

Workshop Report (17-21 June 2019, Villa Vigoni, Italy)

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June 2019 saw a group of German and Italian scholars come together in the German-Italian Cultural Center of Excellence Villa Vigoni to discuss national perspectives on environmental history. The event was convened by Roberta Biasillo (KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm), Serenella Iovino (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill), Christof Mauch and Claudio de Majo (both from the Rachel Carson Center, Munich).

From the first session on Monday afternoon, it was clear that the participants came from an array of diverse backgrounds. While environmental history was a *trait-de-union* for several German and Italian participants, with senior scholars such as Christof Mauch and Gabriella Corona representing environmental history in Germany and Italy respectively, the group also included participants with backgrounds in literary studies and the fine arts, such as leading environmental humanities scholar, Serenella Iovino.

Christof Mauch chaired the opening conversation, setting up the main ideas that would take us through the workshop: what are the common points between German and Italian environmental history and why is German-Italian cooperation a relevant discussion for the future of this discipline in the European academic context? The participants divided into groups to explore leading questions. What is the relation between nature and state? What are the limits of nation-states in the study of environmental history? Should there be an autobiographical element in environmental history writing? What are the differences between German and Italian traditions of environmental history scholarship?

The second day of the workshop took the form of a writing lab entitled “Writing History for the Future,” led by award-winning nature writer Rebecca Giggs and RCC senior editor Katie Ritson. The basic premise was to explore creative non-fiction as a way of writing to a broad readership within environmental humanities. Rebecca Giggs presented the main features of creative non-fiction: personal engagement with the topic, situated writing, and targeting a broader audience. In a more technical fashion, she explained how to present your personal voice in the text and how to begin and conclude a paragraph. Workshop participants worked on a writing exercise, producing a short text about one of their earliest memories related to the environment.

In the second part of the workshop, the group looked at the utilization of different narrative registers, learning how to adopt and interchange them according to the situation. In order to provide a practical example, the group analyzed a text excerpt from Robert Macfarlane’s non-fiction nature essay “Silt.”^[1] Then the group attempted to adopt some of the techniques utilized by the author in a second writing exercise involving a personal interaction with the landscape. Finally, the group discussed writing style.

Rebecca discussed beginnings, in particular the way that creative non-fiction differs from academic writing, in the third second of the workshop: the opening paragraph has to be used as a single unit of thought, and should not try to condense the whole argument of the text. Successful creative non-fiction should not use too large contextualization, or sound too instructive or didactic. Rather, it should attempt to draw the reader slowly into the narrative by intriguing her.

The seminar was brought to a close by Rachel Carson Center’s Katie Ritson, who illustrated the multiple publication venues offered by the RCC—from curated series on the blog *Seeing the Woods*, to RCC’s open-access journal *RCC Perspectives*, to special issues in conjunction with the Italian journal *Global Environment*. She outlined the RCC’s focus on publishing across divides within and beyond academia by adopting different writing formats and targeting multiple audiences.

The day concluded with two keynote speeches by Prof. Nadine Hee (Free University of Berlin) and Prof. Luigi Piccioni (University of Cosenza). Both speakers attempted to contextualize German and

Italian Environmental History within a broader European context, discussing the strengths and weaknesses of these two approaches. They discussed the discipline's state of the art, their main accomplishments and produced a literature review of the most important works produced by the field (e.g. Christof Mauch's *Nature in German History* and Joachim Radkau's *Nature and Power* for Germany; Marco Armiero and Marcus Hall's edited volume *Nature and History in Modern Italy* and Gabriella Corona's *A Short Environmental History of Italy*). In both cases, they detected growing national movements, characterized by a disciplinary shift of structured academics from both related and non-related *milieus* (e.g. agrarian and industrial history, but also other disciplines such as geography, philosophy, political sciences and even the hard sciences), as well as a steep increase in young scholars trained directly in environmental history. The lack of official teaching chairs in environmental history, both in the Italian and German contexts, was interpreted by both scholars as a sign of the relatively young age of this emerging field. Both speakers noted that in Germany and Italy environmental history is attached to single individuals rather than grounded in an established academic debate; they agreed that institutional recognition will constitute a key element for the success of the environmental history in both countries.

The remainder of the workshop was dedicated to discussing the research of the early-career scholars participating in the conference. Each researcher gave a short presentation of their research project, which was followed by discussions and questions from the rest of the group. In the first session, chaired by Wilko Graf von Hardenberg and Roberta Biasillo, Ansgar Schanbacher (postdoctoral researcher at the University of Göttingen) presented on the early modern environmental history of central Europe, assessing the relations between industrial production, demographic growth and environmental transformation. He was followed by postdoctoral researcher David-Christopher Assmann (Goethe University, Frankfurt) discussing waste in German literature from the late nineteenth century and attempting to provide a neo-materialist reading of literary accounts tackling the topic of waste production and disposal in nineteenth-century Germany.

Noemi Quagliati, doctoral candidate at the Rachel Carson Center, presented her project "Photography, Landscape, and German Visual Culture in WWI," in which she attempts to frame photography and the history of technology within the framework of environmental history, discussing representation of environmental transformations. Astrid Kirchhof (Humboldt University of Berlin) presented her book project on East German environmental history, analyzing political issues related to waste in East Germany during the Cold War Years. Doctoral candidate (Humboldt University of Berlin) Sophie Lange's presentation "Environmental Politics of East and West Germany" focused on the controversial history of waste disposal and trading between Western and Eastern Germany during the Cold War.

The next session saw postdoctoral researcher Giacomo Bonan (University of Bologna) discuss the industrial waterways of the river Piave in northeastern Italy during the nineteenth century, in a presentation entitled "An Alpine Energy Transition—the Piave River from Charcoal to 'White Coal.'" He was followed by Fabian Zimmer (doctoral candidate at the Rachel Carson Center) on "Hydroelectricity in the (French and German) Alps and in Scandinavia," addressing narratives of power promoted by industrial groups through popular media (e.g. documentaries and photography). After the break, postdoctoral researcher Flora Roberts (University of Tübingen) discussed environmental policies and power relations in "Water in Soviet Central Asia," with a particular focus on Tajikistan. Later on, assistant professor Angelo Matteo Caglioti (Columbia University), presented his research project "The Hydro-Politics of Italian Colonialism: Science, Water and Empire in the Horn of Africa," an environmental history of Italian colonialism between the second half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century.

The last session, entitled "Society and the Environment," was chaired by Gabriella Corona. First, RCC doctoral candidate Claudio de Majo presented on "Writing about Multi-Species Alliances in the Ecological Mesh: An Autobiographically Neo-Materialist Perspective," where he discussed his personal perspectives on environmental history informed by neo-materialist philosophies.

Second, Gilberto Mazzoli (doctoral candidate at the European University Institute Florence) presented his research on “Migrants’ Urban Ecologies,” in which he discussed urban farming among Italian immigrant communities in New York between the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Finally, PhD candidate Marco Moschetti (University of Modena), discussed race relations and environmental injustice in late nineteenth-century Louisiana and postwar Chicago.

The conference was taken into its final session with remarks by Christof Mauch and Serenella Iovino, who thanked the participants and launched a last round of discussions in which people were asked to think about the importance of environmental history for our world and its future. The main ideas that emerged considered the groundbreaking potential of environmental history; its capacity to look at a changing world and understand its relation to past events and delineate possible futures; to look across disciplinary boundaries, involving different actors (e.g researchers from other disciplinary fields, policymakers, and local activists) in the conversation and thus negotiating transnational and transdisciplinary knowledge patterns of environmental learning. Finally, while the complexity of environmental history forces researchers to face methodological challenges at every turn, it allows the discipline to look above and beyond more traditional forms of historical research.