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Bodies of Naples: Stories, Matter, and the Landscapes of Porosity

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6 Bodies of Naples

Stories, Matter, and the Landscapes of Porosity

Serenella Iovino

In the heart of the city of Naples there is a place with a curious name: Largo Corpo di Napoli. This little square opens up like an oyster at a point where the *decumani,* the Greek main streets, become a tangle of narrow medieval lanes and heavy gray-and-white buildings. Like an oyster, this square has a pearl: an ancient statue of the Nile, popularly known as *Corpo di Napoli,* the body of Naples. The story of this statue is peculiar. Dating back to the second or third century, when it was erected to mark the presence of an Egyptian colony in the city, the statue disappeared for a long time and was rediscovered in the twelfth century. Its head was missing, and the presence of children lying at its breasts led people to believe that it represented Parthenope, the virgin nymph to whom the foundation of the city is mythically attributed. In 1657 the statue was restored, and a more suitable male head made it clear that the reclining figure symbolized the Egyptian river and the children personifications of its tributaries. In spite of evidence and philology, however, for the people the sculpture remained the symbol of their city's body. In this body, as it sometimes happens in local rituals and legends, the boundaries of gender roles, like those of matter and spirit, present and past, are blurred and shifting.

Not far from the *Body of Naples,* concealed in a side lane, the city offers its corporeality again, this time in the overflowing baroque splendors of the San Severo Chapel. Here, other bodies appear: bodies of marble, like the *Veiled Christ* and the *Veiled Modesty,* two emphatic eighteenth-century sculptures in which the presence of a shroud makes the corporeal dimension even more naked and exposed, and, stunningly displayed in a scientific cabinet, a man and a pregnant woman, known as "anatomic machines." These bodies, whose circulatory systems and internal organs have been carefully reconstructed with wax using real skeletons as a basis, have also been for centuries the subjects of legends and popular tales about alchemical transubstantiations and mysterious practices that would preserve matter from corruption.

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In a few square meters, there is an accumulation of bodies: of mythical bodies alluding to the elemental forces and intermediate divinities presiding over the birth of the city, of bodies used as "anatomical machines" for protoscientific experiments, of marble bodies covered with marble veils to give the illusion of mystic weightlessness, and, most of all, of living human bodies. With three million residents in its metropolitan area, a volcanic region in coastal Campania, Naples is indeed one of the most populated Italian cities, and, within this overpopulated city, this quarter is one of the most filled with people, their emerging dynamics, and their stories.

This chapter is about some of the many bodies of Naples and its turbulent surroundings and about how stories, memories, and meanings are materially carved onto them. These are bodies of humans and nonhumans, hybrid bodies that coalesce with the materiality of places and natural forces, intra-acting with flows of substances, imagination, and discourses. Via these reciprocal transformations, the lively matter of these bodies becomes a template for the stories of this region, a narrative agency, a "storied matter."

Interpreting bodies—the bodies of Naples—as texts conveying the signs and meanings expressed by material forces, this chapter tries to shed light on the complexity of levels, at once ecological, political, telluric, artistic, cultural, that craft the life of this place. In the examination of two examples, taken from archaeological research and from literature, respectively, I will illustrate the Neapolitan landscape as a fluid compound of agencies in mutual determination in which every part emerges as a crossroad of ongoing stories.

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A Porous City

Like many German intellectuals and artists of his age, Walter Benjamin visited Naples several times during the 1920s. In a short memoir he wrote with Asja Lacis, the Brechtian actress with whom he was in love, the city is described with excited impressionism and defined with a recurrent adjective: "porous." In their Mitteleuropean eyes, Naples's porous texture involved forms and styles, gestures and behaviors, relationships and places (see Benjamin and Lacis, "Napoli" 33–39; Velardi). Most of all, though, the city looked porous to them because of its predominant building material: a pale-yellow, spongy, and sandy stone called "toof" (in Italian, *tufo*). Naples's toof, whose scientific name is *Ignimbrite campana*—literally, Campania's "fiery rock dust cloud" (from the Latin *ignis,* "fire," and *imber,* "rain")—is a sedimentary formation of pyroclastic rock, resulting from deposits of ash and lapilli explosions, and lava flows.[1] Toof exists in huge concentrations in the Campi Flegrei (literally, "Flaming Fields," from the Greek *phlégo,* "burn"), a vast volcanic area delimited at the Southeast by Mount Vesuvius. In the middle of this land, suspended between the sea and the volcano, and erected on toof, is Naples: a porous, volcanic city built up with porous, volcanic rock.

Figure 6.1. *Corpo di Napoli* (2012). Courtesy of Christian Arpaia.

Easy to work, light, resistant, and very abundant, toof is practically everywhere in Naples. Indeed, this rock is so copious that it has been used for almost every palace, church, house, fisherman cave, or storage room fabricated here prior to the advent of reinforced concrete. Permeating the very soil of Naples, toof is also an immediately available material, and this creates one of the city's fascinating paradoxes. The majority of the buildings, in fact, lie directly on the caves from where the construction materials were taken, giving the feeling of a city rising from its own womb. Thus, if Venice is erected upon an underwater forest of innumerable trees, Naples is founded on hollows, its bodies literally staying at the bottom of burning fields and living in houses and streets fabricated with volcanic rocks, whether toof or other kinds of lava formations. Developing in a vast network of subterranean tunnels, these hollows—used as storage spaces, domestic dumps, and, during World War II, as antiaircraft shelters—have filtered for centuries the matter and emotions of the city above, participating in its life with their underground mineral agency.

Although intended to be more picturesque than scientific, Benjamin and Lacis's definition of Naples as a "porous city" is very effective. Naples is porous in many ways. It is spatiotemporally porous: a city upon other cities, where traces of the Greek and Roman settlements, preserved in the underfoot layers, systematically overflow onto streets and corners, sharing transversal portions of space with medieval tribunals, Renaissance palaces, or baroque churches. Naples is porous because of its overall volcanic aura, a pervious agency that permeates the city's history. Indeed, eruptions have absorbed Naples's life for millennia. The last upsurge, in 1944, almost coincided with the entry of the Allied forces in the city. And volcanic porosity also fills the city's cultural imagination: to the many intellectuals and artists who, like Benjamin or Goethe long before him, stopped here on their Grand Tour, Mount Vesuvius's lush and sulfurous landscape provided a vibrant and swallowing experience of "volcanic sublime," a telluric variety of *Et in Arcadia ego*.

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But, examined more carefully, Naples's porosity replicates the porosity of all bodies taken as sites of "interchanges and transits" (Alaimo, *Bodily* 2), crossroads of agencies, and "congregational" entities (Bennett, *Vibrant* 34): permeable and compound systems, in which the alternation of plenum and void is the very condition of every possible existing thing. As Karen Barad explains, "According to the quantum field theory, the vacuum is far from empty; indeed, it's teeming with the full set of possibilities of what may come to be" (*Meeting* 354). If, from a physical viewpoint, void is literally the site where particles of matter can move, combine, and carry on activity, from a more general perspective, all possible bodies emerge from this interplay of emptiness and density. And it is this interplay that makes all bodies, from atoms and molecules to assemblages and collectives of humans and

nonhumans, permeable to the world. This porosity occurs at many levels, both material and semiotic, allowing transformations, metabolism, and flows of matter, energy, and information. It is interesting to notice that, before being proven by biologists and physicists, the permeability of matter had been a cornerstone of natural philosophy (more notably, of atomism) for millennia. The Epicurean poet Lucretius, for example, who lived and philosophized at the foothills of Mount Vesuvius, wrote in his lyrical treatise *The Nature of Things* that "however solid things appear . . . even these are porous":

> In a cave of rocks the seep of moisture trickles
> And the whole place weeps its fat blobs of tears.
> Food is dispersed all through a creature's body;
> Young trees grow tall and yield their fruit in season,
> Drawing their sustenance from the lowest roots
> Through trunks and branches; voices penetrate
> Walls and closed doors; the seep of stiffening cold
> Permeates bone. Phenomena like these
> Would be impossible but for empty spaces
> Where particles can pass. (30)

Filtering through time and visions, these ideas resonate with a passage from *The Fold,* where, commenting on Leibniz's ontology, Gilles Deleuze writes that matter "offers an infinitely porous, spongy, or cavernous texture without emptiness, caverns endlessly contained in other caverns: no matter how small, each body contains a world pierced with irregular passages" (5). This description seems to fit Naples's reality perfectly.

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Many centuries after Lucretius and Leibniz, today we know that every body, every corporeal entity, is intrinsically open, intrinsically "of and in the world" (Tuana, "Viscous" 198). It is, as Levy Bryant has written, "a heterogeneous and complex network of entities that is itself an entity or unity," a singularity that, in order to be what it is, has to be microscopically vast and to contain multitudes. Bodies, in other words, "are more like sponges than marbles"—also because, considered in their inner structure, "even marbles are a sort of sponge" (Bryant n.p.). Like every transformative or metabolic process of the world, thus, corporeality is always already open and trans-corporeal.[2] This trans-corporeality expresses itself in the way material substances interfere and intermingle with each other, determining the world as a site of ongoing hybridizations, from evolutionary processes to environmentally related illness. Also food consumption, as Lucretius reminds us, is a way through which bodies are reciprocally transformed. Eating is a mutual hybridization of bodily matters, and so are sweating, the chlorophyllian synthesis of plants, the physicochemical transformation of atoms into molecules with properties of their own, and the flowing of lava from the recesses of the

earth to the "open" world up above. All these are examples of the world's metabolic porosity, accurately expressed by the German word for "metabolism," *Stoffwechsel:* literally, an exchange of matter.

As bodies are what they are via their permeable boundaries (membranes that cause the flows of energy and matter), so, too, bigger entities and formations follow the same dynamics. A city, for example, is a porous body inhabited by other porous bodies, a mineral-vegetal-animal aggregate of porous bodies. Following the patterns of intra-action, cities are compounds of matter and energy in mutual transformation with human and nonhuman beings, living and nonliving matter, thus participating in the world's "geochoreographies" (Cohen, "Stories" 56). A convincing model for this porous geochoreography is provided by Manuel De Landa, who writes: "From the point of view of energetic and catalytic flows, human societies are very much like lava flows; and human-made structures (mineralized cities and institutions) are very much like mountains and rocks: accumulations of materials hardened and shaped by historical processes" (55). There is a substantial—ontological and historical—continuity in the formation of cities and volcanic rocks. The rhythms of "mineralization" and "catalysis" of cities might differ from those of geological structures, but they are part of the ongoing morphing process that involves together organisms, structures, genes, languages, or ideas: "Living creatures and their inorganic counterparts share a crucial dependence on intense flows of energy and materials. . . . Our organic bodies are, in this sense, nothing but temporary coagulations in these flows" (104). Seen in this light, porosity is not only the basis of change, growth, and decay both on a geological and a human level, but the very condition of history: a history that is not a linear succession of events, but rather a path emerging from the fluxes of matter and energy in which our organic bodies are "nothing but temporary coagulations," as De Landa says.

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In the vast landscape of porosity, cognition occupies an important part, too. As Varela, Thompson, and Rosch explain, cognition "depends on the kind of experience that comes from having a body with various sensorimotor capacities"—capacities that "are themselves embedded in a more encompassing biological, psychological, and cultural context" (173). As a set of embodied practices, knowledge consists "in the interface between mind, society, and culture, rather than in one or even in all of them" (Varela, Thompson, and Rosch 179). Knowledge—human and nonhuman informational interchange with the world—is a form of porosity; it is the way the world enters and conditions habits of living, thus determining the way living beings *in-habit* the world. To say that knowledge is "embodied" means that the world acts together with bodies, becoming sedimented in and filtered through cognitive practices. This is what N. Katherine Hayles, in *How We Became Posthuman,* describes as a process of cognitive "embodiment." Every cognitive experience, whether an "incorporated practice" ("an action that is encoded

into bodily memory by repeated performances until it becomes habitual" [199]) or the enactive processes of "embodied knowledge," is rooted in the mutual porosity of bodies and world. Embodied knowledge, in particular, is a process and a flux, "a mode of learning which is . . . different from that deriving from cogitation alone" (201), and therefore "contextual, enmeshed with the specifics of place, time, physiology, and culture" (196). In other words, knowledge comes from the give-and-take between bodies and the world. It materializes the porous exchange of inside and outside, the progressive becoming-together of bodies and the world, their intra-action.

This discloses another important dimension of this permeability, which is also discursive and semiotic: the flow of information and discursive practices through bodies. Phenomena such as gender, sexuality, class, social practices, *and their narratives* are filtered through this porosity as forms of an "emergent interplay" of natural-cultural factors. This is the key of Alaimo's trans-corporeality and of what Nancy Tuana calls an "interactionist ontology": an ontology in which the social is considered in its materiality, in strict combination with the agency of the natural, thus challenging essentialist visions and their normative constructions (see "Viscous" 188). "Porosity" means here the permeability not only "between our flesh and the flesh of the world we are of and in" (198), but also between bodies and the discursive worlds in which they are located: bodies "produc[e] culture at the same time that culture produces . . . bod[ies]" (Hayles 200). This "emergent interplay" or, in Barad's compelling term, intra-action of matter, discourses, and cognitions shows that there are not clear-cut boundaries separating "the natural from the human-constructed, the biological from the cultural, genes from their environments, the material from the semiotic" (Tuana, "Viscous" 198), but that every body is a crossing of flesh and meanings, a unique coagulation in the stories of matter.

Bodies of Stone and Bones. Do not distribute without permission.

The landscape of Naples and its region not only is materially and historically porous, alternating hollows and density in "a mosaic of ecological and semiotic processes" (Farina 64), but also, with its coemerging bodies, epitomizes such a vision. Being themselves players in the making of the world, all of these bodies are in fact enactive and cognitive filters for agencies, which are natural and social, human and nonhuman, visible or invisible, foreseen or unpredictable. Their narrative porosity becomes therefore both the point where the world enters bodies and the point from which bodies deliver their stories to the world. In this junction, made of material, social, and cognitive mergings, material ecocriticism concentrates its analyses.

(Absent) Bodies

An interesting chapter of this story of bodies and porosity is to be found a few miles south of Naples, displayed in the dusty showcases of Pompeii's *antiquar-*

ium. It tells us about the eruption that in AD 79 affected a vast territory at the foothills of Mount Vesuvius, modifying life and landscape of the Neapolitan area.

Forgotten for many centuries, the site of ancient Pompeii had been rediscovered (and severely plundered) by the Bourbons, Naples's Spanish sovereigns, at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and finally identified in 1763. Over time, many bodies have emerged from the excavations. These were bodies that, covered with volcanic debris, had left their imprints in the solidified lava, so that one could see "the full form of the dead, their clothing, and their hair" (Beard 6). But similarly eloquent were other kinds of bodies, the absent ones. Here, again, porosity is part of the picture. As cyberneticians know, information is not only embodied in the *presence* of the object, in its material density; absent objects can also convey a message and a meaning. In other words, the void also possesses a semiotic dimension. Similar to Naples's buildings emerging from the hollows of the city, Pompeii's bodies emerged from their own absence, from the hollows they left in the petrified ash after decomposing. These absent bodies started materializing around the 1860s, via a technique developed to obtain casts of wooden doors, shutters, furniture, and other perishable objects. Like a photonegative, this void was charged with information; combined with plaster, it made it possible to look into that historical moment, literally giving a face to the—human and nonhuman—victims of the eruption.

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From an archaeological viewpoint, the combination of excavated and "photonegative" findings, of plenum and void, constitutes a site full of narratives: narratives about social roles and gender practices, about what Bruno Latour calls assemblages and collectives, about human and nonhuman agencies in ancient everyday life. It is not by chance that archaeology is one of the fields in which the dialogue with the new materialisms has emerged more significantly.[3] Reading into the stratified natural-cultural ecologies of this place, the archaeological research has indeed opened windows on more-than-human realities both in larger visions and in little but meaningful segments. From the many examples that can be quoted, one is the discovery of small breads left in an oven where they were being baked when the upsurge started. Baked twice, both by human and by volcanic heat, these breads remained suspended in the twilight zone where intentionality is overcome by material agency, thus turning into an involuntary *mise en abyme* of the town swallowed by lava. Another compelling snapshot on this world of confluent forces is offered by the cast of a guard dog, suffocated by the ash and pumice in the hopeless attempt to get rid of his chain. With his bronze studded collar and the excruciating fear still visible in his (absent) face, the dog shared the same fate of a man, probably a slave, who died while trying to unshackle his ankles from the iron bonds that tied them. Like material texts emerging from the void, these plaster casts render the agony of human and nonhuman bodies in a pitiless combination with the agency of the elements and of socially constructed bindings.

But, following the tracks of porosity, I would like to focus now on another narrative, complementary to the one collected by archaeologists. In this intra-active narrative, the alternation of plenum and void—in terms of bodies, memory, and cognition—sheds light on the "emergent interplay" of agencies at work in the event of AD 79.

The surprise inscribed in these bodies is a key element of this narrative. When the German philosopher Karl Löwith saw the plaster casts in 1924, he commented, "Death took them in the middle of life, not leaving them, so to speak, the time of dying" (63; my translation). Although this might appear normal for people facing a natural cataclysm, in Pompeii the people's surprise reveals another important element of this story of presence-absence, density and void. Considered on a cognitive level, the volcanic eruption is a breach, an epistemic rupture in the mind of this place. For a long time Mount Vesuvius was believed to be a mountain. Some Roman writers had commented on the mountain's similarity to Mount Etna, an active volcano in Sicily, or conjectured about Vesuvius's being a volcano. Strabo, for example, had written that the summit "shows pore-like cavities in masses of rock that . . . [look] as though they had been eaten out by fire; and hence one might infer that in earlier times this district was on fire and had craters of fire" (453). However, Vesuvius had been dormant for eight hundred years: the memory of its agency had simply disappeared from the general narratives about this place—thus, the epistemic (and physical) shock. As Jeffrey Cohen says, nature's active powers "surprise and then confound" ("Ecology's" xxiv).

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In her essay "Landscape, Memory, and Forgetting," Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands has expressed inspiring considerations on the ties between memory, body, and landscape. Drawing from the medical research about Alzheimer's disease and from David Abram's ecophenomenology, she writes:

> Remembrance—the act of embodying an act or object or place or concept in some portion of the brain or another—is not solely a question of the remembering subject. Both the written page and the storied landscape are warehouses of memory that are external to the individual body. . . . [T]he act of remembering involves a recognition of a relationship between the body/mind and the external world that is not only determined by internal forces. The experience of memory is thus always already social, technological, and physical in that the conditions of the relationship between brain and object cannot help but be located in a complex range of conditions that offer the subject to the experience, and experience to the subject. (274)

There is, in other words, a mutual porosity, an intra-action, between individuals and their landscapes, both embodying, as Abram suggests, the mind of place (see Abram, *Becoming* and *The Spell;* Iovino "Restoring"). Lacking the recognition of the way the "relationship between the body/mind and the external world" could be articulated, these bodies express the surprise in the place's mind—a mind

whose memory, Sandilands maintains, is "always already social, technological, and physical" ("Landscape" 274).

But the place's mind is, here, an amnesiac mind. Ironically enough, already a couple of centuries after Pompeii had been buried by lava, there was almost no memory of its site anymore. The excavations and the emerging of these bodies from the hollows of space-time-matter represent therefore another epistemic rupture. This is a clear example of how material agency and discursive practices mingle in shaping the human and nonhuman world—bodies, landscape, and memory. The world is not simply "fabricated" by discourses and cultural memory. There is a strong, deep, and complex interrelation between the agency of natural forces and the agency of cultural practices. The landscape of discourses, words, and conceptual descriptors melts with the landscape of elements, of geology, of telluric and atmospheric agencies, of biotic and ecosystemic balances. The case of these bodies—and houses, and things, and forgotten places—emerging from the underground levels of a buried city is dialectically complementary to the surge of lava from the body of a mountain. Being rich with signs and meanings, and therefore with information, both these bodies and the lava create a material-semiotic compound. In this compound, while the bodies inform (and narrate) about an almost forgotten complexity (the site of the ancient Pompeii), the lava informs (and narrates) about the forgotten orographic structure of this site, inhabited by volcanic and seismic agencies, even though believed to be "simply" a mountain.

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The forgetfulness about the fact that every mountain has its own rhythms of motion, its telluric choreography, signals the human forgetfulness of nature's agentic force. The material correlation of memory and forgetting, however, is meaningful evidence about how society and nature cooperate in shaping "a world of complex phenomena in dynamic relationality" (Tuana, "Material" 239). If these bodies left their imprints and transmitted their narratives over time, it is because of the interstice opened by a combination of biochemical elements, environmental conditions, and geophysical energies over time. This interstice is filled with apersonal agency and is pervaded by forces that, as Jeffrey Cohen says, are inhuman per definition:

> *Inhuman* means not human . . . and therefore includes a world of forces, objects, and nonhuman beings. But *in-human* also indicates the alien within (a human body is an ecosystem filled with strange organisms; a human collective is an ecosystem filled with strange objects), and requires as well a consideration of the violently *inhumane.* ("Zombie" 271)

The "violently inhumane" can have many forms: a volcanic eruption, a virus, a falling asteroid, war, and even politics. Combined with human life, all these things shape "collectives" in which strange objects express their agency in pulsating porosity. What material ecocriticism suggests is that these collectives are dynamically contextual, their agency always porously "in the making" with an outside.

Taken in their process of becoming with the world—of intra-active embodiment—bodies display "the importance of context to human cognition," also in relation to memory: "Just as disembodiment require[s] that context be erased, so remembering embodiment means that context be put back into the picture" (Hayles 203). In this porous dimension in which bodies are absorbed by the world, and the world—in the form of lava or discourses—is absorbed by bodies, landscape is the material and cognitive context of memory. And it is, therefore, a transformative site of cognitive categories. If remembrance is "a recognition of a relationship between the body/mind and the external world that is not only determined by internal forces" (Mortimer-Sandilands, "Landscape" 274), then landscape is the deciding site where the relation of inside and outside, body-mind and world, gets reinforced or progressively erased. In the shadow of Vesuvius, an intra-action of multifarious elements produced an ironic phenomenon: just like the "natural" body of a volcano was forgotten in the evolving human narratives, the "cultural" and more-than-human body of Pompeii was forgotten only a couple of centuries after it was buried by the eruption.

In the choreography of agencies moving in the hollows and plenums of space-time-matter, the erratic emergences of naturecultures always surprise, and then confound.

Flesh and Skin

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In 1944, just after the arrival of the Allied Army, another eruption hit the Vesuvian area. Curzio Malaparte (1898–1957), a former Fascist journalist who subsequently became a philo-American writer, described the event in his novel *The Skin:*

> The sky to east was scarred by a huge, crimson gash, which tinged the sea blood-red. . . . Shaken by subterranean convulsions, the earth trembled; the houses rocked at their foundations. . . . Vesuvius was screaming in the night, spitting blood and fire. Never since the day that saw the final destruction of Herculaneum and Pompeii, buried alive in their tomb of ashes and lava, had so dreadful a voice been heard in the heavens. (280)

The violence of nature and the violence of the humans over Naples's bodies go hand in hand in this controversial book, written immediately after the end of the war and published in 1949. Fiercely attacked by many Italian intellectuals of the time and even censored for the crudeness of its descriptions of Naples's "moral plagues" (in the English translation, several scenes and an entire chapter on an ancient ritual of "queer maternity" are missing), *The Skin* (*La pelle*) is the story about the "liberation" of Naples, occupied by the Allied Army in 1943. More than a novel with a traditional plot, the book is a memoir-like succession of apparently autobiographic episodes taken from the author's experience as an officer of the Italian Army. Having the function of facilitating the "interchange" between the Americans and "liberated" Naples, Malaparte himself seems to act as a membrane,

a filter between these two different worlds. (This is also evident from the recurring usage of English expressions in the novel.) With his dense and provocative prose, Malaparte—who had already represented the brutality of World War II in his previous novel *Kaputt* (1944)—scratches the surface of this world of liberators and victims, pointing out the penetration of the "violently inhumane" (volcanic eruptions, war, corruption) into the city's flesh. Showing Naples's destroyed urban body and its innumerable wounded bodies (both human and nonhuman), Malaparte's novel represents how, coupled with the uncontrollable agency of nature, war and liberation create an unpredicted mixture of material and discursive elements that penetrate the skin of people and the land, irremediably changing them, leaving them without protection, either from the outside or from the inside.

The quoted passage on the eruption of 1944 is exemplary in this respect. Here, as in several other similar places, the author's rhetorical artifice of humanizing natural elements is evident, even excessive: the sky is disfigured and bleeds into the sea; the earth trembles in convulsions, and houses rock; the volcano screams in the night, "spitting blood and fire"; its "dreadful voice" is "heard" in the heavens. In spite of their apparent (at times naive and grotesque) anthropomorphism, however, these lines convey a complex vision of nature and history. In this vision, the volcanic eruption and the scars on land act as a counterpoint to the discourse about the city being "liberated" by the Allied Army. Even if war—the "violently *inhumane*" per definition—is apparently over, there is no liberation from the "violently *inhuman*" agency of the elements: an agency so gruesome to assault the body of the land itself and to make the elements "scream" in terror and convulsion. But something clearly emerges in this place suffering the tremendous aftermaths of the conflict: in front of the violence of both war and nature, everything is a body, and everything is ripped and exposed. Like the bodies of people and animals, also the land, the sea, the sky, and the volcano are bodies. The eruption and the war affecting the land's body play a natural-cultural mirroring game—again, a *mise en abyme*—with the eruption and war affecting the bodies of Naples. Saturating this porous corporeal "collective," a dangerous—sometimes terrifying—intra-action of agencies scratches every skin and penetrates every flesh.

In Malaparte's novel the skin is thus both a membrane and a metaphor: it is a medium for and a sign of the permeability of substances. Once the skin has been damaged, these substances—and elements, discourses, practices, and worldviews—enter in collision with each other, leaving bodies fully exposed to the "violently inhumane." As a result, all the oddities, the contradictions, and the "moral" ruins of this place are conjured up on the surface, materializing into Naples's bodies and their stories.

Among these bodies, the most vulnerable to the violence of "History" (the capitalized "History" that figures as the magmatic and obscurely agentic background in Elsa Morante's famous novel *La storia*) are those of the "innocents":

children, virgins sold to American soldiers, animals, and even rare fishes taken from the Aquarium to be served as a meal in surreal banquets.

All of these bodies, in Malaparte's book, are transformed into narrative agencies that testify to the entanglements of politics, violence, illness, moral discourses, and survival struggles in a city whose rich and glorious past seems to be turned into damnation. Naples's damnation, Malaparte suggests, is its failed transformation of the body politic into a real, modern, citizenry.[4] In the imagination of the city, the body is therefore everything: it is language, it is money, it is food, it is a battlefield, an abyss, and a fate. It is even a convulsive proscenium for queer sexuality, as in the censored episode "Il figlio di Adamo," "Adam's son" (*La pelle* 135–56). Invited by an American officer, Malaparte attends a secretly performed ritual of "queer maternity." In a villa at the foothills of Mount Vesuvius, a young man, disguised as a woman and surrounded by several other figures (Allied officers, male members of the local aristocracy, young peasants, and an old woman acting as a midwife), "gives birth" to a "little monster" (150), a baby-like wooden puppet. After this dramatic scene, pervaded by grotesque excitement, an orgy takes place. Here the puppet, which displays a huge phallus, similar to the augural priapic statuettes found in Pompeii, is taken in triumph and then dismembered.

Interesting comments could be made here, for example, on the connection between queerness, power, and pre-Christian rituals of generation.[5] However, this episode reminds us that the bodies of Naples are intrinsically hybrid and queer: in the novel and in the city's imagination, they are in fact male and female, human and nonhuman, sacred and impure. Seen in this light, the *Corpo di Napoli* is also a queer statue: a male body apparently breast-feeding its children. Even Parthenope, the nymph or siren who, according to legends, founded the city, is a hybrid being, halfway between the human and the nonhuman. In Malaparte's novel, Naples itself emerges as city and noncity: a preurban dimension inhabited by a historically porous collective of human and nonhuman forces, in which the human part waits to "progress" toward citizenry and reason. In this world, whose history is always hybridized with mythos, and whose bodies are always interspersed with all sorts of material-discursive agencies, the human "is determined in that no-one's land between myth and reason, in the ambiguous twilight where the living accepts to be confronted with the inanimate images delivered to it by historical memory, so that it can take them back to life," as Giorgio Agamben says (*Ninfe* 34–35, my translation). In *The Skin,* this queer and posthuman dimension is the other side of the Arcadian Mediterranean dream of (philosophical and physical) light and (natural and moral) lushness. Dark, violent, and queer, Malaparte's Naples is the Mediterranean's Underworld.

An uncanny continuity unifies the bodies that populate this porous Underworld. This is the continuity of blurred ontological boundaries: here all bodies, human and nonhuman, are metamorphoses of each other, blends of material elements

in their formative and performative histories. But this porous interchange of substances is even more visible in the inescapably metabolic and quasi-cannibalistic dimension of life: as Malaparte insists, commensality and mutual ingestion are basic relations among Naples's bodies.

An interesting episode to be quoted in this context is that of "General Cork's Banquet." In a starving Naples, fishing in the bay has been prohibited due to the pollution caused by bombing (an element through which the trans-corporeal dimension of the environments of war is interestingly depicted). As a result, the Americans start eating fish from the Aquarium, and, in a gala dinner at the headquarters, a "siren" is served over a bed of lettuce and corals. In an expressionist crescendo of bodily details, this rare fish—here claimed to belong to the family of Sirenoidei—is described as having the look of a boiled little girl:

> In the middle of the tray was a little girl, or something that resembled a little girl. She lay face upwards . . . encircled by a large wreath of pink coral stems. . . . She might have been not more than eight or ten years old. . . . Here and there . . . the skin had been torn out or pulpified by the process of cooking, and through the cracks and fissures a glimpse was afforded of the tender flesh, which in some places was silvery, in others golden. . . . She had short, fin-like arms, pointed at the ends and similar in shape to hands with no fingers. . . . Her flanks were long and slender, and terminated, exactly as Ovid says, *in piscem*—in a fish's tail. . . . It was the first time that I had even seen a little girl who had been cooked . . . and I was silent. . . . All the diners were pale with horror.
>
> General Cork raised his eyes and looked at his guests. "But it isn't a fish . . . It's a little girl!" he exclaimed in a trembling voice.
>
> "No," I said, "it's a fish. . . . It's the famous Siren from the Aquarium." (235–36)

Besides the trustworthiness of the episode, which is closer to surrealism than to ichthyology and certainly a literary invention of the author's, in this context the idea of eating rare fish from an aquarium has a very powerful symbolic significance. It represents the devastation of a war serving on plates of the finest porcelain a library of evolution—a natural evolution, but also a symbolic-cultural one. The siren is part of the imagination of a city stemming from a "virginal" mermaid (the mythical Parthenope), and where even the virginity of the children's bodies is disrupted by the violence of war. Eating the siren is a "naked lunch" disclosing a material-symbolic abyss: it means, indeed, eating the substance and body of the city and ritually consuming its identity through a marine and evolutionary Eucharist. In this precultural cannibalistic dimension, the body of a fish is enmeshed with that of a human being, producing an intermediate and hybrid deity, which is here much more concrete, physical, and ontologically eloquent than the disembodied Spirit of transcendental theology. In this paradoxical ritual, meta-

physics is turned into metabolism. *Parousía*—the advent and presence of God—is turned into porosity.

The fact that the diners (among whom military officers, a lady, and a Catholic priest) refuse to eat this meal, and the fact that, nevertheless, this humanlike fish is killed and cooked, recalls the dialectic antithesis between conscious and unconscious, totem and taboo.[6] It is a cultural self-censorship that clashes with war as a total openness and wildness, both corporeal and moral. And in fact, the territory, like its bodies, is now wildly open. War opens the corporeal breach, which is the breach wide open in the body of land, society, and the city. Trans-corporeality becomes here inter-corporeality, in the sense that there is no frontier in the attack to the bodies of Naples, even more if these bodies are sacred. Once sirens have been slaughtered, everything that happens afterward is simple corollary.

* * *

What are the stories of Naples's bodies *today*? The discussed examples have been chosen to answer this very question, because the stories they tell are still written in today's bodies. The first is a story of forgetfulness: an amnesia that—despite the plethora of popular songs and rhetorical statements—is still visible in the fissure between the Vesuvian people and their volcanic land. In fact, regardless of physical evidence, embodied cognitions, and any precautionary principle, in the local imagination Mount Vesuvius has returned to being "simply" a mountain, and it is covered with a crust of (mainly unlawful) constructions, which nearly reach the crater. The second is a story of violence and war: a violence and war pervading in many forms the flesh and skin of this land's bodies. These bodies are often toxic, absorbing in their porosity the millions of tons of pollutants illegally dumped in this region by the so-called ecomafia and its vast network of political complicities.[7]

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All of these stories are written on the living bodies of Naples. They are bodies in which, like in Pompeii's plasters, an absence is often encapsulated: it is the absence of citizenship and of collective protection, the absence of a political ecology both of things and of humans. Here material ecocriticism veers into environmental justice. Here, as Marco Armiero and Giacomo D'Alisa write about Naples's waste crisis, "the very frontier between surrounding and surrounded is blurred up . . . placing human body at the crossroad of this meeting" (56). In a material-ecocritical perspective, it is not only the frontier between surrounding and surrounded to be blurred up, but also the frontier of the text. The body is a semiotic agency in its very materiality. It is *in* the body that the formative agencies at work in a place's life materialize and express themselves. Naples's bodies are texts, the city itself is a text, and its texture is its own narrative. It is a narrative populated by substances, choices, voices, human presences, illness, scars, memory, forget-

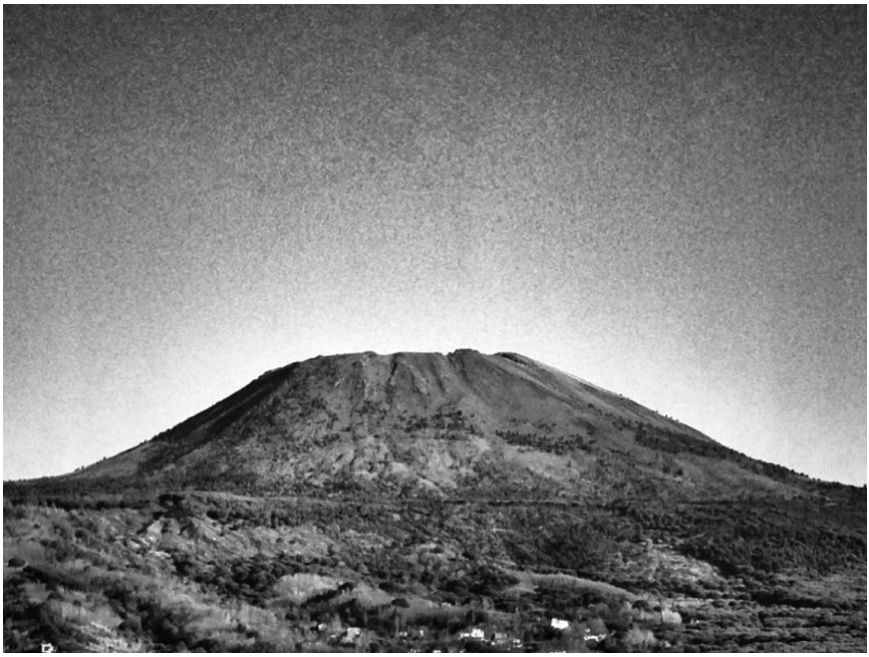

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Figure 6.2. *The Sleep of Reason* (2012). Courtesy of Christian Arpaia.

fulness, natural catastrophes, war, contamination, fear, death, and life. The narrative agency of these porous bodies conveys the matter and discourses of their formative histories. In so doing, it creates ties of awareness that, disclosing the processes at work in these bodies' becoming, restore their political imagination. Here the role of literature and creativity is essential: when human creativity "plays" together with the narrative agency of matter, intra-acting with it, it can generate stories and discourses that "diffract" the complexity of our porous collective, producing narrative emergences that amplify reality, also affecting our cognitive response to this reality. In ethical and political terms, this has a great potential for a practice of liberation.

Here this Vesuvian antipastoral, filtered by my compound body-mind, temporarily pauses. This journey across storied matter of Naples, however, is not finished. The narrative crossroads where this city, like every other place, tells its stories through all of its bodies will continue to produce creative diffractions. This will happen through all those who, intra-acting with their complexity, will be part of the landscapes of porosity. Including you, reader. Because now you, too, are part of the story.

Notes

1. The term "ignimbrite" was coined by New Zealand geologist Patrick Marshall (1869–1950). See his essay "Acid Rocks" 1.

2. A recurrent word and a foundational concept of material ecocriticism, trans-corporeality has been firstly developed by Stacy Alaimo in her essay "Trans-corporeal Feminism" and in her award-winning book *Bodily Natures.* For a discussion, see Iovino, "Steps."

3. For the role of archaeology in the material turn, see *The Oxford Handbook of Material Culture Studies* and *The Cambridge Companion to Historical Archaeology,* both edited by Dan Hicks and Mary C. Beaudry. Particularly useful are, in our perspective, the methods of documentary archaeology, for which each body is a "body of evidence," a unique lens to visualize "past lives" in variable "scalar and temporal resolution" (Wilkie 13). See also the essays on archaeology and material agency in Knappett and Malafouris, *Material Agency* (in particular, Sutton, "Material Agency, Skill, and History"; and Yarrow, "In Context").

4. On this point, see also Iovino, "Naples," in particular the discourse of "thwarted citizenship."

5. For a reading of this scene in relation to the ancient gnostic cults once widespread in the region (Mithra, Zoroaster), see Albrile 17–18. On the tie between queerness and "race" under Fascism, see Benadusi 100.

6. Malaparte's comment about his having seen a "cooked girl" for "the first time" is also noteworthy, implying that the serving up of the bodies of Naples will be repeated in future banquets. I thank Elena M. Past for drawing my attention to this element.

7. See Armiero, "Seeing"; Iovino, "Naples," "Stories," and "Keyword." See also Past, "Trash."

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