



**LANDSCAPES,  
NATURES,  
ECOLOGIES**

**EDITED BY**

Serenella Iovino  
Enrico Casetti  
and Elena Past

# Italy and the Environmental Humanities

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**Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism**

**EDITORS**

**Michael P. Branch, Kate Rigby, John Tallmadge**

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# Italy and the Environmental Humanities

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## Afterword: The Proper Study of the Humanities Is No Longer "Man"

The international scientific community reached a consensus in August 2016 that the geological era we are living in is to be known as the Anthropocene, that is to say, a time when human action is having a lasting and negative effect upon the sustainability of the planet. In so far as the Anthropocene implies a reconsideration of the human and its place in the world, it intersects with the debate about posthumanism and the displacement of anthropocentrism. My argument is that we have entered a posthuman condition, and this is not only a crisis of belief in the future, but also and foremost a deep transformation: the productive aspects balance out the negative ones. My working definition of the posthuman condition is the convergence of posthumanism on the one hand and post-anthropocentrism on the other. The former focuses on the critique of the humanist ideal of "Man" as the universal measure of all things, while the latter criticizes species hierarchy and human exceptionalism. Their convergence is producing a trans-disciplinary field of posthuman scholarship that is more than the sum of its parts and points to the rise of the critical posthumanities, best exemplified by the environmental humanities (Braidotti 2013).

This positive approach is supported by the vitality of contemporary post-human scholarship, which so far has displayed great transdisciplinary exuberance. For instance, the terminology has become more complex and nuanced: the nonhuman, the inhuman, the posthumanist; the post-anthropocentric, the multispecies; the trans-species; the "new" human as *Anthropos* today are circulating freely in academic publications. This discursive creativity reflects the explosion of the concept of life from *bios* to a myriad of nonhuman variations; *zoe* as a vital force emerges as the point of reference (Braidotti 2002).

As the essays gathered in this collection brilliantly illustrate, the environmental humanities offer different angles of approach. They do focus on the study of contemporary "medianaturecultures," a neologism that foregrounds

the relational, self-organizing, technologically mediated, material systems of expression of forces that—before the Anthropocene—we used to call “nature.” Complexity is the key to contemporary posthuman research, which feeds an exuberant discursive growth and tends to concentrate in a number of creative interdisciplinary hubs. Comparative literature and literary studies, in dialogue with cultural studies, science and technology studies, and disability studies, are building a new connection with urban studies and media studies to address computational and algorithmic cultures, issues of sustainability, and green citizenship. They are at the core of the new transdisciplinary assemblages that are rewriting the script of the posthuman condition. The generative transdisciplinary assemblage of the environmental humanities does not coincide completely with the traditional humanities disciplines in that it does not assume a concept of the “human” identical to the humanist “Man,” nor is it compatible with anthropocentrism. This hybrid crossover formation rather builds a number of productive relations across a web of research areas.

This fast-growing scholarly landscape indicates that the consensus about “Man” as the basic unit of reference for the human has long been lost and that this figure is in trouble. It is time to speak of “former Man” and to give a posthuman core to the contemporary humanities. As this enlightening collection proves, the critical posthumanities are emerging today, as post-disciplinary discursive fronts not only around the edges of the classical disciplines but also as offshoots of the critical studies areas. They provide the answer to what the humanities can become, in the posthuman era, after the decline of the primacy of universalist “Man” and of supremacist *Anthropos*.

The critical posthumanities—as in the environmental humanities—are geo-centered and post-anthropocentric. They assemble the many others of “Man”: the feminists and those who identify as LGBT+; the non-white, postcolonial, black, Jewish, indigenous, and native subjects; and the nonanthropomorphic—animals, insects, plants, trees, viruses, fungi, and bacteria. They connect them to the nonorganic force of technological automata and artifacts, and even to extraterrestrial bodies. This empathic bond to the nonhuman sets the tone for an anthropological exodus toward the posthuman.

This hybrid transversal assemblage is very striking when placed in the context of Italian literature and culture, in so far as Italy and humanism have often been taken as synonyms. The strength of this collection consists in honoring this aspect of Italian culture and literary history, while exploring its long and rich relationship to the nonhumans in all their shapes—from birds, to earthquakes, to hydrocarbon. Italian literature is full of monsters and chimeras, shiny metal things and pollution fumes. Moreover, Italian literature has dealt with the necro-political aspects of processes of government, both in terms of social disasters and, quite simply, in mobilizing deep familiarity

with death and decline. These are posthuman *topoi* par excellence, which support a change of critical perspective in the direction of the environmental humanities.

The building block or plane of composition for the environmental humanities is the emphasis on matter as vital, dynamic, and self-organizing. Living matter as *zoe* indicates a geo-centered process of interaction with the techno-social, psychic, and natural environments. This posthuman approach composes transversal alliances. The subjects of the environmental humanities can therefore be redefined as nomadic, embedded, embodied, relational, and technologically mediated. Their relational capacity is not confined within the human species but includes nonanthropomorphic elements. They constitute complex assemblages of human and nonhuman, terrestrial and cosmic, given and manufactured forces.

*Zoe*-centered egalitarianism respects the nonhuman force of life as the transverse entity that connects across previously segregated species, categories, and domains. It can relate to contemporary informational and scientific practices but also resist the opportunistic trans-species commodification of life that is the logic of advanced capitalism. The posthuman *zoe*-centered framework of the environmental humanities sustains analyses of the new power relations carried by the posthuman condition and the social forms of exclusion and dominations perpetuated by the current world order.

The environmental humanities advocate an intensive shift outward, toward extra-disciplinary encounters in the real world. This expresses the relational nature of their epistemic core: a text gets redefined in terms of its transdisciplinary capacity for movement across different fields of knowledge production and toward the real-life world. Maybe because of this great vitality, the environmental humanities are reproducing rhizomatically across multiple discourses, missing links, and liminal spaces: they are the nomadic sciences of today. In this respect they design a horizon of posthuman becoming of the humanities—as an academic “minor science”—that the contemporary university and especially the academic world would do well to heed.

This opening out toward the world is multidirectional: it involves renewed attention to social and cultural movements, new kinds of economies and political systems, and multiple curiosity-driven knowledge practices. Consequently, posthuman critics today pursue the all too human task of speaking truth to power at a time when power is morphing into multimodal and multiscaled processes of domination and exclusion. Instead of new generalizations, we need sharper focus on the complex singularities that constitute our respective power locations. The aim is not to reunify humanity in new universals but rather to ground it in diversity by accepting the changing perceptions and formations of the human in the posthuman era. In this re-



spect the environmental humanities give us a distinct foretaste of what we are in the process of becoming, as this enlightening volume so eloquently demonstrates.

## WORKS CITED

- Braidotti, Rosi. 2002. *Metamorphoses: Towards a Materialist Theory of Becoming*. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press.
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“An excellent book with an innovative approach that addresses many of the most vibrant and relevant topics in the field today.”

—**Heather Sullivan**, Trinity University, coeditor of  
*German Ecocriticism in the Anthropocene*

**B**ringing together new writing by some of the field’s most compelling voices from the United States and Europe, this is the first book to examine Italy—as a territory of both matter and imagination—through the lens of the environmental humanities. The contributors offer a wide spectrum of approaches—including ecocriticism, film studies, environmental history and sociology, eco-art, and animal and landscape studies—to move past cliché and reimagine Italy as a hybrid, plural, eloquent place.

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## Under the Sign of Nature: Explorations in Ecocriticism

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