

## Pollution

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“Garbage hills are alive,” Robert Sullivan writes in the travelogue of his explorations along the waste dumps outside Manhattan: “there are billions of microscopic organisms thriving underground in dark, oxygen-free communities” (2006, 96). After metabolizing the trash of New Jersey or New York, these cells will “exhale huge underground plumes of carbon dioxide and of warm moist methane” (2006, 96), soaking through the ground or crawling up into the atmosphere, where they will eventually compost the ozone layer.

Whether organic or not, an alien agency is a constant feature in landscapes of pollution. As in the garbage hills of New Jersey, there is life in Naples’s exhausted landfills—life, in the hazardous elements that saturate the pastures in the “Triangle of Death,” a former agricultural area comprised by the towns of Acerra, Nola, and Marigliano, now entirely poisoned by dioxin, polychlorinated biphenyls, and other noxious waste (Senior and Mazza 2004). There is life in the asbestos plaques abandoned under the motorway flyovers, and in the barrels of toxic substances spilled overnight in the canals meant to irrigate the lush country at the foothills of Mount Vesuvius. There is life, but not because these things are alive. In fact, only a small portion of the waste discarded in the soil, sea, and watercourses of Campania, Naples’s region, is “metabolic.” In most cases these are only heaps of inorganic matter, concentrations of nonliving toxicity. Nevertheless, such waste lives in and across the bodies it intersects in its

magmatic trajectories of contamination. Epidemiological studies report an alarming increase of toxic-related diseases due to an intermingling of elements such as arsenic in water supplies, lead, cadmium, and mercury in the ground, and dioxin in the residents' blood (De Felip and Di Domenico 2010).

The case of Naples is emblematic of a combination of historical factors that includes decades of misrule, missed social integration, wrong development policies, industrial contamination, poor enforcement of environmental regulation, a chronic need for jobs, and insufficient waste facilities for a growing population. Over the years this dangerous mix has led to a "waste crisis" culminating in 2008 with four hundred thousand tons of uncollected rubbish piled in the streets. Making this picture gloomier is the recent emergence of the "ecomafia." Coined in 1994 by Legambiente, the major Italian environmental NGO, the term "ecomafia" describes a whole series of ecologically lethal criminal activities, organized in networks that extend far beyond Italian borders. Among these crimes, the unlawful disposing of waste stands out as the most profitable and harmful (Pergolizzi 2012). It has been calculated that, from 1993 to 2008, ten million tons of waste have been illegally dumped in the Campania region (Legambiente 2008). The Neapolitan writer Roberto Saviano has pictured this pile of rubbish as "the tallest mountain on earth" (2007, 283), bigger than Mont Blanc and Everest put together, rising 47,900 feet from a base of three hectares. Targeted in detectable, but more often in undetectable ways, the population can hardly avoid the risks of contamination.

As the story shows, there is a form of pollution just as infiltrating and dangerous as the material one. This is the pollution hiding in behaviors and words, in the hazy territory where political discourses and social life intermingle with environmentally lethal

activities, some of which are illegal, some others of which are perfectly within the bounds of the law and regulation. To see pollution as a material or “physical” phenomenon is therefore to see it only in part. As Herbert Marcuse said, “Pollution and poisoning are mental as well as physical phenomena, subjective as well as objective phenomena” (2005, 175). Confirming this argument, the Naples case proves how pollution is an interplay of harmful material substances and harmful discourses and practices, whereby inadequate environmental policies, corruption, criminal complicities, and lack of adequate epistemological instruments often cooperate with uncontrolled industrial activities and forms of maldevelopment in ripping the social fabric, creating unequal protection, thwarting citizenship (Iovino 2009), and damaging human and non-human life. All these elements merge into the flesh of the body politic, proving how ecological health—namely, the health of biological systems—is strictly connected to political, social, and ethical issues in the forms of a participatory democracy and “cognitive justice” (de Sousa Santos 2007a; Armiero 2008; Armiero and D’Alisa 2011).

One of the major causes of the ecological crisis, pollution, has been, for more than two centuries, the dark outcome of industrial development. While liberating many people from hardships and needs, this development has also created new forms of oppression for human and nonhuman natures. This makes “pollution” a keyword for understanding these oppressions. Considered in its complex framework of material and discursive elements, in fact, pollution has the power to reveal abuses and inequalities. Tracing pollution through the bodies of living organisms and living land as in a litmus test, this keyword signals the stories of political failures, socio-ecological decline, and the discriminatory practices that infiltrate uneven societies.