at the head of the table, serving food and drink to the men gathered around him.
‘It is he,’ he said, ‘who helped me to sow, hoe, reap, thresh, and grind the grain from which this
bread is made.
Take and eat, this is his bread.’
Others arrived. The father poured wine and said:
‘It is he who helped me prune, sulphur, hoe, and harvest the vineyard from which this wine comes.
Drink, this is his wine.’
The men ate and drank, and some dipped their bread into the wine.”¹
 Ignazio Silone, *Bread and Wine* (1936)

This passage is not introduced here as a literary ornament, but as an ethnographic and conceptual threshold.

Silone’s words articulate a vision of labour as radically shared: bread and wine emerge not from individual authorship, but from a dense web of human, vegetal, and more-than-human collaborations. The gesture of attributing food and drink to an unnamed “he” unsettles the idea of solitary production and anticipates a relational understanding of work, value, and responsibility.

In this sense, the quotation opens the analytical horizon of the article, foregrounding fermentation and viticulture as collective processes in which invisible forms of labour – such as that of yeasts – are already implicitly at work.

Introduction: Beyond Human Heroism

The Susa Valley, in Western Piedmont, offers a privileged field for observing how wine emerges from the entanglement of relationships among people, environments, and non-human beings. Here, the vine grows in balance on steep slopes, among stone terraces and shifting microclimates, and wine production requires slow gestures, patience, and collaboration.

While the notion of “heroic viticulture” is locally used to describe the physical hardship of mountain winegrowing, I propose to reinterpret it analytically as an invitation to move beyond the centrality of human heroism. From an anthropological perspective, heroism here does not reside solely in human endurance, but emerges from a constellation of shared labours involving vines, soils, climatic forces, and microbial life. The expression “heroic viticulture” operates across multiple semantic and practical registers, which do not always coincide. At an institutional level, it functions as a normative category, defined

¹ Original quotation in Italian from *Vino e pane* (1936). Translation by the author.

through measurable criteria such as slope gradient, altitude, and terracing, and mobilised in policy frameworks aimed at protecting marginal agricultural landscapes. At a discursive level, the term circulates in promotional materials, media narratives, and collective initiatives as a powerful label that conveys values of effort, resilience, and territorial authenticity. Ethnographic engagement, however, reveals a more ambivalent relationship to the notion at the level of everyday practice.

While some producers strategically adopt the language of “heroism” in contexts of communication and valorisation, many do not explicitly describe their work as heroic. Instead, they speak of necessity, habit, attachment to the land, or simple continuity with past practices. In this sense, “heroic viticulture” emerges less as a stable self-attribution than as a category that is negotiated, selectively mobilised, or even bracketed in daily labour. This distinction allows the article to approach heroic viticulture not as a fixed identity, but as a semiotic field in which institutional norms, public narratives, and situated practices intersect – sometimes reinforcing one another, sometimes diverging. It is within these dissonances that the analytical shift proposed here takes place: from heroism as an individual attribute to viticulture as a collective and more-than-human accomplishment.

Within this semiotic field, the viticultural landscape of the Susa Valley can be read as a constellation of more-than-human relations: a system of metabolic, affective, and technical exchanges in which different forms of life participate in constructing taste, quality, and territorial memory. Each harvest renews a fragile equilibrium between natural and cultural elements, between seasons and hands, between microbial invisibility and agricultural gestures.

This article is informed by, yet not fully aligned with, the so-called ontological turn in anthropology. Rather than adopting an ontological framework as a doctrinal position, the analysis draws on its core intuition: that worlds are not merely interpreted differently by social actors, but are actively enacted through relations, practices, and material engagements. This perspective is particularly suited to the study of viticulture and fermentation, where agency, temporality, and causality are distributed across heterogeneous beings and processes. Here, the ontological turn is mobilised as an analytical sensibility rather than as a theoretical endpoint – a way to take seriously more-than-human forms of coexistence without presuming a radical break from other anthropological traditions. In this article, I propose analytically to approach yeasts not merely as technical elements of fermentation, but as participants in the processes through which the valley’s wines take form. This perspective does not necessarily reflect an explicit emic theory articulated by vine growers themselves – who have only recently begun to attend to yeasts as actors in fermentation – but rather emerg-

es from ethnographic observation, dialogue with oenologists, and engagement with multispecies theory. From an analytical perspective, to look *beyond human heroism* thus means to read viticulture not solely as an agricultural or economic activity, but as an ontological practice of cohabitation, in which life – human and microbial – intertwines in a continuous process of transformation and mutual attunement.

Fermentation could also be interpreted through a critical lens as a form of human exploitation of non-human labour, in which microbial activity is harnessed, managed, and instrumentalised to produce economic value. From this perspective, yeasts appear as a biological workforce whose metabolic capacities are extracted, optimised, and stabilised through technical intervention, echoing broader critiques developed within political ecology and science and technology studies.

However, ethnographic observation of spontaneous and mixed fermentations in the Susa Valley complicates a purely extractive reading of microbial labour. In these contexts, human control over fermentation remains partial, fragile, and constantly exposed to uncertainty. Producers repeatedly emphasise waiting, attentiveness, and restraint rather than mastery, and technical intervention is often described as a form of accompaniment rather than command.

For this reason, I propose to approach fermentation not primarily as a relation of domination or extraction, but as a situated form of collaboration and interdependence. Yeasts are neither autonomous agents nor passive resources: they act within constrained environments shaped by human decisions, while simultaneously exceeding human prediction and control. Collaboration, in this sense, does not imply symmetry or harmony, but names a relational condition marked by negotiation, vulnerability, and mutual exposure.

This relational configuration becomes particularly visible in practices such as spontaneous fermentation and co-inoculation, in which producers deliberately accept a degree of microbial autonomy while remaining responsible for the outcome. Fermentation emerges as a space of more-than-human diplomacy, in which collaboration is continuously tested rather than assumed.

This analysis develops in dialogue with Arceño's work on multispecies alliances in winemaking (Acerno 2021), which explores how human–microbial relations are configured within established wine economies in contexts such as Ohio and Alsace. Arceño's contribution is crucial in showing how fermentation emerges as a site of coordination, control, and cooperation between humans and yeasts within relatively stable technical and institutional frameworks.

The case of the Susa Valley, however, foregrounds a different configuration of multispecies alliance. Here, winemaking unfolds within a marginal and fragile viticultural context, characterised by steep terrain, limited mechanisation,

regulatory constraints, and economic vulnerability. In this setting, collaboration with yeasts is not primarily oriented toward optimisation or consistency, but toward persistence, care, and adaptation under conditions of uncertainty. Rather than stabilising fermentation through standardised infrastructures, producers often negotiate microbial activity through waiting, restraint, and selective intervention.

This comparison highlights how multispecies alliances in winemaking are not uniform, but are shaped by territorial conditions, regimes of regulation, and degrees of marginality. While Arceño's work illuminates fermentation within consolidated wine worlds, the Susa Valley reveals how more-than-human collaboration takes on a distinct ethical and political valence when it becomes a matter of sustaining life and labour in precarious landscapes.

This article also resonates with broader anthropological and interdisciplinary debates on value, materiality, labour, and the governance of life. While not engaging these literatures systematically, the article draws selectively and implicitly on classic and contemporary contributions as conceptual resources rather than as direct objects of engagement. These works concern food and value, critical historiographies and ontopolitical readings of material practices, Anthropocene temporalities, and more-than-human approaches to labour, environment, and vitality (Mintz 1985; Chartier 2021; Chakrabarty 2009; Povinelli 2016; Krzywoszynska 2020; Fair, McMullen 2023).

Theoretical Framework: Non-Human Labour and Zymurpolitics

If heroic viticulture renders visible the shared labour between people, vines, and landscape, fermentation brings this cooperation to an even more intimate and contested level, where questions of agency, labour, and governance are condensed within microbial life. In the depths of the cellar, the relations that animate the territory condense into a living substance: must in transformation. Here, manual effort intertwines with the invisible activity of yeasts, and wine production becomes a site of encounter between human work and microbial work, between technical gesture and vital transformation. It is within this intermediate space – where the scent of must mingles with the silence of the vaults – that the analytical focus of this article takes shape: an ethnographic reflection on the metabolic, sensory, and relational alliances through which wine comes into being.

The anthropology of the more-than-human (Haraway 2007; Tsing 2012) invites us to conceive of production not as an exclusively human gesture, but as the outcome of alliances and cooperations among species. In the context

of heroic viticulture in the Susa Valley, this cooperation takes shape through yeasts, whose metabolic activity unfolds alongside winemaking practices, shaping taste, temporalities, and forms of memory under conditions of material constraint and regulatory pressure.

As Barua (2018) writes, non-human labour is both metabolic and affective: it acts within matter and simultaneously within relationships. From this perspective, Furness (2022; 2023) proposes the notion of *zymurpolitics* – a politics of fermentation that acknowledges the vital and relational dimensions of fermentative processes.

Fermenting is not merely a technical action, but a way of living together, of negotiating balance and autonomy between humans and yeasts. The cellar thus becomes a site of cohabitation, where care, waiting, and attentiveness are transformed into ethical acts, understood as situated forms of listening and shared governance of living processes (Despret, Meuret 2016). Within this theoretical framework, the research sought to explore how such interspecies alliances take shape within the concrete practice of winemaking. Observing the work of yeasts meant entering an environment where more-than-human labour is not just a concept, but a lived reality – an interweaving of gestures, smells, temporalities, and relations that becomes knowledge.

Methodology: Doing Research with Yeasts

This study is based on a multi-sited ethnographic approach aimed at exploring the practices and narratives emerging within the winemaking contexts of the Susa Valley (Western Piedmont, Italy). Fieldwork began in June 2025 and developed through an initial phase of approximately six months, encompassing key moments of the viticultural and oenological cycle, including vineyard work, the 2024 harvest, and cellar-based fermentation. Following this initial phase, fieldwork was temporarily suspended and subsequently resumed, allowing for continued ethnographic engagement beyond the submission of the manuscript in November 2025. While this article draws primarily on material collected during the initial phase of research, the broader ethnographic project remains ongoing. The research focuses on how humans and non-humans co-inhabit a shared workspace beyond purely technical practices.

The research involved approximately ten main interlocutors, primarily vine growers, alongside one oenologist and several sommeliers, whose perspectives contributed to the analysis of taste, quality, and wine valuation. Additional secondary interlocutors were encountered during fieldwork. These interlocutors

differed in age, professional background, and degree of engagement with spontaneous or guided fermentations. Access to the field was facilitated through repeated visits to vineyards and cellars and through the gradual construction of trust and familiarity with local producers and institutional actors. Although the core ethnographic fieldwork for this article was conducted in the Susa Valley, the research is informed by a broader, long-term engagement with winemaking contexts across different regions. Over the years, I have visited wineries in Piedmont (including the Langhe and Barolo area), Tuscany, Sardinia, Burgundy and Provence, observing diverse fermentation practices, regulatory regimes, and technical cultures.

Rather than constituting a systematic comparative study, this extended circulation provided a situated background against which the specificity of the Susa Valley could be analytically grasped. The multi-sited character of the research thus lies both in the movement between different cellars and vineyards within the valley and in the relational positioning of this field within a wider ecology of winemaking practices. These sites include not only physical locations, but also institutional, regulatory, and ritual settings – such as the Consortium, public wine events, and local festivities – through which winemaking practices are negotiated and made visible.

Fieldwork involved participant observation in cellars and vineyards at different stages of the production cycle, with particular attention to spontaneous fermentations and co-inoculation processes. These practices made it possible to observe how producers balance the freedom of indigenous yeasts with the pursuit of oenological safety and regularity. Spontaneous fermentations – entrusted to the cellar's microbiome and the natural populations of the must – render perceptible a more autonomous dimension of microbial labour; co-inoculations, by contrast, operate as a form of technical diplomacy in which selected and indigenous yeasts coexist, collaborate, or compete. Following both practices made it possible to analyse the ongoing negotiation between technical and sensory knowledge, between prediction and surprise, which constitutes a central dimension of the wine's ontopolitics.

During this phase of research, my role was primarily that of an observer rather than an active participant in winemaking operations. However, this observational stance was informed by an embodied familiarity with viticultural and cellar practices, acquired through long-term family experience. Wine was traditionally made in my family, and I participated for many years in manual harvest and cellar work.

This background shaped my mode of observation: rather than focusing on learning techniques, attention could be directed toward rhythms, gestures, and moments of uncertainty in fermentation. Observing-and-making wine thus

differed from simply making wine, insofar as the presence in the cellar was oriented toward relational dynamics and more-than-human interactions rather than toward production outcomes.

Semi-structured interviews and informal conversations were also conducted with producers, oenologists, and agronomists in the valley, exploring topics such as the memory of spontaneous fermentations, the role of DOC regulations, experimentation, and perceptions of quality. The words of the winemakers were treated not as sources of information, but as performative acts: each narrative reformulates the relationship with wine and with yeasts, constructing its own ontology of labour.

In parallel, the research included a qualitative analysis of technical practices, based on direct observation and photographic documentation, integrated with a critical review of anthropological, oenological, and microbiological literature. This triangulation of perspectives made it possible to follow fermentation as a relational process articulated across multiple levels – material, sensory, symbolic, and political.

These reflections emerged directly from prolonged observation of fermentation processes and from repeated moments of waiting, hesitation, and adjustment shared with producers during cellar work. From an epistemological standpoint, the research aligns with an *anthropology of care* understood as a situated practice of attention and responsibility toward living processes (Despret, Meuret 2016). Doing research with yeasts means accepting a non-human temporality: learning to linger, to wait, to listen to the rhythm of another life. Spontaneous fermentations, with their unpredictability, impose a *methodology of uncertainty*, in which the unforeseen is not an error but a source of knowledge. The reference to a methodology of uncertainty situates this research within a broader anthropological tradition that treats uncertainty not as a lack of knowledge to be eliminated, but as a constitutive condition of social and epistemic life. Scholars such as Samimian-Darash and Rabinow (2015) have shown how uncertainty operates as a productive and anticipatory force within regimes of knowledge and governance, while anthropologists including Mary Douglas (1972) and João Biehl (2013) have explored how indeterminacy is lived, inhabited, and negotiated in everyday practices.

In dialogue with this literature, the case of fermentation in the Susa Valley allows uncertainty to be approached not primarily as a condition of crisis or risk, but as an ordinary and generative feature of productive life. Spontaneous fermentation requires winemakers to engage with indeterminacy as a mode of collaboration rather than as a problem to be solved, transforming waiting, attentiveness, and restraint into practical forms of knowledge. In this sense, the methodology of uncertainty developed here does not seek to manage or reduce

unpredictability, but to learn from it, treating uncertainty as a shared temporal condition that structures relations between humans, yeasts, and environments. In this sense, multispecies ethnography does not simply consist of adding yeasts among social actors, but of recognising that all knowledge arises from doing-together. Yeasts, winemakers, temperature, and the stone and wood of the cellar participate in the emergence of a world that takes form through the course of research. Observation is never neutral: it is part of the same ecology it seeks to describe.

During the research, attention was also paid to mediating devices as sites where the relationship between control and spontaneity is negotiated. Regulations, oenological protocols, and DOC standards were analysed not as mere technical constraints but as ontopolitical regimes defining what can and cannot be considered “good wine.”

From this perspective, the methodology adopts a lens inspired by the concept of *more-than-human labour* (Barua 2018; Mouret, Lainé 2023). Studying fermentation means recognising that labour does not belong exclusively to the human sphere: it is a metabolic, affective, and collective process in which yeasts perform material and symbolic transformations. Their *doing* generates value – taste, identity, memory – but also relationships, since every fermentation involves cooperation, conflict, and diplomacy among species.

Finally, the methodological approach integrated moments of reflective and autoethnographic writing. My position, in this context, was that of a *partial witness* (Haraway 1988): aware of my situated presence, yet also of the need to allow myself to be transformed by the encounter. Ethnography with yeasts required a rethinking of the very concept of the field: no longer a physical place to explore, but a fermenting environment in which knowledge is produced through contamination and coexistence.

In summary, this methodology sought to make research itself an act of epistemic coexistence – a way to interrogate winemaking as a form of relationship, of memory, and of a shared future between humans and non-humans.

This methodological approach calls for an explicit clarification of the relationship between ethnographic voices and analytical interpretation.

Throughout the article, a distinction is maintained between emic conceptions articulated by producers and the analytical framework developed by the author. While vine growers in the Susa Valley have only recently begun to explicitly reflect on yeasts – often delegating such concerns to oenologists – the analytical attention to microbial processes in fermentation represents a theoretical proposition informed by ethnographic encounters, situated observations, and multispecies scholarship. Rather than attributing this perspective directly to local actors, the article explores how their practices, silences, and selective attentions make space for such an interpretation.

Heroic Landscapes and Geographies of Wine

The historical reconstructions presented in this article draw on a combination of oral memories collected during fieldwork, local narratives, and existing historical and ethnographic literature; where possible, these sources are explicitly distinguished.

When summer recedes and the days grow shorter, the vine growers of the Susa Valley begin the harvest. It is an ancient gesture that renews a millennia-old relationship between humans and the vine. The origins of this beverage, which has always accompanied moments of celebration, go back to pre-Roman times: historical reconstructions suggest that viticulture in the Susa Valley developed along the Via Francigena, a route of trade and pilgrimage linking Italy to neighbouring France. Inns and taverns scattered along the way offered travellers rest and refreshment with flasks and litres of local wine – expressions of a social and sensory landscape in which hospitality was an integral part of local culture.

According to local accounts and oral memories shared during fieldwork, small producers would keep for themselves the lesser-quality wine, obtained from the grape pomace and the remaining juice after pressing the finest clusters – the so-called *torchum du bun* – or drink *piketto*, made by adding water to the leftover marc. This economy of reuse and frugality, typical of mountain peasant societies, expressed a logic of care and non-waste: every part of the vine, every residue, was material for life and exchange.

After the Second World War, urbanisation and industrialisation led to the abandonment of fields and the near-total disappearance of mountain crops. In recent decades, however, a group of vine growers from the Susa Valley has revived the local wine-growing heritage, bringing back to light rare and almost forgotten grape varieties. The valley's pedoclimatic conditions – sheltered from northern winds, well-exposed to sunlight, and ventilated – now allow vines to be cultivated even beyond 850 metres above sea level, in what is proudly described as *heroic viticulture*.

Heroic because it is practised under extreme conditions, on steep slopes and dry-stone terraces; heroic because it requires manual work, effort, and dedication; heroic, finally, because it represents a form of cultural and territorial resistance. To be classified as such, viticulture must meet at least one of the following criteria: a slope exceeding 30%, an altitude over 500 metres, or vineyards planted on terraces and stone walls. Yet beyond these technical parameters, it is “heroic” because it produces a collective effect: it preserves the landscape, safeguards biodiversity, and maintains human presence in marginal areas often threatened by depopulation.

The hardship of mountain viticulture intertwines with the tenacity of the plants themselves, which adapt to harsh environmental conditions. In this context, the vine becomes a figure of co-resistance: it lives in balance with the soil, stabilises the slopes, limits erosion, and contributes to the ecological and symbolic continuity of the territory. Manual cultivation reduces energy impact and supports soil health; green manuring, even at high altitudes, enriches the land with organic matter, fostering biodiversity. The scarcity of resources and the uniqueness of microclimates confer rare, almost unrepeatable sensory qualities upon the wines, making each vintage a document of the landscape.

The recovery of these practices is part of a broader movement, recognised internationally: as recalled by the *Associazione Nazionale Città del Vino* (2022), heroic viticulture represents a “sentinel of biodiversity and landscape preservation.” In the 1980s, the vineyard became an integral part of the landscape and a bearer of cultural value – a strategic element for territorial quality and local development.

In the Susa Valley, this heroic landscape is manifested in the stone terraces, in plots situated between 700 and 1000 metres above sea level, in the windy microclimates and wide temperature variations that influence grape ripening and microbial metabolism, contributing to the definition of a unique oenological profile. In some high-altitude areas of the valley, these environmental conditions have also allowed the survival of rare vines planted on their own roots (*piède franco*). Unlike most European vineyards, which were grafted onto American rootstocks following the phylloxera epidemic that devastated *Vitis vinifera* in the late nineteenth century, these vines were spared due to altitude and climatic constraints that limit the parasite’s survival. The presence of *piède franco* vines is locally perceived as a sign of continuity with pre-phylloxera viticulture and reinforces the representation of the Susa Valley as a marginal yet resilient wine-growing landscape.

The native grape varieties – *Avanà*, *Becuet*, and *Baratuciat* – recount, through their aromatic and genetic differences, the valley’s cultural plurality. The Valsusa DOC Consortium now works to promote this identity, enhancing quality and typicity through collaborative networks among producers, researchers, and institutions.

The contemporary revival of viticulture in the Susa Valley is often described as a “renaissance.” Ethnographic accounts, however, reveal how this revival is marked by structural fragilities and uneven conditions, rather than by linear growth or institutional support.

As one producer explained, the main obstacle to the renewal of viticulture is not lack of interest, but the material and political conditions required to make

investment possible. “People talk about starting again”, he said, “but few realise what it actually costs. You need land, equipment, time – and there is very little public support to make that feasible.”

He recounted the case of a young grower who had recently gained access to a series of plots, some of which fall within the boundaries of a protected park. While he had already prepared grafted vines in a greenhouse, he was unable to plant them: park regulations prohibit fencing, yet without fencing the vines would be destroyed by wild animals. In this sense, the “renaissance” of viticulture in the Susa Valley appears less as a return than as a fragile and contested process, shaped by regulatory constraints, uneven access to land, and the absence of sustained political support for mountain agriculture.

These difficulties unfold within a territory deeply shaped by large-scale infrastructural projects, most notably the high-speed railway (TAV). Beyond its symbolic and political visibility, the project has had direct material effects on viticulture in the Susa Valley: vineyards have been expropriated, agricultural plots fragmented, and access to cultivated land restricted.

In some cases, producers are required to enter militarised construction areas in order to reach their vineyards, negotiating daily with regimes of surveillance, soil consumption, and infrastructural disruption. Under these conditions, viticulture becomes an act of persistence within a landscape where agricultural continuity is repeatedly interrupted by projects of territorial transformation.

Within this scenario, wine continues to represent a *total social fact*: an expression of labour, memory, and the relationship between humans and their environment. Each bottle contains a fragment of landscape, a form of knowledge, and a gesture of resistance. As in the rituals of the past, today too the care of the vine and the fermentation of wine embody a way of dwelling in the world – of building relationships and safeguarding the life that renews itself through time.

Wine Rituals and Cycles of Rebirth

As documented in historical and ethnographic studies of Alpine religious traditions (Giai 2011), wine assumed a sacred dimension on specific ritual occasions, such as during the *sacre rappresentazioni* or *mystères* – religious plays widely performed since the Middle Ages in the Alpine lands between Savoy and the Dauphiné – forming a vast heritage of folk and cultural traditions. In past centuries, the *mystères* were staged by mountain communities at the end of the long and harsh Alpine winter, usually during the feast of Pentecost. They combined the Christian celebration (the life and martyrdom of a saint, or the Passion of Christ) with the pagan rituals of spring agricultural festivities and the first harvest.

During these occasions, the *holy Pentecostal bread* was distributed – small round loaves symbolically recalling the breasts of Saint Agatha, virgin and martyr – celebrating fertility and the rebirth of the earth. The religious spectacle, lasting two or three days, was accompanied by music, food, and drink, imbued with ancient symbolic meanings tied to the cult of trees, the May festivals, sword dances, and propitiatory rituals for the harvest. The *sacre rappresentazioni* often contained references to wine – *clairret*, *muscat*, *hippocras* – probably wines produced in the valley itself (Giai 2011).

These practices were embedded in communities that survived through agriculture in harsh, inhospitable environments, marking the agricultural year through cyclical rituals of fertility and rebirth – marking the agricultural year through cyclical rituals of fertility and rebirth, often narrated and remembered as forms of continuity across generations. In such a socio-economic context, wine was not, as is often assumed, a mere palliative offered to the dreams of people deprived of other forms of distraction, but a powerful social bond. It was one of the ways through which communities kept their traditions and peasant culture alive.

The collective act of wine drinking – as a moment of friendship and shared celebration – has endured throughout the centuries: from the times when Saint Maximus, Bishop of Turin, railed against the *dianatici*, drunken worshippers of pagan cults in the countryside, to the present day, when good wine still accompanies the rituals of spring festivals and remains an indispensable ally in taming the bear that awakens in February in Urbiano, during one of the most significant Alpine carnivals still alive in Piedmontese folklore.

Even today, on the feast day of Saint Brigid, patron saint of Urbiano, hunters go in search of the bear – impersonated by a local villager – corner him, and drag him in chains through the streets: the bear drinks copiously of the red nectar until, finally tamed, he dances with the most beautiful girl in the village. The dance seals the symbiotic relationship and “domestication” between humans and nature, between the sacred and the profane, between Saint Brigid and the wild power of the mountain.

In these practices, wine appears as a medium of transition and reconciliation – a liminal substance that unites worlds and temporarily suspends boundaries between human and animal, festivity and sacrifice, faith and fertility. Drawing on long-term ethnographic research in the Western Alpine area, these ritual configurations can be read as expressions of an *animated nature*, in which wine functions not merely as a symbol, but as an active mediator within a relational ecology involving humans, animals, saints, and landscape (Agus 2015; 2018; 2023; Zola *et al.* 2022). During fieldwork, the circulation and consumption of wine during the feast emerged not as a symbolic residue of the past, but as a taken-for-granted gesture embedded in collective participation, conviviality,

and bodily engagement, reaffirming wine's role as a mediator in lived social relations rather than as a heritage marker explicitly framed as "tradition."

As in the festivals, so too in the cellar does wine remain a site of transformation and encounter. Fermentation can be approached analytically as a rite of passage, insofar as it marks a transition between states and requires forms of collective attention, waiting, and care. This is not to suggest that winemakers explicitly conceptualise fermentation in ritual terms, but rather that this analytical lens helps make visible forms of collective attention, waiting, and care that structure fermentative practice. In this sense, the cellar may be read as a ritual stage, not in a literal sense, but as a space where transformation is collectively anticipated, monitored, and interpreted.

The Work of Yeasts in the Fermentation of the Must

Alcoholic fermentation is the invisible heart of winemaking – a process through which yeasts transform the sugars in the must into ethyl alcohol, heat, and carbon dioxide, while simultaneously generating aromatic compounds and sensory textures that give body and voice to the wine.

Leading this transformation are primarily *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, fermentative yeasts that take over after an initial phase dominated by apiculate and oxidative strains – more ephemeral and sensitive to alcohol.

Taken together, these microbial populations compose a dynamic sequence: a community in motion that temporarily inhabits the must and transforms it, leaving in it biochemical and olfactory traces of its presence. Fermentation thus becomes an invisible choreography of births, alliances, and substitutions, where matter becomes relation and wine begins to take shape.

In oenology, a distinction is made between "indigenous" yeasts, naturally present in the vineyard and the cellar, and "selected" yeasts, cultivated and multiplied in laboratories to ensure regular and predictable fermentations. The former, slower and less stable, carry the microbial memory of place and the imprint of the *terroir*; the latter guarantee safety and reproducibility but tend to reduce biological diversity and territorial specificity.

Winemakers in the Susa Valley often experiment with intermediate forms – such as co-inoculations and co-fermentations – that can be understood analytically as forms of technical diplomacy between control and spontaneity. Yeasts participate in shaping the aromatic profile of the wine, a role that this article interprets as a form of more-than-human labour. Their work is at once metabolic and creative: a mediation between sugary matter and the culture of taste, between microbial life and territorial identity.



Cellar Memory and Care

Local producers and oenologists describe the cellar as a living organism endowed with its own microbiome – a porous space that holds stratified microbial memories and requires constant gestures of care. The walls, vats, and barrels retain traces of past fermentations, of seasons and hands that have inhabited that place. Contemporary hygienic practices, such as the sanitisation measures required by HACCP regulations, have improved oenological safety but can also reduce biodiversity and weaken the biological “memory” of the site.

Within this context lies an ethical and sensory choice: to accompany spontaneous fermentation, entrusting the process to the indigenous yeasts of the cellar, or to inoculate selected strains to guarantee predictability and stability. According to the recollections of local producers and oenologists, until the mid-1990s the Susa Valley relied almost exclusively on spontaneous fermentations: wine was born from the microbes dwelling on grape skins and within the working environments, in a dialogue of trust with time and matter. The introduction of industrial yeasts, beginning in that period, improved the safety and regularity of the process, but sometimes at the cost of part of the wine’s aromatic and sensory complexity.

Today, many producers seek a balance between these two poles, practising forms of co-fermentation and mixed inoculation that restore to the cellar its relational dimension: a space where control and spontaneity, technique and memory, and an ethics of care are held together through microbial activity that continues largely beyond human attention.

In recent decades, wooden vats and barrels, traditionally used for vinification, have often been replaced by stainless steel tanks or new-generation composite materials. Whereas wood was porous and alive, capable of hosting a stable microbiome and retaining the aromas of previous vintages, steel ensures greater hygiene and thermal control but also a certain sensory neutrality.

Many winemakers describe this transition as a tactile and affective turning point: the gestures, sounds, and smells of the cellar have changed. Wood “breathed”, while steel “protects but remains silent.”

In the passage from the organic to the metallic, the cellar transforms into a laboratory where technical precision coexists with nostalgia for contact – a place where the memory of wood survives in the stories told, in the small vats still in use, and in experimental micro-fermentations.

Waiting, in the cellar, is a form of invisible labour. In the early hours of morning, when the vapour of the must rises in thin filaments, the air changes colour – dense, golden, vibrant. One hears the faint sound of bubbles multiplying, the step of the winemaker gently scraping the floor, the metallic clink of tools rest-



ing against the wall. Everything else is suspension: fermentation time does not obey the clock, but an internal rhythm that only the yeasts know.

It is within this same logic of interdependence that the experience of the *Consorzio di Tutela e Valorizzazione dei Vini DOC Valsusa* takes root, where collaboration among winemakers, institutions, and researchers continues the invisible work of fermentation, translating microbial trust into a collective project of Alpine renewal.

The Consortium and the Winemaking Revival of the Susa Valley

The *Denominazione di Origine Controllata* (DOC) Valsusa was established by ministerial decree on 31 October 1997 (published in the *Gazzetta Ufficiale* No. 265 of 13 November of the same year) and reserves the DOC designation for red wines made from Avanà, Barbera, Dolcetto, and Neretta Cuneese grapes (alone or together) for at least 60%, and for the remaining 40% from other recommended and authorised varieties of the Province of Turin. Since 2004, the production regulations have also included Becuèt, another important local grape whose valorisation has helped define the contemporary identity of wine production in the Susa Valley.

In 1999, the *Consorzio di Tutela e Valorizzazione dei Vini DOC Valsusa* was founded, based at the *Comunità Montana Bassa Valle Susa e Val Cenischia* in Bussoleno. Today, the Consortium, chaired by Giancarlo Martina, brings together twelve wineries that cover almost the entire area registered under the DOC designation – about ten hectares distributed across nineteen municipalities, from Almese to Exilles.

For over twenty-five years, the Consortium has promoted the protection and enhancement of a wine-growing sector as fragile as it is significant: just over twenty hectares of vineyards, laid out on steep slopes and dry-stone terraces. Its goal is twofold: on one hand, to ensure the continuity of Alpine viticulture, and on the other, to make the valley's oenological distinctiveness recognisable within the broader Piedmontese landscape.

DOC Valsusa wines derive from three main native varieties – the red *Avanà* and *Becuèt* and the white *Baratuciàt* – which testify to the valley's long oenological history, when it once exported wine to Savoy, the Dauphiné, and Turin. After a long period of abandonment, production is experiencing new vitality: *Becuèt* is now vinified in purity; *Avanà* is transformed into classic-method rosé sparkling wine; and late-harvest *Becuèt* grapes give rise to the evocative *Vino del Ghiaccio* (Ice Wine), produced between Chiomonte and Exilles. *Baratuciàt*, rediscovered by Giorgio Falca in Almese, is now cultivated throughout the valley, both as still and sparkling wine.

Alongside the Consortium's work, new independent initiatives – such as that of Giuliano Bosio, former mayor of Almesè and winemaker – have given decisive impetus to the rediscovery and dissemination of *Baratuciàt*. Bosio has recovered ancient mountain vineyards, experimenting with spontaneous fermentations and sustainable agronomic practices, helping to make the variety known beyond regional borders. His activity, together with that of other small, non-affiliated producers, represents a form of oenological resistance: a way of preserving biodiversity and peasant memory through daily gestures of care and an intimate alliance with yeasts and with the mountain.

Thanks to high altitudes, strong temperature variations, and mineral soils, the wines of the Susa Valley are distinguished by freshness, elegance, and aromatic complexity, with a reduced need for chemical treatments. The Consortium is working to expand the vineyard area (which in the early twentieth century covered hundreds of hectares) and to strengthen collaboration between producers, local authorities, and universities.

It is important to note that the winemakers of the Susa Valley are not external to the DOC framework, nor do they position themselves in opposition to it. On the contrary, the Consortium itself was founded precisely in order to obtain DOC recognition, which is widely perceived as a necessary condition for economic survival, territorial visibility, and institutional legitimacy. At the same time, the DOC framework introduces logics of standardisation, predictability, and conformity that do not always align with local practices and aspirations. While regulations do not explicitly impose the use of selected yeasts, they implicitly privilege stable sensory profiles and reproducible outcomes. This creates a normative horizon in which spontaneous and indigenous fermentations appear as risky or marginal. Within this tension, winemakers navigate DOC constraints pragmatically rather than ideologically. Practices such as co-inoculation, selective use of indigenous yeasts, or the confinement of spontaneous fermentations to specific batches allow producers to remain within the DOC system while partially resisting its standardising effects. Resistance here does not take the form of refusal, but of situated negotiation: an effort to preserve microbial diversity and territorial specificity without abandoning the institutional framework that makes wine production viable. Alongside institutional certification regimes such as the DOC, producers in the Susa Valley also rely on informal and relational mechanisms of quality recognition. Although no formal system of participatory guarantee is currently in place, trust-based relationships with consumers, sommeliers, and local networks function as alternative forms of validation. These informal regimes of recognition are also sustained through cultural and editorial initiatives aimed at making mountain viticulture publicly visible. An example is the volume *Valsusa. Emozioni da bere* (Il Graffio, 2022), published in connection with exhibitions,



tastings, and public events involving local producers and the DOC Consortium. Rather than serving as an empirical source, such initiatives function as dispositifs of territorial valorisation, contributing to the circulation of narratives of mountain viticulture, biodiversity, and renewal. Quality, in this sense, emerges less as a standardised attribute than as a negotiated and situated process, grounded in proximity, reputation, and repeated encounters. These informal regimes of recognition resonate with broader efforts to reclaim control over production, circulation, and value – efforts that are inseparable from the material and political conditions of viticulture in the valley.

In this sense, the winemaking revival of the Susa Valley appears as a collective project of Alpine resilience, where the vine becomes an agent of territorial, social, and cultural regeneration. Through this shared labour, the valley rediscovers in viticulture not only an economy, but a way of inhabiting the landscape, restoring value to memory, and building possible futures together. This revival is not merely a productive fact but a lived experience – composed of daily gestures, peasant memories, and new forms of cooperation with the land and its yeasts. The voices of the producers who animate the valley all tell, in different ways, of the same ethical tension: to restore meaning and vitality to a border landscape through viticulture.

Voices of the Valley: Ethical Microcosms and Practices of Resistance

In the Susa Valley, viticulture takes on multiple forms, yet all are united by a shared principle of resistance: the will to restore meaning, voice, and vitality to a marginal landscape. The stories of the producers I encountered show how wine becomes a moral and sensory language – a way of world-making through gestures of care, attentiveness, and cohabitation. In this perspective, vineyards and cellars appear as ethical microcosms, places where the relationship with the land and with yeasts is translated into a practical and affective knowledge.

This research focuses particularly on those contexts that adopt spontaneous fermentations or co-fermentations – practices in which the presence of indigenous yeasts is recognised as a constitutive part of both landscape and sensory quality. In these cellars, agricultural action emerges as a form of embodied knowledge: a “technology of the living” combining scientific know-how with bodily intuitions, discipline with sensitivity. Viticulture, in this sense, is not merely an economic practice, but a *practice of worlding*: an art of maintenance that intertwines human labour with the breathing of soils, the climate, the seasons, the memory of gestures, and the invisible presence of yeasts.

These ethical microcosms are not only enacted in vineyards and cellars, but also in the ways wine is made visible, recognised, and valued within the territory. As one long-standing producer deeply engaged in the collective life of the valley recounted, the challenge of valorising Valsusine wines is not only external but also internal to the territory itself. When asked about the possibility of promoting local wines through events organised outside the Susa Valley, he explained his reluctance: “I think it’s more important to start here, in the valley. Many people who live here don’t even know these wines exist. How can we talk about exporting them if they are invisible at home?”. He recalled how, when he first began producing wine, he personally approached local restaurants, asking them to include Valsusine wines on their wine lists – ideally at the very beginning. Restaurant owners often replied that there was no demand for such wines. “But how can there be demand”, he said, “if they are never offered?”. In some cases, he described giving bottles away directly to restaurant customers who asked about the wines, not as a commercial strategy but as an act of promotion and recognition. For him, making wine in the Susa Valley meant not only producing a beverage but patiently cultivating a local culture of taste, familiarity, and belonging – starting from within the valley itself.

Such practices of care and resistance take different forms across the valley, from collective initiatives to individual experiments in heroic viticulture.

Granja Farm, founded in 2015 in Chiomonte, defines itself as a form of resistance viticulture: the recovery of steep terraces, animal husbandry, distributed hospitality, and experimentation in collaboration with nature. Born out of the movement opposing the construction of the Turin-Lyon high-speed rail line (TAV), the farm – founded by a collective of young farmers – interprets agricultural work as an ecological and political practice of reclaiming territory. Here, the value of indigenous yeasts intertwines with an ethics of care and multispecies coexistence, in which wine production becomes part of a broader strategy of resistance to damage.

La Chimera, founded by Stefano Turbil and his wife Mariangela Calcagnile near Chiomonte, represents an emblematic example of heroic and organic viticulture. Its historic vineyards, located over 700 metres above sea level, host native varieties such as *Avanà* and *Becuèt*, cultivated without herbicides and vinified with low intervention. The wines’ aromatic profile, intense and complex, is interpreted by Turbil as a direct expression of the Alpine microbiome and as the living memory of the territory.

Interviews with Mattia Longoni, Giancarlo Martina, and Vincenzo Rumiano complete this mosaic of experiences. Longoni, an oenologist who moved to Mompantero after working in Trentino, South Tyrol, and Tuscany, sees wine as a tool for territorial regeneration. He focuses on two native varieties – the

white *Baratuciàt* and the red *Becuèt* (known in Savoy as *Persan*) – alongside Nebbiolo and Riesling, the grape variety to which he feels most connected. For him, regenerating the valley means recovering viticultural memory and engaging in dialogue with older generations: gathering the knowledge and gestures of a peasant *savoir-faire* that risked being lost is a way to restore continuity to a mountain-rooted wine culture. In this act of listening and reconstruction, viticulture becomes for Longoni a practice of caring for memory and territory, where scientific research dialogues with oral wisdom and with the microbial vitality of the landscape.

Giancarlo Martina, together with his wife Serena, runs the *Cantina Martina* in Giaglione, cultivating varieties such as *Bequet*, *Avanà*, and *Malliolo*. He experiments with whole-cluster fermentation on *Avanà* and promotes an ethic of manual and affective labour. For Martina, heroic viticulture is also a tool for storytelling and for revaluing the Alpine landscape: wine contributes to requalifying the territory, underlining the link between production, tourism, and local culture.

Vincenzo Rumiano, also from Giaglione, recalls the figure of his father Mario, one of the first local winemakers to introduce the use of sulphur dioxide, at a time when “sulphite was seen as a demon.” His words evoke a time when fermentation was always spontaneous and technical control minimal – a sensorial and artisanal knowledge transmitted in the silence of the cellars.

Within this web of memories, experiments, and gestures, viticulture in the Susa Valley appears as a constellation of practices of resistance and multispecies cooperation. Oenological labour becomes a vital continuum between past and future – a way of cultivating relationships and regenerating the mountain. This analytical framing builds on multispecies ethnography and theories of more-than-human labour, while remaining attentive to the fact that it exceeds the everyday language used by most producers and constitutes an interpretive move made by the researcher. In fermentation, as in social life, the inhabitants of the Susa Valley experiment with forms of diplomacy between freedom and control, care and autonomy, tradition and innovation. Wine production thus becomes, in the analytical framing proposed here, a political and poetic gesture: a *practice of worlding* that intertwines ethics, ecology, and affect. The voices of the valley form a polyphonic chorus of experiences and resistances, in which the landscape, humans, and yeasts continually negotiate the possibility of remaining, coexisting, and transforming together.

In these experiences, the boundary between artisanal practice and scientific experimentation becomes porous. The care of wine does not end with the winemaker’s daily gesture, but continues in laboratories, in consortia, and in dialogues among microbiologists, oenologists, and producers. The living matter

of fermentation thus becomes a shared field of inquiry, where technique is not opposed to nature but part of the same ecology of knowledge.

It is within this space of interaction – among indigenous yeasts, selected strains, and laboratory practices – that the future of Susa Valley viticulture is being shaped. Decisions about inoculation, fermentation temperatures, new steel tanks, or returns to wooden vats are not merely technical choices: they are political acts defining the relationship between humans and microbes, between safety and freedom, between standardisation and diversity.

Technique, Experimentation, and Microbial Biodiversity

The cellars of the Susa Valley can be understood as sites of experimentation, where technique does not replace life but enters into dialogue with it. Co-inoculations and co-fermentations mark an intermediate path between control and biodiversity, enhancing process stability while preserving the microbial plurality that sustains wine's identity and complexity. Here, scientific knowledge does not stand in opposition to tradition but unfolds as a practice of listening and cooperation with the living.

In fermenting musts dwells an extraordinary biodiversity of yeasts that participate in the process at different frequencies and times. *Saccharomyces cerevisiae*, thanks to its resistance to alcohol, tends to dominate alcoholic fermentation, but the achievement of this predominance is variable and depends on the relationship between *Saccharomyces* populations and the non-*Saccharomyces* yeasts present in the must. The initial phases, more chaotic and unpredictable, involve the intervention of different species that prepare the ground for subsequent transformation.

Oenological research at the turn of the millennium emphasised the growing interest in understanding and managing yeast diversity in winemaking, highlighting how different *Saccharomyces cerevisiae* strains contribute to fermentation outcomes and wine quality (Pretorius 2000). Some strains, in particular, can persist in the same cellar for consecutive years, becoming part of its stable microbiome and contributing to the “style” and territorial recognisability of the wines (Capece *et al.* 2016; Bokulich *et al.* 2016).

A fundamental contribution in this direction comes from the work of Simona Guerrini, Giacomo Buscioni, and Lisa Granchi (*Food Micro Team*, DAGRI, University of Florence, 2019), which demonstrated that some strains of *S. cerevisiae* can persist for more than a decade within the same cellar environment, linking microbial memory to human gestures, materials, and rhythms of work. This research shows how each cellar can be approached as a unique ecosystem – an invisible landscape of microorganisms that co-evolves with people and winemaking practices, contributing to the territorial specificity of wine.



From an anthropological perspective, such persistence can be read as a form of living memory: yeasts behave like invisible archivists, capable of transmitting a specific territorial sensitivity over time. The cellar thus becomes a place of biological and cultural inheritance, where matter also ferments history.

From a contemporary standpoint, the recovery and valorisation of autochthonous strains require networks of collaboration involving oenologists, microbiologists, and anthropologists. The goal is not a nostalgic return to a “pure nature” but the construction of a diplomacy of the living – an art of balance between safety and freedom, between standardisation and biodiversity.

The use of selected indigenous strains – naturally adapted to the cellar environment and capable of positively influencing the wine’s sensory characteristics – can represent a concrete way of reconciling technical quality with territoriality. In this perspective, wine science is not merely a technological knowledge but a field of ethical relations: a practice that recognises the more-than-human labour of yeasts as an integral part of the valley’s culture and memory.

If technique constructs the conditions for coexistence, it is in the time of fermentation that such coexistence takes shape. The life of yeasts imposes on winemakers an ethics of waiting and a pedagogy of listening: learning to read the transformations of matter, to accept its autonomy, and to recognise in the rhythm of wine another way of inhabiting time.

Temporalities, Affects, and Fermentative Landscapes

If technique and biodiversity create the conditions for coexistence, it is in the time of fermentation that such coexistence takes form. Spontaneous fermentation imposes another temporality: allowing the wine itself to tell when it is ready. In the cellar, time is not a linear measure but a rhythm to be listened to, a breath to be followed. This ethics of waiting – often in tension with the accelerated tempos of markets and industrial production – becomes a form of sensitive resistance: learning not to force life, but to collaborate with its own rhythms.

Winemakers in the Susa Valley speak of wine as a being in becoming. Yeasts are perceived as presences with character and mood: some “start quickly”, others “fall asleep” and later “wake up”, while others “remain silent for days, then suddenly burst.” This anthropomorphic language does not trivialise the living, but acknowledges its subjectivity – an affective grammar that allows a relationship with what is not human. As Vinciane Despret (2013) suggests, giving voice to the other is a form of care; in the cellar, this gesture translates into listening to the signs that matter emits – a rustle, a shift in temperature, a changing scent.



Fermentation, from this perspective, is an act of sensory coexistence. The winemaker moves through the cellar like a translator: observing, smelling, touching, adjusting the rhythms of racking, recognising that quality is not born of control but of a relationship of reciprocal adaptation. As Tim Ingold reminds us, craftsmanship is always a “walking with materials”, a following of their movements. Thus, in the vats of the valley, humans learn the language of fermenting wine, participating in a process that is at once biological, ethical, and perceptual.

In the Alpine context, fermentation is also a way of inhabiting the landscape. Altitude, sharp temperature variations, and stony soils influence both microbial and human rhythms, producing a plural temporal landscape – one made of waiting and returning, of silences and vital explosions. Within this entanglement of climate, matter, and memory, fermentation becomes a practice of ecological sensitivity: a way of perceiving the mountain as a living organism and recognising in yeasts its invisible messengers.

In the Susa Valley, therefore, wine production is not merely labour but a form of temporal and affective relationship. In the fermenting vats, time becomes porous – inhabited by humans and microbes that coexist, observe, and transform one another. The slowness of fermentation is not inefficiency but a pedagogy of the living: a mutual learning in which the wine teaches the winemaker to care, to wait, and to trust.

As Barad (2007) suggests, matter is never inert: it acts, responds, and enters into relation. The winemaker’s waiting is therefore not emptiness, but shared time – an intra-action among bodies, substances, and temperatures through which wine takes form. In this sense, fermentation is an exercise in co-temporality: a learning of the other’s rhythm, a way of inhabiting time not as a line but as a weave of durations.

Tsing (2012) invites us to think of multispecies collaborations as forms of entanglement emerging in the interstices of capitalism, where life reinvents itself despite the urgency of productivity. The cellars of the Susa Valley can be read as one such interstice, where practices such as spontaneous fermentation and co-inoculation transform slowness into a form of epistemic and ecological resistance, and microbial difference into a principle of survival.

In this perspective, waiting itself becomes political: suspending intervention, listening to the time of the must, and accepting the unforeseen means resisting the logic of total predictability. Wine thus teaches an ethics of uncertainty, in which knowledge consists not in control but in *being with* – in participating in the becoming of things. Fermentation becomes an ontological laboratory of the more-than-human, where time itself works, ferments, and transforms together with the wine.

The waiting and care of fermentation teach that wine is never born alone: it is the outcome of a fragile and situated collaboration. From this everyday practice of coexistence arise the deepest political questions – who decides what counts as quality, who speaks for nature, who remains invisible in the story of taste. It is within these negotiations that the ontopolitics of yeast takes shape.

Ontopolitics of Yeast

The qualities of wine are never fixed once and for all. They are constructed, debated, and continually renegotiated within an entanglement of material practices, sensory knowledge, and social conventions. As Callon suggests, quality is the result of a process of qualification – a collective operation that defines, through relationships and trials, what is perceived as “good”, “authentic”, or “true”. Demossier, in her studies on French wine culture, similarly reminds us that “quality is a social act” a language of power and belonging.

In the Susa Valley, this language unfolds through a lexicon of trust and collaboration. When producers speak about their wines, they do not merely describe aromas or flavours but recount stories of fermentations, difficult vintages, waiting, and dialogue with yeasts. Sensory quality thus emerges from a work of relation: between the winemaker’s hands, the climate’s conditions, the memory of the cellar, and the invisible trajectories of yeasts in action.

In this context, quality becomes a political act in the Foucauldian sense – a field where diffuse forms of power are exercised and regimes of truth are built. DOC production regulations, for instance, establish analytical parameters, yields, and permitted grape varieties, yet they still fail to recognise the fermentative component as a defining element of territorial identity. While only a limited number of producers explicitly articulate yeasts as an extension of *terroir*, this article explores how certain practices and discourses allow yeasts to be analytically understood as part of the territorial assemblage.

Terroir, once a purely geographical category, thus transforms into a constellation of relations: a more-than-human system that also includes yeasts. They translate into chemistry the temperature of the summer, the stoniness of the soils, the history of dry-stone walls, the humidity of cellar vaults. Following Szymanski’s (2018) proposal in her study of synthetic yeasts, *terroir* may be understood not as an exclusive property of soil or tradition, but as a multispecies and multi-sited relationship – one capable of encompassing technical practices and controlled environments. This perspective shows how laboratory practices can themselves generate forms of territoriality, made of technical, affective, and sensory connections between humans and yeasts. *Terroir* thus becomes a

situated co-figuration of relations rather than a natural property – a field in which technologies also participate in the construction of identity and taste. In the Susa Valley, this perspective allows both spontaneous fermentations and guided inoculations to be read as expressions of a shared relational landscape, where human practices and microbial dynamics intertwine in shaping quality, meaning, and the wine’s memory. It is a composite landscape where different ways of inhabiting the living coexist. Some producers speak of the need to “accompany” fermentation – a grammar of gesture that weaves together technical knowledge and relational sensitivity. In this sense, even standardisation is not merely an act of control but a form of diplomacy between safety and freedom, between prediction and listening. Szymanski invites us to shift our gaze: the question is no longer whether a wine is “natural” or “artificial”, but to interrogate the ontopolitics that make certain practices legitimate, certain relations visible, and others marginal.

Wine quality thus emerges as a collective field of negotiation among regimes of knowledge, technical instruments, and microbial presences – where the “good” is not an objective given but the result of a *sensitive politics* (Foucault 1976; Latour 2005). In the Susa Valley, this politics takes the form of a plurality of practices: a continuous mediation between regulatory norms, desires for authenticity, and alliances with the yeasts that ferment, rest, and awaken. Spontaneous fermentation, with its unpredictable timing, becomes a form of both sensory and political mediation – a way of letting the earth speak, but also of accepting its autonomy.

DOC regulations, which define grape varieties, yields, and analytical parameters, still do not consider fermentation as a key element of territorial identity. Yet many Susa Valley producers regard yeasts as an extension of the *terroir* itself. From this perspective, yeasts do not merely transform must, but participate in shaping taste, shared vocabularies, and criteria of value. The quality of wine, therefore, is a social and multispecies fact – born from the encounter between human sensitivity and biological creativity, between an ethics of care and a science of fermentation.

Recognising yeasts as more-than-human workers does not mean anthropomorphising them, but admitting that wine quality arises from shared labour. In the Alpine landscape of the Susa Valley, *zymurpolitics* thus takes shape in everyday acts of care and collaboration aimed at defending microbial biodiversity and territorial identity. Considering the microbiome as part of *terroir* opens a public discussion on the politics of quality, inviting consortia, producers, and researchers to co-design tools that include the invisible labour of yeasts.

From this standpoint, taste reveals itself as a political terrain where questions of value, recognition, and power intertwine. If fermentation is a practice of



coexistence between humans and yeasts, taste is the language through which this coexistence is translated, judged, and socially shared.

To speak of quality, however, also means to question what, in wine, is perceived as “good.” Behind every sensory judgement lies a worldview – a symbolic order that determines what deserves trust, what counts as pure, what truly belongs to a territory. It is from this dimension of taste that anthropological reflection encounters fermentation.

The Good to Think... and to Ferment

In anthropology, “the good” is never a neutral category. As Lévi-Strauss (1964) reminded us, what is “good to eat” is also “good to think”: taste is a form of social knowledge, a language that orders the world. In wine, the “good” is constructed at the intersection of sensory experiences, cultural norms, and technical regimes: it is the outcome of a collective process of qualification that reflects values, memories, and forms of belonging.

Douglas (1972) showed how classifications of purity and impurity always express a symbolic order; in wine, these categories are now reformulated through discourses of “spontaneity” and “naturalness.” Yet what is considered pure or authentic does not depend on intrinsic properties – it is the product of practices, discourses, and power relations (Foucault 1976).

Within this entanglement, sommeliers too participate in defining the “good.” Through the language of tasting – a lexicon that is both technical and deeply cultural – they translate into words and judgements the invisible work of yeasts, winemakers, and landscapes. As Demossier (2010) observes, the figure of the sommelier acts as a mediator of worlds, rendering the complexity of wine intelligible and contributing to the construction of taste hierarchies. Tasting, in this sense, is a political practice: a way of asserting what counts as quality, what deserves trust, and which sensory relationships are considered legitimate.

In the Piedmontese context, the wines of the Susa Valley occupy a particular position: less known than the region’s great appellations, they sometimes move along the margins of more established circuits. This condition is not merely economic but also symbolic: taste reflects and reproduces hierarchies of attention and value. In some producers’ accounts, one hears the feeling that Valsusine wines “still need to find their own words”, or that “our wine is not yet taken seriously” within the broader language of Piedmontese wine.

This condition, however, is not a sign of fragility but of an alternative sensibility – one that proposes a different way of understanding quality: a quality built through dialogue, proximity, and attention to detail. For this reason, tasting assumes a special value here. Sommeliers who work with Valsusine wines en-



gage with a living, sometimes surprising material that invites them to suspend the usual parameters of evaluation and make room for curiosity and listening. In this sense, tasting becomes a meeting ground between different kinds of knowledge: between the codified languages of oenology and the situated forms of understanding that emerge from mountain terraces and cellars.

In the Susa Valley, the good is not a universal value but a relational experience: a wine is “good” when it speaks of its place, when it preserves the voice of the yeast, when it conveys the memory of the landscape in sensory form. Taste thus becomes a mode of *situated thought* (Haraway 1988): a way of being in the world and making world with others – human and non-human alike. Yeasts, with their invisible vitality, participate in this collective construction of the good, translating landscape into flavour and memory into aroma.

From this perspective, taste is not only aesthetic but also ethical and political. As Despret (2013) suggests, thinking with the living means learning to recognise the relationships that make us capable of feeling. The “good” thus emerges as exercise in attention: a way of being in the world and making world with others – humans, yeasts, soils, and climates – who inhabit the valley and sustain its vitality.

If the good is what unites thinking and feeling, then fermentation becomes the place where this encounter takes material form. In the relationship between winemaker and yeast, taste transforms into gesture, and knowledge takes the shape of shared care. It is here that space opens for reflecting on work as a practice of alliance – on fermenting as a way of thinking life itself.

Beyond the Anthropocene: Ethics of Fermentation and Shared Futures

The fermentations of the Susa Valley speak not only of wine, but of a different way of inhabiting the world. In an age marked by haste and extraction, the slowness of fermentation appears as an act of resistance. The work of yeasts – invisible, metabolic, collective – offers a lesson in biological democracy: no hierarchy, no centre of command, only interactions, exchanges, adaptations. Each cell works for itself and for the whole, transforming time into matter and matter into relation.

To think of fermentation as a social and political practice means to shift our gaze: from the producer to the entire ensemble of living beings who take part in the making. It is within this entanglement that the very concept of labour is redefined. As Barua (2018) and Mouret and Lainé (2023) suggest, more-than-human labour is always metabolic: a process of reciprocal transformation



between bodies and environments, between energy and affect. Yeasts do not merely produce alcohol; they generate relational value – reworking residues, recreating balances, giving shape to the very possibility of taste.

From this perspective, the cellar becomes a model of *sympoiesis* (Haraway 2007): a making-with that has neither masters nor fixed boundaries. The winemaker, the yeasts, the air, the stone, and the temperature all collaborate in the production of a common world. Knowledge manifests itself as a diplomacy of the living – an art of mediation among species, techniques, and temporalities, in which care replaces control and sensitivity becomes expertise.

The practices of the Susa Valley show that non-human labour is not an archaic remnant but a possible horizon – a way to rethink sustainability beyond the logic of productivity. In a world that tends to reduce every form of life to a resource, recognising the contribution of yeasts – and with them, of soils, waters, and climates – means imagining shared futures founded not on extraction, but on reciprocity.

To take fermentation seriously as a philosophical gesture also means rethinking responsibility. In every microbial alliance, there is a form of accountability that exceeds the human: a responsibility distributed among gestures, temperatures, and invisible agencies. This calls for an ethics of attention, one that listens to the quiet signals of transformation and accepts uncertainty as part of creation. Such an attitude could inform broader social and ecological practices, suggesting ways of working that privilege responsiveness over domination. In this sense, the ethics of fermentation resonates with feminist and postcolonial critiques of control – offering instead a politics of care, maintenance, and mutual flourishing. What emerges is not a romantic return to nature, but a pragmatic art of composition, where knowledge grows through coexistence rather than competition.

Within this ecology of labour, wine emerges as a relational outcome: matter that responds, memory that is continually renewed, and language through which shared meanings take shape. Fermentation, as Lévi-Strauss once wrote of mythical thought, serves not only to transform nature but to transform those who practise it. And perhaps it is here, in the silent cellars of the Susa Valley – amid the warm breath of the vats and the waiting of the winemakers – that a concrete possibility of a post-Anthropocene world takes shape: a world in which quality is not a measure, but a relationship that keeps fermenting. Perhaps it is in fermentation itself that the simplest and most radical form of thinking together lies hidden.

From here arises the final question: how might yeasts teach us to imagine possible futures – futures fermented through collaboration rather than domination, where the art of making becomes a shared gesture of care and transformation, a quiet revolution still unfolding within and around us.

Conclusions. Fermenting the Relation: Yeasts, Labour, and Possible Futures

In the Susa Valley, wine emerges from a gesture of trust that unfolds through time and matter: a passage from human hands to invisible populations of yeasts, and back again in the form of taste, warmth, and voice. As shown throughout this article, viticulture in this Alpine context is not reducible to a technical process but takes shape as a situated practice of care, in which spontaneous fermentations, co-inoculations, and negotiations with DOC regulations require attentiveness, waiting, and selective intervention. Within these practices, yeasts are not treated as inert tools but as living presences whose activity remains partially unpredictable and whose vitality must be accompanied rather than mastered.

Approaching fermentation through the lens of more-than-human labour (Barua 2018) allows this shared work to be understood as a relational process rather than as the extraction of biological capacities. In the cellars of the Susa Valley, microbial labour unfolds within fragile and marginal conditions – steep terrain, limited mechanisation, regulatory constraints, and economic vulnerability – that shape how winemakers engage with uncertainty. Practices such as spontaneous fermentation and co-inoculation make visible a form of labour that is distributed across species and environments, and that produces not only wine but also relationships, memories, and forms of territorial attachment.

From this perspective, fermentation can be read as an ontopolitical practice: a space in which decisions about control, standardisation, and biodiversity are continuously negotiated. As discussed in relation to DOC frameworks, producers do not oppose institutional regulation outright, but navigate it pragmatically, experimenting with intermediate techniques that allow them to remain within certification regimes while preserving microbial diversity and sensory specificity. Resistance, here, does not take the form of refusal, but of situated adjustment – an effort to sustain life and labour in a marginal landscape without relinquishing institutional visibility.

Thinking with care, as proposed by Despret (2013), helps clarify the ethical dimension of these practices. Attention to yeasts, to rhythms of fermentation, and to signs of transformation does not imply anthropomorphism, but recognises that knowing and producing are inseparable from responsibility toward the living beings involved. In this sense, the work of yeasts and that of humans are not parallel processes but intertwined forms of engagement that sustain both wine and landscape over time. The fermentations of the Susa Valley thus invite a rethinking of labour, value, and production beyond anthropocentric frameworks. When work is shared with other living beings,



it becomes a practice of coexistence and imagination – resisting the homogenisation of taste and knowledge, and opening up possibilities for slower, more relational futures. Wine, in this light, is not simply made: it is accompanied. And to accompany fermentation is to accept uncertainty as a condition of life, restoring dignity to the invisible labour that continues to transform the world, quietly and collectively.

Acknowledgements

This work is dedicated to my grandfather, Gai Giglio, who taught me the value of slow time and of work done with both hands and heart. In his way of listening to the land and caring for it, I recognise the same gesture of the valley's winemakers: a form of knowledge that cannot be measured but is transmitted, like a silent yeast that continues to ferment through time.

I wish to thank the winemakers and vinegrowers of the Susa Valley who shared with me their time, their words, and their experience. Their knowledge – made of gestures, patience, and trust in yeasts – made this essay possible and continues to remind us that every wine is a collective story.

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And finally:

Across the silence of working days, you walk beside me with respect and patience. No words are needed to express gratitude, for it is within quiet dialogue that research finds its breath. Deep within the most authentic relationships, a subtle trace always remains – the rhythm of a shared thought, the memory of a presence. Remaining close, even from afar, is a form of care that traverses both time and pages. Every gesture, small or invisible, continues to ferment. All this, simply: thank you.

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Plant and Human Work at the Botanical Garden of Rome: A Biosemiotic Ethnography

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Abstract: In this paper, we aim to answer two research questions: how do plants work with signs? Moreover, how is the human work of gardeners and conservators intertwined with the plants' semiotic actions? Starting from a field internship at the Botanical Garden of Rome and interviews with some of its conservators and gardeners, we highlight the central role of direct observation in recognising the work that plants undertake to achieve their flourishing and well-being. Further, we link the biosemiotic framework to multispecies ethnography, showing how the semiotic continuum between species is central to the recognition of vegetal work and to a broader reconceptualisation of it.

Keywords: Plant agency; Phytosemiotics; Vegetal work; Multispecies Ethnography.

Introduction

“Let us tell a little bit about their world, a lot about their world” (Oak).¹

In this paper, we discuss several aspects of plants' lives, primarily using two frameworks: biosemiotics (Hendlin, Kusters 2026) and multispecies ethnography (Kirksey, Helmreich 2010), with a focus on the work that plants do and

¹ To ensure the anonymity of gardeners, when we discuss and quote their interviews directly, we will use the name of some plants as a pseudonym. In fact, during the interviews, the interviewer asked the gardener about their favourite plant(s) in the Botanical Garden. We will use these common names – when possible – instead of personal names and surnames. In any case, the pseudonym will not be italicised, even if in Latin, to underline that we are not referring to the actual vegetal specimens.

the collaborations between their efforts and gardeners/conservators' interpretations and actions in the Botanical Garden of Rome. Biosemiotics plays an important role in demonstrating that plants are active and effectively perform interpretive and signalling work in their environment. This standpoint informed our idea of giving a biosemiotic definition of vegetal work to offer a non-anthropocentric view of what plants do in Rome's Botanical Garden. On the other hand, multispecies ethnography was a useful framework and analytical tool for including plants as proper research subjects and examining their relations with gardeners. We consider multispecies ethnography, both theoretical and empirical efforts to understand the experiences of other-than-human living beings and the people who are in direct daily interaction with them.

We then touch on several points to explain what the plants do and how we can recognise their activities. In *Theoretical Horizon*, we present the theses that informed our work: the definition of vegetal agency starting from the biosemiotic domain and from multispecies ethnographies; we also offer our definition of (biosemiotic) work. In the *Methodology* section, we present the fieldwork undertaken, as well as the place in which it took place – it is vital to remember, indeed, that places are never neutral, and in the case of plants, the interrelation with abiotic space is extremely important in understanding vegetal life (Casey, Marder 2024). In *Vegetal Work*, our more consistent section, we analyse the interaction between gardeners and plants, emphasising that the biosemiosis of plants differs according to their evolutionary history, and therefore the work for plants must be recognised starting from their peculiarities and the places where they evolved. Finally, in the *Final Remarks*, we conclude the paper with reflections on the research outcomes.

Theoretical Horizon

The debate on vegetal agency is rich and articulated in current critical plant studies, and several perspectives arise, sometimes at odds. In *Plant Thinking*, for instance, Marder grounds plant agency in vegetal freedom and indeterminacy (2013, p. 129), since vegetal beings do not have the same constraints of animals in the organisation of their bodies – a classical perspective on plant agency and nature taken up by several Western philosophers, as pointed out by Marder also in *A Phytocentrism to Come* (2014). Other perspectives highlight the necessity to consider biological agency in plants more straightforwardly through the study of vegetal plasticity (Gilroy, Trewavas 2022), taking into consideration also the so-called plant neurobiology (Lee, Calvo 2023), while others propose to focus on traditional Indigenous knowledge, to decolonise our gaze on plants'

actions (Lawrence 2022). There are, indeed, several Indigenous authors working on the relationship between humans and plants and on how the latter directly influence us— see, for instance, the work of Kimmerer, especially *Braiding Sweetgrass* (2013). To conclude this brief overview, we must also consider radical approaches that attribute personhood to plants (Hall, 2011). However, the decision to attribute agency to plants is not politically neutral – see, for instance, Helton’s proposal in *Growing Methods* (2021), and Bourgeois-Gironde and Lumb’s attempt to read the events of Paris’ Commune through the lens of vegetal radicality (2025): it has consequences on our understanding of the world, and highlights the oppressive relationships between species. Hence, we adopt a biosemiotic understanding of agency, grounded in studies of phytosemiotics (Krampen 1981; Kull 2000; Comollo 2024): semiotic agency means that plants use signs to act in the environment, interpreting the external and reacting coherently to it. This perspective is not politically neutral: it deconstructs the anthropocentric and glottocentric understanding of action through meaning (Cannizzaro, Cobley 2015), acknowledging the profound interconnectedness of living beings with their environment and other organisms (Wheeler 2019). The idea of interconnection and readability of plants’ signs by other living beings allows us to create a bridge between critical plant studies, biology, and anthropology; in other words, we use biosemiotics as a metalanguage capable of translating biological and semiotic understanding of agency also in philosophy and anthropology, starting from the assumption that plants are active and at the same time deeply interrelated with the external; the indeterminacy of plant signs are deeply embodied in plants’ morphology, but also in the medium where they grow.

We can now move on to multispecies ethnography, a valuable framework that allows speculation about humans while also offering new perspectives on non-human beings and their capabilities. There are different ways to conceive of the *Anthropos* and its relationship with the more-than-human, as Kirksey and Helmreich’s brilliant article suggests (2010) – and as Fuentes reinforces (2010), underpinning multiple anthropological points of view. For us, it is essential to consider human nature as an interspecies relationship, as Tsing (1995; 2015) and Haraway (2008) point out, and to take into consideration the role of “care” in these human and other-than-human ties (Bellacasa 2017). Care must be understood as a work of maintenance with ethical, political and affective implications that involve different types of living beings. This assumption is relevant because it could be seen as a fundamental first step in establishing a relationship between humans and plants, specifically in the gardeners’ work; caring is an important part of their relationship with plants. Moreover, this paper focuses on plants’ actions. The latter is another

multispecies' ethnography's crux: the other-than-human existence and capacities. On this topic, there are many contributions that can be cited, such as Lien and Law on salmon (2011), Van Dooren on birds (2014), and Candea on meerkats (2010). Particularly relevant is Parrenas (2012), who studies orangutans in a Malaysian recovery centre and focuses on the concept of "affect" to establish a relevant theoretical frame for understanding how relations between humans and other-than-humans share affections (of different kinds). This topic is deeply connected to the biosemiotic framework presented earlier, and in this paper, we apply it specifically to plants. Indeed, some works already focused on vegetal organisms starting from these premises. For instance, Chao, in her contribution on the oil palm tree in Indonesia and the conflict relations with the Upper Bian Marind people (2022), explains how multispecies relations and the "entanglement" concept can also generate violence and conflict among different other-than-human species and humans. Another example focuses on knowledge developed through entanglement in what Krzywoszynska (2016) defines as the concept of "skill". Multispecies relations generate, and at some time require, some kind of specific knowledge that is here described with gardeners' experience. Pruning and caring for plants are indeed works that generate "effects" on those involved and, at the same time, slowly create a new kind of connection and shared knowledge between humans and plants. For all these reasons, multispecies ethnography offers a useful lens to see beyond the definition of work as just human. Consequently, in this paper, to define "work", we take on a definition used by Beever and Tønnessen (2015) to discuss their proposal of a biosemiotics particularism in (biosemiotically influenced) moral philosophy: according to the two scholars, normative discussions on more-than-human beings should "be based on the organism's fulfilment of their needs, which are generally related to their semiotic capacity" (Beever Tønnessen 2015, p. 34).² Paraphrasing this statement, we propose considering work as the semiotic activity undertaken by living forms to fulfil their needs and achieve their overall well-being, which always involves multispecies interactions. We are aware, indeed, that it is a quite broad and counter-intuitive understanding of work: several studies support different directions; for example, Besky and Blachette reflect on what it would entail to consider "industrial grains and animals as 'workers'" (2019, p. 2), in the contemporary capitalist understanding of this term: indeed, there are some specific conditions (especially in agriculture), in

² In other words, living beings' needs depend on living forms' abilities to interpret the surroundings and their internal states and answer to them. From a biosemiotic standpoint, all these abilities are semiotic, since there is a consistent use of signs.

which plants can be considered as producing something in the classical anthropocentric perspective: as Besky underlines in the case of monocultures, “despite dreams of alienation, monocultures ‘work’ – when they work – by drawing capital, labour, and technologies together and keeping them there” (Besky 2019, p. 26). However, in this context, we aim to reach a minimal understanding of this concept to move toward a plant-centred perspective. In other words, we aim to observe in the botanical garden not the “work of plants”, namely just recognisable (or projected) from our human perspective, but rather the “work for plants”, namely the vegetal activity which wants to reach something that is valuable for the plants themselves, and which is recognisable only in a second moment by us in the semiotic efforts done by the botanical species. With this broad definition, we can easily understand plants’ semiotic actions in their environment as work, often invisible to an anthropocentric perspective. In other words, we define plant work as the activity undertaken by plants to obtain what they seek, their goals, even if they cannot be recognised by us as economically valuable. It is a phytocentric and phylogenetic definition that can be applied to all biological entities: exactly as plants, even animals (and, within this category, us), mushrooms, bacteria, and so on have their ways of working, sometimes recognisable from our gaze, others not. Since there are several ways species can indeed co-act and co-work, in this paper, we focus on the co-work humans can establish with plants in the context of a botanical garden, starting from the plants’ perspective rather than the opposite.

Methodology

Considering the theoretical approach and framework, along with our biosemiotics-oriented, vegetally inflected definition of work, we can gain a deeper understanding of the methodology employed during fieldwork. One of the authors spent ten months, from May 1, 2024, to February 28, 2025, conducting a research internship at the Museum Botanical Garden of Rome, part of the University of La Sapienza’s museum system. During this period, eight semi-structured interviews were conducted with workers at the Botanical Garden Museum, and various participant observations were performed with collaborators. The Botanical Garden of Rome is situated in the centre of the city, in the Trastevere neighbourhood. It is situated on the Janiculum, one of the seven hills of Rome, and within it, several paths allow visitors to explore the various collections, which can be quite dense, as seen in the bamboo collection.

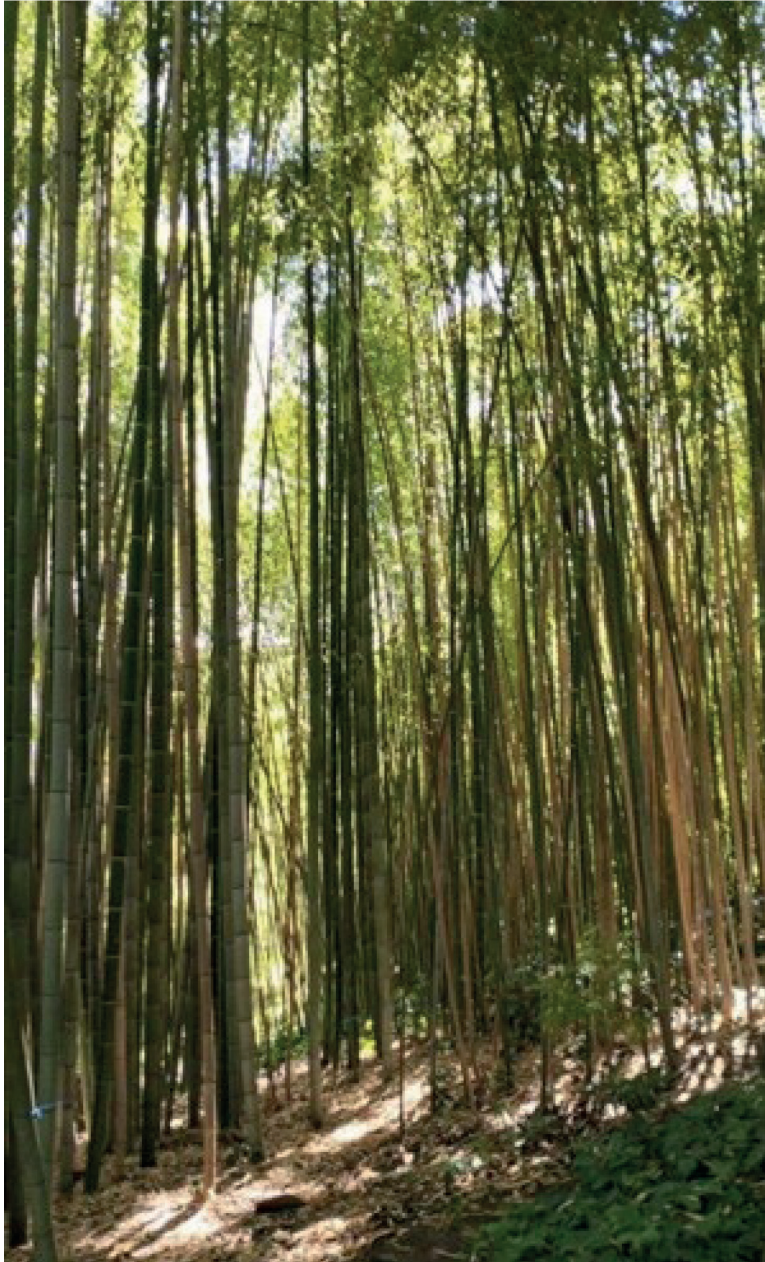


Figure 1: Section of the Bamboo collection at the Botanical Garden of Rome. *(Picture by the authors).*

Inside, we can find several plant collections: palm trees, ferns, a rose garden, Italian vines, bamboo, a rock garden, a Japanese garden, a Roman forest, conifers, a garden of aromatic and medicinal plants, a zone for aquatic vegetation, a tropical greenhouse, the Corsini greenhouse, the monumental greenhouse, the French greenhouse, the propagation greenhouse, and the mediterranean garden; there are also several monumental trees, and not always the plants of a collection are limited to a single place. The place is an ideal laboratory for botanists and biologists. Inside the park's outer perimeter, hundreds of perfectly preserved local and alien species coexist. The various plant-related activities are planned according to the specific needs of each species. People who work in the garden are friendly with strangers and visitors, and are happy to share and discuss their experiences freely. At the same time, after making some observations, it became clear that everyone in the garden was very busy. The place is enormous, and it requires a lot of work and organisation. The species currently preserved in botanical gardens, including those autochthonous to Rome, have no predominant productive purpose in a capitalist sense and do not share the dynamics of extractivism, plantation logic, and deforestation typical of productive varieties, even if visitors must pay an admission fee to help maintain the place.

Thanks to the long internship period, it was possible to observe the immense extent of the Botanical Garden, with all its various zones and greenhouses. These observations were conducted alone during extensive walks around the garden and by following the workers' daily lives within the same structure. Each "gardener" is responsible for a specific plant collection. The human workforce comprises the director, curators, botanists, researchers, and workers who are not directly involved in plant care but rather interact with visitors or provide educational/artistic programs and services offered by the Botanical Garden. The people interviewed are mainly men aged 30-50, most of them with a high level of education (master's degree or higher). During the ten-month research period in the Garden, seventeen gardeners worked daily to care for the plants; due to the volume of work at the Botanical Garden, it was not possible to interview all of them.

During the first months of the internship, an essential questionnaire with guided questions was developed to explore three thematic fields: first, what does it mean to be a curator, and what plants need most in terms of care? This part of the interview helped explain how a curator's job is articulated, and how they can interact with vegetal organisms. Secondly, participants were asked to observe and explain the intra and interspecific relationships among plants, indicating which plants better "collaborate" with others. Thanks to these questions, it was possible to understand some relationships that form and inhabit the Bo-

tanical Garden. The final field explored the possibilities of interaction between humans and plants, with questions aimed at examining the informants' sensitive perception and how they learn to "read" plants' needs. This last field also focused on the experiences of gardeners who, quoting Clément, need to work with, rather than on, nature (1994, p. 12). These questions allowed us to enter the world of the Botanical Garden and its complex relationships through the eyes and observations of the workers who daily interact with plants.

Vegetal Work

To begin the discussion on vegetal work, we would like to start with one observation made by the gardener Aloe³ during the interview on succulent plants.⁴ Discussing the various species present in the Botanical Garden's greenhouses, the conservator explained how plants of the *Lithops* genus can perform the photosynthesis process underground. The sunlight passes through the fleshy leaves and reaches the part of the plant most protected from heat and potential dangers, which is located below the soil surface. This simple botanical notion about one of the thinnest species in the Botanical Garden offers a helpful metaphor for plant work: it is, most of the time, invisible to the anthropocentric gaze. This condition is not only determined by the so-called plant-blindness, but also by a general difficulty in considering plants without a zoo-centric approach (Sandford 2023, p. 2). Following a phylogenetic interpretation of biosemiotic branches, we know that the semiotic competence of distinct species (and, clearly, kingdoms) is differentiated through the phylogenetic tree (Lineweaver 2025);⁵ in other words, the semiotic actions (and, consequently, the work) of botanical species are shaped by the various constraints⁶

³ From this point to the end of the paper, this is the pseudonym for this gardener.

⁴ With "succulent plant", we refer generally to plants that have "large cells for water storage" (Griffiths, Males 2017, p. 890).

⁵ A phylogenetic tree is the graphical representation of the differentiation of species and kingdoms of life during the years; it is helpful in recognising the exact momentum in which organism evolutionary path diverged, and different abilities evolved.

⁶ The concept of "constraint" is critical from a biosemiotics perspective. Indeed, living forms can evolve and adapt through their semiotic freedom in the presence of external «enabling constraints» (Kauffman 2014, p. 3) that must be overcome. Different constraints lead to distinct evolutionary adaptations, and, as Zhou notes, more constraints mean greater semiotic freedom (2023, p. 412). The essential point of our discussion is that evolutionary adaptations and habits define how living beings work, following the biosemiotic definition of work we adopted. Therefore, the distinction between species, determined by the different constraints and interpretations of the latter, is a central aspect of the differentiation between more-than-human works. We could say that there exist as many more-

they face(d) during their evolutionary paths. If the general definition of work we gave at the beginning of this paper is helpful to show a general informative assumption of our paper, we want to underline the differences in plants' work in the botanical garden. We explain them through analysis of various collections and observations made by gardeners, starting with the succulent plants curated by Aloe and distributed across four expository and one reproductive greenhouse. In these places, we can find several plants from different ecological niches, all characterised by a subdesert climate. Aloe began explaining the organisation and division of the greenhouses, where each plant has a specific place. This is a central topic in Aloe's interview. The plants are not only divided into different greenhouses depending on their needs, but the work of Aloe is also aimed at describing and rebuilding their origins:

So this is a small quantity of the objective of the Botanical Garden, that is, *ex situ* conservation and then reintroducing the plants *in situ* into their environment; therefore, no 'more or less there' but in a geographical area that corresponds precisely to the natural population, and therefore gives this data an additional value to the collection (Aloe, translated by the authors).

Plants have their place both inside and outside the garden; determining where they fit best is Aloe's responsibility. This topic highlights a critical element of reflection: even plants can migrate, and gardeners and conservators are well aware of the mobility of vegetal beings. For this reason, the taxonomical work at the Botanical Garden is not just a discipline that aims to "know names"; instead, it focuses on describing the story of every single plant. Where they came from, how they arrived in the Botanical Garden, where they belong, etc. Considering all these differences among plants, Aloe observed that geographically distant organisms sometimes evolved similar traits to overcome similar constraints, a phenomenon that can be termed "evolutive convergence" in scientific terms. Consequently, some plants evolved similarly, while others completely differently: when we refer to "succulents", we are dealing with an extremely vast number of living forms (and the same discourse applies to other plant groups, due to the incredible variety in the plant kingdom). Taking these premises into account, we can now discuss some characteristics of the succulent plants' work. As Aloe underlined during the interview, succulent plants usually do not face particular competition from other plant species. However, rather than their direct "opponent", the environment itself can be considered

than-human works as there are interpretative organisms, or, to use a Uexküllian term, *Umwelten* (von Uexküll 2010 [1934]).

a serious risk. Due to the extreme climate, the plants evolved specific habits to not disperse water and energy. If, on the one hand, the classic action attributed to almost all vegetal life forms is photosynthesis, on the other hand, one of the vital works of succulent plants is to conserve water. It is indeed a characteristic that defines important aspects of these plants' life and morphology, as some of them have evolved a peculiar photosynthesis system.⁷

Considering this aspect, we can discuss some interesting points: the recognition of the surroundings, the search for water, the storage of the latter, and the evolution and growth of defence mechanisms to prevent its loss (for instance, thorns). All these (semiotic) actions entail interpretation of stimuli, internal communication and signalling, the making of decisions on how to cope with constraints, and the use of energy to effectively "act"; in other words, they are forms of work. The various ways species respond to their environment demonstrate a diversity that cannot be reduced to mechanicism: there is a creativity of living forms (Hoffmeyer 1996, p. 38), the creation of paths that did not previously exist.

This aspect is common to all vegetal work: plants overcome similar or different constraints, creating new paths or reproducing past habits to them. An important part of the role of gardeners and conservators at the Botanical Garden is, therefore, to recreate the conditions that allow plants to grow (and, consequently, work) effectively. Without the right climate, exposure, and symbiotic species, some plants cannot undertake the actions they evolved to flourish and thrive, and sudden evolution and the creation of new habits are not always immediate. Gardeners, in other words, are the direct observers and facilitators of vegetal work. This perspective takes us outside the Botanical Garden's succulent greenhouses to the tropical greenhouse, curated by Jubaea,⁸ where the vegetal work differs. In the greenhouse, there are tropical plants from four continents, which thrive in a hot, humid climate: their ecological niches extend across the equator, encompassing the Tropic of Cancer in the North and the Tropic of Capricorn in the South. The temperature can fluctuate between 35 and 40 degrees Celsius (the closer to the tropics, the lower it is), with a humidity range of 70% to 90%. Another important characteristic of these environments is the hours of light: approximately 12 hours of daylight and 12 hours of night throughout the year. Indeed, Jubaea explains that tropical plants grow and photosynthesise year-round.

⁷ We are referring to the so-called CAM (Crassulacean Acid Metabolism), namely the mechanism through which some (but not only) succulent species can exchange gases necessary for the photosynthesis process at night. In this way, the evapotranspiration is prevented. For a detailed review of this mechanism, see *Crassulacean Acid Metabolism* (Ranson, Thomas 1960) and *Crassulacean Acid Metabolism: Plastic, Fantastic* (Dodd et al. 2002).

⁸ From this point to the end of the paper, this is the pseudonym chosen for this gardener.

After many years of collecting and reproducing tropical plants, gardeners faced one significant issue: overpopulation. Some of the initial 300 species planted over approximately 630 square metres had to be moved outside because growth could not be maintained indoors. Growth is indeed one of the more intuitive ways to notice and account for the plants' work. Through morphology and plasticity, we can recognise not only the vegetal movement but also the interpretation they give to the territory (Gilroy, Trewavas 2022).

In this regard, *Jubaea* provides a critical example. To address the overpopulation problem, some plants have been relocated outside the tropical greenhouse and planted under two *Quercus suber* trees, whose evergreen foliage helps maintain temperatures above 4 or 5 degrees Celsius. After a few challenging years (for example, *Jubaea* reports cases of leaves growing smaller than usual), the situation stabilised, and some tropical plants have even flourished. Among these plants, we find specimens of *Ceiba speciosa* also known as *Palo Borracho* in Spanish, an endemic plant in Argentina and other South American regions, including Brazil. This species is characterised by numerous thorns on the trunk and branches, which help defend the water inside the plant. *Jubaea* noted, however, that one of the plants exhibited morphological change and did not possess these spines. He brought the interviewer to the plant and pointed out the bark: it was completely thornless. The gardener discovered that the plant had been planted where a heavily irrigated flowerbed once stood, and the abundance of water made the plant's thorn defence within it unnecessary. By adjusting the irrigation, the plant has begun to revert to its classic morphology.

We have so far pointed out how plants work through signs and give meaning to the external world, and we can observe this through the analyses of their morphological changes, underscoring that the work of each species highlights its specificities. However, analysing species solely from a morphological perspective poses many practical problems, for instance, in determining plant origins. Related to this topic, hybridisation is one of the most common factors in misidentification, as Platanus,⁹ a systematic botanist, says, and it is also directly associated with human activity, often for commercial purposes or to move plants from one climate to another. The question of plant names is relevant to Platanus' job, and he created a database of all species names from the Botanical Garden to upload and register with Botanic Garden Conservation International, a platform and organisation that involves various botanic gardens around the world. The classical Linnean method of systematisation of plants is not always sufficient to identify plants and understand their origins, as Platanus explained:

⁹ From this point to the end of the paper, this is the pseudonym chosen for this botanist.



Figure 2: A specimen of *Ceiba pentandra* inside the tropical greenhouse. (Picture by the authors).

However, we obviously need to give it a name. Moreover, sometimes we do not succeed because there is no historical reference. The plant may not even present the diagnostic characteristics required for recognition; for example, if it has only leaves and does not produce flowers and fruits, we are unable to determine the plant (*Platanus*, translated by the authors).

Another line of reflection that directly connects to plant morphology is the symbolic value we assign to the shapes of flowers; in this context, roses are a clear example, suggesting that some plants have special meanings and economic value due to their appearance. To underscore the importance of flowers in our market system and chain of value, it suffices to recall that in the 17th century, the first speculative economic crisis of the modern capitalist era was triggered by the importation of tulips into the Netherlands (Neal, Weidenmier 2003). Aesthetics and plants have a close relation that passes through the human anthropocentric gaze and system of meaning, and sometimes this relation manifests in the plant's appearance. Modern roses are remarkably different from old varieties, explains Rose,¹⁰ a young researcher interested in various issues, including the impact of climate change on *Rosaceae* species. Older species are more sensitive and fragile to climate change; the number of petals varies (so-called ancient roses have fewer petals), and every year, thanks to human-induced hybridisation processes, new varieties are created. We find it interesting to highlight this step, as the biological capabilities of these plants, i.e., their work, are utilised for human economic and aesthetic interests. At the basis of this procedure, there is the recognition of this vegetal capacity, even if little explored. The aesthetic conception is clearly anthropogenic and has little to do with plant health.

This point is clear in relation to plant work seen in the Botanical Garden's rose garden. Rose presents the various reasons why roses are grown by humans – from aesthetic reasons to controlling certain pests in vineyards – and explains, during a walk through the rose garden, how rose plants are fertilised in an artificial or controlled way to give life to new varieties for collectors. However, during the interview, he points out that roses are also bioindicators due to their sensitivity to climate variation.

They are considered the sentinels of nature; these spies of nature are used and known by winemakers. Why do they plant them at the beginning and end of the rows of vines? Because roses get sick first, winemakers immediately know how to intervene before vines become infected (Rose, translated by the authors).

¹⁰ From here until the end of the paper, a pseudonym for this conservator and gardener.

Again, in the Rose's interview, hybridisation and aesthetic cross in a multi-species relationship. Discussing the history of roses and even their future, the plants' freedom and agency emerge in distinct ways. Indeed, if we abandon an anthropocentric gaze, we notice that the semiotic activity of these plants is present in every interaction they have with their surroundings, as they process information, attract pollinators, and even react to stimuli humans send them. Moreover, plants, and even roses, affect us, making the process of domestication less unilateral. If the semiotic continuum demonstrates that all living beings act through signs, vegetal signs can act on us. Therefore, plants are not only working with us to flourish (like in the case of roses' hybridisation, where the human and the other-than-human work converge), but are also working on us, inducing us to care for them, as proposed by Hodder (2012, p. 74). Clearly, in the case of roses, aesthetics plays a central role in our understanding of plant value and even of their responses to our stimuli. However, this is not always true for all plant species. We can explore this point further, returning to the words of Jubaea:

Plants are not, as we think, objects of aesthetic beauty only. I consider all plants beautiful, regardless of whether they produce more or fewer showy flowers. Why? Ultimately, they all serve the same purpose: absorbing carbon dioxide. They are the first medicine and pharmacy in the world that come from plants. Furthermore, the fact that a plant can have a beautiful flower next to it, a less significant one, in fact, does not change the functionality for us (Jubaea, translated by the authors).

Plants are, therefore, purposeful and co-acting living beings, and we can act with them in several fields and for different purposes: aesthetic, medical, environmental, etc. This point of plant co-action with us is evident even in the interview with Hypericum,¹¹ curator and gardener of the *Orto dei semplici*, where medical plants and spices are cultivated together. Hypericum notices the difference between some species that are more "exuberant" and can migrate through flowerbeds, and those that require human assistance to propagate and change position. The gardener's action is therefore required to recognise the signs of plants that need to change soil, migrate, and adapt in a new space and, at the same time, contain the exuberance of those plants that would harm other vegetal species. We could wonder where Hypericum's work begins and ends, and where the plants' actions predominate in this subtle relationship. However, we know that the boundary between human and plant action is ambiguous, mak-

¹¹ From here until the end of the paper, a pseudonym for this conservaphylogenetic differentiation, and provided plant species-specific analyst and gardener.

ing plant work particularly difficult to isolate. Differences between species suggest that we should treat plant work as distinct from human work. However, as mentioned earlier, sometimes entanglements can occur.

So far, in this section, we have explored vegetal work, including examples of phylogenetic differentiation, and provided plant species-specific analyses and discussions. Moreover, we mentioned the issue of co-action, showing that each botanical species has distinct exigencies, and that its work is not isolated in the environment but, on the contrary, requires contact with other agencies.

Moreover, another point emerges: the direct observation of plants' work. Only through the latter, multispecies ethnography, is it possible to describe and untangle the complex relational schemes among species. As one of the curators (here referred to as Maple) pointed out, observation is crucial to understanding the plant world. While theoretical studies are important and can save time and effort, only through direct observation of plants, analysing their condition, and interpreting their signals can we grasp part of the complexity of the vegetal world. As previously mentioned, the gardener's work involves understanding the plants' needs, fulfilling them, and standing alongside them when necessary. Therefore, the Japanese garden curated by Maple can be viewed as a collaborative effort among different agents, both human and vegetal. As Maple observes, the plants in the Japanese Garden grow by interpreting their environment and adapting to human aesthetic goals. Consequently, Maple had to study their behaviours carefully and accompany them as they followed a specific, unfamiliar order. In a context of syncretism involving plant species from very different ecological niches, it became necessary to make some adjustments during the garden's construction, providing more space for plants that risked being suffocated by unfamiliar neighbours or invasive species, both underground and aboveground.

At the same time, the gardener needs to know when to leave space for the plant to work. During an interview, another collaborator, Oak, points out that plants often need to be left to grow without our intervention, since they have existed far before our species and have adapted to extreme conditions and climates. Leaving space plants, indeed, is not just a gardener's practice, but a possible path for ecological niche restoration (Gagnon 2023). In most cases, as humans, we are led to think that plants depend on us, when in fact the opposite is true. Plants can migrate but cannot rapidly leave a place; many of their adaptations have been designed to increase their chances of survival without requiring quick movement. "What do we have to do with a plant that has been alive for 140 years? Nothing, as little as possible", said Oak to explain his point of view better. The interaction between our species has not always been beneficial for them, as Oak mentioned in the case of rose cultivation in Rome's suburbs. Due

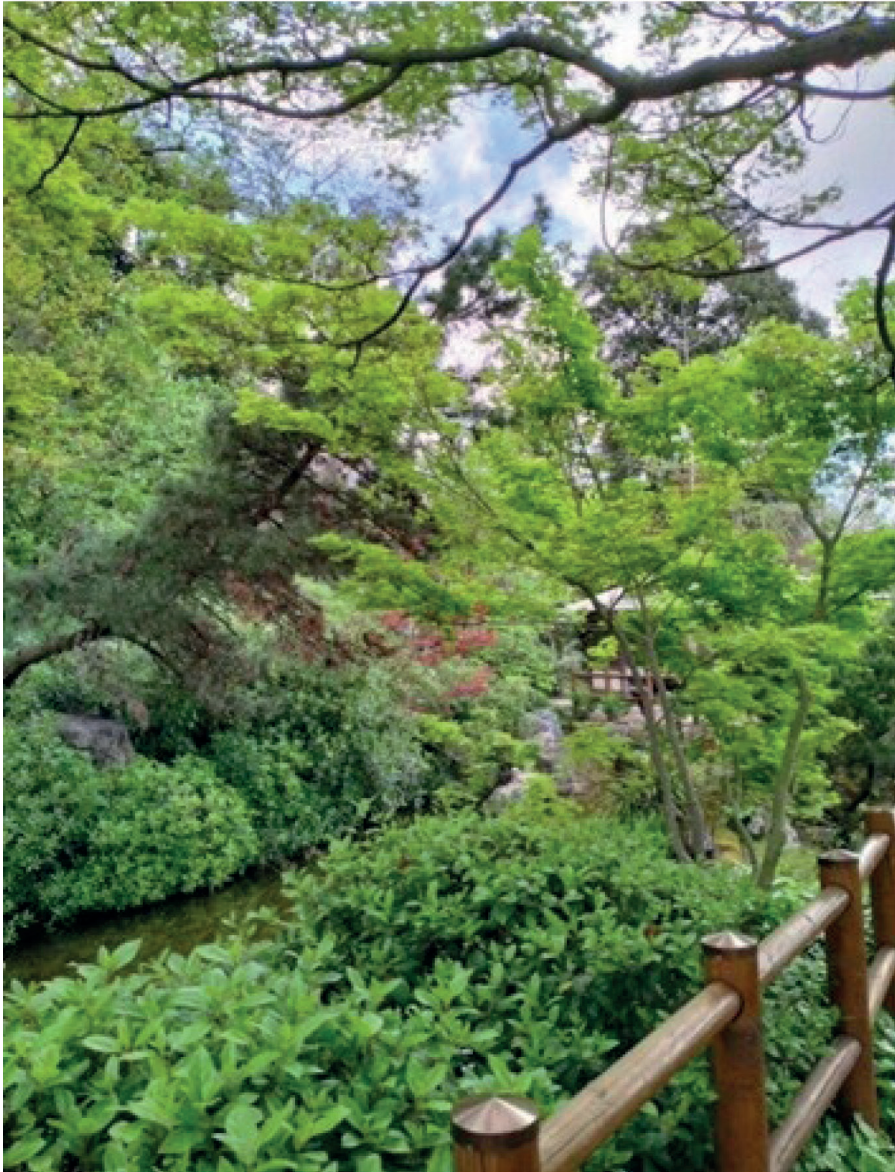


Figure 3: Glimpse of the Japanese garden. (*Picture by the authors*).

to the excessive use of chemical products, the soil remained totally sterile for decades. Not everything in interspecies relations is easy, and most of the time, we (humans) make mistakes. Therefore, the gardeners and conservators need to know precisely when and where to interact with the plants, leaving space for vegetal work. A great sensibility toward vegetal beings, demonstrated also during the interviews, is then central and non-negotiable: just through observation, the gardener is the one who lives with and “senses” the more-than-human work of plants daily.

The question of reading plant appearance is a recurring topic among the people interviewed. Shape is the first characteristic our eyes can see and try to understand. All observation gardeners make on plants is based on plant morphology and external appearance, even when they try to assess a plant’s health. The recognition of work is, again, related to our recognition of their spatial position and change, returning to the centrality of plant morphology.

Thus, plants have their own appearance as well as their own architecture, like us animals. Each of us has our own form, and each animal has its own strength. In short, each plant has its own unique shape, and beyond that, they exhibit a very distinct appearance. I cannot tell you precisely by what signs the florid plant is doing well [...]. Experience, unfortunately, cannot be written. It cannot be written; it can be told in everyday life. You observe plants, you observe them in a community because they live in large communities and in any case, they somehow manage to feel better, because they are not only living but also sentient beings, [...]. And then they together form a ‘we’ that we call an ecosystem (Oak, translated by the authors).

Oak is responsible for several projects, including aquatic plants, and is very precise; the relationship and knowledge of plants derive from empirical observation that cannot be translated into words. Moreover, in Oak’s opinion, plants are perfectly sentient, living in an entangled community and ecosystem. He explained several of his perspectives to the interviewer, including what he meant by the terms “ecosystem” and “sentient”. Sometimes, the only real option for understanding otherness is to try to read others’ emotions; in some ways, gardeners do the same with their plants. He discussed newborn *Ginkgo biloba* specimens generated from a group of other *Ginkgos*. For many years, they never needed water. For him, plants that grow in “families” are stronger and less sensitive to climate alterations. Humans are not essential, and in any case, only if we can clearly understand the plants’ conditions and needs can we develop a way to co-act with them.

On this topic, Oak is an expert. During his time at the Botanical Garden, he, along with other collaborators, developed a specific hydroponic system that

utilises ordinary water, is chemically free, and relies solely on daylight for crop growth. Observing plants' work and clearly recognising the latter helps imagine and develop new forms of collaboration between species, taking into account the needs and perspectives of both humans and plants.

Another interesting aspect of the recognition of plants' activity and collaboration has been presented by Cinnamomum,¹² who discussed one of his projects, which we can call "gardens of well-being". At the time of the interview, Cinnamomum was the curator of conifers at the Botanical Garden. After graduating in psychology, he spent "his second life" at the Botanical Garden, studying and exploring how plants can be used in therapy. The project is ongoing, and Cinnamomum is thinking of introducing a garden for well-being in the Botanical Garden, to explore the so-called "forest therapy":

[...] I was saying forest therapy and therapeutic wellness gardens. A wellness garden will be built here within the botanical garden and will be designed for the autism spectrum, Alzheimer's, and addiction. Partly taking into account the most widespread pathologies, and considering the particularity of the location, specifically the botanical garden, as well as the nearby neighbourhood (Cinnamomum, translated by the authors).

These conversations underscore a profound understanding rooted in gardeners' empirical experiences and their intimate relationships with plants. Across various conversations, the relevance of observational practice emerges as an independent source of knowledge and understanding, enabling relationships with other beings, including, in this case, the acknowledgement of the more-than-human work they undertake.

Final Remarks

As we have seen in the various interviews, the Museum of the Botanical Garden of Rome demonstrates that theory and practice converge, showing that the vegetal world is far more complex than we usually imagine. Indeed, our understanding of vegetal work, grounded in a biosemiotic understanding of agency, is recognised by the humans who necessarily work with these living forms every day. In other words, we can say that at the Botanical Garden of Rome, plants work alongside humans, creating a unique relationship between species that cannot be described within the anthropocentric notion of work.

¹² From this point to the end of the paper, this will be the pseudonym for this gardener.

From our perspective, however, this case study is not merely an observation of how work can unite several species, but also an example of how biotic communities can be effectively established among different living forms. Leopold, in *A Sand County Almanac* (1966 [1949]), broadly discussed his proposal for a “land ethic,” underscoring that humans could create multispecies communities only by abandoning their conqueror attitude (and, we add, gaze) towards other living forms – and even towards abiotic parts of the landscape. What we find in the Museum of the Botanical Garden of Rome is exactly what meets these necessities: a multispecies community in which several living beings with completely different evolutionary backgrounds collaborate and cooperate for a common objective: the well-being of plants.

People interviewed at the Botanical Garden have been crucial to understanding and exploring the concepts of “work” and “work with” as they relate to plants. The fundamental knowledge and relationships they have with various kinds of plants are an outstanding example of multispecies relations observable in an urban context. Their “art of noticing”, their deep sensitivity to understand plants’ needs, and their dedication to another form of life are inspiring and deserve careful reflection. First, it is essential to emphasise that, for various authors (Tsing 2015; Kohn 2013), multispecies ethnography is a discipline that focuses on studying the relationships between humans and other forms of life inhabiting the wilderness, often in non-Western countries. The fundamental elements that make multispecies ethnography so valuable – and at the same time so necessary – are its ubiquity and its interiorisation. Places like the Botanical Garden of Rome demonstrate that it is not necessary to be in a natural environment to observe other species. Since species are everywhere in our world, even in urban contexts, we can imagine ethnography as a common practice for “tell” elements of other worlds; it is just necessary to develop the art of observation, as Tsing (2015) suggests. This possibility of conducting ethnography almost anywhere has direct consequences, promoting self-questioning about what we are observing, who we are as humans, and what our role is in the environment. Most of the people interviewed share these questions and doubts, but they also know very well what plants do: they move, interpret, migrate, produce oxygen and absorb carbon dioxide; at the same time, they know what their role as gardeners and conservators is: to live with plants and “read” their necessities when they occur, facilitating plants’ well-being, or, in de la Bellacasa words, “caring” (2017). Therefore, related to this topic, we can assume from the interviews that the strict relationship built between gardeners and plants contributes to the process of recognition and discussion of what we can call a “vegetal agency”, an interesting new point of view in considering other forms of life as “working subjects”, without attributing all the characteristics of human subjectivity to plants, clearly.

Applying our understanding of work and a solid theory of agency grounded in biosemiotics, we notice that all these interactions and the creation of this sort of “community” are made possible also by the active nature of plants; vegetal beings seek connections and relationships to overcome constraints and survive. We, therefore, believe that a convergence between species, in this case with botanical species, is achievable in the exact moment in which more-than-human work stops being invisible to us. Gardeners and conservators at the Botanical Garden of Rome trained their gaze to recognise how plants communicate, act, change, and intertwine with external stimuli and other plants. They can coordinate their actions with those of plants, working with them rather than on them, only after noticing this form of activity. The Botanical Garden is therefore a multispecies social laboratory of significant importance: in addition to being an important place for botanical research, dissemination of knowledge outside the academy, and aesthetic pleasure for our eyes, it also becomes a place where human beings can experience different forms of relationships with plants without necessarily having to go through purely instrumental and extractivist needs, as happens in contexts such as agriculture. Hopefully, in the future, Botanical Gardens will become increasingly spaces for ethical and social research on plants, studying new forms of living and working together.

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Unemployment: from Ontological Fracture to Political Composition

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Abstract: This article offers a theoretical rethinking of unemployment beyond its institutional and economic representations. Rather than approaching unemployment solely as a lack of work or income, it examines it as a condition that challenges dominant modern-capitalist notions of dignity, productivity, identity, and social recognition. Drawing on selected ethnographic insights from employment agencies – understood not as a full-fledged ethnography but as a heuristic starting point – the article develops a critical-analytical framework that intertwines ontological and political dimensions.

By engaging with debates on subjectivation, inoperativity, the common, and multispecies relationality, the article reinterprets non-work not simply as deficit or exclusion but as a potentially generative condition. In dialogue with contemporary post-structuralist and post-humanist thought, it proposes an onto-political perspective in which unemployment and inoperativity can reveal alternative forms of sociality and modes of being-together, already emerging within the ruins of late capitalism.

The contribution is thus primarily theoretical: it organizes a set of conceptual tools aimed at reconfiguring the anthropological understanding of unemployment and at opening new avenues for analyzing historically and socially situated contexts.

Keywords: Unemployment; Ontology; Post-Marxism; Post-humanism; Commons.

Introduction: being unemployed today

To be unemployed, in the modern sense, is not merely to lack an income. It is to stand suspended between visibility and erasure, between belonging and abandonment, between being and non-being. The unemployed person, in contemporary capitalism, becomes a figure who has fallen out of the



order of recognition – a life that persists without qualification. Economists quantify this condition through statistics and rates, but as David Graeber reminds us in *Bullshit Jobs* (2018), labour itself is not only an economic category but a moral and ontological imperative. It provides a language through which existence is validated, disciplined, and made legible to others. In Graeber's view, the absurd proliferation of meaningless forms of employment reveals a society that fears the possibility of non-work – not because work is necessary, but because it has become the moral scaffolding of subjectivity itself (Graeber 2018).

From this vantage, unemployment appears not as a simple social failure but as a breach in the ontology of modern life. The unemployed subject embodies a paradox: biologically alive, socially present, yet symbolically suspended. The absence of work becomes an absence of legitimacy. To lack employment is to be deprived not only of income but of the very frameworks through which one is recognized as a participant in the social contract. In this sense, unemployment is an ontological fracture: a site where the capitalist articulation of life and productivity comes undone.

Slavoj Žižek (1989; 2010) situates this fracture within the structure of ideology itself. For him, capitalism functions by suturing the subject to fantasies of productivity, mobility, and merit – fantasies that conceal the structural impossibility of universal inclusion. When the machinery of productivity falters, unemployment reveals the Real of the system: the void at its centre, the impossibility that sustains its promise. The unemployed subject is thus both excluded and indispensable, embodying the trauma that capitalist ideology cannot fully repress.

Ernesto Laclau (2005) offers another lens. Exclusion, in his framework, is not merely an accident of hegemony but its constitutive moment. Every political order, he argues, relies on an unrepresentable lack – an empty signifier that organizes social meaning precisely by what it excludes. Unemployment, in this light, represents not just social failure but a necessary limit condition of productivity. The category of “the unemployed” sustains the coherence of “the worker” as its dialectical other. The unemployed body, positioned at the threshold of visibility, is what allows the productive subject to exist.

If Laclau and Žižek describe unemployment as the excluded remainder of capitalist hegemony, Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt (2000; 2004) push the analysis toward potentiality. Within the framework of biopolitical capitalism, labour no longer confines itself to the factory or the office. It permeates life itself: communication, emotion, creativity, care. In this expanded field, unemployment cannot simply be understood as the absence of work; rather, it becomes a latent force – a reservoir of potential cooperation and commons production

that eludes capitalist measure. The multitude, for Negri and Hardt, is always already productive, even in its refusal. Non-work is not nothingness; it is the excess that capitalism cannot contain.

Alain Badiou (1988) offers yet another perspective. In *Being and Event*, he describes the count-as-one – the operation through which any situation is constituted as a coherent totality. Unemployment, in this schema, would be a rupture in the count, a moment when being is no longer accounted for, when elements fall out of the situation's ontology. Yet such ruptures, for Badiou, are not mere negations. They are the sites from which events emerge – moments when new truths can appear, when fidelity to what was excluded can reorganize the world. To think unemployment ontologically, then, is to attend to these ruptures, to the zones of uncounted existence where new political forms might germinate. But this rethinking must also move beyond the human, as thinkers like Bruno Latour (2005), Philippe Descola (2005), and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2017) remind us. Modernity, they argue, rests on a narrow naturalist ontology that divides subjects from objects, humans from nonhumans, culture from nature. Capitalism inherits this division, valuing only those beings that can be integrated into circuits of production and exchange. Animals, landscapes, and technologies are treated as resources or tools, their agency denied except in service to human labour. To extend the concept of unemployment to these nonhuman realms is therefore to expose a deeper fracture – one that runs through the entire ontology of the modern world.

In this essay, I propose to trace this fracture in the dialogue between ethnographic experience and theoretical reflection, weaving together the lived experiences of unemployed humans with the silent testimonies of landscapes, machines, and nonhuman lives. The fieldwork that grounds this reflection takes place in a (post-)industrial municipality in Piedmont, in northwestern Italy – a town of 45,500 inhabitants whose factories, once humming with the rhythm of metal and labour, now stand in various stages of ruination. Here, employment agencies function as both therapeutic and disciplinary spaces, managing unemployment through bureaucratic rituals of activation, profiling, and employability. These rituals, as Carlo Capello (2020) has shown, are not simply administrative; they are performative mechanisms of recognition, designed to render the unemployed visible within a narrow grammar of productivity. They create the illusion of inclusion while perpetuating ontological exclusion.

This essay therefore asks how contemporary regimes of employability reconfigure subjectivity and value in a landscape marked by industrial decline, and how those caught in these regimes narrate, resist, or reimagine their condition. Writing from the dual standpoint of ethnographer and career counsellor – working daily within a job agency and a vocational training institution – I



seek to interrogate my own implication in these processes, positioning this inquiry as a situated form of reflexive engagement rather than detached observation. Methodologically, the work draws on postmodern ethnographic approaches that foreground partiality, intersubjectivity, and the entanglement of researcher and field (Denzin 1997). Following this lineage, the study treats ethnography not as a mirror of reality but as a dialogical, affective, and political practice – one that attempts to render visible the unstable boundaries between care and control, autonomy and dependence, work and its absence.

In conducting this research, particular attention is devoted to the ethical implications of an inquiry that unfolds within the very institutional and professional contexts in which I am personally embedded. The dual position of counsellor and ethnographer entails both privileged access and heightened responsibility: it requires constant negotiation between institutional expectations, clients' trust, and the demands of critical reflexivity. Following the ethical orientations outlined by Carolyn Ellis (2020), this project adopts a relational ethics framework that prioritizes care, transparency, and reciprocity in all encounters. Every narrative, conversation, and observational note has been anonymized to safeguard the identities of participants, while composite characters and altered identifying details ensure confidentiality without erasing the specificity of lived experience. Rather than claiming neutrality, this work acknowledges its partial, situated nature, recognizing that ethnographic practice and professional activity are inseparable dimensions of the same ethical and political engagement.

The Bureaucratic Theatre of Employability

Each morning, in the waiting room of the employment agency where I work as a counsellor, the scene repeats itself. Men and women sit in rows of plastic chairs, clutching folders filled with documents: *résumés*, certificates, proof of attendance. The air is thick with the quiet hum of fluorescent lights and the muted tapping of smartphones. The institutional vocabulary – activation, profiling, re-employment pathway – echoes through the hallways, alternating with sighs, small talk, and the occasional nervous laugh. These are the rituals through which unemployment is administered, translated into measurable tasks and digital traces.

In this perspective, employment agencies may be understood as bureaucratic theatres of employability, institutional spaces where unemployment is translated into administrative categories, moral evaluations, and performative expectations. In these bureaucratic theatres, work is both absent and omnipres-

ent. People arrive to prove that they are trying to work, that they deserve to be reintegrated. The system demands not productivity but performance: the performance of employability. A man in his fifties, once a machine operator in an automotive factory, puts it bluntly: “I come here every month to sign forms. It feels like my new job is proving I don’t have a job”. His irony captures the paradox of neoliberal governance: to be unemployed today is to work continuously – on oneself, on one’s résumé, on one’s digital profile – without ever producing anything of value.

The reflections that follow do not aim to provide an exhaustive ethnographic account of these settings; rather, they draw on selected observations and encounters as a heuristic entry point into a broader theoretical inquiry. Within these spaces, people are interpellated as subjects in need of activation and self-entrepreneurial recalibration. The everyday interactions that unfold across desks, forms, and assessment interviews reveal how unemployment is not merely registered but normatively shaped, framed as a temporary malfunction to be corrected through appropriate conduct, training, and motivational alignment. The unemployed person is subtly repositioned as an insufficiently optimized subject, someone whose value must be restored through compliance with institutional pathways of reintegration.

Michel Foucault’s notion of biopolitics (1979) illuminates this paradox. In the biopolitical regime, governance extends beyond the management of populations to the production of subjectivities. The unemployed are not abandoned but regulated through apparatuses that measure, activate, and normalize their behaviour. The goal is not to exclude them entirely but to maintain them within a field of potentiality – as bodies available for reinsertion, as data points in a labour market algorithm. Through these technologies of control, the unemployed become active subjects, endlessly improving their employability, even when no employment exists.

Franco “Bifo” Berardi (2009) has described this as the pathology of activation – the compulsion to remain active in a world where activity no longer guarantees meaning or sustenance. The result is a condition of exhaustion without productivity, anxiety without purpose. Berardi’s *The Soul at Work* captures precisely what I witness daily: lives stretched between the demand to remain useful and the impossibility of fulfilling that demand. The unemployed are condemned to a paradoxical form of hyperactivity that produces no recognition.

A young woman, classified as a NEET, tells me after a compulsory training course: “They want you to teach us how to write CVs for jobs that don’t exist. We all know it. But they want us to smile while doing it”. Her remark resonates with Laclau’s concept of disarticulation (Laclau 1996): the symbolic chain – training, employability, employment – no longer coheres, yet the ritual



persists. The course becomes a performance of faith in a promise long expired. Like the sacraments of a fading religion, these bureaucratic rites sustain a social order by reproducing its illusions.

From a phenomenological standpoint, this repetitive performance generates what Sara Ahmed (2010) might call an affective atmosphere of waiting. Waiting becomes the temporality of unemployment: a suspended time in which movement continues without direction. People attend meetings, fill out forms, refresh job portals, and check their phones – not because they expect results, but because the ritual itself is all that remains. The temporality of the unemployed is not linear but circular, looping endlessly between hope and resignation.

This circularity mirrors the logic of what Maurizio Lazzarato (2012) calls the indebted man. Unemployment, like debt, functions as a form of moral regulation. It creates subjects who must constantly prove their worthiness, their willingness to work, their gratitude for the possibility of reintegration. The unemployed person becomes a debtor of society – indebted not financially but ontologically. Their existence demands justification.

Ethnography of Absence, Ecologies of Non-Work

The ethnographic scene of unemployment is not defined by what happens, but by what fails to happen. It is a field of absences: of work, of recognition, of predictable futures. Yet these absences are not empty. They are thick with affects, with unspoken gestures, with what Tim Ingold (2011) calls the lines of life that continue to unfold beneath the surface of institutional scripts.

A man in his early sixties, a former mechanic, tells me: “It’s not that I don’t work. I repair things every day – for my neighbours, for my family. But that work is invisible here. The office doesn’t see it, the system doesn’t count it. I am unemployed, even when I work”. His words echo David Graeber’s critique of value (2019): productive activity only counts when it passes through the wage relation. Everything else – care, repair, maintenance – is ontologically annulled.

In this sense, unemployment reveals what feminist theorists like Silvia Federici (2012) have long argued: that capitalism depends on vast realms of invisible labour. Housework, emotional care, ecological regeneration – all these forms of work are rendered external to value precisely so that waged labour can appear as its privileged form. The unemployed, like unwaged caregivers, embody the system’s constitutive outside: the life that sustains production but is denied its recognition.

If unemployment is an ontological suspension, it is also an ecological one. The same processes that render human lives superfluous also render lands, animals, and technologies obsolete. Machines are decommissioned, soils are left fallow, rivers are rerouted. The unemployed subject, in this broader sense, is not only a worker without a job but a being expelled from the circuits of recognition that define the capitalist cosmos.

To understand unemployment as more than a human crisis, we must read it ecologically. Karl Marx's reflections on the metabolic rift in *Capital* (1867) already diagnosed the violent separation between human labour and the natural cycles that sustain it. Industrial capitalism, he wrote, disturbs the metabolic interaction between man and the earth (Marx 2004). Jason W. Moore (2015) later reformulated this as world-ecology: capital not only exploits workers but reorganizes nature itself into an apparatus of productivity. When that apparatus breaks, unemployment spreads across the biophysical world. Soil exhaustion, species extinction, and derelict factories are all symptoms of the same metabolic disorder. In the post-industrial valleys of Piedmont, this disorder is palpable. The river that once powered textile mills now runs slower, carrying residues of dyes and oil. The abandoned plants are habitats for moss, pigeons, and stray cats. These non-human occupiers are, in a sense, the next generation of workers: silent agents reappropriating the ruins. Andreas Malm (2016) would call this the fossil afterlife of production – the residue of “fossil labour,” in which energy once condensed from ancient organisms now lingers as waste and heat. The unemployed human and the polluted river share a condition: both are leftovers of exhausted value regimes.

Anna Tsing's *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015) offers a vocabulary for this coexistence. Her description of matsutake mushrooms flourishing in capitalist ruins shows that life persists in the gaps of production, forging what she calls collaborative survival (Tsing 2015). Likewise, in Piedmont's decaying factories, weeds pierce asphalt floors and fungi creep along steel beams – a quiet insurgency of growth beyond value. To speak of “non-work” here is not to name absence but to observe another kind of productivity, one indifferent to wages or GDP.

Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010) and Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) expand this intuition. Both invite us to consider vitality as distributed across matter. Machines, metals, bacteria, and data possess their own rhythms of agency. Unemployment, then, is not simply a social phenomenon but a disturbance in these heterogeneous rhythms. When a factory closes, the disconnection reverberates through networks of steel, dust, and memory. The ontology of non-work is ecological because production has always been ecological: an assemblage of human and non-human forces (Bennet 2010; Braidotti 2013).



Bruno Latour's *Politics of Nature* (2004) insists that political modernity was built on excluding non-humans from deliberation (2004). What if unemployment were approached as a symptom of this exclusion? The laid-off worker and the idle machine, the dried river and the discarded algorithm, all demand a new assembly – a parliament of the unproductive. Their coexistence calls for what Isabelle Stengers (2005) terms a cosmopolitical attitude: the recognition that politics begins where beings negotiate their modes of existence rather than their market value.

Ruins and Afterlives: Technological Unemployment and Algorithmic Control

The ruins of industry have become emblematic of this ontological suspension. Anthropologists such as Ann Laura Stoler (2008), Shannon Lee Dawdy (2010), Christopher Harrison (2013), and Caitlin DeSilvey (2017) remind us that ruins are not static remains but living processes – afterlives where materials and memories decay together. In Piedmont, rust and ivy are not metaphors; they are temporalities. They mark the slow transformation of production into decomposition.

Walking through an abandoned metal-press factory, one encounters traces of human labour: names carved into lockers, calendars frozen in time, safety posters turned yellow. Yet the building is not dead. It vibrates with microbial life, humidity, the hum of distant traffic. Stoler would call this a ruin of empire, not because it once belonged to a colony but because it manifests the imperial temporality of capitalism itself – its capacity to produce waste faster than meaning. Anthropologist Yael Navaro-Yashin (2012) speaks of affective remains: material residues that continue to shape emotional and political life. The unemployed who revisit these ruins – to salvage tools, to reminisce, to photograph – engage in what DeSilvey describes as curation by decay. Their gestures refuse the clean separation between past productivity and present uselessness. In one such visit, a former steelworker ran his hand along a silent press and whispered, “It still has muscle.” His touch reactivated the machine’s dormant vitality, performing an unspoken claim: unemployment does not erase agency; it displaces it into other registers.

The anthropology of ruins thus converges with post-humanist ethics. Donna Haraway (2016) urges us to stay with the trouble, to inhabit rather than transcend the mess of coexistence. To stay with the unemployed factory or the unemployed field is to practice this ethic of staying – to attend to the persistence of life after value. Ruins are not endings but laboratories where new forms of relation are invented.



If ruins mark the past of production, algorithms script its future. The rhetoric of *automation* promises liberation from labour, yet the reality often reproduces dispossession. Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams (2015) have argued for embracing automation as part of a post-work utopia, but others – such as Nick Dyer-Witheford, Svitlana Matviyenko (2019) and Shoshana Zuboff (2019) – warn that digital capitalism simply replaces industrial discipline with data surveillance.

In employment agencies, this transformation is tangible. Algorithms rank candidates, assign probabilities of success, and generate personalized activation paths. Pierre Bourdieu's insight into symbolic power (1984) resonates here: the algorithm becomes a new bureaucratic priesthood, translating life into metrics. One client once asked me, after seeing his profile score – the score assigned by the employment centre to unemployed people participating in an active employment policy program that provides different access to the allocated measures (training, orientation, etc.): “So am I a 72-percent human now?” His joke revealed the violence of quantification – a reduction of being to employability data.

Bernard Stiegler (2010) described this as psychopower: the capture of attention and desire by digital systems. For the unemployed, whose time is already colonized by waiting, algorithmic interfaces extend the regime of control. Every click becomes both confession and command. Yet, paradoxically, this technological unemployment also produces spaces of refusal. Franco Berardi (2019) notes that the autonomy of life is implied in the automation of capital. When machines work without us, the possibility emerges to rethink what it means to live without work – not as deprivation but as liberation from the command of efficiency.

During a digital training session, a migrant woman from Ghana told me: “They want us to learn computers, but the computers don't learn us.” Her phrase condenses an entire critique of artificial intelligence. Algorithmic rationality does not recognize the singularities of life; it classifies, predicts, and excludes. The “intelligence” of capital is precisely its indifference to experience. In this sense, unemployment today is increasingly algorithmic: it is produced by systems that decide who counts as employable, who remains invisible, and who becomes data waste.

The Metabolic Rift and the Unemployment of Nature

Returning to Marx through an ecological lens reveals how unemployment extends into the non-human. When capital withdraws from a region, it leaves behind landscapes of redundancy. Fields once cultivated by sharecroppers become monocultural deserts; rivers once channelled for mills are neglected; ani-



mals bred for labour lose their function. The very metabolism between human societies and the earth – what Marx called *Stoffwechsel* – is suspended.

Jason Moore (2015) describes this as the capitalocene, an epoch defined not by human activity in general but by the logic of capital's abstraction. In the capitalocene, value flows through everything, but recognition does not. Species and ecosystems that fail to generate profit are written out of the ledger of existence. Their unemployment is ecological, yet also political.

Consider the mules and sheepdogs once central to Piedmontese agriculture. Their disappearance from the fields – gradually supplanted by tractors, quad bikes, and drones – does not simply mark a passage from one set of instruments to another, but the fading of a web of reciprocal dependencies. Yet it would be misleading to suggest that these animals were ever regarded as replaceable “non-subjects.” Shepherds and farmers in the Piedmontese Alps and plains attributed to their mules and dogs not interiority in the Amazonian sense described by Eduardo Viveiros de Castro (2017), but rather a pragmatic, affective form of companionship grounded in shared labour and endurance. Their relationships were not ontological statements about personhood so much as ethical and experiential practices of cohabitation. The ensuing mechanization did not therefore signal a shift from animism to naturalism, as Philippe Descola (2005) might frame it, but a reconfiguration within a local cosmology that had long acknowledged animals as co-workers rather than tools – partners whose disappearance transformed both the rhythm and the moral texture of rural life. The environmental unemployment of soils and waters follows the same logic. In some Piedmont valleys, European subsidies encourage ecological set-aside – fields intentionally left uncultivated to restore biodiversity. Yet local farmers call these zones *terre ferme*, still lands, perceiving them as signs of abandonment. The soil itself, however, tells another story: worms return, moisture increases, plants diversify. From a human economic view, these lands are unemployed; from a multispecies view, they are flourishing. Here perspectivism becomes method, not metaphor.

The concept of the metabolic rift thus expands into what Moore calls the metabolic shift (2015): the reorganization of life's cycles under capital. Unemployment is part of this reorganization – the forced idleness of both bodies and ecologies that no longer fit productivity metrics. To repair the rift requires what Maria Mies (1986) called subsistence perspectives: practices grounded in care, reciprocity, and ecological interdependence rather than profit.

A former factory technician, who used to calibrate hydraulic systems for a metalworks company upstream, told me he uses to come to Po River to fish and “keep an eye on the current”. “When the factory was alive, the river had a heartbeat. You could hear the turbines. Now it sleeps” – he says during a meeting.



His description anthropomorphizes the river, yet it also expresses recognition: a shared unemployment between man and water. The silence of turbines is not absence but a new acoustic ecology, filled with birds and insects. Our conversation drifts to his search for work. “They say there’s demand for technicians”, he sighs, “but not for our kind – the old kind who fix things by ear”. His phrase by ear stays with me. It marks an epistemology of work based on resonance and attention rather than algorithmic precision.

From the factory technician’s perspective, the river isn’t resting – it’s recalibrating. Its flow, altered by decades of industrial extraction and channelization, adjusts to new sediments, changing temperatures, and shifting microbial populations. Where once the river absorbed effluents and thermal waste, it now redefines its course and chemistry, redistributing nutrients, recolonizing abandoned banks with reeds and amphibians. Its metabolism continues, but according to nonhuman rhythms: a slow, biochemical labor of recovery and adaptation. For the former technician, waiting means confronting suspended time – the cessation of waged work, the bureaucratic limbo of job applications and retraining programs. For the river, waiting takes the form of metabolic recalibration, an ecological reorganization that exceeds human schedules of productivity or repair. As the industrial twilight deepens, the soundscape changes: frogs reclaim the margins, insects return, and the machines hum only faintly in the distance. This, as Deborah Bird Rose (2011) would say, is a multispecies knot of time – a site where asynchronous temporalities coexist, where both human and river dwell in intervals of unfinished transformation, inhabiting different but resonant kinds of waiting.

Toward a Politics of the Unproductive

To further unsettle the economic understanding of unemployment, it is helpful to engage with Giorgio Agamben’s notion of inoperativity – *inoperosità* (1993). Inoperativity does not simply denote inactivity, passivity, or the absence of function. Rather, it names a suspension of predetermined ends and productive imperatives, a condition in which established forms of doing are rendered inoperative so that their potentiality may be exposed. In this sense, inoperativity is not the negation of action but the opening of action to other possible uses. Introducing this concept allows unemployment to be reconsidered beyond the binary of productivity and deficit. If modern capitalist rationality equates human value with measurable output, inoperativity interrupts this equation by foregrounding a dimension of existence irreducible to performance. It is precisely this suspension – this deactivation of the compulsory link



between being and producing – that makes inoperativity a decisive conceptual hinge for rethinking unemployment as a site of ontological and political possibility rather than mere exclusion.

The unemployed, in this sense, enact politics not by claiming inclusion within the existing order but by disrupting the very distribution that renders them uncounted. Their political force lies in appearing as speaking and acting beings in a space that assigns them no part. What is at stake is not simply visibility but a reconfiguration of the sensible: the unemployed interrupt the alignment between worth and productivity that structures contemporary regimes of recognition. Jacques Rancière (1999) defines politics as the interruption of the police order – the implicit partition that determines who is qualified to speak, to act, and to be seen as a participant in common life. Unemployment exposes a miscount within this order: those who are present but not recognized as contributing subjects.

Extending this insight beyond the human does not anthropomorphize abandoned machines, feral dogs, or polluted rivers; rather, it foregrounds how the sensible order of productivity governs an entire ecology of relations. The idle vineyard, the decommissioned factory, the exhausted river basin each marks a site where the equivalence between function and value falters. They do not speak in a human sense, yet their material persistence unsettles the logic that renders only productive entities perceptible as meaningful. To politicize unemployment beyond the human is thus to confront the hegemony of productivity as the organizing principle of the sensible itself.

The unemployed workshop, the idle vineyard, the decommissioned machine all participate in this experiment. They form what I call assemblages of non-work – provisional constellations in which the suspension of assigned function makes other uses thinkable. Within these spaces, the binary of productivity and passivity loosens its grip. As Deleuze and Guattari (1980) remind us, there is always something working in the work of the non-working: potentiality circulates even where function has been withdrawn. The task of theory, then, is not to restore proper use but to attend to these minor displacements, to the vibrations through which new forms of commonality begin to compose themselves.

Rosi Braidotti (2022) has recently argued for a post-human ethics of affirmation – one that acknowledges shared vulnerability while cultivating joy in interdependence. Applied to unemployment, this perspective invites a shift from narratives of deficit toward practices of recomposition: collective gardens, repair workshops, mutual-aid networks, ecological restoration projects. Such initiatives do not deny precarity; rather, they rework it into forms of situated cooperation. In the Piedmont town where I work, some former factory workers have created a cooperative that transforms industrial scrap into furniture. “We

recycle ourselves,” one of them jokes. Their laughter does not erase the history of industrial decline; instead, it signals a fragile but tangible reappropriation of agency – an embodied affirmation that alternative ways of inhabiting the ruins of production can be enacted here and now.

The Ethics of Inoperativity: Waiting, Care, and Productive Uselessness

Unemployment, when examined beyond its statistical face, becomes an apprenticeship in inoperativity. Giorgio Agamben’s *The Coming Community* (1993) and *The Use of Bodies* (2016) describe *inoperosità* not as passivity but as the suspension of predetermined functions, a state in which potentiality is freed from obligation. To render something inoperative, Agamben writes, is to open it to a new possible use. In this sense, unemployment is not simply the collapse of labour but the exposure of life to other uses that escape the measure of capital (Agamben 1993; 2016).

This is also what Hannah Arendt (1958) distinguished in *The Human Condition* as the difference between labour – the cyclical maintenance of life – and action, which inaugurates new beginnings. Under neoliberalism, the two collapse: the constant demand for activation transforms action into endless labour. The unemployed are told to be active, yet this activity serves no new beginning. It is a parody of Arendtian action, a politics without world-building.

In Piedmont’s employment agencies, this parody unfolds daily. During one counselling session, a woman, dismissed from a textile company after twenty-five years, told me: “I sew at home now. Not for money. For the silence”. Her words unsettled the managerial categories that would call this hobby or coping strategy. Lucia’s sewing is neither productive nor therapeutic; it is inoperative. Thread by thread, she practices what Agamben calls the use of the world without work – a relation to things that is intimate but non-instrumental (2016). The hum of her old Singer machine, inherited from her mother, resists the noise of employability seminars.

A migrant from Mali repairs discarded computers he collects from recycling bins. He cannot sell them legally, so he gifts them to neighbours. “I don’t work for money”, he smiles, “I work for connection.” His tinkering evokes what Steven Jackson (2014) calls repair work: the unseen labour that maintains infrastructures in the face of neglect. Through repair, he restores not only circuits but relations – between humans, machines, and trust. This is a modality of inoperativity: an of maintenance detached from economic reward yet dense with meaning. They expose what Lauren Berlant (2011) called slow death – the



attrition of life under precarity – but also its counterpoint: slow life, the art of persisting otherwise.

Veena Das (2007) reminds us that everyday life after catastrophe is not the opposite of politics but its continuation by other means. Her attention to small acts of repair – boiling water, sweeping dust, tending to the sick – reveals an ethics grounded in endurance. Likewise, among the unemployed, endurance becomes the invisible labour of living. Care for oneself, for others, for the remnants of a past world: these are practices of inoperativity, of keeping potential alive when recognition is withdrawn.

Elizabeth Povinelli's (2011) concept of economies of abandonment offers another angle. She shows how late liberalism produces zones of endurance where life is maintained without flourishing. The unemployed inhabit such zones: kept alive through bureaucratic care but deprived of social worth. Yet within these spaces, Povinelli also finds geontological creativity – the ability of beings to re-compose relations even in exhaustion. In this light, unemployment is not only a space of neglect but a laboratory of alternative ethics.

In the corridors of the agency, people exchange small gifts: a jar of jam, a repaired phone, advice on paperwork. These gestures are not transactions; they are forms of reciprocal inoperativity. They refuse the logic of equivalence. Here the commons are not declared but enacted through care that does not seek return. As Kathleen Stewart (2007) would note, such gestures form an ordinary affect: a texture of life that cannot be captured by policy or theory but sustains worlds in suspension.

To wait is to work without recognition. Anthropologists of bureaucracy have described waiting rooms as theatres of slow violence. Time is confiscated, stretched, and returned as moral judgment: those who wait too long are seen as undeserving. But waiting also generates its own solidarities. Among the unemployed clients, shared time becomes shared knowledge – of loopholes, sympathetic clerks, better coffee. Waiting together produces an interval of equality. Jacques Rancière (1999) would call this the politics of appearance: when those without a part make themselves visible simply by being there.

One afternoon, a group of long-term unemployed men began meeting in the square outside the agency. They brought old folding chairs, cards, and a portable radio. They joked that they had formed the unemployed union of benches. Their gathering, informal and half-ironic, became a fixture of the town. Passers-by smiled, sometimes joined in. No manifesto, no program – only presence. And yet this idle congregation embodied what Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) names being-in-common: existence as coexistence, without shared work or identity. Their union had no demands because its existence was already a claim – the right to linger without purpose.



Such moments reveal what I call productive uselessness: the capacity of inactivity to produce relations, affects, and meanings that escape calculation. They recall Georges Bataille's (1988) notion of *dépense*, the unproductive expenditure through which life exceeds utility. For Bataille, festivals, laughter, and mourning are economies of loss that reaffirm existence beyond profit. The unemployed bench union participates in this excess; their time, socially wasted, becomes cosmically lavish.

The feminist tradition also illuminates this field. Silvia Federici (2012) and Kathi Weeks (2011) have long argued that the refusal of work is a demand for another measure of value. Weeks's call for a feminist utopia of work insists that liberation requires re-imagining the relation between time, necessity, and care. For many unemployed women I met, care was not a retreat from politics but its re-foundation. One participant who balances child-care with part-time cleaning, said: "They say I'm inactive. But every hour I'm holding something together". Her sentence crystallizes the invisible infrastructure of life that the statistics call inactivity.

Ontologies of Rest and the Post-Productive Immanent Commons

The anthropology of unemployment must end, paradoxically, with an anthropology of rest. If capitalism measures life by activity, rest becomes heresy. To rest is to interrupt circulation, to reclaim time from value. Baruch Spinoza's notion of *conatus* – the immanent striving of each being to persevere in existence – offers a way to rethink rest not as inertia but as affirmation. In *Ethics. Demonstrated in Geometrical Order* (2018), Spinoza writes that joy arises when a body's power to act increases. Rest, then, can be joyful when it restores the capacity to affect and be affected. Unemployment, stripped of moral stigma, may harbour this potential: a collective pause in which new forms of power assemble.

Deleuze's reading of Spinoza transforms *conatus* into *potentia*, the active force of life's immanence. For Gilles Deleuze, every being is a composition of speeds and slownesses, a rhythm rather than a substance (Deleuze 1988). The unemployed, human or non-human, inhabit altered rhythms—neither productive nor inert but vibrating differently. To think ontologically of unemployment is to attend to these temporal modulations, to the possibility that slowness itself is a form of resistance. Franco Berardi (2011) calls this the right to slowness, a counter-tempo against the accelerations of semiocapitalism.

In Piedmont, this right manifests in modest ways. Former factory workers meet once a week to cook polenta together in the community hall. The gathering be-



gan as mutual aid but has become ritual. They chop, stir, and talk slowly. One morning, a man who once managed the furnace line, said: “In the factory we raced against the clock. Here, the clock waits for us”. His phrase captures the shift from chronometric time to what the philosopher Byung-Chul Han (2017) calls the time of resonance: a temporality of attention rather than accumulation.

About it, Spinoza’s immanence dissolves the boundary between individual and collective striving. Power (*potestas*) imposed from above differs from power (*potentia*) generated in common. Antonio Negri (1999) reads this as the foundation of constituent power: the capacity of the multitude to create institutions of life without sovereignty. Applied to unemployment, this means that the jobless multitude already embodies a constituent potential. Deprived of wage mediation, they experiment with new forms of cooperation – repair collectives, informal childcare, urban gardens. These are not residues of the old economy but embryos of a post-productive commons.

The commons here are neither romantic return to pre-capitalist community nor digital utopia. It is, as Hardt and Negri (2009) argue, the biopolitical commons – the shared production of affects, knowledge, and care that exceeds property. Rosi Braidotti (2022) extends this to the post-human: the commons are not only human but planetary, composed of organic and technological forces. Unemployment, viewed from this angle, exposes how much life already operates beyond work: ecological cycles, informal exchanges, machine autonomies. To recognize these as commons is to broaden politics beyond the factory and the office, into the interstices of everyday life.

Jean-Luc Nancy (2000) insists that being-in-common is not a project to be achieved but a condition always already given. The unemployed bench union, the gardeners, the stray-cat feeder – all enact this given-ness. Their gatherings are not instruments toward productivity but affirmations of coexistence. The post-productive commons are thus less an institution than a rhythm – a shared breathing among beings suspended from value.

Gaia and the Multispecies Multitude: Rest as Resistance

Bruno Latour’s late work on *Gaia* (2017) reframes politics as terrestrial attachment. He urges us to abandon the illusion of global progress and return to the ground – to the network of reciprocal dependencies that sustain life. Unemployment, in this geophilosophical light, signals the exhaustion of a civilization that sought to detach itself from the earth’s rhythms. The idle machine, the polluted river, the discarded animal, and the jobless worker are all symptoms of a planet made uninhabitable by productivity.

Donna Haraway's (2016) call to "make kin, not babies" resonates here as an invitation to compose post-productive kinships. In the Piedmont valley, I have seen such kinships forming: between ex-workers who cultivate gardens with migrants, between farmers and environmental activists who restore irrigation channels as communal infrastructure, between old mules kept as companions and children who learn care through feeding them. These alliances blur species and generations, creating what Anna Tsing (2015) would call patchy commons: temporary yet vital assemblages of coexistence.

The post-productive commons also include machines. Bernard Stiegler (2018) envisioned a neganthropocene – an era in which technology serves care rather than control. When unemployed technicians refurbish obsolete devices, they practice this neganthropic art: reversing entropy through attention. Their workshops smell of solder and coffee; conversations mix engineering with philosophy. One participant, a guy, once a robotic-arm programmer, told me: "I used to teach machines to imitate humans. Now I learn from them how to slow down". His paradox condenses the shift from automation to contemplation.

Rest, often dismissed as idleness, is perhaps the most radical form of non-work. The global proliferation of burnout, insomnia, and anxiety reveals how capitalism colonizes rest itself. Jonathan Crary (2013) in *24/7* shows that sleep remains the last frontier of resistance, the temporal gap that cannot be commodified. For the unemployed, however, rest is ambivalent: too much sleep becomes stigma, too little anxiety. To reclaim rest as collective right requires redefining it as political time.

In one small country village not so far from employment agency where I work, a group of women started *la stanza del riposo* (the room of rest). They meet weekly in the different houses of the participants creating a quiet space with mats and cushions. There is no meditation teacher, no productivity goal. They sit, breathe, sometimes nap. "It's the only hour where no one asks what we're doing," says a woman, once a metalworker assembler. Their practice recalls Peter Sloterdijk's (2016) idea of anthropotechnics: exercises that cultivate being. But here the exercise is non-doing, a disciplined rest that resists acceleration.

The ethics of rest aligns with Berardi's (2019) plea for futurability: the capacity to imagine futures from within the ruins of exhaustion. Rest, in this sense, is not withdrawal but a generative suspension – a refusal of acceleration that opens space for reorientation. To rest together is to practice a different relation to time, one that resists the capitalist injunction to incessant productivity. It is to engage in what Isabelle Stengers (2018) calls slow science: a science that proceeds with hesitation, attention, and attachment, cultivating knowledge through care rather than control. Slow science is not a methodological deceleration but an ethical stance – an insistence on the situated, collective, and



interdependent nature of thinking. Similarly, feminist collectives have long framed such pauses as acts of collective care, where rest becomes both method and resistance, allowing bodies and ideas to recover from the violence of extraction. In these interstices of non-doing, the multitude gathers its scattered conatus – its striving to persist – transforming fatigue into a shared experiment in survival and imagination.

Toward an Ontopolitics of Recognition: The Afterlife of Work

Unemployment, when followed to its ontological depth, is not the end of work but the beginning of another politics of existence. It reveals how recognition in capitalism depends on productivity and how being itself is policed by the wage. The unemployed-human, animal, machine, and landscape–expose the fragility of this measure. They invite us to think politics as the art of composing value otherwise.

Anthropology's task, then, is not to rehabilitate the unemployed into old categories but to accompany their experiments in non-work: gardens, repairs, benches, rests. As Marisol De la Cadena (2015) suggests, ethnography must learn to listen to earth-beings-entities that speak in silences, rustlings, and pauses. In the Piedmont field, these voices are everywhere: the drip of a leaking pipe, the sigh before signing a form, the hum of an idle motor. They articulate what Laclau (1996) would call the surplus of being – that which cannot be signified yet sustains all signification.

Spinoza's *conatus* runs through them all: the unemployed worker who repairs a bicycle for a friend, the vineyard soil reclaiming itself from herbicides, the cat sleeping in the shade of a rusted press. Each strives to persevere, to compose relations that make life possible. To recognize these strivings is to practice an ontopolitics of recognition – a politics not of inclusion into productivity but of affirmation across difference.

In this ontopolitical horizon, unemployment ceases to be a pathology and becomes a pedagogy. It teaches how to live when usefulness fails, how to care when systems collapse, how to rest without guilt. The unemployed multitude, far from being surplus humanity, is the living laboratory of the post-productive commons. From the ruins of work, they cultivate the fragile but persistent art of existing together.

When the factory gates close for the last time, the sound lingers. Not only in memory but in the air of the town, in the slow breathing of its streets. What follows is not silence but another kind of noise: the hum of small repairs, the chatter of coffee bars, the echo of radio songs leaking from open windows.

Unemployment, in this afterlife of work, becomes the rhythm through which the social body learns again how to listen to itself.

The Piedmont town where this research unfolded is filled with such residual acoustics. The factory bell has stopped, yet people still glance at their watches around its old ringing time. This persistence of rhythm recalls Henri Lefebvre's (1992) insight that everyday life is structured by overlapping temporalities—some imposed, others improvised. The disappearance of industrial rhythm does not produce chaos; it exposes the multiplicity of other times that industrial discipline had repressed: domestic time, ecological time, animal time, the time of care.

A former metalworker once described the closure of his plant as “a silence that made space for thinking”. His phrase could have been written by Walter Benjamin, who in his *Arcades Project* (1999) imagined the ruins of modernity as dialectical images: fragments where the past interrupts the present to reveal unrealized futures. In the post-industrial landscape, unemployment acts as such a dialectical interruption – an opening that forces thought to slow down and recompose (Benjamin 1999).

Benjamin's angel of history, blown by the storm of progress toward an accumulating pile of debris, finds a contemporary cousin in the unemployed subject standing before the ruins of labour. Yet, unlike the angel, this subject cannot fly away; he must inhabit the debris, repurpose it, turn ruins into shelter. This is where the politics of recomposition begins.

Ruins, Remains, and the Reassembly of Value: Temporal Commons and the Slowing of History

Anthropology has become increasingly attentive to ruins – not as symbols of loss but as spaces of reconfiguration. Ann Laura Stoler's *Imperial Debris* (2013) and Shannon Dawdy's *Patina* (2016) both demonstrate how material remnants carry forward political affects. Ruins are not dead; they are temporal laboratories in which new alliances are tested (Stoler 2013; Dawdy 2016).

In the decommissioned industrial zones of northern Italy, these laboratories proliferate. Young people organize concerts in abandoned workshops, migrant associations transform storage halls into cultural centres, elderly workers build community gardens between rusted rails. Every act of occupation redefines what counts as value. Marx's notion of use-value – once subordinated to exchange – returns as an aesthetic and ethical principle. Value becomes what sustains life, not what extracts surplus.

This movement resonates with Jason W. Moore's world-ecology perspective (2015), which understands capitalism as a regime that organizes the cheap-



ness of nature, labour, and energy. When the machine stops, this cheapness unravels, and new ecologies of value emerge. In Piedmont, retired workers trade vegetables for bicycle repairs; an unemployed engineer maintains the irrigation canal in exchange for honey. These are micro-transactions of care that quietly undermine the ontology of scarcity. They instantiate what Arturo Escobar (2018) calls autonomous design – collective processes of world-making grounded in relationality rather than accumulation.

To inhabit the ruins is also to slow history down. The anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2009) speaks of existential velocity: the speed at which people experience their capacity to act. Under neoliberal precarity, existential velocity oscillates wildly – between frantic job-searching and paralysing inertia. The unemployed learn to modulate this speed, often inventing micro-rituals to manage the stretch of empty days. Some walk the same route each morning, as if clocking in to the city itself; others keep notebooks where they list tasks that are not tasks – “go to market, feed birds, call mother”. These gestures re-temporalize life.

Philosophically, such modulation evokes Hartmut Rosa’s theory of resonance (2016): the idea that a good life depends not on acceleration but on meaningful attunement. Unemployment, stripped of external compulsion, can become a pedagogy of resonance. To survive long-term joblessness requires cultivating sensitivity – to one’s body, to weather, to community rhythms. The anthropological literature on waiting (Auyero 2012; Hage 2009) often describes it as passive endurance, yet in these practices, waiting becomes an art of resonance, a slow tuning with the world.

Deleuze once wrote that philosophy is the creation of concepts that express new ways of living (Deleuze, Guattari 1994). If so, the unemployed invent their own minor concepts: the useful uselessness, the dignity of time, the slow repair. These are not slogans but living definitions that reshape experience.

From Ontological Fracture to Political Composition: Nonhuman Companions in Political Becoming

The earlier sections of this essay argued that unemployment functions as an ontological fracture – a suspension of being within the nexus of productivity. Yet fractures can also become joints, sites where new structures are assembled. The challenge is to move from fracture to composition without losing the radical openness that the fracture disclosed.

Ernesto Laclau’s theory of the empty signifier (2005) helps illuminate this transition. For Laclau, political identities are built around lacks – absences that demand articulation. The unemployed, lacking work, become the embodiment

of such absence; but by naming themselves as a collective, they transform lack into universality. What would happen if informal groups of job seekers began independently organizing roundtables where they could exchange stories of failure and resilience? These assemblies could gradually become recognized by the municipality as interlocutors in urban policy. From the standpoint of hegemony, they filled the signifier unemployment with new content: not victimhood, but mutual listening.

This shift echoes Jacques Rancière's idea of subjectivation (1999): politics arises when those who have no part assert themselves as speaking beings. The unemployed who gather not to demand jobs but to affirm existence are performing this subjectivation. Their politics does not seek reintegration into productivity; it redefines what counts as participation.

If the unemployed human is a figure of suspension, the unemployed nonhuman expands the field of political imagination. The post-industrial landscape is populated by beings in similar states of waiting: idle machines, feral plants, semi-wild dogs, half-flooded quarries. Following Eduardo Kohn's *How Forests Think* (2013), we can treat these entities as semiotic agents participating in the collective semiosis of place.

One spring morning, I visited an abandoned factory courtyard overgrown with weeds. Amid the debris stood a rusted robotic arm, frozen mid-gesture. Moss had colonized its joints; a blackbird nested in its cavity. The scene condensed Latour's (2005) actor-network principle: agency distributed across metal, moss, and bird. The robot's unemployment had created a niche of life. It was an image of what Jane Bennett (2010) calls vibrant matter – the vitality of things once deemed inert. To acknowledge this vitality is to extend solidarity beyond the species barrier: the solidarity of the unemployed with the unproductive world. Donna Haraway's concept of sympoiesis (2016) – making-with rather than self-making – becomes crucial here. The unemployed worker and the derelict machine are not analogues but partners in co-invention. In several workshops, former technicians repurpose old industrial robots into art installations or mechanical gardens. One collective attached brushes and ink to robotic arms, programming them to draw random lines as visitors moved nearby. "They still work," said one technician, "just differently". This "different work" is the emblem of sympoietic politics: cooperation without command.

Care and Hope as Counter-Production. For a Planetary Commons

Throughout this research, care repeatedly emerged as the counter-term to productivity. Joan Tronto's ethics of care (1993) defines caring as everything



we do to maintain, continue, and repair our world so that we can live in it as well as possible. This definition could serve as the manifesto of the unemployed commons. Where production extracts, care sustains; where labour consumes, care repairs.

In Piedmont, care takes material form in small infrastructures: benches painted, walls cleaned, cats fed, water channels unblocked. These acts recall Maria Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017) argument that care is a speculative ethics: it imagines futures through attention to neglected matters. The unemployed gardener who saves seeds from an abandoned field speculates in this sense – investing not in profit but in continuity. Her garden becomes a time-machine of care, linking human and more-than-human agencies across temporal scales.

What keeps people going amid long unemployment is rarely faith in institutions. It is hope in a quieter sense: what Ernst Bloch called *das Prinzip Hoffnung* (1986) – the principle of hope as an anticipatory consciousness embedded in everyday gestures. Hope, for Bloch, is not optimism but the unfinished texture of reality. Every act of repair, rest, or companionship carries a utopian surplus.

This resonates with the minor utopias described by anthropologist Stefania Pandolfo (2018) in her studies of waiting and prayer in North Africa – moments where the impossible is imagined through repetition. In the Piedmont field, similar minor utopias arise in daily improvisations: a meal shared, a computer resurrected, a garden replanted. They do not promise systemic change, yet they hold open the possibility of another relation to time and to the earth. As global automation, climate breakdown, and demographic shifts redraw the meaning of labour, the unemployed condition becomes planetary. Environmental degradation produces what some ecologists call ecological unemployment: forests no longer sequestering carbon, soils exhausted, oceans acidified. These nonhuman job losses reveal the absurdity of measuring life by productivity. What we are witnessing is the generalization of unemployment to the biosphere itself.

The challenge, then, is to articulate a planetary commons where human and nonhuman agencies cooperate in regeneration. Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's (2010) notion of *ayllu* – the Andean community of humans and nonhumans – offers inspiration. In an *ayllu*, work and rest are distributed across beings: the river flows, the llama grazes, the farmer plants, all participating in reciprocal sustenance. Translating this to post-industrial Europe means recognizing that the idle factory, too, belongs to the commons – not as heritage but as potential habitat, energy reservoir, or memory archive.

New political experiments point in this direction: cooperative renewable-energy projects, repair cafés, urban compost networks. These initiatives echo



Negri's (1999) concept of constituent power: the capacity to invent forms of governance from below. They are not utopian detachments but practical ontologies of coexistence, materializing Spinoza's insight that power is the composition of bodies.

Relearning the Art of Existence: The Future as Commons

Reconsidering unemployment through the lens of inoperativity does not mean aestheticizing deprivation, nor denying the material violence of involuntary non-work. The absence of remuneration – or the experience of chronically insufficient income – remains a structural axis of contemporary exclusion, exposing individuals and their networks of interdependence to economic fragility, social devaluation, and affective strain. Entering unemployment often precipitates what may be described as a social drama, reverberating through households, partnerships, kin relations, and local communities. Yet to acknowledge these constraints is not to reaffirm the dogma that wage labor is the sole horizon of dignity. On the contrary, confronting the material consequences of unemployment requires questioning the regime that makes access to livelihood contingent upon participation in productivist circuits. The point is not to compensate for exclusion from work, but to unsettle the ontological primacy accorded to work itself.

If capitalism trained subjects to live through work, the post-productive condition demands learning how to live through relation. The unemployed are not simply its victims; they are its reluctant pioneers. Their biographies chart a passage from wage-centered identities to precarious but inventive forms of relational subsistence. To follow them ethnographically is to observe practices of collaborative survival unfolding within damaged landscapes (Tsing 2015). As Tsing's study of matsutake mushroom foragers shows (*Ibid.*), value can emerge from salvage rather than production, from coordination rather than accumulation. Likewise, the unemployed foragers of Piedmont – searching not for mushrooms but for meaning – experiment with forms of collaborative survival that bind human endurance to ecological regeneration. In their gestures, unemployment becomes apprenticeship: a difficult training in coexisting with what remains after the promises of growth have withered.

Closures do not automatically generate renewal; ruins are harsh teachers. Yet in the suspension of productivity, other capacities become perceptible. Care, rest, attention, maintenance, and mutual reliance – long subordinated to output and efficiency – emerge as infrastructural conditions of collective life. In the ruins of productivity, the multitude does not simply wait for reintegration;



it composes provisional worlds. These practices are fragile and uneven, but they expose the contingency of the equation between usefulness and worth. To conceive unemployment as ontological suspension is to recognize that life exceeds every economy and every calculus of productivity. Anthropology's task is not to romanticize marginality but to register this excess: the undercurrents of existence that persist beneath metrics of value. From Spinoza's *conatus* to Haraway's making-kin, from Agamben's *inoperosità* to Negri's commons, a shared intuition surfaces: being cannot be reduced to function. What persists, what relates, what composes with others – these precede and exceed the wage relation. The Piedmont unemployed, the stray animals, the idle machines, the recovering soils all participate in this dispersed affirmation. They are not inert residues of a superseded order but active indicators of another possible arrangement of life, one in which usefulness no longer monopolizes worth and interdependence replaces competition as the primary grammar of coexistence. To imagine such a world is not escapism; it is a refusal of fatalism. As one worker once told me: "We thought work was life. Now we're learning that life works by itself".

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Miscellanea



Le zone grigie del Welfare:

invecchiamento della popolazione straniera,
bisogni abitativi e servizi sociali.

Welfare Grey Areas:

Aging among the Foreign Population, Housing
Needs, and Social Services

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Abstract: Although the ageing of the foreign population is often portrayed as a future issue, the Italian welfare system is already facing changes in the demographic composition of migrants. Starting from the idea that ageing in migration affects not only migrants themselves and their families – whether reunited or left behind (Ciobanu et al. 2017) – but also the social context and welfare system of the receiving country (Bolzman, Vagni 2017), this article focuses on the ageing of the foreign population through the lens of social services. It asks: what are the specific features of working with elderly migrants? Do they generate new demands for services, and if so, how are services responding? Based on interviews and focus groups with officials from the Social Services of the City of Turin, as well as practitioners from third-sector organizations contracted to provide these services, the article highlights how the needs expressed by older people with a migratory background – particularly housing-related needs – often fall into a “grey area,” located between the responsibilities of different services. To address this issue, the article first describes the services involved and the demographic context in which they operate, and then analyzes the tensions between their “historical mandates” and emerging needs, as well as how the categories through which needs and vulnerabilities are defined shape practices in the field. These tensions lie at the core of the grey area under discussion. In conclusion, the article shows how, in response to new demands and shrinking resources, services adopt both defensive strategies and transformative approaches in an effort to safeguard social rights.

Keywords: Migration, Ageing, Social services, Homeless, Housing needs

Introduzione

Prendiamo l'ultimo che è arrivato. Questa persona è arrivata dal Marocco nel 1991. Oggi ha 71 anni e vive in una cantina. Vive in una cantina, ma paga un affitto regolare, tra l'altro paga una cifra che sarebbe da affitto di un alloggio vero e proprio. [...] Ha una licenza elementare, ha lavorato per diversi anni in edilizia, poi come corriere. I contratti, però, non erano sempre regolari, e non erano continuativi. Si è un po' arrangiato, si è arrabattato fino a un certo punto e poi... [...] spesso queste situazioni non emergono prima, non sono visibili ai servizi. Lo diventano quando si aggiungono altri elementi di fragilità. Spesso c'è una separazione coniugale alle spalle [...] e così questo signore [...] arriva al servizio sociale solo adesso. Ha la pensione sociale, ha la residenza [...] non è una marginalità estrema, è più una fascia grigia, se vogliamo chiamarla così. (Servizio adulti in difficoltà)

Ho ascoltato queste parole nella sede di un Servizio sociale di Torino, durante un'intervista in cui si rifletteva su una condizione che segna la vita di molte persone anziane con background migratorio e che può riguardare anche chi vive nel paese di arrivo da lungo tempo: la precarietà abitativa. Portando questo esempio, la persona intervistata faceva riferimento a situazioni di marginalità prolungata che rimangono a lungo invisibili e che diventano "visibili ai servizi [solo] quando si aggiungono ulteriori elementi di fragilità". In questo caso è l'ingresso nell'età anziana a far affiorare questo bisogno sommerso, cosa che ci permette di parlare di vite rimaste invisibili ai servizi fino a quando l'età non ne ha acuito le fragilità. In un'altra intervista si è parlato di situazioni analoghe ricorrendo a una metafora legata all'acqua, evocando l'immagine di persone presenti in Italia da molti anni che "hanno galleggiato", senza mai approdare a una condizione che garantisse loro stabilità economica e documentale.

Le riflessioni qui contenute traggono origine dal lavoro che ho condotto all'interno del progetto Age-It,¹ grazie a un assegno di ricerca che, negli ultimi tre anni, mi ha permesso di esplorare il nesso tra migrazione e invecchiamento. Il progetto si è concentrato in particolare sul tema della salute e, per questa ragione, i contesti in cui è iniziata la mia ricerca sono stati due ambulatori del terzo settore attivi nella zona di Porta Palazzo, area torinese storicamente caratterizzata da un'alta concentrazione di persone non italiane: l'ambulatorio Giovanni Paolo II (all'interno del Sermig) e l'ambulatorio dell'Associazione Camminare Insieme. Attivi rispettivamente dalla fine degli anni '80 e dall'inizio degli anni

¹ La ricerca è stata realizzata nell'ambito del Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (PNRR), Investimento Partenariato Esteso PE8 "Conseguenze e sfide dell'invecchiamento", Progetto Age-IT, CUP: B83C22004800006.

'90, questi ambulatori fanno parte di un insieme di esperienze che in quegli anni sono nate in grandi città italiane e che, nel tempo, sono diventate un tassello fondamentale per la tutela del diritto alla salute della popolazione straniera (Castagnone *et al.* 2015; Tognetti Bordogna 2006), ma anche – e sempre di più – di persone italiane in condizioni di indigenza (Civitelli *et al.* 2024). Con l'obiettivo di esplorare il "triplo nesso" tra migrazione, invecchiamento e salute (Cela, Barbiano di Belgiojoso 2021) ho condotto otto mesi di etnografia, durante i quali ho conosciuto le persone anziane che quotidianamente frequentano gli ambulatori. Attraverso dialoghi spontanei avvenuti nelle sale di attesa, osservazione di momenti di visita e conduzione di interviste ho raccolto il materiale che mi ha permesso di inserire i bisogni di salute di questa popolazione all'interno di una prospettiva di lungo periodo, che tiene conto dei percorsi biografici delle persone incontrate.² Nel mio lavoro ho esplorato i fattori di rischio connessi alla cronicità (Ferrero 2025) e ho ragionato in prospettiva diacronica sugli effetti di una precarietà lavorativa protratta che sta portando molte persone a non maturare i requisiti necessari per accedere al welfare pensionistico (Ferrero in corso di pubblicazione).

A partire dalla consapevolezza che invecchiamento demografico e mobilità sono i più importanti trend demografici a livello internazionale (King *et al.* 2017, p. 194), l'intersezione tra queste due dimensioni è stata recentemente oggetto di molti studi che hanno mostrato l'eterogeneità di esperienze comprese nel nesso migrazione/invecchiamento (Sampaio 2022). Gli stranieri di cui mi sono occupata sono solo una piccola parte dei soggetti che rientrano in questa categoria, in quanto il mio sguardo si è concentrato su coloro che dopo molti anni di vita in Italia permangono in condizione di fragilità e "marginalità multipla": povertà economica, fragilità sociale e giuridico-amministrativa, precarietà abitativa e povertà relazionale (Ferrero 2025). Pur nella loro specificità, le esperienze degli uomini e delle donne che ho incontrato ci parlano di bisogni che sono destinati ad aumentare, in quanto già qualche anno fa in altri contesti europei vi era consapevolezza che "la categoria degli anziani stranieri include alcuni tra gli individui più deprivati, isolati ed esclusi" (Warnes, Williams 2006, p. 1260).

Nel più ampio dibattito sul rapporto tra invecchiamento della popolazione e welfare, le prospettive critiche tendono a concentrarsi sulla sostenibilità del sistema pensionistico, spesso considerato destinato a un progressivo collasso. Questo lavoro, invece, si focalizza su una fascia marginale della popolazione che,

² All'interno degli ambulatori ho condotto otto mesi di osservazione partecipante (Ottobre 2023-gennaio 2024 presso la Camminare Insieme; febbraio-maggio 2024 presso l'ambulatorio del Sermig) e ho realizzato 35 interviste con donne e uomini stranieri over 60.

per specifiche traiettorie migratorie e lavorative, non avrà accesso alla pensione contributiva e si concentra in particolare sulle richieste che queste persone rivolgono ai servizi sociali in materia di bisogno abitativo. Osservare forme di marginalità economica, giuridica e abitativa destinate ad acuirsi nel futuro non è solo un modo per parlare di chi vive queste esperienze, ma è anche occasione di descrivere i bisogni che si affacciano ai servizi delle nostre città. L'esito spontaneo di questo percorso è stato quindi quello di chiedersi che cosa accade "dall'altra parte", domanda che mi ha portata a immaginare una seconda fase del lavoro. Questo articolo è frutto di un cambio di prospettiva rispetto al fenomeno indagato, ovvero della constatazione che l'invecchiamento in emigrazione riguarda i protagonisti, i familiari ricongiunti o rimasti al paese di origine (Ciobanu *et al.* 2017), ma anche il contesto sociale e il sistema di welfare del paese ricevente (Bolzman, Vagni 2017). Proprio per questo spostamento di sguardo, l'attenzione non è qui rivolta alle biografie dei soggetti migranti – già approfondite in altri scritti – ma alle modalità attraverso cui i servizi incontrano, interpretano e rendono leggibili i bisogni di questa popolazione. Per portare lo sguardo "dall'altra parte" ho scelto di condurre interviste e focus group con funzionari e funzionarie dei Servizi sociali della Città di Torino e con operatori e operatrici di enti del terzo settore a cui vengono appaltati questi servizi, con l'obiettivo di ragionare sulle seguenti domande: quali sono le specificità del lavoro con gli stranieri anziani? In che modo le categorie concettuali attraverso cui i servizi definiscono bisogni, diritti e situazioni di vulnerabilità influenzano le pratiche professionali? Come gli operatori negoziano la propria agency entro vincoli istituzionali? In che misura tali pratiche contribuiscono a ridefinire le categorie di inclusione ed esclusione? La richiesta di condurre interviste sul tema dell'invecchiamento della popolazione straniera ha in alcuni casi destato stupore, in quanto il tema scelto era percepito dai miei interlocutori come "qualcosa di originale", su cui alcuni hanno inizialmente riferito di "non aver molto da dire". Questa reazione è in parte riconducibile alla specifica configurazione demografica dell'invecchiamento migrante in Italia. Sebbene la popolazione di origine straniera stia progressivamente invecchiando, la sua struttura per età rimane ancora sensibilmente più giovane rispetto a quella della popolazione nativa e la presenza di persone nelle fasce di età più avanzate – in particolare oltre i 75 anni, età maggiormente associata a condizioni di non autosufficienza e allo sviluppo di patologie croniche o degenerative – resta relativamente contenuta. Come evidenziato da diversi studi sull'invecchiamento migrante, le prime coorti di migranti che raggiungono l'età anziana nei paesi di immigrazione presentano infatti traiettorie e configurazioni demografiche differenti rispetto a quelle della popolazione nativa (Warnes, Williams 2006; Torres 2013; Ciobanu, Fokkema, Nedelcu 2017). Ne deriva che l'invecchiamento della popolazione migrante tende a manifestarsi,

almeno per ora, in forme diverse da quelle più frequentemente associate nel discorso pubblico all'invecchiamento demografico: non tanto situazioni di grave perdita di autonomia, quanto piuttosto condizioni più sfumate, spesso collocate in una "zona grigia" tra autonomia e vulnerabilità.

Ciò nonostante, anche se l'invecchiamento della popolazione straniera viene spesso descritto come qualcosa che riguarderà il futuro del nostro paese, il welfare italiano si sta già confrontando con il progressivo cambiamento della composizione demografica della popolazione straniera. Ciò che è emerso da questi scambi è infatti che funzionari e operatori di ambiti diversi dei servizi sociali stanno *empiricamente* prendendo atto dell'invecchiamento della popolazione con background migratorio, delle molteplici condizioni di svantaggio che queste persone spesso portano con sé e delle sfide che questo pone ai servizi. Nel mio dialogo con funzionari e operatori, così come in questo scritto, i servizi sono intesi come un osservatorio privilegiato, come soggetti che agiscono le politiche – non senza un margine di discrezionalità e creatività (Dubois 2018, Tarabusi 2019) – e come luogo di riflessione di fronte a fenomeni percepiti come (almeno parzialmente) nuovi.

A partire da queste premesse, l'articolo intende gettare luce sul fatto che i bisogni abitativi espressi da soggetti anziani con background migratorio e da biografie segnate da quelli che Bommes chiama *biographically accumulated record of exclusion* (2000, p. 91) – concetto che altrove ho tradotto come traiettorie di esclusione (Ferrero 2025) – sembrano collocarsi in una "zona grigia", a cavallo tra le competenze di servizi diversi, che genera un oscillamento "tra presa in carico e abbandono" (Biffi 2022). Per raggiungere questo obiettivo descriverò i servizi con cui ho interagito e il contesto demografico in cui essi operano, per poi analizzare le tensioni tra i "mandati storici" di questi servizi e i bisogni emergenti, frizione che sta alla base della zona grigia oggetto di interesse di questo scritto. Nella parte conclusiva tenterò di illustrare come per fronteggiare esigenze nuove i servizi mettano in campo sia logiche difensive sia spinte trasformative, attraverso le quali tentano di garantire i diritti sociali facendo fronte a risorse sempre più limitate.

L'ambizione di questo scritto è quella di contribuire al recente ma florido dibattito italiano che si è sviluppato sull'invecchiamento in seno all'antropologia delle migrazioni (Favi 2021; Scaglioni 2021; Scaglioni, Diodati 2021; Frisone 2022, 2024; Gardini 2022a, 2022b, 2023; Dia 2025), rappresentando al contempo un esempio di analisi antropologica delle politiche dello stato sociale (Porcellana 2022; Rimoldi, Pozzi 2022), a partire dalla relazione che queste hanno con fasce di popolazione che sembrano "indesiderate" (Tosi Cambini 2015), con particolare attenzione alle richieste che persone migranti in condizione di precarietà abitativa portano al welfare.

Un triangolo di servizi

Le domande alla base di questo contributo non hanno animato la mia ricerca *a priori* ma si sono generate sul campo. Si tratta di uno sviluppo nato dall'incontro con uomini e donne senza dimora: persone che frequentano gli ambulatori in modo autonomo, ma anche soggetti che vi arrivano grazie al supporto di altre realtà impegnate nel lavoro con le persone senza dimora. Nello specifico, l'ambulatorio Giovanni Paolo II si trova all'interno dell'Arsenale della Pace, uno spazio gestito dal Sermig³ all'interno del quale vengono offerte numerose forme di sostegno (come la mensa, i corsi di italiano e la distribuzione di abiti). In spazi limitrofi i volontari gestiscono anche un'accoglienza notturna destinata a donne (e donne con bambini) e due accoglienze notturne destinate a uomini.⁴ Vista la prossimità geografica e grazie al lavoro dei volontari, che dirigono gli ospiti delle accoglienze verso il Poliambulatorio, ho incontrato diversi uomini e donne che si stavano appoggiando a queste accoglienze.

La stessa cosa è avvenuta nell'ambulatorio dell'associazione Camminare Insieme. Se anche qui l'accesso di persone senza dimora all'ambulatorio avviene spesso in modo autonomo, il personale della Camminare Insieme è anche coinvolto in una collaborazione con il Comune di Torino che prevede interventi sociosanitari rivolti alle persone temporaneamente accolte nelle Case di ospitalità del Comune.⁵ Una volta al mese una équipe composta da un medico, uno psichiatra e un mediatore si reca all'interno di ognuna delle Case di ospitalità coinvolte nel progetto per effettuare visite, colloqui e distribuzione dei medicinali, rimandando le persone all'ambulatorio in caso di follow up o necessità di visite specialistiche.⁶ Nei mesi della mia ricerca, grazie alla disponibilità del Direttore, dei medici e di tutto il personale della Camminare Insieme – oltre che alle autorizzazioni che mi sono state gentilmente concesse dal Comune di Torino – ho potuto unirmi alle équipes che dalla sede dell'associazione portavano i loro servizi nelle Case di ospitalità. Come facevo all'interno dell'ambulatorio,

³ Associazione laica di ispirazione cristiana fondata nel 1964 a Torino da Ernesto Olivero.

⁴ Per consultare la relazione delle attività del 2024 delle accoglienze notturne: https://www.sermig.org/media/ckeditor/1753266425_relazione-attivita-CNoi-2024.pdf

⁵ A Torino, i cosiddetti "dormitori" comunali sono ufficialmente denominati Case di ospitalità. Questa definizione, adottata dalla Città di Torino nelle comunicazioni istituzionali e nella documentazione dei servizi per persone senza dimora, sottolinea la funzione di accoglienza e tutela degli ospiti e descrive la trasformazione avvenuta a seguito del periodo pandemico, quando la maggior parte delle strutture è passata dalla sola apertura notturna a una apertura per le 24 ore della giornata.

⁶ Per consultare i dati dell'attività si veda il Bilancio Sociale dell'Associazione del 2024: <https://www.camminare-insieme.it/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Bilancio-sociale-Camminare-Insieme-2024-.pdf>

anche in queste strutture ho potuto assistere alle visite, condurre osservazione e stabilire contatti per realizzare interviste narrative, agevolata dal prezioso aiuto ricevuto dagli operatori e dalle operatrici delle strutture visitate.

Per gli obiettivi specifici del mio lavoro di ricerca, sia negli ambulatori che nelle Case di ospitalità ho dedicato la mia attenzione a uomini e donne di origine straniera che avevano oltrepassato i 60 anni,⁷ rimanendo colpita dalla frequenza con cui incontravo persone che soddisfacevano questo requisito d'età. Lo stupore nasceva non solo dalla consapevolezza che la popolazione senza dimora è mediamente giovane, ma soprattutto dal fatto di sapere che, fino a pochi anni fa, le Case di ospitalità avevano un'età limite per l'accesso e la permanenza che era quella di 65 anni, solo di recente innalzata a 67. Incontrare all'interno di queste strutture uomini e donne over 60 e persone che già avevano superato il limite di età e che continuavano a permanervi *in deroga* ha fatto, in modo spontaneo, emergere una domanda che potrebbe apparire quasi banale: che ne sarà di queste persone col passare degli anni?

La deroga è uno strumento di flessibilità che permette ai servizi di studiare le risposte appropriate caso per caso, ma d'altra parte – se diventa strumento a cui si fa ricorso ripetutamente – può mostrare quello che è un limite o una rigidità del servizio stesso. Nel suo testo sui servizi per senza dimora a Torino, riflettendo su altre dinamiche che portavano a ragionare sulle forme di inclusione/esclusione di determinate fasce di popolazione, Valentina Porcellana osservava come la deroga “non [fosse] una soluzione, né una presa di posizione politica, eppure [fosse] utilizzata come via di uscita, almeno momentanea, da una situazione di crisi” (2016, p. 88). Relativamente agli anziani stranieri presenti nelle Case di ospitalità mi sembrava di riconoscere una situazione simile, ovvero l'utilizzo di uno strumento che dovrebbe essere *straordinario* per la gestione di un fenomeno *ordinario*, seppur nuovo e ancora numericamente limitato. Con questa curiosità e con questa prospettiva in mente ho iniziato a porre domande su questo argomento nelle diverse visite che effettuavo nelle Case di ospitalità, registrando risposte che andavano pian piano a definire i contorni della zona grigia.

Nelle nostre strutture tendenzialmente c'è un 7-8% di persone che accedono a 65 anni, quindi non è sicuramente il *core* dell'attività che noi facciamo, però ci viene richiesto ogni tanto di fare delle deroghe e [in questi] il problema è poi l'uscita. (Servizio adulti in difficoltà)

⁷ L'età considerata anziana è generalmente definita dall'ISTAT a partire dai 65 anni, in linea con la soglia convenzionale di pensionamento e con le statistiche ufficiali italiane sulla popolazione anziana. Per ampliare il campione nella presente ricerca, ho deciso di includere anche persone a partire dai 60 anni.

I servizi con cui ho deciso di interagire rientrano in tre ambiti dei Servizi sociali della Città di Torino e si relazionano con gli anziani stranieri da prospettive e per fini diversi. Si tratta del Servizio stranieri e promozione della coesione sociale, del Servizio adulti in difficoltà e dell'Area anziani dei Servizi sociali distrettuali.⁸ Si tratta di servizi che ho immaginato come vertici di un triangolo, che osservano la realtà da prospettive diverse e che quindi possono offrire letture complementari sul gruppo qui analizzato. L'obiettivo è stato comprendere quali rappresentazioni emergono da queste tre angolature quando lo sguardo si orienta verso persone che sono *al contempo* straniere, anziane e in condizioni di difficoltà.⁹

Vista la specificità territoriale dei Servizi sociali, è necessario indicare brevemente quale è l'ambito di lavoro di queste aree – quello che definisco il loro “mandato storico” – per poi passare a descrivere il contesto in cui operano e soffermarmi infine sulle sfide che l'incontro con una nuova richiesta pone a questi mandati. Il Servizio stranieri e promozione della coesione sociale (d'ora in avanti Servizio stranieri) nasce nel 1982 in risposta ai bisogni portati in città dalle prime importanti ondate migratorie e alla necessità di dare supporto istituzionale alle persone straniere presenti sul territorio. Oggi si occupa prevalentemente di persone di nuovo arrivo, di titolari di protezione internazionale, di donne vittime di tratta e di persone che sono all'interno del sistema di accoglienza ministeriale SAI. Ha all'attivo progetti di assistenza, tutela, accoglienza e inclusione abitativa e lavorativa, prevalentemente rivolti a persone con tipologie di permessi di soggiorno riconducibili alla procedura di richiesta di protezione.

Il Servizio adulti in difficoltà si occupa delle persone senza dimora, coordinando le Case di ospitalità notturna e i servizi di accoglienza residenziale, tra cui l'Housing First. Nasce nel 1981 con il compito di programmare, promuovere e realizzare interventi e servizi in favore della popolazione *homeless*; storicamente si è occupato della gestione dei dormitori della Città, ad oggi mantiene il focus su senza dimora avendo però ampliato tantissimo la tipologia di offerta abitativa e avendo trasformato radicalmente i modelli di intervento.¹⁰

⁸ Tutti e tre gli ambiti afferiscono al Dipartimento Servizi sociali, socio sanitari e abitativi della Città di Torino: i primi due sono parte della Divisione inclusione sociale e sono servizi cittadini, mentre l'area Anziani fa parte della Divisione Servizi sociali e lavoro e ha una declinazione distrettuale, cioè organizzata territorialmente nei quattro distretti cittadini.

⁹ Visto che ciò che mi preme è mostrare l'angolatura dello sguardo, ogni citazione è seguita dall'area in cui lavora la persona che parla, senza che sia specificato il suo ruolo. Al fondo delle citazioni delle interviste verrà dunque indicato: Servizio adulti in difficoltà, Servizio stranieri e Servizio anziani.

¹⁰ Per approfondire come è strutturato il servizio, si faccia riferimento a <https://www.welforum.it/il-punto/diritti-senza-dimora-il-contrasto-alla-poverta-estrema-tra-nuovi-bisogni-e-nuove-sfi->

Le équipe anziani dei Servizi sociali distrettuali (d'ora in avanti Servizio anziani) si occupano dei bisogni di persone ultrasessantacinquenni, tramite il lavoro del settore dedicato alla domiciliarità (che promuove la permanenza a domicilio, con progetti personalizzati per anziani autosufficienti e per non autosufficienti) e del settore dedicato alla residenzialità (che si occupa dell'accesso alle strutture residenziali per anziani e dell'integrazioni rette per coloro che non possono sostenere la spesa della retta della struttura).

Ai margini dell'invecchiamento demografico, al centro del bisogno

I Servizi sociali considerati in questo studio operano in un contesto in costante mutamento e in un quadro di progressivo definanziamento. Tra i fattori demografici che incidono sull'emergere dei bisogni, due trend risultano particolarmente significativi: l'invecchiamento della popolazione di origine straniera e l'innalzamento dell'età media delle persone senza dimora. Per quanto riguarda il primo trend, come illustrato di seguito, la letteratura esistente e i dati statistici disponibili offrono evidenze solide, permettendo di delineare con relativa precisione le dinamiche in corso. Il secondo trend, invece, è meno documentato: sebbene sia riportato in studi internazionali (Grenier 2022), nel contesto locale oggetto di questa ricerca l'aumento dell'età media tra le persone senza dimora emerge principalmente dall'osservazione diretta dei professionisti dei servizi sociali. Questo approccio empirico suggerisce l'esistenza di una tendenza significativa, ancora poco studiata in termini quantitativi, e sottolinea la necessità di approfondimenti futuri, sia mediante raccolta sistematica di dati statistici sia tramite analisi qualitative mirate. Si tratta inoltre di due fenomeni che sono inevitabilmente legati al progressivo aumento dell'età media nella nostra società, ma che ciò nonostante si collocano "a margine" del dibattito mainstream sull'invecchiamento, più dedicato alle riflessioni legate all'active ageing che agli spazi caratterizzati da marginalità e vulnerabilità. All'opposto di una narrazione neoliberale che intende l'invecchiamento attivo come insieme di pratiche e stili di vita individuali, la riflessione qui proposta si rifa a un filone di studi che mette al centro le dimensioni sociali e politiche dell'invecchiamento (Cappellato, Gardella Tedeschi, Mercuri 2021; Favi 2021; Cappellato 2022). Uno studio del 2023 affermava che negli anni tra il 2012 e il 2022 gli stranieri over 64 erano passati dal 2,2% al 5,1% del totale delle persone con cittadinan-

de/poverta-estrema-e-servizi-abitativi-nella-citta-di-torino/. Per un approfondimento storico e antropologico sul servizio si veda Porcellana (2016).

za non italiana (De Sario 2023, p. 8). Gli stessi dati calcolavano che nel 2027 circa il 30% della popolazione straniera residente avrà 50 anni o più, entrando a far parte di quelli che Ciobanu e colleghi (2017) chiamano *future older migrants*. Torino, per la sua presenza straniera storica e radicata, rappresenta un osservatorio interessante di questa dinamica. I dati del più recente Rapporto dell'Osservatorio interistituzionale sulle persone straniere nella Città metropolitana mettono in luce il progressivo invecchiamento della popolazione straniera residente, che è passata da 8.773 unità nel 2020 a 12.674 nel 2025 (Osservatorio interistituzionale 2025, p. 32). Non è solo il dato assoluto a essere in aumento, ma anche l'indice di vecchiaia, ovvero il rapporto di coesistenza tra la popolazione anziana (65 anni e oltre) e la popolazione più giovane (0-14 anni).

L'andamento dell'indice di vecchiaia riferito alla sola popolazione straniera è, infatti, aumentato significativamente nel quinquennio di riferimento, passando da 22,2 ultrasessantacinquenni al 1° gennaio 2020 a [...] 32,9 nel 2025, a causa di un incremento della popolazione straniera anziana di quasi 4.000 unità (2025, p. 19).

Questi dati non tengono conto né delle persone senza documenti – che per definizione sfuggono alle statistiche – né dei naturalizzati, che dal punto di vista statistico sono italiani, ma che possono portarsi dietro svantaggi legati alla condizione di “essere stati” stranieri.

Questo trend si accompagna e, in molti casi, si intreccia all'innalzamento dell'età media delle persone senza dimora che, come anticipato, è riscontrato dagli operatori che lavorano nei servizi dedicati, tanto nei servizi pubblici quanto nel privato sociale.

Rispetto alle prese in carico, siamo ormai quasi alla metà di persone straniere. Per quanto riguarda le presenze nei dormitori, è da circa 15 anni che gli italiani rappresentano meno del 50%, mentre i migranti sono più numerosi. Attualmente gli stranieri, soprattutto nelle Case di ospitalità, contribuiscono ad abbassare l'età media. Tuttavia, il trend che possiamo immaginare è quello di un loro progressivo invecchiamento. (Servizio adulti in difficoltà).

Questo trend è già esplicitamente riscontrato nella relazione annuale dei volontari del Sermig, dove si legge:

Nel 2024 abbiamo fatto fronte a un'emergenza che, seppur ancora minima, potrebbe essere notevole tra qualche anno: gli anziani senza fissa dimora. Si tratta perlopiù di uomini oltre i 70 anni che non possono avere accesso ai dormitori comunali, e per cui l'unica soluzione sono le residenze per anziani (a pagamento)

e le accoglienze private (come la nostra). È un fenomeno in crescita che necessita una presa in carico, in quanto in diversi casi oltre la fragilità data dall'età, subentra una fragilità di natura sanitaria.¹¹

Ciò che ho riscontrato sul campo e ciò che riscontrano i volontari e gli operatori delle accoglienze notturne richiama tendenze che sono già tratteggiate nella letteratura internazionale, che testimonia che gli anziani sono sempre più visibili per le strade e nelle strutture di accoglienza (Grenier 2022) e che ciò richiede interventi specifici, politiche mirate e servizi adattati alle loro esigenze fisiche, psicologiche e sociali (Ng, Rizvi, Kunik 2013).

Invecchiamento della popolazione straniera e innalzamento dell'età media dei senza dimora si intersecano, e non stupisce quindi che il bisogno principale con cui gli anziani stranieri si rivolgono ai servizi coinvolti nella mia ricerca abbia a che fare proprio con la dimensione abitativa. Si tratta di una delle tante forme attraverso cui si manifesta lo svantaggio abitativo della popolazione straniera (Fravega 2022; Ponzo 2016), che ci parla di biografie che non si concludono con il riconoscimento del “fallimento” dell'esperienza migratoria e un conseguente rientro nel paese di origine (Gardini 2023; Masi 2024), ma con la scelta e la necessità di restare in Italia anche a fronte di condizioni economiche, sociali e abitative precarie (Hunter 2018). Si tratta di persone che – nelle parole di un mio interlocutore – hanno sperimentato il “mal d'Europa” e si trovano “in una posizione marginale che produrrà anziani che hanno vissuto una vita di mortificazione e che anticipano le questioni tipiche dell'anzianità”. Alcuni di loro hanno una relazione con i servizi di lungo corso, mentre per altri – come emergeva dalle parole scelte per aprire questo scritto – è proprio l'età anziana a rappresentare il momento di avvicinamento ai servizi. In queste storie l'età anziana, con le difficoltà connesse alla salute e all'impossibilità di mantenersi attivi in settori del lavoro precari, diventa l'elemento determinante che segna la perdita di forme di autonomia. Ciò coincide con l'emersione verso i servizi di persone che per anni hanno abitato una “sottocultura della sopravvivenza” (Bolzman, Gakuba 2025), come emerso dallo stralcio di intervista posto in apertura e da molti scambi:

Senti alcune storie e ti chiedi: “Come ha potuto vivere qui vent'anni?”, “Ma cosa faceva?”. Lavoravano in nero e non c'è traccia di loro...o magari c'è una vecchia residenza presa insieme ad altri connazionali, cose di questo genere. (Servizio adulti in difficoltà)

¹¹ https://www.sermig.org/media/ckeditor/1753266425_relazione-attivita-CNnoi-2024.pdf

“E quindi ‘Di chi è?’: i servizi tra “mandati storici” e “nuovi bisogni”

Io posso dire tranquillamente che se si presenta un anziano ai nostri servizi noi dovremmo dire: “Non ci occupiamo di te. Se non hai determinati requisiti e quant’altro questo è l’ufficio sbagliato. (Servizio stranieri).

Le case di ospitalità accoglievano persone fino a 65 anni, ora il limite di età è stato alzato a 67. (Servizio adulti in difficoltà).

Le presenze più rilevanti sono ancora nel Servizio stranieri o nel Servizio adulti in difficoltà, però via via si avvicinano situazioni [...]: compiuti i 65 anni, le persone fanno riferimento al Servizio sociale distrettuale, perché le risposte del Servizio adulti in difficoltà non sono più corrispondenti, mai *ahimè* neanche le nostre [lo sono], perché una struttura per anziani autosufficienti ha delle caratteristiche dove queste persone, diciamo, non sono proprio le persone [adatte]. (Servizio anziani).

Come mostrano gli stralci di intervista selezionati, i bisogni della popolazione straniera che sta invecchiando nel nostro Paese – e che non prevede un ritorno al contesto di origine – rappresentano un punto di osservazione significativo per parlare di dinamiche di inclusione ed esclusione dai servizi. Questi ultimi, infatti, operano secondo logiche di selettività, includendo alcuni potenziali fruitori ed escludendone altri sulla base del possesso o meno di requisiti formalizzati per la presa in carico. Per quanto riguarda gli anziani stranieri, è soprattutto in merito al bisogno abitativo che tali meccanismi emergono, mostrando come le risposte disponibili faticino ad adattarsi a traiettorie biografiche e condizioni di vulnerabilità che sfuggono alle categorie tradizionali dell’intervento sociale.

Le risposte oggi disponibili sono strutturate a partire da quelli che definisco i “mandati storici”, ossia le finalità principali che caratterizzano ciascun servizio. Come è stato detto in apertura, il Servizio stranieri – per suo mandato – si occupa prevalentemente di persone neo-arrivate o di persone in possesso di un permesso di soggiorno legato alla domanda di protezione internazionale. Le persone anziane inserite nelle diverse progettualità del Servizio stranieri, quindi, rappresentano una fetta specifica, che non include (o lo fa raramente) persone che sono invecchiate nel nostro Paese. Seppur non sia il focus specifico di questo scritto, va detto che anche nei progetti di accoglienza rivolti a chi possiede o a chi richiede la protezione internazionale l’incontro con l’anziano o con l’adulto maturo rappresenta una sfida in quanto le progettualità “classiche” – costruite intorno al concetto di autonomia – sono difficilmente declinabili su persone di questa fascia di età.¹²

¹² A tal proposito segnalo che dalla consultazione dei Rapporti degli ultimi anni si può notare quanto segue: le tabelle che mostrano l’età delle persone inserite nei progetti SAI fino all’anno 2020

Il Servizio adulti in difficoltà si è da sempre rivolto a persone fino ai 65 anni. Storicamente, i dormitori hanno accolto persone sino al raggiungimento dell'età anziana, elemento che – almeno teoricamente – rappresenta una delle condizioni per essere presi in carico dai servizi per anziani. Il limite dei 65 anni era quindi concettualmente legato al raggiungimento dell'età anziana e, al tempo stesso, della pensione, sia essa quella contributiva o quella sociale. Con la Riforma Fornero e l'innalzamento dell'età pensionabile da 65 a 67 anni, il limite di età per rimanere all'interno dei servizi gestiti dal Servizio adulti in difficoltà è stato innalzato a 67 anni, come modo di far fronte a quella che ormai era una presenza significativa di ultrasessantacinquenni, presenti nel servizio in deroga.

A 65 anni puoi accedere all'area anziani, quindi [alzando il limite di età] noi ci siamo dati questi due anni per lavorare. Gli ultra 65 anni sono comunque tantissimi, e allora dovevi andare in deroga. Gli davi il posto di emergenza e toglievano posti ad altre fragilità. Ci siamo detti: è un dato strutturale, decidiamo che fino a 67 si può stare, tanto appunto si va in pensione a 67 anni, e quindi abbiamo alzato l'età. (Servizio adulti in difficoltà).

Nonostante la modifica, questa area dei servizi sociali continua a ragionare sulla base del presupposto di una "età limite", fornendo un esempio dell'arbitrarietà del welfare. Non si vuole con questo suggerire che questa scelta non sia corretta, ma semplicemente mettere in luce che proprio in quanto definito e modificabile, questo criterio è di per sé arbitrario. Il limite di età differenzia, infatti, i servizi rivolti a senza dimora in Italia con servizi analoghi in contesti dove non esiste un limite di età nei servizi per senza dimora (Greneir 2022).

Come descritto brevemente nell'introduzione, i servizi dedicati agli anziani si ripartiscono in prestazioni per la domiciliarità e prestazioni per la residenzialità, ed entrambi questi settori erogano prestazioni diverse per anziani autosufficienti e non autosufficienti.¹³ Per facilità espositiva, posso descrivere le prestazioni del servizio come organizzate in quattro macro-ambiti: domiciliarità per non autosufficienti, domiciliarità per autosufficienti, residenzialità per non autosufficienti, e residenzialità per autosufficienti. Il confronto con le responsabilità dei distretti cittadini ha messo in evidenza come sia nell'ultimo di questi

incluso erano ripartire secondo tre fasce di età (0-17, 18-25 e 26-40). La fascia d'età "superiore ai 41 anni" è comparsa solo a partire dal 2021, e ha registrato un progressivo aumento.

Nel 2021 in quella fascia rientrava il 6% dei beneficiari, nel 2022 l'8,1%, nel 2023 il 9% e nel 2024 il 9,9%. Per approfondimenti si rimanda ai Rapporti, reperibili sul sito <https://www.retesai.it/>

¹³ L'autosufficienza è valutata dall'ASL tramite l'UVG (Unità di valutazione geriatrica), che esamina la capacità della persona di svolgere le attività quotidiane essenziali e la necessità di assistenza continuativa; i servizi sociali collaborano fornendo supporto e informazioni. Per approfondimenti si veda Cappellato (2022).

ambiti che esse cominciano a confrontarsi con la presenza di anziani stranieri. La richiesta con cui gli stranieri che hanno da poco compiuto i 65 anni si affacciano al servizio è dunque prevalentemente quella dell'accesso a residenze per autosufficienti (RA).¹⁴

La prevalenza sono proprio quelle situazioni di anziani – giovani, perché hanno appena compiuto i 65 anni – che non possono più stare nei dormitori, senza residenza, senza reddito, dove la richiesta è quella di essere inseriti in una struttura per anziani autosufficienti. Per ora sono prevalentemente uomini. (Servizio anziani).

La maggior parte degli stranieri che si affacciano [da noi] sono giovani-anziani e quasi tutti con percorsi da senza dimora che chiedono una sistemazione abitativa, che nel nostro caso è una RA. Se confronto l'inizio del 2025 con l'anno scorso già si vede che sono in crescita. (Servizio anziani).

Come si evince dai contenuti sino ad ora esposti, le tre aree dei servizi indagate – che si relazionano con i soggetti di cui parliamo in quanto *stranieri*, *anziani* o *in difficoltà* – si confrontano con limiti, che sono sia limiti strutturali – legati alle risorse e alle competenze disponibili – sia limiti di mandato. L'aumento del numero di soggetti che si colloca sul margine o al di fuori di tali limiti rende più ampia e visibile quella che io chiamo zona grigia e che Fassin definirebbe più incisivamente “buco nero”, espressione che l'autore ha usato per riferirsi a spazi sociali, amministrativi e morali in cui le persone rischiano di cadere fuori dai sistemi di protezione (2013). I buchi neri emergono laddove il welfare contemporaneo crea distanza tra diritti proclamati e diritti accessibili, generando scarti o eccedenze che spesso riguardano soggetti che non soddisfano requisiti burocratici o coloro che sono *troppo* poveri, *troppo* malati o *troppo* irregolari per essere “gestibili”. Queste dinamiche coesistono con tendenze più ampie e di carattere generale che oltre a essere legate ai limiti delle risorse economiche hanno anche fare con quello che Gargiulo, Morlicchio e Tuorto (2024) definiscono “lo sciovinismo del welfare”, una strategia di gerarchizzazione della società basata sull'idea di appartenenza e sul tempo di permanenza, che rende l'accesso al welfare diseguale e condizionato dall'appartenenza a specifici gruppi sociali. Si tratta di strategie che non dipendono ovviamente dai singoli operatori e funzionari, che spesso agiscono imbrigliati in queste norme anche quando ne hanno una visione profondamente critica.

¹⁴ Le RA (Residenze assistenziali) accolgono prevalentemente persone autosufficienti, fornendo supporto nelle attività quotidiane e assistenza sociale. Le RSA (Residenze sanitarie assistenziali), invece, sono destinate a persone non autosufficienti, offrendo assistenza sanitaria continuativa e monitoraggio medico e infermieristico 24 ore su 24.

Il fatto che i soggetti di cui ci occupiamo in questo scritto abbiano a che fare per alcune caratteristiche con l'area stranieri, per altre con l'area anziani e per altre con l'area adulti in difficoltà, fa sì che quando le équipes multidisciplinari sono di fronte ai casi più complessi si generino ambiguità e negoziazioni rispetto a chi debba effettivamente prendere in carico i soggetti.

Quando ci sono casi complessi, io avevo coniato il "Di chi è?" ...e tanto gira che ti gira è mio, perché tanto prima è [considerato come] straniero, poi è [considerato come] adulto in difficoltà, poi è [considerato come] anziano. (Servizio stranieri).

La domanda "Di chi è?" – ironicamente posta per chiedersi quale area del Servizio sociale debba prendere in carico soggetti marginali, stranieri e anziani – è il modo emico con cui alcuni funzionari hanno descritto la zona grigia, l'esistenza di emergenti bisogni che non trovano facilmente risposta in un sistema che frammenta identità e bisogni. Di fronte a questa dinamica e al riconoscimento dei propri limiti, i soggetti che lavorano all'interno dei diversi servizi agiscono allo stesso tempo in maniera difensiva e trasformativa rispetto alla logica insita nel loro mandato storico.

Difendere la logica e....

Messi alla prova da un contesto demografico in trasformazione e dell'emersione di nuove forme di marginalità, i mandati storici dei servizi sono in un certo senso rivendicati come elementi necessari per far fronte alla crescente complessità del sociale. In questo paragrafo esploro i diversi significati sottesi alla difesa del mandato storico: dalla necessità di non snaturare un determinato servizio, al tentativo di non intrappolare soggetti vulnerabili in categorie immutabili, fino alle difficoltà di ordine materiale ed economico. Come già osservato, il mandato del Servizio stranieri riguarda prevalentemente l'assistenza a coloro che hanno presentato richiesta di protezione internazionale. Tentare di rispondere ad altre esigenze della popolazione con background migratorio nel suo complesso, finirebbe per trasformare il Servizio in un contenitore indistinto di interventi, con il rischio di perdere la propria specificità e di compromettere la coerenza dell'azione sociale all'interno del sistema dei servizi.

Anche per noi che abbiamo il mandato di lavorare con gli stranieri c'è evidentemente l'incontro con tante nuove complessità. Al momento io penso di essere l'unico servizio che si rivolge a una popolazione da 0 a 99 anni! Il lavoro diventa molto difficile e com-

plesso quando io ho mamme con bambini, anziani e vulnerabili, le tre categorie che sostanzialmente destabilizzano il sistema. [...] Io non ho problema ad occuparmene [...] ma qual è il nostro ruolo? Per la tipologia di interventi che noi possiamo mettere in campo, dovremmo stare all'interno di qualcosa [di temporaneo] se no divento il servizio stranieri che fa 200.000 attività differenti, dal baby parking all'accompagnamento alla morte. (Servizio stranieri).

Nelle parole di chi lavora nel Servizio adulti in difficoltà, difendere la logica che struttura il servizio e il proprio mandato storico non è solo un modo di tutelarsi da una crescente complessità, ma è anche un modo per rivendicare diritti e tutele sociali:

La ratio del limite di età [nei dormitori] è: tu sei cittadino esattamente come tutti gli altri. Quindi se gli altri arrivati a 67 anni vanno nelle residenze anziani anche tu "barbone" devi andare nella residenza anziani. Cosa molto complicata perché le persone con grave emarginazione hanno anche problematiche sanitarie connesse. Non sono facilmente, come dire, inseribili in struttura. Però al di là di quello, su quello ci siamo sempre battuti [...] Da un punto di vista l'abbiamo messa un po' come questione di principio, dicendo: non esiste che un senza dimora rimanga senza dimora. Lo so che le etichette sono sbagliate, ma è un anziano pari agli altri e deve accedere [ai] servizi per anziani, come tutti gli altri. (Servizio adulti in difficoltà).

Dall'altra parte la difesa del mandato storico è anche un modo per riconoscere la specificità del servizio e l'estrema eterogeneità presente nella categoria "anziani", che richiederebbe di pensare soluzioni diversificate in base alle esigenze e alle biografie di coloro che richiedono accesso alle residenze:

La struttura per anziani autosufficienti non è appropriata a queste situazioni, perché è una risposta vecchia, studiata su un bisogno che probabilmente già corrisponde poco alle esigenze degli anziani di oggi, però sugli stranieri ancora meno... e soprattutto su chi ha un percorso di vita così marginale, non è né di aiuto alla persona ma è anche una complicazione per gli altri ospiti, perché poi stiamo parlando di posti dove ci sono 40-50 persone... Con degli spazi in comune, le attività in comune, la stanza in comune, quindi questo è da tenere presente. (Servizio anziani).

Se ci fermassimo al mero dato anagrafico – astraendo l'età dal resto del percorso di vita dei soggetti – sarebbe proprio l'area anziani la principale responsabile dei bisogni degli anziani stranieri che ho incontrato nella mia ricerca, ma la presa in carico di queste richieste non è automatica e non si può dare per scontata. Per questa ragione è necessario approfondire ciò che le responsabili

intendono quando affermano che il loro servizio non è *appropriato*. Perché e in che senso un servizio può ritenersi “non appropriato”?

Dal punto di vista delle responsabili dei Servizi distrettuali per anziani, le strutture per anziani autosufficienti non sono la risposta adatta alle esigenze di questa popolazione per una diversificata serie di ragioni, che proverò qui a riassumere. Innanzitutto, anche se formalmente accolgono persone dai 65 anni in su, la popolazione autoctona fa accesso alle strutture per autosufficienti in età più avanzata, quando si confronta con un cambiamento profondo dello stile di vita. In secondo luogo, sebbene rivolte a persone ancora autonome, tali strutture impongono regole precise sugli orari e limitano alcune forme di autonomia, come la possibilità di cucinare per sé. Ciò rende le strutture per autosufficienti poco adatte a “giovani anziani” ancora pienamente indipendenti e, in particolare, a coloro che arrivano da percorsi in “bassa soglia”, per elementi che hanno a che fare sia con il loro profilo¹⁵ che con l’organizzazione stessa delle strutture.

Da una parte hai qualcuno che ti organizza in maniera istituzionale quello che è il tuo ritmo di vita e la tua permanenza all’interno della struttura, dall’altra persone che sono state abituate per molti anni a vivere in un modo totalmente diverso [perché] all’interno del dormitorio ci sono quattro regole, e poi tendenzialmente la tua giornata te la gestisci abbastanza in base a quello che vuoi o non vuoi fare. (Servizio adulti in difficoltà).

Sono proprio questi limiti, insieme alla collocazione geografica delle strutture e alla richiesta economica, a generare forme di rifiuto da parte degli stranieri stessi. La dimensione geografica ha a che fare con la dislocazione delle residenze: più di una volta ho sentito di casi di persone a cui è stato proposto un posto in una struttura in provincia, scelta che avrebbe compromesso il mantenimento della rete sociale di queste persone. La dimensione economica, invece, ha a che fare con il pagamento delle rette. Le persone inserite in una struttura per anziani devono pagare una retta, calcolata sulla base di un costo giornaliero che varia in base al reddito. Coloro che non riescono a coprire la retta intera possono rivolgere domanda di integrazione al Comune; mentre a coloro che sono titolari di una pensione viene a monte trattenuta la quota per la struttura, fatta eccezione di 145 euro per le spese personali.¹⁶ Se per gli italiani, al raggiungimento dei 67 anni è pressoché automatica la possibilità di accedere all’assegno sociale (qualora la persona non abbia maturato gli anni di contributi necessari

¹⁵ Va tenuto presente che coloro che hanno vissuto l’esperienza del dormitorio presentano spesso altre forme di marginalità, come alcolismo e problematiche connesse alla sfera della salute mentale.

¹⁶ La stessa quota è garantita dal Comune a coloro che non possono pagare la retta, in aggiunta al pagamento della retta stessa.

per accedere a una pensione contributiva e abbia redditi inferiori alle soglie previste annualmente dalla legge)¹⁷, per gli stranieri questo passaggio non è per nulla scontato in quanto richiede requisiti aggiuntivi, accentuando il rischio di povertà in età avanzata rispetto ai cittadini italiani.¹⁸

Se da un lato è prevedibile che l'aumento della quota di stranieri anziani farà crescere la richiesta di accesso alle strutture da parte di persone a totale carico dell'amministrazione comunale, dall'altro lato il tema della retta è un nodo significativo anche per alcuni stranieri che – vincolati all'invio di rimesse al paese di origine, desiderosi di tenere da parte i soldi per alcuni viaggi al paese di origine o familiarizzati con altri sistemi di accoglienza che non chiedono una retta – rifiutano il posto in struttura perché preferiscono soluzioni alternative (spesso precarie) che permettono loro di gestire autonomamente il loro piccolo capitale economico, scegliendo di rimanere fuori o “ai margini” dei servizi (Altin 2019).

È anche vero che però quando poi hanno un minimo di pensione sono soprattutto gli stranieri a rinunciare ad entrare in struttura perché comunque viene fatto il calcolo e ti dicono: mi arrangio da un amico, mi faccio ospitare o: “Era tanto comodo il dormitorio fino a quando ho potuto”... (Servizio anziani).

A tutto ciò si aggiungono i temi radicalmente nuovi che questa presenza porta all'interno di un'area che non si è ancora confrontata con le specifiche esigenze dell'utenza straniera. Come ha osservato una delle responsabili dell'area in un'intervista: “È molto difficile capire, perché siamo in una situazione dove tutti siamo inesperti”. L'anziano straniero introduce nelle residenze richieste finora inedite: un servizio mensa differenziato per motivi religiosi o culturali, spazi dedicati alla preghiera per persone di fede musulmana, presenza di ospiti con scarsa competenza in lingua italiana, necessità di mediazione culturale (Pot, Keijze, De Bot 2020) e personale formato con tempo dedicato a pratiche amministrative come il rinnovo dei documenti. Queste esigenze mettono in

¹⁷ Nonostante ciò, questi interventi restano circoscritti in quanto sono pensati soprattutto per chi vive in condizioni di povertà estrema o ha un ISEE molto basso, e molte persone che potrebbero averne bisogno rimangono escluse.

¹⁸ Per i cittadini stranieri, l'accesso all'assegno sociale richiede, oltre ai 67 anni di età, alcuni requisiti aggiuntivi. È necessario avere un periodo di soggiorno legale e continuativo di almeno 10 anni in Italia, i cittadini comunitari e i familiari extracomunitari di cittadini comunitari devono essere iscritti all'anagrafe del comune di residenza, e i cittadini extracomunitari devono possedere il permesso di soggiorno UE per soggiornanti di lungo periodo. Infine, è richiesta la residenza effettiva in Italia, condizione che può risultare difficile da rispettare sia per chi è arrivato in età adulta, sia per chi, pur vivendo in Italia da molti anni, ha attraversato situazioni abitative precarie che hanno impedito il mantenimento continuativo della residenza anagrafica (Gargiulo, 2020).

evidenza come la diversità culturale e linguistica richieda l'attivazione di nuovi strumenti organizzativi.

....immaginare trasformazioni

L'accesso ai servizi residenziali per la popolazione anziana va ovviamente letto nel quadro più ampio delle caratteristiche del welfare italiano per l'età anziana. Studi sociologici hanno mostrato come il sistema italiano sia storicamente segnato da una forte centralità della famiglia nella cura degli anziani e da un'offerta pubblica limitata di servizi istituzionalizzati (Saraceno, Naldini 2013). In particolare, la frammentazione e le disuguaglianze territoriali nell'offerta di servizi residenziali e domiciliari hanno reso centrale il ricorso a soluzioni familiari o di mercato per la gestione quotidiana della non autosufficienza (Ranci, Pavolini 2015) e a tal proposito anche l'etnografia ha contribuito a far emergere come l'esperienza concreta della cura emerga dall'intreccio tra politiche pubbliche, risorse familiari e pratiche quotidiane di assistenza (Diodati 2026). È dunque all'interno di un quadro di carenze strutturali evidentemente più ampio che il progressivo invecchiamento della popolazione migrante solleva interrogativi specifici rispetto alle modalità di accesso ai servizi residenziali e alle forme di esclusione che ne derivano.

Per quanto riguarda il punto di osservazione che in questo articolo è stato adottato, si può notare come l'emergere di nuovi bisogni stia inevitabilmente agendo anche come spinta trasformativa, in quanto vi è nei servizi la consapevolezza che quello che vediamo oggi sia solo la punta dell'iceberg di bisogni emergenti, che si faranno rapidamente più visibili. A partire dalla constatazione che i servizi territoriali rappresentano "una serie di pratiche mutevoli e diversificate" (Langer, Hojlund 2011, p. 1), l'aumento di anziani stranieri che portano ai servizi (tra gli altri) un crescente bisogno abitativo spingendo i servizi stessi a riflettere su direzioni di cambiamento e a riconoscere i limiti della propria offerta.

[...] quella popolazione ti porta delle esigenze diverse e quindi [dobbiamo] immaginare un servizio un pochino diverso in virtù di quell'utenza (Servizi adulti in difficoltà).

Il riconoscimento dei limiti da un lato e la constatazione di un'esigenza ormai strutturale dall'altro hanno già portato ad avviare sperimentazioni volte a colmare la zona grigia. Se nel Comune di Napoli, ad esempio, l'età limite per accedere ai servizi di accoglienza notturna è stato alzato a 70 anni, il Servizio adulti in difficoltà del Comune di Torino ha da qualche anno avviato il Rapid

Rehousing Anziani, una progettualità per anziani basata sul modello degli alloggi in condivisione.¹⁹ Si tratta di una delle tante progettualità nate per proporre alternative alle Case di ospitalità, ma a differenza di altre progettualità analoghe offerte dal servizio, questa è destinata in maniera specifica a

persone che hanno più di 67, che sarebbero inaccoglibili in bassa soglia. [Le persone nel progetto] vanno da 65 anni fino al primato di un signore del 1942, che quindi ha 83 anni, che erano cronicizzati nel nostro sistema di accoglienza, che però si rivolgevano ai servizi sociali di distretto per età appunto, ma l'unica risposta fino almeno a due o tre anni fa era "Vuoi andare in casa anziani?", cioè le strutture residenziali tipiche, e 90 su 100 delle nostre situazioni, soprattutto per quanto riguarda appunto gli autosufficienti, rifiutava quel tipo di proposta progettuale e quindi si ritrovavano a transitare in un circolo vizioso all'interno.... Oppure a star fuori da qualsiasi circolo. (Servizio adulti in difficoltà).

Si sentiva l'esigenza di liberare dei posti in dormitorio e c'era il tema di dove collocare queste persone in attesa di una risorsa abitativa ed ecco che è venuta fuori l'esigenza di presentare un progetto dedicato a questa fascia d'età anziana. [...] Se una persona ha un minimo di reddito e ha una serie di capacità può essere inserita in questi piccoli alloggi. Le persone mantengono il possesso, la determinazione rispetto i propri averi, le proprie modalità di comportarsi, eccetera eccetera. Questa cosa ha consentito a una serie di togliere dai dormitori persone che erano lì da vent'anni. (Servizio adulti in difficoltà).

Il progetto risponde ai bisogni di un numero limitato di persone, ma rappresenta un interessante esempio di come i servizi si ripensano e si trasformano dopo aver fatto l'esperienza del limite. In particolare, questo esempio ci permette di riflettere sulla ridefinizione delle risposte di welfare, che non può limitarsi all'innalzamento dei criteri anagrafici di accesso, ma richiede una riconfigurazione delle stesse progettualità. Nel caso degli alloggi in condivisione rivolti a persone anziane, ad esempio, è emersa la necessità di predisporre servizi ad hoc, sia sul piano strutturale sia su quello relazionale e di cura. Gli spazi abitativi devono infatti essere progettati tenendo conto delle esigenze legate all'età (assenza di barriere architettoniche, dotazioni di sicurezza, supporto nella gestione domestica), mentre l'accompagnamento sociale richiede una maggiore attenzione alla dimensione sanitaria e alla prevenzione del decadimento dell'autonomia. Per queste ragioni, questa progettualità può essere pensata come una sorta di dispositivo ponte, che potrà transitare le persone verso alloggi di Edilizia residenziale Pubblica o verso il Servizio anziani.

¹⁹ Il progetto Rapid Rehousing Anziani è nato all'interno del Piano di inclusione sociale della Città di Torino, una forma di coprogettazione della programmazione delle politiche sociali locali avviata nel 2018. Per approfondire si veda Stefani (2022).

Il riconoscimento dei limiti porta anche a immaginare di integrare mansioni sino ad ora immaginate come facenti capo a servizi distinti. Le nuove esigenze sociali e i nuovi “profili di utenti” sono infatti elementi che se da un lato rischiano di mettere in crisi il sistema, dall’altro rappresentano occasioni per ripensare le categorie con cui il welfare classifica i soggetti. Inoltre, le competenze che fino ad oggi sono state appannaggio dei servizi ad hoc per persone straniere devono progressivamente assumere un carattere trasversale, entrando a far parte del patrimonio professionale di tutti i servizi sociali.

[Devono] andare a interessare tutti gli altri servizi [...] È un percorso non semplice perché evidentemente tutti i servizi che fino a ieri magari si erano concentrati su determinati target con determinati requisiti e quant’altro devono [...] far saltare una serie di limiti che ci impedivano di fare un discorso progettuale che non sia a camere stagna. (Servizio stranieri).

Un esempio relativo allo sviluppo di competenze condivise riguarda la gestione degli aspetti amministrativi connessi alla documentazione e ai relativi rinnovi, ambito tradizionalmente presidiato dai servizi per persone straniere. La crescente presenza di utenti stranieri anche all’interno di servizi rivolti ad altri target, come i servizi anziani, ha reso necessario l’attivarsi di canali di comunicazione diretti con le questure, finalizzati a supportare il lavoro di operatori chiamati a gestire iter complessi che, pur non rientrando formalmente nelle loro mansioni, diventano parte integrante della presa in carico.

[Questa presenza] comporta una serie di problematiche che non siamo tanto preparati ad affrontare, cioè per esempio ci è capitato poi di inserire persone straniere che però avessero comunque ancora dietro di loro problemi con il codice fiscale, con il permesso di soggiorno e quindi di avere poi delle difficoltà o delle lungaggini per poterle assistere e indirizzare in questo senso, perché diciamo non corrispondono tanto alla richiesta classica che viene fatta rispetto all’equipe anziani. (Servizio anziani).

Le riflessioni contenute in questo scritto mettono chiaramente in luce quanto il sempre maggior radicamento della popolazione straniera e, in particolare, l’invecchiamento di coloro che hanno vissuto ai margini richieda di ripensare non solo i mandati storici dei servizi, ma anche le logiche che sottendono alla separazione tra aree dei servizi sociali, rivendicando una maggior integrazione e ibridazione tra servizi che storicamente hanno avuto mandati diversi. Le competenze interculturali (Göttler 2023), la capacità di comprendere le dinamiche delle relazioni interetniche, l’approfondimento dei meccanismi giuridici di accoglienza e in definitiva l’inclusione sociale delle persone con background

migratorio non rappresentano più tematiche specifiche di un unico settore, ma diventano saperi necessari e obiettivi a livello trasversale. Al di là del binomio “restare o ritornare”, la relazione fra società di arrivo e diverse forme di invecchiamento si gioca anche sulla capacità che il nostro welfare avrà di rispondere ai bisogni emergenti di cittadini stranieri (Ricucci, Elia, Cellini 2025), attraverso la collaborazione ed integrazione tra servizi diversi, nei quali le professioni sociali hanno un’importanza cruciale.

In prospettiva più ampia, queste evidenze contribuiscono a pensare il welfare non solo come insieme di servizi, ma come spazio dinamico di negoziazione sociale, in cui le politiche pubbliche, le pratiche familiari e le esperienze individuali si intrecciano. I bisogni abitativi degli anziani stranieri mette in luce questioni che riguardano questioni più ampie, come la sostenibilità dei sistemi sociali di fronte all’invecchiamento demografico, la necessità di inclusione interculturale e la ridefinizione dei confini tra pubblico e privato, tra cura formale e informale. In questo senso, la gestione dei bisogni emergenti della popolazione migrante non è un tema marginale, ma un indicatore delle capacità del nostro sistema sociale di adattarsi a trasformazioni profonde.

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Le madri nella cosiddetta violenza basata sull'onore

Riflessioni dalla ricerca etnografica in Alto Adige.

Mothers in so-called honour-based violence

Reflections from ethnographic research in South Tyrol

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Abstract: This article draws on ethnographic research conducted in South Tyrol on the understanding of gender-based violence (GBV) and empowerment among migrant women. It examines key concepts like *honour* in relation to so-called honour-based violence (HBV), increasingly reported by young migrant-origin women seeking support from local services. Focusing on the involvement of mothers in the perpetration of this violence and building on findings from a subsequent research project on how social services interpret migrant women's parenting, the article interrogates culturalist readings of GBV, which mobilise honour as a central explanatory framework and contribute to processes of othering embedded in anti-migration narratives. At the same time, this obscures the transversal patriarchal structures that implicitly and explicitly emerge from the interviewed young migrant-origin women, and within which women negotiate their position in relation to gender and age hierarchies, as well as social and political frameworks. The analysis further highlights a moral dispositive centred on ideals of motherhood, generating a specific *moral semantics* related to oppositional categories and producing a teleology of migrant women's emancipation that invests motherhood itself, while masking structural conditions arising from intersecting hierarchies of gender, race, and class in migratory contexts. The article argues for moving beyond this moral semantics, as it risks reinforcing reductive interpretations of so-called HBV.

Keywords: Honour-based violence, Migration, Culturalization, Mothering, Antiviolence centres.

Introduzione

Comprendere e denunciare le radici patriarcali della violenza sulle donne è un impegno che perseguo da anni, come attivista, come ex operatrice di un centro antiviolenza e come antropologa. Se il lavoro con donne in situazione di violenza mi ha permesso di riconoscere le diverse sfaccettature del fenomeno, osservando ciò che favorisce o che ostacola i percorsi di affrancamento dalla violenza, il focus sulle esperienze delle donne con background migratorio è stato l'oggetto delle mie indagini etnografiche. In quanto ex operatrice le ricerche hanno preso le mosse dalle pratiche dei centri antiviolenza per analizzarne i principi di riferimento, le gerarchie istituzionali in cui prendono forma e le relazioni di potere che si innescano nell'accoglienza delle donne migranti.

In uno studio svolto tra il 2014 e il 2017 ho analizzato come le barriere strutturali dell'intersezione tra violenza domestica e processi migratori sono riprodotte nelle pratiche del centro antiviolenza in cui avevo lavorato, considerando anche i servizi correlati, *in primis* il servizio sociale. Accanto al riconoscimento delle barriere legali, linguistiche, economiche e burocratiche, la ricerca ha analizzato i processi di culturalizzazione dei vissuti delle donne migranti e la loro ricaduta sulle pratiche di sostegno.

Dalla volontà di approfondire questo aspetto è nato il progetto "Verso la comprensione interculturale della violenza di genere e dell'empowerment femminile tra le donne con background migratorio in Alto Adige", che ho svolto tra il 2018 e il 2020 come assegnista di ricerca presso la Libera Università di Bolzano. La ricerca ha raccolto voci di donne migranti e di operatrici sulla loro lettura della violenza di genere e dei percorsi di empowerment.¹ Il punto di vista delle interlocutrici è stato raccolto tramite focus group in tre centri antiviolenza e interviste in profondità con 24 donne di diverse generazioni e provenienze (principalmente area balcanica, Maghreb, Sud Asia e Asia sudoccidentale), parte delle quali, nel periodo precedente alle interviste, si era rivolta a un centro antiviolenza altoatesino.² Negli incontri con le operatrici e con le intervistate ho posto domande

¹ Il termine *empowerment* fa qui riferimento all'affrancamento dalla violenza e alla prevenzione delle condizioni strutturali che la determinano. Pur nella criticità del termine, che risente di una prospettiva femminista emancipazionista e neoliberale, la scelta di adottarlo è stata dettata dalla familiarità con questo concetto da parte di servizi e istituzioni locali coinvolti nella progettazione dello studio. Tuttavia ne è stata chiarita l'accezione come superamento delle relazioni di potere e presa di responsabilità istituzionale relativamente a violenza di genere, processi migratori e giustizia sociale. La coprogettazione ha portato alla stesura di un testo *open access* destinato ai servizi (<https://webservices.scientificnet.org/rest/uisdata/api/v1/blobs/publications/2609>).

² I contesti di origine elencati corrispondono alle maggiori aree di provenienza extra UE delle donne migranti in Alto Adige al momento della ricerca. La scelta di intervistare donne con esperienze diverse sul

intorno a quattro concetti fondamentali: l'essere donna, la violenza sulle donne, l'onore e l'empowerment femminile. Lo scopo è stato identificare le discrepanze tra le prospettive delle donne migranti e quelle delle operatrici allo scopo di mettere in discussione o di ampliare i presupposti su cui si basa il lavoro dei centri.³ La scelta di includere il concetto di onore è legata alla sua comune associazione con il tipo di violenza subita da giovani donne con background migratorio all'interno delle loro famiglie, i cui casi gestiti dai centri altoatesini erano in aumento nel periodo precedente e contemporaneo allo studio. Dalla ricerca sono emersi alcuni aspetti specifici legati a questa forma di violenza, tra cui il coinvolgimento delle madri. Lo scopo dell'articolo è riflettere su di esso nel tentativo di sottrarlo a interpretazioni stereotipate che collocano le madri in categorie semantiche oppositive di natura sia orientalista, rispetto a una specifica lettura dell'emancipazione femminile, sia morale, rispetto al ruolo genitoriale delle madri nella relazione con le figlie adolescenti. Un aspetto quest'ultimo che metterò in relazione con i dati emersi da una ricerca in corso sulla comprensione della genitorialità delle donne migranti tra chi opera nei servizi sociali.

Prima di procedere, desidero chiarire alcuni aspetti relativi al linguaggio adottato. Nel testo parlerò di *cosiddetta* violenza basata sull'onore per sottolineare la criticità di questa espressione, che tratterò nell'articolo. Quanto al linguaggio di genere, considerato il tema trattato – che evidenzia il doppio standard nelle relazioni di potere tra uomini e donne – ricorro alla declinazione binaria, femminile e maschile, senza adottare soluzioni quali asterisco o schwa, che prediligo in altri testi.

Onore e violenza sulle donne

A partire dalla sua iscrizione nel binomio *onore-vergogna*, il concetto di onore è stato oggetto di numerose riflessioni critiche all'interno dell'antropologia.

piano dei processi migratori (di cosiddetta prima e nuova generazione e con permessi di soggiorni differenti), dell'età anagrafica (da poco maggiorenni a donne poco sotto i 50 anni) e dell'esperienza con la violenza domestica (tra donne che hanno riportato vissuti di violenza e donne che non si sono confrontate direttamente col fenomeno) è dovuta alla volontà di cogliere differenze e comunanze tra le diverse prospettive.

³ Questi si rifanno ai principi mutuati dai movimenti femministi di seconda ondata e alla relativa lettura della violenza sulle donne come insita a un sistema culturale, sociale, economico e giuridico di matrice patriarcale, che subordina ruoli, diritti e desideri delle donne a quelli degli uomini e individua nella famiglia un contesto privilegiato di controllo maschile sulle donne. Assumere tale lettura richiede alle operatrici di *stare dalla parte delle donne* sulla base della comune appartenenza di genere, costruire relazioni non gerarchiche tra operatrici e con le donne assistite e sostenere spazi e pratiche di solidarietà femminile (Della Rocca 2023).

Qui ne richiamo solo alcuni passaggi funzionali alla mia argomentazione. La sua attribuzione all'area del Mediterraneo – come sistema di potere basato sul genere, in cui le donne hanno il compito di preservare l'onore maschile rispettando specifiche norme morali e sessuali – è stata oggetto di critiche da parte dell'antropologia femminista, e non solo, poiché ritenuta problematica nella sua collocazione nell'area e perché distante dalla realtà sociale cui pretende di riferirsi; tale rappresentazione, infatti, non restituisce la pluralità delle rivendicazioni femminili e degli spazi di autonomia delle donne nell'area (Sacchi, Viazzo 2013). Maher (2007), nella sua rilettura critica del binomio, propone di sostituire il termine *vergogna* con *pudore* (*pudeur*), riferendosi ad atteggiamenti di modestia, riservatezza e dignità, da intendere sia come sfera sociale femminile autonoma rispetto al dominio maschile, sia come agency all'interno dell'ordine patriarcale. Già Abu-Lughod (1986) interpreta la modestia come spazio di affermazione delle donne come agenti morali dotate di un potere sociale che non si esaurisce nel controllo maschile. L'idea dell'onore come mero strumento di controllo sessuale delle donne risulta quindi riduttiva, sebbene sia largamente utilizzata nella descrizione della violenza che a livello internazionale viene definita *honour-based violence* (HBV). Con questa espressione le esperte indicano azioni quali aggressioni fisiche e verbali, percosse, restrizioni della libertà, matrimoni forzati, femminicidi e attacchi con l'acido, perpetrati soprattutto da familiari o coniugi – per lo più di genere maschile – con l'intento di ristabilire l'onore proprio e della famiglia, ritenuto compromesso da comportamenti considerati moralmente scorretti, o presunti tali, da parte di mogli, figlie, sorelle o nuore, spesso in relazione alla loro condotta sessuale (Welchman, Hossain 2005, p. 4).

Parlando del concetto di onore con le operatrici, la connessione con la violenza di genere è stata immediata sia per descrivere le violenze subite dalle giovani con background migratorio, sia per il legame col contesto italiano in relazione alla legge sul delitto d'onore vigente in Italia fino al 1981. I tre gruppi di operatrici si sono trovati quindi d'accordo sul nesso tra onore e codici morali basati sul genere, di cui i membri dei nuclei familiari, in particolare padri e madri, sono i principali esecutori e custodi. Tuttavia alcune operatrici hanno parlato di reputazione (familiare e individuale) anche al di là dell'ambito del controllo sessuale; altre hanno sottolineato l'idea dell'onorare se stessi/e sul piano personale, riferendosi soprattutto all'autodeterminazione delle donne nel riconoscere e rispettare i propri desideri.

Le donne migranti intervistate hanno attribuito al concetto di onore accezioni diverse sulla base delle esperienze personali o del paese di origine, con una varietà di significati anche interna allo stesso contesto di provenienza e nell'uso delle parole usate per designarli. C'è chi ha definito l'onore come rispetto verso

gli altri, verso le persone anziane, ma anche verso sé stesse, in analogia con quanto espresso dalle operatrici. Altre lo associano chiaramente al controllo delle condotte femminili. Al di là dei termini adottati, emerge come sia le operatrici sia le donne migranti riconoscano l'esistenza di codici morali fondati sul genere, all'interno o al di là del concetto d'onore, che limitano la libertà femminile e producono forme di violenza che si inscrivono in "rapporti di potere che, malgrado le differenze, producono in forma ricorrente, anche se non universale, l'oppressione di un genere su un altro" (Gribaldo, Ribeiro Corossacz 2025, pp. 76-77). Esplorare le diverse interpretazioni ha permesso di mettere in discussione la centralità del concetto di onore, spesso soggetto a una lettura culturalista e reificante che incide sulla rappresentazione della violenza contro le donne attribuiti a contesti non occidentali (Keyhani 2013). Una lettura che danneggia specifiche comunità di migranti e che si declina prevalentemente in chiave islamofobica, costruendo l'Islam come un'entità "la cui cultura e religione sono ritenute incompatibili con la laicità, la libertà delle donne e la modernità" (Salih 2008, p. 142). Tale logica trasforma le donne e la loro emancipazione nell'oggetto privilegiato di una supposta missione salvifica dell'Occidente nei confronti delle donne *altre*, retorica che – come ha mostrato Lila Abu-Lughod in riferimento al contesto statunitense post 11 settembre 2001 – ha coinvolto diversi gruppi femministi in campagne per la liberazione delle donne islamiche (Abu-Lughod 2013, pp. 6-8). Un costrutto che sta alla base del dispositivo *femonazionalista* analizzato da Farris, che, nell'intreccio tra nazionalismo, femminismo e politiche neoliberiste, strumentalizza le istanze femministe per giustificare propagande e politiche xenofobe e soprattutto islamofobiche (Farris 2017; tr. it. 2019, pp. 14-15). In esse "l'enfasi [posta] sulle donne migranti musulmane e non occidentali come vittime da salvare" (Ivi, p. 114) rivela una razzializzazione del sessismo in cui la cultura *altra* è dipinta come un inferno sessista per le donne, generando una stigmatizzazione del migrante non occidentale (Ivi, pp. 110-111). Un dispositivo riconducibile al dominio coloniale insito alle retoriche sulle donne islamiche, che ha trasformato i loro corpi, a loro discapito, in un terreno di resistenza culturale al progetto coloniale e imperialista, all'interno di una dinamica di sguardi reciproci, dove le donne sono soggette a pratiche di disciplinamento fondate su gerarchie di potere di matrice patriarcale (Salih 2008, pp. 13-17). Sharzad Mojab (2004) evidenzia come di fatto nel Medio Oriente all'inizio del Novecento la lotta contro il patriarcato sia stata portata avanti da uomini e donne che insieme hanno denunciato le violenze di genere, tra cui i cosiddetti crimini d'onore. Critica sia le posizioni relativiste che giustificano questi delitti all'interno della cornice della differenza culturale, sia la loro culturalizzazione in chiave razzista, ricordando che il femminicidio è un fenomeno globale in cui l'enfasi sullo scarto culturale è espressione del do-

minio coloniale. Abdo (2004) evidenzia il ruolo politico del concetto di cultura, in cui le norme religiose o le strutture familiari vengono strumentalizzate per occultare le strutture di potere sociali e politiche. Per restituire l'importanza della dimensione politica l'autrice analizza il contesto palestinese all'interno della colonizzazione e dell'occupazione da parte del governo israeliano.

Il *bias* orientalista in tema di violenza di genere è diffuso in vari ambiti: dalle propagande politiche in particolar modo di destra – seppur Farris sottolinei la trasversalità degli schieramenti politici in Italia rispetto al tema (Farris 2017; tr. it. 2019, pp. 62-67) – alla loro narrazione nei media; dai report di organizzazioni sui diritti umani ad alcune ricerche in ambito accademico anche all'interno della disciplina antropologica, soprattutto nel legame con il concetto di onore (Abu Lughod 2011); dai dibattiti interni a organismi internazionali sui diritti delle donne alle convenzioni contro la discriminazione e la violenza di genere (Merry, Peroni, Connors in Della Rocca, Zinn 2019, pp. 328-329), all'insegna della tendenza ad attribuire a forme di violenza nei contesti *altri* la categoria di *pratiche culturali tradizionali dannose*.

Quest'attenzione al concetto di cultura mostra la sua problematicità anche nella valutazione in sede giudiziaria degli atti di violenza agiti da stranieri. Sacchi sottolinea che il suo uso nei processi sui crimini d'onore mette in luce la logica essenzialista alla base di due meccanismi correlati: quello della *cultural defense*, ossia la cultura considerata come attenuante, e quello del movente culturale come aggravante (Sacchi 2013, pp. 124-127). Questo ordine del discorso si iscrive nelle forme di orientalismo sopra richiamate ed è confermato da molte delle intervistate quando denunciano la strumentalizzazione delle motivazioni culturali e religiose per giustificare la violenza contro mogli e figlie in nome di specifici codici morali, mobilitati nel quadro di un'azione punitiva rivolta alle donne.

Nella culturalizzazione di questi crimini il comportamento abietto viene rappresentato come altro dal Sé nazionale (Ivi, pp. 131-132). Sacchi evidenzia come in Italia ciò avviene respingendo la memoria della legge sul delitto d'onore, per proiettare sull'*altro* caratteristiche stigmatizzanti (*Ibid.*). Una rappresentazione che riflette il doppio standard evidenziato da Ribeiro Corossacz (2013), secondo cui la violenza degli uomini migranti non occidentali viene culturalizzata, mentre quella degli uomini italiani viene *de-culturalizzata* e interpretata prevalentemente come un'anomalia. Già Abu-Odeh (1997), nella sua analisi comparativa tra Egitto e Stati Uniti, aveva messo in luce come i casi di femminicidio fossero oggetto di rappresentazioni differenziate nei due contesti: in quello egiziano come reazioni alla violazione dell'onore familiare, negli Stati Uniti come crimini passionali riconducibili a un'azione individuale di natura emotiva. Secondo l'autrice ciò genera una dicotomia tra onore e passione parallela a quella

tra tradizione e modernità, che a prescindere da questa retorica porta entrambi i moventi a fungere da giustificazione nell'omicidio di una donna.

È sulla base di quest'ultima considerazione che i centri antiviolenza scelgono di non scindere la cosiddetta violenza basata sull'onore dalle altre forme di violenza sulle donne, riconducibili, tutte allo stesso modo, a un costruito sociale e culturale di matrice patriarcale che conduce al controllo della sessualità femminile tramite l'uso della violenza (Héritier 2002; tr. it. 2004; Tabet 2014).

Allo stesso tempo, alcune caratteristiche della cosiddetta violenza basata sull'onore si distinguono dalle situazioni più comuni affrontate dai centri antiviolenza, ossia la violenza esercitata sulle donne da partner ed ex partner. Evidenziarle non intende ridurre questa forma di violenza a una pratica culturale specifica, rischiando di riprodurre la culturalizzazione denunciata; al contrario, l'obiettivo è mettere in luce aspetti quali la giovane età delle vittime e le loro relazioni familiari con le figure coinvolte, sia sul piano affettivo – per le giovani che lasciano la famiglia – sia rispetto alle risposte sociali.⁴

Uno degli aspetti più discussi nel corso della mia esperienza presso il centro antiviolenza è stato il coinvolgimento delle madri: in alcuni casi conniventi con la violenza esercitata dal padre, in altri direttamente partecipi di atti violenti nei confronti delle figlie. Tale configurazione rientra tra le caratteristiche di quella che la letteratura criminologica definisce *multiple-perpetrators domestic violence* (Salter 2014).⁵ Nei casi che riguardano le giovani con background migratorio, l'esistenza di più soggetti maltrattanti riguarda membri della famiglia nucleare ed estesa, anche oltre frontiera (Cavenaghi 2013). Quest'alleanza è mossa dall'impegno comune di mantenere o ripristinare la reputazione della famiglia, legata a *quello che dicono gli altri*, un'espressione emersa spesso tra le donne intervistate, che la spiegano, in modi impliciti o espliciti, come una violenza psicologica esercitata dalla collettività sui singoli e sulle famiglie; una pressione che genera comportamenti controllanti, coercitivi e talvolta violenti seguendo una doppia morale rispetto alle condotte femminili e maschili.⁶ È in questa dinamica che va compreso il coinvolgimento di figure femminili. La scelta di analizzarlo in questo scritto, focalizzandomi sulle madri, non ha lo scopo di esa-

⁴ Una grande preoccupazione riguarda le sorelle minori, che secondo le intervistate, risentono di un maggiore controllo e di un effetto sulla loro reputazione dopo la fuga di una sorella dalla famiglia. Va inoltre segnalato i centri antiviolenza altoatesini non accolgono nelle loro case giovani minorenni che subiscono violenza, che vengono accolte in strutture per minori.

⁵ Uno studio su questa tipologia di violenza mostra che le donne agiscono violenza prevalentemente in concorso con altri autori e raramente singolarmente (Salter 2014, pp. 102–104).

⁶ Le condotte maschili sono meno monitorate per il minore impatto sulla reputazione della famiglia. Ma nei casi di identità e orientamento sessuale non conformi ai codici morali tradizionali i rischi dei figli maschi sono analoghi a quelli delle figlie (Cavenaghi 2013, pp. 49–50).

minarne le responsabilità nell'azione violenta, bensì di riflettere sul dispositivo culturalista che si attiva e che, intrecciandosi con la genitorialità, genera una specifica semantica morale (Taliani 2019, p. 113), investendo le madri di un peso simbolico inscritto nelle gerarchie di genere, razza e classe.⁷

“E sono anche vittime, da una parte”

Però, se io avessi, cioè se dovessi avere un figlio o figlia che sia e...se il mio compagno si comporta male, ma ingiustamente nei confronti dei miei figli, cioè, io mi faccio valere! Cioè, io difendo i miei figli! Mia mamma non lo ha mai fatto perché non ha...non ha diritto, ecco! Quindi è sempre lì, che mio padre diceva una cosa, era legge! Lei non ha mai difeso noi. Non ha mai...non è mai andata a favore di...cioè cavolo, sei una donna, femmina, quello che vuoi, dovresti capire un'altra femmina, no? Un'altra ragazza, quello che vuoi. Cioè, certe esigenze le capisci. Però non è mai andata contro mio padre. Perché era sottomessa. Non aveva diritto, non aveva potere. (Djamila, intervista 2018)

Djamila è una giovane donna nata da una famiglia di richiedenti asilo e cresciuta in Alto Adige. Ha subito violenze fisiche e psicologiche dal padre al fine di controllare ogni aspetto della sua vita, negandole libertà di movimento e punendola con restrizioni o percosse per le sue effettive o presunte trasgressioni. Djamila è riuscita, con dubbi e paure, a lasciare la famiglia d'origine grazie al sostegno di affetti consolidati al di fuori della cerchia familiare e del sostegno di un centro antiviolenza. Ai tempi dell'intervista era passato qualche anno dall'accoglienza nella casa protetta. Djamila ha sottolineato più volte la rabbia nei confronti del potere esercitato dal padre, intransigente sul piano morale in quanto figura di riferimento sia tra i connazionali in Alto Adige sia nel contesto di provenienza. Ha inoltre espresso dolore e incredulità di fronte a quella che descrive come una combinazione di impotenza e riluttanza della madre nel ribellarsi al controllo paterno – al quale prendeva parte attivamente – e alla violenza esercitati dal marito sulla figlia.

Altre intervistate con esperienze simili descrivono la madre come una figura ambivalente, divisa tra il ruolo di vittima e quello di connivente.

Però ci sono alcune donne, che io ho conosciuto, che insieme al marito, al papà della figlia, possono anche alzare le mani alle figlie. E sono anche vittime da una parte. Perché è la donna che sta in casa, a gestire i bambini e tutti. Il marito è fuori in strada, a lavorare, tipo... Ad esempio se io sono fuori casa, secondo me, sono al cento per cento

⁷ Razza è qui intesa come categoria politica (Gribaldo, Ribeiro Corossacz 2025, p. 11)

sicura che mio padre avrà accusato mia mamma. Perché è lei che è la casalinga, no. È la più grande in casa, che deve gestire, deve sapere la figlia cosa fa, la figlia dove va e tutto. (Maya, intervista 2018)

Nel contesto britannico, una ricerca ha analizzato i dati delle forze dell'ordine e le interviste con agenti di polizia. Ne emerge che le madri sono, tra le figure femminili, le più coinvolte nei casi di HBV, sia in modo dipendente sia indipendente dal marito (Aplin 2016). Lo studio descrive le forme in cui queste agiscono la violenza: aggressioni fisiche, denigrazioni verbali in alleanza con altri/e parenti e induzione all'aborto. Lo studio evidenzia la riluttanza degli agenti intervistati ad attribuire alle madri un'intenzione violenta, collocandone le azioni in un quadro di sottomissione ai mariti, in linea con le narrazioni delle vittime e degli altri parenti coinvolti (Ivi, p. 3-7).⁸ Di fatto nessuna delle intervistate nella ricerca svolta in Alto Adige descrive le proprie madri come autrici di violenza, ma come donne sottomesse al potere del coniuge, investite del ruolo di custodi delle condotte delle figlie al fine di preservarle dal giudizio morale dei/delle connazionali, ma anche dalle stesse ritorsioni del padre o di altri/e familiari.

[...] in these situations usually a mother wants for her daughters to be ehm...on the normal side, to be the normal girl who, who has high morals, who is very honorable, who is a nice girl, who...who get married very quickly with a very good guy, has a very nice house... (Nawal, intervista 2018)

“La funzione delle madri sta a monte e precede, anzi, dovrebbe rendere inutile il compito di controllo e punizione degli uomini” (Cavenaghi 2013, p. 188). Questo emerge non solo dalle parole di Nawal, una giovane richiedente asilo, ma anche dalla testimonianza di Amelia che ha una storia di violenze subite dal padre, dai fratelli e in seguito dal marito. Amelia racconta che la madre le imponeva di tacere, vietandole qualsiasi parola o atto di ribellione verso il padre.

“Non devi [parlare]” e così, sai, sempre. Però come ti ho detto, che le mamme ti imparano così! Io dico no, non è così, ma senti la tua mamma che dice che è così, è così sempre... Tante donne dicono che è così. E quelle ragazze che sono diciamo moderne, sono ancora...sai che pensano più moderno, più... alla libertà, [...] Dentro, come dire, sai, tante ragazze che soffrono. Perché pensano che stanno sbagliando. (Amelia, intervista 2018).

⁸ Una riluttanza attribuibile anche alla tendenza di vedere le donne come soggetti passivi, quindi *in primis* come vittime di violenza, a cui corrisponde tuttavia una maggiore severità di giudizio quando si ritiene che le donne abbiano trasgredito le norme di genere consolidate (Sapelza 2026, p. 250).

Il monito della madre di Amelia, che invita la figlia al silenzio per evitare possibili reazioni violente del padre, conferma l'ipotesi avanzata da Bates secondo cui le madri cercherebbero di mitigare le violenze dei mariti nei confronti delle figlie.

Thus, there may be questions over the extent to which women “perpetrators” have an active choice in their actions. There may be nuances to their roles which have as yet been insufficiently explored – for example, might they be operating tacitly to mitigate or disrupt male-perpetrated violence within the family? (Bates 2018, p. 294)

A rafforzare questa interpretazione contribuisce il racconto di Nadia, una giovane fuggita dal proprio paese dopo essere stata ripudiata dai genitori per uno stupro subito da un conoscente. All'epoca dell'intervista non parlava con i genitori da qualche anno. Nadia mi spiega che il padre è sempre stato violento verso la madre. La madre, a sua volta, monitorava Nadia per evitare che uscisse da sola, o che frequentasse un ragazzo, sia per rispettare specifici codici morali, sia per proteggere sé stessa e la figlia dalle reazioni dell'uomo.

Hema, una giovane arrivata in Alto Adige durante l'adolescenza, spiega che questa pressione era esercitata non tanto dal padre, già emigrato in Italia quando era una bambina, quanto dal contesto sociale. Hema spiega che la madre, in assenza del padre, era investita di una responsabilità maggiore nel vigilare sulla condotta delle figlie, poiché la reputazione familiare e la sicurezza delle figlie ricadeva interamente su di lei:

[...] perché [nel mio paese d'origine] è quasi impossibile che il padre non vive con la famiglia stessa, perché devono vivere tutti assieme, e ... una famiglia senza padre, non è vista bene, perché è molto fragile, [...] gli uomini, pensano che questa donna vive da sola, è facile entrarci o ... fare qualcosa ... di brutto. E quindi mia mamma è stata iperprotettiva per questa cosa perché era sua responsabilità di proteggere le figlie, da questi uomini, da questi vicini, e ... tutte le...figure maschili, in qualsiasi ambito, sia al mercato, sia al negozio, sia ... per la strada, sia la scuola, sia i vicini, non potevamo mai rimanere con una figura maschile da soli in nessun luogo. (Hema, intervista 2018)

Deniz Kandiyoti sottolinea che a seconda dei ruoli, delle condizioni personali e sociali, e delle contingenze storiche, le donne negoziano costantemente con l'ordine patriarcale in cui sono inserite, negoziazioni che non influenzano solo le scelte razionali, ma anche “gli aspetti più inconsci della loro soggettività di genere, poiché permeano sia il contesto della loro prima socializzazione sia l'ambiente culturale in cui vivono da adulte” (Kandiyoti 1988, p. 285). Questo trova conferma nuovamente nelle parole di Hema: “per la mia educazione, che

è stata per vent'anni [nel mio paese d'origine], se sento la parola donna, per me è la responsabilità, l'onore della famiglia, e una che deve vivere per gli altri e non per sé stessa.”

Kandiyoti evidenzia che all'interno di ogni sistema patriarcale, le donne esercitano specifici poteri e relative strategie in relazione ai ruoli ascrittiti e che non tutte le donne sono disposte a rinunciare al potere acquisito all'interno del sistema patriarcale in cui vivono, resistendo alle spinte di cambiamento sia interne alle dinamiche familiari che derivanti dal contesto più ampio. Non solo madri, ma anche altre figure femminili, in primis le suocere, sono investite di questi processi.

Anu è una donna che vive in Alto Adige da molti anni ed è attiva a Bolzano nel sostegno alle donne migranti. Sottolinea il ruolo che ricoprono le suocere all'interno del modello di famiglia estesa, virilocale, nel quale è cresciuta. La suocera ha il potere e il dovere di svolgere un'azione controllante e a volte coercitiva nei confronti delle nuore: una norma non scritta a cui aderiscono sia il marito che la famiglia d'origine della giovane. La letteratura situa tale modello in contesti che Kandiyoti (1988) definisce di assetto patriarcale *classico*, in cui l'uomo più anziano occupa il vertice della gerarchia familiare, mentre la nuora ne rappresenta il gradino più basso. La violenza delle suocere nei confronti delle nuore è connessa al potere che esse acquisiscono nella famiglia, dove le dinamiche di genere si intrecciano con quelle generazionali, attribuendo loro una posizione di controllo nello spazio domestico alimentata dall'alleanza madre-figlio (*Ibid.*). Nei sistemi familiari virilocali, fondati sulla coabitazione e sull'accentramento del potere nelle mani dei figli maschi, destinati a ereditare il ruolo di capofamiglia, le madri fungono da custodi delle condotte interne alla famiglia a scapito delle altre donne, *in primis* le nuore più giovani, ma anche in alleanza con le figlie maggiori (Bates 2018). Un modello patriarcale che Sacchi, Viazzo e Remotti (2024) definiscono bidimensionale nel suo intreccio tra gerarchie di genere e generazionali, nel quale le azioni e le forme di negoziazione agite dalle donne sul piano dei rapporti intergenerazionali è espressione del patriarcato interiorizzato in cui “la subordinazione agli uomini è controbilanciata dal potere di controllo che le anziane esercitano sulle giovani” (Ivi, p. 17). Alla riproduzione di questo assetto, come a diverse forme di negoziazione al suo interno, contribuiscono diversi soggetti, tra cui figli, fratelli e altri membri della famiglia nucleare ed estesa, come ad esempio zii e cognati/e. L'inchiesta di Ayse Onal (2008; tr. it. 2009) sui delitti d'onore nel contesto turco aiuta a superare interpretazioni monolitiche di questi soggetti. Nelle storie raccolte attraverso interviste a uomini che hanno ucciso figlie, madri, mogli e sorelle, le soggettività coinvolte – comprese le donne che emergono dalle narrazioni – restituiscono condizioni sociali e tensioni personali complesse.

Avvicinandosi al testo risulta meno immediato, di quanto ci si aspetti inizialmente, tracciare un confine netto tra le responsabilità individuali e quelle del contesto, seppur emerga chiaramente una discendenza maschile nella riproduzione e affermazione del potere patriarcale, che conduce all'esecuzione dei delitti da parte degli uomini. Senza assolvere i responsabili dalla gravità, innanzitutto umana, dell'atto femminicida, le storie narrate restituiscono l'assetto sociale più ampio, da comprendere nell'intreccio tra codici culturali, tensioni politiche e classe sociale. Interessante è un passaggio del libro nel quale una voce femminile ribadisce che davanti al denaro ogni tradizione è dimenticata (Ivi, p. 29), evidenziando l'uso strumentale dell'onore, che molte delle donne che ho intervistato hanno sottolineato più volte. L'onore, in questo senso, è da comprendere nell'ambito di strategie più complesse che hanno una rilevanza anche economica, come evidenzia Nawal, una delle intervistate. Nawal spiega che il capitale sociale delle famiglie povere è basato esclusivamente sull'onore. Se una figlia è promessa al figlio di qualcun altro, lo deve sposare per mantenere la parola data, perché ciò definisce il prestigio morale della famiglia, che è tutto quello che possiede, mentre una famiglia di classe elevata può permettersi di rompere le regole grazie al suo potere economico; per esempio, dice Nawal, in una famiglia ricca la figlia non viene uccisa ma allontanata, magari facendola studiare in Europa.

I diversi soggetti sono coinvolti nella violenza simbolica di una "società complessivamente organizzata secondo il principio androcentrico" (Bourdieu 1998, p. 9) e ne interiorizzano le gerarchie naturalizzate, aderendo a un ordine dominante che eccede l'ambito domestico e attraversa trasversalmente i contesti sociali e geografici. Sacchi, Viazzo e Remotti (2024) spiegano questo processo nei termini di un neo-patriarcato – rispetto al patriarcato classico – in cui il dominio del padre viene esteso "oltre i confini del gruppo domestico, così da invadere le sfere del potere politico ed economico" (Ivi, p. 19). Ben lontano dal costituire un costruito coerente e monolitico, è attraversato da cambiamenti storici, sociali e politici definiti sull'asse del privilegio, di cui il genere è rilevante tanto quanto lo sono le forme di oppressione basate su età, razza e classe sociale (hooks 2015; tr. it. 2021).

Veena Das (2008) mostra come violenza, ordine politico e ruoli di genere siano interconnessi e si rafforzino reciprocamente, poiché la violenza è intimamente intrecciata alle forme di relazione sociale e alle strutture di potere; la cui comprensione richiede un'analisi che consideri genere, norme sociali e soggettività come aspetti inseparabili.

hooks sottolinea la necessità di analizzare la maschilità come ideale basato sul dominio di alcuni soggetti su altri, un dominio che danneggia gli stessi uomini (Ivi, pp. 137-134), entro le briglie di una complicità "omosociale maschile"

(Oddone 2020, p. 107), in conformità con un modello sociale eteronormativo, fondato su asimmetrie di genere. Secondo Oddone la maschilità, come ideale e come esperienza incorporata, ha bisogno di affermarsi attraverso pratiche che trovano legittimità nell'ordine sociale esistente e che coinvolge diversi soggetti nella sua riproduzione (Ivi, p. 131).

È all'interno della complessità che ho illustrato che va compreso il ruolo delle madri nell'esercizio della violenza, un ruolo che richiede un ulteriore livello di analisi alla luce della dimensione genitoriale.

Il dispositivo morale della genitorialità

Una ricerca avviata nel 2024 analizza come i servizi sociali altoatesini leggono e gestiscono le effettive o presunte difficoltà genitoriali attribuite alle donne migranti.⁹ La ricerca parte dalla lettura critica dell'*intensive parenting*, un ideale di genitorialità che permea le istituzioni coinvolte nella tutela minori (Lanini 2024) e che si basa su un modello di "*total motherhood*" (Sità 2017 p. 46), cioè di dedizione e investimento pressoché totalizzante sul piano emotivo, economico e temporale. A questo aspetto si affianca una visione deterministica della genitorialità appiattita sulle competenze dei genitori, con aspettative diverse in base al genere; competenze basate su saperi esperti, che pretendono di entrare – anche attraverso l'imposizione istituzionale – nelle pratiche domestiche della cura dei/delle figli/e, iper-responsabilizzando e colpevolizzando madri e padri (Ivi, pp. 46-48).

La ricerca, ancora in corso, coinvolge assistenti sociali, personale del terzo settore (servizi di supporto alla genitorialità o per persone migranti e richiedenti asilo, centri antiviolenza) e madri con background migratorio assistite dai servizi sociali. Dopo un questionario esplorativo che ha coinvolto 61 assistenti sociali, il progetto prevede lo svolgimento di interviste con i vari soggetti e un ciclo di focus group.

Tra le problematiche individuate dagli/dalle assistenti sociali intervistati/e, emerge la difficile relazione delle madri con figli/e adolescenti che non vogliono conformarsi alle regole dettate dalla cultura di provenienza dei genitori. Tale questione riguarda soprattutto il rapporto madre-figlia, anche indipendentemente dal padre. Il conflitto tra cultura di provenienza e quella del contesto di immigrazione è associato spesso a paesi dell'Asia Meridionale, prove-

⁹ La ricerca si svolge nell'ambito delle mie attività presso il Centro di Competenza per il Lavoro Sociale e le Politiche Sociali della Libera Università di Bolzano.

nienza alla quale viene attribuita una maggiore chiusura dei nuclei familiari e della comunità di riferimento, una frequente dipendenza della moglie dal marito e un maggiore isolamento delle donne, scelto o imposto dal partner, alla luce delle specifiche caratteristiche personali e familiari.¹⁰ L'isolamento comporterebbe maggiori barriere linguistiche, minore accesso ai servizi e un marcato gap culturale tra sistemi di valori opposti. Secondo gli/le assistenti sociali, questo riguarda soprattutto il ruolo della donna nella famiglia, che per scelta o imposizione svolge esclusivamente la funzione di cura e di custode dei valori culturali a cui i figli, e in particolare le figlie, devono aderire. Questi valori dettano una serie di regole molto stringenti sulla relazione con coetanei/e, sulle uscite autonome, sull'abbigliamento e sulle scelte matrimoniali. Se gli effetti dei processi migratori e delle politiche correlate, in termini di status legale e interventi sociali, sono considerati fattori importanti dagli/dalle assistenti sociali, lo scarto culturale rimane la chiave interpretativa più immediata, soprattutto in due ambiti: modelli educativi e di accudimento e concezione della donna e del suo ruolo. In relazione al secondo aspetto, lo scarto culturale innesca un dispositivo morale in cui l'opposizione tra la donna custode di codici tradizionali e quella che li supera per aderire a ideali moderni di emancipazione definisce il concetto di "buona madre" per le figlie cresciute nel contesto di immigrazione, anch'esse intrappolate nella rappresentazione del conflitto tra culture. Questa prospettiva comprende anche l'idea, espressa da alcuni/e assistenti sociali, della maggiore difficoltà delle donne migranti a uscire da situazioni di violenza domestica. Pur riconoscendo la trasversalità del fenomeno, alcuni/e ritengono che nei nuclei con background migratorio la violenza sia più soggetta a una normalizzazione all'interno dei rapporti di genere.

È importante evidenziare che molti studi mostrano l'esistenza di processi di *mother blaming* nei confronti delle madri in situazione di violenza domestica attuati per lo più dai servizi sociali e dalle istituzioni correlate, tra cui il tribunale. In questo processo, che la letteratura specialistica definisce come forma di vittimizzazione secondaria, le madri vengono colpevolizzate per non essere in grado di allontanarsi dai partner violenti o sono soggette a un maggiore monitoraggio delle capacità genitoriali rispetto al padre, anche dopo essersi allontanate da quest'ultimo; una risposta che oscura i condizionamenti sociali ed economici che stanno alla base delle difficoltà di allontanarsi dalla violenza e

¹⁰ Il focus su questa area geografica riflette la tendenza a cristallizzare lo scarto culturale in base alla provenienza, con particolare attenzione alle aree a maggioranza musulmana, soprattutto in relazione alla subordinazione delle donne; tuttavia occorre considerare le diverse esperienze lavorative degli/delle assistenti sociali nei vari territori della provincia, che si differenziano in relazione alle provenienze delle famiglie migranti presenti.

che nega la struttura degli stereotipi di genere attraverso cui si guarda all'ideale materno (Humphreys, Absler 2011). Nei casi che coinvolgono madri migranti, viene inoltre a mancare la considerazione delle difficoltà legate ai processi migratori e alle barriere istituzionali che ne conseguono (Hauge, Kiamanesh 2020; Della Rocca 2023, pp. 141-167).

Caroselli, in una precedente ricerca in Alto Adige, rileva la tendenza dei servizi a imporre alle madri richiedenti asilo "comportamenti conformi alle norme nella società di origine [...] per trasformarle in 'madri meritevoli', [...] [mentre] gli enti locali non si adeguano alle trasformazioni in atto a livello nazionale in materia di immigrazione, asilo, tratta e sfruttamento, generando forme di esclusione" (Caroselli 2024, p. 87). L'autrice analizza il giudizio morale verso le pratiche genitoriali delle donne richiedenti asilo cosiddetti *fuori quota*, (cioè respinte dal confine del Brennero verso l'Austria), imbrigliate nella categoria di soggetti vulnerabili e al contempo indesiderati (Ivi, p. 88).

Nei casi che riguardano la ricerca in corso, è lo scarto culturale, inscritto nella cornice discorsiva che ruota intorno a genere, violenza, cultura ed emancipazione, a orientare la valutazione della *buona genitorialità* delle madri con background migratorio. Alla luce dei processi di *mother blaming*, l'attenzione si concentra sul divario culturale all'interno del binomio tradizione-modernità. L'investimento morale sulle madri, con radici storiche consolidate nel contesto occidentale, innesca una specifica etica dell'amore materno che distingue tra madri capaci di colmare lo scarto culturale, sostenendo le figlie contro le norme patriarcali dei paesi d'origine, e madri che riproducono tali norme antepo- nendo i codici morali basati sul genere al benessere delle figlie. Un dispositivo morale in cui l'idea della cultura rappresenta le madri in una costante tensione tra assoggettamento e colpevolezza.

Riflessioni conclusive

Nel libro "Femminicidi d'onore. Dal 'processo Saman' ai diritti negati delle donne migranti" a cura di Ilaria Boiano e Isabella Peretti, l'avvocata Giovanna Fava parla di Nazia, madre di Saman, giovane di origine pachistana uccisa nel 2016 dai familiari, il cui caso ha avuto grandissima risonanza sui media italiani. Fava ricostruisce i fatti che coinvolgono Nazia nell'uccisione della figlia, definendola come una figura rimasta in ombra, silenziosa, di cui si sa molto poco. Da qui prendono le mosse le riflessioni sulla donna, che secondo l'autrice "deve aver pensato di non avere altra scelta" (Fava 2024, p. 31). Fava con le sue considerazioni non intende assolvere Nazia dalle sue responsabilità nell'uccisione della figlia, ma invita a guardarla oltre il *paradigma della colpevolezza* per cercare

di comprendere le condizioni che danno forma ai suoi comportamenti e alle sue scelte. Prende spunto da questa storia per aprire questioni più ampie che ci interrogano sulle effettive possibilità delle donne migranti nel contesto di immigrazione.

Kandiyoti, in *Bargaining with Patriarchy*, solleva la questione delle reali possibilità delle donne coinvolte nella riproduzione dell'oppressione patriarcale di negoziare la propria posizione e invita a riflettere su quale alternativa venga loro offerta per sfidare lo status quo (Kandiyoti 1998, p. 282). Le intervistate ci parlano della presenza di molteplici fattori che influenzano il modo in cui le madri subiscono ed esercitano le gerarchie di genere nell'esperienza migratoria.

Una donna se è laggiù nel suo paese sempre ha un backup, sarebbe la famiglia, il dietro, per proteggere o per aiutare o ...per qualsiasi cosa, c'è la famiglia. Invece qua... le donne che vivono da sole, nel senso ... che hanno lasciato la famiglia laggiù, si trova isolata se viene violentata, sì che si trova isolata, si sente sola, si sente peggio. E anche che è debole la lingua. È ancora peggio. Una persona che non sa parlare, che non ha... non sa la legge, è brutto. (Anu, intervista 2018)

Le ricerche in Alto Adige hanno evidenziato, in conformità alla letteratura sul tema, l'influenza delle barriere strutturali che le donne migranti affrontano nei contesti di immigrazione e che sono di ostacolo sia in termini di prevenzione della violenza di genere, sia di sostegno nei casi di violenza domestica. Le barriere linguistiche sono quelle maggiormente evidenziate sia dagli/dalle assistenti sociali nella ricerca attuale, sia dalle giovani intervistate in quella precedente.

No, lei ha paura, lei ha bisogno di me, perché ...non sa scrivere, non sa leggere, non sa la lingua e... non si sente bene qua, perché non...perché non parla con nessuno e quindi..." (Hema, intervista 2018).

Le parole di Hema evidenziano il ruolo che molte figlie assumono in questi casi, contribuendo tra l'altro al mantenimento di queste ultime dentro i confini di uno specifico assetto familiare nel contesto di immigrazione. Alle barriere linguistiche si aggiungono quelle economiche sulla base di discriminazioni di razza, genere e classe nell'accesso al lavoro e alla casa; e ancora le barriere legali, che legano le donne al permesso di soggiorno dei mariti, determinando una dipendenza difficile da modificare sul piano giuridico e che ha implicazioni sociali importanti, soprattutto quando coesistono con le altre barriere elencate (Della Rocca 2023). In questo quadro, la famiglia stessa rappresenta per alcune un luogo di protezione dal razzismo, come spiegano Naima e Zara, due delle

donne intervistate arrivate in Italia rispettivamente da adulta e da bambina. Entrambe si sentono protette dai membri maschili della famiglia all'interno del contesto di immigrazione. La sfera domestica non rappresenta solo un'adesione "all'ordine sociale sessuato, ma è anche una forma di agency" (De Petris in D'Odorico, Vianello 2011, p. 108). Interessante in questo senso è l'esperienza di Choiti, che è arrivata in Alto Adige senza il marito e lavora come può nonostante le difficoltà linguistiche che le precludono lavori stabili e ben remunerati. Il suo scopo è ricongiungere il coniuge, sperando che possa lavorare permettendole di svincolarsi da questo onere, per svolgere il ruolo di moglie e madre, che per lei rappresenterebbe una condizione di minore stress all'interno della sua esperienza migratoria.

Le numerose questioni sollevate restituiscono una pluralità di dimensioni che non può ridursi a interpretazioni culturaliste e aspettative morali basate sul genere. Analizzarle mira a guardare criticamente a schemi dicotomici quali tradizione *vs.* modernità, cultura *vs.* emancipazione, assoggettamento *vs.* buona genitorialità: tre dicotomie che si sovrappongono, inscritte nel paradigma della colpevolezza e che generano una specifica *semantica morale oppositiva*.

L'analisi proposta non mira a relativizzare la gravità delle responsabilità attribuibili alle madri – o ad altre figure della famiglia – in casi come quello di Saman. Non intende nemmeno considerare il coinvolgimento delle donne nell'esercizio della violenza come un fenomeno limitato alla tipologia di violenza analizzata: un tema difficile, che secondo bell hooks necessita di un'analisi femminista, soprattutto in riferimento alla violenza di soggetti adulti, comprese le donne, su minori (hooks, 2015; tr. it. 2021, pp. 135-140). Una riflessione che bell hooks, non a caso, collega alla tendenza delle istituzioni a porre particolare attenzione alle famiglie monogenitoriali condotte da donne, soggette ad essere considerate disfunzionali sulla base di un ideale di "famiglia patriarcale e biparentale" (Ivi, p. 143). hooks mostra ancora una volta quanto facilmente si attivino processi di colpevolizzazione delle madri sulla base di un ideale di maternità distante dai presupposti dell'analisi femminista.

Un processo analogo emerge in un articolo di criminologia femminista che analizza il coinvolgimento delle donne nel *trafficking*, sia come autrici sia come vittime di reato (Sapelza 2026). Lo studio mette in luce un trattamento giuridico differenziato basato su specifici stereotipi di genere: da un lato, le donne vengono reclutate nelle organizzazioni criminali perché sono solitamente soggette a pene meno severe; dall'altro, quando l'attenzione si concentra sui fattori sociali e sulle caratteristiche individuali, le sanzioni nei loro confronti tendono ad aggravarsi, proprio in virtù delle aspettative morali di genere, tra cui l'ideale materno nel caso di imputate con figli/e (Ivi, p.256). Anche in questo studio emerge una tensione nella valutazione dei comportamenti femminili tra

il ruolo di vittima e quello di autrice di reato, influenzata da specifici stereotipi di genere (e di razza), con conseguenze sulla percezione della credibilità delle donne. Un elemento che si ritrova nell'analisi di Gribaldo (2021) sulla riconoscibilità della violenza domestica nelle aule di tribunale, dove la valutazione si concentra per lo più sulle dinamiche di coppia fortemente segnate dagli stereotipi di genere, con l'effetto di distogliere l'attenzione dalla dimensione sociale del fenomeno.

Quando questi dispositivi morali si intersecano con la culturalizzazione della violenza si configura una *teleologia dell'emancipazione femminile* (Pinelli 2021; Farris 2017; tr. it. 2019, pp. 200-204) che, nel caso delle madri, investe la genitorialità. Pinelli interpreta la teleologia dell'emancipazione riguardanti le donne richiedenti asilo come il risultato di processi di culturalizzazione strettamente intrecciati alla rappresentazione della violenza come "pratica sedimentata delle loro culture di origine" (Ivi, p. 119), soggetta a una *depoliticizzazione* (Ivi, p. 135) rispetto ai condizionamenti sociali, alle rappresentazioni morali e alle dinamiche particolari in cui si manifesta.

L'intento di questo articolo è contribuire al dibattito sulla comprensione della violenza di genere attraverso gli strumenti dell'analisi antropologica in dialogo con l'esperienza dei centri antiviolenza, il sapere delle esperte e i vissuti delle donne direttamente o indirettamente coinvolte.

A partire da un'analisi critica del concetto di onore nel suo legame con una specifica forma di violenza, ho evidenziato la lettura culturalista attraverso cui viene comunemente interpretata. Ho quindi contestualizzato il coinvolgimento delle madri nell'esercizio della violenza sulle figlie alla luce dei vissuti di queste ultime, le cui voci mostrano le ambivalenze che vivono sul piano emotivo e che generano sofferenza e incredulità; ma che restituiscono allo stesso tempo le contraddizioni nelle posizioni delle loro madri entro coordinate morali e sociali entro le quali negoziano le loro effettive possibilità in base a condizioni personali e trasformazioni sociali che impattano sulla loro vita, tra cui l'esperienza migratoria. Infine ho compreso queste dinamiche alla luce di un'ideale di genitorialità marcato da stereotipi di genere.

Mi auguro che un confronto su queste basi possa aiutare a superare *bias* culturalisti e i dispositivi morali presenti nei servizi e nelle istituzioni, nonché a sottrarre il dibattito da letture populiste che rafforzano narrazioni che risultano seduttive proprio in funzione del loro appiattimento su stereotipi di genere e razza – come suggerisce Abu-Lughod in "*Seduction of the 'Honour Crime'*" (2011).

Rifacendomi proprio ad Abu-Lughod, desidero ribadire che nello sviscerare le dimensioni politiche e sociali che sottendono alla questione analizzata, l'intento non è giustificare e né relativizzare l'azione dei soggetti che esercitano

la cosiddetta violenza basata sull'onore (Ivi, p. 51), siano esse madri o altre figure. L'obiettivo è piuttosto contribuire a rendere più efficaci le risposte rivolte alle giovani che vivono situazioni drammatiche e che, come spesso accade alle donne che si ribellano alla violenza, possono risultare molto pericolose sul piano dell'incolumità fisica e psicologica. Un impegno che richiede innanzitutto interventi di protezione efficaci rispetto ai rischi legati alle dinamiche della violenza che subiscono all'interno della famiglia d'origine, nucleare ed estesa, ma che impone anche una riflessione critica sulle rappresentazioni che orientano la lettura di questa forma di violenza e delle diverse figure coinvolte.

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***Children on the move* tra politiche
di protezione ed esclusione di genere:**
il caso dei minori nelle strade di Dire Dawa
(Etiopia)

***Children on the move* between
protection policies and
gender-based exclusion**
the case of street-connected minors in
Dire Dawa (Ethiopia)

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Abstract: This article demonstrates how policies designed to promote the welfare and well-being of vulnerable groups – in this case, migrant minors or “children on the move” in Ethiopia – may, through the use of seemingly neutral categories, conceal forms of *gender bias*. To support this argument, the article examines the concepts of protection, mobility, and the deinstitutionalization of childcare facilities, focusing in particular on family reintegration policies and identifying the critical points where gender becomes a decisive factor. Ethnographic fieldwork conducted in the city of Dire Dawa made it possible to highlight these issues.

Keywords: children on the move; family reintegration policies; gender bias; Ethiopia; Dire Dawa

Introduzione

La ricerca etnografica condotta a Dire Dawa, in Etiopia, ha coinvolto due ricercatrici sostenute da una ONG nell’ambito di un progetto dedicato ai “minori in movimento” (in inglese “children on the move”).¹ Nel lessico

¹ L’indagine si inserisce nell’ambito del progetto Supporting Protection, Education and Movement for vulnerable children in Eastern Africa (SPEM), finanziato dalla Commissione per le Adozioni Internazionali (CAI) e finalizzato all’analisi dei fenomeni di migrazione e lavoro minorile in tre Paesi

del progetto questa espressione indica minori che hanno intrapreso percorsi migratori all'interno del paese, spesso viaggiando da soli – nel progetto sono indicati come “minori non accompagnati”, cioè privi della tutela e della protezione degli adulti – e che, una volta giunti in città, cercano di sopravvivere organizzandosi in piccoli gruppi di coetanei e inserendosi in diverse attività dell'economia informale urbana. Il lavoro si è inizialmente concentrato sull'osservazione dei centri di accoglienza destinati ai minori nella fase che precede il loro reinserimento familiare.² La città offre un panorama variegato di associazioni e organizzazioni che lavorano in collaborazione con le entità governative responsabili delle politiche per le donne e l'infanzia, con l'obiettivo di favorire la reintegrazione dei minori che vivono in strada all'interno delle loro famiglie di origine. L'osservazione ha evidenziato come le ragazze migranti restino spesso escluse dai target di intervento e dai percorsi di protezione: l'uso del termine inglese *child* o *children*, nella sua formulazione apparentemente neutra, tende a tradursi in una sistematica esclusione delle bambine e delle adolescenti dai beneficiari degli interventi. L'adozione di espressioni apparentemente inclusive che non distinguono tra maschile e femminile, come *children on the move*, contribuisce a invisibilizzare la specificità dei percorsi migratori femminili e delle attività lavorative che molte ragazze sono chiamate a svolgere sin dall'infanzia e durante tutta l'adolescenza, ad esempio nell'ambito del servizio domestico. Un ulteriore nodo critico individuato dall'indagine riguarda la non univocità del concetto di “famiglia” e di “protezione familiare” nei diversi contesti culturali (cfr. Declich 2020), che si rivela centrale nell'analisi delle modalità di reinserimento proposte dai programmi di intervento. Il contrasto tra la normalizzazione del lavoro svolto da molte adolescenti all'interno delle abitazioni e la forte stigmatizzazione dei minori che vivono in strada risulta particolarmente rilevante per comprendere le dinamiche di esclusione di genere osservate a Dire Dawa. Mentre le attività domestiche femminili vengono lette come parte integrante dell'ordine familiare – e dunque come compatibili con una condizione di “protezione” – la presenza dei ragazzi nello spazio pubblico urbano è associata a marginalità, devianza e disordine

dell'Africa Orientale (Etiopia, Kenya, Tanzania). La ONG che ha supportato le due ricercatrici in Etiopia è il CIFA (Centro Internazionale per l'Infanzia e la Famiglia).

² Dopo aver individuato e contattato alcuni ragazzi che vivono nelle strade di Dire Dawa, lo staff del CIFA li accoglie in una struttura temporanea dove soggiornano per un periodo limitato, generalmente compreso tra due settimane e tre mesi, in attesa del ricongiungimento con le rispettive famiglie di origine. L'edificio dispone di una stanza con letti a castello, di un terrazzo attrezzato con un biliardino per il tempo libero, e offre ai minori beni essenziali come abiti nuovi, materiale scolastico e cibo.

sociale. È in questa opposizione tra interno ed esterno, tra casa e strada, che si costruisce una gerarchia morale delle vulnerabilità (Bonfanti, Chen, Massa 2022; Fassin 2007): alcune forme di sfruttamento e dipendenza, perché iscritte nello spazio domestico e nei ruoli di genere femminili, risultano socialmente tollerate e istituzionalmente invisibili; altre, perché visibili e percepite come perturbanti dell'ordine urbano, attivano invece l'urgenza dell'intervento umanitario.

Alla luce di queste premesse, il presente contributo è strutturato come segue. Dopo aver illustrato la metodologia e il contesto della ricerca, viene proposta una breve analisi di alcune categorie apparentemente neutre, come *“child”* e *“family”*, mettendo in luce i significati locali e le modalità attraverso cui il linguaggio progettuale della protezione dell'infanzia le adotta come dispositivi classificatori, incidendo sulle forme di visibilità e invisibilità delle vulnerabilità femminili. La sezione successiva si concentra sulle prospettive di mobilità e sugli approcci di de-istituzionalizzazione adottati dalle organizzazioni impegnate nella protezione dei minori. L'analisi evidenzia le tendenze lessicali e classificatorie che contribuiscono a tracciare una netta linea di separazione tra coloro che vengono inclusi nei progetti – i minori “non accompagnati” che vivono nelle strade di Dire Dawa – e coloro che ne restano esclusi, come numerose ragazze migranti che lavorano in spazi chiusi sotto la supervisione di un presunto familiare. La cornice sulle politiche sociali di protezione infantile e sul linguaggio progettuale viene confrontata con l'ampio dibattito accademico inaugurato negli anni Duemila dalla cosiddetta “svolta della mobilità” (*mobility turn*) (cfr. Cresswell 2006; Declich, Rodet 2018; Nyamnjoh 2022; Sheller, Urry 2006; Riccio 2019; Salazar 2019). Il contributo prosegue delineando il profilo dei minori in movimento inclusi nei progetti della ONG che ha sostenuto la ricerca, così come in quelli promossi da molte delle organizzazioni intervistate. Vengono descritte le loro esperienze lavorative in ambito urbano e le variabili che, nell'ottica degli interventi di protezione, li rendono classificabili come “soli/e” o “già protetti/e”, e quindi come potenziali beneficiari (o meno) dei progetti. Tali descrizioni contribuiscono a evidenziare con maggiore chiarezza le dinamiche di esclusione di genere.

La ricerca e la metodologia di raccolta dei dati

La ricerca è stata realizzata a Dire Dawa tra agosto e settembre 2024, attraverso incontri che hanno coinvolto le ricercatrici, diverse organizzazioni della società civile attive nella protezione dei minori migranti in condizioni di vulnerabilità

e gli uffici governativi competenti.³ La maggior parte delle organizzazioni intervistate si occupa dell'assistenza a minori comunemente definiti come “bambini di strada” – in inglese “*street children*”, “*children in street situations*” o “*street-connected children*” – ovvero privi di una residenza stabile, che vivono e lavorano quotidianamente nello spazio urbano di Dire Dawa.⁴

La raccolta dei dati ha incluso interviste individuali, condotte sia in forma semi-strutturata sia in modalità aperta e libera, oltre a discussioni di gruppo (FGD – Focus Group Discussions). Sono stati coinvolti i rappresentanti di 13 organizzazioni, tra enti governativi e non governativi, associazioni, ONG, istituti di ricerca, oltre a minori beneficiari dei progetti da esse attuati.⁵

Sono state intervistate individualmente 16 persone (12 uomini e 4 donne), di età compresa tra i 26 e i 51 anni, tutti membri o rappresentanti delle organizzazioni e istituzioni precedentemente menzionate. La marcata disparità di genere tra gli intervistati rappresenta una delle limitazioni della ricerca, che non è stato possibile arginare a causa del tempo ristretto a disposizione e delle specificità organizzative del contesto. La ONG ospitante si era infatti impegnata a predisporre una lista di persone che fossero disponibili per gli incontri al momento dell'arrivo delle ricercatrici.⁶ Per rispetto del lavoro svolto dallo staff locale e per non interferire con le modalità di pianificazione adottate, si è scelto deliberatamente di non esercitare pressioni sulla ONG né sulle altre organizzazioni coinvolte rispetto alla selezione degli “informatori”. Nella maggior parte dei casi, gli interlocutori designati erano uomini che ricoprivano ruoli di rilievo all'interno delle rispettive strutture. Lo staff locale aveva inoltre chiarito sin dall'inizio quanto fossero densi i calendari lavorativi delle organizzazioni partecipanti, evidenziandone l'attivismo e la dedizione nella tutela dei diritti dei minori, e suggerendo implicitamente la necessità di attenersi ai nominativi indicati dai responsabili, senza avanzare ulteriori richieste. Parallelamente agli incontri più formali, si è comunque cercato di raccogliere una pluralità

³ Il supporto dello staff del CIFA è stato indispensabile per facilitare e permettere i contatti con le associazioni, organizzazioni e autorità incontrate.

⁴ Consultare il sito dell'Alto Commissariato delle Nazioni Unite per i Diritti Umani, per un approfondimento sui diversi termini utilizzati per descrivere i bambini/e e i ragazzi/e di strada: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/calls-for-input/2025/call-input-child-centered-response-sexual-exploitation-children-street> (Consultato il: 22/06/2025)

⁵ Di seguito l'elenco delle istituzioni coinvolte: Save the Children; SOS Children's Village; Dire Dawa Justice Security & Legal Affairs Bureau; Forum on Sustainable Child Empowerment (FSCE); Dire Dawa Community Action (DDCA); Bureau of Women and Children Affairs (BoWCA) Dire Dawa; Bureau of Women and Children Affairs (BoWCA) HararCharity Association in Harar; Restore the Broken in Harar; Hohite Misrak Child Care Center in Harar; Positive Action for Development (PAD); Dire Dawa University; United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

⁶ Tutti i membri del personale impiegato dall'ONG a Dire Dawa sono etiopi.

di prospettive sul tema di ricerca, intrattenendo conversazioni informali con interlocutori eterogenei: dai collaboratori di CIFA attivi sul campo a persone incontrate in modo occasionale durante la permanenza a Dire Dawa.

Sono state inoltre raccolte le testimonianze di undici minori, tutti di sesso maschile, di età compresa tra i 13 e i 15 anni: sette hanno partecipato a FGDs, mentre quattro sono stati intervistati individualmente. Anche in questo caso, i tentativi di coinvolgere bambine e ragazze non hanno avuto esito positivo, evidenziando al contempo una dinamica di esclusione di genere che costituisce uno dei fili conduttori di questo articolo. L'unica occasione che sembrava offrire una possibilità concreta di interagire con una ragazzina è presto venuta meno. Si trattava dell'unica "beneficiaria" tra i minori selezionati da una ONG partner del CIFA e, per questo, avevamo sperato di poterla incontrare o, quantomeno, di raccogliere alcune informazioni sulla sua esperienza. Tuttavia, ci è stato comunicato che il caso era particolarmente sensibile (verosimilmente anche per via di episodi di abuso e grave sfruttamento) e che, per ragioni di tutela e riservatezza, restava sotto l'esclusiva responsabilità della ONG e delle istituzioni governative locali competenti, senza la possibilità di divulgare alcuna informazione in merito. Pur comprendendo pienamente la necessità di privacy, il caso rivela che effettivamente la necessità di protezione delle ragazze emerge solo quando si verificano abusi conclamati che vengono alla luce, invece che in forma preventiva.

Il coinvolgimento dei minori rappresenta un ambito particolarmente delicato, che solleva inevitabilmente numerose questioni etiche nelle diverse fasi della ricerca – prima, durante e dopo il lavoro sul campo – a maggior ragione quando, come in questo caso, i tempi per la raccolta dei dati risultano relativamente ristretti. Sebbene l'ampio ventaglio di dilemmi etici – dalle dinamiche relazionali sul campo, alle sfide legate alla rappresentazione e alla restituzione narrativa delle esperienze altrui – attraversino anche le indagini etnografiche condotte con adulti, il lavoro con i bambini tende a esercitare "un effetto di amplificazione", al punto da mettere talvolta in discussione l'intera cornice etica della disciplina antropologica (Razy 2018, p. 20). In questo studio, i momenti di dialogo con i minori non sono stati predefiniti né strutturati, ma sono scaturiti in modo spontaneo durante le rare occasioni in cui è stato possibile visitare il piccolo centro di accoglienza gestito dal CIFA e da una ONG partner. A questi si sono aggiunti brevi scambi informali e osservazioni sul campo nel corso delle visite ai progetti delle diverse organizzazioni intervistate, in coincidenza con la presenza dei minori nelle rispettive strutture. Si sono prese le distanze dall'approccio compassionevole insito nella nozione globalizzata dell'infanzia, che tende a rappresentare i minori come esseri "incompleti", "innocenti" e costantemente vulnerabili, bisognosi di protezione (cfr. Evers, Notermans, Van

Ommering 2011). È stata adottata una prospettiva centrata sulle loro esigenze, desideri e aspirazioni, riconoscendo che questi possono differire sensibilmente dalle priorità e dalle visioni di chi si occupa della tutela dei loro diritti.

La maggior parte delle interviste, tuttavia, non ha coinvolto direttamente i minori, ma i membri e rappresentanti degli enti impegnati nei progetti di protezione a loro destinati. Il punto di vista di questi ultimi è stato approfondito anche successivamente al periodo di ricerca sul campo, in particolare nell'ambito di una fase di restituzione e disseminazione dei risultati svoltasi tra la fine di aprile e la metà di maggio 2025, attraverso una conferenza organizzata a Dire Dawa. L'evento – promosso dal CIFA nell'ambito di una giornata più ampia dedicata anche alla presentazione delle attività della ONG – ha coinvolto una pluralità di interlocutori, tra cui funzionari delle autorità locali, rappresentanti di organizzazioni nazionali e internazionali, sia governative che non governative, membri della società civile, associazioni attive nella tutela dei migranti e professionisti del settore. L'intento dell'iniziativa è stato quello di creare uno spazio di confronto attorno ai risultati emersi dalla ricerca etnografica, all'interno del quale i partecipanti potessero esprimere osservazioni critiche, proporre riflessioni, suggerire integrazioni o modifiche, e contribuire alla definizione di una lista di raccomandazioni utili per l'elaborazione dei futuri interventi della ONG rivolti ai minori in movimento. Da questo confronto è emersa una tensione tra la rappresentazione largamente condivisa, che identifica la strada come lo spazio primario del rischio e della vulnerabilità – ritenuti colpire soprattutto i ragazzi – e posizioni più critiche, espresse in particolare da organizzazioni attive nel contrasto alla violenza di genere, che hanno richiamato l'attenzione sui rischi meno visibili associati agli spazi chiusi in cui vivono e lavorano molte ragazze.

Il contesto di ricerca: Dire Dawa

Situata nella parte orientale dell'Etiopia, Dire Dawa confina con le regioni di Oromia e Somali. Secondo le stime demografiche del 2024 fornite dall'Ethiopian Statistics Service (ESS), la popolazione complessiva dell'amministrazione è di circa 566.000 abitanti, dei quali circa 366.000 risiedono nell'area urbana e 200.000 in quella rurale.⁷ La città è caratterizzata da una composizione della popolazione estremamente eterogeneità. I dati del 2021 dell'UNHCR indicano

⁷ Ethiopian Statistical Service: https://ess.gov.et/download/projected_population-2024/ (Consultato il: 22/06/2025)

che il gruppo più numeroso è costituito dagli Oromo (48%), seguito dagli Amhara (27,7%), dai Somali (13,9%) e dai Guragie (4,5%), che comprendono sottogruppi come i Sebat Bet (2,3%), i Sodo (0,8%) e i Silte (1,4%). I restanti gruppi rappresentano complessivamente il 5,9% della popolazione.⁸ Questa pluralità etnica si riflette anche sul piano linguistico: sebbene l'amarico, lingua ufficiale del governo federale, sia la più utilizzata negli ambiti amministrativi e pubblici, gran parte della popolazione parla come lingua madre il somalo o l'afan oromo. Il bilinguismo, e talvolta il multilinguismo, costituisce pertanto una delle peculiarità sociolinguistiche della città. Dal punto di vista religioso, Dire Dawa è a maggioranza musulmana, ma ospita anche una consistente presenza cristiana, composta da fedeli ortodossi, protestanti e cattolici, oltre a una minoranza appartenente ad altre confessioni (cfr. Iazzolino 2018, Worku 2017). L'eterogeneità etnica, linguistica e religiosa che contraddistingue la città ha contribuito a consolidarne l'immagine di contesto relativamente inclusivo e pacifico, capace di favorire la convivenza tra gruppi differenti e di attrarre migranti provenienti da varie aree del Paese. La sua posizione strategica lungo l'asse che collega Addis Abeba a Gibuti la rende inoltre un nodo cruciale nei flussi migratori diretti verso gli Stati del Golfo. Secondo l'Organizzazione Internazionale del Lavoro (IOM), sebbene esista una vasta letteratura sulle dinamiche migratorie africane, vi è una significativa lacuna nella ricerca dedicata ai bambini, ai giovani e ai modelli di migrazione mista nei Paesi del Corno d'Africa (cfr. Zeleke 2020). Le informazioni disponibili sull'Etiopia si concentrano soprattutto sulle rotte orientali che, attraverso lo Yemen, conducono verso la Penisola Arabica. Tuttavia, mancano dati aggiornati e approfonditi sui fenomeni migratori interni al Paese. Prima di attraversare il confine con Gibuti o il Somaliland, molti minori vivono infatti una fase di mobilità interna. In questo scenario, Dire Dawa riveste un ruolo chiave come punto di transito e di aggregazione per i migranti interni in procinto di intraprendere il viaggio verso l'estero (cfr. Coslovi, Stocchiero, Adugna 2025; Teshome, Belete 2017). Forte di una consolidata esperienza in progetti sul transito migratorio da Dire Dawa verso Gibuti, l'ONG partner di questa ricerca ha scelto, nell'ambito del progetto SPEM, di contribuire a colmare tale lacuna, concentrandosi in particolare sulle esperienze dei minori con percorsi migratori che vivono nelle strade di Dire Dawa.

L'economia di Dire Dawa sta attraversando una fase di crescita significativa, alimentata dall'urbanizzazione e dall'espansione delle attività economiche lo-

⁸ UNHCR: <https://help.unhcr.org/kenya/wp-content/uploads/sites/29/2021/06/Dire-Dawa-City-Information-Brochure.pdf> (Consultato il: 22/06/2025)

cali. Negli ultimi dieci anni, sono sorte numerose imprese manifatturiere di piccola scala, oltre ad alberghi, caffè e attività commerciali avviate grazie al supporto di piccole e medie imprese (Iazzolino 2018, p.19). Il governo etiope ha inoltre intensificato gli investimenti nei parchi industriali con l'obiettivo di incrementare le esportazioni e posizionare l'Etiopia come primo produttore industriale di riferimento per il continente africano (Feyissa *et al.* 2018, p.8). Tali dinamiche stanno generando nuove opportunità occupazionali e attraggono un numero crescente di migranti provenienti sia dalle aree rurali circostanti sia da altre regioni del Paese. Alcuni minori giungono a Dire Dawa con l'intenzione di proseguire il viaggio verso l'estero, ma finiscono per stabilirsi nella città, modificando i propri progetti iniziali. Altri, scoraggiati dalle difficoltà incontrate o da aspettative disattese, scelgono invece di continuare il percorso migratorio, spesso in direzione dei Paesi del Golfo, attraversando il Gibuti o la Somalia. Per molti, Dire Dawa rappresenta un punto di passaggio strategico, dove fermarsi temporaneamente per accumulare risorse prima di riprendere il viaggio verso altre destinazioni (Ivi). L'interesse del CIFA nel supporto ai minori "in movimento" rientra in una cornice teorica e operativa che contempla una molteplicità di forme di mobilità infantile, siano esse su brevi o lunghe distanze, racchiuse nella definizione ampia di "*children on the move*". In questo quadro, risulta cruciale interrogare le categorie attraverso cui i progetti di protezione nominano e classificano i minori – in particolare "child" e "family" – e gli effetti che tali definizioni producono nelle pratiche di intervento.

Dispositivi classificatori: *child* e *family* tra neutralità linguistica ed esclusione di genere

Sebbene la documentazione progettuale e il lessico delle organizzazioni internazionali utilizzino prevalentemente l'inglese, il lavoro quotidiano di operatori e operatrici sul campo avviene generalmente in amarico.⁹ La traduzione del termine *child* in amarico non comporta una marcatura di genere grammaticale né orienta implicitamente verso un referente maschile. Ad esempio, il termine *lij* (ሊጅ) indica "bambino/a, figlio/a" e può riferirsi indistintamente a maschi e femmine; come mostra Getie Gelaye, il sesso del referente viene esplicitato solo quando ritenuto rilevante nel contesto comunicativo (cfr. Gelaye 1998). Ciò non implica, tuttavia, che l'uso di termini apparentemente neutri produca

⁹ A seconda delle preferenze linguistiche dei partecipanti, possono tuttavia essere impiegate anche altre lingue, come l'afan oromo o il somalo, e più raramente il tigrino, oppure combinazioni di diversi repertori linguistici.

effetti neutri sul piano delle pratiche di intervento. Nel contesto osservato a Dire Dawa, la classificazione dei minori avviene attraverso associazioni morali e operative condivise dagli operatori locali: la presenza nello spazio pubblico, la vita in strada e l'assenza di una figura adulta di riferimento tendono a essere implicitamente associate a percorsi maschili; al contrario, la collocazione in ambito domestico o all'interno di una famiglia ospitante viene interpretata come una forma di protezione, anche quando coinvolge bambine o adolescenti impiegate in lavori non retribuiti o in condizioni di sfruttamento. In questo senso, il carattere *gender-blind* del termine *child* non agisce tanto a livello linguistico, quanto come dispositivo classificatorio che, una volta tradotto nelle pratiche locali, contribuisce a rendere invisibili specifiche forme di vulnerabilità femminile. Il bias di genere non risiede dunque nella parola in sé, ma nel modo in cui le categorie dell'aiuto vengono operativamente incarnate, traducendo una presunta neutralità in criteri selettivi che finiscono per escludere molte bambine e ragazze dai percorsi di protezione.

Una dinamica analoga riguarda il concetto di "famiglia", che nel lessico dei progetti di protezione qui considerati è spesso implicitamente assunto come sinonimo di spazio sicuro e di cura genitoriale. Nel contesto etnografico considerato, la "famiglia" non coincide con il solo nucleo genitoriale né con un'unità domestica necessariamente nucleare, stabile e delimitata, ma rimanda a configurazioni relazionali più ampie, attraversate da rapporti di parentela, affinità, amicizia e comune appartenenza a specifiche comunità (religiose, di quartiere, e così via). In amarico non esiste un termine equivalente all'inglese "family": il termine più vicino è *beteseb* (ቤተሰብ) generalmente tradotto come "famiglia" (*household*) o come "gruppo domestico" (*domestic group*). Letteralmente, *beteseb* significa "casa di persone" (*house of people*) e designa un'unità di co-residenza e condivisione delle risorse, la cui composizione può includere soggetti con status differenziati, legati da rapporti parentali o non parentali (Hoben 1973: 43). Le relazioni tra i membri sono strutturate da ruoli differenziati, che possono includere forme di servizio e dipendenza, obblighi reciproci, aspettative di riconoscenza e interdipendenze materiali e morali, senza che ciò implichi necessariamente rapporti paritari o simmetrici. In questo quadro si colloca la pratica dell'affidamento di bambine provenienti da contesti caratterizzati da precarietà materiale a gruppi domestici più abbienti (cfr. Kassa 2016).¹⁰ Tali

¹⁰ Tali pratiche possono coinvolgere sia bambine sia bambini. Se i maschi sono più frequentemente accolti in contesti rurali, dove imparano a occuparsi del bestiame e di altri mestieri legati alla vita agricola, le femmine vengono più spesso inserite in abitazioni situate in contesti urbani come Dire Dawa, dove apprendono i lavori domestici. Per questo motivo, nel presente articolo il riferimento è limitato al collocamento femminile nelle case urbane.

inserimenti sono frequentemente presentati come opportunità di protezione, crescita e mobilità sociale, ma danno luogo a configurazioni di coabitazione ambigue, in cui accoglienza, lavoro, obbligo morale e sfruttamento risultano profondamente intrecciati. L'assunto secondo cui la collocazione all'interno di un gruppo domestico equivalga automaticamente a una condizione di protezione contribuisce a rendere invisibili vulnerabilità che si producono in quelle stesse case che, secondo alcuni studi, figurano tra gli spazi più pericolosi per le donne in diverse aree del mondo e all'interno delle quali le violenze sessuali sono perpetrate prevalentemente da persone intime (Gribaldo, 2021) e per motivi strutturali (Guillaume, 2024). Un esempio significativo è offerto da uno studio condotto in Palestina, dove già nel 2010 la centralità dell'ambiente familiare come luogo di violenza nei confronti delle donne risultava documentata anche in contesti in cui lo spazio pubblico esterno era caratterizzato da un'elevata conflittualità ed era percepito come estremamente pericoloso (Balsamo 2010, p. 30). Gli studi su migrazione, "fare casa" e vulnerabilità insistono proprio su questo punto: la domesticità può offrire riparo e al tempo stesso esporre a ulteriori forme di precarietà, soprattutto quando la vulnerabilità è inscritta nelle relazioni ordinarie della coabitazione (Bonfanti, Chen, Massa 2022). Queste riflessioni consentono ora di inquadrare il caso di Dire Dawa all'interno delle cornici teoriche e delle categorie operative che strutturano i progetti rivolti ai *children on the move*, e di interrogare criticamente le nozioni di mobilità e protezione che ne guidano l'azione.

Cornici teoriche, categorie operative e politiche sociali nei progetti rivolti ai minori

Prospettive di mobilità e protezione

Sin dalle prime fasi del progetto è emersa – tanto nei colloqui con gli operatori in Italia e in Etiopia, quanto dall'analisi della documentazione progettuale – una chiara preferenza per l'uso del termine "movimento" rispetto a "migrazione" nel descrivere le esperienze di spostamento dei minori. La dicitura inglese "*children on the move*" – tradotta come "bambini/e in movimento" – è divenuta centrale nel corso dell'ultimo decennio nel linguaggio di agenzie internazionali e organizzazioni della società civile, con la motivazione che permetterebbe di includere una gamma più ampia e sfumata di situazioni rispetto al termine "migrazione", generalmente associato a spostamenti su larga scala, di lunga durata e spesso transfrontalieri. Già nel 2013, l'espressione è stata adottata in un rapporto ufficiale dell'Organizzazione Internazionale per le Migrazioni (IOM), mentre nel

2016 il FXB Center for Health & Human Rights (Harvard) ha pubblicato uno studio intitolato *Children on the Move: An Urgent Human Rights and Child Protection Priority*, con l'obiettivo di promuovere politiche e strumenti legali specifici per questa categoria di minori (cfr. Bhabha *et al.* 2016). Il termine è stato ribadito e codificato dall'International Data Alliance for Children on the Move (IDAC) – associata a UNICEF – in briefing concettuali diffusi con il rapporto *Children on the Move: Key Terms, Definitions and Concepts*. Si tratta di un concetto ombrello che “comprende molti sottoinsiemi di bambini/e definiti/e nei settori della migrazione, dello spostamento e della mobilità umana in generale” (IDAC 2023b, p. 3).

Parlare di “movimento” implica l'inclusione di mobilità a breve raggio, ripetute nel tempo, talvolta reversibili e, in alcuni casi, circoscritte allo stesso contesto urbano o rurale. Rientrano in questa definizione i percorsi di minori che si allontanano dal proprio gruppo familiare e finiscono con il vivere nelle strade delle aree urbane di destinazione, che migrano temporaneamente per motivi di lavoro o che si spostano da una città all'altra alla ricerca di protezione, istruzione o mezzi di sussistenza. Sono inclusi coloro che rimangono nel contesto d'origine mentre i genitori emigrano (i cosiddetti “*children who stay behind*”), i minori non accompagnati (“*unaccompanied children*”) e coloro che, pur non rientrando in tale categoria, sono stati separati dai loro genitori, tutori o altri adulti (“*separated children*”), i minori apolidi (“*stateless children*”), e così via (cfr. IDAC 2023a, 2023b). In pratica, “*children on the move*” non presuppone necessariamente né un trasferimento permanente né il superamento di un confine nazionale, ma descrive ogni situazione in cui i minori si spostano (anche per lavoro stagionale, educazione, calamità, violenza domestica ecc.).

Volendo confrontare queste definizioni operative con la letteratura accademica nelle scienze sociali, questo approccio sembrerebbe allinearsi con quegli studi che prediligono la nozione di “mobilità” per indicare spostamenti dinamici, di piccola scala e di breve durata, che plasmano la vita quotidiana delle persone (Veale, Dona 2014, pp. 5-6), a lungo trascurati rispetto all'interesse predominante per i movimenti su larga scala e di lunga durata, ma anche con quelle prospettive che adottano il termine “migrazione” in un'accezione più ampia, che include le esperienze di mobilità, come argomentato da Marie Rodet ed Elodie Razy nel volume *Children on the move in Africa*:

In un contesto africano, quindi, intendiamo la migrazione come qualsiasi cambiamento di residenza (a livello locale, regionale, nazionale/internazionale o intra/intercontinentale) che avviene al di fuori dello spazio di una comunità data (come un villaggio o una città), che sia temporaneo o permanente. Sono incluse quindi anche le migrazioni stagionali, così come le migrazioni di lunga durata (Razy, Rodet 2016, p. 2)

La riflessione accademica si radica però in un ampio dibattito inaugurato già negli anni Duemila con la cosiddetta “svolta della mobilità” (*mobility turn*), che ha messo al centro dello studio i movimenti, le circolazioni, i flussi (di persone, oggetti, capitali, idee) e le loro implicazioni sociali, spostando il focus dalla sedentarietà alla circolazione, dall’identità fissa alla soggettività in movimento, dal confine al transito (cfr. Cresswell 2006; Declich, Rodet 2018; Nyamnjoh 2022; Sheller, Urry 2006; Riccio 2019; Salazar 2019). L’adozione delle “lenti della mobilità” (Massa 2021, p. 23) ha permesso di decostruire l’idea della migrazione come tragitto lineare e definitivo tra un punto di partenza e uno di arrivo, mettendo invece in evidenza la natura frammentata, non lineare, aperta e spesso imprevedibile delle traiettorie migratorie. Questa lettura ha avuto importanti implicazioni anche sul piano analitico. Adottare le lenti della mobilità significa interrogare criticamente le categorie giuridiche e istituzionali che classificano i soggetti in movimento – come “rifugiati”, “rimpatriati”, “migranti economici”, e così via – mostrando come esse siano frutto di processi storici, morali, sociali e politici (cfr. Gallo *et al.* 2024). Lunghi dall’essere meri strumenti descrittivi, tali etichette possiedono un potere performativo, incidono concretamente sulle possibilità di accesso a risorse, diritti, narrazioni e riconoscimenti, e tendono a semplificare esperienze complesse e frammentate.¹¹

Il progetto SPEM da cui siamo partite si colloca – analogamente a molti altri interventi recenti dedicati allo spostamento dei minori in Africa orientale – all’interno di un approccio marcatamente orientato alla protezione: anziché enfatizzare lo status giuridico dei minori (migranti regolari, irregolari, richiedenti asilo, ecc.), l’idea di “minori in movimento” mette in primo piano le loro vulnerabilità, i bisogni e i diritti, indipendentemente dal tipo o dalla “legalità” del loro spostamento. Inoltre si riconosce che il concetto di migrazione rimanda troppo spesso all’idea che la normalità sia costituita necessariamente da una stanzialità su un territorio (cfr. Malkki 1995; Declich 2020) che nel caso dell’infanzia assume caratteristiche particolari. I bambini e le bambine seguono genitori o parenti, o vengono inviati a vivere da parenti in altre città, e per questo possono cambiare città stagionalmente o regolarmente. Evitando le connotazioni normative e politiche che il termine migrazione può implicare, “movimento” viene utilizzato in questo contesto (almeno in teoria) come categoria strategica e operativa per definire l’intervento sociale, educativo e protet-

¹¹ Etnografie dei servizi di tutela in Europa mostrano come categorie giuridiche e lessici istituzionali incidano sulle pratiche e sulle aspettative morali della cura. In questa prospettiva, Giulia Consoli mostra come, nei sistemi di welfare europei, le catene di cura locali tendano a irrigidirsi in etichette, protocolli e retoriche dell’“autonomia”, spesso sganciate dalle risorse e dai tempi effettivamente disponibili (cfr. Consoli 2023).

tivo verso tutti quei minori che, per una molteplicità di ragioni, non si trovano più nel luogo in cui sono nati o hanno vissuto stabilmente. La terminologia è centrata sui diritti dei bambini e delle bambine, in linea con UNICEF, secondo cui “i bambini in movimento sono innanzitutto bambini che hanno bisogno di protezione” (UNICEF 2017, p. 7) e con la dichiarazione congiunta di IOM, Save the Children, UNHCR e UNICEF del 2024: “i bambini in movimento sono, prima di tutto, bambini, titolari del diritto alla protezione, all’inclusione e alla partecipazione a tutte le decisioni che li riguardano, indipendentemente dalle ragioni del loro spostamento e dal loro status.”¹²

L’aspetto interessante della questione è che, da un punto di vista teorico, o quantomeno nelle dichiarazioni che accompagnano gli approcci operativi adottati, tale prospettiva sembrerebbe rievocare proprio quel dibattito accademico volto a superare letture semplificate e categorizzazioni rigide, promuovendo invece una comprensione delle mobilità infantili nella loro eterogeneità e complessità. Tuttavia, a livello operativo, laddove alcune categorie ed etichette normative vengono abbandonate, altre tendono a formarsi, finendo per generare nuove tipologie di incasellamento ed esclusione. Nel caso del progetto analizzato, le categorie di minori “soli”, “senzatetto” e “non accompagnati” hanno determinato una marcata esclusione di genere che ha colpito, in particolare, bambine o ragazze adolescenti. Tale esclusione dalla lista dei “beneficiari” è avvenuta in ragione del fatto che queste minori risultavano “accompagnate”, durante i loro spostamenti, da genitori, garanti, parenti o supposti parenti, oppure perché, una volta giunte in città, erano impiegate in lavori domestici o di altro tipo presso famiglie ospitanti, il che veniva interpretato come una forma di protezione sufficiente a sottrarle allo stato di vulnerabilità. Questo cortocircuito (la casa come prova di protezione) ricorda quanto osservato da Grotti *et al.* (2018) nei “contesti di confine”: anche quando esistono cornici che garantirebbero accesso alla cura/protezione, è nelle pratiche concrete e nelle interazioni quotidiane che alcune vulnerabilità diventano visibili e altre restano opache. Nel caso di Dire Dawa la collocazione domestica di bambine e ragazze funziona come un indicatore amministrativo di “sicurezza”, che però può coincidere con relazioni di dipendenza e sfruttamento difficilmente intercettate dai dispositivi di presa in carico. L’idea che la famiglia sia un luogo sicuro e protetto è uno stereotipo che si scontra con le diverse realtà vissute in contesti segnati da povertà e violenza di genere strutturale. Talvolta, ad esempio, le bambine sono spinte a fug-

¹² Sito UNHCR: <https://www.unhcr.org/africa/news/speeches-and-statements/prioritizing-rights-children-call-action-international-migrants-day#:~:text=Migration%20policies%20and%20practices%20must,services%20including%20national%20education%2C%20health%2C> (Consultato il: 18/06/2025)

gire da casa perché la morte dei loro genitori è vista come un evento fatale che attira il malocchio (Grabska, De Regt, Del Franco 2019, p. 153), oppure perché il trattamento riservato loro da un nuovo partner del genitore è inaccettabile, o ancora perché in famiglia non ci sono risorse sufficienti per tutti. In questo scenario, se le minori in movimento finiscono a lavorare come domestiche in famiglie di scarse risorse possono incontrare trattamenti molto abusivi (cfr. Cirillo 2024).

Le categorie operative utilizzate nei progetti di protezione dell'infanzia (minori soli, non accompagnati, senzatetto) riflettono anche l'influenza degli attuali approcci alla de-istituzionalizzazione adottati in numerosi progetti di protezione dell'infanzia nell'Africa orientale.

Approcci di de-istituzionalizzazione

Nel contesto della protezione dell'infanzia, la “de-istituzionalizzazione” indica un processo di riforma del sistema di accoglienza che prevede la chiusura graduale degli orfanotrofi e delle strutture di tipo istituzionale, trovando per bambini e bambine soluzioni alternative in ambito familiare e comunitario. Questo approccio comporta sia il reinserimento dei minori già istituzionalizzati nelle comunità, sia la prevenzione dell'ingresso in istituto attraverso il sostegno diretto alle famiglie d'origine o l'affido familiare (cfr. Ulybina 2023). L'obiettivo è garantire a ogni bambino e bambina l'opportunità di crescere in un contesto familiare, considerato cruciale per uno sviluppo armonico, in conformità con i principi sanciti dagli standard internazionali sostenuti da dichiarazioni ufficiali e casi studio prodotti da organizzazioni impegnate nella tutela dei diritti dell'infanzia (cfr. UNICEF 2022). Questa tendenza pro-famiglia è promossa dalle Nazioni Unite, dall'Unione Europea, dall'Agenzia statunitense per lo sviluppo internazionale (USAID), da numerosi attori della società civile e della comunità scientifica internazionale (European Expert Group 2012; ChildFund International 2018; UN General Assembly 2009; UNICEF 2018; Goldman *et al.* 2020).

Il movimento per la de-istituzionalizzazione della cura dei minori affonda le sue radici nella metà del Novecento, quando gli studi di psicologia infantile – in particolare la “teoria dell'attaccamento” elaborata da John Bowlby nel Regno Unito e sviluppata da Mary Ainsworth in Nord America – iniziarono a evidenziare gli effetti negativi derivanti dalla crescita in ambienti istituzionali privi di figure familiari stabili (cfr. Howe 2011). Alcune ricerche empiriche hanno inoltre suggerito che certi comportamenti dell'attaccamento infantile possano essere considerati “universali”, offrendo così un fondamento teorico alle politiche delle Nazioni Unite in materia di cura e tutela dei minori in diverse parti del mondo (Harlow 2022, p. 174).

Tra gli anni '50 e '80 del Novecento, in diversi paesi europei e nordamericani si diffuse la chiusura di orfanotrofi a favore di sistemi di affidamento familiare e adozione nazionale. Questo trend fu rafforzato da studi che evidenziavano gli effetti negativi dell'istituzionalizzazione sullo sviluppo fisico, cognitivo ed emotivo dei bambini e, al contempo, dimostravano i benefici associati alla transizione verso contesti di cura familiare, in particolare in termini di crescita e sviluppo cognitivo (cfr. Nelson III *et al.* 2009). Tali evidenze hanno alimentato un consenso globale sull'urgenza di ridurre gli accessi in istituto e promuovere l'inserimento in famiglie, nel rispetto del principio del superiore interesse del bambino.

In ambito normativo internazionale, il principio trova fondamento nella Convenzione ONU sui Diritti dell'Infanzia (1989) che riconosce il diritto di ogni bambino a crescere in un ambiente familiare (Preambolo) e impegna gli Stati a predisporre forme di accoglienza alternativa per i minori privi di famiglia (art. 20).¹³ Per concretizzare questi precetti, nel 2009 l'Assemblea Generale ONU ha adottato le Linee Guida sull'accoglienza fuori dalla famiglia d'origine che stabiliscono due principi cardine: il principio di necessità (un bambino dovrebbe essere allontanato dalla famiglia solo se strettamente necessario per il suo benessere) e il principio di appropriatezza (qualora necessario, vanno individuate soluzioni di cura il più possibile simili a un contesto familiare).¹⁴

A livello globale, dagli anni Duemila in poi, la de-istituzionalizzazione è entrata nell'agenda di molte istituzioni sovranazionali e governi. L'Unione Europea ha adottato politiche che vincolano l'uso dei fondi strutturali e di investimento europei (fondi SIE) al superamento degli orfanotrofi e delle grandi istituzioni nei Paesi membri e candidati,¹⁵ mentre organizzazioni specializzate (ad esempio Better Care Network, Hope and Homes for Children) sostengono riforme dei sistemi di welfare in favore dell'affido familiare e dei servizi di prevenzione dell'abbandono.¹⁶

¹³ Il Preambolo della Convenzione dichiara che "il/la bambino/a, per poter sviluppare pienamente e armoniosamente la propria personalità, deve crescere in un ambiente familiare, in un clima di felicità, amore e comprensione..." Link al sito ufficiale delle Nazioni Unite: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/convention-rights-child> (Consultato il: 20/06/2025)

¹⁴ Linee Guida sull'accoglienza fuori dalla famiglia d'origine: <https://iss-ssi.org/storage/2023/04/UN-Guidelines-Italianne.pdf> (Consultato il: 20/06/2025)

¹⁵ Comitato economico e sociale europeo (CESE), Parere del Comitato economico e sociale europeo sul tema "Assistenza sociale a lungo termine e deistituzionalizzazione" (parere esplorativo) (2015/C 332/01). Gazzetta ufficiale dell'Unione europea, C 332, 8 ottobre 2015, pp. 1-7.

^{Link} al sito ufficiale dell'Unione Europea: <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/IT/TXT/?uri=CELEX%3A52014AE7336&qid=1750347713769> (Consultato il: 19/06/2025)

¹⁶ Better Care Network: <https://bettercarenetwork.org/about-bcn/what-we-do/key-initiatives/un-advocacy/guidelines-on-deinstitutionalization-including-in-emergencies-2022> (Consultato il 19/06/2025)

In numerosi contesti africani, la de-istituzionalizzazione ha guadagnato slancio più di recente ponendosi in controtendenza rispetto ad una prassi consolidata, dove la gestione di orfanotrofi era affidata principalmente ad enti privati o confessionali introdotti da missionari o da dipartimenti coloniali, spesso ispirati alle strutture residenziali diffuse nell'Europa occidentale nei primi decenni del Novecento, slegati da sistemi pubblici organici di protezione dell'infanzia (Tol-free 1995, p. 11). Diversi governi hanno dichiarato la necessità di cambiare approccio: il Ruanda è un caso emblematico (cfr. Kanyamanza, Nsabimana 2022), avendo avviato dopo il 2012 un piano nazionale per chiudere gli istituti e reintegrare circa 3,300 minori allora presenti in orfanotrofi nel Paese.¹⁷ Già a fine anni '90, tramite programmi di ricongiungimento familiare e affidamento, il Ruanda era riuscito a ridurre da 12,700 a circa 5,300 i bambini istituzionalizzati in seguito al genocidio del 1994 (Muraguri et al. 2024, p. 92). Il Kenya ha aggiornato la normativa con il *Children Act 2022*, che enfatizza l'affidamento e l'adozione nazionale.¹⁸ Per diversi anni ha inoltre mantenuto una moratoria sulle adozioni internazionali (2001-2022) proprio in attesa di riformare il sistema di protezione e promuovere l'accoglienza locale (Chege, Ucembe 2022, p. 57).

L'Etiopia ha adottato nel 2009 le *National Alternative Childcare Guidelines*, che stabiliscono criteri sistematici per l'assistenza alternativa alla famiglia, inclusi affido, reintegrazione e supporto alla comunità.¹⁹ Nel gennaio 2018, il governo etiope ha imposto un divieto totale di adozioni internazionali (con eccezione per gli stranieri di origine etiope), citando preoccupazioni su possibili abusi e sul benessere dei bambini.²⁰ Tale provvedimento si inserisce in una più ampia strategia volta a rafforzare le risposte di protezione a livello nazionale, promu-

Hope and Homes for Children: <https://www.hopeandhomes.org/publications/good-practice-guide-deinstitutionalisation/> (Consultato il 19/06/2025)

¹⁷ Il programma Tubarerere Mu Muryango (TMM), tradotto come "Let's Raise Children in Families", è stato avviato in Ruanda nel 2012 per attuare una riforma radicale del sistema di assistenza all'infanzia, passando dall'assistenza istituzionale a quella familiare. La riforma è stata portata avanti dal Governo del Ruanda con il supporto di UNICEF, ONG locali e internazionali, e finanziamenti di USAID. Oltre a chiudere gli istituti, TMM ha puntato sul rafforzamento del sistema nazionale di protezione dell'infanzia, formando operatori sociali, coinvolgendo le comunità ed elaborando politiche inclusive. È oggi considerato un modello di riferimento per la de-istituzionalizzazione in Africa. Link al sito National Child Development Agency (NCDA): <https://www.ncda.gov.rw/1/tubarere-mu-muryango-tmm> (Consultato il: 20/06/2025)

¹⁸ The Children Act 2022: <https://new.kenyalaw.org/akn/ke/act/2022/29/eng@2022-12-31> (Consultato il: 20/06/2025)

¹⁹ Le linee guida sono state aggiornate nell'ambito di un programma di sostegno ai minori vulnerabili, finanziato dalla Cooperazione Italiana allo Sviluppo. National Alternatives Childcare Guidelines: <https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/guide.pdf> (Ultima consultazione: 20/06/2025)

²⁰ Library of Congress: <https://www.loc.gov/item/global-legal-monitor/2018-03-26/ethiopia-federal-family-code-amended-ending-intercountry-adoption/> (Consultato il: 20/06/2025)

overe l'adozione interna e favorire la reintegrazione dei bambini nelle comunità di origine, sostenendo in tal modo i processi di de-istituzionalizzazione. Va inoltre ricordato che dal 2002 l'Etiopia ha aderito e ratificato la *Carta Africana sui Diritti e il Benessere del Fanciullo* (1990), la quale incoraggia la cura dei minori privi di ambiente familiare in contesti quanto più vicini ad una famiglia (art.25).²¹

Complessivamente, sempre più Paesi dell'Africa sub-sahariana stanno avviando il passaggio da istituti a forme di assistenza comunitaria, sebbene spesso tramite progetti pilota o riforme parziali e non ancora su scala nazionale (cfr. Milligan *et al.* 2016). Le priorità emergenti riguardano la prevenzione dell'allontanamento dei minori dalle famiglie e comunità d'origine, soprattutto quando motivato da condizioni di povertà o difficoltà considerate transitorie: si afferma sempre più il principio, ormai consolidato nelle Linee Guida di organizzazioni come Save the Children, secondo cui "la povertà non è una ragione valida per la separazione" ("*poverty is not a reason for separation*") (Save the Children 2012, p. 3). In tale prospettiva, si promuovono alternative come il ricongiungimento familiare, l'affido, l'adozione nazionale o l'accoglienza in case famiglia di dimensioni ridotte quando necessario. Questi principi ispirano anche gli interventi attualmente attivi a Dire Dawa, nel caso studio qui analizzato, con l'obiettivo di favorire il reinserimento sicuro dei ragazzi migranti nelle comunità locali. Come già evidenziato, tali progetti – come d'altronde più in generale le politiche nazionali – tendono però a escludere molte adolescenti, considerate non bisognose di ricongiungimento con la famiglia di origine in quanto ritenute già sotto la tutela di adulti che si occupano di loro, anche se con modalità che possono celare abusi. Per comprendere meglio le logiche di inclusione ed esclusione che guidano questi interventi, è utile delineare il profilo dei minori coinvolti.

Profilo dei minori in movimento

Il profilo dei minori qui delineato emerge dall'intreccio tra le informazioni fornite dai rappresentanti delle organizzazioni intervistate, le brevi interazioni con i minori "beneficiari" dei progetti promossi dal CIFA e da una ONG

²¹ Tabella con lo stato di ratifica della *Carta Africana sui Diritti e il Benessere del Fanciullo* per ciascuno Stato membro dell'Unione Africana: <https://www.acerwc.africa/en/member-states/ratifications> (Consultato il: 20/06/2025)

African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child: https://au.int/sites/default/files/treaties/36804-treaty-african_charter_on_rights_welfare_of_the_child.pdf (Consultato il: 20/06/2025)

partner, e le conversazioni informali avvenute durante il periodo di ricerca sul campo con persone al di fuori degli incontri ufficiali. Si tratta di un profilo che riflette prevalentemente la percezione condivisa da molte delle organizzazioni attive a Dire Dawa rispetto a chi possa essere considerato come potenziale destinatario degli interventi, nel contesto della migrazione infantile o, più precisamente, dei *"children on the move"*. La maggior parte di questi minori proviene da aree rurali delle province di Hararghe Orientale e Occidentale, situate nella Regione Oromia orientale. In particolare, si tratta di villaggi o zone semi-urbane nei pressi di località come Deder, Kobo e Gara Muleta (Hararghe Orientale), e Chiro, Badessa e Asebot (Hararghe Occidentale), a una distanza compresa tra i 90 e i 250 chilometri da Dire Dawa. La prossimità geografica della città ne fa una meta privilegiata per i minori provenienti da queste aree. La maggiore familiarità di questi giovani con il contesto urbano e la pratica di forme di migrazione circolare tra città e luoghi di origine ne facilitano l'intercettazione e il coinvolgimento nei progetti delle organizzazioni locali. Al contrario, i minori provenienti da aree più remote, meno abituati alla città e più diffidenti nei confronti degli operatori delle ONG, risultano meno accessibili nei tempi dei progetti. Ne consegue che, pur a fronte di un documentato e crescente afflusso di migranti dalle zone rurali dell'Hararghe (cfr. Diriba 2025), la composizione del gruppo dei minori coinvolti in questo studio riflette anche una selezione situata, legata alle possibilità di accesso al campo, alle tempistiche e alle reti relazionali dello staff locale. Gli undici minori intervistati, di età compresa tra i 13 e i 15 anni, si identificano tutti come appartenenti al gruppo linguistico Oromo, sono di religione musulmana e provengono dalla provincia di Hararghe. La maggior parte di loro (dieci su undici) è originaria dell'Hararghe orientale: sette risiedono nel distretto di Deder e tre in quello di Kobo. Un solo intervistato proviene dall'Hararghe occidentale, nei pressi della città di Chiro. Il livello di istruzione dichiarato varia dal secondo al sesto grado della scuola primaria: quattro minori hanno completato il secondo grado, tre il terzo, due il quarto e uno il sesto.

Secondo le informazioni condivise dai partecipanti alla ricerca, la maggior parte dei minori migranti che arriva a Dire Dawa ha un'età compresa tra i 10 e i 17 anni. In base alla modalità del loro spostamento, questi giovani possono essere distinti in due gruppi principali: i "minori non accompagnati", che intraprendono il viaggio da soli, e i "minori accompagnati", che viaggiano insieme a familiari, tutori o altre figure adulte con un ruolo di supervisione. In relazione alle condizioni di vita che sperimentano a Dire Dawa, molti di questi minori rientrano anche nella categoria dei cosiddetti "ragazzi di strada" (*street children*). La categoria stessa di *"street children"* è criticata in alcune parti dell'Africa orientale perché può diventare un'etichetta indelebile nella vita di

una persona, che potrebbe trovarsi a lavorare e vivere per un periodo della sua vita sulla strada, ma che potrebbe anche sottrarsi a questa condizione se le venissero offerte delle opportunità. Pertanto, ove possibile, utilizzeremo i termini “minori che vivono sulla strada” o “minori in movimento” come traduzione di “*children on the move*”, che è una categoria universalmente accettata. In lingua italiana talvolta è però più lineare parlare di bambini di strada. L’attribuzione alla categoria di “bambini di strada” non esclude la distinzione tra “accompagnati” e “non accompagnati”, che viene definita principalmente sulla base dell’esistenza o meno di reti familiari a Dire Dawa e della possibilità, anche solo saltuaria, che i bambini hanno di usufruire di un alloggio presso parenti o conoscenti. Come già emerso, le organizzazioni consultate nel corso della ricerca tendono ad orientare i propri interventi a favore dei “minori in movimento non accompagnati”, ritenuti in condizioni di maggiore vulnerabilità.

Minori che vivono in strada: accompagnati e non accompagnati

Diversi rappresentanti delle ONG interpellate hanno proposto una classificazione articolata dei ragazzi che vivono in strada, che distingue tra coloro che dormono stabilmente in strada, quelli che vivono in stanze in affitto condivise e quelli che, pur trascorrendo la giornata in città, rientrano a casa la sera. I primi sono considerati “non accompagnati”, poiché privi di riferimenti familiari o reti di supporto a Dire Dawa; si tratta di ragazzi che non hanno alcun parente o conoscente in grado di offrire loro un rifugio sicuro alternativo alla strada. Anche coloro che vivono in stanze in affitto, spesso in gruppi di dieci-quindici, rientrano nella categoria dei non accompagnati. La loro situazione però è vista come meno allarmante di quella di coloro che dormono per strada. Queste abitazioni sono generalmente gestite da una figura adulta che assume il ruolo di leader o protettore, ma che talvolta può esercitare forme di controllo e sfruttamento, coinvolgendo i minori in attività lavorative o sessuali di diverso tipo. A tal proposito, i minori intervistati hanno evidenziato che tale figura non è necessariamente un adulto in senso stretto: può trattarsi di un ragazzo appena più grande, riconosciuto come punto di riferimento perché ha vissuto in passato la stessa condizione dei nuovi arrivati e, nel tempo, ha assunto una posizione di comando, fino a svolgere un ruolo centrale nell’organizzazione delle reti informali di accoglienza e inserimento. Vi sono infine i minori definiti come “bambini che vivono in strada accompagnati”, cioè coloro che, pur trascorrendo gran parte della giornata per le strade di Dire Dawa insieme ad altri coetanei “non accompagnati”, fanno ritorno la sera presso le abitazioni di genitori, parenti o conoscenti, situate per lo più in aree rurali o periferiche della città.

I minori non accompagnati, identificati dalle organizzazioni intervistate come potenziali beneficiari prioritari, risultano aver lasciato i propri villaggi di origine viaggiando in piccoli gruppi composti da tre o quattro coetanei oppure, in alcuni casi, in gruppi leggermente più numerosi, fino a un massimo di otto o dieci membri. Secondo molti degli interlocutori, ciò che li distingue dalle loro coetanee è il fatto di affrontare il viaggio “da soli”, ovvero senza la presenza di una persona adulta, sia durante il tragitto sia nella fase di inserimento lavorativo a Dire Dawa. Al contrario, bambine e ragazze viaggiano spesso insieme a un parente o a una persona adulta che svolge un ruolo di garante o supervisione e che, in alcuni casi, si occupa anche della mediazione per il loro inserimento lavorativo presso famiglie ospitanti. Tali condizioni, agli occhi di molti operatori, ne riducono la vulnerabilità percepita e le escludono, almeno in via preliminare, dai casi ritenuti prioritari per l’attivazione di misure urgenti di protezione. La distinzione tra minori “accompagnati” e “non accompagnati” funziona così come una semplificazione operativa che traduce una pluralità di situazioni in criteri amministrativi di accesso o esclusione dalla protezione e in una qualificazione dei soggetti come più o meno “vulnerabili”.

Tra esclusione di genere e vulnerabilità

È significativo osservare come l’esclusione di genere sia motivata da una convinzione – ampiamente condivisa tra gli intervistati – secondo cui le ragazze sarebbero, in linea generale, “più vulnerabili” dei ragazzi. La dinamica descritta si articola nel seguente modo: proprio in quanto considerate maggiormente esposte al rischio di abusi sessuali e di altre forme di violenza, le ragazze migrano in numero decisamente inferiore rispetto ai coetanei maschi e, quando lo fanno, non viaggiano da sole ma molto spesso accompagnate da qualcuno. Da ciò derivano due implicazioni: da un lato, la migrazione minorile sembra essere prettamente maschile; dall’altro, le ragazze che viaggiano con una persona adulta vengono percepite come già inserite in una rete di protezione di tipo familiare che le distingue dai coetanei maschi “abbandonati a loro stessi” (proprio perché ritenuti meno vulnerabili). In questo quadro, la definizione di “vulnerabilità” agisce come categoria performativa che può al tempo stesso includere ed escludere: utilizzata come criterio morale ed emotivo per orientare l’intervento umanitario e giustificarne le priorità, essa contribuisce a stabilire gerarchie tra le vite, determinando chi è ritenuto meritevole di attenzione e protezione e chi, al contrario, può essere lasciato ai margini. Letta con Didier Fassin, questa produzione di gerarchie è un tratto strutturale della “politica della

vita” dell’umanitarismo: l’azione di protezione, mentre afferma un valore universale della vita, deve tradurlo in criteri, soglie e categorie che inevitabilmente differenziano le esistenze e le rendono più o meno eleggibili all’intervento (Fassin 2007).

Il carattere “seducente” della vulnerabilità (Faas 2016, p. 14), fa sì che questo concetto possa circolare con grande facilità tra analisi, pratiche e linguaggi istituzionali. Proprio per questo, però, quando viene tradotto in strumenti di policy rischia di essere depotenziato e de-storicizzato: da chiave critica per interrogare i processi che producono rischio e disuguaglianza, la vulnerabilità può ridursi a un’etichetta descrittiva, utile a classificare ma poco capace di spiegare. Nel caso qui esaminato, la distinzione rigida tra “minori accompagnati” e “non accompagnati” contribuisce a rendere invisibili molte bambine e adolescenti che lavorano all’interno degli spazi domestici o che, pur svolgendo attività in spazi aperti, vengono comunque considerate sotto la tutela di un adulto (cfr. Cirillo 2024). È inoltre altamente improbabile che le bambine che lavorano negli spazi domestici arrivino a denunciare situazioni di enorme disagio, come peraltro avviene generalmente nei casi di violenza domestica intra familiare. L’invisibilità non è solo spaziale (chiuso/domestico), ma anche comunicativa e relazionale: alcune forme di sofferenza non riescono a diventare “casi” perché mancano le condizioni per essere espresse, ascoltate e tradotte in richiesta legittima di aiuto. A questo punto, soffermarsi sulle principali attività lavorative svolte dai ragazzi “non accompagnati” a Dire Dawa permette di comprendere più a fondo le dinamiche di esclusione di genere che coinvolgono bambine e ragazze.

Esperienze lavorative a Dire Dawa

Una volta giunti a Dire Dawa, i minori tendono a organizzarsi in piccoli gruppi e a inserirsi rapidamente in attività economiche informali che consentano loro di sostenersi quotidianamente. Tra le pratiche più comuni vi è il facchinaggio, che consiste nel trasportare carichi di vario tipo – dalle borse e valigie ai sacchi di alimenti – per conto di clienti incontrati soprattutto nei pressi dei mercati o delle stazioni di trasporto. Il compenso oscilla generalmente tra i 20 e i 50 birr etiopi, in funzione del peso trasportato e della distanza percorsa. Altre attività diffuse includono la raccolta dei rifiuti, che i minori offrono come servizio porta a porta, ricavandone una somma variabile tra i 10 e i 50 birr per ciascun cliente, e la pulizia dei veicoli – in particolare dei “bajaj” (i tipici riscio a tre ruote impiegati nel trasporto pubblico e privato) – per la quale possono ricevere piccole somme, da 5 a 10 birr per la semplice pulizia dei vetri, fino a un massimo

di 50 birr per un intervento più completo.²² Molto praticato è anche il lavoro di lustrascarpe, in cui i ragazzi si posizionano ai bordi delle strade e offrono i loro servizi ai passanti. Spesso questa attività si svolge sotto la supervisione di un ragazzo più grande, che si occupa dell'acquisto dei materiali necessari e raccoglie i compensi ricevuti, distribuendo solo una piccola parte – talvolta sotto forma di mancia – ai più giovani che lo affiancano. Accanto a questa pratica, è frequente anche il coinvolgimento nella vendita ambulante, svolta tanto durante il giorno quanto nelle ore notturne, di beni di prima necessità o di generi alimentari di consumo immediato, come caramelle, gomme da masticare, fazzoletti, accendini, sigarette, noccioline e *dabo kolo*.²³ Queste attività si svolgono talvolta sotto il controllo di un adulto che trattiene una parte significativa del guadagno, ma possono anche essere gestite autonomamente dai gruppi di minori in forma più estemporanea. Infine, accanto a queste forme di lavoro si afferma il ricorso sistematico alla mendicizia, che assume diverse forme: dalla richiesta diretta di denaro o cibo ai passanti, alle sollecitazioni rivolte agli automobilisti nelle strade trafficate, fino al tentativo di ottenere avanzi o piccoli importi presso hotel e ristoranti. In molti casi, l'elemosina non è un'attività isolata, ma si affianca in modo strutturale alle altre strategie di sopravvivenza. La pratica della mendicizia, d'altra parte, a volte porta i bambini a sviluppare atteggiamenti aggressivi o violenti nel caso non ottengano ciò che chiedono.

È significativo notare che molti ragazzi di strada aspirano a trovare un impiego presso abitazioni private, ad esempio come domestici o giardinieri, attratti dalla possibilità di ottenere una retribuzione più elevata, e talvolta anche vitto e alloggio. Mikael, un ragazzo di dodici anni originario di Kobo (nell'Hararghe orientale), ha raccontato di essere arrivato a Dire Dawa con l'obiettivo di guadagnare 3,000 birr lavorando come lavapiatti in una casa privata, ma si è presto reso conto di quanto fosse difficile accedere a tale opportunità. I ragazzi di strada sono infatti oggetto di forti stigmatizzazioni: vengono percepiti come ladri, sporchi o potenzialmente pericolosi, e indicati con il termine dispregiativo "*duriyotch*", che in amarico significa "vagabondi" o "teppisti" (cfr. Heinonen 2011, p. 47; Mains 2012, p. 61). Tali rappresentazioni emergono nella lettera-

²² Le informazioni relative ai compensi sono state fornite dai minori intervistati, ma è importante sottolineare che le remunerazioni risultano estremamente variabili e dipendono da una molteplicità di fattori, tra cui la posizione sociale e generazionale di chi svolge il lavoro, la natura del rapporto con eventuali figure di riferimento o controllo, il tipo di clientela, il luogo e l'orario in cui l'attività viene svolta, insieme ad altre condizioni contingenti.

²³ Il Dabo Kolo è una varietà di cereali coltivati in Etiopia, principalmente orzo e frumento, che sono successivamente tostati, salati e serviti da soli o insieme ad arachidi o anacardi.

tura sul gangsterismo, dove si evidenzia come i progetti di sviluppo volti al “recupero” e alla “riabilitazione” dei ragazzi che vivono sulla strada contribuiscano in molti casi a rafforzare una narrazione che li descrive come soggetti devianti, membri di gang criminali e portatori di un dissenso politico latente (cfr. Di Nunzio 2019; Marasco 2024). A causa di questi pregiudizi, i proprietari delle abitazioni tendono a non fidarsi ad assumerli, preferendo piuttosto affidarsi a raccomandazioni personali, e scegliendo spesso adolescenti di sesso femminile segnalate da parenti o conoscenti. Da questo punto di vista, le ragazze rappresenterebbero coloro che hanno avuto il “privilegio” di essere accolte sotto l’ala protettiva della famiglia estesa, ospitate in una casa e inserite in un sistema lavorativo alternativo alla strada. Questo aspetto risulta particolarmente significativo perché, da un lato, tiene lontane le ragazze da un elemento ricorrente nel vissuto di molti ragazzi di strada – ovvero il disagio legato allo stigma sociale – mentre dall’altro si inserisce nel più ampio discorso sulla protezione dell’infanzia, che tende a rappresentare lo spazio domestico e l’ambito familiare come intrinsecamente sicuri e protettivi. Una visione di questo tipo rischia di oscurare le esperienze di numerose ragazze esposte a forme di sfruttamento lavorativo e sessuale proprio all’interno delle abitazioni, o da parte di coloro che le hanno “accompagnate” a Dire Dawa o le hanno “accolte” al loro arrivo. Tali minori possono essere trattate in inganno dalla promessa di essere inserite presso famiglie che consentirebbero loro di proseguire gli studi, per poi essere invece destinate a lunghi orari di lavoro domestico (cfr. Cirillo 2024).

Tracce di invisibilità femminile

Alcuni degli interlocutori intervistati hanno evidenziato come tra le ragazze meno visibili vi siano anche quelle che, pur avendo viaggiato “non accompagnate” – ossia insieme a coetanei e in assenza di una figura adulta – una volta arrivate a Dire Dawa instaurano relazioni stabili con ragazzi più grandi, assumendo il ruolo di compagne o, in alcuni casi, di mogli. Questi ragazzi possono ricoprire ruoli chiave all’interno delle reti informali: sono spesso leader di gruppi di minori, intermediari che facilitano l’accesso al lavoro, gestori degli alloggi condivisi da minori, oppure potenziali datori di lavoro coinvolti nell’economia informale della città. In questi casi la probabilità di avere delle gravidanze colloca le ragazze in posizione di dipendenza ed estrema vulnerabilità. La prostituzione diventa così una possibilità tutt’altro che remota per queste giovani, che talvolta sembra offrire opportunità percepite come migliori rispetto ad altre strategie di vita. Anche in questo contesto, le ragazze tendono a non essere riconosciute come “sole” e, di conseguenza, a sfuggire ai criteri di identificazione e presa in carico previsti da molti interventi di protezione. Nello specifico, du-

rante le attività sul campo il nostro tentativo di parlare con ragazzine è risultato fortemente frustrato dal fatto che le minori rintracciate e accolte nelle case rifugio erano pochissime. In uno di questi casi, ci è stata espressamente – e probabilmente anche a ragione – negata la possibilità di condurre un colloquio, in quanto la minore era considerata un caso “particolarmente delicato”. Dunque, quando le ragazze sono vittime di abuso sessuale all’interno di contesti domestici, tali situazioni tendono a non emergere, mentre alcune minori vengono intercettate come casi da attenzionare solo nel momento in cui si sospetta un loro coinvolgimento in reti di traffico o di prostituzione organizzata. Ulteriori informazioni relative alle attività e alle possibili vulnerabilità delle bambine migranti che non lavorano specificamente come domestiche in quest’area sono state ricostruite attraverso proxy qualitativi, costituiti dalle mediazioni e dai resoconti degli operatori intervistati. Un funzionario dei servizi sociali ha descritto uno dei percorsi ricorrenti osservati sul campo: “Le bambine che finiscono in gruppi di lavoranti gestiti da un intermediario, alloggiate in abitazioni in affitto e inserite in forme di coabitazione, sono spesso costrette a diventare compagne o mogli di qualcuno, talvolta degli stessi manager e si trovano successivamente a gestire gravidanze precoci”. Un altro funzionario ha affermato che: “Le ragazzine che sperimentano la prostituzione di strada riescono talvolta a ottenere guadagni relativamente cospicui, per cui proporre loro una via di uscita viabile non è facile”.

Gli studi sul fenomeno del sesso transazionale in Africa hanno evidenziato come esso possa costituire una risorsa in momenti di difficoltà e, talvolta, anche dare origine a relazioni affettive significative (Declich 2024, p. 455; Hunter 2002; Wamaji *et al.* 2019, p. 2), laddove siano presenti forme di consensualità e un’età adeguata. La ricerca di Katarzyna Grabska *et al.* (2019) sulle bambine migranti ad Addis Abeba mostra come le esperienze che spingono alcune minori fuggite di casa a doversi destreggiare in queste transazioni siano spesso profondamente traumatiche, inducendole in seguito a proiettare sui propri figli le speranze di un riscatto. Elementi riconducibili a dinamiche simili sono emersi anche nel contesto di Dire Dawa, in particolare attraverso le osservazioni di persone attive nell’ambito del contrasto alla violenza di genere. Un’operatrice sociale, ad esempio, ha fatto riferimento al fenomeno delle cosiddette “famiglie di strada” (*street families*), utilizzando questa espressione per descrivere un processo che prende avvio dalle “madri di strada” (*street mothers*) (Nigatu *et al.* 2022). Secondo tale ricostruzione, la dinamica inizia con l’arrivo a Dire Dawa di bambine o adolescenti migranti, sole o in compagnia di pochi coetanei, che una volta giunte in città instaurano relazioni intime con figure percepite come protettive – coetanei più grandi o giovani adulti con maggiore esperienza, spesso in grado di guidare o controllare altri minori. Le gravidanze precoci che ne deri-

vano danno origine alle prime “famiglie di strada”, considerate come una prosecuzione del precedente percorso migratorio delle madri. Nel tempo, questi nuclei tendono ad ampliarsi, elaborando forme collettive di sopravvivenza e di organizzazione della vita quotidiana nello spazio urbano. Questi elementi, raccolti in modo frammentario e mediato attraverso gli operatori, non ci hanno consentito di approfondire le traiettorie di vita delle ragazze coinvolte, ma permettono tuttavia di cogliere un dato cruciale: le forme di vulnerabilità che attraversano le esperienze femminili a Dire Dawa tendono a rimanere opache proprio perché si inscrivono in relazioni affettive, di dipendenza o di protezione che sottraggono le ragazze allo sguardo istituzionale. La difficoltà di accesso etnografico a queste situazioni riflette dunque una condizione strutturale di invisibilità, prodotta dall'intreccio tra norme sociali, dispositivi di protezione e criteri operativi di identificazione dei “casi”. È a partire da questa zona d'ombra che le conclusioni del saggio interrogano criticamente le politiche di protezione e le categorie attraverso cui esse definiscono la vulnerabilità infantile.

Conclusioni

Questo contributo ha mostrato come le politiche e i progetti rivolti ai cosiddetti “minori in movimento” possano produrre, attraverso categorie solo apparentemente neutre, forme specifiche di esclusione di genere. Le etichette operative (minori accompagnati, soli, senza dimora stabile, ecc.), rispondendo a logiche istituzionali e funzionali – legate alla rendicontazione dei progetti e ai dispositivi normativi nazionali e internazionali – tendono a riprodurre gerarchie implicite di meritevolezza e vulnerabilità. Nel caso di Dire Dawa, la distinzione tra minori “non accompagnati/soli” e minori “accompagnati” rende visibili e prioritari i ragazzi che vivono in strada e risultano privi di reti familiari urbane, mentre colloca molte bambine e adolescenti in una zona di non-intervento, poiché considerate già “protette” dalla presenza di un adulto o dalla collocazione in un contesto domestico. Rientrano in questa esclusione di genere anche quelle “minori in movimento” che si trovano sotto la presunta protezione di intermediari, broker, garanti, parenti o presunti tali e che, proprio per questo, non vengono riconosciute come “sole”. Ciò avviene nonostante gli innumerevoli strumenti elaborati nel corso del tempo per superare i pregiudizi di genere nella formulazione e nell'implementazione dei progetti di cooperazione (Moser 1993; 1996; Ostergaard 1992; Pomeranzi 1989; Spring 1993), così come le numerose politiche adottate dalle organizzazioni internazionali negli ultimi quattro decenni. In questo quadro, la vulnerabilità funziona come un dispositivo di classificazione che orienta l'identificazione

dei casi e stabilisce soglie di accesso alla presa in carico, producendo zone d'ombra: la protezione viene presunta nello spazio domestico – fatto coincidere con la “famiglia” e la “normalità” – e negata nello spazio della strada, associato al rischio e alla devianza, anche quando sfruttamento e violenza attraversano entrambi (Fassin 2007; Bonfanti et al. 2022). Non a caso, i progetti di supporto ai minori in movimento con cui ci siamo confrontate prediligono un approccio di de-istituzionalizzazione, che individua come soluzione la re-integrazione dei minori proprio in quelle famiglie ritenute “sicure” che hanno lasciato. Si tratta di una cornice operativa condivisa da governi, organizzazioni nazionali e internazionali impegnate nella protezione dell'infanzia, che tende a escludere dalla lista dei beneficiari coloro che risultano già collocati entro una presunta protezione familiare. In contrasto con questo orientamento, i dati raccolti mostrano come il ritorno dei e delle minori migranti alle famiglie di origine risulti in molti casi impraticabile, sia per la difficoltà di accettazione da parte dei genitori, sia perché sono gli stessi minori a non desiderare il rientro in contesti di emarginazione, maltrattamento o assenza di opportunità educative. I ragazzi che vivono nelle strade di Dire Dawa, oggetto di stigma per le connotazioni di devianza e delinquenza associate alla loro presenza nello spazio urbano, costituiscono i principali “beneficiari” individuati dai progetti di protezione dell'infanzia. Ciò che resta nascosto all'interno delle case suscita un'attenzione politica minore, anche perché non “disturba il decoro urbano” quanto il vagabondaggio dei bambini in strada. Il lavoro delle bambine nella loro migrazione “silente” viene così considerato una soluzione ovvia alla povertà delle famiglie, e la loro esclusione dai progetti di protezione un sacrificio necessario e raramente problematizzato.

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Report



La legge “perfetta”

Un’analisi di strumenti legislativi e amministrativi sull’abitare di rom e sinti in Emilia-Romagna

The “perfect” law

Housing policies and administrative tools for Roma and Sinti in Emilia-Romagna

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Abstract: This report focuses on some of the results of the research “Contemporary Anti-Gypsyism in Italian Local Legal Devices” conducted by the Centre for Ethnographic Research and Applied Anthropology (CREAa) of the University of Verona as part of the broader project “Countering Anti-Gypsyism: a cultural pathway between memory and actuality” funded by UNAR and Formez PA.

The research was conducted between September 2022 and July 2023, involving a comparative analysis of Regional Laws for Roma and Sinti in Italy, as well as a case study on housing policies for Roma and Sinti in Bologna.

What emerged from the research made it possible to unveil some persistent criticalities that lurk precisely in the gap between a Regional Law (L. R. Emilia-Romagna 11/2015) that seems “perfect”, and aims to protect the right to housing of Roma and Sinti also through innovative tools such as the “micro-areas” (L. R. 11/2015), and the “Regional Regulations on the Technical Requirements of Micro-areas” (D.G.R. 43/2016), which establishes the temporariness of this type of housing solutions, setting de facto limits characterised by a clear sedentist bias to the implementation of the law.

Keywords: Housing policies and regulations; Right to housing; Sedentist bias; Roma and Sinti; Italy.

Introduzione

La ricerca denominata *Antiziganismo contemporaneo nei dispositivi normativi locali italiani* è stata commissionata all’Università degli Studi di Verona e, in parti-

colare, al CREAA (Centro di Ricerche Etnografiche e di Antropologia applicata “Francesca Cappelletto” presso il Dipartimento di Scienze Umane), nell’ambito del progetto *Contrastare l’antiziganismo: un percorso culturale tra memoria e attualità*, implementato sulla base della Convenzione tra la Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, il Dipartimento per le Pari Opportunità, l’UNAR (Ufficio Nazionale Antidiscriminazione Razziale) e il Formez PA (Centro servizi, assistenza, studi e formazione per l’ammodernamento delle pubbliche amministrazioni) del 25 maggio 2021.

La ricerca è stata realizzata da Federica Scrimieri, con il coordinamento e la supervisione scientifica di Stefania Pontrandolfo, tra settembre 2022 e luglio 2023. La ricerca ha previsto in una prima fase un’analisi delle Leggi emanate in diverse Regioni italiane a partire dagli anni Ottanta del Novecento per la regolamentazione delle presenze e l’inclusione delle comunità rom e sinte sui loro territori. In una seconda fase ha approfondito l’analisi dei dispositivi normativi locali rivolti a rom e sinti tramite un’etnografia condotta nei contesti specifici della Regione Emilia-Romagna e della città di Bologna, con particolare riferimento alla prevenzione o al rischio di antiziganismo nelle normative sull’abitare.

Per i risultati della ricognizione e analisi delle Leggi Regionali specifiche per rom e sinti si rimanda al rapporto finale della ricerca,¹ mentre ai fini di questa pubblicazione² ci limitiamo a sottolineare che una delle considerazioni emerse da questa prima fase della ricerca era che l’attuale Legge Regionale specifica per rom e sinti dell’Emilia-Romagna, la n. 11 del 16 luglio 2015, denominata *Norme per l’inclusione sociale di rom e sinti*, fosse la più rappresentativa del cambiamento dei contenuti e degli indirizzi tra le Leggi per rom e sinti degli anni Ottanta/Novanta e quelle degli anni Duemila, e anche quella che ha finora maggiormente recepito le raccomandazioni della prima “Strategia nazionale d’inclusione dei Rom, dei Sinti e dei Caminanti”, proposta da UNAR nel 2012 in attuazione della Comunicazione della Commissione Europea n. 173/2011³. Queste specificità ci hanno indotto a scegliere di condurre, nella seconda fase della ricerca, un approfondimento sulla suddetta Legge della Regione Emilia-Romagna, che ha previsto la ricostruzione del processo che ha portato alla sua

¹ Consultabile sul sito del CREAA al seguente link: <https://sites.dsu.univr.it/creaa/progetto/antiziganismo-contemporaneo-nei-dispositivi-normativi-locali-italiani/> (consultato il 10/07/2025)

² Questo rapporto di ricerca è il prodotto del lavoro congiunto delle due autrici in tutte le sue parti.

³ A seguito della prima, è stata più recentemente approvata una seconda *Strategia Nazionale di uguaglianza, inclusione e partecipazione di Rom e Sinti (2021-2030)*, in attuazione della Raccomandazione del Consiglio dell’Unione Europea del 12 marzo 2021 (2021/C 93/01), adottata il 23 maggio 2022.

delibera e, successivamente, all'adozione di strumenti attuativi che, come vedremo, non permettono, di fatto, una coerente implementazione della stessa legge. A questo è stato affiancato uno studio etnografico del contesto della città di Bologna, per ricostruire da una parte la storia del trattamento amministrativo delle comunità rom e sinte presenti sul territorio bolognese prima e dopo l'implementazione di questa legge, dall'altra le risposte strategiche e tattiche delle comunità stesse a questi processi. Mentre, ancora una volta, rimandiamo al sopracitato rapporto finale della ricerca per i risultati di questa seconda fase dell'indagine, dedicheremo la presente pubblicazione esclusivamente ad alcune discrepanze significative tra la L.R. 11/2015 dell'Emilia-Romagna e i suoi strumenti attuativi emerse durante l'approfondimento del processo che ha portato alla delibera e all'attuazione della Legge.

Si tratta di importanti discrepanze tra la Legge Regionale Emilia-Romagna del 16 luglio 2015, n. 11, *Norme per l'inclusione sociale di rom e sinti*,⁴ che costituisce un notevole sforzo istituzionale di seguire le raccomandazioni delle istituzioni europee e nazionali a tutela dei diritti di rom e sinti, proponendo modi rispettosi di pensarli e proposte innovative per la loro inclusione, in particolare nell'ambito dell'abitare, e uno strumento attuativo, quello della *Direttiva sui requisiti tecnici delle microaree familiari* (D.G.R. 43/2016), che di fatto pone precisi limiti all'implementazione della stessa legge.

La L.R. 11/2015, infatti, tende a garantire la tutela del diritto all'abitare dei rom e dei sinti, individuando tra le possibili soluzioni abitative proposte come superamento delle vecchie "aree sosta" (i cosiddetti "campi"): "processi di transizione alle forme abitative convenzionali"; "iniziative, anche sperimentali, di autocostruzione e autorecupero"; ma, soprattutto, le "microaree familiari" come "soluzioni insediative innovative di interesse pubblico".

Al contrario della legge, la D.G.R. 43/2016 considera le microaree come strutture caratterizzate da "straordinarietà e temporaneità", "destinate ad assolvere alla loro funzione fintantoché i nuclei familiari interessati non possano transire verso forme abitative convenzionali", rivelando la persistenza di un forte pregiudizio sedentarista nelle politiche abitative per rom e sinti che continuano a non riuscire a concepire un abitare di comunità stabile e non temporaneo, come quello delle microaree, richiesto da una parte delle famiglie sinte che vivono in Italia.

Quello che è emerso dalla ricerca è, in altri termini, come una cornice legislativa "perfetta" sulla carta possa combinarsi con ordinanze attuative che di fatto

⁴ <https://demetra.regione.emilia-romagna.it/al/articolo?urn=er:assemblealegislativa:legge:2015;11> (consultato il 04/12/2022).

tradiscono i presupposti della legge stessa e in parte le aspettative delle comunità che hanno contribuito a promulgarla.

Quello che presenteremo di seguito è un significativo esempio di come anche nei casi in cui un corpo politico e amministrativo si sforzi attivamente di modificarsi e migliorarsi adottando un’ideologia più inclusiva che si fa norma attraverso una Legge Regionale, i meccanismi burocratici di implementazione della norma riportino a un *sedentist bias*⁵ come *doxa* che si riproduce proprio attraverso le *tecniche* dell’amministrazione (Bourdieu 1972; Semplici and Rodgers 2023).

Quello che ricostruiremo di seguito è proprio un processo attraverso cui certe *tecniche* (nel caso specifico atti amministrativi) condizionate dal pregiudizio sedentarista possono andare a intaccare l’efficacia anche di importanti sforzi legislativi. Il tentativo della L.R. 11/2015 di contrastare l’inerzia istituzionale in termini di produzione di nuovi *immaginari*, dimostrando una forte sensibilità alle esigenze di inclusione di una minoranza culturale come quella dei rom e dei sinti in Italia, è destinato a bloccarsi del tutto nei meccanismi burocratici deliberati per la sua implementazione.⁶

Cornice metodologica

Come anticipato nell’*Introduzione*, si presentano qui solo alcuni dei risultati di una ricerca complessa, supervisionata da Stefania Pontrandolfo e condotta sul campo da Federica Scrimieri, che ha utilizzato in modo eclettico diverse fonti bibliografiche, d’archivio, etnografiche.

⁵ La nozione di *sedentist bias* (qui tradotto con “pregiudizio sedentarista”), non nuova nell’ambito degli studi su gruppi che praticano diverse forme di mobilità, è stata sviluppata recentemente durante un progetto di ricerca collaborativo dal titolo “*Re-imagining Development for Mobile and Marginalised Peoples – (ReDeMP)*”, finanziato dal John Fell Fund presso la Oxford University, a cui hanno partecipato Cory Rodgers (Refugee Studies Centre – Oxford University), Ariell Ahearn (School of Geography and the Environment – Oxford University), Greta Semplici (European University Institute), Matthew Porges (Oxford Anthropology), Marco Solimene (University of Iceland), Dawn Chatty (Oxford Department of International Development), Stefania Pontrandolfo (University of Verona).

Per maggiori informazioni su questo progetto e relative pubblicazioni vedi: <https://sites.dsu.univr.it/creaa/progetto/re-imagining-development-for-mobile-and-marginalised-peoples-redemp/> (consultato il 31/01/2026).

Alcuni dei risultati di questa ricerca sono stati pubblicati in *Antropologia Pubblica*, vedi: Pontrandolfo, Solimene, Secchi (2022). Per altre pubblicazioni vedi l’introduzione allo *special issue* della rivista *Nomadic Peoples* a cura di Semplici e Rodgers (2023) e l’insieme dei contributi in essa pubblicati.

⁶ Per simili riflessioni su norma e dispositivi attuativi della residenza anagrafica vedi Pontrandolfo e Solimene (2023).

Per l'iniziale individuazione e analisi dei testi delle Leggi Regionali (sia quelle abrogate che quelle vigenti) dedicate a rom e sinti in Italia, sono stati utilizzati portali giuridici quali *leggiditaliaprofessionale.it* e *normattiva.it*; sono stati utilizzati inoltre i siti delle Regioni italiane e l'archivio on line della Gazzetta Ufficiale per la ricostruzione delle modifiche e degli aggiornamenti alle leggi.

Il caso di studio etnografico si è focalizzato sull'arco temporale compreso tra il 1988, anno di promulgazione della prima Legge Regionale specifica per rom e sinti (L.R. 47/1988) in Emilia-Romagna, e i giorni nostri, per poter indagare il processo di sviluppo e i cambiamenti che le politiche abitative hanno subito, nel corso degli ultimi quarant'anni circa, in particolare nella città di Bologna.⁷

Si è proceduto inizialmente a una ricognizione bibliografica della letteratura esistente sulla presenza di gruppi rom e sinti e sulle politiche abitative a loro rivolte nel territorio bolognese a partire dagli anni Ottanta. È stata condotta di seguito una ricerca sugli strumenti amministrativi regionali e comunali che hanno accompagnato queste politiche, svolta attraverso le piattaforme web che archiviano gli atti amministrativi e le delibere approvate a livello regionale e comunale e le azioni dell'Assemblea legislativa regionale.

La ricerca sul campo di tipo etnografico ha previsto, oltre alla sopraccitata ricerca bibliografica e documentale, anche la conduzione di molti colloqui formali e informali con diversi interlocutori, con le tecniche di produzione dei dati dell'intervista semi-strutturata, del colloquio etnografico e dell'osservazione partecipante. Nello specifico sono stati coinvolti esponenti dell'amministrazione regionale e comunale, operatori dei servizi sociali e rappresentanti della comunità rom e sinta sul territorio di Bologna, e sono stati svolti numerosi colloqui etnografici informali con membri delle comunità rom e sinte e della società civile vicini alle comunità che risiedono sul territorio bolognese. Il metodo dell'osservazione partecipante è stato utilizzato nella frequentazione degli interlocutori nei loro spazi lavorativi e abitativi distribuiti sul territorio bolognese: gli uffici utilizzati dagli impiegati della pubblica amministrazione, gli spazi di incontro e di lavoro degli operatori delle cooperative coinvolte e le abitazioni delle famiglie rom e sinte. È stata inoltre praticata in occasione di alcuni eventi nazionali che hanno permesso di approfondire la conoscenza e partecipare alle attività degli interlocutori di questa ricerca nei loro percorsi quotidiani di approfondimento e negoziazione.

⁷ Nell'ambito della ricerca citata, la città di Bologna è stata scelta come caso di studio sulle politiche abitative destinate a rom e sinti anche in considerazione della presenza storica di lunga durata di gruppi rom e sinti sul suo territorio. La città è infatti considerata dalle comunità rom e sinte il primo luogo d'arrivo dei gruppi in Italia, in funzione della testimonianza riportata dalla Cronaca Rampona del 18 luglio 1422. Per approfondimenti rispetto al valore documentale della Cronaca Rampona si veda Piasere (2011).

Attraverso l'insieme dei dati raccolti è stata ricostruita cronologicamente la storia del trattamento politico amministrativo delle presenze rom e sinte sul territorio bolognese dai primi anni Ottanta, gli anni dell'ultima fase di delega alle Autonomie locali da parte dello Stato italiano, fino a oggi, in cui la cessione di deleghe è compiuta e il Comune di Bologna dispone autonomamente della gestione e regolamentazione delle politiche abitative e non per rom e sinti nel loro territorio.

Attraverso l'analisi diacronica è stato possibile evidenziare un contesto locale peculiare in cui si possono notare sia episodi e processi sistemici di antiziganismo, che continue negoziazioni e dialoghi tra le minoranze rom e sinte e la maggioranza non rom/non sinta che sono in vario modo condizionati dall'ordinamento locale, a sua volta influenzato da raccomandazioni esterne a livello nazionale ed europeo, in una rete intricata di delibere e bandi e assegnazioni di fondi.

Di tutto questo lavoro, selezioneremo nei paragrafi successivi solo l'analisi e la riflessione a partire da alcuni strumenti politico-amministrativi della Regione Emilia-Romagna,⁸ al fine, come già anticipato, di sottolinearne alcune significative discrepanze.

La Legge Regionale 11/2015

In questo rapporto di ricerca analizzeremo il percorso che dall'inizio degli anni Dieci del Duemila ha portato alla promulgazione di una nuova legge specifica per rom e sinti in Emilia-Romagna. Una Legge considerata rispettosa delle direttive europee e nazionali e per il coinvolgimento delle comunità rom e sinte, che solo recentemente comincia a essere oggetto di critiche da parte dell'attivismo rom e sinto a livello nazionale e locale, soprattutto per la sua natura definita “facoltativa”, che non prevede dunque l'obbligo per i Comuni di attuazione delle disposizioni.⁹

⁸ Come già precisato, il corpus di dati etnografici è alla base delle interpretazioni del rapporto finale della ricerca (si veda *infra* nota 1), mentre in questo report vi si fa solo breve riferimento nel riportare l'opinione dei funzionari amministrativi, delle rappresentanze di rom e sinti incontrate (si veda per esempio *infra* nelle note 9, 11, 14, 18).

⁹ Le criticità sollevate rispetto alla Legge Regionale 11/2015 sono evinte dagli interventi dei portavoce nazionali del Movimento Kethane ascoltati durante l'evento UNAR per la presentazione della nuova Strategia Nazionale 2021/2030 del 4 aprile 2023 e dei rappresentanti del Movimento Kethane – Reggio Emilia durante un evento del 27 maggio 2023. Sono inoltre emersi dalle interviste con la referente dell'Associazione Amici di via Django, Simonetta Malinverno, svolta il 07/04/2023 presso la sua abitazione e con l'attivista sinto di Bologna, Claudio Minguzzi, svolta il 07/04/2023 presso la sua abitazione: entrambi hanno utilizzato nello specifico il termine “facoltativa”.

L'iter di approvazione della L.R. 11/2015 è avviato dall'approvazione della Strategia nazionale per l'inclusione rom e sinti nel 2012 a cui segue, il 24 gennaio 2013, l'approvazione da parte della Conferenza delle Regioni di un documento, basato sulla Strategia nazionale, che prevede la costituzione di Tavoli Regionali per il coordinamento degli interventi locali in materia di integrazione. Analogamente, a livello regionale, il 22 gennaio 2013, la Cabina di Regia sociale e sanitaria – sede di confronto, coordinamento e integrazione tra la Regione e il sistema delle Autonomie locali – valida un percorso regionale volto sia a un allineamento al quadro strategico europeo e nazionale, sia alla revisione della L.R. 47/1988 “Norme per le minoranze nomadi” dell'Emilia-Romagna. Dai provvedimenti precedenti, la Strategia nazionale d'inclusione dei Rom, dei Sinti e dei Caminanti, in attuazione della comunicazione della Commissione europea n.173/2011, la Legge regionale 47/1988, come le altre coeve, appare obsoleta per linguaggio utilizzato e finalità che non rispecchiano le istanze e la composizione della comunità rom e sinte presenti sul territorio locale.

La Regione Emilia-Romagna organizza il 21 marzo 2013 un convegno preparatorio alla revisione della L.R. 47/1988 in collaborazione con il Difensore Civico Regionale. Nel Quaderno *Verso il superamento dei campi nomadi. Analisi e proposte per una nuova legge regionale* pubblicato al termine dei lavori, l'allora Difensore Civico, Daniele Lugli, premette chiaramente come “norme etnocentriche favoriscano comportamenti etnocentrici” (Lugli e Crocitti 2013, p. 11) mutuando l'affermazione dal punto 7 del cosiddetto decalogo per la convivenza pluriethnica di Alexander Langer del 1994¹⁰ e dimostrando una prospettiva chiaramente inclusiva.

Il processo di revisione parte, dunque, da una ricognizione della situazione dell'epoca. A partire dal 1996, la Regione Emilia-Romagna effettua una rilevazione statistica sulla presenza di rom e sinti mediante raccolta di informazioni, attraverso un apposito questionario compilato dai Comuni. L'ultima rilevazione si riferisce al 30 novembre 2009 e restituisce l'immagine della popolazione rom e sinta che abita nelle aree (aree di sosta, di transito e a destinazione particolare) pubbliche e private.

Le premesse sono poste attorno alla necessità di superare la L.R. 47/1988, poiché non più rappresentativa della situazione reale, che il suddetto Quaderno descrive come “disaggregata per etnia” nel seguente modo: “l'88,3% della popolazione appartiene alla comunità sinta, il 7,4% ai rom di nazionalità italiana e solo il 3,3% ai rom stranieri. Diversamente dalle rappresentazioni dei nomadi come ‘stranieri’, l'immagine che l'indagine regionale restituisce delle persone

¹⁰ <https://www.alexanderlanger.org/it/32/104> (consultato il 08/06/2023).

che vivono nei campi è composta quasi esclusivamente da cittadini italiani. Si tratta dunque di persone nei cui confronti, come per gli altri cittadini ‘non-nomadi’, le amministrazioni hanno precisi obblighi ai fini del riconoscimento di diritti (e doveri), anche e soprattutto al fine di garantire un accesso non discriminante ai servizi” (Lugli e Crocitti 2013, p. 84).

L’atto successivo è la Determina n. 8860 del 22 luglio 2013, che istituisce formalmente il Tavolo tecnico regionale per l’inclusione di rom e sinti, all’interno del quale si svolgono 12 incontri tra il 9 giugno 2013 e il 10 giugno 2014, inclusi incontri con le rappresentanze di rom e sinti.¹¹

Non sono disponibili alla consultazione verbali di questi incontri preparatori del Tavolo tecnico regionale, tuttavia riportiamo di seguito degli stralci a nostro avviso significativi del Resoconto integrale n. 17 della Seduta del 30 giugno 2015 dell’Assemblea legislativa dell’Emilia-Romagna.¹²

Tenendo conto che risale al 7 luglio 2014 l’approvazione della prima proposta di legge ovvero DGR 1014/2014: “Progetto di legge: Norme per l’inclusione sociale di rom e sinti”, che l’8 giugno 2015 viene approvata la nuova proposta di legge e che il 14 luglio 2015 viene approvata definitivamente la L.R. 11/2015, riteniamo che questo resoconto a ridosso dell’approvazione definitiva contenga in sé i punti salienti del dibattito tra funzionari politici e rappresentanze sinte prevalentemente interessate.

All’apertura della seduta, i rappresentanti Luigi Chiesi (Presidente Associazione Sinti italiani di Bologna), Vladimiro Torre (Presidente Associazione Thèm Romanó di Reggio Emilia) e Simonetta Malinverno (Vicepresidente Associazione Amici di via Django di Modena) propongono degli interventi in cui ribadiscono le esigenze delle loro comunità.

Riportiamo un passaggio dell’intervento di Luigi Chiesi:

Nella cultura che c’è stata sempre tra i Sinti, quella di girovagare, di andare con le giostre a destra e a sinistra, in realtà per noi il campo nomadi, ora come ora, non è la soluzione. In realtà vorremmo uscire dai campi nomadi però vorremmo avere l’alternativa di queste aree particolari, che assomigliano di più a quello che è la nostra cultura, il nostro modo di vivere, anche perché è quello che ci serve per il lavoro che facciamo. Essendo giostrai, in queste aree abbiamo la possibilità di riporre le giostre, mettere i camion che servono per il nostro lavoro, mentre in una casa popolare non

¹¹ Informazioni su questi incontri con le rappresentanze rom e sinte sono state gentilmente fornite da Antonella Gandolfi, allora referente del servizio di “Contrasto alla grave emarginazione adulta” della Regione Emilia-Romagna, durante l’intervista effettuata il 21/03/2023 presso gli Uffici della Regione Emilia-Romagna.

¹² <https://demetra.regione.emilia-romagna.it/al/articolo?urn=er:assemblealegislativa:resocontoemissione:20150630;4-P> (consultato il 08/06/2023).

avremmo tutto questo spazio per appoggiare tutti i mezzi con cui tuttora lavoriamo e ci guadagniamo da vivere. Queste aree che noi chiediamo, queste microaree, è per darci la possibilità di prepararci per il futuro dei nostri figli, delle generazioni che verranno [...]. Noi non è che chiediamo di avere delle microaree e poi essere ancora un aggravio per Comuni e Regione: a noi servono queste microaree, ma noi saremo autonomi. Certamente all'inizio avremo bisogno di essere portati ad uscire dai campi, di essere incoraggiati, però abbiamo il desiderio di avere delle microaree da gestire personalmente, con gli oneri, tutto quello che si deve fare (luce, acqua, gas). Nelle microaree manca la casa in mattoni, ma il restante è una casa, perché ci vivono solo i miei figli e mia moglie, come vive ogni cittadino italiano. Ci faremo carico degli oneri di pagamento. Non tutti i Sinti desiderano la microarea, ci sarà qualche Sinto che avrà desiderio di andare nelle case popolari, di passare dal campo nomadi alle case. La maggioranza, però, vorrebbe avere le microaree.

Questa la replica all'intervento, con le domande previste dalle modalità di "audizione" dell'incontro, di uno dei Consiglieri presenti, Daniele Marchetti (Lega Nord Emilia e Romagna):

Qualche domanda assolutamente dovuta, dato che abbiamo chiesto questa audizione proprio perché non abbiamo paura di confrontarci con nessuno ed è giusto così. Parto dalle considerazioni che sono state fatte dai rappresentanti dei Sinti italiani: è stato detto che la microarea viene vista come alternativa al campo. Per noi l'unica alternativa rimane comunque la casa, non capiamo per quale motivo si devono andare a creare delle aree, in deroga a tutti gli strumenti urbanistici dei Comuni, cioè mettere in campo delle regole differenti rispetto a tutti gli altri cittadini. [...] Io capisco tutto, ma sentirmi dire "noi siamo fatti così, ci dovete capire". Se venisse qui, in Emilia-Romagna, un eschimese cosa dobbiamo fare? Un igloo perché a lui piace vivere in un igloo? È una cosa fuori da ogni concetto logico. Nella nostra società si vive nelle case, bisogna andare nelle case, non capisco quale sia il problema, non la vedo una tragedia, con tutte le persone che, quest'oggi, sono fuori casa. Io vorrei sapere qualcosa sul discorso culturale: non credete sia opportuno che facciate voi un passo verso la cultura della realtà in cui viviamo e non viceversa?

Altre domande poste dalla Consigliera Raffaella Sensoli (Movimento 5 Stelle) e dal Consigliere Alan Fabbri (Lega Nord Emilia e Romagna) attengono alla modalità di gestione delle microaree e delle tipologie di lavori oltre il lavoro di giostraio, alle quali Chiesi risponde:

Per quanto riguarda l'autogestione di queste aree, l'abbiamo già detto, saranno a carico nostro la gestione delle aree, per quanto riguarda la gestione del pagamento, sarà tutto a carico nostro. Il passaggio che vogliamo fare noi dal campo nomadi

è perché vogliamo uscire. Si diceva prima della cultura Sinti che non è mai uscita, che non è mai stata portata, che svolta ha avuto nella società. Non abbiamo mai avuto la possibilità di portare la nostra cultura in mezzo alla società perché siamo stati sempre discriminati nei campi nomadi, siamo mischiati come le persone che da vent’anni sono in Italia, cioè i Rom che vivono nelle baracche. Siamo sempre stati considerati come quella popolazione, ma non è la realtà perché i Sinti italiani sono qui dal 1400. [...] Se viene un eschimese e tu lo metti in una casa con un fornello a 50 gradi quello muore, gli devi dare il tempo di capire che in Italia non c’è il freddo che hanno loro. Bisogna fare un passaggio, mi capite? Non è facile [...] Noi non siamo qui per dire che abbiamo il diritto di avere le aree, noi abbiamo fatto una proposta, non diciamo che abbiamo il diritto di avere tutto. [...] Noi chiediamo, se possibile, se ci date la possibilità di vivere in questa maniera, noi ne saremo grati. Non pretendiamo, nessuno di noi pretende, neanche i campi nomadi non li abbiamo pretesi noi, ci hanno messo i divieti di girare, ci hanno messi fuori come cani, non potevamo più girare, non è una scelta nostra. Ci hanno costretto ad andare in quei luoghi, non è una scelta nostra, però abbiamo ubbidito alle leggi e siamo stati nel campo nomadi.

La seduta termina con toni elevati a causa di quelle che le rappresentanze dei rom e sinti definiscono “provocazioni” più che domande, sentendosi accusate di essere istigate a non rispondere più ai quesiti posti e di essere in qualche modo strumentalizzati dalle parti politiche.

Ci è sembrato utile riportare questi estratti, perché troviamo che racchiudano il nucleo del conflitto rispetto alle microaree che sono l’oggetto principale della L.R. 11/2015 in questa fase prossima all’approvazione. È presente infatti innanzitutto la onnipresente supposta dicotomia “nomade/cittadino” secondo cui un “nomade” sarebbe altro rispetto a un “cittadino”, dimostrando quanto i pregiudizi sedentaristi rientrino nel “senso comune” (Herzfeld 2006) anche dei nostri politici e amministratori. Dall’altra parte, in questa fase, le microaree con modalità di autogestione e autosostentamento, previo accompagnamento iniziale, sono la soluzione che emerge dal dibattito interno rispetto alla comunità sinta (anche se è difficile definire in questa sede quanto veramente i rappresentanti presenti siano “rappresentativi” di tutte le famiglie sinte). Si rileva come si insista per un accompagnamento iniziale nella gestione, date le esperienze precedenti non positive. La rappresentante dell’associazione Amici di via Django, che riunisce i nuclei familiari delle microaree sorte dallo smantellamento del campo di via Baccelliera di Modena,¹³ Simonetta Malinverno, sostiene, per esempio, come proprio l’“isolamento

¹³ Per una visione più approfondita del caso di Modena vedi Secchi (2018).

istituzionale”¹⁴ seguito alla chiusura del campo e al trasferimento nelle micro-aree abbia causato l’attuale situazione emergenziale rispetto a problematiche strutturali dell’impianto fognario e della mancata manutenzione degli spazi in cui versa soprattutto la microarea sperimentale di via Django. Emerge inoltre con evidenza il conflitto presente sul territorio bolognese tra i gruppi sinti e i gruppi rom incentrato sull’essere accomunati e inseriti in un’unica categoria.

La legge viene comunque approvata, ma accolta con opinioni contrastanti dall’Assemblea legislativa regionale. Il centro-sinistra, che l’ha sostenuta e votata, riferisce che:

Questa legge affronta il problema con serietà e pragmatismo [...] una proposta seria che affrontava in modo non populista, non demagogico, un tema che è quello dell’integrazione, dell’inclusione di rom e sinti in modo appunto efficace, superando i grandi campi, dando vita alle microaree.¹⁵

Riportiamo di seguito invece le maggiori criticità rilevate dai suoi detrattori politici:

In realtà questa è una legge nuova per modo di dire. Nel senso che abroga la vecchia, ma al tempo stesso mantiene in vita la vecchia. Dice che vuol togliere le aree per i nomadi, ma in realtà le moltiplica sul territorio perché da un campo nomadi grande nasceranno 12 campi nomadi piccoli. [...] I campi nomadi andavano chiusi perché bisogna fare di tutto perché queste persone capiscano che, volendo essere cittadini di questo paese, volendo essere cittadini italiani, debbono necessariamente fare quello che fanno i cittadini italiani e cioè vivere in abitazioni. Se a loro non va bene questo sistema, allora anziché fare i nomadi stanziali facciano i nomadi nomadi, cioè vengono stanno una settimana e se ne vanno.¹⁶

Riportiamo per intero queste dichiarazioni fatte a caldo in seguito all’approvazione perché testimoniano il clima all’interno del quale la legge è stata varata, nonostante il lungo processo preparatorio. Tali dibattiti rispec-

¹⁴ Tratto dall’intervista a Simonetta Malinverno svolta il 07/04/2023 presso la sua abitazione.

¹⁵ Lepida.Tv. Puntata 20. 2015. Notiziario ON/ER. Tratto da un’intervista a Igor Taruffi, all’epoca Consigliere Regionale per SEL, oggi Assessore Regionale. <https://www.lepida.tv/video/assemblea-on-er-il-settimanale-dellassemblea-legislativa-dellemilia-romagna-5> (consultato il 06/06/2023).

¹⁶ Lepida.Tv. Puntata 20. 2015. Notiziario ON/ER. Dichiarazioni di Tommaso Foti, all’epoca Consigliere Regionale per Fratelli d’Italia. <https://www.lepida.tv/video/assemblea-on-er-il-settimanale-dellassemblea-legislativa-dellemilia-romagna-5> (consultato il 06/06/2023).

chiano inoltre la costante negoziazione tra comunità rom e sinte, amministrazioni locali e parti politiche che ruota attorno ad assunti sfatati da trent'anni ma che rimangono al cuore del conflitto: i costi sostenuti dall'amministrazione e l'equivoco altamente strumentalizzabile tra cittadinanza e appartenenza a una minoranza che pratica forme di mobilità per la sua sussistenza.

L'amministrazione regionale, da parte sua, nel report *Abitare un territorio. Le diverse traiettorie di vita nella popolazione sinta e rom. Valutazione qualitativa delle azioni di integrazione in Emilia-Romagna* (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2021a) sostiene come si avvii attraverso la L.R. 11/2015 “un percorso di modifica dei propri strumenti di intervento nell'ambito dell'integrazione delle comunità rom e sinte presenti sul territorio”. L'orientamento era quello “di un intervento normativo ‘leggero’, che riconoscesse le identità culturali e sociali di rom e sinti e la loro specificità, promuovendone le pari opportunità, l'uguaglianza e la dignità [...], ribadisse i principi dell'inclusione e della non discriminazione per tutti/e, facendo riferimento alle norme e alle disposizioni regionali già esistenti nei settori chiave dell'educazione, dell'istruzione, della formazione, del lavoro, dell'abitare e della salute” (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2021a, p. 9). La legge è infatti organizzata intorno a quattro assi fondamentali di intervento: abitare, scuola e formazione, lavoro, salute, in allineamento con le raccomandazioni europee e nazionali, e focalizza in particolare l'attenzione sull'asse dell'abitare, individuato come possibile leva per avviare percorsi di autonomia ed emancipazione. Le disposizioni non si prefiggono di essere specifiche per una categoria di cittadini/e, ma strumenti per intervenire solo se occorre rimuovere eventuali ostacoli all'integrazione e all'accesso a beni, prestazioni, servizi, opportunità previsti per la popolazione emiliano-romagnola. Si afferma con chiarezza come il legislatore abbia “preso atto di come il nomadismo fosse ormai divenuto un fenomeno residuale per comunità ormai stanziali da anni. A questo proposito, un fenomeno peculiare dell'Emilia-Romagna è stata la tendenza di molti nuclei sinti ad uscire dalle aree sosta pubbliche, create grazie alla precedente Legge regionale, per stabilirsi in piccoli appezzamenti agricoli di loro proprietà” (Ivi, p. 10). Gli interventi realizzati a seguito di questa legge, tuttavia, non si sono concentrati sugli appezzamenti di proprietà dei sinti (per esempio con opere di urbanizzazione che li trasformassero da “terreni agricoli” a terreni abitabili), ma sulle microaree (pubbliche o private) in grado di “consentire condizioni di vita migliori alle famiglie, rispettarne le specificità culturali rispetto al tema dell'abitare, favorirne l'autonomia e l'emancipazione, avere un impatto meno ‘forte’ sul tessuto sociale, creare i presupposti per l'autogestione responsabile e indipendente delle aree stesse, sgravando le Amministrazioni dei costi, spesso considerevoli, sostenuti annualmente per la gestione e manutenzione delle aree sosta pubbliche” (Ivi, p. 11).

Scopriamo tuttavia, attraverso questo primo documento della Regione Emilia-Romagna, che le “microaree familiari” pubbliche e private, considerate soluzioni insediative innovative di interesse pubblico e individuate proprio nel confronto con le rappresentanze di rom e sinti, come in effetti abbiamo visto, sarebbero però “*un’ulteriore soluzione a carattere temporaneo, nella prospettiva della piena integrazione dei nuclei e del passaggio verso forme abitative ordinarie*” (Ibid. corsivo nostro).

In realtà la L.R. 11/2015 non fa esplicito riferimento a questo passaggio, né al carattere temporaneo delle microaree, essa specifica il sostegno al “superamento delle aree di sosta [...] in quanto fonti di esclusione e discriminazioni” (L.R. 11/2015 Art.3, comma 1, lettera a), indica microaree familiari, pubbliche e private come “soluzioni insediative innovative di interesse pubblico” (Ivi, lettera b) e specifica anche la promozione di “processi di transizione alle forme abitative convenzionali” (Ivi, lettera c), ma in nessun passo della legge si identifica la microarea familiare come fase di *passaggio verso forme abitative ordinarie*. Questo passaggio si compie invece definitivamente con la Delibera di Giunta regionale n. 43 del 25 gennaio 2016,¹⁷ promossa dagli Assessori della Giunta regionale, non dall’Assemblea legislativa, che decidono di normare questa nuova tipologia abitativa al fine di fornire alle amministrazioni locali precisi riferimenti di natura urbanistica, edilizia e procedurale, ma a questo punto anche al fine di conferirle *una precisa direzione sedentarista*:

Le esigenze di riduzione del consumo del suolo e della dispersione insediativa [...] impongono alle amministrazioni comunali di ridurre al minimo l’impatto di tali soluzioni abitative sul territorio extraurbano, consentendosi la realizzazione solo di strutture leggere e temporanee, destinate ad assolvere alla loro funzione fin tanto che i nuclei familiari interessati non possano transitare verso forme abitative convenzionali (DGR 43/2016, p. 6).

Da queste premesse appare evidente il carattere di temporaneità strutturale delle nuove microaree, con l’obiettivo, affatto occultato, dell’inquadramento verso soluzioni abitative convenzionali, le abitazioni in muratura. La Delibera introduce infatti “la facoltà dei Comuni di prevedere sul proprio territorio aree da destinare, *con il carattere della straordinarietà e temporaneità*, a questa tipologia abitativa. Le microaree, che devono essere individuate attraverso uno specifico programma comunale, da approvare con un’apposita variante al POC (Piano Operativo Comunale) nel rispetto dei vincoli posti dalla normativa sulla tutela

¹⁷ <https://sociale.regione.emilia-romagna.it/esclusione-sociale-e-poverta/rom-e-sinti> (consultato il 08/06/2023).

e l'uso del territorio, non sono soggette pertanto a modifica della destinazione d'uso (a conferma della temporaneità della soluzione)” (Regione Emilia-Romagna 2021a, p. 11 corsivo nostro).¹⁸

L'ultimo atto normativo conseguente alla L.R. 11/2015 è stata la “Strategia Regionale per l'inclusione di rom e sinti”, approvata il 29 marzo 2016 con la Delibera di Giunta regionale n. 402. La Strategia regionale è il documento di indirizzo e programmazione degli interventi per l'inclusione di rom e sinti. Individua obiettivi, soggetti attuatori, strumenti e percorsi da attivare a livello locale attraverso i Piani di Zona distrettuali per la salute e il benessere, che devono essere approvati secondo quanto previsto dalla Legge Regionale 12 marzo 2003 n. 2 “Norme per la promozione della cittadinanza sociale e per la realizzazione del sistema integrato di interventi e servizi sociali” e dal Piano Sociale e sanitario. Il documento, per quanto riguarda la tematica dell'abitare, individua ancora specificamente “soluzioni insediative innovative di interesse pubblico, quali le microaree familiari, pubbliche e private; abitazioni convenzionali; sperimentazione di autocostruzione e autorecupero” (DGR 402/2016 § 3, p. 29).

A conclusione della panoramica sul processo normativo che abbiamo appena ricostruito, possiamo sottolineare come dalla ricerca sul campo svolta da Federica Scrimieri sul caso particolare della città di Bologna sia emerso che il Comune di Bologna abbia recepito queste direttive regionali concentrando gli sforzi sulle prime due soluzioni insediative proposte dalla L.R. 11/2015 e dalla Strategia Regionale del 2016, ma conformandosi anche alla Delibera di Giunta regionale 43/2016 e dunque alla realizzazione di microaree “temporanee”.

Conclusioni

L'analisi del processo che ha condotto alla promulgazione e all'attuazione della Legge Regionale Emilia-Romagna del 16 luglio 2015 n. 11 “Norme per l'inclusione sociale di rom e sinti” si è rivelato di particolare rilievo, perché se da una parte ci ha permesso di mettere a fuoco punti di forza dell'apparato politico-amministrativo locale (in particolare la grande capacità di smuoversi

¹⁸ Tutto ciò in parte corrisponde anche a diversi posizionamenti rispetto all'abitare di diverse famiglie sinte. Come emerso da alcuni dei colloqui etnografici, tra i sinti di Bologna c'è chi considera le microaree una soluzione auspicabile temporanea di transizione e adattamento verso una casa in muratura, e chi in casa “non ci vuole andare e non ci andrà mai” perché si sentirebbe “in prigione”. Entrambi i commenti sono stati raccolti durante l'evento *Festaromsintagiana* tenutosi a Bologna il 27/05/2023 nei colloqui con due famiglie sinte intervistate.

dal rischio di inerzia istituzionale con l'attivarsi per la revisione della precedente L.R. 47/1988), dall'altra ci ha anche permesso di svelare alcune criticità persistenti che si annidano proprio nello scarto tra una Legge Regionale effettivamente a tutela del diritto all'abitare dei rom e dei sinti (L.R. 11/2015) e la sua delibera attuativa, la Direttiva sui requisiti tecnici delle microaree familiari (D.G.R. 43/2016), che stabilisce carattere di temporaneità a quelle forme auspiccate e richieste da molti sinti.

La grande capacità dimostrata tanto dai politici quanto dai funzionari amministrativi regionali dell'Emilia-Romagna di riflettere sulle proprie azioni, di avviare e mantenere dialoghi continuativi con il territorio (dal terzo settore alle comunità rom e sinte), e di conseguenza di modificarsi progressivamente ma inequivocabilmente nel tempo, può davvero essere considerata un modello per molte altre realtà italiane. D'altra parte, però, non possiamo non rilevare come anche nel migliore degli esempi possibili individuabili a livello nazionale di progettazione e implementazione di politiche per il miglioramento delle condizioni di vita di rom e sinti, persistano evidenti pregiudizi sedentaristi che vanno, di fatto, a inficiarne l'efficacia. Quello che emerge, ancora una volta prepotentemente, da questo caso di studio è il forte operare come *doxa* dell'agire politico-amministrativo di una "cosmologia sedentarista" che proprio non lascia spazio all'introduzione di modalità abitative stabili, sebbene non conformi a quelle della maggioranza della popolazione sedentaria, con forme di "abitare di comunità" tipologie di spazi che possano permettere alle famiglie sinte di mantenere uno stile di vita legato a pratiche economiche parzialmente itineranti ancora vitali (come per esempio quelle dello spettacolo viaggiante o del riciclo di metalli).

La transizione abitativa dei rom e dei sinti dai grossi "campi" del passato può essere pensata come una transizione in appartamenti per tutte le famiglie che lo desiderino, ma il desiderio più volte espresso di una parte delle famiglie sinte di vivere stabilmente in microaree (magari di loro proprietà) andrebbe maggiormente e più efficacemente tutelato.

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Intelligenze naturali e artificiali:

alcune riflessioni antropologiche dal Festival della Biodiversità 2025

Natural and artificial intelligences:

some anthropological reflections from the Festival della Biodiversità 2025

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Abstract: The 19th edition of the Festival della Biodiversità, held from May 31 to June 8, 2025, developed the topic “Natural and artificial intelligences” through a complex multidisciplinary program, aimed at exploring the interactions between humans, the environment, digital technologies and artificial intelligence (AI). Promoted by a network of institutional and cultural entities, the Festival featured the collaboration of the Scientific and Artistic Committees, whose members discussed the epistemological, ecological, and sociopolitical implications linked to the development of AI.

This article, born from the author’s experience as an anthropologist and member of the Scientific Committee, offers an anthropological perspective on the theme centred on the deconstruction of dichotomies such as modernity/tradition, digital/non-digital societies and nature/culture. It also draws on some reflections developed from recent ethnographic research conducted in North-Eastern Brazil. The analysis focuses on the role of AI and ICTs in the processes of identity redefinition and sociopolitical affirmation among native peoples, highlighting how digital technologies – though developed within neoliberal frameworks – can become tools of agency and resistance. Viewed through this lens, the Festival is therefore configured as a theoretical and practical laboratory aimed at rethinking biodiversity and digital technologies through more complex, pluralistic, and inclusive paradigms.

Keywords: Festival della Biodiversità; IA; ICTs; Native Peoples.

Introduzione

Dal 31 maggio all’8 giugno 2025 si è svolta a Milano la diciannovesima edizione del Festival della Biodiversità, organizzata dal Comitato Promotore composto da enti istituzionali, associazioni, cooperative e società. Capofila della rete del

Festival è stato – come per ogni edizione – l’Ente Parco Nord Milano, che da ormai cinquant’anni si impegna nella tutela ambientale e nella promozione di azioni di valorizzazione e difesa della biodiversità, con l’obiettivo di sensibilizzare i cittadini sulla sua importanza a livello globale.¹

Anche quest’anno il Festival ha visto l’azione congiunta di un comitato scientifico e di un comitato artistico, impegnati nel proporre e vagliare un ricco calendario di eventi, tra cui conferenze, laboratori, passeggiate naturalistiche, spettacoli, rassegne teatrali e installazioni interattive. Il tema attorno al quale si è svolta la diciannovesima edizione è stato intitolato “Intelligenze naturali e artificiali”. Coinvolgendo esperti, artisti e pubblico, il Festival ha riflettuto sull’interazione tra natura e tecnologia, cercando di mettere in luce se e come l’intelligenza artificiale possa contribuire alla conservazione della biodiversità e al miglioramento del benessere degli esseri umani e, più in generale, degli esseri viventi.

In particolare, il tema è stato declinato secondo sei sezioni principali (intelligenze naturali; intelligenza artificiale e potere; IA e creatività artistica; IA e ricerca scientifica; fisicità dell’IA; intelligenza, mente e corpo), ciascuna delle quali è stata arricchita dalle riflessioni dei membri dei comitati scientifico e artistico, dai contributi degli ospiti esterni e dalle suggestioni del pubblico. Un Festival dunque dal carattere multidisciplinare, all’interno del quale l’antropologia è potuta entrare in dialogo con altre aree scientifiche per cercare di indagare meccanismi, relazioni, opportunità, limiti e rischi sottesi allo sviluppo e all’utilizzo dell’intelligenza artificiale e delle ICTs.²

Le riflessioni contenute nel presente contributo sono il frutto delle sollecitazioni e delle occasioni di confronto e di dialogo rese possibili dalla mia partecipazione al comitato scientifico del Festival per l’edizione 2025, nonché il risultato delle prime considerazioni provenienti dalla mia ricerca sul campo – appena conclusa – nel nordest del Brasile.³

Un Festival dal carattere plurale

Punto saldo del Festival è stata la valorizzazione della complessità di esperienze, situazioni e significati mobilitati intorno al concetto di “intelligenza”, per ques-

¹ <https://www.festivalbiodiversita.it/chi-siamo/> (consultato il 19/06/2025).

² *Information and Communication Technologies*, in italiano “Tecnologie dell’Informazione e della Comunicazione” (TIC), cioè l’insieme di metodi, tecniche e strumenti per la creazione, trasmissione, ricezione, archiviazione ed elaborazione delle informazioni in formato digitale.

³ Un ringraziamento particolare va al Prof. Roberto Malighetti per avermi coinvolto e guidato nell’attività del comitato, nonché agli altri suoi membri per gli spunti promossi e i proficui scambi di idee.

to motivo declinato al plurale nel titolo dell'edizione 2025. La scelta del plurale – condivisa dagli organi dell'Ente Parco Nord Milano, dalla Direzione del Festival e dai membri dei comitati – è stata funzionale non solo all'apprezzamento della molteplicità dei contributi e dei saperi all'opera, ma anche e soprattutto al riconoscimento della nostra appartenenza a un mondo plurale, eterogeneo e dinamico dove le interazioni tra uomo, ambiente e tecnologia assumono un carattere di specificità e varietà che ha rappresentato la vera ricchezza di cui il Festival ha voluto nutrirsi.⁴

Per cercare di mettere in luce la pluralità di propositi, saperi, approcci e contenuti tematici sottesi al Festival della Biodiversità, i comitati scientifico e artistico si sono impegnati nella redazione di un documento comune che avesse il carattere di un Manifesto a uso interno e che fungesse da dichiarazione d'intenti e guida teorica per la costruzione della diciannovesima edizione. Ragionando sulla possibilità di riconoscere e attribuire al suolo, alla vegetazione e al mondo animale una pluralità di forme di intelligenza, il comitato scientifico ha quindi riflettuto su come l'IA possa aiutare le scienze nella scoperta dei meccanismi biologici e relazionali che regolano la vita sulla Terra. Sottolineando il carattere eminentemente strumentale dell'IA, i membri del comitato si sono dunque interrogati circa i benefici, le sfide e i rischi connessi al suo utilizzo e alla sua diffusione in ambito scientifico e accademico, analizzando le possibili correlazioni tra apprendimento umano e apprendimento della macchina e affrontando alcune questioni cruciali che accomunano le scienze e le arti, come il diritto d'autore, oggi sempre più messo in discussione anche dall'avanzamento dell'intelligenza artificiale generativa.⁵

Le riflessioni del comitato – portate avanti nel corso delle riunioni succedutesi a cadenza mensile – si sono inoltre concentrate sul tema dello spreco di risorse (suolo, acqua ed energia elettrica) collegato ai processi di addestramento dell'IA e alla sua componente materiale, per riconoscere nell'utilizzo smodato di questo strumento una possibile sfida alla cura della biodiversità. Infine, sono state discusse alcune delle numerose implicazioni politiche legate allo sviluppo dell'IA, analizzata come un influente strumento di potere e dominio le cui ripercussioni a medio e lungo termine alimenteranno incessantemente i dibattiti a venire.

⁴ Per un approfondimento sul processo germinativo dell'edizione 2025, sulla scelta del titolo e sulle iniziative in programma si rimanda al video di presentazione della diciannovesima edizione, trasmesso in live streaming il 22 maggio 2025 sui principali canali social del Festival e reperibile al seguente link: <https://www.youtube.com/live/ZMIJpwV5ruo>.

⁵ IAG, in inglese GenAI o GAI (*Generative Artificial Intelligence*), è un tipo di intelligenza artificiale capace di generare testi, immagini, audio, video e modelli 3D tramite l'utilizzo di modelli generativi. Per una definizione tecnica: Ronge, Maier, Rathgeber, 2025.

Il nodo centrale per la redazione del documento comune è stato il binomio naturale/artificiale, ritenuto di maggiore interesse ai fini del tema del Festival se considerato dal punto di vista delle connessioni tra i due ambiti piuttosto che nella sua componente di apparente antinomia. In questo senso, i membri del comitato hanno convenuto che porre un confine netto tra i concetti di naturalità e artificialità non sia necessariamente utile al processo di conoscenza di ciò che ci circonda, e che anzi possa esserne un ostacolo.

Il contributo dell'antropologia al Festival

Come antropologa e membro del comitato scientifico per la diciannovesima edizione, ho potuto partecipare alla stesura e alla discussione del testo comune per cercare di veicolare parte delle riflessioni sviluppate dalla nostra disciplina sul tema affrontato dal Festival. Avere l'opportunità di fornire un taglio in parte anche antropologico al Manifesto ha significato quindi contribuire ad arricchire – in perfetta sintonia con la visione di pluralità del Festival – la varietà di prospettive sui contenuti ivi riportati, solitamente caratterizzati da un discorso abbastanza serrato con le discipline STEM e le scienze biologiche. In dialogo con gli altri membri del Comitato, ho dunque circoscritto alcune delle acquisizioni della disciplina a mio parere centrali per lo sviluppo del tema, elencate brevemente qui di seguito.

In primis, durante gli incontri del comitato, ho voluto ragionare sul carattere *ibrido* delle esperienze pratiche e simboliche – anche legate al digitale – vissute dai gruppi umani, i quali agiscono dentro un “intreccio” (Fabietti, Malighetti, Matera 2020, p. 153) costante di contributi locali e globali (Geertz 1999), interni ed esterni, presenti e passati (Quijano 2019), riconsiderando e trasformando di volta in volta le proprie azioni, valori e significati secondo esiti molto spesso imprevedibili.⁶ Procedendo in questa direzione, ho pensato quindi di condividere con gli altri membri alcune delle formulazioni di Bruno Latour, a mio modo di vedere interessanti per lo sviluppo del tema non solo in relazione alle riflessioni sul ruolo di agenti – o “attanti” (Latour 2022, capp. 2-3) – dei collettivi di non-umani, entro cui gli odierni strumenti digitali ricadono a pieno titolo, ma anche per le implicazioni del concetto di modernità sul processo di costruzione dei fatti scientifici e sul consolidamento delle dicotomie natura-cultura, tradizione-modernità, noi-loro.

⁶ Per un approfondimento sul tema dell'ibridazione culturale cfr. Canclini 1998; Fabietti, Malighetti, Matera 2020.

Riconoscere – come proposto da Latour (2018) – che “non siamo mai stati moderni” oggi significa anche evidenziare come invece “siamo tutti contemporanei” (Matera 2017, p. 20). Da questo punto di vista, ho suggerito l'importanza di decostruire la netta divisione – ancora molto ancorata nel senso comune e in parte rinvenibile all'interno di una prima versione del documento interno, poi revisionata – tra società moderne e società tradizionali, società digitali e società non-digitali, proponendo di sostituire la visione più semplicistica e riduzionista delle realtà sociali con una prospettiva che invece valorizzasse la complessità alla base dei processi di costruzione delle identità individuali e collettive e quell'intreccio di contributi sopra menzionati.⁷

A tal riguardo, ho tratto ispirazione dalla mia recente ricerca etnografica condotta nella comunità afrodiscendente di Frechal⁸ (Maranhão, Brasile) e in particolare dalle riflessioni di alcuni degli interlocutori che hanno preso parte a essa. Tali contributi sono riassumibili nella considerazione per cui credere che si possa operare una separazione netta tra popoli digitalizzati e non digitalizzati – e che i primi coincidano in larga parte con le nazioni occidentali, mentre la restante parte di mondo ricada nella seconda categoria – alimenti quel pregiudizio per cui esistono società più avanzate, al centro degli eventi, e società più arretrate, le quali conducono le loro esistenze al di fuori del tempo e lontano dall'avvenire delle cose.

A tal proposito, come mi disse Elio, interlocutore sul campo:

Ancora oggi ci sono persone che vengono qui e dicono che questa non è affatto una comunità quilombola, perché credono che la comunità quilombola è la comunità che resta nell'arretratezza (*atraso*). Ci dicono che qui è una città, non è un quilombo. Ci sono molti storici che hanno questo tipo di mentalità: il quilombo

⁷ In particolare, la prima versione del documento interno si articolava in diversi paragrafi, idealmente uno per ciascuna disciplina o per ciascun membro afferente del comitato scientifico. Per quanto riguarda il paragrafo di competenza antropologica, la bozza elaborata prima del mio ingresso nel comitato prevedeva il titolo provvisorio “IA e rapporto con le culture non-occidentali e non-digitali”. La proposta da me avanzata è stata pertanto quella di riconsiderare tale formulazione, al fine di evitare la riproduzione delle dicotomie implicite già menzionate e la circoscrizione di determinati popoli e comunità mediante una definizione in negativo rispetto ad altri.

⁸ Frechal è stata la prima comunità afrodiscendente in Brasile a istituire un processo di riconoscimento formale come *quilombo*. Tuttavia, non ottenne la proprietà definitiva della terra, istituita come una riserva estrattiva (RESEX), cioè un'area protetta a uso sostenibile di proprietà dello Stato federale, il quale però riconosce alla comunità che la abita il diritto di portare avanti le pratiche estrattive tradizionali. Per una descrizione del processo giuridico di riconoscimento – durato circa vent'anni – e delle dinamiche di costruzione identitaria attivate dal gruppo, cfr. Malighetti (2004). Sulla gestione delle risorse naturali all'interno della RESEX, cfr. Tassan (2013).

deve essere quello del XVIII secolo, quello del passato, senza alcuna infrastruttura. Ma noi sappiamo che non esistono comunità che restano ferme, soprattutto oggi. [...] Il quilombo non resta mai fermo nel tempo, non può restare lì al XVIII secolo. Noi cambiamo, le cose cambiano, le nuove generazioni già vogliono cose differenti. Certo, ciò non significa che dobbiamo perdere la nostra origine, che possiamo smettere di essere ciò che siamo... Ma cambiare... Tutti dobbiamo cambiare (Elio, 26/09/2024, Frechal).

È proprio tale pregiudizio che i popoli indigeni, le comunità quilombola, i *seringueiros*⁹ e tutte quelle “nuove etnie” (Almeida 2011) impegnate a far valere la propria identità culturale e vedere riconosciuti i propri interessi stanno ormai da secoli cercando di “rompere”, oggi servendosi anche degli strumenti digitali per raggiungere tale scopo. Il digitale, secondo gli interlocutori sul campo, può in questo senso rientrare pienamente nella questione della cittadinanza e del riscatto dei diritti negati, configurandosi – come vedremo più avanti – come un indicatore dei rapporti di forza in essere e come un possibile strumento di dominio o, per contro, di resistenza a esso.

Rispondendo quindi alle sollecitazioni e alle curiosità degli altri membri del comitato, ho steso un paragrafo riassuntivo dal titolo “Internet, IA e popoli nativi”, incluso nel Manifesto a uso interno e successivamente da me utilizzato come traccia per la partecipazione a uno degli eventi del Festival. Il 5 giugno 2025, presso il Museo Interattivo del Cinema (MIC) di Milano, ho avuto infatti l’opportunità di dialogare con la patologa generale e biologa cellulare Caterina La Porta sul tema della diciannovesima edizione, presentando al pubblico il punto di vista antropologico e indagando – per rispondere alle attese dei fruitori dell’evento – le interazioni tra popoli indigeni (in particolare dell’Amazzonia brasiliana), ICTs e IA. I contenuti del mio intervento, presentati per l’occasione in maniera divulgativa, sono riportati nei paragrafi seguenti, arricchiti da alcune considerazioni teoriche e dai riferimenti bibliografici a sostegno.

Internet, rappresentanza online e affermazione sociopolitica

Se la diffusione delle piattaforme digitali su scala globale genera rilevanti trasformazioni di natura socioeconomica, politica e culturale – che si diffondono localmente secondo modalità sempre differenti e specifiche –,

⁹ Raccoglitori di lattice dall’albero di *seringueira* (*Hevea brasiliensis*), nativo della regione amazzonica. Il lattice estratto viene poi utilizzato per la produzione della gomma naturale (caucciù).

spesso la transizione digitale si intreccia con altri fenomeni a carattere globale, come i crescenti processi di urbanizzazione e migrazione. Questa commistione di fenomeni, di grande impatto sull'opera di immaginazione del sé di individui e collettivi (Appadurai 2012), sta contribuendo a produrre inediti adattamenti tra gruppi e a stimolare sempre nuovi e reciproci scambi simbolici. Di fronte all'utilizzo massiccio e capillare di internet e dei sistemi integrati di telecomunicazione a esso correlati, i popoli nativi costruiscono azioni originali di organizzazione delle proprie economie, di ridefinizione dell'arena politica e di ri-concettualizzazione delle proprie identità collettive (Santos-Granero 2021), integrando la questione dell'accesso alle risorse digitali all'interno della più ampia riflessione sulla cittadinanza.¹⁰

Negli spazi digitali, infatti, prendono consistenza rinnovate forme di agentività, nuovi sentimenti di appartenenza e inedite dinamiche di inclusione/esclusione. Il "digitale" (Miller 2018), in questo senso, si può configurare come uno strumento favorevole all'affermazione di nuove politiche identitarie e alla creazione di nuovi spazi pubblici di contestazione.

Al tempo stesso, internet e le ICTs – soprattutto se considerati in termini di produzione, distribuzione, consumo e fruizione (si pensi al tema delle carenze infrastrutturali e al cosiddetto *digital gap*) – sono il prodotto situato delle strutture sociali esistenti nonché delle gerarchie e delle dinamiche di potere vigenti. Concentrate nei laboratori della Silicon Valley – e, in maniera crescente, nei sempre più numerosi *hub* tecnologici distribuiti a livello globale – le imprese dell'high-tech riproducono propositi, conoscenze e visioni propri dell'agenda neoliberale e dei paradigmi scientifici statunitensi e occidentali (Coleman 2010; Ginsburg, Abu-Lughod, Larkin 2002).

¹⁰ A titolo di esempio, in Brasile, la legge federale 12.965 del 2014 – più conosciuta come *Marco Civil da Internet* ("Statuto Civile di Internet") – ha introdotto "un insieme di disposizioni che sanciscono, nell'ordinamento giuridico nazionale, il riconoscimento del carattere essenziale dell'accesso a Internet" (Alimonti 2015, p. 64). In particolare, l'articolo 7 della suddetta legge ha stabilito che "l'accesso a Internet è essenziale all'esercizio della cittadinanza" (per consultare il testo integrale della legge n. 12.965/2014, si veda: https://www.planalto.gov.br/ccivil_03/_ato2011-2014/2014/lei/l12965.htm). In questo quadro, il progetto di legge 3.903/2023 è stato specificatamente elaborato con l'obiettivo di adeguare l'attuale assetto normativo in funzione della "garanzia di accesso a Internet alle comunità indigene e alle comunità di discendenti dai *quilombos*" (Câmara dos Deputados 2023). Il testo – attualmente in fase di esame presso la Commissione di Comunicazione (CCOM) – stabilisce che, nei procedimenti di riconoscimento e di titolarizzazione delle terre tradizionalmente occupate, l'accesso alla rete debba essere considerato un criterio rilevante di valutazione, al pari degli altri requisiti tecnici e giuridici previsti dalla normativa. In tal modo, il progetto di legge risponde alle rivendicazioni dei movimenti sociali che chiedono di introdurre un legame diretto tra connettività, politiche pubbliche e diritti territoriali.

Lo sviluppo dell'intelligenza artificiale ha in molti contesti ampliato questo divario, risultando il frutto di scelte di modellizzazione e ottimizzazione parziali e contestuali, e trovando applicazione secondo l'interesse e gli ideali propri dei suoi programmatori e delle grandi aziende del settore. In quanto strumento di analisi ed elaborazione di dati, l'IA opera infatti secondo delle regole che possono essere espresse eminentemente in termini quantitativi, tendendo spesso a riflettere nelle proprie elaborazioni algoritmiche la ridotta presenza dei contenuti e dei contributi di tutti quei gruppi marginali che trovano – in virtù delle difficoltà di accesso a dispositivi, infrastrutture e incarichi di rilievo nel settore IT¹¹ – minore rappresentanza in ambito digitale (Lowry 2023; Williams, Schipley 2021).

Per reagire e resistere alla proliferazione di disparità e disuguaglianze sociali online e attraverso i media digitali, le comunità indigene e i popoli nativi cercano di appropriarsi di questi stessi strumenti per veicolare i propri contenuti in rete (Budka 2019; Ginsburg 2008).

Alcuni esempi in questo senso ci vengono offerti dall'uso di internet e del digitale che le popolazioni indigene dell'Amazzonia brasiliana – le quali presentano una grande eterogeneità di lingue, saperi e pratiche – stanno portando avanti recentemente in funzione delle loro rivendicazioni collettive. Protagonisti di questo “net-attivismo” (Di Felice 2017) sono tanto le associazioni, i collettivi e gli organi di rappresentanza indigena, i quali utilizzano internet – e in particolare i *social media* – per divulgare iniziative a carattere politico e sociale, quanto gli influencer indigeni (oggi sempre più numerosi), che si impegnano nella diffusione del proprio immaginario di pratiche e saperi tradizionali.¹²

Produzione e riproduzione del patrimonio indigeno online

L'uso di internet e delle ICTs da parte dei popoli nativi non consente solamente la riappropriazione di un'agency e di una cittadinanza per lungo tempo negate, ma permette anche la costruzione di una specifica immagine del sé, tanto

¹¹ Information Technology.

¹² Oggi alcuni di questi occupano un ruolo istituzionale di rilievo (ad esempio Célia Xakriabá, membro della Camera dei deputati del Brasile dal 2023, impegnata insieme all'influencer indigeno Tukumã Pataxó nella produzione del podcast *Papo de Parente*, creato con l'obiettivo di veicolare alcuni dei saperi indigeni attraverso l'arte culinaria, la letteratura, l'agricoltura e la medicina indigene tradizionali. Per ascoltare il podcast (in lingua portoghese): <https://www.globo.com/podcasts/papo-de-parente/325d6028-6db1-48a1-9853-cd87da6e0f23/> (consultato il 03/06/2026).

individuale quanto collettiva. Ne è un esempio il recente processo di ri-soggettivazione del patrimonio indigeno brasiliano, storicamente estetizzato dallo sguardo europeo e poi tipicamente oggettivato tramite l'arte piumaria esposta nei musei etnografici di tutto il mondo.

Portando avanti un'analisi critica di questo tipo di organizzazione museale – che rappresenta il risultato di secoli di indebite appropriazioni e oggettivazioni esterne di un'esperienza che, in realtà, per i soggetti direttamente coinvolti risulta essere più complessa e di natura intersoggettiva – gli influencer e i collettivi indigeni online cercano di riappropriarsi di questo stesso patrimonio, riorientando i criteri alla guida delle collezioni e ottenendo spesso ottimi risultati.¹³

In questo senso, internet e il digitale stanno stimolando un generale ripensamento della relazione tra produttori di manufatti, pensatori, fruitori e curatori museali. Sono sempre più numerosi, inoltre, i musei e le collezioni artistiche fruibili interamente online tramite la realtà virtuale aumentata, la quale contribuisce al riconoscimento del patrimonio indigeno come elemento vivo, dinamico e profondamente interrelato.¹⁴

Il digitale stesso, inoltre, si è configurato negli ultimi anni come parte integrante del patrimonio di queste comunità, le quali (soprattutto tra le nuove generazioni) ne fanno un elemento costitutivo delle proprie reti relazionali e di mobilitazione politica, nonché uno strumento utile a sviluppare nuove modalità di comprensione e valorizzazione del proprio patrimonio, anche artistico, linguistico e materiale.

Cominciano, inoltre, a diffondersi online e sui social media le narrazioni emiche dei conflitti ambientali e delle invasioni territoriali che spesso contrappongono i popoli nativi alle grandi imprese minerarie, del legno e multinazionali. La narrazione di questi conflitti socio-ambientali è stata appannaggio, fino a non molto tempo fa, delle grosse ONG transnazionali, la cui proliferazione ha avuto un impatto notevole sulle politiche sociali e sulle dinamiche territoriali interne all'Amazzonia. Le interazioni specifiche che le ONG e i movimenti ambientalisti hanno via via attivato con le popolazioni locali sono state spesso guidate, infatti, da un'ottica preservazionis-

¹³ Ne è un esempio la proficua collaborazione creata tra il museo di archeologia ed etnologia dell'Università Federale di Bahia e la popolazione kamayurá, i cui manufatti contenuti all'interno del Museo erano stati originariamente collocati secondo accostamenti impropri e una narrazione poco sensibile alla realtà vissuta dai kamayurá. Dal progetto di collaborazione è scaturita una riorganizzazione della collezione, funzionale anche al recupero e alla valorizzazione del patrimonio indigeno ivi contenuto (Nascimento, Bolletín, Teixeira 2023).

¹⁴ Si veda ad esempio il MAI (*Museu de Arte Indígena*) di Curitiba (Paraná), visitabile online al seguente link: <https://www.tourvirtual360.com.br/mai/mai.html> (consultato il 03/06/2026).

sta priva di qualsiasi presupposto antropologico, restituendone frequentemente – anche attraverso il web – un’immagine idealizzata e standardizzata, volta a catturare l’attenzione emotiva e visiva dei possibili donatori (Landzelius 2006; Lenzi Grillini 2021).

Il confronto con l’IA sembra, in relazione a ciò, rendere ulteriormente più complesso il problema della rappresentazione online dei popoli nativi. L’IAG, infatti, può tornare a minacciare – deformandole e appropriandosene senza criterio – le narrative indigene costruite online, proponendo nuovamente un’immagine stereotipata di queste comunità e una riduzione della varietà e della complessità di esperienze, saperi, pratiche e valori vissuti. A titolo di esempio, sono sempre più numerosi gli archivi di immagini generate dall’IA che operano un completo appiattimento dei significati e delle simbologie in gioco, suggerendo tassonomie e categorizzazioni molto spesso totalmente aleatorie, semplicistiche e omogeneizzanti delle realtà sociali raffigurate.¹⁵

Alla base del problema si collocano i dataset utilizzati per i sistemi di apprendimento automatico dell’IA, i quali incorporano e moltiplicano quei *biases* di classe, genere e razza presenti nel senso comune e continuamente riprodotti online. Il risultato è ciò che Boulamwini e Gebru (2018) hanno definito nei termini di una vera e propria “discriminazione algoritmica”, alimentata dalla parzialità dei criteri che informano i dataset di allenamento, completamente sbilanciati a favore dei gruppi sociali più privilegiati e più partecipi nella programmazione di tali tecnologie.¹⁶

¹⁵ Si notino ad esempio le restituzioni spesso molto arbitrarie, inautentiche e stereotipate dei copricapi o delle pitture corporali, le quali hanno invece caratteristiche, forme e colori specifici funzionali a veicolare significati profondi e relazionali, legati per esempio all’appartenenza al gruppo e al territorio, alla trasmissione della memoria orale, alle pratiche spirituali. Per un approfondimento sui significati legati alle pitture corporali, cfr. Xakriabà (2018).

¹⁶ Per introdurre al pubblico del 5 giugno il tema della meccanizzazione dei pregiudizi, ho proposto la visione del trailer del docufilm *Coded Bias* (2020), di Shalini Kantayya, il quale indaga la relazione tra razzismo e IA a partire dall’episodio che coinvolse la ricercatrice del MIT Media Lab Joy Buolamwini. Per visionare il trailer (in lingua inglese): <https://www.codedbias.com/about> (consultato il 03/06/2026).



Figura 1. Immagine dallo stock di Veecteezy.com, intitolata “Indigeno, tribale, persona nel costume tradizionale”.¹⁷

Intelligenza artificiale e preservazione ambientale

Sebbene la programmazione dell'IA sfugga quasi totalmente al controllo delle comunità indigene, oggi alcune di esse fruiscono delle sue elaborazioni algoritmiche soprattutto attraverso i programmi di tutela e monitoraggio ambientale. In Brasile, ad esempio, da circa due anni l'IMAZON (*Instituto do Homem e Meio Ambiente da Amazonia*), un'istituzione non governativa che si occupa del monitoraggio della foresta amazzonica, ha sviluppato e applicato per i suoi report annuali la tecnologia PrevisIA, una piattaforma aperta che utilizza l'IA con lo scopo di prevenire – attraverso l'analisi di anomalie e variazioni topografiche mediante droni – eventuali incendi e disboscamenti illegali.¹⁸

Oggi, inoltre, sono sempre più numerosi i membri delle comunità indigene, afrodiscendenti ed estrattiviste dell'Amazzonia brasiliana che ricoprono il ruolo di agenti ambientali autorizzati all'uso dei droni per il monitoraggio delle proprie riserve. L'efficacia di questi strumenti e delle tecnologie a essi correlate passa, infatti, anche attraverso la possibilità per queste comunità di accedere ai corsi di formazione e addestramento in tal senso.

¹⁷ L'immagine, generata dall'IA, ha licenza gratuita: <https://it.veecteezy.com/foto/54360330-indigeno-tribale-persona-nel-tradizionale-costume> (consultato il 03/06/2026).

¹⁸ <https://previsia.org.br/> (consultato il 03/06/2026).

Sebbene il protagonismo sociale di queste comunità sia in crescita e l'utilizzo di internet e dell'IA da parte dei loro membri ai fini della protezione ambientale abbia mostrato già i primi risultati (soprattutto in termini di rapidità delle segnalazioni agli organi competenti), è necessario sottolineare che anche il settore dell'agrobusiness più aggressivo e gli attori responsabili dell'estrazione illegale di legno e minerali utilizzano tali tecnologie. A titolo di esempio, emergono i primi allarmi riguardo l'utilizzo sistematico delle antenne Starlink nei territori indigeni e quilombola da parte dei minatori per coordinare le proprie attività illecite e anticipare i movimenti delle forze dell'ordine o degli addetti al monitoraggio.¹⁹

È importante rimarcare, inoltre, che la produzione e la programmazione delle apparecchiature collegate all'IA sono tra i più crescenti fattori di inquinamento e surriscaldamento del pianeta, dei quali tali comunità risultano essere le prime vittime. Lo sviluppo degli hardware collegati all'IA, infatti, continua a richiedere un sempre maggiore consumo di energia elettrica. Uno studio realizzato nel 2019 dall'Università del Massachusetts Amherst ha mostrato che all'epoca una sola unità di elaborazione grafica (GPU) utilizzata per i sistemi di addestramento della NLP (*Natural Language Processing*) – cioè l'area dell'IA che si occupa dell'interazione tra computer e linguaggio umano – generava fino a cinque volte in più le emissioni di CO2 rispetto a un'automobile media negli Stati Uniti per tutto il suo percorso di vita, dalla produzione al consumo di combustibile, fino al suo smaltimento (Strubell, Ganesh, McCallum 2019).

Un recente report del Washington Post, sviluppato in collaborazione con uno studio portato avanti dall'Università della California di Riverside, ha inoltre quantificato il consumo di acqua per il raffreddamento dei server utilizzati per l'addestramento e il funzionamento di ChatGPT. In particolare, lo studio riporta che per ciascuna richiesta a ChatGPT di stesura di un testo di circa 100 parole si consuma all'incirca mezzo litro di acqua, mentre ha stimato che per le prime due settimane di addestramento di ChatGPT-3 i data center di Microsoft abbiano consumato circa 700 mila litri di acqua potabile (Li *et al.* 2023).

Il futuro dell'IA come strumento di difesa della biodiversità e di preservazione ambientale, insomma, appare strettamente legato all'efficienza energetica delle apparecchiature a essa collegate e alle politiche di gestione delle risorse materiali di cui l'IA si nutre ed è composta.

¹⁹ Si vedano: <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/article/2024/sep/08/alarm-at-musk-starlink-dominance-brazil-amazon>; <https://www.brasildefato.com.br/2024/05/15/find-out-how-illegal-miners-in-the-amazon-use-elon-musk-s-internet-to-evade-surveillance/> (consultati il 03/06/2026).

Oltre il contenuto digitale: materialità, infrastrutture e politiche

Se i dibattiti delle scienze sociali sulle conseguenze della transizione digitale e dell'implementazione degli strumenti di intelligenza artificiale si concentrano spesso – e a ragion veduta – sui contenuti veicolati in rete e sulle ragioni politiche che informano tali contenuti, oggi l'analisi antropologica ci può aiutare a evidenziare come queste relazioni politiche si manifestino e agiscano anche tramite la componente materiale e infrastrutturale propria di tutte le tecnologie. Le conseguenze della loro progettazione e dell'utilizzo delle risorse materiali necessarie per il loro funzionamento possono essere più o meno intenzionali, più o meno esplicite, assumendo caratteristiche e distribuzioni diverse a seconda del contesto geografico, delle condizioni sociali ivi incontrate e della scala di estensione e diffusione delle stesse.

Se è vero che siamo spesso portati ad associare il digitale a qualcosa di eterico e immateriale, intoccabile e dunque imm modificabile (il *cloud*), l'antropologia può contribuire invece a ricordare come esso sia dotato *in primis* di una forte componente materiale, dalle conseguenze ambientali e sociali estremamente rilevanti (Monserrate 2022).

Diversi contributi hanno mostrato come la materialità del digitale (e delle tecnologie più in generale) e la sua infrastruttura siano spesso nascoste al senso comune ed emergano all'attenzione solo nei casi in cui si verifichi un'interruzione (ad esempio un blackout), un problema (Gupta 2015; Sinanan 2022). Ciò avviene a causa di quella che Miller (1987) ha definito l'"umiltà degli oggetti", cioè la proprietà degli oggetti (anche – e, aggiungerei, soprattutto – digitali, ormai onnipresenti nella nostra quotidianità) di non essere notati, di essere dati per scontati e di agire in maniera così efficace all'interno delle nostre vite proprio grazie al grado di inconsapevolezza del loro operato da parte degli esseri umani. L'etnografia, cercando di mettere in luce i processi di appropriazione degli strumenti digitali da parte degli attori sociali, diventa così un ottimo strumento per restituire agli artefatti tecnologici il loro interesse scientifico e relazionale. Aprire l'analisi anche alla componente materiale del digitale, inoltre, significa mettere in luce questioni cruciali come il tema delle carenze infrastrutturali, della possibilità di accesso ai dispositivi in funzione della distribuzione delle risorse, degli usi creativi delle materie prime di cui i dispositivi sono composti, della gestione dei rifiuti che il sistema digitale genera quotidianamente.

Riconoscere che gli oggetti tecnologici e le loro infrastrutture contribuiscono attivamente alla costruzione e all'istituzione delle cornici (nel senso di *frameworks*) entro cui agiscono gli esseri umani e l'ordine pubblico, tuttavia, non deve far cadere le scienze sociali nella trappola del determinismo tecnologico, il quale – come spiega Langdon Winner (1980) – consiste nell'idea che la

tecnologia si sviluppi come unico risultato di una dinamica interna e conseguentemente modelli la società secondo i suoi schemi. Piuttosto, queste analisi possono aiutarci a ridiscutere e superare quella dicotomia reale/virtuale ormai desueta, per mettere in luce il carattere effettivo, duraturo e di realtà che il digitale assume in relazione alle nostre vite quotidiane (Boellstorff 2016).

Conclusioni: IA e condizione umana

Se a un primo sguardo il binomio intelligenze naturali/intelligenze artificiali presente nel titolo sembri riprodurre quella dicotomia natura-cultura ormai abbandonata dalla disciplina antropologica,²⁰ oggi lo sviluppo dell'IA e le sue applicazioni stanno suggerendo nuovi possibili punti di contatto tra i due ambiti.

L'IA, infatti, portandoci a ragionare sempre più sulla differenza tra specie umana e condizione umana, richiama all'attenzione – in termini comparativi – le prospettive proprie, ad esempio, del pensiero amerindio, secondo il quale la condizione umana può travalicare la fisicità e accomunare così anche specie diverse ritenute comunemente inanimate dal pensiero occidentale.

L'IA, in questo senso, può essere analizzata come un tentativo di esteriorizzare l'intelligenza umana attraverso l'applicazione della tecnologia informatico-computazionale. Il contributo dell'antropologia può dunque essere quello di mostrare come, presso altre società, siano da secoli presenti concezioni della soggettività che non la fanno coincidere rigidamente con i confini della specie umana, secondo modalità che sfuggono (o sfuggivano) al nostro intento classificatorio perché rimandano a modelli identificativi ibridi, prospettici e profondamente relazionali. Sfidando la visione dicotomica della realtà, i robot guidati dall'IA e gli spiriti animali delle cosmologie indigene potrebbero insomma possedere molte più qualità in comune di quanto non si creda, a partire dal fatto – come ha recentemente suggerito Remotti (2024) – di essere entrambi prodotti culturali della specie *Homo Sapiens*.

Lo sviluppo dell'IA, in conclusione, oggi aggiunge ulteriori elementi di dinamicità a campi già profondamente dinamici, nonché inedite occasioni di confronto tra saperi e pratiche molteplici, offrendo all'antropologia nuove opportunità di comprensione di che cosa significhi essere umani. Del resto, come intuito da Escobar (1995) già trent'anni fa, la fondamentale trasformazione

²⁰ Tale dicotomia, infatti, risulta essere estranea alla maggior parte delle cosmologie indigene e appannaggio soprattutto della visione occidentale. Per una critica della dicotomia natura-cultura, cfr. Descola 2021; Viveiros de Castro 2019.



che le tecnologie informatiche stanno determinando nella struttura e nel significato delle società può costituire un ambito privilegiato per l'avanzamento del progetto antropologico. Ciò che ho cercato qui di restituire è come il Festival della Biodiversità 2025 e i dibattiti ivi alimentati abbiano in qualche modo contribuito a nutrire questo progetto disciplinare, potendone beneficiare al tempo stesso.

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Verso lo sviluppo di approcci metodologici condivisi tra antropologia e medicina: il caso di Castel Volturno

Towards the development of shared methodological approaches between anthropology and medicine: the case of Castel Volturno

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Abstract: This report offers a methodological reflection based on a medical-anthropological study conducted in Castel Volturno, Italy, with the objective of identifying and addressing barriers to healthcare access for migrant women, particularly mothers and pregnant women. The research began at a primary care clinic run by Emergency NGO, which functions as a frontline service for individuals in conditions of socio-health vulnerability. Castel Volturno, due to its distinctive socio-demographic and urban features, represents a paradigmatic case for analysing tensions between national health systems and migrant subjectivities. Using a qualitative and quantitative methods design, including semi-structured interviews, participant observation, textual analysis and cross-coding, the study develops a shared framework that integrates biomedical approaches with anthropological insight. The article advocates for a collaborative model of research and intervention that fosters both epistemological and operational dialogue between medicine and cultural anthropology. Central to this proposal are the co-production of knowledge, the continuous negotiation between disciplinary languages and the participatory development of culturally sensitive health education initiatives. In operational terms, this perspective finds concrete expression in the promotion of community-based health projects, which reposition migrant communities not as passive recipients of care but as active co-producers of health. Within this framework, particular relevance is given to Community Health Workers (CHWs), community-embedded figures who

act as bridges between healthcare services and local social worlds, facilitating mutual understanding, fostering trust and contributing to more culturally responsive care. This integrated model seeks not only to understand the barriers to healthcare access but to intervene on them directly, by making clinical tools more responsive to migratory experiences and enhancing communication between health professionals and patients. It contributes to a more inclusive, participatory and sustainable healthcare system in contexts marked by high socio-economic complexity.

Keywords: Anthropology of health; Healthcare access; Migrant women; Interdisciplinary methods; Cultural mediation.

Il contesto

Castel Volturno, situato nella provincia di Caserta, rappresenta uno dei territori più critici del panorama urbano italiano per quanto riguarda la coesistenza di marginalità socioeconomica, frammentazione amministrativa e composizione demografica eterogenea. A partire dagli anni Ottanta, il progressivo abbandono del comparto turistico e l'assenza di una pianificazione urbanistica coerente hanno generato una crescita urbana disordinata, segnata da abusivismo edilizio e degrado infrastrutturale. A partire dagli anni Novanta, il comune è divenuto meta di arrivo per consistenti flussi migratori, attratti dalla possibilità di accedere a soluzioni abitative informali e a basso costo (tra cui appartamenti locati in assenza di regolare contratto, edifici occupati e successivamente inseriti in circuiti di subaffitto informale e illegale da parte di occupanti che ne detengono un possesso *de facto*, nonché abitazioni di fortuna, capannoni industriali dismessi e stabilimenti abbandonati riconvertiti informalmente a fini residenziali) e dalla presenza di reti comunitarie già radicate, che hanno svolto un ruolo cruciale nel facilitare i processi di insediamento. Nelle aree più periferiche del comune si sono sviluppati insediamenti ad alta densità abitativa, spesso privi di servizi di base, abitati in larga misura da persone originarie dell'Africa subsahariana, in particolare Ghana e Nigeria. La composizione sociale del territorio risulta altamente eterogenea (ISTAT 2021). Infatti, presso Castel Volturno, convivono individui con status giuridici e percorsi migratori diversificati, anche in termini temporali, comprendendo sia arrivi recenti sia presenze ormai radicate da anni, e gradi variabili di inserimento nel tessuto socio-economico locale. Secondo i dati dell'Organizzazione Internazionale per le Migrazioni (OIM 2010), gli stranieri rappresentavano un terzo della popolazione residente, mentre le più recenti statistiche ISTAT (2021) attestano la presenza di cittadini stranieri

al 17,5%, con una forte prevalenza di persone di origine ghanese e nigeriana (Emergency 2021). Tale popolazione risulta tuttavia internamente eterogenea sotto il profilo giuridico e migratorio, comprendendo sia titolari di permesso di soggiorno di lungo periodo, sia richiedenti asilo, sia persone prive di un regolare titolo di soggiorno. Queste differenze sono strettamente connesse alle diverse fasi storiche di arrivo e ai mutamenti del quadro normativo italiano ed europeo in materia di immigrazione. In particolare, a partire dalla metà degli anni 2010 si è registrato un aumento delle richieste di protezione internazionale anche tra cittadini ghanesi e nigeriani già presenti sul territorio (Emergency 2021), in parte riconducibile al progressivo restringimento delle possibilità di accesso e rinnovo di altre tipologie di permesso di soggiorno, che ha reso la domanda di asilo una delle poche opzioni percorribili per la regolarizzazione giuridica e la permanenza nel paese.

In questo quadro, l'ambulatorio di Emergency, attivo dal 2013, inizialmente in forma mobile e oggi stabilmente insediato sulla via principale del comune, rappresenta un presidio sanitario di prossimità fondamentale. Questo offre servizi gratuiti di medicina di base, orientamento socio-sanitario e mediazione culturale a persone in condizione di vulnerabilità socioeconomica e incertezza giuridica, intendendo con ciò individui privi di un'occupazione formale o inseriti in circuiti di lavoro informale e sottopagato, disoccupati o sotto-occupati, persone senza dimora o in condizione di grave marginalità abitativa, residenti in alloggi sovraffollati o insicuri, soggetti privi di reddito regolare o al di sotto della soglia di povertà, nonché individui privi di reti familiari e sociali di supporto sul territorio, spesso esclusi dal Servizio Sanitario Nazionale. La sua funzione non si esaurisce però nella cura clinica, ma si estende alla costruzione di uno spazio "liminale" (Van Gennep 1909), capace di coniugare intervento medico, ascolto, supporto di mediazione interculturale e accompagnamento.

Tale funzione assume una rilevanza particolare se letta alla luce della composizione di genere delle comunità migranti locali, storicamente caratterizzate da una prevalenza maschile, legata alle prime migrazioni per lavoro degli anni Novanta e Duemila, seguite progressivamente dall'arrivo di donne attraverso percorsi di ricongiungimento familiare, migrazione autonoma o, in alcuni casi, inserimento in circuiti lavorativi precari e informali. A partire dalla metà degli anni 2010, si osserva infatti un progressivo incremento delle presenze femminili e una crescente stabilizzazione familiare, che contribuiscono a ridefinire i bisogni sociosanitari e le modalità di accesso ai servizi. In questo contesto, la posizione strategica dell'ambulatorio e la reputazione acquisita attraverso il passaparola tra le comunità migranti ne fanno un punto di riferimento stabile, in particolare per molte donne, che vi si recano anche per ricevere informazioni e orientamento non strettamente medico.

Un'indagine qualitativa condivisa: confronto tra antropologia e medicina

Il presente contributo si inserisce nell'ambito di un'indagine medico-antropologica promossa da Emergency e avviata nel maggio 2024, con l'obiettivo di esplorare le condizioni di accesso alla salute delle donne migranti, in particolare madri e gestanti, residenti nel territorio di Castel Volturno. Il focus è stato posto su donne con status giuridici differenziati (richiedenti asilo, titolari di protezione e persone prive di regolare permesso di soggiorno), appartenenti a diverse fasce d'età, e prevalentemente originarie dell'Africa subsahariana, in particolare Ghana e Nigeria, che rappresentano i gruppi maggiormente presenti nel contesto locale.

La ricerca si è articolata attorno a due obiettivi principali: (1) analizzare i fattori strutturali e istituzionali che ostacolano o facilitano l'accesso alle cure alle donne e madri migranti; e (2) comprendere le loro strategie di adattamento e (ri)organizzazione sociale nel far fronte alle cosiddette barriere, con particolare attenzione alle pratiche di riappropriazione e alla risignificazione dei concetti di genitorialità, salute riproduttiva e percorsi di cura, intese come modalità con cui le donne migranti riprendono in mano la gestione della propria salute e della genitorialità e ne ristrutturano il significato alla luce delle proprie esperienze, risorse e reti sociali.

Tali pratiche si sviluppano in dialogo o in tensione con il modello biomedico dominante, permettendo alle donne di adattare le cure ai propri bisogni culturali e sociali, integrando, reinterpretando o selezionando le informazioni e i percorsi offerti dal sistema sanitario istituzionale. In altre parole, l'esame delle barriere burocratiche, economiche, geografiche, linguistiche e culturali nell'accesso ai servizi sanitari ha costituito il punto di partenza per indagare come il sistema di assistenza sanitaria venga percepito, negoziato e trasformato dalle migranti stesse. Questo processo porta a una vera e propria riconcettualizzazione della cura da parte delle donne migranti in questione, intesa come la capacità di reinterpretare e adattare i percorsi di salute, la genitorialità e le pratiche di assistenza medica alle proprie esigenze, risorse e reti sociali. In questo senso, la cura non è più solo il rispetto dei protocolli biomedici, ma un insieme di significati e strategie costruiti dalle migranti per rispondere al loro contesto concreto di vita e alle barriere incontrate, pur in dialogo o tensione con il sistema sanitario istituzionale e le pratiche degli operatori. Il progetto si è sviluppato a partire da un impianto metodologico qualitativo, costruito attraverso il confronto tra approcci disciplinari differenti e competenze eterogenee. Il team di ricerca comprendeva medici con esperienza in raccolta e analisi di dati clinici e di tipo qualitativo su tematiche di salute globale, e un'antropologa

specializzata in metodologie etnografiche e indagine qualitativa. Questa configurazione ha permesso di sviluppare un approccio interpretativo integrato, in cui i contenuti emersi dalle interviste e dall'osservazione partecipante sono stati analizzati congiuntamente secondo prospettive antropologiche e medico-sanitarie. La collaborazione tra discipline è avvenuta in maniera spontanea: ciascun ricercatore ha contribuito con il proprio metodo e, progressivamente, si è co-costruito un percorso di analisi condiviso, capace di valorizzare le diverse competenze disciplinari.

Di seguito si indicano brevemente le diverse fasi della ricerca per permettere al lettore di seguire da vicino il processo che abbiamo seguito nella co-costruzione di un metodo transdisciplinare.

Il lavoro ha preso avvio con una serie di incontri preliminari tra i membri del team, finalizzati a esplicitare le rispettive posture epistemologiche, confrontare approcci e sensibilità e definire congiuntamente gli obiettivi e i temi della ricerca. Questo momento di negoziazione iniziale ha rappresentato un passaggio cruciale per la costruzione di un terreno di lavoro condiviso, capace di integrare differenti linguaggi e competenze. A seguito della definizione degli obiettivi comuni, ha avuto inizio la prima fase sul campo, affidata alla componente medica, che ha previsto la realizzazione di interviste semi-strutturate rivolte a un campione selezionato di pazienti donne frequentanti l'ambulatorio di Emergency, con particolare attenzione a madri e gestanti. Parallelamente, sono state raccolte le voci di operatori sanitari dei servizi pubblici territoriali, medici, mediatori culturali e rappresentanti di associazioni locali, con l'obiettivo di cogliere prospettive differenziate sui percorsi di accesso alla salute, sulle pratiche di cura e sulle criticità emerse nell'interazione con il sistema sociosanitario.

La seconda fase, a conduzione antropologica, ha comportato un inserimento progressivo della ricercatrice nel contesto dell'ambulatorio, attraverso una presenza prolungata e una pratica di osservazione partecipante. L'indagine si è focalizzata sull'osservazione quotidiana delle interazioni tra pazienti, personale sanitario e mediatrice culturale, sulla conduzione di interviste e dialoghi informali. Questo processo ha permesso di esplorare in profondità le dimensioni relazionali, simboliche e pratiche che strutturano i percorsi di cura, ponendo attenzione alle relazioni di potere implicite, alle forme di agency femminile e ai sistemi di supporto e (ri)adattamento informali attivati dalle pazienti. Conclusi le attività di campo, il corpus delle interviste è stato quindi sottoposto a un processo di codifica tematica incrociata (*coding*), procedura propria della ricerca qualitativa, finalizzata a identificare ricorrenze, significati e nuclei tematici emergenti dal materiale empirico e condotta congiuntamente dai due membri del team.

In linea con questo approccio, il corpus delle interviste è stato oggetto di una rilettura critica congiunta, condotta a partire da prospettive disciplinari differenti, attraverso la quale ciascun ricercatore ha applicato al materiale le proprie categorie analitiche di riferimento. Questo processo ha consentito di far emergere “codici” distinti ma tra loro dialogici, successivamente messi in relazione in un’ottica interpretativa condivisa, valorizzando il confronto interdisciplinare come parte integrante dell’analisi qualitativa. La componente medica ha rilevato la ricorrenza di alcuni temi e/o pattern critici, tra cui l’analfabetismo sanitario e la scarsa familiarità con le pratiche di prevenzione, le barriere linguistiche che ostacolano la comunicazione tra pazienti e operatori, l’incompatibilità tra approcci medici differenti, le difficoltà nella comprensione delle prescrizioni terapeutiche e delle sequenze di visite, nonché la distanza fisica dei presidi sanitari, che spesso rende impossibile l’accesso ai servizi e causa frequenti interruzioni nei percorsi di cura. L’analisi antropologica, dal suo canto, ha fatto emergere dimensioni complementari e trasversali, come le pratiche di adattamento quotidiano messe in atto dalle pazienti, le forme di resilienza femminile, la diffusa sfiducia verso le istituzioni sanitarie e verso il corpus medico, il ruolo centrale delle reti informali come strumenti di sostegno, e la presenza di economie di sopravvivenza che influiscono direttamente sulle scelte in ambito sanitario. A partire dai codici individuati e discussi congiuntamente, è stata costruita una narrazione integrata che ha preso forma in un articolo scritto a più mani,¹ con l’intento di restituire in maniera articolata e dialogica i risultati dell’indagine.

Il lavoro si è organizzato attorno a due assi principali. Il primo ha riguardato l’analisi delle barriere all’accesso ai servizi sanitari, distinte in barriere materiali (come la mancanza di trasporti, gli orari inadeguati e le difficoltà linguistiche), simboliche (legate al timore di essere giudicate, denunciate o non comprese) e culturali (connesse a visioni divergenti della salute, della maternità e del corpo). Il secondo asse si è invece concentrato sulle strategie di riadattamento sviluppate dalle donne migranti in risposta all’assenza di supporti istituzionali strutturati. Con questo termine si intende forme di adattamento creativo e/o resistenza strategica, attraverso le quali le donne negoziano quotidianamente

¹ L’articolo, dal titolo “Breaking Barriers to Access to Sexual and Reproductive Health for Migrant Women in Castel Volturno, Italy: combining a public health with an anthropological perspective” è il frutto di un lavoro collettivo, redatto a più mani da antropologi, medici, operatori e ricercatori di Emergency coinvolti nel progetto. Il contributo è stato recentemente presentato e accettato per la pubblicazione sulla rivista scientifica *SSM – Health Systems*, edita da Elsevier e consultabile al seguente link: <https://www.sciencedirect.com/journal/ssm-health-systems>. In specifico, il team di autori comprende: Mafikuyomi B., Bongiolatti G., Serraino S., Omorogieva F., Russo G., Longo E., Marro G. e Lamberti-Castronuovo A., Pine J.

le barriere incontrate e rimodellano i propri percorsi di cura: il ricorso a reti religiose e comunitarie, la cura condivisa tra madri, l'uso selettivo e strategico dei servizi sanitari disponibili, e l'alternanza tra pratiche mediche tradizionali e biomedicina. In questo senso, le strategie di riadattamento non rappresentano semplicemente un assestamento passivo, ma un esercizio di agency, con cui le donne plasmano le pratiche di cura e protezione della salute in funzione delle proprie esigenze, risorse e contesti sociali.

Limiti e potenzialità della collaborazione tra saperi

A distanza di un po' di tempo del lavoro svolto, si rende necessario, in questa sezione, interrogarsi sulle potenzialità e sui limiti di una collaborazione tra saperi diversi, così come sulle pratiche più efficaci da valorizzare e replicare. L'integrazione tra l'approccio medico e quello antropologico ha mostrato, da un lato, la capacità di superare dicotomie ormai riduttive (come quella tra vulnerabilità e agency), restituendo le esperienze delle donne nella loro complessità: non solo come soggetti colpiti da disuguaglianze sistemiche, ma anche come attrici capaci di attivare risorse, costruire reti e negoziare margini di autonomia. Al contempo, la collaborazione ha evidenziato tensioni strutturali e differenze epistemologiche tra le due discipline. La medicina, legata a tempi rapidi di risposta, a categorie standardizzate e alla necessità di efficacia e verificabilità operativa, si muove spesso secondo una logica d'intervento e di ricerca precisa. L'antropologia, al contrario, si fonda tradizionalmente su tempi lunghi e sulla necessità di "sostare" nel campo, in quel "soffermarsi presso" evocato da Clifford Geertz nella sua celebre definizione di "descrizione densa" (Geertz 1973), ovvero l'interpretazione di significati culturali in relazione ai contesti in cui emergono. In aggiunta, l'antropologia medica, in particolare, ha a lungo rivendicato il valore della lentezza e della prossimità per indagare le dimensioni profonde della cura e del "vissuto corporeo" (Kleinman 1988, Scheper-Hughes, Lock 1987, Nguyen 2010). In questo senso, il contatto con l'operatività medica ha obbligato e stimolato la ricerca antropologica a confrontarsi con una dimensione più applicativa, rapida e finalizzata al risultato, mettendo alla prova i suoi stessi strumenti. Per comprendere meglio come si sia giunti a una sintesi operativa, è utile descrivere brevemente i due approcci disciplinari in forma "pura", prima della contaminazione reciproca.

L'approccio medico, tradizionalmente, si fonda su un impianto metodologico fortemente orientato alla risoluzione dei problemi e alla presa in carico efficace del paziente. Storicamente, la medicina ha sviluppato un sapere clinico basato su protocolli biomedici standardizzati, diagnosi formulate secondo classifica-

zioni riconosciute e su un'osservazione di fenomeni clinici definibili, misurabili e riproducibili. In questa logica, nella ricerca in ambito medico, il dato assume un valore centrale, in quanto strumento per produrre evidenze utili all'intervento, ed è ciò che in medicina viene definito *evidence-based practice*, ovvero una prassi fondata sull'uso sistematico delle migliori evidenze disponibili per prendere decisioni cliniche informate (Sackett 1996). Tuttavia, nel corso degli ultimi decenni, ed è questo il caso di Castel Volturno, la medicina ha riconosciuto sempre più la necessità di affiancare ai metodi quantitativi tradizionali anche strumenti di indagine qualitativa, capaci di cogliere dimensioni soggettive, relazionali e culturali della salute e della cura. Come sottolinea la medica Greenhalgh (1997), l'adozione di approcci qualitativi consente di esplorare fenomeni non immediatamente misurabili, come le esperienze dei pazienti, la comunicazione medico-paziente, la percezione della malattia o l'aderenza ai trattamenti. D'altro canto, l'antropologia classica si è sviluppata, fin dalle sue origini, come una disciplina fondata sull'immersione nel contesto e sull'ascolto profondo dell'altro. Il metodo etnografico classico si struttura attorno all'osservazione partecipante, teorizzata da Bronislaw Malinowski (1922) come pratica di lunga durata, in cui il ricercatore "vive con" la comunità studiata, assumendo una posizione di prossimità e di continua riflessività. Questa impostazione metodologica, centrata sulla specificità più che sulla generalizzabilità, ha tradizionalmente privilegiato uno sguardo lento, aperto, processuale, orientato più alla comprensione che alla misurazione. L'etnografo, più che testare ipotesi, ricostruisce mondi di senso, lasciando che le categorie analitiche emergano dal campo, attraverso una continua negoziazione di significati e posizioni. Nel corso del tempo, tuttavia, un po' come è successo alla "tradizionale" medicina, anche l'antropologia ha attraversato una serie di trasformazioni interne, che ne hanno esteso il raggio d'azione oltre i confini accademici. Già a partire dagli anni Sessanta e Settanta, con lo sviluppo dell'antropologia medica, si è consolidata una riflessione attenta alla relazione tra cultura, salute e malattia, che ha portato a un'analisi della malattia come esperienza culturale e sociale (Kleinman 1980; Good 1994). In questo campo, la metodologia antropologica ha mantenuto il suo orientamento qualitativo e interpretativo, ma si è progressivamente adattata a contesti istituzionali (ospedali, ambulatori, servizi sociosanitari) e a un dialogo diretto con altri saperi disciplinari, come la medicina, la salute pubblica, la psicologia. In Italia, in particolar modo, una figura centrale in questo processo innovatore è stata quella dell'antropologo Tullio Seppilli, che ha elaborato il concetto di "uso sociale dell'antropologia" (Seppilli 1973), rivendicando la possibilità e la responsabilità per l'antropologo di uscire dall'osservatorio neutro ed entrare in relazione con contesti istituzionali, politici e professionali, producendo un sapere maggiormente applicativo

e spendibile. A posteriori di quanto emerso, e alla luce delle due metodologie fin qui descritte, le quali, pur partendo da cornici epistemologiche differenti, hanno negli anni subito trasformazioni e aperture significative, è quindi possibile leggere l'esperienza di ricerca presso Castel Volturno come esito di un doppio movimento. Da un lato, l'antropologia ha teso verso un uso più "applicato" (Malighetti 2020) e "socialmente impegnato" (Seppilli 1973) del proprio sapere, rispondendo alla necessità di intervenire concretamente nei contesti di indagine; dall'altro, la medicina ha progressivamente riconosciuto il valore della ricerca qualitativa, capace di restituire le dimensioni soggettive, culturali e relazionali che condizionano l'accesso ai percorsi di cura. Questo avvicinamento, tutt'altro che lineare, ha richiesto un lavoro costante di negoziazione, di traduzione tra linguaggi, di scambio di punti di vista. Tuttavia, il punto di contatto si è rivelato essere proprio il soggetto stesso dell'intervento oggetto di questo Report, ossia il paziente migrante, in questo caso di genere femminile, con le sue soggettive traiettorie di mobilità e di marginalità socio-sanitaria, le pratiche quotidiane di adattamento, riorganizzazione e selezione delle pratiche di cura e di mescolamento tra medicine tradizionali e occidentali. La migrazione, intesa in termini generali, in questa ricerca si è configurata come uno spazio di intersezione privilegiato tra medicina e antropologia. Da un lato, il sistema sanitario nazionale, e in particolare Emergency, che opera come servizio "stampella" nei vuoti lasciati dal settore pubblico, è stato chiamato a interrogarsi su quali strumenti, linguaggi e prassi possano realmente adattarsi alla popolazione culturalmente eterogenea presente sul territorio italiano. Dall'altro, l'antropologia si è trovata nella necessità di riorganizzare i propri strumenti e obiettivi, passando da una produzione di sapere lenta, densa e spesso rivolta esclusivamente al mondo accademico, a forme di restituzione più agili, comprensibili e spendibili anche in contesti operativi. In questo crocevia, l'ascolto delle soggettività migranti è divenuta una condizione metodologica che ha permesso a entrambe le discipline di mettersi in discussione e avviare una riflessione comune sulla complessità della cura. È proprio a partire da questo confronto e da questa negoziazione epistemica che nasce il principale obiettivo di questo contributo, ovvero mettere in luce una prassi metodologica interdisciplinare. A questo proposito, nei paragrafi seguenti, proponiamo una sequenza di fasi operative, che restituiscono in forma strutturata il percorso metodologico sperimentato, con l'intento di offrire uno strumento utile a chi, in ambito sanitario, sociale o di ricerca, desideri informarsi sulla possibilità di costruire un lavoro congiunto tra saperi. In questa prospettiva, auspichiamo di avvicinare il lettore alla comprensione della malattia come un'esperienza situata, profondamente intrecciata alle condizioni sociali, economiche e politiche in cui emerge (Quaranta 2012).

Note di campo: dialoghi disciplinari in atto presso l'ambulatorio di Emergency

Gran parte dell'osservazione partecipante si è svolta all'interno dell'ambulatorio di Emergency, uno spazio discreto, situato lungo la strada principale di Castel Volturno, la "famosa" Via Domiziana,² e profondamente radicato nella vita quotidiana delle comunità migranti locali. L'ambulatorio, aperto nel 2013, ha progressivamente adattato la propria struttura alle trasformazioni del contesto: se in passato erano presenti medici e un pediatra, oggi il presidio è garantito principalmente da due infermieri, un logista responsabile dell'organizzazione generale, una mediatrice culturale ghanese (che di seguito verrà chiamata Maria) e un giovane operatore della Guinea incaricato di accompagnare i pazienti più vulnerabili alle visite ospedaliere esterne. Il flusso annuale di circa 2000 pazienti dimostra come la struttura operi non solo come servizio clinico, ma come nodo sociale e relazionale. Molti pazienti si rivolgono all'ambulatorio per orientamento burocratico, supporto nelle procedure amministrative, mediazione culturale e sostegno relazionale. La sala d'attesa, pur essendo uno spazio fisico limitato, si configura come un luogo sociale denso, in cui osservare e comprendere le dinamiche quotidiane dei pazienti consente di cogliere aspetti significativi delle pratiche di cura e della costruzione della fiducia (Goffman 1963). È in questo spazio sospeso che hanno avuto luogo le principali interviste e conversazioni informali, le osservazioni più significative e le confidenze più dirette tra l'antropologa sul campo e le donne migranti.

Esther (nome fittizio), donna nigeriana al sesto mese di gravidanza, è seduta accanto a me, mentre rigira nervosamente un foglio di appuntamento. Con voce timida mi confessa: *"They told me to go to the hospital for check... but I don't know why. I don't really know anything about this healthcare"*. La sua esitazione e il senso di disorientamento mettono in luce una delle sfide centrali nell'accesso alle cure: la rigidità delle procedure standardizzate, non garantiscono di per sé adesione o fiducia. (Osservazione di campo, agosto 2024).

In questo contesto, la mediazione culturale assume una funzione critica. Maria, mediatrice dell'ambulatorio, interviene non come semplice interprete linguistico, ma come ponte tra saperi, traduttrice di codici culturali e creatrice di un contesto sicuro per l'apprendimento pratico della salute (Kleinman, 1980).

² La definizione di "famosa" qui si riferisce a quanto riportato da diverse testate giornalistiche e fonti locali, dove la Via Domiziana è spesso citata come simbolo di Castel Volturno, associata a fenomeni migratori, tensioni sociali, crimini o dinamiche urbane particolari.

Spiega spesso: *"Sometimes I need to sit with them and explain everything from the beginning. Not because they don't want care, but because nobody ever told them."* (Estratto di una conversazione con Maria, agosto 2024). Il suo ruolo incarnato rappresenta una forma di antropologia applicata, in cui le osservazioni etnografiche informano e guidano le pratiche cliniche, mentre l'esperienza concreta della cura plasma le domande e i metodi dell'antropologo sul campo. In questo spazio ibrido, il processo di mediazione culturale diventa un nodo operativo: ogni spiegazione, ogni dialogo, ogni chiarimento costruisce fiducia, consentendo al personale sanitario di interpretare correttamente i comportamenti dei pazienti e permettendo al medico di raccogliere dati rilevanti per comprendere le traiettorie culturali e individuali della salute. In tal modo, l'incontro tra antropologia e medicina si concretizza sul campo, generando un vero e proprio meticciamiento disciplinare, dove la cura diventa pratica situata, relazionale e culturalmente sensibile.

Un'altra paziente, Ama, originaria del Ghana, racconta la sua opinione sui controlli prenatali: *"In my country, you go to hospital only if you are very sick. Why go if you feel fine?"*. Il suo commento mette in luce una tensione disciplinare: la medicina preventiva, cardine della pratica clinica occidentale, entra in collisione con modelli culturali alternativi, orientati all'intervento esclusivo in presenza di malattia manifesta. L'interazione tra professionisti sanitari, mediatori culturali e osservatori antropologi consente di sviluppare pratiche adattative, che vanno oltre la semplice adesione ai protocolli, integrando conoscenze scientifiche e comprensioni culturali. Al contempo, l'ambulatorio stesso sembra agire come nodo relazionale più ampio. Le donne arrivano spesso accompagnate da amiche, sorelle o mariti, generando un passaparola che conferisce alla struttura legittimità sociale e transculturale: *"My friend told me to come here. She said that here there is a sister that explains things"*, racconta una paziente. Il sapere medico e antropologico si mescola così a reti informali di trasmissione culturale, creando uno spazio di cura che è contemporaneamente clinico, educativo e relazionale. In definitiva, l'ambulatorio di Castel Volturno si configura come spazio di meticciamiento disciplinare, dove la medicina apprende dalla lente antropologica a leggere i comportamenti, le paure e le rappresentazioni culturali dei pazienti, e l'antropologia si applica all'urgenza e alla concretezza dell'intervento sanitario. Le conversazioni informali, le spiegazioni contestualizzate, la mediazione costante e le osservazioni sul campo costituiscono un corpus di dati qualitativi che informa interventi clinici più efficaci e culturalmente sensibili. La salute emerge così come esperienza situata, intrecciata a fattori sociali, culturali ed economici (Quaranta, 2012), e la mediazione culturale diventa strumento epistemico e operativo, capace di rendere visibili e traducibili significati, percezioni e bisogni spesso invisibili nei protocolli standardizzati.

Verso una prassi condivisa e ripetibile

A partire dalle riflessioni emerse e dalla necessità di costruire uno spazio di ricerca realmente utile, la presente esperienza ha portato alla definizione di una prassi metodologica interdisciplinare, ipoteticamente replicabile in altri contesti ad alta complessità sociosanitaria. L'obiettivo è quello di offrire uno strumento pratico e teoricamente fondato per favorire il lavoro congiunto tra antropologia e medicina, tenendo insieme ricerca, osservazione e azione. Il metodo, qui formalizzato a partire dal caso studio di Castel Volturno, si articola in una serie di fasi operative che possono essere adattate e modulate in base al contesto, alla composizione del team e agli obiettivi specifici della ricerca.

1. La definizione condivisa dell'obiettivo di ricerca.

Il processo prende avvio da un confronto paritario tra i/le ricercatori/trici coinvolti/e, con l'obiettivo non solo di definire un focus comune (es. l'accesso alla salute per donne migranti), ma anche di esplicitare le proprie posture teoriche e le proprie aspettative. In seconda istanza, è utile prevedere un momento di informazione/formazione reciproca preliminare, per offrire all'antropologo una base sulle principali patologie, diagnosi e prassi cliniche del contesto, e al medico alcuni riferimenti chiave dell'antropologia, utili a comprendere i significati culturali legati alla salute e alla cura. Questo passaggio aiuta a costruire fin da subito un linguaggio condiviso e una maggiore comprensione tra i saperi.

2. La ricerca sul campo.

Nel momento in cui si pianifica il lavoro sul campo, è importante tenere presente che una presenza parallela dei ricercatori provenienti da ambiti disciplinari diversi può rappresentare un elemento di grande arricchimento. La co-presenza nello stesso contesto, anche se con approcci e strumenti differenziati, consente infatti di osservare i fenomeni da prospettive complementari, facilitando confronti immediati. Inoltre, la raccolta dati dovrebbe prevedere l'uso integrato di metodi qualitativi eterogenei: interviste semi-strutturate e narrative, osservazione partecipante, materiali visuali (mappe, schede, disegni) e tecniche partecipative. Inoltre, la possibilità di ritornare più volte dagli stessi interlocutori consente di costruire un rapporto di fiducia e di approfondire i significati emersi. L'inclusione di focus group integrati, con la partecipazione di pazienti, operatori e mediatori, può rappresentare un ulteriore strumento di validazione e produzione condivisa di senso.

3. L'analisi qualitativa e il coding incrociato.

Una volta conclusa la fase di campo, si apre il momento dell'analisi, che richiede un passaggio dal dato raccolto alla sua interpretazione. Il corpus di interviste, osservazioni e materiali raccolti viene così sottoposto a un processo di anali-

si incrociata, in cui ciascun componente del team applica le proprie categorie analitiche di riferimento. Il processo di coding, in questo senso, è uno spazio di confronto epistemico, nel quale le differenti prospettive sono un'occasione per arricchire l'analisi interpretativa. Ad esempio, ciò che un medico può identificare come "negligenza", ovvero la mancata adesione ai protocolli di cura prescritti, può essere riletto, da un punto di vista antropologico, come una "strategia adattiva", esito di una serie di decisioni culturalmente fondate prese dal paziente. L'obiettivo non è far prevalere una lettura sull'altra, ma tenere insieme le diverse dimensioni del fenomeno, restituendo la complessità delle pratiche di cura nei contesti reali. In definitiva, il coding incrociato è una pratica riflessiva a più voci, che consolida la co-produzione del sapere e getta le basi per una elaborazione realmente integrata.

4. La costruzione di una narrazione integrata.

Dopo l'analisi, i codici e le interpretazioni emerse vengono riorganizzati all'interno di una narrazione condivisa, che intreccia le diverse prospettive disciplinari. La stesura del testo avviene in modo collaborativo, attraverso la suddivisione delle sezioni, la lettura incrociata delle parti, lo scambio di commenti e le proposte di modifica. La revisione finale diventa un momento di sintesi, in cui si verifica la coerenza interna e si garantisce l'equilibrio tra i contributi. Anche la ricerca bibliografica segue la logica integrata, attingendo in modo bilanciato a riferimenti provenienti da entrambe le discipline, in modo da rafforzare l'ibridazione e teorica del prodotto finale. In questo senso, la stesura stessa del prodotto finale si configura così come parte integrante del metodo, in cui prende forma un linguaggio comune e si consolida la co-produzione del sapere.

5. Il passaggio dalla ricerca alla ricerca-azione.

Una volta individuate le criticità trasversali e i bisogni emersi nel lavoro sul campo, il percorso di ricerca non si conclude con la produzione di conoscenza teorica o la pubblicazione accademica, ma si apre a una dimensione operativa e trasformativa.

L'approccio transdisciplinare proposto mira, infatti, a generare ricadute concrete attraverso la progettazione di workshop e laboratori partecipativi che coinvolgeranno le donne migranti che hanno preso parte alla ricerca, riconosciute come interlocutrici centrali nella definizione delle priorità e delle possibili strategie di intervento. Questi spazi saranno concepiti come momenti di confronto e co-costruzione, finalizzati ad approfondire in maniera condivisa i bisogni emersi e a esplorare modalità di cura maggiormente accessibili e culturalmente situate, favorendo il dialogo tra modelli biomedici e pratiche di salute proprie dei contesti di origine. In questa prospettiva, la ricerca-azione si configura in ultima fase come un processo di restituzione attiva che intende contribuire alla definizione di raccomandazioni operative e buone prassi, ela-

borate a partire dal coinvolgimento diretto delle donne migranti e orientate a promuovere forme di assistenza sanitaria più inclusive, sensibili alle differenze culturali e maggiormente rispondenti alle loro condizioni di vita.

A partire dalle evidenze raccolte, risulta non solo possibile ma auspicabile tradurre il lavoro etnografico in interventi operativi, quali laboratori di prevenzione, incontri di alfabetizzazione sanitaria e percorsi formativi congiunti rivolti a pazienti ed operatori sanitari. In questo approccio, l'antropologo/a non riveste un ruolo meramente osservativo, ma partecipa attivamente ai processi, affianca il personale medico e contribuisce a rendere la pratica clinica quotidiana più riflessiva, contestualizzata e attenta alla dimensione relazionale della cura. In termini operativi, l'attivazione di interventi di promozione della salute a base comunitaria (*community-based health projects*) rappresenta una delle evoluzioni più rilevanti dell'approccio integrato proposto in questo lavoro. Alla base di tale impostazione vi è l'idea che l'obiettivo non sia semplicemente quello di rafforzare l'accesso ai servizi sanitari da parte delle fasce più vulnerabili, ma piuttosto di ridefinire in profondità il rapporto tra istituzioni e territorio, promuovendo forme di partecipazione attiva, continuativa e trasformativa da parte delle comunità stesse. In questa prospettiva, le comunità non sono più intese come destinatari passivi delle politiche sanitarie, bensì come co-produttrici di salute, attraverso il riconoscimento e la valorizzazione dei propri saperi, delle reti di solidarietà informali e delle organizzazioni sociali in termini di cura. I *community-based health projects* possono tradursi, in maniera concreta, nella formazione dal basso di gruppi di supporto tra pari, nella creazione di spazi di confronto comunitario, e soprattutto nei servizi in cui vi è l'incontro con i *Community Health Workers* (CHWs), figure "ponte" capaci di intercettare un possibile dialogo tra il sistema sanitario nazionale e le esigenze e i linguaggi delle comunità. A differenza dei mediatori linguistico-culturali, che sono generalmente professionisti esterni chiamati a operare con gruppi linguistici e culturali diversi, i CHWs provengono dalle stesse comunità con cui lavorano, ne condividono i codici culturali, le esperienze migratorie e, spesso, le condizioni sociali. L'inserimento strutturato di queste figure, sia in ambulatori gestiti da organizzazioni come Emergency sia nei servizi sanitari pubblici, costituisce una risposta sostenibile e durevole ai bisogni rilevati sul campo. Dal punto di vista delle comunità, i CHWs rappresentano una forma concreta di *agency* dal basso: non più semplici destinatari di interventi sanitari, ma protagonisti attivi dei processi di cura, capaci di mediare tra i linguaggi medici, burocratici e istituzionali, e le pratiche di cura quotidiane delle comunità. In questo stesso quadro, il ruolo dei CHWs, si estende ben oltre la traduzione linguistica, articolandosi nella decodifica simbolica dei bisogni, nella negoziazione dei significati attribu-

iti alla malattia e alla cura, e nella costruzione di un rapporto terapeutico basato su prossimità, fiducia e riconoscimento reciproco (Radicioni 2022). Il modello interdisciplinare integrato si configura così non solo come strumento analitico, ma come pratica di ricerca-azione sociale, capace di restituire la conoscenza prodotta alle comunità e trasformarla in leva concreta per fare passi avanti in termini di inclusione, giustizia e accesso alla cura.

Conclusioni

Il modello di ricerca sperimentato a Castel Volturno intende proporsi come una metodologia integrata replicabile, capace di orientare la produzione di conoscenza interdisciplinare nei contesti di marginalità socio-sanitaria. Ciò che emerge con forza è la possibilità di superare la dicotomia tra sapere clinico e sapere antropologico, costruendo un terzo spazio conoscitivo, di tipo dialogico, in cui le differenze epistemologiche vengono valorizzate come risorse analitiche. Il processo interdisciplinare adottato si è rivelato efficace non solo per la qualità dei risultati prodotti, ma perché ha generato momenti fondamentali di apprendimento reciproco come in sede di definizione degli obiettivi condivisi, nella costruzione congiunta degli strumenti di ricerca, nel corso dell'analisi incrociata dei dati e infine nella stesura partecipata dell'articolo finale. In questa prospettiva, il caso presentato si colloca chiaramente all'interno di una logica di ricerca-azione (Fals-Borda 1991), orientata non soltanto alla comprensione dei fenomeni, ma alla costruzione di strumenti operativi e raccomandazioni concrete, pensati per essere utili sia al personale sanitario che alle comunità coinvolte. L'obiettivo finale è la produzione di un sapere applicativo, capace di tradurre l'analisi in pratiche, rendendo la ricerca uno strumento di trasformazione e non solo di osservazione. Un esempio concreto in questa direzione è offerto dall'esperienza della Migration and Health Clinic dell'Ospedale Amedeo di Savoia di Torino, dove è stata sviluppata la cartella clinica etnografica come strumento per integrare, nella presa in carico del paziente, aspetti culturali, sociali e biografici (Pettirino 2019). Questo dispositivo nasce proprio dalla volontà di superare il riduzionismo biomedico, fornendo un modello pratico che mette il sapere antropologico al servizio della clinica, e che riconosce il paziente nella sua complessità, oltre la dimensione puramente sintomatica. In linea con questa esperienza, anche la collaborazione tra medicina e antropologia proposta nel presente lavoro mira a generare strumenti concreti e condivisi, capaci di migliorare la qualità della risposta socio-sanitaria sia all'interno degli ambulatori di Emergency, sia nei servizi pubblici con cui tali strutture si interfacciano. Emergency, infatti, agendo spesso come presidio di supporto ("stampella") a un

sistema sanitario sotto pressione, può rappresentare, proprio per questo, un terreno fertile per l'innovazione metodologica e l'elaborazione di modelli replicabili. Se portata ad un livello di ragionamento successivo, questa prospettiva invita a ripensare in modo radicale la relazione di cura, estendendone la portata ben oltre il solo ambito migratorio. In effetti, viene chiamato in causa l'intero sistema sanitario, interrogandone le capacità di ascolto, adattamento e redistribuzione del potere decisionale. Come osserva O'Callaghan (2022), ridurre la cura alla sola gestione dei sintomi biomedici significa trascurare storie, aspettative e bisogni profondamente situati, finendo per compromettere tanto l'efficacia quanto l'etica dell'intervento terapeutico, indipendentemente dall'origine o dallo status del paziente (O'Callaghan 2022). Riflettere oggi su queste collaborazioni interdisciplinari significa dunque gettare le basi per futuri percorsi di ricerca congiunta, in cui l'integrazione dei saperi non sia solo auspicata, ma effettivamente praticata, e orientata alla costruzione di percorsi operativi operative capaci di produrre impatto reale nei contesti di maggiore vulnerabilità.

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Confronti



Prime note per un abitare leggero

Corrispondenze tra antropologia e filosofia
dentro e ai margini della crisi planetaria

First notes for a light dwelling

Correspondences between anthropology and
philosophy within and at the margins of the
planetary crisis

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Abstract: This article explores the ethical and political dimensions of dwelling through an anthropological and philosophical inquiry in the Simeto River Valley, Eastern Sicily. Drawing on Ingold's dwelling perspective and other relational approaches, the authors inquire into the potential of a "light" form of dwelling to sustain and foster regenerative processes within the current socio-ecological crisis. Following Heidegger's critique of "modern technique" and Krenak's distinction between "heavy" and "light" ways of inhabiting the Earth, the authors look at one particular activity that involves liberating the land from plastic irrigation pipes and creating a small wetland. By allowing water to circulate within the wider environment, such an activity represents an innovative practice of water management that resists the socioecological crisis from the margins of a landscape heavily dominated by agroindustry and its "heavy" forms of dwelling. The resulting wetland supports biodiversity thus demonstrating concrete alternatives to extractive forms of agriculture. These practices are not universal models to be replicated; they rather unveil the possibilities and the potential of the margins in resisting the "traditional" extractive practices that characterize the Anthropocene.

Nota degli autori

Questo scritto nasce da una ricerca antropologica condotta da Paolo Gruppuso nella valle del Simeto, in Sicilia Orientale nel 2024, presso l'azienda agricola Munnu di Luca Provenzano, architetto con un dottorato in filosofia, e Jennifer

Harumi Tanaka, ricercatrice presso l'Università di Catania, che si occupa di movimenti legati al cibo e alla sostenibilità alimentare. Si è sviluppato attraverso una corrispondenza sollecitata da un preciso interesse di ricerca verso le trasformazioni ambientali del territorio e le relazioni socio-ecologiche in un contesto di crisi ambientale ed economica.¹

Il testo è stato scritto congiuntamente da Paolo Gruppuso e Luca Provenzano. L'introduzione e il paragrafo III sono stati redatti principalmente da Paolo portando una prospettiva antropologica sulle pratiche a cui ha partecipato. Il paragrafo II è stato scritto principalmente da Luca, sviluppando le riflessioni filosofiche sulla tecnica. I paragrafi I e IV sono frutto di una scrittura congiunta che intreccia osservazioni etnografiche e riflessione filosofica.

Se Paolo e Luca hanno firmato e scritto questo articolo, di cui si assumono la piena responsabilità autoriale, è importante sottolineare che le riflessioni da cui scaturisce sono frutto di conversazioni e vicinanza quotidiane che hanno coinvolto anche Jennifer.

Introduzione

I processi legati all'abitare attivano relazioni ecologiche tra organismi e materiali che intrecciandosi danno vita a un ambiente. È in questo intreccio che abitare diventa costruire. In questo senso, costruire non è attività esclusivamente umana, riguarda piuttosto ogni forma vivente – animale o vegetale – in quanto nodo di relazioni che si dispiega nel mondo. Se gli approcci strettamente “costruttivisti”² concepiscono l'ambiente come un sostrato indifferenziato di materiali a cui degli agenti viventi, più o meno intenzionalmente, impongono forma e significato attraverso il costruire; questa prospettiva, invece, rovescia tale logica e vede nell'ambiente un campo aperto di possibilità che emerge nei

¹ Il lavoro di Paolo Gruppuso sul Simeto si protrae dal 2023 tra ricerca d'archivio e diversi periodi trascorsi sul campo. Tra il novembre del 2023 e l'ottobre del 2024, la ricerca è stata condotta all'interno del progetto Europeo Horizon “BIOTraCes: Biodiversity and Transformative Change for Plural and Nature-Positive Societies” (agreement n. 10108192), nel team di ricerca guidato da Mara Benadusi presso l'Università di Catania. I successivi periodi di ricerca sul Simeto e il lavoro di scrittura di questo articolo si inseriscono all'interno del progetto ‘Rethinking Wetlands: An Environmental Anthropology of Wetlands’, finanziato dalla Fondazione Tedesca per la Ricerca (DFG) presso il Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society – LMU (project number 528547179).

² Con “costruttivismo” ci riferiamo qui a quegli approcci che, pur nelle loro differenze, tendono a concepire l'ambiente come prodotto dall'azione di agenti attraverso pratiche culturali, tecniche, o simboliche (Berger, Luckmann 1966). In particolare qui facciamo riferimento alla prospettiva che Tim Ingold indica come *ilemorfismo* (Ingold 2013).

processi di corrispondenza tra organismi viventi e materiali. Gli approcci costruttivisti si situano nella dicotomia egemonica cultura/natura, dove la prima da forma alla seconda attraverso processi di costruzione simbolica e materiale mediati da aspetti sociali e storici. La prospettiva che proponiamo, a seguire Ingold (2000; 2011), dissolve questa dicotomia suggerendo invece un approccio ontogenetico in cui costruire è pratica implicita all'abitare, è dunque processo in divenire che si lega inestricabilmente al vivere.³

Se, dunque, abitare significa costruire come possiamo distinguere tra la qualità delle forme, e il tipo di impatto che queste hanno sul mondo in cui viviamo, e sulle nostre vite? Il distinguere qui non si riferisce alla capacità di riconoscere le differenze tra una città e un formicaio; tra una palazzina di eternit, acciaio, e vetro, e una capanna di canne, argilla, e paglia; tra un canale costretto tra argini di cemento e un fiume che scorre tracciando liberamente il suo percorso; o tra una diga e uno stagno; una foresta e un impianto agrovoltaiico; un frutteto sinergico e una piantagione. La distinzione a cui facciamo qui riferimento ha piuttosto un valore etico e politico riassumibile nella questione seguente: se costruire è parte integrante del vivere, come possiamo distinguere tra processi necrotici che impoveriscono la vita, restringendola in forme disciplinanti, e pratiche rigenerative che alimentano e sostengono la diversità della vita? Se dissolviamo la dicotomia natura/cultura e riconosciamo che tutto il vivente "costruisce", come possiamo mantenere la capacità di scegliere e implementare diverse modalità di abitare e dare forma al mondo?⁴

Se tali domande hanno implicazioni dirette su come pensiamo l'architettura, l'urbanistica, l'agricoltura, e la gestione territoriale, la loro importanza trascende questi campi di applicazione, investendo in pieno il nostro modo di stare al mondo e relazionarci con il resto del vivente. In questo senso, sono urgenti perché vanno dritte al cuore di questioni legate alla crisi sociale ed ecologica che caratterizza la nostra era. La riflessione su tali questioni però non è per noi strumentale alla ricerca di facili soluzioni, è piuttosto indispensabile per abitare e comprendere la crisi di senso che investe le nostre vite (Weber 2019). Per questa ragione, il nostro processo speculativo non è *astratto* dalla realtà, si situa piuttosto in essa attraverso una duplice corrispondenza. Tra un antropologo e un filosofo/architetto e tra noi e la valle del Simeto, nella parte orientale della Sicilia, ai piedi del monte Etna. Qui, il fiume con il più grande bacino idrogra-

³ Per un approfondimento su questo tema, in relazione a un discorso più ampio sul relativismo culturale si veda Knudsen 2016.

⁴ Per una critica al lavoro di Tim Ingold relativa alla mancanza di una riflessione di natura politica sulle questioni ecologiche si vedano Hornborg 2018 e Mc Call Howard 2018. Per una riflessione autocritica su questi temi si veda Ingold 2005.

fico dell'isola oggi scorre in un paesaggio che porta i segni evidenti dei processi necrotici che caratterizzano la modernità e l'attuale crisi socio-ambientale (Gruppuso, Garozzo 2025). Il Simeto negli anni Cinquanta del secolo scorso è stato interessato da un violento processo di infrastrutturazione che lo ha progressivamente alienato dalla vita sociale della valle, distruggendo gli ambienti ripariali, e trasformandolo in una condotta idraulica finalizzata alla produzione di energia idroelettrica e all'irrigazione di piantagioni industriali di arance.⁵

In questo contesto si trova l'azienda agricola Munnu, nel territorio di Paternò, non distante dal fiume Simeto, dove attua un sistema di pratiche colturali che incarnano un modo radicalmente diverso di abitare e costruire, all'interno e ai margini di un paesaggio epitome dell'attuale crisi socioecologica. In particolare, le nostre riflessioni nascono da una serie di attività legate alla gestione dell'acqua. Queste attività, finalizzate all'ottimizzazione del sistema di irrigazione in una parte dell'azienda, hanno prodotto un ambiente vitale – una piccola zona umida – che si differenzia nettamente dal circostante paesaggio agroindustriale, dimostrando concretamente la possibilità di una modalità altra di relazionarsi all'ambiente. Allo stesso tempo, le pratiche legate alla realizzazione di questo sistema di irrigazione, hanno suscitato questioni più ampie, legate alla natura della tecnica, e alle potenzialità di un abitare *sostenibile*. Luca, in un certo senso seguendo Calvino (1988),⁶ definisce queste modalità altre come “leggere”, in contrapposizione alla “pesantezza” che la modernità – intesa come insieme di dispositivi tecnici e ideologici, egemonici e colonizzanti – ha imposto sul fiume Simeto e sul territorio della valle.

È a partire da queste contrapposizioni che le questioni poste in apertura prendono forma concreta, attraverso una postura situata nella pratica e pertanto esplicitamente *posizionata*.

Dal pranzo alla filosofia: osservazioni su “la tecnica moderna”

Eravamo a pranzo, durante la pausa in una delle belle giornate di lavoro della primavera del 2024 nelle campagne paternesì, in provincia di Catania. In quell'occasione, parlando del degrado che caratterizza il fiume e della sua alienazione dalla vita sociale della valle, Luca osservava: “Negli anni, il fiume è stato trasformato in un'opera ingegneristica dell'Enel, una condotta idraulica

⁵ Per una riflessione sui processi di trasformazione più recenti in atto nella valle del Simeto si veda Provenzano 2025.

⁶ In *Lezioni Americane* Calvino dedica un'intera conferenza al concetto di leggerezza, difendendolo come soluzione alla pesantezza della nostra società moderna e industriale.

ca, dove sembra quasi non ci si possa andare. Come se fosse vietato". La sua osservazione, radicata nell'esperienza quotidiana di chi vive e lavora in quel contesto, ha colpito la curiosità antropologica di Paolo. Nelle conversazioni che hanno seguito quel pranzo, confluite in questo scritto, Luca ha chiarito la portata filosofica della sua affermazione, in cui faceva riferimento al concetto di "tecnica moderna" sviluppato da Martin Heidegger ne *La questione della tecnica*.⁷ In questo lavoro, Heidegger distingue tra la *techné* dell'Antica Grecia e la "tecnica moderna" nata nel XIX secolo, declinando la differenza tra le due come una questione di energie. Mentre la *techné* era uno dei tanti nomi del "conoscere in senso ampio" (Heidegger 2007, p. 380),⁸ la tecnica moderna è un mezzo di stoccaggio di energie (ivi, p. 381). A tal proposito, Heidegger fa l'esempio dell'uso del fiume Reno, ristrutturato in chiave "moderna" dalla Germania durante la Ricostruzione. Mentre anticamente, commenta Heidegger, si costruivano ponti sui fiumi, adesso "è il fiume ad essere costruito nella centrale elettrica" (*Ibid*). Questo perché, da essere dotato di vita e dinamiche proprie, con la scienza moderna, il fiume diventa una cascata di particelle di H₂O, dotate di pressione e forza cinetica. Questa inversione riguardante la metafisica del corpo d'acqua ha concesso alla Germania, e alle altre nazioni europee dell'epoca (Mauch, Zeller 2008), di avviare un processo di "sfida" alla natura che consiste, per il filosofo tedesco, nelle operazioni di estrazione, trasformazione, stoccaggio e distribuzione di energia (ivi, p. 382). Heidegger riassume tale processo nel concetto di *gestell*: letteralmente, la "sovrastruttura", che nell'opera del filosofo assume il senso del "disporre sfidante" dell'uomo occidentale (*ibid*).

La critica heideggeriana alla tecnica moderna, riletta insieme ad altra letteratura filosofica, etnografica ed etologica, pone le basi per ciò che Tim Ingold chiama "prospettiva dell'abitare" (2000, pp. 172-188). Questa "prospettiva", dissolve la distinzione tra costruzione e abitazione che caratterizza il pensiero moderno, mostrando come il costruire emerga dall'abitare stesso attraverso un continuo processo di corrispondenza tra organismi e materiali. Se Heidegger denuncia la riduzione del fiume a "risorsa energetica" inserita nel *gestell* della tecnica moderna, Ingold ci offre gli strumenti concettuali per pensare modalità alternative: non più l'imposizione di forma sulla materia secondo il modello ilomorfo che domina il pensiero occidentale, ma un processo generativo in cui forme e relazioni emergono dal coinvolgimento reciproco tra esseri viventi e ambiente.

⁷ Frutto di una conferenza pronunciata dal filosofo il 18 novembre 1953 presso l'*Auditorium Maximum* della *Technische Hochschule* di Monaco.

⁸ Traduzione di Luca Provenzano.

È sorprendente come il concetto di *gestell*, così altisonante nei termini di Heidegger, faccia eco ai discorsi di molti popoli indigeni che oggi, in diversi contesti post-coloniali, assumono un posizionamento resistente e critico nei confronti di mega-infrastrutture industriali che assediano e trasformano i loro ambienti di vita. Qui un esempio di come l'attivista brasiliano Ailton Krenak riassume la questione:

Quando depersonalizziamo il fiume, la montagna, quando li priviamo del loro senso – un attributo che riteniamo prerogativa dell'essere umano – releghiamo questi luoghi al livello di semplici risorse per l'industria e l'estrattivismo (Krenak, 2019a, p. 49).⁹

La “depersonalizzazione” di cui scrive Krenak diventa comprensibile anche nell'ontologia moderna e occidentale quando associata al fiume Simeto che, come tanti altri fiumi (Brierley 2020), ha subito un processo di modernizzazione che lo ha privato di senso, fino quasi a farlo scomparire, trasformandolo in una centrale elettrica, dimenticato dalla comunità che abita la valle, e “dove sembra quasi non ci si possa andare”. In questo senso, possiamo comprendere l'idea espressa da Krenak, quando afferma che questo “divorzio” ci lascia “orfani” (*ibid*).

L'unico momento in cui ci si ricorda del fiume è quando qualcosa va storto. Le riflessioni di Krenak diventano ancora più calzanti se pensiamo al fatto che il leader indigeno è anche il reduce di una delle peggiori catastrofi ambientali al mondo, causate proprio dalla rottura di una diga costruita su un fiume. Ci riferiamo qui al disastro ambientale Bento Rodrigues, accaduto nello stato di Minas Gerais nel 2015, durante il quale l'omonima diga, gestita dalle compagnie minerarie private Vale e BHP, è collassata riversando nella valle del fiume Doce 45 milioni di metri cubici di scarti industriali, inquinando in maniera irreversibile il fiume e le sue sponde che ospitano, tra le altre specie viventi, la comunità indigena di Krenak.¹⁰

Durante lo stesso pranzo con cui abbiamo iniziato questo paragrafo, Jennifer riporta la notizia di un'altra diga brasiliana, questa volta nello stato di Santa Catarina, che collassando ha provocato decine di morti e dispersi. A questa notizia fa da contrappunto la sua affermazione che “è strano vivere vicino a un grande fiume come se non esistesse”. L'osservazione di Jennifer riassume bene la *crisi di senso* che attraversa la valle del Simeto e i suoi abitanti, sollevando questioni più sottili che riguardano la marginalità del fiume dalla vita sociale della valle, alimentata dai processi di esclusione che, nella pratica, allontanano la comunità

⁹ Traduzione nostra dal Portoghese.

¹⁰ Vedi https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Disastro_ambientale_di_Bento_Rodrigues

umana dal fiume, invisibilizzandolo e così perpetuando l'idea – e la pratica – di un fiume come “opera ingegneristica dell'Enel”, come condotta idraulica a servizio degli impianti idroelettrici e dell'agricoltura industriale.¹¹

Queste istanze – la centrale idroelettrica e la piantagione industriale – esemplificano la “pesantezza” della modernità sul paesaggio, alla quale si contrappongono pratiche abitative “leggere”, che tentano invece di attenuare – o liberare – il paesaggio di quella pesantezza. Queste pratiche di “alleggerimento” hanno stimolato l'attenzione etnografica di Paolo, che le ha individuate nelle attività legate alla gestione dell'acqua. Una delle attività a cui ha partecipato durante la sua permanenza nell'azienda Munnu è stata quella di dissotterrare, in una parte del terreno, i tubi di irrigazione in plastica che lo attraversano. Questa attività, materialmente finalizzata all'ottimizzazione del sistema di irrigazione, ha offerto elementi importanti di riflessione antropologica. Vanga in mano, dissotterrare i tubi, mettere le mani nella terra e scoprire il rizoma di plastica che compone questo tratto di valle, ha innescato un processo di ribaltamento della prospettiva sul paesaggio, mettendolo “sottosopra” e portando alla luce in piccola scala, quello che a scala planetaria definisce la crisi socioambientale e l'antropocene (Crutzen, Stoermer 2000).¹² Questa pratica di liberazione e “alleggerimento” del terreno rappresenta la possibilità non di una “contrapposizione” ma di una resistenza viva e vitale che nasce dentro e ai margini della crisi socioecologica. Questa forma di resistenza può leggersi, secondo Paolo, come una “innovazione”, in un contesto in cui la tradizione sembra essere rappresentata da pratiche estrattive e di annichilimento delle relazioni ecologiche.

Tale innovazione prende forma nella parte più bassa dell'azienda Munnu, dove questo processo di alleggerimento del terreno ha generato una piccola zona umida. A partire da una canaletta di irrigazione in disuso sono stati scavati due piccoli fossati che attraversano il terreno, rendendolo umido, e che alimentano un giovane stagno. Dall'alto potrebbe sembrare uno di quei laghetti artificiali che punteggiano la Piana di Catania, e che servono da serbatoi d'acqua per irrigare il terreno. Non potrebbe essere più diverso. I laghetti artificiali sono elementi puntuali, serbatoi impermeabilizzati da cui l'acqua scorre in tubi che sono spesso a loro volta impermeabili. In questo senso, sono alienati dall'ambiente che li circonda. Lo stagno e i fossati che sono stati scavati a Munnu,

¹¹ Per un'analisi dei processi politici e sociali che negli ultimi anni hanno tentato di ridare centralità al fiume nella valle del Simeto si veda Lambert-Pennington, Pappalardo 2025. Al di là di questi processi, il fiume accoglie attività e soggettività oggi marginalizzate, legate al pascolo e, in misura minore, alla pesca, la cui analisi esula dallo scopo di questo articolo.

¹² Per una riflessione sulla complessa ambiguità dell'antropocene si vedano Whitehouse 2015, Palsson e Swanson 2016, Weber 2019.

sono invece porosi e permeabili. Il processo di impermeabilizzazione è costantemente in divenire perché è l'acqua stessa che penetrando tra le pieghe del terreno argilloso lo compatta e attraverso un processo di "litificazione" lo rende quasi-impermeabile. Questo processo di "litificazione" (Luisetti 2023), ricorda l'azione di un fiume che scava il suo letto, rendendolo tale attraverso il dispiegamento nel tempo di relazioni particolari e specifiche con l'ambiente circostante. Nel primo caso, il sistema di irrigazione "tradizionale" diviene parte di un sistema industriale di produzione, così come il fiume diventa parte della centrale idroelettrica, appesantendo l'ambiente su cui viene forzatamente imposto. Nel secondo caso, il "nuovo" sistema di irrigazione non aggiunge nulla, lavora anzi per sottrazione, liberando il terreno dai residui dell'agricoltura industriale, e innescando un processo di litificazione che ricorda la *fluvialità* di un fiume, il suo essere fiume dentro e con l'ambiente in cui scorre e che trasforma.

Luca: la "leggerezza del fare" come modalità di abitare

I concetti di "pesantezza" e "leggerezza" identificati da Luca, richiamano il lavoro del giovane architetto e antropologo brasiliano Thago Magri Benucci (2020; 2022). Questo autore ha elaborato le categorie di *architettura pesante* e *architettura leggera*, ispirandosi alla distinzione tra "pesantezza" e "leggerezza" posta da Ailton Krenak, che scrive:

[I] bianchi [...] hanno vissuto tra noi, poi hanno dimenticato chi erano e hanno continuato a vivere una vita diversa. Si sono aggrappati alle loro invenzioni, ai loro strumenti, alla scienza e alla tecnologia. Hanno perso la strada, saccheggiando il pianeta. Poi ci incontriamo di nuovo, e c'è una sorta di rabbia contro di noi [indigeni] per essere rimasti fedeli a un percorso qui sulla Terra che loro non sono riusciti a mantenere. Sono inorriditi e dicono che siamo pigri, che non abbiamo voluto diventare civili. Come se "diventare civili" fosse un destino. È una sciocchezza, è la loro religione. La religione della civiltà. *Cambiano il loro repertorio, ma ripetono la danza. La loro coreografia è la stessa. È procedere a passo pesante sulla Terra. La nostra, è camminare a passo leggero, molto leggero, sulla Terra* (Krenak 2019b, corsivo nostro).¹³

Ispirato da queste parole (che ricordano quelle di altri pensatori indigeni)¹⁴ e a partire dalla constatazione che i popoli indigeni realizzano architetture effime-

¹³ Traduzione di Luca Provenzano.

¹⁴ Le parole di Krenak riecheggiano quelle di un altro pensatore indigeno, questa volta nordamericano, Russel Means. In una famosa conferenza proferita nel 1980, questionato dai suoi interlocutori se

re con consapevolezza e strategia, Benucci riflette sulla possibilità di salvarci dal decadimento cosmico causato dalla società capitalista. Detto in altre parole, sino ad ora considerato come segno di pigrizia e povertà, quel costruire leggero, fatto di fibre vegetali, terra cruda e ossa di animale, si rivela oggi altamente efficace dal punto di vista termico ed energetico, e soprattutto, essendo totalmente biodegradabile, potrebbe aprire nuove frontiere di fronte al tema della sostenibilità ambientale.

Nella sua tesi di dottorato, intitolata *La sostenibile leggerezza del fare* (in corso di pubblicazione), Luca approfondisce la posizione di Benucci. Partendo dagli studi di Hannah Arendt (2007) su ciò che lei chiama *La condizione umana*, e che riguardano l'evoluzione del concetto di vita in occidente, Luca osserva che, nella nostra società, viene fatta una netta distinzione tra la vita degli esseri umani e quella di tutti gli altri esseri viventi. Questa distinzione è stata stabilita da Aristotele più di duemila anni fa e, suggerisce Luca, non è mai più stata messa in discussione, almeno fino all'ultimo ventennio. La distinzione si basa su un discorso apparentemente molto semplice.

In *Etica Nicomachea* Aristotele osserva che esistono due tipi o concetti di vita principali. La prima – che il greco chiama *zoé* – è quella che, nata dalla terra, ad essa vi ritorna senza lasciar traccia di sé. La seconda – identificata da Aristotele con il termine *bios* – è invece la vita specifica dell'essere umano che, grazie alla sua mente (il *logos*, ovvero la sua parte divina) è in grado di spezzare il ciclo dell'eterno ritorno della mera *zoé*, e di elevarsi imponendosi sulla terra come qualcosa di più duraturo della semplice vita animale o vegetale. Detto in altri termini, probabilmente indignato dall'idea che l'essere umano, a causa della debolezza della sua carne, appartenga per natura al primo gruppo di esseri, Aristotele si pose a studiare un modo per elevare l'essere umano alle cose non deperibili. Trovò infatti che, se da un lato, è vero che la carne del corpo umano è deperibile, può non esserlo il suo *operato*. In particolare, Aristotele si concentra sulla permanenza del pensiero umano, quando esso è debitamente tramandato per iscritto.

Questo concetto, evidentemente problematico perché ipotizza la separazione radicale tra mente e corpo, fu tuttavia poi ripreso, quasi senza alterazioni, dalla modernità anglosassone del XIX secolo. Infatti, come sostenne Arendt (2007), anche se è vero che per i pensatori tedeschi della Riforma non è più il *logos* a fare da chiave per l'imperitività umana – il *logos* sarà infatti sostituito dalla fabbricazione di oggetti duraturi e solidi – verrà tuttavia mantenuta in-

ritenesse il marxismo una valida alternativa al capitalismo, rispose con l'epico testo *The same old song*. Quella che era la musica dalle note ripetitive per Means, diventa, nella concezione del brasiliano, una danza dai passi sempre uguali a sé stessi.

tatta sia l'incessante ricerca della salvezza umana, sia la dicotomia tra mente e corpo.¹⁵ È in questo senso che la filosofa tedesca ha perfettamente ragione a sostenere che il cannocchiale di Galileo Galilei ha un significato molto più profondo del semplice fatto di amplificare la vista umana: esso è un chiaro esempio di quegli oggetti non deperibili che elevano la condizione umana naturale, proprio perché non ritorna alla terra dopo la morte del suo creatore. In sostanza, secondo questa prospettiva, ciò che sta alla base del concetto di vita in Occidente, è proprio la scelta dei materiali più durevoli, quali supporto per l'accesso alla vita propriamente umana, che si contraddistingue per una esigua partecipazione alle attività corporali necessarie al mantenimento del suo organismo.¹⁶

Tuttavia, come nota Luca, una volta rintracciata tale dinamica, è anche possibile (e necessario) tracciare una rotta opposta a questa. Questa “nuova danza” – per usare l'espressione di Krenak – dovrebbe passare da azioni di rinuncia teorica di tale metafisica e di rinuncia pratica dei materiali non deperibili. È a questo che fa riferimento l'espressione *leggerezza del fare*, elaborata da Luca nella sua tesi di dottorato. Una rivoluzione interiore che deve partire dai singoli individui occidentali (o occidentalizzati), una presa di coscienza introspettiva dell'insostenibilità, non solo della metafisica occidentale, ma anche e soprattutto del *modo di fare* pratico della nostra società. Sostituire i tubi plastici della nostra agricoltura monocoltura e industrializzata, scavando manualmente dei canali in un esiguo appezzamento di terra – all'apparenza un gesto forse troppo semplice da poter essere definito come “innovazione” – può avere invece effetti sorprendenti. E non perché questo pezzo di terra sia già libero dal peso della nostra civiltà (purtroppo per questo ci vorrà ancora molto tempo) ma perché inizia a esserlo chi scava.

Questa prospettiva fa eco alla distinzione di Ingold (2013) tra il modello “ilomorfo”, in cui la forma viene imposta sulla materia, e il modello della “corri-

¹⁵ Nel corso della storia dell'occidente, questo discorso è stato declinato in innumerevoli varianti, che non è possibile esaurire nello spazio concesso. A titolo illustrativo, una delle più recenti, è quella fatta dal movimento evangelico nel cristianesimo protestante che ha trasposto il fare umano nel tema dell'accumulazione capitalistica della ricchezza. Nonostante ad essere accumulato è qualcosa di poco materico (il denaro), la “danza” non cambia: è sempre l'essere umano che adotta la dottrina ad essere salvato dalla decadenza tramite l'accesso al regno dell'eterno.

¹⁶ Non rientra negli obiettivi di questo testo discutere quali siano stati gli impatti di questo modo di pensare, sia per la biodiversità sociale che naturale. Ma non possiamo esularci dal ricordare al lettore che questa metafisica sia stata una sorta di “bomba atomica” scagliata contro qualsiasi altro modo di pensare e contro le foreste. Il discorso sulla colonizzazione e sulla colonialità del potere messo in gioco dagli studiosi di coloniali (vedi per esempio il lavoro del portoricano Ramon Grosfoguel (2017), così come sull'Antropocene (vedi Danowski e Viveiros de Castro 2015), ha evidentemente a che fare con questo.

spondenza”, in cui le forme dell’abitare emergono nel processo stesso di coinvolgimento con l’ambiente. In questo senso, la *leggerezza del fare* elaborata da Luca, rappresenta un modo diverso di abitare che genera forme attraverso il continuo coinvolgimento con l’ambiente, piuttosto che imponendo strutture su un substrato considerato inerte.

Paolo: dalla leggerezza all’alleggerimento

Le osservazioni filosofiche di Luca sulla metafisica occidentale, e sul *modo di fare* della società capitalista vanno dritte al cuore della questione che ci siamo posti nell’introduzione. Il punto non è riconoscere la differenza tra un sistema “artificiale” e uno “naturale”, ma la capacità – tutta etica e politica – di scegliere il *modo di fare* con cui stare e *costruire* il mondo. Questa scelta ha ricadute significative in un contesto di desertificazione e cambiamento climatico come quello della valle del Simeto, e mette in luce un cambiamento di prospettiva importante. Da un lato la siccità come dato di fatto, a cui corrispondono soluzioni quali l’estrazione e la conservazione dell’acqua intesa come risorsa di carattere economico finalizzata all’uso industriale – per la produzione di energia o per l’irrigazione. Dall’altro lato la siccità come materia di interesse, a cui corrispondono pratiche di cura e di attenzione dell’ambiente nella sua totalità. Nel primo caso, l’abitare implica un costruire che, intubando e conservando l’acqua in strutture impermeabili, impedisce il dispiegarsi di relazioni impattando negativamente sull’ecologia dei luoghi. Nel secondo caso, l’abitare comporta un processo di costruzione e di cura che è continuamente in divenire, perché implica costanti aggiustamenti nei quali umano e non-umano, mondo organico e minerale, si corrispondono.

L’attività di liberazione del terreno dai tubi di plastica, sostiene Paolo, sembra essere un tentativo di decolonizzare le pratiche agricole, e alleggerirle dal peso dell’agroindustria. Allo stesso tempo, liberando l’acqua, questa pratica decentra il peso dell’umano creando una formazione simbiotica che mette in discussione la distinzione tra ciò che è sociale e ciò che è naturale, sfidando l’ordine e le pratiche egemoniche. Il sistema di irrigazione che ne deriva – una piccola zona umida – richiede un processo di “litificazione” che nasce dall’acqua. Questa può essere catturata ma mai completamente posseduta, perché circola nell’ambiente più ampio, innescando così relazioni socio-ecologiche che sono alla base di ambienti vitali e ricchi di biodiversità. Questo sistema non è un soggetto, nel senso moderno, occidentale e razionalista del termine; esso è in grado però di esprimere, dispiegare, e rendere manifeste delle relazioni che, in quel determinato ambiente, sono innovative e alimentano la biodiversità, facendo prosperare

forme di vita diverse, come anfibì e insetti. Infatti, libellule e damigelle volteggiano sopra questi piccoli corpi d'acqua tingeggiandoli coi loro vivaci colori, e il gracidio di raganelle, rane e rospi accompagna il calar della sera. Questo è un paesaggio insolito in quel tratto di valle, dove il fiume scorre monocromaticamente muto, e le rane, a detta dei vicini allevatori, non si fanno più ascoltare da anni a causa dell'inquinamento delle acque.

Adiacente quest'area umida, un canale lungo e stretto che raccoglie l'acqua delle vicine sorgenti ospita un'abbondante micro-vegetazione ripariale nel quale le damigelle si accoppiano e danzando depongono uova. I loro colori, sullo sfondo del verde acceso di piante acquatiche galleggianti, ricordano i dipinti di Monet. Questa inaspettata bellezza non va interpretata come una esaltazione della purezza della natura. Piuttosto ci ricorda che le qualità estetiche di un ambiente possono senza dubbio essere messe in relazione al suo stato ecologico e al benessere dei suoi abitanti umani e non-umani, specialmente in contesti acquatici e quando si incontrano libellule e damigelle, universalmente considerate indicatori importanti della qualità delle acque. Già quindici anni fa l'IUCN lanciava un allarme dichiarando che "circa il 20 per cento delle specie di libellule e damigelle del Mediterraneo è a rischio di estinzione".¹⁷ Questo a causa della crescente perdita e deterioramento di ambienti lenticì: stagni, paludi, fiumi e canali. Per la stessa ragione, anche gli anfibì sono, tra la classe dei vertebrati, quelli che rischiano maggiormente l'estinzione (Rondinini, Battistoni, Teofili 2022). Questi aspetti assumono un valore ancora più importante, secondo Paolo, se si osservano gli aranceti vicini, coltivati in maniera industriale con diserbanti e concimazione fogliare, che illuminano una delle cause più significative del degrado ecologico in valle.

Dai margini una nuova danza: verso la "sostenibilità"

Le pratiche che abbiamo descritto – lo scavo di canali porosi, il dissotterramento di tubi di plastica, l'osservazione attenta delle relazioni che emergono in una piccola zona umida – possono sembrare marginali rispetto alle grandi questioni sollevate dalla crisi ecologica globale. E in effetti lo sono: marginali geograficamente, un appezzamento di terra nella valle del Simeto; marginali economicamente, un'azienda agricola di piccole dimensioni; marginali rispetto ai discorsi egemonici sulla sostenibilità e sulla transizione ecologica. Eppure

¹⁷ <https://www.iucn.it/dettaglio.php?id=6994> (sito visitato il 27 novembre 2024)

è proprio questa marginalità a costituire il loro valore più profondo. Come insegna bell hooks (1989), i margini non sono solo spazi di esclusione e oppressione, ma anche – e soprattutto – “spazi di apertura radicale” dove è possibile immaginare e praticare prospettive alternative e modi altri di stare al mondo. I margini non sono dunque luoghi da cui fuggire; implicano piuttosto per noi una posizione epistemologica e politica privilegiata da cui guardare il mondo con occhi diversi. È ai margini che si sviluppa un potenziale che può sfidare le narrazioni egemoniche, non proponendo soluzioni universaliste, ma sviluppando pratiche posizionate, parziali, e incarnate, sempre radicate in luoghi e in relazioni specifiche.

La macchina messa in piedi da Aristotele (prima, e dai teorici della modernità, dopo) bisogna ammetterlo, offre un netto vantaggio alla civiltà che l'adotta. Questo vantaggio, sostiene Luca, consiste nel fatto che, trattandosi di una metafisica che crea una sovrastruttura di componenti non deperibili (o comunque di elevata resistenza materiale), impone, a tutti coloro che, per qualsiasi motivo, non ne vogliono entrare a far parte, di trovarsi in una condizione di fragilità. In altre parole, mentre chi adotta la macchina occidentale entra a far parte di una maglia socio-tecnica *metallica*, chi non ne fa parte, facendo invece parte di un tessuto di relazioni fatto di *fibre vegetali*, può essere schiacciato in qualsiasi momento. Come disse Don Abbondio di fronte ai bravi – ma adesso possiamo attribuirgli un senso ancora più letterale – chi resta fuori da tale maglia è “un vaso di terracotta che viaggia in mezzo a vasi di ferro”. Di fronte all'angustia causata da questa immagine e alla conseguente paura di esserne schiacciati, alcuni di noi si pongono la questione di sapere se è possibile uscire dalla modernità tutti insieme, o quanto meno in gran numero, tutelati da leggi e da diritti che impediscano di restare schiacciati dal sistema stesso.

Insomma, questa consapevolezza apre un dibattito sulle modalità di come potremmo, noi occidentali, studiare un sistema alternativo alla pesante macchina civilizzatrice sopracitata. A tal proposito, come nota Luca, non ci possiamo concedere il lusso di stare ad aspettare l'arrivo di un movimento (sia esso sociale o politico) *dall'alto verso il basso*. Anche perché i movimenti di resistenza nascono da pratiche insorgenti locali, e mai il contrario. È per questo motivo che è necessaria una rivoluzione interiore, una nuova filosofia di vita. Solo a partire dall'esempio di qualche coraggioso vaso di terracotta, sarà possibile costruire dinamiche ripetibili a più ampia scala e, chissà che la politica si accorga di questo *leggero movimento*, dalle note mai sentite prima.

Lo stagno di Munnu, con le sue libellule e i suoi fossati in un continuo processo di litificazione, non deve essere considerato un modello universale da replicare. Qui ritorna con forza la lezione di Ingold (2000; 2011): abitare

non significa imporre strutture precostituite sull'ambiente, ma corrispondere con esso. In questo senso, il modello proposto da Munnu rappresenta la dimostrazione concreta che l'alternativa alla pesantezza della modernità non sta in grandi progetti di ingegneria sociale o in soluzioni tecnologiche su scala planetaria, ma nella moltiplicazione di diverse pratiche leggere, situate, attente alle relazioni specifiche tra organismi e materiali in luoghi particolari.

Queste pratiche lavorano per sottrazione più che per addizione, attraverso processi di corrispondenza e non di controllo. Liberano il terreno dai tubi di plastica invece di costruire nuove infrastrutture. Lasciano che l'acqua circoli e si infiltri invece di estrarla, catturarla, e stoccarla. Permettono alle libellule di ritornare invece di progettare interventi di ripopolamento. Queste pratiche rappresentano una forma di innovazione basata su una logica della cura alternativa a quella dell'accumulazione e del controllo. In questo senso, la piccola zona umida non va letta come un "ritorno" a un passato più naturale, ma come un esperimento innovativo e creativo di resistenza alle pratiche estrattive "tradizionali".

La fragilità di cui abbiamo parlato – quella del "vaso di terracotta tra vasi di ferro" – non rappresenta un problema, ma una risorsa. La porosità dello stagno, la permeabilità dei fossati, la biodegradabilità delle strutture leggere sono espressioni materiali di una postura che non cerca l'invulnerabilità e la durezza, ma che accoglie piuttosto la dipendenza reciproca, la mortalità, il ciclo continuo di dissoluzione e rigenerazione della vita. È così che leggiamo il senso della *sostenibilità*, come insieme di pratiche e *modi di fare* che distinguono la continuità della vita nel tempo dalla imperitura durezza dei materiali usati per costruire il mondo. È da questa inversione di senso, che confonde la continuità della vita con l'immortalità dei materiali, che si genera la crisi socioecologica che caratterizza l'antropocene.

Ritorniamo, per concludere, al pranzo da cui siamo partiti, a quella conversazione nella primavera del 2024 sull'invisibilità del fiume e sulla diga brasiliana crollata. Jennifer diceva: "È strano vivere vicino a un grande fiume come se non esistesse". In quella frase si cela la questione: come abitare un mondo in cui le relazioni ecologiche sono state rese invisibili e depersonalizzate?

La risposta che emerge dalle pratiche di Munnu non è una risposta definitiva, non cerca la replicabilità. Rappresenta piuttosto il potenziale del margine nell'offrire "spazi di apertura radicale" nel quale immaginare e praticare modalità altre di costruire il mondo. Queste pratiche leggere – queste "note leggere per una nuova danza" – non sostituiranno dall'oggi al domani la pesante macchina della modernità. Tracciano piuttosto una nuova coreografia che "procede a passo leggero, molto leggero", sulla Terra.



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L'assistenza alla nascita come pratica relazionale

Un dialogo con Ivana Arena e Luisa Selva

Birth Care as a Relational Practice

A Dialogue with Ivana Arena and Luisa Selva

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Tra il 2023 e il 2025, nell'ambito della mia tesi di specializzazione in Beni demoetnoantropologici dell'Università degli Studi di Perugia, ho avuto l'opportunità di conoscere e affiancare l'ostetrica domiciliare Luisa Selva, conducendo un'etnografia di profondità sulle pratiche della sua professione. Osservarla nel quotidiano del suo lavoro è stato come riaprire le pagine di un libro rimasto sospeso nella mia traiettoria biografica e professionale, un frammento della mia esperienza che attendeva di essere esplorato.

Ivana Arena, l'altra ostetrica con cui dialogo in questo articolo insieme a Luisa, l'avevo incontrata molti anni fa, credo che fosse il 2011, durante uno spettacolo di teatro forum sul tema della violenza ostetrica. Fu allora che, per la prima volta, assistetti a una contronarrazione della scena del parto, un'esperienza che mi colpì profondamente. Le sue parole mi riportarono immediatamente ai racconti di mia madre sul proprio parto: ricordo vividamente come, parlando di me e dei miei fratelli, mimasse il movimento della mano del ginecologo mentre, con le forbici, le praticava l'episiotomia – quel gesto rapidissimo per fare il “taglietto”. Spiegava che, con il dolore già diffuso per la dilatazione, lei non se ne era quasi accorta. Quella sera, Ivana mi offrì un'altra prospettiva: non tanto la negazione dell'episiotomia in sé, quanto la messa in discussione della sua applicazione routinaria e poco interrogata. In quel contesto, quel gesto poteva non essere stato indispensabile e rientrare, insieme ad altre pratiche oggi vietate, in ciò che lei definiva “violenza ostetrica”. Già da bambina, ascoltando mia madre raccontare le esperienze dei suoi tre parti, avevo provato sgomento: la sua voce pacata restituiva gesti quasi salvifici, rapidi e precisi, percepiti da lei come del tutto naturali. Ascoltare Ivana fu come ricevere una chiave per comprendere e legittimare l'inquietudine che quei racconti avevano suscitato in me. Così, quando rimasi incinta di mio figlio, decisi che in ospedale non avrei partorito.

Reincontrai Ivana alcuni anni più tardi, quando decisi di farmi accompagnare da lei durante la mia gravidanza. È in occasione di questa intervista che ho deciso oggi di far incontrare (seppur virtualmente) Ivana e Luisa e farle dialogare insieme attraverso di me.¹

Luisa e Ivana sono entrambe ostetriche con una lunga esperienza professionale. Prima di orientarsi verso l'assistenza extraospedaliera, hanno lavorato a lungo in ambito ospedaliero e condividono una riflessione critica sui limiti dell'assistenza medica alla nascita, in particolare sul mancato riconoscimento degli aspetti emotivi, mentali e sociali che attraversano la gravidanza e il parto. Sebbene spesso invisibili, questi fattori influenzano in modo significativo l'esperienza e gli esiti del percorso nascita. Entrambe hanno affiancato alla formazione universitaria altri percorsi a partire dalla Scuola Elementale di Arte Ostetrica di Firenze, fondata da Verena Schmid, che è ancora il riferimento principale per le ostetriche domiciliari in Italia.²

Attraverso le voci di Ivana e Luisa il contributo intende interrogare una possibilità di nascita ancora poco conosciuta e spesso oggetto di resistenze istituzionali e culturali: quella che si realizza in ambito domiciliare.

Cecilia: Partiamo da Ivana. Ci racconti quando e perché hai deciso di diventare ostetrica e in che modo, appunto, la tua esperienza personale ti ha influenzato?

Ivana: Nel '95 mi stavo laureando in lettere, storia e critica del cinema perché volevo fare la regista. Poi ho avuto mia figlia e l'esperienza del parto mi ha cambiata. [...] Avevo programmato un parto a casa, che poi si è concluso in ospedale con un cesareo. Non è stato tanto l'intervento il problema, quanto il modo in cui sono stata trattata, che è poi quello che le donne riportano quando

¹ L'intervista si è svolta il 22 gennaio. Io e Luisa ci siamo collegate dalla mia abitazione ad Alghero (SS), mentre Ivana ha partecipato da remoto. In quell'occasione si sono confrontate per la prima volta e, nonostante la distanza biografica e di contesto lavorativo – Ivana ha lavorato come ostetrica ospedaliera e domiciliare prevalentemente a Roma, mentre Luisa opera nel nord della Sardegna – ho riscontrato una forte convergenza su molti aspetti del loro lavoro, sebbene declinati, come emerge dal dialogo, a partire da prospettive differenti. L'incontro è durato un'ora e quaranta minuti; per rispettare i criteri editoriali ho dovuto ridurre il materiale di circa la metà. Alcuni passaggi sono stati quindi sintetizzati per ragioni di spazio. Mi scuso con le due interlocutrici se il flusso spontaneo del loro parlato ha subito lievi rielaborazioni.

² Verena Schmid ha 40 anni di esperienza come ostetrica indipendente, negli ambiti dell'assistenza alle nascite a domicilio, dell'insegnamento e della scrittura. Nel 1985 ha fondato l'associazione per il parto naturale e il parto a domicilio *Il Marsupio* e nel 1996 ha fondato la *Scuola Elementale di Arte Ostetrica srl – SEAO* che ha diretto fino al 2016. Da oltre 30 anni insegna alle ostetriche di tutto il mondo l'approccio salutogenico applicato alla "Midwifery Care", che ha sviluppato nel modello della *Salutofisiologia* (cfr. nota 4).

parlano di violenza ostetrica: nella maggior parte dei casi non è l'intervento in sé il problema, ma come ci arrivi a quell'intervento. Mi hanno portata in sala operatoria dicendo "adesso lo tiriamo fuori" senza spiegarmi che stavano per farmi un cesareo. [...] Mi hanno fatto un'anestesia generale senza darmi spiegazioni del perché non potessero farmi un'epidurale. Ho visto mia figlia il giorno dopo in incubatrice: è stato pesante. Successivamente ho letto molto, ho scritto il libro *Dopo un cesareo* (2007), perché in italiano non c'era niente e ho deciso di fare l'ostetrica: volevo "salvare le donne", un po' un delirio di onnipotenza, ma anche una forte spinta a iscrivermi di nuovo all'università per laurearmi in ostetricia e così ho fatto. [...]

Cecilia: Luisa, tu invece, al contrario, avevi 16 anni quando hai iniziato a studiare. È quindi una decisione nata da subito. Ci racconti che cosa ti ha portato a scegliere?

Luisa: Sì, avevo 16 anni, era il '73. Durante la scuola agraria, ho visto nascere cavalli e mucche e mi sono appassionata al parto. Poi un'ostetrica amica di mia madre mi ha spronato e mi sono iscritta alla scuola. Cinque anni intensi: tre da infermiera, due da ostetrica, ventiquattro ore in ospedale... pazzesco! [...]

Cecilia: Ivana, guardando oggi la tua esperienza professionale, ritieni che il percorso universitario in ostetricia sia sufficiente per lavorare come ostetrica domiciliare?

Ivana: No, assolutamente no. L'università ci prepara più a essere "piccoli medici": una visione molto biotecnologica della nascita, ma con pochissima autonomia rispetto ai medici. L'assistenza extraospedaliera non viene quasi mai considerata come possibile o sicura. Certo, qualcosa sta cambiando: la Federazione³ e una parte della cultura ostetrica stanno iniziando a valorizzare la fisiologia, e anche alcuni ginecologi se ne stanno accorgendo. [...] Il termine "salutogenico"⁴ è entrato nelle ultime linee guida dell'ISS,⁵

³ La "federazione" citata è la Federazione Nazionale degli Ordini delle Ostetriche.

⁴ Il termine "salutogenico" rimanda a una prospettiva che, anziché concentrarsi sulla prevenzione del rischio e della patologia, pone al centro le condizioni che generano e sostengono la salute. In ambito ostetrico, e in particolare nella tradizione elaborata all'interno della SEAO – Scuola Elementale di Arte Ostetrica fondata da Verena Schmid e oggi diretta da Barbara Rossetti – questo approccio considera gravidanza e parto come processi fisiologici complessi, nei quali dimensioni corporee, emotive, relazionali e ambientali concorrono in modo determinante agli esiti del percorso nascita, proponendo un'alternativa al modello puramente patogenico e medicalizzante.

⁵ Istituto Superiore di Sanità, 2025, linee guida sulla gravidanza fisiologica.

quindi c'è qualche apertura. Ma io, sul campo, ho imparato soprattutto buttandomi... letture, osservazioni, percorsi pratici come quelli della Scuola di Firenze con Verena Schmid. Ho imparato dalle donne, ma anche dalla mia gatta, che ha partorito quattro volte... probabilmente più da lei che dai tre anni di università! Guardando, osservando, percependo. Questo lavoro pratico è fondamentale, anche per cogliere cose che oggi la PNEI⁶ e le neuroscienze confermano, come l'incontro madre-bambino o la trasfusione placentare. Chi osserva, vede: penso che Luisa sappia bene di cosa parlo. [...] Il fatto che oggi faccio formazione dovrebbe servire anche a questo: offrire strumenti a chi esce dall'università e non ha le competenze per assistere a domicilio.

Cecilia: E il lavoro in ospedale ti ha dato strumenti utili?

Ivana: Sì, ma è stato duro. I primi sei anni ho visto situazioni complicatissime, con operatori indietro: ginecologi che fumavano e bestemmiavano, donne isolate, padri esclusi. Però ho imparato tanto, soprattutto a riconoscere situazioni critiche. [...] Anche l'aver fatto pronto soccorso in qualche modo ti sveltisce, ti fa vedere, ti fa riconoscere di più alcune situazioni. Quindi, se questo viene a mancare, sicuramente una buona formazione con i simulatori, per esempio, è molto importante.

Cecilia: Ok, Luisa, ti faccio una domanda simile. Pensando oggi alla tua formazione, quanto ritieni che il percorso universitario ti abbia preparato al lavoro che svolgi ora, soprattutto nell'accompagnamento alla gravidanza e al parto in contesti extraospedalieri e quali conoscenze o pratiche hai dovuto integrare o trasformare con l'esperienza?

Luisa: Negli anni di studio in ospedale ho visto solo patologie. Episiotomie, ossitocina, cesarei a nastro... tutto standardizzato, quando ero studentessa si usava ancora il forcipe! [...] Negli anni '80, lavorando in una clinica privata, ho visto un approccio più rispettoso: i papà in sala parto, parto spontaneo dopo cesarei precedenti, minori induzioni automatiche. Poi ho conosciuto Verena Schmid: lì mi si è aperto il mondo ed è cambiato il mio modo di essere. Ho imparato a osservare, a rispettare i tempi, a integrare massaggi, shiatsu, medicina tradizionale cinese, uso di rimedi fitoterapici.

⁶ La PNEI è la Psico-Neuro-Endocrino-Immunologia. È un approccio interdisciplinare che studia le interazioni reciproche tra psiche, sistema nervoso, sistema endocrino e sistema immunitario, mostrando come emozioni, stress, relazioni e contesto influenzino i processi fisiologici e di salute.

Cecilia: Allora, Ivana, Barbara Duden, una studiosa del corpo femminile, sostiene che gli strumenti diagnostici contribuiscono a oggettivare il corpo della donna: l'ecografo, per esempio, porta la donna a leggere il suo corpo tramite i referti, più che attraverso le proprie sensazioni. Tu come ti rapporti con la tecnologia in gravidanza e durante il parto? La vedi come alleata o come limite?

Ivana: Entrambe le cose. Quando serve, ben venga un cesareo sicuro, un'epidurale, un'ecografia... sono strumenti preziosi. Il problema è che oggi li usiamo di routine, per tutte le donne, senza distinguere quando sono davvero necessari. [...] Concordo con Duden: molte donne non ascoltano più il loro corpo. Inoltre, i falsi positivi dell'ecografia, per esempio, generano ansia inutile che può influire sul parto. [...] La tecnologia non è giusta o sbagliata di per sé: dipende da come la usiamo. Oggi penso che sia meglio, a volte, un bel cesareo fatto bene, con cordone intatto e mamma consapevole, piuttosto che un parto traumatico con spinte, episiotomia o ventosa, un "partaccio". Dobbiamo capire cosa vogliamo, soprattutto per la diade mamma-bambino. [...]

Cecilia: Luisa, nella tua esperienza il contatto diretto con le donne che segui sembra centrale, a differenza della pratica ginecologica e ostetrica tradizionale, in cui spesso il contatto fisico è mediato dagli strumenti. Mi vengono in mente, per esempio, due donne che hai seguito. A., con la cicatrice dovuta alla sutura della lacerazione del primo parto in ospedale: le doleva, e toccarla era per lei un tabù; tu l'hai guidata a riprendere confidenza con il proprio corpo, a curare quella cicatrice. E poi E. e quell'abbraccio che vi siete date appena conosciute.⁷ Come osservi e interpreti le reazioni corporee delle donne, per esempio la disponibilità o la resistenza all'abbraccio, e come le guidi a superare eventuali tabù verso il proprio corpo?

Luisa: Allora, per me il contatto fisico è molto importante. Ho studiato medicina tradizionale cinese, fatto shiatsu e tanti altri corsi di massaggi proprio per questo. Oltre alla comunicazione visiva e verbale, quando tocchi il corpo di una persona sai se è disponibile o scettica: il tatto è importantissimo. Regalo sempre massaggi, perché mi piace. Fra poco compirò 70 anni e nella mia vita ho fatto tante cose, ma oggi l'approccio con una donna è veramente... lo sguardo va bene, ci parli, fai la cartella, fai quello che devi fare, ma poi, sul lettino, senti

⁷ Faccio qui riferimento a due sue assistite che sono state mie interlocutrici nel corso della ricerca per la mia tesi di specializzazione. La tesi e il materiale etnografico raccolto durante l'indagine sono depositati e consultabili presso gli archivi della Scuola di Specializzazione in Beni Demoetnoantropologici dell'Università di Perugia e dell'Istituto Centrale per il Patrimonio Immateriale.

tutto: senti com'è la persona, la sua energia, qualcosa che non puoi descrivere. L'abbraccio è tutto. Anche rispetto alla gravidanza e al parto comprendi molte cose. Sono sensazioni che mi arrivano: emozioni, traumi pregressi, cose che le donne si portano dietro. Con il tocco, e anche da piccoli commenti che ti fanno, lo percepisci.

Ivana: È verissimo quello che dice Luisa. Questo è, per esempio, qualcosa che nella formazione manca completamente. È una cosa che in parte sono riuscita a costruire negli anni, non tanto quanto Luisa, ma che mi permette di percepire l'energia della persona, intuire come sta e adattarmi ai suoi bisogni. Sebbene la formazione teorica e le linee guida siano importanti, ciò che manca spesso è il contatto fisico diretto, sia tra l'ostetrica e la donna che tra la donna e il suo corpo.

Cecilia: Oltre al contatto fisico, e ai dati clinici, mi rivolgo ancora a Luisa, investo molto anche nella relazione. Spesso si crea una vera rete di scambi: non si tratta solo di conoscersi, ma di costruire fiducia reciproca attraverso piccoli doni, scambi di libri, oli e altri oggetti. Questi gesti rafforzano un rapporto, che va oltre l'assistenza professionale. Sei guida durante la gravidanza, ma al tempo stesso diventi una figura quasi familiare, con cui la coppia, la famiglia e talvolta gli amici instaurano un'intimità particolare. Puoi raccontarci un esempio concreto?

Luisa: Sì, penso a M., che doveva partorire in casa e la madre, che viveva sopra, era completamente contraria. Ci siamo conosciute nei primi mesi di gravidanza e così ho chiesto di incontrarla. L'ho semplicemente accolta, mettendole le mani sulla schiena, e piano piano si è sciolta: ha pianto e condiviso le sue paure e i traumi passati. Poi si è fidata quando le ho detto chi sarebbe stato il pediatra, una figura che già conosceva e di cui si fidava. [...] Abbiamo coinvolto anche il padre, le sorelle e gli amici: si è creata una vera rete di supporto attorno a lei. Oltre a questo, il mio tempo a disposizione mi permette di curare altri dettagli: preparo erbe, oleoliti e piccoli doni che offro alle famiglie. Sono gesti semplici, ma aiutano a rafforzare il legame. Ad esempio, L., una mamma che ho seguito, un giorno è venuta a sentire il battito del bambino e abbiamo finito per fare una lettura delle carte insieme, ma era lei che le leggeva a me. Alla fine, l'ho invitata a restare a cena: così nascono questi rapporti belli e profondi, che vanno oltre la semplice assistenza ostetrica.⁸ [...]

⁸ Anche M. e L. hanno collaborato alla mia ricerca, ho infatti conosciuto e intervistato molte donne che hanno partorito con Luisa. Alcune interviste integrali sono presenti nella tesi di specializzazione, consultabile come riferito nella nota precedente.

Cecilia: Questo influenza l'andamento del travaglio e gli esiti del parto?

Luisa: Sì assolutamente. Non puoi fare un parto in casa se non c'è armonia totale.

Cecilia: L'antropologia della nascita ha mostrato come non esistano sistemi del parto privi di ritualità, ma solo differenti modi in cui questa legittima specifici regimi di sapere e di autorità. Come osserva Brigitte Jordan (1984), nel parto ospedaliero molte pratiche mediche non hanno solo una funzione clinica, ma operano come rituali che rafforzano il primato del sapere biomedico. Anche il parto domiciliare, però, si fonda su un sistema di valori forte. In particolare, l'idea di fisiologia, di natura affidabile e di intervento come eccezione orienta le pratiche e rende certe scelte più legittime di altre. Le forme di ritualità che accompagnano questo tipo di nascita possono però essere molteplici. Luisa, dai tuoi racconti emergono situazioni differenti, pur mantenendo intatti i valori di fondo ai quali ancori il tuo modo di essere ostetrica. Hai aiutato M. a ri-appropriarsi di pratiche che la nonna conosceva bene, ma che erano andate perdute con la sua morte, come la fabbricazione delle "punghie" e la "medicina dell'occhio".⁹ Nella lunga intervista che ho fatto a M., è lei stessa a sottolineare quanto tu sia stata preziosa nel recuperare un sapere che pensava perso. Con altre donne, invece, hai accolto modalità differenti, a volte inventate o reinventate a partire da tradizioni lontane. È come se tu riuscissi a plasmarti di volta in volta, accogliendo ciò che ti arriva senza imporre una tua ritualità. Cosa ti viene in mente in proposito?

Luisa: Mi viene in mente un'altra ragazza che ha fatto il parto in casa, che voleva assolutamente la madre, e la sua amica brasiliana e *parteira*.¹⁰ Ha partorito nella vasca il suo terzo bimbo. Lei ha fatto un percorso con me perché i due parti precedenti fatti in ospedale erano stati terribili, ma proprio terribili e quindi non voleva la stessa esperienza. Abbiamo lavorato molto con trattamenti, massaggi, abbiamo lavorato sul perineo che, Ivana, tu la dovevi vedere com'era, l'avevano cucita talmente stretta che era una cosa... cioè infatti ho detto "cavoli di violenza ostetrica!". Abbiamo lavorato per ammorbidire, in

⁹ La *punga* è un amuleto protettivo, utilizzato come scudo contro il malocchio. Viene realizzata cucendo un pezzetto di stoffa contenente un frammento di cordone ombelicale, nel caso si tratti di un amuleto per il neonato, insieme a preghiere o altri piccoli oggetti simbolici. La medicina dell'occhio è una pratica tradizionale sarda che si occupa della cura e protezione contro il malocchio e altre influenze dannose, spesso percepite come causate da sguardi invidiosi o malefici (Gallini 1973).

¹⁰ La *parteira* nel contesto brasiliano è ostetrica tradizionale, legata al parto domiciliare e a saperi comunitari non biomedici. È una figura riconosciuta ma non pienamente istituzionalizzata.

diversi modi, anche con le visualizzazioni. Il parto è stato molto bello perché la mamma ha acceso delle candele, a un certo punto la sua amica ha preso il tamburo e ha iniziato a intonare un canto per accompagnare la nascita della sua creatura. Si è creata una magia. È stato bellissimo perché la madre, buddista, recitava le sue preghiere, l'amica suonava il tamburo sciamanico e io le facevo i massaggi. Perfetto. Lei al centro, il marito è entrato in acqua insieme con lei nella piscina, si sono rotte le membrane ed è affiorata la testina che lui ha accolto. Se la sono messa al collo ed è stato magnifico. Si creano questi momenti. Lei mi ha detto: "grazie perché io mi son sentita una grande dea madre". Lei che partoriva. È stato bellissimo. Come fai a fare tutto questo in una sala parto? Non si può. Forse nelle case maternità. Io assisto pochi parti e – ringrazio l'universo – capitano molte di queste cose così. Sì, sì, veramente. Mi viene in mente anche un altro parto in cui lei ha passato il suo travaglio suonando la chitarra e cantando. [...]

Ivana: Io ho sempre pensato di voler essere un'ostetrica camaleonte. Sono io che mi devo adattare a chi ho di fronte, del resto, questo è anche scritto dall'OMS già da tantissimi anni. L'unico motivo per intervenire è quando ci sono dei rituali che sono dannosi, francamente dannosi, come quello di non far prendere il colostro al bambino, di separarlo troppo presto dal cordone. Questi del resto sono interventi, ma sul non intervento e sul voler accogliere pratiche differenti bisogna assolutamente accompagnare le persone, e questo dovrebbe far parte della formazione.

Cecilia: Luisa, tu mi hai detto diverse volte che mentre durante la gravidanza fai massaggi, tocchi e intervieni; durante il parto invece sei la "guardiana", colei che vigila affinché tutto vada bene, ma con le mani a posto. Raccontaci come.

Luisa: Intanto c'è da dire che durante la gravidanza tratto anche tutti quanti i padri, nel senso che anche con i padri faccio un lavoro, usando diverse tecniche, per buttare fuori tutte le paure. Mi è capitato di vedere papà diventare più amorevoli, più partecipanti. Quando si respira amore in casa è molto bello. [...] Durante il parto io non faccio più niente, è il padre che assiste. Non visito quasi mai, aspetto, perché ormai mi accorgo dalla postura, dall'uso della voce che cambia [come procede il travaglio] ed è il padre che assiste. E questo secondo me è molto importante perché si crea un legame più forte. Ho notato in ospedale, vedevo che in terza giornata c'era proprio una brusca caduta di ormoni, le donne piangevano. Quando lavori anche con il padre, si crea proprio la triade, è tutto molto più semplice perché forse la donna si sente più accolta, più centrale. È diverso. [...]

Ivana: Anch'io, soprattutto negli ultimi anni, se vedo che c'è anche solo una piccola discrepanza nel come stanno insieme, lavoro col padre, me lo prendo da parte e gli spiego perché serve lui e come serve, quanto è importante il suo ruolo. Quindi assolutamente bello questo.

Cecilia: Eh sì, infatti volevo chiedere qualcosa anche a te, Ivana, perché ricordo che durante il mio travaglio ti sei spesa tantissimo perché avevo queste contrazioni tremende dietro la schiena che mi mettevano ko e non si infittivano mai; quindi, è stato un travaglio molto lungo, molto doloroso. Io mi ricordo che mi sentivo proprio coccolata, tu c'eri, sentivi il mio dolore e cercavi di far di tutto per alleviarlo. Poi mi ricordo che a un certo punto ho fatto un suono "strozzato", come se stessi compiendo uno sforzo, e tu hai detto: "ah, bello questo suono, mi piace, sta andando molto bene!" e poi i dolori sono cambiati. Raccontaci qualcosa anche tu di questo. Qual è la tua postura durante il travaglio e il parto?

Ivana: Ah, guarda, io cerco di pormi un po' a seconda di quello che sento essere il bisogno della donna, quindi sono d'accordo con Luisa, meno si fa, meglio è. A volte scherzo in gravidanza, dico, "Guarda, io non c'ho voglia di lavorare, eh, quindi meno faccio e meglio è". Quindi nel tuo caso, probabilmente ho cercato di mettere in campo un po' di analgesia fisiologica, le digitopressioni che quando c'è un bisogno utilizzo. C'è una scuola di pensiero che sostiene che la donna deve essere lasciata da sola nel suo dolore perché così "sbrocca" e partorisce. Ecco, io su questo non sono d'accordo perché poi si creano dei traumi se la donna si sente abbandonata; quindi, mi fa piacere che tu mi dica che ti sei sentita coccolata. Quindi se la donna riesce, e questo sarebbe l'ideale, ad attivare la sua endoanalgesia, le sue risorse, io sto in un cantuccio, come fa Luisa, assolutamente, cioè sto proprio da una parte tranquilla, mi assicuro che l'ambiente vada bene, che la temperatura dell'acqua sia adeguata. Se la donna ha bisogno cerco di starci. Se ovviamente è molto lungo, magari intercambiandomi con la collega. Fare l'ostetrica è questo, cioè cerchiamo sia in gravidanza che nel travaglio di attivare la donna, affinché riesca con le sue forze, laddove questo non è possibile per qualsiasi motivo, io ci devo stare e le devo stare vicina, devo accogliere il suo dolore, devo cercare di sostenerlo. In alcuni casi qualche visita in più serve per capire cosa sta succedendo, però di solito passo tanti parti anche senza fare neanche una visita. Quindi, voglio dire, questa per me è l'essenza dell'assistenza ostetrica: essere presenti, offrire le nostre competenze quando c'è bisogno e intervenire in caso di emergenza.

Cecilia: C'è qualcos'altro che vuoi aggiungere rispetto al tuo ruolo di formatrice oltre che di ostetrica domiciliare?

Ivana: Sì, ho creato questa formula che a me piace e che in questo periodo della mia vita posso praticare, quella della formazione a domicilio. Sto portando in giro per l'Italia la formazione alle colleghe dove e come me la chiedono, agli ordini professionali, alle ASL o privatamente. E questo mi piace molto perché in qualche modo c'è un parallelo tra la mia attività di ostetrica domiciliare e l'andare in giro per l'Italia col mio manichino (per le simulazioni). [...] Ieri sono stata in Toscana a fare il laboratorio sulle suture. L'altra settimana, ho fatto lezione alle colleghe dell'ordine, abbiamo concordato un programma, erano contentissimi e questo è molto bello e quindi ecco, questo mio modo di fare formazione è proprio lo stesso modo in cui faccio l'ostetrica, senza dogmi e cercando di andare incontro ai bisogni delle colleghe in questo caso. Nella formazione anche io imparo sempre qualche cosa, quindi cerco di farlo con umiltà, no? Nel senso che, sicuramente ho venticinque anni di esperienza, qualcosa, cioè devo comunque essere assertiva nel fatto che alcune cose le so, tra virgolette, però so anche di non saperne tante altre e quindi c'è sempre qualcosa che io imparo anche dalle colleghe e credo che questo lo sentano. [...]

Cecilia: Ora cambiamo argomento e affrontiamo una questione scottante: quella economica. Un aspetto problematico dell'ostetrica domiciliare come professionista indipendente è proprio la questione finanziaria, una difficoltà che sembra accomunare tutte le ostetriche indipendenti. Il parto a domicilio ha un costo, ed è quindi una scelta accessibile solo a chi può permetterselo. D'altra parte, però, c'è anche l'incertezza per l'ostetrica di ricevere il pagamento, perché non è mai garantito. Ivana, la mia domanda, che potrebbe sembrare un'ipotesi irrealizzabile, è questa: cosa accadrebbe se l'ostetrica domiciliare ricevesse uno stipendio dal Comune o dal Ministero della Salute? È una proposta concretizzabile?

Ivana: Allora, ti direi che sarebbe come ritornare alla condotta ostetrica, che da un lato sarebbe bellissimo. [...] Il problema della condotta è che, nel momento in cui lo Stato ti paga per fare questo lavoro, ti istituzionalizza; quindi, pretende da te che lavori in un certo modo, che è nel modello biomedico. Se tu porti l'ospedale a casa fai danni irreversibili, mentre in ospedale c'è la sala operatoria al di là del corridoio, al limite corri in sala operatoria. Se tu certe cose le fai a casa, hai dei danni, quindi dovrebbe essere comunque supportato da una formazione universitaria adeguata. Noi nel Lazio abbiamo il rimborso regionale, ma è solo parziale, però è già qualcosa. È possibile, non c'è la volontà di farlo, non si è capito l'importanza.

Cecilia: Negli ultimi anni la cultura del rischio legata al parto, che cresce sempre di più, non solo ha alimentato la diffidenza verso il parto extraospedaliero

programmato, ma ha anche contribuito alla chiusura di molti punti nascita, com'è successo ad Alghero. La scelta per le donne sul luogo e la modalità di parto invece di ampliarsi si restringe. Ivana, qual è il tuo punto di vista su questo fenomeno e quali conseguenze ha, secondo te, sull'assistenza alle donne?

Ivana: Allora, questo è stato fatto in modo miope, perché invece di considerare il numero dei parti, quello che era importante considerare erano gli esiti. [...] Il ragionamento è stato: se tu hai meno di 300-500 parti, quella volta che ti arriva un caso particolare non lo sai gestire e fai danni. Ma lì non nasce dall'esperienza dell'operatore, nasce da come lavori. Perché come ti dicevo, se tu porti la modalità ospedaliera in casa fai danno. La stessa cosa avviene se porti una modalità biomeccanica di gestire il parto, come in un ospedale universitario di terzo livello, in un centro nascita da 500 parti, e in più ti sobbarchi comunque le spese del medico reperibile per un eventuale cesareo, l'anestesista ecc. Non è sostenibile economicamente, ma a volte si fanno le cose veramente male. Inoltre, laddove decidi di chiudere un punto nascita, non è che lo chiudi e sul territorio non c'è più niente, perché trasportare una donna in macchina o in elicottero durante un travaglio è già di per sé un rischio. [...] C'è miopia politica, non ti so dire se ci sono lobby di potere, sicuramente c'è tanta ignoranza: la popolazione non sa, figurati i politici, ma spesso non lo sanno neanche gli operatori sanitari che cos'è un parto. Non sanno che cos'è un parto. Per loro il parto è quello che si vede in TV e vedono in sala parto, quando imparano a fare gli ostetrici. Quello non è un parto. Non è un parto. Il parto con stimolazione, epidurale, ventosa, posizioni forzate, non è la fisiologia, non ha niente a che vedere col parto umano, che invece ha molto più a che fare con, a parte la fisiologia, anche con questi elementi sottili che ancora non vengono riconosciuti, di relazione. L'utero è un sensore ambientale, se la donna non si sente completamente al sicuro nella parte subconscia, che è quella più profonda, non si va da nessuna parte.

Cecilia: Allora mi riallaccio a questo per la prossima domanda. Mi ricordo che quando venivo da te durante la mia gravidanza, mi dicevi: "Io devo trovare il modo di farti staccare la mente durante il travaglio, non so se ci riuscirò". Ti ricordi? Pensi che una mente troppo vigile possa costituire un rischio in un parto programmato extraospedaliero?

Ivana: Non è un rischio nel senso di mettere in pericolo di solito la vita della mamma o del bambino, ma è una possibilità che capita spesso nelle donne del 2000-2026. Siamo esseri umani con neocorteccia molto sviluppata, imbibita di narrazioni tossiche, paure, traumi precedenti, programmazioni. Sicuramente questa attivazione neocorticale inibisce i processi fisiologici, ma come nella ses-

sualità: se c'è una attivazione neocorticale che dice "ah devo fare la spesa, potrebbe entrare qualcuno, non mi sento al sicuro", l'orgasmo non lo raggiungo. È la stessa cosa nel parto, gli ormoni sono identici. Questo può portare a travagli più lunghi, più dolorosi, non so Luisa, nella tua esperienza. Come ruolo dell'ostetrica io vedo quello di protezione dell'ambiente, soprattutto nel momento del travaglio.

Luisa: Sono anche le nostre memorie uterine che ci portiamo dietro, quelle di nostra madre, nonna, bisnonna, e così via.

Cecilia: Mentre Ivana ci dice che è la parte razionale che blocca, Luisa, tu sostieni che anche le emozioni possono bloccare. Vuoi aggiungere qualcosa in proposito rispetto alle emozioni? Per esempio, un grosso lavoro che fai spesso è sulla rabbia, no?

Luisa: Eh, perché la rabbia è proprio il primo trauma che noi ci portiamo dietro. Cosa trasmettiamo noi a questi bambini in utero? Lavorare ancora prima sulla comunicazione madre bambino è importante. Di questi traumi non si parla quasi mai: sono piccoli, ma ce li portiamo dietro. Non vengono riconosciuti. Forse oggi se ne parla un pochino di più, ma neppure uno psicologo ti parla dei traumi della nascita, dei traumi del parto. Bisogna far emergere le emozioni e tirare fuori la rabbia. Come respiriamo? Ce lo chiediamo? Anche piangere fa bene alle volte.

Ivana: Quando io dico neocorteccia dico che c'è quell'aspetto lì, però mi sto rendendo conto sempre di più invece di quanto il subconscio è ancora più potente, quindi il lavoro sulle emozioni che dice Luisa, assolutamente sì. Cioè, sono due fattori. E in questo momento la donna del 2000 è proprio scissa in modo terribile tra questa neocorteccia, i pensieri, le narrazioni tossiche e tutti i traumi, tutte le programmazioni: "non sei capace, il parto a casa è pericoloso", capito? Quindi è proprio un mix letale.

Cecilia: Come sapete, l'ostetricia è stata recentemente riconosciuta dall'UNESCO come patrimonio culturale immateriale dell'umanità. L'assistenza alla nascita è presentata come una pratica socioculturale, non solo tecnica e non necessariamente riconducibile alla sfera medica, ma iscrivibile anche all'interno di pratiche tradizionali e comunitarie, i cui effetti immediati sulla donna si riflettono sull'intera comunità. Nel testo, il parto è descritto come un processo di transizione e un'esperienza trasformativa della donna, e viene sottolineata la capacità della donna di sostenerlo con le proprie risorse. In questo senso, il riconoscimento UNESCO sembra confermare molte delle istanze che voi ostetriche domiciliari sostenete da anni. Ivana, vuoi commentare?

Ivana: Non ho potuto leggere il testo integrale, ma è importante riconoscere il ruolo dell'ostetrica e della donna nel sapere partorire. Direi di non usare il termine "ostetricia", proprio perché include anche la pratica medica. Il mio sogno è che le ostetriche diventino inutili in futuro: le donne riacquisiscano la competenza che abbiamo avuto per millenni, e il parto torni a essere un atto fisiologico, come mangiare o respirare. Oggi invece la medicalizzazione ha creato un bias culturale enorme. Molte donne percepiscono il parto a casa come più pericoloso di quanto non sia.

Cecilia: Hai fatto bene a puntualizzare il termine "ostetricia": nella versione francese del testo si parla di *maïeutique*, l'arte maieutica del "tirar fuori", cioè il sostegno alla donna nell'attivare le risorse che già possiede; in quella inglese si usa l'espressione *midwifery*, e il termine *midwife* indica letteralmente colei che sta accanto alla donna, nel medesimo significato attribuito prima. Questa scelta terminologica è significativa nel testo UNESCO.

Ivana: Dobbiamo cambiare la narrazione sul parto, lo dico anche nel mio ultimo libro (Arena 2024). Per migliaia di anni l'umanità si è riprodotta senza ostetriche, con successo. Il parto non può essere un atto pericoloso e non lo è nella maggior parte dei casi. Io e Luisa abbiamo il privilegio di vederlo nella fisiologia, non è pericoloso! I problemi più gravi derivano dalla medicalizzazione, non dal parto in sé. Ma questa cosa oggi non la vediamo e la cosa più grave è che neanche le donne la vedono più. È essenziale ripristinare un paradigma che riconosca la competenza delle donne: autonomia e fiducia nel proprio corpo non possono essere un lusso, ma una necessità.

Luisa: Io direi che dobbiamo riprendere il contatto con la terra e anche il parto cambia, assolutamente, e cambia il nostro modo di vivere. Quindi riprendiamocelo. Diventiamo tutte quante delle grandi dee connesse alla madre terra e consapevoli del nostro potere.

Ivana: Voglio rinforzare questo concetto della dea. Noi donne dobbiamo ricominciare a poterci sentire delle dee su tutto. Dea nella sessualità, dea nella normalità, dea in menopausa. In menopausa noi adesso sappiamo che si ricostituisce il cervello (Arena 2024). Le uniche mammifere che vanno in menopausa sono una specie di elefanti in cui la leader è la femmina del gruppo. Noi ci dobbiamo riprendere questa leadership. Invece, annichilirci nella sessualità e nel parto significa che ti tieni lì buona, buona nella paura. È terribile quello che abbiamo permesso di farci.

Queste ultime battute restituiscono un posizionamento politico netto di Ivana e Luisa come attiviste, portatrici di istanze che si inscrivono nella stessa griglia interpretativa che ha guidato alcune storiche nella rilettura dei processi riproduttivi alla luce dei rapporti di genere (Ranisio 2012; Filippini 2017; Federici 2004; Pancino 1984). L'ospedalizzazione del parto può così essere letta come l'esito di un processo di lungo periodo che, passando anche attraverso la repressione dei saperi femminili durante la caccia alle streghe (Federici 2004), ha progressivamente espropriato le donne del controllo sul proprio corpo e sulla propria competenza riproduttiva (Pancino 1984). In questa prospettiva, l'appello a "sentirsi dee" diventa un invito a riappropriarsi dell'autonomia e della competenza perdute.

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Recensioni

Zelda Franceschi, Diego Villar (eds.), *Antropología en singular. Historias menores de las tierras bajas sudamericanas*. Aubervilliers, Éditions de l'IHEAL, 2025

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Il libro curato da Zelda Franceschi e Diego Villar, *Antropología en singular. Historias menores de las tierras bajas sudamericanas*, ci offre una galleria di storie minori o, come definite dagli stessi autori, “ritratti o schizzi minimalisti” provenienti dalle terre basse sudamericane. Sono narrazioni che definirei, per diverse ragioni che emergeranno di seguito, delle *storie indomite*. Ma andiamo per ordine. Uno degli obiettivi di questo libro, a mio avviso, è particolarmente decisivo e necessario, e ha molto a che fare con una scommessa metodologica di questi tempi cruciale: indagare “l’ampia gamma di possibilità interpretative che ci offrono le biografie [...] nel momento di concettualizzare, descrivere, e analizzare l’azione sociale” (p. 12), a partire da un’attenzione privilegiata ai dettagli, al punto di vista individuale, alle configurazioni specifiche e personali proprie a ogni vita, riflesses e “riflettute” in ogni biografia. Definisco questo approccio come “cruciale” in quanto, come ben sottolineato dai coautori nell’Introduzione, ci troviamo forse oggi in un momento paradossale, nel quale il proliferare dei dibattiti sul multiculturalismo e quelli sulla interculturalità corrono perennemente il rischio di tradursi in nuovi discorsi egemonici che, incapaci di ricomprendere in sé le mille espressioni e sfumature del sentire e dell’esperire individuale, possono “domesticare” (p. 11) la diversità e la molteplicità delle voci singolari anzi silenziate e oggi ricondotte, nelle loro caratteristiche uniche, a paradigmi e modelli già pensati a priori, all’interno dei quali, più o meno forzatamente, sono apparentemente contemplate in termini generali e generalizzanti. In questo contesto, le “autobiografie”, le “storie di vita”, o le “narrazioni in prima persona”, spesso si traducono immediatamente in archetipi (“lo sciamano”, il “leader indigeno”, il “rappresentante di tal popolo”) che usano un’esperienza personale – presentata comunque come ampiamente generalizzabile, in estremo quasi intercambiabile con quella di qualsiasi altro rappresentante di una stessa “classe” venutasi a creare – come ottimo pretesto o strumento per parlare di qualcosa d’altro (la resistenza indigena al capitalismo o alle dinamiche neocoloniali, per esempio). In questi casi, le specificità di ciascuna narrazione e di ogni singola vita perdono quasi automaticamente importanza, sacrificate sull’altare di una strategia – spesso anche assolutamente legittima e sicuramente

efficace – che finisce per dissolvere le storie personali in un discorso politico omogenizzante che le trascende e che fa degli individui un “emblema, canale, o vettore di un’idea; come se, più che di persone, si trattasse di politiche, di epistemologie o di ecologie incarnate” (p. 16).

In questo senso una delle sfide dei testi raccolti da Franceschi e Villar consiste proprio nel cercare di creare una breccia, di aprire un varco in queste testimonianze della diversità e della pluralità, attraverso la messa in gioco delle complessità proprie alle vicende personali e uniche, in cui i protagonisti non sono più esclusivamente portavoce di un gruppo, e le loro storie non sono più “significanti di un presunto significato” o “mezzo per un fine” (p. 17). Sono infatti i dettagli, le molteplici ambiguità, le opacità, le luci e le ombre di ogni narrazione che fanno delle biografie delle storie precise, distinte e individuali, le stesse che, nella diffusione di nuove prospettive universalizzanti, sono accuratamente mascherate dall’apparente coerenza e linearità che appiattiscono le molteplicità e le contraddizioni che dimorano in ogni persona. È in primo luogo per questa ragione che le biografie di questo libro sono certamente “indomite”.

A partire da queste premesse, le storie minori raccolte nel volume assumono, nella prospettiva dei vari autori, il ruolo di documenti, di testimonianze e di archivi privilegiati e preziosi *in sé*, nei loro minuziosi dettagli, nelle loro inconsistencies e ipocrisie, nella loro indeterminatezza. In virtù di questo approccio, queste storie ci permettono di scoprire le traiettorie personali e straordinarie di individui che, nella loro specificità e unicità, incarnano comunque – o, forse, proprio per questo – i complessi mondi nei quali vivono e di cui sanno restituirci fini e lucidissime immagini che continuano ad interrogarci sulle costruzioni delle rappresentazioni del Sé e sulle articolate relazioni tra l’individuale e il sociale. Passeggiando nella galleria dei personaggi presentati nel libro emergono infatti delle narrazioni che danno conto dei modi mediante i quali ognuno di essi costruisce la propria identità – al contempo il proprio “sé individuale” e la “persona pubblica” – attraverso scelte, strategie, azioni e omissioni diverse. Tutti atti che ne definiscono i percorsi personali, che si riflettono sulle modalità specifiche del loro racconto e che, allo stesso tempo, possono illuminarci sui modi, sempre cangianti, di definizione dell’identità e dell’alterità, del Sé e dell’Altro, nelle terre basse sudamericane.

Le poche righe di cui dispongo non mi permettono, purtroppo, di entrare nel merito delle sedici traiettorie di vita presentate nel volume. Tuttavia, posso tentarne una presentazione generale che ne metta in luce le risonanze e le continuità, lasciando al lettore il compito più stimolante che questo testo ci permette di assumere, ovvero quello di apprezzare l’intrinseca unicità propria a ciascuna narrazione.

La prima caratteristica che salta all'occhio scorrendo le pagine del libro riguarda il fatto che molte delle vite narrate e commentate sono storie di persone che vivono i continui mutamenti dei loro contesti e le sfide della contemporaneità dimostrando al contempo una gran capacità di adattamento e di comprensione dei discorsi e delle dinamiche di funzionamento delle società nazionali nei quali sono immersi, un'abilità che si riflette nel loro ruolo protagonista all'interno delle proprie comunità di appartenenza (Taparindu, Maria Cristina, Fausta, Cándida, don Vega) e, in molti casi, anche nel contesto di organizzazioni sempre più ampie, come i movimenti indigeni o la politica locale o nazionale (come nei casi di René Ramirez, Rogelio Segundo, Mario Juruna). Sono anche storie di persone caratterizzate da una spiccata abilità nella mediazione, capaci di intessere alleanze e ampliare i loro campi di socialità attraverso l'istituzione di relazioni anche contraddittorie, sempre instabili, con una serie di attori fondamentali (come missionari, antropologi, giornalisti, politici e ONG) aumentando la loro sfera di influenza nello sforzo di perseguire – parallelamente o separatamente agli obiettivi “collettivi”, a proposito dei quali già si sono spese molte parole – dei propositi che sono propriamente individuali. Uno dei maggiori meriti del libro, a mio parere, è proprio l'aver dato spazio alla contraddizione che emerge dalle azioni attuate da individui che portano avanti le proprie aspirazioni con metodi e valori personali, attraverso scelte consapevoli che talvolta possono apparire paradossali o incoerenti (di cui l'alleanza di René con il “nemico dei Maskoy” o il brillante caso storico dell’“incostanza” di Cuñamboy sono forse gli esempi più lampanti). Queste scelte non sono fratture, ma il risultato di un percorso individuale per imporre un'agenda propria che, anche se talvolta ingloba, giocoforza trascende le lotte collettive di cui le persone ritratte nel libro, almeno in alcuni casi, si fanno portavoce. Queste ambiguità, incoerenze, “scelte discutibili”, sono proprio un altro dei fattori che rende queste storie “indomite” e “inclassificabili”, resistenti ai giudizi degli osservatori esterni e alle delusioni e frustrazioni che possono suscitare negli amanti della coerenza e della linearità dei discorsi essenzializzanti ed “eroici” del multiculturalismo.

Le vite narrate nel testo includono anche preziose testimonianze di persone “in bilico tra più mondi”, della loro ricerca di legittimità, di riconoscimento e di affermazione personale, identitaria e sociale. Illuminante, in questo senso, è la storia del “voltabandiera” José Segundo, come lo sono le storie comuni e straordinarie di Elda e Silverio ma anche la lotta per l'identità indigena di Elba o i discorsi contraddittori e la “banalità” del gringo Javier che ha bisogno allo stesso tempo della presenza e dell'assenza degli indigeni per avverare il suo sogno di modernità e le sue aspirazioni pionieristiche. Sono persone che si interrogano sulla storia dei propri gruppi, sulle specificità dei loro modi

di vivere e sulle forme di farli convivere e di intrecciarsi con quelli di un mondo in trasformazione continua, con uno sguardo strabico e produttivo (Maria Cristina) e con la consapevolezza dell'importanza di custodire, a modo proprio, la memoria collettiva di fronte alle sfide quotidiane in territori contesi o di frontiera (la vita e i libri di Laureano Segovia sono un esempio in questo senso). Sono storie di persone che, dentro questo mondo cangiante, sperimentano continuamente nuove forme di potere, di rappresentanza e influenza (come don Vega, vicino ai missionari e agli sciamani, leader comunitario, "simbolo wichi" e orgoglioso protagonista di un romanzo di successo) o modi diversi di vivere nell'esilio, nella memoria della violenza o nelle fratture della migrazione (Elia Jan Caqueo, i due Juan, la Comandante Boliviano). Sono persone comuni e fenomenali, come i meccanici argentini, brasiliani e peruviani, geni popolari, in luoghi marginali e senza risorse, che, inventando misteriosamente una moto che funziona ad acqua, creano una chimera meccanico-animale, "bestie mitiche" che sfidano al contempo le leggi della meccanica e del regime meccanico globalizzato: mito e commento locale della transizione ecologica mondiale.

Sono, queste, delle storie di diplomatici, militanti, leaders politici o religiosi, ma anche, e contemporaneamente, di persone comuni, con esistenze e impieghi in apparenza ordinari, con i loro dettagli meschini, miserabili, straordinari. Storie di figlie e figli, madri e padri, mariti e mogli. Sono, insomma, storie di persone, che in quanto tali non si possono sussumere in categorie "comode" e predefinite. I nostri protagonisti assumono, nell'arco dei distinti momenti delle loro vite, ruoli diversi, si muovono in spazi diversi, si reinventano costantemente e, nel farlo, sfidano continuamente le dicotomie offerte da letture univoche e manichee (dicotomie, fra l'altro, di cui da lungo tempo è stata sottolineata l'improduttività: indigeno/non indigeno; moderno/tradizionale; autenticità/inculturazione; urbano/rurale, ecc.). Come sottolineato da Preci nel volume, è proprio l'ambiguità a costruire la singolarità (p. 103) delle persone ritratte e caratterizzare i loro percorsi esistenziali, appunto, "indomiti".

Le persone, attraverso le loro narrazioni, sono testimoni eccezionali in grado di gettare luce sui contesti storici, culturali, sociali e politici specifici nei quali vivono, restituendoci spesso delle prospettive tradizionalmente silenziate, dimenticate o, perché no, anche "scomode": pensiamo alle lettere che danno forma all'ambivalente ritratto di Lizzie, rari documenti sull'esperienza e sul ruolo femminile nella storia del *periodo cauchero* in Amazzonia o, ancora, alle storie orali raccolte in occasione della XI marcia indigena in Bolivia, che risaltando le contraddizioni della società nazionale – legate anche alle antinomie del nuovo costituzionalismo latinoamericano e alle sue logiche di

rappresentanza ventriloque – di riflesso mettono in discussione l'idilliaca visione di un movimento indigeno omogeneo e sempre coerente con se stesso (*in primis* grazie ai riferimenti all'esperienza femminile della militanza e ai conflitti interni agli stessi organismi di base).

In virtù della grande abilità spesso dimostrata dai protagonisti delle biografie nel riflettere sulla multidimensionalità delle circostanze in cui si trovano immersi, le storie minori divengono inoltre dei documenti preziosi anche per la comprensione delle fini dinamiche che attraversano i nostri campi. Come esemplificato dalle storie di Elda e Silverio – che, non conformandosi alla “condotta *wichí*”, riescono ad osservarla dai margini, “da fuori e da sopra”, nell’uscire e tornare dentro”, e riflettere su di essa da un luogo privilegiato – o da quella di José Segundo – con sue minuziose osservazioni sul mondo *toba* che all’occorrenza lo convertono in etnologo –, le sedici traiettorie biografiche raccolte nel volume ci restituiscono delle magnifiche descrizioni su diversi aspetti socioculturali di numerosi gruppi delle terre basse. Attraverso le biografie si parla infatti anche delle forme di socialità *chané* e *toba*, delle concezioni del potere *chané*, della costruzione dell’identità *maskoy* e di quella *wichí* in un contesto “di contatto”, delle modalità relazionali espresse mediante l’idioma del conflitto e della diplomazia *xavante*, del modo in cui l’essere-nel-mondo *ayoreo* si adatta, si trasforma o coabita con il “nuovo mondo” nato dall’incontro tra l’Eami e l’Occidente (p. 117), dell’inatteso “individualismo” dei capi *chiriguano*s, della nozione di persona *mapuche* e del percorso di distinzione delle specificità *williche* in seno allo stesso gruppo.

Per di più, le biografie, attraversate da specifiche congiunture storiche, ne diventano commento e interpretazione. Esse ci parlano così anche delle dinamiche di costante riformulazione delle relazioni interetniche, della costruzione degli stati latinoamericani – con la loro storia di dittature, diaspore, violenza, di formazione delle nazioni “interculturali” nel contesto del socialismo del XXI secolo –, dell’integrazione delle terre basse nell’economia internazionale e della sua progressiva colonizzazione, dell’articolazione dei gruppi autoctoni all’interno delle missioni cattoliche, evangeliche e anglicane – e dei cambiamenti radicali dell’azione evangelizzatrice, soprattutto nel contesto cattolico post-concilio Vaticano II – e della politica locale, statale e mondiale, nonché dell’emergenza e della continua trasformazione dei movimenti indigeni, dei paradossi dell’indigenismo classico, del *mestizaje* e delle politiche di riconoscimento del multiculturalismo neoliberale, dell’essenzialismo escludente da questo riprodotto, e delle logiche di cooptazione delle rivendicazioni mediante l’assistenzialismo e lo sviluppismo (ma anche della grande abilità dei “destinatari” a sfruttare queste logiche, apprenderne i linguaggi e ribaltarne le logiche). Ma non è solo questo il punto. Il riconoscimento del valore

delle storie minori al momento di comprendere e decifrare, attraverso il particolare, dinamiche più grandi e meccanismi generali, ci invita a spostare un pochino più in là i limiti della nostra riflessione e a interrogarci circa le potenzialità dell'individuale *in sé*, ovvero sulle possibilità che la biografia ci offre “nel momento di concettualizzare, descrivere e analizzare l'azione sociale” (p. 12) a partire dall'unico, dall'irriducibile, dalla singola prassi individuale, dal modo di raccontare e dai dettagli specifici di ogni vita. E sono al contempo questi stessi dettagli biografici, con le loro ambiguità e i loro paradossi, che – parafrasando l'introduzione di Franceschi e Villar – ci permettono di comprendere ciò che rende le persone degli individui, ma anche ciò che fa di un individuo una persona. In questo senso, forse Antonio Candido aveva proprio ragione quando, parlando di letteratura, ci insegnava che “chi vuole vedere in profondità, deve accettare la contraddizione, [...] perché, secondo una frase giusta, essa ‘è il nervo stesso della vita’” (1981, p. 30).

In definitiva, il libro edito da Franceschi e Villar è riuscito a gettare uno sguardo originale sulle storie minori, non accontentandosi di sommarsi ai tentativi di restituire uno spazio, una voce, dei nomi a delle vite che sarebbero rimaste nell'ombra o nell'invisibilità (un'attività che comunque rimane fondamentale anche dal punto di vista dei nostri interlocutori, come ben argomentato nel caso delle biografie *mapuche*), e non incagliandosi nemmeno nelle analisi, già abbondantemente sfruttate, sulla decostruzione delle narrazioni o sull'opportunità e la pertinenza della nozione di “individualismo” nelle terre basse. Al contrario, e nondimeno tenendo in considerazione tutti questi aspetti, il tentativo di questi scritti li trascende, nell'obiettivo, e qui cito testualmente un eloquente passaggio di Oakdale (2005) scelto dagli autori, di “documentare la configurazione biografica unica di ciascun personaggio al di là della sua eventuale capacità di rappresentazione” (*infra*, p. 16). Le storie minori, in virtù di questo approccio, divengono dunque intrinsecamente valide e non più esclusivamente esempi di tendenze globali nelle quali possono essere sussunte mediante delle operazioni di riduzione che ne diluiscono la specificità. È, infine, proprio il proposito perseguito dal libro di declassificare le biografie e di mettere in luce la resistenza che la vita oppone alle facili sintesi che rende queste storie “indomite”, ma mai fini a se stesse. È infatti attraverso di esse che possiamo iniziare a tracciare nuovi cammini possibili per la comprensione di questioni che risultano cruciali all'interno della nostra disciplina (ma che certamente non esauriscono la loro pertinenza nel solo dibattito antropologico): dalle dinamiche – individuali e sociali – legate alla costruzione della persona e della soggettività e, insieme, alle forme e ai significati che quest'ultima assume in diversi contesti, fino all'indagine sulle forme di rappresentatività e sui meccanismi di trasmissione, riproduzione,



riflessione critica e costante (ri)definizione delle plurali, cangianti, disomogenee “identità indigene” nel contesto del continuo trasformarsi del panorama sociale e relazionale delle terre basse latinoamericane.

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We are engaged in a struggle to demonstrate our worth in a world that seems disinterested if not hostile, and we are at the same time obligated to chip away at every foundation of our enterprise. Having begun to convince others that there is a valuable certainty in our work, we are ourselves less sure of where that certainty lies. This, I suggest, is a good course to be on, even if discomfoting. It is the stirring of our critical sense (Chambers 1987, p. 329).

Il libro di Francesco Vietti, *Unexpected encounters. Migrants and Tourists in the Mediterranean*, ha senz'altro il merito di essere una riuscitissima etnografia della mobilità, ben iscritta all'interno dell'ormai rigoglioso dibattito sulle migrazioni nel Mediterraneo, ma con diverse linee di originalità.

L'obiettivo dichiarato, sin dalla ricca *Introduzione*, è quello di mettere in discussione la cristallizzazione di categorie come "migrante", "turista" e "locale", non solo per fini analitici ma con lo scopo politico di "destabilizzare le relazioni di potere che sono implicate nei discorsi sull'ospitalità rispetto alla migrazione e al turismo" (p. 31). Come avevano già messo in luce i geografi Chiara Rabbiosi e Prosper Wanner (2019), infatti, "l'istituzionalizzazione della separazione delle mobilità turistiche da altre forme di mobilità, tra cui quelle migranti" (p. 135) agisce performativamente sui luoghi definendone i criteri di accessibilità e diventa, in definitiva, una questione politica. Vietti, che con questo libro si pone il preciso scopo di "non depoliticizzare la mobilità" (*infra*, p. 20), porta avanti questo intento presentando un lavoro denso e multisituato che copre un arco di quindici anni di ricerca sul campo "attraverso il Mediterraneo".

Un'attenzione importante viene posta sul concetto di "esperienza". Esperienza è senza dubbio quella delle persone migranti che intraprendono il loro viaggio verso l'Europa e arrivano sulle coste greche o italiane, incontrando apparati di controllo e sicurezza di ogni genere, ma anche slanci e iniziative solidali nei loro confronti, e che si trovano poi a vivere nelle città italiane come Torino, di cui si scrive nell'ultima parte del libro. Esperienze sono senz'altro pure i ritorni nel proprio Paese di origine che si è lasciato tanti anni prima e che si guarda con altri occhi; o le vacanze, un po' stranianti, dei giovani nati o cresciuti in Italia che fanno visita, d'estate, ai parenti nei Paesi di

origine dei loro genitori. Ma esperienza è anche quella che, per antonomasia, si aspettano di vivere i turisti, spesso, paradossalmente, negli stessi luoghi di provenienza delle persone migranti o negli stessi spazi che, per queste, costituiscono punti intermedi e sospesi dei loro tragitti migratori. E si sa, l'industria turistica è nata precisamente con lo scopo di organizzare, temporalmente e spazialmente, questo genere di esperienze (Pine, Gilmore 1999), tanto che negli ultimi anni anche il colosso dell'*hospitality* per eccellenza, Airbnb, ne ha fatto un servizio specifico, le *Experiences*. Eppure, sarebbe una grave mancanza, e l'autore lo sottolinea chiaramente, considerare l'etnografia come qualcosa di avulso da questi ragionamenti: come già metteva in luce Victor Turner (1986), gli antropologi e le antropologhe sono essi stessi dei viaggiatori che producono sapere precisamente attraverso la loro esperienza. Come infatti scrive l'autore, "l'esperienza come viaggio" è "un tema ricorrente nella storia delle culture umane e il presupposto di ogni analisi antropologica dell'incontro tra ricercatori, migranti e turisti" (133). È proprio attraverso la porosità e l'ambivalenza di questo concetto di "esperienza" che questo libro costruisce il suo senso più profondo: un'esperienza che si costruisce sempre *in mobilità* e nell'incontro.

Un altro aspetto che viene tracciato sin dall'*Introduzione* è la questione degli immaginari, strettamente correlata a quella delle scale. Se con Immanuel Wallerstein (1974) assumiamo che il mondo contemporaneo, strutturato dal capitalismo globale, si configuri come un sistema articolato di relazioni su larga scala segnate da profonde disuguaglianze tra centri, semiperiferie e periferie – ciò che lo studioso statunitense definiva "sistema-mondo" – allora anche lo sguardo della ricerca deve necessariamente muoversi lungo queste stesse traiettorie. Questa "transcalarità" richiama molto da vicino l'approccio etnografico di Anna Tsing (2015; 2004), ma risuona anche particolarmente con ciò che Ferdinando Fava definiva "lo sguardo strabico dell'antropologia": la capacità, cioè, della disciplina di mantenere simultaneamente un'attenzione alla dimensione situata dell'esperienza e alle strutture di potere che la attraversano, senza ridurre l'una all'altra. Come sottolinea Francesco Vietti (*infra*, p. 11), infatti, questo approccio implica un'estensione delle scale analitiche del campo che vanno dall'interazione *face to face* fino alla dimensione globale delle mobilità e delle asimmetrie di potere che le costituiscono. In questa prospettiva, quindi, fenomeni apparentemente distinti appaiono invece intrecciati. L'analisi appaduriana degli *scapes* torna utile, in questo senso, a comprendere l'intreccio tra turismo e migrazione come interconnessione di una stessa configurazione globale. Gli immaginari, così, sono ciò che tiene insieme flussi eterogenei e rende possibile la loro articolazione: è attraverso di essi che mobilità diverse diventano pensabili, desiderabili o necessarie, in-

scrivendosi in uno stesso spazio al contempo locale e sempre globale fatto di connessioni, disgiunzioni e disuguaglianze che rendendo visibili le contraddizioni e le gerarchie del mondo contemporaneo.

Il libro è diviso in tre parti che ne compongono l'apparato etnografico, anticipate dall'*Introduzione*. La prima parte è dedicata alle *Radici* e tratta, attraverso le ricerche sul campo che l'autore ha condotto in Albania, di alcuni luoghi da cui le traiettorie migratorie sono cominciate. Lo fa attraverso lo sguardo dei ragazzi di origine albanese ma cresciuti per la maggior parte della loro vita in Italia che visitano l'Albania con il progetto "I ragazzi di Via Egnatia"; di chi ritorna ai luoghi di origine del proprio percorso migratorio, stavolta come turista, e di chi invece è rimasto e ha visto cambiare radicalmente il proprio paesaggio di vita. La seconda parte si intitola *Shores*, "coste", ma anche "sponde", e racconta, attraverso il materiale raccolto nell'isola di Lesvos, in Grecia, e a Lampedusa, le inaspettate (e talvolta mancate) interazioni tra i e le migranti sbarcati sulle isole e presi nel micidiale sistema di *hotspot* e campi, e il turismo. Un turismo non solo marittimo, ma che negli anni si è andato a configurare come una categoria articolata fatta di soggetti diversi tra loro: reporter, giornalisti, volontari e ricercatori si mescolano a turisti estivi che si fanno coinvolgere dalle iniziative solidali con i e le migranti o che, addirittura, scelgono quei luoghi proprio perché offrono quel tipo di esperienza turistica. Infine, la terza parte dà corpo all'interessante ambivalenza insita nel suo titolo: *Gates*. Come infatti scrive l'autore, questa parte

si sposta verso quelle metropoli dell'Europa mediterranea che, negli ultimi decenni, hanno visto crescere muri e barriere (talvolta tangibili, talvolta simboliche) tra aree destinate ai residenti, ai turisti e agli immigrati, e che si sono talvolta trovate ad affrontare le sfide della coesistenza di queste diverse popolazioni urbane all'interno degli stessi quartieri. Qui, il flusso turistico produce dinamiche di gentrificazione, accompagnate dall'espulsione dei cittadini di origine immigrata, ma anche opportunità di lavoro e forme di convivenza interculturale tra residenti (p. 42).

In questo senso, i *gates* rappresentano le soglie urbane, visibili e invisibili, vere e simboliche, che separano e al contempo permettono un contatto e una connessione tra migranti, turisti e residenti, sempre in una logica porosa di fluidità categoriale. Il palazzo dove per lunghi anni ha vissuto l'autore, con la sua lunga storia abitativa e con la moschea al piano terra che lo pongono al centro della dimensione migratoria e dei vecchi e nuovi flussi di mobilità che passano per Torino, diventa lo spazio in cui i contatti e gli attraversamenti tra soggettività differenti si rendono non solo possibili, ma effettivi e ineluttabili. Sarà infatti da questi incontri e dal potenziale generativo che possiedono che nascerà l'esperienza di *Migrantour*, a cui sono dedicate le ultime pagine prima delle *Conclusioni*.

Le parti di cui è composto il volume sono a loro volta articolate in altrettante linee concettuali: *scapes*, *gazes* e *regimes*. Già dall'*Introduzione* viene reso esplicito, quindi, il modo in cui leggere questo libro, attraverso gli spazi fisici della ricerca sul campo, ma anche mediante tali categorie. In questo senso le storie individuali e gli aneddoti etnografici che sono posti all'inizio di ogni capitolo risultano particolarmente esplicativi di questo viaggio attraverso luoghi diversi del Mediterraneo e delle sue propagazioni, e rendono bene il senso *esperienziale* di questo testo etnografico.

Tuttavia, come l'autore spiega bene nella sua *Introduzione*, queste linee concettuali devono essere sempre concepite come dispositivi relazionali e non univoci. La dimensione degli *scapes*, infatti, sarebbe impensabile fuori da una logica di "connessione" che renda conto della porosità con cui gli spazi delle mobilità (e gli oggetti che li popolano) vengono percepiti e significati. Così, ad esempio, la Madonna di Porto Salvo, a Lampedusa, passa dall'essere oggetto di culto locale come protettrice dei pescatori e dei marinai a diventare il simbolo dell'accoglienza e della protezione dei migranti che sbarcano sull'isola. Allo stesso modo, i regimi di visibilità che coinvolgono i soggetti migranti e i turisti, così come gli incontri che vedono protagoniste queste categorie porose e i residenti, ci obbligano a "decostruire la rigida dicotomia tra ospitanti e ospiti e tra 'locali' e stranieri (siano essi migranti o turisti)" (p. 31). È per rendere conto di questa dimensione fluida che Vietti mutua dal filosofo francese Jacques Derrida il concetto di *Hos(ti)pitality*, per mettere in luce la radice latina comune di *hostis* ("nemico") e di *hospes* ("ospite") che "mostra il paradosso etico di un'apertura totale all'altro che, al tempo stesso, esprime la necessità di controllare il potere che l'ospitante esercita sull'ospitato" (p. 30). E questo vale nella stessa misura per i migranti e per i turisti: la dimensione di potere, insomma, insita nelle relazioni tra *host* e *guest* non può essere elusa e, tuttavia, non è scontata. Questo emerge chiaramente, per esempio, nel caso del villaggio albanese di Ksamil, luogo segnato dai consecutivi flussi di insediamento e migrazione, durante e dopo il regime di Enver Hoxha, e dove oggi il turismo, formato soprattutto da albanesi della diaspora, è stato una forza in grado di riconfigurare la dimensione abitativa e il senso di appartenenza dei residenti. Ma emerge anche nel particolare statuto che hanno le stesse persone di origine albanese ormai stabilmente residenti in Italia che tornano a fare visita ad amici e parenti durante l'estate, anche facendo sfoggio dello stile e dei beni che hanno acquisito nei paesi di residenza: *Migrants, Tourists and/or Home-Comers?* titola infatti un paragrafo del primo capitolo.

In ultimo, pure i regimi di mobilità, nell'ampio spettro che va dal *leisure* turistico alla reclusione in un CPR, sono guardati nella loro possibilità di essere

attraversati e abitati. Il concetto di *border*, al contempo “confine” e tecnologia di controllo e sorveglianza di quel confine, ha infatti insita l’evocazione di un suo attraversamento. Questo è senz’altro vero nel caso dell’isola di Lesvos e del suo tristemente celebre campo di detenzione per migranti, Moria. Nel marzo del 2020, quando ancora la crisi economica faceva sentire i suoi effetti, la presidente della Commissione europea Ursula von der Leyen aveva definito la Grecia “scudo d’Europa” (utilizzando la parola greca *aspida*) a mo’ di elogio per il suo ruolo nel contenere gli arrivi di migranti dalla Turchia. Lesvos, per la sua posizione geografica è stata, insieme soprattutto alle isole di Samos, Chios e Kos, uno dei punti di arrivo principali dei migranti in arrivo soprattutto da Siria, Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iran e Somalia che si sono trovati incastrati in questi spazi insulari, veri e propri *confini*, nel doppio senso spaziale e biopolitico. Qui, la dimensione disumana del campo (gestito dallo stato greco, con l’impiego di esercito e polizia, e dalle autorità europee per l’espletamento delle richieste di asilo) e del mare circostante sono venute a costituire quello che Barak Kalir (2019) definisce “regime di *departheid*”, cioè il governo europeo delle migrazioni perpetrato “attuando misure di oppressione e gestendo la segregazione spaziale dei migranti” (*infra*, p. 114). Tuttavia, anche in questo stato di estremo assoggettamento il *border*, come linea spaziale e come tecnologia di sorveglianza, non ha uno statuto assoluto. Se da un lato infatti, attivisti, ricercatori, *locals* e persino turisti veri e propri si sono in molte circostanze dimostrati attori chiave nel superamento delle barriere, morali e fisiche, che imprigionavano i migranti, dall’altro, come ricorda l’antropologa greca Katerina Rozakou, la “complicità epistemologica” dei molti ricercatori impegnati nell’analisi del fenomeno migratorio, frutto dell’esercizio “di un potere sovrano in quanto cittadina impegnata in pratiche di confine” (2019, p. 78), mostra quest’ultimo come un oggetto permeabile e, in definitiva, socialmente e discorsivamente prodotto. Il libro si apre e si chiude con la storia di Ibrahim, che ne raccoglie perfettamente la parabola etnografica e concettuale e che dà anche allo scritto una piacevole forma circolare. Ibrahim è stato un agente di viaggi nella sua città natale, Damasco. Facilitato dalla sua conoscenza della lingua italiana, diventa ben presto un punto di riferimento per i turisti italiani in visita in Siria e sarà proprio grazie ai legami costruiti attraverso queste relazioni che riuscirà, con l’aggravarsi della guerra civile nel 2012 e dopo essere fuggito in Libano con la famiglia, a raggiungere l’Italia e ottenere lo status di rifugiato, stabilendosi a Torino, “un porto mediterraneo lontano dal mare” (*infra*, p. 194). La sua famiglia, rimasta in Libano, riuscirà a raggiungerlo solo in seguito, a caro prezzo e con molta sofferenza, attraverso il mare: partendo dalla Turchia e arrivando, dapprima, sull’isola di Kos. Una volta riuniti a Torino, Ibrahim e la sua famiglia cominciano la loro seconda vita. Ibrahim, infatti, inizia a col-

lavorare intensamente con il progetto *Migrantour* e, in seguito, diventa uno dei curatori del Museo Egizio di Torino. La parabola circolare della vita di Ibrahim, da guida turistica di Damasco a guida e poi curatore museale nella sua città di immigrazione, è una storia senz'altro esemplare, seppur unica e particolare, che racconta alcuni dei modi in cui mobilità diversissime si intrecciano e conducono ad esiti imprevedibili.

La storia di Ibrahim, in questo senso, enuclea già alcuni dei tratti salienti che vengono poi sviluppati nel resto del testo, attraverso altri aneddoti etnografici e storie (in Albana, in Grecia, a Lampedusa e a Torino, ma anche in Calabria e in Moldavia). Da un lato, infatti, mostra come le storie di migrazione come quella del protagonista di questo racconto non siano storie di mobilità "lineari", ma piuttosto che queste sono costituite da fattori personali e strutturali che si combinano in modo variegato, rendendo ogni esperienza diversa dalle altre. Dall'altro, suggerisce che categorie apparentemente irrelate di soggetti in movimento – migranti e turisti – e di "residenti" non solo entrino in relazione tra loro, ma che proprio in virtù del fatto che questi incontri avvengono in contesti di mobilità essi diventino potenzialmente generativi, permettendo di abitare, scambiare, sovvertire la linea – immaginaria – che divide gli *host* dai *guest*.

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