

## Editorial

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In *Invisible Cities*, Italo Calvino conjures up an imaginary dialogue between Marco Polo and Kublai Khan. The subjects of their conversations are, as expected, cities. More unexpected, however, are the *natures* of the cities, meticulously arranged in a geography made up of memory, signs, desire, eyes, names, the dead, the sky. These cities are themselves classified according to uncommon features: they are continuous cities, hidden cities, thin cities, trading cities. Talking of Zaira, “city of high bastions,” Marco reveals to the Khan:

The city [...] does not tell its past, but contains it like the lines of a hand, written in the corners of the streets, the gratings of the windows, the banisters of the steps, the antennae of the lightning rods, the poles of the flags, every segment marked in turn with scratches, indentations, scrolls. (9)

Like Zaira, every city contains its past in every segment and corner, just “like the lines of a hand.” This past is represented by sedimentations and disaggregations in the innumerable ties that connect the city to its elements—elements that are at the same time natural and non-natural, material and semiotic, human and more-than-human, and whose layers constitute the backbone of the city’s present as well. Traveling through Marco Polo’s imaginary urban universe, we understand that cities are strange organisms made of signs and stuff, energy flows and stories. Their memory is at once metabolic and historical; their dynamics include competition and cooperation, survival and extinction, transformation and permanence, just as for all organisms. Because, as Christopher Schliephake writes in his cutting-edge study *Urban Ecology*, “the city, too, is a form of nature” (xvi).

Guest-edited by Catrin Gersdorf, this special issue of *Ecozon@* sets out to further delineate the speculative charter of “Urban Ecologies,” a field that, to quote Schliephake again, views cities as something more than “spatial phenomena.” Like Calvino’s *Invisible Cities*, these urban agglomerations have:

manifold and complex material interrelations with their respective natural environments, and [...] harbor ‘minds’ [...] of their own: Ideas, imaginations, and interpretations that make up the [...] discursive side of our urban lives and that are stored and constantly re-negotiated in their cultural and artistic representations. (Schliephake xii)

Faced with the challenge of delving into these “minds,” the Creative Writing and Arts Section explores the way the naturalcultural imagination of and around urban ecologies is conveyed by photos and poems. The first contribution is *Madrid Rio* by Laura Sánchez-Vizcaíno. A cinematographer and videoartist by training, and a naturopathic therapist by vocation, here Sánchez-Vizcaíno interprets a contemplative visit to the Madrid Rio

Project (2003), a grand urban-ecological experiment thanks to which a river and its urban environment have been finally restored to a dimension of shared life. One of Europe's most ambitious endeavors of this genre, jointly pursued by Spanish and international landscape architects and engineers, the Madrid Rio is a restoration of the Manzanares River's original riverbed that directs the ring motorway underground, thus revitalizing not only the sense of place of the residents, but also the more-than-human destination of this ecosystem. As Sánchez-Vizcaíno explains in her description—a short but very insightful piece covering various aspects of the Madrid Rio plan—"citizens were consulted on how they envisioned a revitalized river-space, a major presence in traditional festivals and paintings of an earlier Madrid." Reminding us of Henri Lefebvre's remark that "every social space has a history, one invariably grounded in nature" (110), this socio-ecological restoration has thus helped to transform a depressed urban area into a new, meaningful ecology of the place's "mind," teeming with life and creativity. And this new urban ecology of mind is exactly what we read in Sánchez-Vizcaíno's artistic pictures, including the cover of this issue ("Y in Green").

The second contribution is *Racconti di confine\_Critical Zones (Stories from the Border\_Critical Zones)* by Pompeian architect and photographer Christian Arpaia. In these seven powerful black-and-white images, all shot in the Italian South, Arpaia captures phases of urban ecologies as episodes of a tranquil apocalypse. Silently, the built environment intermingles with the natural, up to the point of becoming organic, an element of a wider natural metabolism. This is the quiet apocalypse: the silent but indisputable revelation of natural-cultural dynamics of mutuality, that can show the demise of politics vis-à-vis rural abandonment or become oppressive and engulfing, like the geologic phagocytizations of the Anthropocene, where "the 'urban strata' of a major city and [its] geometrical complexity can seem limitless, almost fractal" (Zalasiewicz 121). This is clearly exemplified by "Caged\_N," where "N" might stand both for Naples, whose hardcore urban structure is represented in the photo, and "Nature", here embodied by the volcano in the background and all the (in-)natural elements that make up the life of this five-thousand-year-old city. Even more dramatically, there is the photograph "Ashes," a portrayal of Naples' avant-garde science hub Città della Scienza, set on fire (probably by the local mafia) in 2013. As Arpaia explains in his eloquent (and here warmly recommended) description:

This is the fate of the South: to be alive in spite of everything, in spite of bad politicians and of colonizations disguised as (short-term) "development" policies. Though, this being alive conveys very much the weight of a problematic life, which is often a struggle against the challenges of space\_time\_matter. Or against the threats of organized crime, as in the case of the City of Science ("Ashes") incinerated in 2013 and now slowly resurrecting.

However, the fate of the South is not solely one of demise and decline. The "original characters" of these lands, in fact, are not embodied only in quasi-relics such as abandoned agrarian houses ("Agrarian Reform") or old railway stations, but also emerge in the unexpected creativity of past concepts of the built environment. Basilicata's historic town Matera ("Matera") offers an example. From being the deserted backwater

of poverty epitomized by Carlo Levi's novel *Christ Stopped at Eboli*, it has become a UNESCO World Heritage Site and will be the European Capital of Culture in 2019.

The Art Section continues with two lyrical sylloges that stretch the map of urban ecologies to semi-rural and post-pastoral environments. In the first, "Early Light and Other Poems," Kathryn Jo Kirkpatrick—a Professor of English at Appalachian State University and a recognized poet, winner of important awards—explores "an ethic of care across the boundaries of species and ability," as she declares in her illuminating statement. Inspired by the author's personal ecology of mind and places, one made of multi-species encounters and the intimate pain of living with a cognitively impaired parent, these poems express the blurred boundaries of domesticity (which can be co-evolutionary and more-than-human) and wilderness (which can be in turn *in/human*, in the sense of profoundly intimate and yet uncanny<sup>1</sup>). Emerging from her world of "sheepdogs, raccoons, nuthatches, black-capped chickadees, cardinals," cows, calves, and disabled mother, Kirkpatrick's poems embody the geography of a space that is impossible to understand from within species-specific outlooks. In these lyrics, the nonhuman is not merely symbolic or metaphorical, but also intrinsically alive as an individual always already in relation with other individuals, whether by way of bonds of blood, competition, or solidarity. This *inhabited* ecology of difference allows the human to better understand its role—evolutionary, ethical, and emotional—in a world whose real cypher is coexistence. The section closes with Dean Anthony Brink's *Five Poems*. A professor at the Taiwanese National Chiao Tung University, a poet, and a piano composer, Brink illustrates here the collapse of pastoral ideals (and dreams) vis-à-vis the crises of urban (and post-urban) environments. Here, as in Kirkpatrick's verses, global dynamics are interlaced with the lives of human and nonhuman animals. And powerful interlacements also tie the fate of our systems (husbandry, big cities, Anthropocene sceneries) to things and elements. In visions of vast horizons, individuals are all trapped in inescapable mechanisms that produce material dead-ends and ethical inquietudes. As Brink writes in "Edenic Cul-de-Sac":

While half up river  
salmon jump the perimeter  
islands lost to global warming gave way  
to airstrips and more Starbucks foaming  
while we say  
*what we've done to our earth is shoddy*  
and go on sewing echoes to empty bodies.

Starbucks, salmon, global warming, the earth, its landscapes, and all its inhabitants. Like Zaira's antennae and banisters and lightning rods, these are the *natures* of the Anthropocene city in which we dwell. If the city is "a form of nature," imagining urban ecologies through art is yet another attempt to nudge the mind of our time toward more *inhabitable* creativities.

## Works Cited

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<sup>1</sup> See Cohen, *Stone: An Ecology of the Inhuman*. On disability as "human wilderness," see Iovino, *The Wilderness of the Human Other*.

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