

Binding and Liberating: Recipes for Environmental Narratives

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Abstract

Crafting narratives alternative to dominant discourses of natural-cultural depletion is one of the signature goals of the ecocritical “test kitchen.” This culinary analogy highlights deeper similarities: both recipes and eco-narratives create symbolic and material connections between people and the environment, which, in turn, enable transformative practices. But how can we craft messages that are generative of positive processes of transformation? Or, to put it differently, what are recipes for eco-narratives? This article proposes a versatile method to test what uses of language and dynamics elicited by texts might produce environmental action. The culinary experiment draws on Italian second-wave feminism, a theoretical “cuisine” that has engaged with language to rework dominant relationships to others and to the world. Feminist strategies, including the practice of “starting from oneself,” the reclaiming of the personal as political, and the retracing of alternative genealogies, have used language as a means simultaneously of liberation and of reconnection with the material, embodied world. This liberating binding is repurposed as a key technique to craft and identify effective eco-narratives. Here, feminist strategies intersect with the chemical and social operations of cooking through discussion of three recipes tied to the author’s Mediterranean origins: a milk pudding, eggless fresh pasta, and a type of ancient-grains bread. Through the processes of binding and softening, common to preparations that employ starch, the analysis demonstrates that a starchy language used both to bind (us to material life) and to soften (power structures) has enormous environmental potential. While primarily serving scholars in Italian studies and ecocriticism, this culinary method invites adaptations across food cultures and gender identities.

Keywords: recipes, Italian feminism, eco-narratives.

Resumen

Confeccionar narrativas alternativas a los discursos dominantes del agotamiento natural-cultural es una de las metas distintivas de la “cocina de prueba” de la ecocrítica. Esta analogía culinaria destaca similitudes más profundas: tanto las recetas como las eco-narrativas crean conexiones simbólicas y materiales entre las personas y el entorno, las cuales, a su vez, permiten posibilitar prácticas transformativas. Sin embargo, ¿cómo podemos confeccionar mensajes que generen procesos de transformación positivos? O, dicho de otro modo, ¿cuáles son las recetas de las eco-narrativas? Este artículo propone un método versátil para comprobar qué usos del lenguaje y dinámicas obtenidas de los textos pueden producir acción medioambiental. El experimento culinario recurre a la segunda ola del feminismo italiano, una “cocina” teórica que ha interactuado con el lenguaje para reconfigurar las relaciones dominantes con los otros y con el mundo. Las estrategias feministas, incluyendo la práctica de “empezar por una misma”, reclamar lo personal como político, y volver a trazar genealogías alternativas, han usado el lenguaje como una forma de liberación así como de reconexión con el mundo material. Este vínculo liberador vuelve a proponerse como una técnica para confeccionar e identificar eco-narrativas efectivas. Aquí, las estrategias feministas se cruzan con las operaciones culinarias químicas y sociales a través de la discusión de tres recetas ligadas a los orígenes mediterráneos de la

autora: un pudín de leche, pasta fresca sin huevo, y un tipo de pan de granos ancestrales. A través de los procesos de vinculación y de moderación, comunes a las preparaciones que usan almidón, el análisis demuestra que un lenguaje almidonado usado tanto para vincularnos (a la vida material) como para moderar (las estructuras de poder) tiene un enorme potencial ecológico. Aunque sirva principalmente para académicos en estudios italianos y ecocrítica, este método culinario promueve adaptaciones a otras culturas culinarias e identidades de género.

Palabras clave: recetas, feminismo italiano, eco-narrativas.

Introduction

Hazelnuts, cocoa, sugar, palm oil, powdered milk, lecithin, vanilla extract.

These are the ingredients of Nutella, the iconic hazelnut chocolate spread made by the Italian company Ferrero and sold in 160 markets, for a total of 400 thousand tons of Nutella every year (Fantigrossi, Greco). The exact recipe is still a secret. What is well known, though, is that the original recipe has changed. In 2017, the company was criticized for distributing a version of the product in the German and French markets that contained increased percentages of powdered milk (from 7,5% to 8,7%) and sugar (from 55,9% to 56,3%), and reduced percentages of cocoa and hazelnuts, which—needless to say—are more expensive ingredients (Cozzella). In 2015, Ferrero introduced the use of palm oil, imported from Indonesia, Malaysia, and New Guinea, to make its cream smoother and less spoilable while also cutting production costs. When a debate arose about the usage of palm oil—an oil that Italian customers perceive as unhealthy for being high in saturated fats—Ferrero “launched a large media campaign advocating for the health benefits of properly sourced palm oil” and simultaneously pledged that “the products it imports do not involve deforestation and indigenous exploitation” (Cesaretti 17). In response, competitor brands adopted the counter-strategy of labelling their products “without palm oil” and therefore healthier. Nutella and its competitors thereby created different, if related, eco-narratives. Furthermore, as Enrico Cesaretti noted, the eco-consciousness displayed by Ferrero in its sourcing of palm oil clashes with the company’s plan of “increasing [by] 30% (20.000 tons/10 million plants) the production of national hazelnuts by 2025;” the issue is that “hazelnut plantations [...] are characterized by practices of land-clearing and substantial use of fertilizers, pesticides, and weed-killers” (14).

Retracing the evolution of a recipe that became smoother, sweeter, and more resistant to external agents makes us wonder if the corporate sustainable narratives and practices were crafted to smooth, sugarcoat, and protect the “persisting legacies of capitalism entering the planet’s green organosphere” (Cesaretti 16). If environmental narratives can hide bitter old flavors, if they can be artificially processed and even emptied of their substance in order to maintain rigid agrilogistic

structures, the question to tackle is how to make eco-narratives from scratch or pick out “organic” ones that are substantive and transformative.

During the late-capitalist era, consumerism and its detractors came to resort to the same list of ingredients: strategies of diversification and customization have gradually colonized niche-markets and “communities of resistance [have been] replaced by communities of consumption” (Massumi 20–21; hooks 375–76). Global corporations have appropriated the environmental lexicon to the point that sugarcoating goods with green buzzwords—all natural, plant-based, organic—has become a popular strategy to devise messages aimed at fueling tried-and-true systems. Despite there being an actual need for words that invite “positive Earth emotions” and strengthen symbiotic relationships between people and the planet, here my goal is not to coin a new lexicon (Albrecht 22). Environmental narratives are not, or not solely, words blended together into ecological messages; effective eco-narratives depend on the capacity of language—even language not explicitly environmentalist—to activate modes of thought and interaction that dislodge exploitative mindsets and spur alternative ways of world-making. In this analysis, I aim to provide a practical-theoretical method to guide our understanding and deployment of processes vehiculated by language that might generate nourishing discourses of change.

Crafting new palatable narratives could be a goal of the ecocritical “test kitchen.” This culinary analogy suggests deeper similarities between environmental discourses and recipes. All recipes across cultures are texts that, in developing material and symbolic connections between individuals and food, generate transformative practices. It is in the recipe’s interplay of words and work that ingredients turn into dishes. Likewise, eco-narratives create a connective tissue between nature and culture, and, in doing so, become generative of policies, behaviors, and actions that can benefit both humans and nonhumans. But, if recipes and eco-narratives similarly feature a synergy of world, words, and work, what “chemical” processes and techniques allow for the transformation of the ingredient that is everyday communication into discourses of change? Or, to put it in cookbook terms, what are recipes for environmental narratives?

This article engages with the culinary art as a method to test what uses of language and relational dynamics elicited by words might enable environmental action. My cooking experiment draws from Italian second-wave feminism, in particular from the Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective and the Diotima community. Thinking of feminism as a cuisine and of feminist proposals as recipes re-envision what might by some be considered an outdated or controversial theory into an innovative take on environmentalism—one focused on the real-world processes that language can activate or involve.¹ Chemical and social operations of cooking become

¹ As Casarino and Righi explain, this lineage of Italian feminist theory has elicited boredom and annoyance for its emphasis on the mother, for not adequately grappling with intersectionality, and for portraying an understanding of sexual difference (in the singular) that might seem “steeped in old and

a lens to discuss how feminist “recipes,” through their texts and practices, have reworked dominant relationships to others and to the world, and can still offer models for effective environmental narratives. The notions of “starting from oneself” and of embracing “difference,” the reclaiming of the personal as political, the “practice of doing,” and the retracing of maternal genealogies are all strategies that have used language as a revolutionary means of reconnection with the material world *and* of liberation—a liberating binding.

By repurposing the kitchen from a site of female relegation into a space for intellectual engagement,² I have redeployed Italian feminist theory into techniques to develop eco-narratives. Recipes of starchy food tied to my Mediterranean origins—a milk pudding, eggless fresh pasta, and a traditional type of bread—lead to an examination of broader material and linguistic processes that inform environmental discourses, practices, and ethics. Exploring the operations of binding and softening, common to preparations that employ starch, demonstrates that a starchy language used both to bind (us to material life) and to soften (power structures) has enormous environmental potential.

Starting from myself, I locally sourced the recipes shared here in my native island, Sicily. The preparations feature the twofold use of starch as thickener and softener. Once mixed with water, starch creates cohesive “relational” structures; this is why it is commonly used to thicken sauces or puddings. However, starches can also help soften the rigid protein structure of gluten, resulting in lighter baked goods. The recipes include: *biancomangiare*, a milk pudding in which a few simple ingredients bind together while maintaining their distinctive flavors; *pasta povera* (poor pasta), a type of fresh pasta that does not use eggs as a binding agent; and *pane di Castelvetro*, a bread made with ancient grains that, being naturally low in gluten, contribute to creating a porous texture. Infused with feminist thought and framed by an ecocritical understanding of the material world as “stories embodied in material formations,” these recipes exemplify the importance of adopting both binding and softening techniques to craft narratives of natural-cultural (re)connection and liberation (Oppermann 57). The silky texture of *biancomangiare* comes to illustrate how language can tie us to material life while offering a means of individual and collective freedom; the preparation of *pasta povera* showcases how this process of liberating reconnection has informed creative solutions; finally, *pane di Castelvetro*—a recipe and story that I reconstructed through interviews with Sicilian farmers—demonstrates how implementing different approaches to agriculture has percolated through the local environment and softened rigid socio-economic structures.

In a 1994 paper featuring sixteen perspectives on ecocriticism, Christopher Cokinos observed that both feminist and ecocritical analyses “re-emphasize the real work of words in a world of consequence, joy, and despair” while drawing

superseded patriarchal divisions between man and woman (9). On these issues, see their introduction to *Another Mother*.

² An inspiring example of this repurposing is Clara Sereni’s *Casalinghitudine*.

“connections among self, society, nature, and text” (What is Ecocriticism?). Reading Italian recipes and feminist theory as texts that generate transformative processes can prompt environmental reflections on the types of interactions through which words put the world to work. Ultimately, sharing recipes for eco-narratives is a way to spur unforeseen pairings and flavorful interdisciplinary research on issues at the crossroads of language, food science, and sustainable practices.

***Biancomangiare*: The Texture of Environmental Words**

Ingredients

500 ml milk

100 gr sugar

50 gr starch

cinnamon, dark chocolate, pistachios

Preparation

Mix the starch in 150 ml of milk and set aside. Mix the remaining 350 ml of milk with the sugar and bring to boil. Reduce the heat and add the starch dissolved in milk. Let the mixture thicken for about 4–5 minutes, while continuing to stir. Pour it in a mold, let it cool, and refrigerate for at least four hours. Remove the pudding from the mold and serve sprinkled with cinnamon, grated dark chocolate, or pistachios.

Biancomangiare is a delicate milk pudding and a comfort food of my childhood. Its taste still recalls memories of a familiar attachment that gifted me with the curiosity to leave and explore, and with a longing for returning. In this recipe, the starch acts as a thickener and its function can be explained by recalling some notions of organic chemistry. Starch is a polysaccharide, formed when molecules of the simple sugar are joined together into long chains (amylose) and branch trees (amylopectin). When heated in water, starch granules absorb the water and expand, eventually separating into a loose liquid colloid that acts as a thickener (Quellen Field 49–50). In the making of *biancomangiare*, the use of milk rather than water prevents the formation of a thick gel. The texture of this pudding is softer than the firm consistency of jello, which is made with fruit juice and gelatin, or of *crème brûlée*, in which eggs act as a stronger binder. The creaminess of *biancomangiare* derives from a binding process that thickens the ingredients without generating either a rigid structure or a distinctive aroma. Yet, it is the starch that, despite remaining almost undetectable, shapes this dessert.

The consistency of *biancomangiare*—the starchy binding that delicately holds the ingredients together and lets their individual flavors shine through—resembles the texture of maternal language, one of the signature “dishes” of Italian feminist theory.³ Maternal language takes shape from the close bond between infant and caretaker: in this relationship language skills are formed through tactile, emotional,

³ On maternal language see Muraro, Zamboni, and Casarino and Righi.

and creative connection. For some readers this traditional feminist cuisine might seem old-fashioned, renowned for its overuse of womanhood as a unifying essence and the maternal as the “parsley in any soup”—an Italian idiomatic expression that indicates an unfailing, cumbersome presence.⁴ Still, despite its grandma’s-cooking feeling, this approach remains highly original and can serve as a basic recipe for achieving (or at least envisioning) the thick and soft consistency that environmental narratives could ideally take.

Feminist philosopher Luisa Muraro, in developing her view of maternal language, challenged dominant positions (first and foremost Lacanian theories) that identify the mother with the space of the pre-linguistic, and language acquisition as a separation process through which a symbolic order rises above maternal shapeless matter, like water separating from oil. For Muraro, when language acquisition is conceived of as a process of separation, it “impl[ies] and sustain[s] the parallelism between natural life and culture together with an unlimited series of oppositions and analogies between one and the other” (18). The artificial divide between matter and language might explain why the arguments of climate change deniers have resorted to a metaphoric device of hyperseparation from disturbing material referents that, to recall Carol Adams’ claim, become “absent” (67–68). These discourses tend to filter away (feminized) images of “vulnerability, risk, gender, threat, crisis, or harm” by adopting an overtly “objective” scientific language, purified from any material and emotional residue (Alaimo 99). By contrast, Muraro contended that learning how to speak derives from a thickening process in which “disparities, irreversibilities, dependencies, and all the other possible mixtures” clump together and shape our possibility of self-expression (18–19).

The Symbolic Order of the Mother (1991) is the theoretical “cookbook” in which the feminist thinker has retraced language acquisition to the interplay of “language and life, speech and body, words and things” that enabled our vital communication with the mother or with those “who [are] in her place” (Muraro 40).⁵ However, the key ingredient of maternal language is not so much the mother, acting as the fermenting starter, but the mother in relation to the child—their meaningful connection and interaction. Chiara Zamboni, another feminist philosopher of the Diotima community, has acknowledged the difficulty of reconstructing “the substance of that first language” we all spoke as children but no longer speak: “that language [that enabled us to learn other languages] incorporated itself into [those] languages, merging with them [...] just like water, which, given its transparency, once mixed with other liquids, can no longer be separated” (“Maternal language” 133). Maternal language, though, does not act (solely) like water, but like the milk that, in the *biancomangiare* recipe, is mixed with the starch and added to the boiling pot. That starchy liquid has neither a definite taste nor a shape, but mediates the creation of other textures and flavors.

⁴ On the critics to Italian feminism see Zerilli, De Lauretis, and Casarino and Righi.

⁵ The mother should not be associated necessarily with female sex and biology.

The experience of coming to life is defined by a relationship of co-dependence, by a gestational process that anchors each of us to another body while building our first experiences as individuals. Also, language acquisition develops from a bond that creates embodied relationships while enabling new forms of life and narratives to thrive. Birth and language acquisition are two universally binding events, across humans and across species: plants and animals do come into the world via birth, and, as studies on vegetal life prove, not only animals, but also plants are able to communicate (Gagliano, Ryan, and Vieira). Therefore, the binding and liberating properties of maternal language can become foundational for the making of starchy narratives that blend nature and culture to enable different modes of thinking and acting.

However, in an epoch of widespread greenwashing, building narratives that bind people to their environment is not enough to usher in environmental behaviors. As the case of Nutella demonstrated, Ferrero's updated recipe was linked to ecological messaging to implement procedures that reduced production costs, lowered the quality of the product, and might cause environmental damage at global and local scale. The operation of binding alone would not make a good *biancomangiare* either; it is the thickening process initiated by the starch *together with* the softening agency of the milk that turn the liquid mixture into thick creaminess, adaptable to infinite shapes. Similarly, the bond between mother and child is tied to their potential to speak freely and use words as tools to soften and reshape rigid structures of power, starting with the "natural" expectations about motherhood and, more broadly, with patriarchal associations between women and nature. For Italian feminists, reconnecting women to an embodied and meaningful place of origin—to a female genealogy—was a way to claim women's free choice to generate or not (Cavarero 59). It is still a way to liberate the maternal from the procreative and nurturing function that have (uniquely) been assigned to this figure, and from a pro-life agenda that remains unconcerned with creating life-affirming conditions for humans and nonhumans.

Rediscovering our connection to the mother implies exploring the possibility to mold new understandings of motherhood, conceived of as a right across species, beyond idealized notions of sacrifice and unpaid labor, beyond stereotypical views of masculinity and femininity, heteronormative family models, and figurations of Mother Earth in capitalist contexts. As Black feminist activist Alexis Pauline Gumbs suggested, "the word 'mother'" should be regarded "less as a gendered identity and more as a possible action, a technology of transformation" (23). The maternal theorized by Muraro is a binding agent that creates relationality and transformation through "a living (rather than an instituted) order" (65). Like the *biancomangiare's* starchy mixture, maternal language generates an order that does not crystallize into a structure, but forms a relational system that can change shape and flavor profile depending on the mold and spices used, without losing its texture. As Muraro further explains, the maternal order is "maintained [...] by means of its constant

transformation that allows it to take shape again in spite of and even thanks to the countless irregularities of our speaking” (65).

Maternal language and its relational symbolic order employ operations of binding and softening that are fundamental in the making and enacting of eco-narratives. These discourses aim to strengthen the intimate environmental bond that we experience through our own body, which is “intra-connected” with our surroundings, and at a broader scale, beyond the boundaries (and the privileges) of our individuality. But in thickening the lived experiences of different co-inhabitants of earth, environmental narratives should also soften the idea that categories such as the Anthropocene or the Capitalocene constitute the only possible words to describe the (somewhat) natural order of things. Eco-narratives can turn into effective practices only when they re-enact the world-building experience of maternal language; namely, when they bind people around a shared creativity—around the possibility to envision “new forms of exchange [and coexistence] that are created from our differences and not by erasing difference”⁶ (Zamboni, *Sentire e scrivere* 77). In connecting people as well as human and nonhuman life, these embodied stories should sound as an open invitation to experiment with the imaginative potential that resides within an infinitely moldable language. The words that are tied together to form environmental discourses have a pudding-like texture that remains adaptable to countless shapes, and is generative of forms of life, communication, relationality, and self-affirmation that are associated with the ethics of codependence.

Pasta Povera: How to Make the Difference

Ingredients

500 gr semolina flour

350 ml lukewarm water

Some extra flour

Preparation

Make a hill of the flour with a hollow in the middle. Gradually incorporate the water and knead the dough to form a smooth, elastic ball. Then roll it out into a very thin layer. Sprinkle some flour on top and, using a knife, cut a series of strips. Roll up each strip and cut into slices to form tagliatelle noodles. Unwrap the noodles and let them dry for 30 minutes. Bring a pot of salted water to boil and cook the pasta for 3–4 minutes.

Unlike its richer counterpart made with eggs, *pasta povera* requires two basic ingredients: water and semolina flour. My grandmother’s family used to reserve eggs for other meals or dishes, so she learned to make more with less and has carried on this southern culinary tradition across generations. The pasta has maintained its delicate taste and consistency, yet despite the changes in average wealth and availability of food, what used to be a resourceful dish, dictated by necessity, became

⁶ My translation.

a meal for special occasions. The need to feed everybody using fewer ingredients has evolved into a moment of celebration, while memories of post-WWII scarcity have fueled a new abundance. In the history of this recipe, the relationship between words and world has changed, and *povero/a*, an adjective that indicates deprivation, has come to refer to a bountiful environment.

Pasta povera carries a story of enriching minimalism that is intrinsic to its preparation. When making fresh pasta, eggs usually serve as binding agent; however, the poor dough gains its consistency and softness only from gluten, a protein complex of wheat. Semolina flour contains a higher quantity of gluten (13% or more, compared to 8 to 11% contained in all-purpose flour). Since gluten is insoluble in water, instead of dissolving, it creates a gelatin complex that substitutes for the protein binding action of eggs. Furthermore, because of its reticular chemical structure, gluten retains the starch present in the flour. This property helps with maintaining the shape of the noodles throughout the cooking time and with keeping their soft texture. What might look like lack of ingredients is revealed to be a chemical process that enhances both cohesion and flavor.

In the recipe of *pasta povera*, the interplay of binding and softening derives from a minimalist substitution. Swapping water for eggs does not aim at replacing the missing ingredient with something else, as happens, for example, with the mixture of flax and water used to make vegan “eggs.” In the preparation of eggless pasta, the substitution works as a radical subtraction, predicated on the bold idea that eggs are not an essential ingredient to make fresh noodles. The minimalist richness of *pasta povera* offers an alternative to the underlying logics of capitalism—to its pressing call for overabundance and its constant anxiety about scarcity. This recipe generates a *different* fulfilling path that problematizes the abundance/scarcity binary and dominant cookbook practices, by maximizing the properties of pantry ingredients and daring to experiment with other sets of needs—creativity, joyful sharing, sense of community.

The operation of creative subtraction that shapes eggless pasta resonates with the feminist notion of *difference* and can inspire narratives that resist the homogenizing script of green consumerism. Like the pasta recipe, this approach hinges on a radical proposition, namely, that it is possible to embrace liberation and emancipation without fighting for inclusion. Carla Lonzi elaborated on difference in her groundbreaking *Let's Spit on Hegel* (1970). Here she dislodges Hegelian dialectical thinking—a thinking that assimilated women within the values and needs of patriarchal society, but never acknowledged their independent role. In reclaiming that role, Lonzi is not setting women in opposition to men, as a specular antithesis looking for recognition. Rather, she is removing women from this polarized logic, and positioning them into *another* possible space: “Women are not in a dialectic relationship with men. The demands we are trying to make clear imply not an antithesis, but a *moving on another level*” (291). The idea that another level exists—a place outside the scarcity of options provided by sexist culture yet also outside men’s privileges—implies questioning the popular narration that being included, becoming

followers of the standardized “recipe to success,” is what minoritized groups should chase after. But what if a space to move freely and experiment with unexpressed needs and desires existed?

This alternative view of freedom that does not call for equality and inclusion is hard to digest for an Anglophone western audience.⁷ Its full theorization appeared in *Non credere di avere dei diritti*, a 1987 book authored by the Women’s Bookstore Collective of Milan (and translated in English as *Sexual Difference*). The collective’s thought-provoking “recipe” for women’s liberation was not based on a vindication of “equal rights under the law, but only [on] a full, political and personal accountability to women” outside sociopolitical institutions (Zerilli 93). For the Milanese group, forms of social reparation and attempts to coopt women into the dominant system could not *substitute for* a type of freedom built by women through their relationships, their dialogue, their being together. They could do without “an ideal of equality which neither grew out of [women’s] history nor corresponded to [their] interests” (Zerilli 108). The group rejected using women’s historical oppression as a binding agent for their gatherings, and aimed at building bonds around narratives that would allow women to (re)define freedom for themselves, in line with desires that would not adopt (or adapt to) “what others have said or would say” (Muraro 32).

Feminist difference springs from a bold “subtraction” that makes new texture, flavors, and modes of sharing, while challenging the assumption that enjoying more means *being included* into a system of power that has normalized inequity and can only work if equality is a promise, dislocated in the future, or mythicized into a virtuous exception for privileged groups. For the Milanese collective, the process of exploring the free sense of their difference rather than fighting for a sense of equality tailored by men for men entailed acknowledging that even women are “not equal among themselves,” and that forming real bonds involves facing disparities—many of which are unjust, while others can foster relationships of *affidamento* (entrustment) and shape relationships from an apparent condition of necessity (The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective 132). Rethinking the ingredients that made their freedom rather than accepting a tried-and-true recipe is a self-critical process that led women to explore a variety of possible preparations, all different yet all “starting [...] with women as subjects” (De Lauretis 5).

If the 1970s and early 1980s marked a period of great ferment for Italian feminism, in the late 1990s collectives had established forms, languages, and figures—in particular, the figure of the mother. In 1999 feminist philosopher Angela Putino stirred up the debate with her pamphlet, *Amiche mie isteriche* (*Dear Hysterical Girlfriends*). In this work, Putino warns her companions of the risk of falling into habits, or even worse, of creating a fit-all “recipe” of maternal order that would paradoxically serve the agenda of patriarchy. She reminds her girlfriends that *difference*, far from being a homogenizing binding narrative founded on having a uterus, resides in a never-ending “questioning of the meaning of freedom and justice”

⁷ On this, see De Lauretis and Zerilli.

(51).⁸ This shared process of inquiry should encourage processes of disjunction and divergent evolution, or, in our cookbook language, of inventive substitutions. Putino was especially concerned that the maternal practice of care—or rather its unquestioned abundance or scarcity—might turn into a rigid prescriptive structure, into a system of assimilation controlled by power and institution. Care can create a “regime that [...] assign[s] value to that part of humanity that enjoys it;” and, being inspired by desires of protections and guidance, the exercise of care “is not spoiled by the fear of the coercive violence” that might underlie its practice (66).

Environmentalism has molded narratives of care that have united people around a shared platform; yet if caring for the environment can act as a powerful binding agent, creating eco-narratives entails rethinking environmentalism as a matrix of uses of language and practices that can loosen our ties to a late capitalism with a green and caring facade. *Pasta povera*, through its logic of subtraction that succeeds in creating joyful abundance, escapes the popularized eco-narratives of care that, by focusing on the fear of scarcity, have served the capitalist agenda of overproduction. Its material discourse of enriching minimalism invites us to *sottrarci* (to remove ourselves) from the unquestioned recipe that “producing more [is] the single most urgent priority” (Parasecoli 135). Rather than focusing exclusively on quantities—on cutting doses, or swapping a (cheaper) ingredient for another—the preparation of *pasta povera* shifts the focus toward the qualities of relationships. In this recipe, what makes the difference is valuing the binding properties intrinsic to water and flour, as this acknowledgment opens another possible way of creating material and symbolic relationships. In making the poor dough, women like my grandmother inventively reworked the scarcity of their war-time pantries into the possibility of gathering people at the table, nourishing them, and caring for those resisting the hardship of war.

The preparation of eggless pasta demonstrates, in an intuitive and practical way, a concept that Frances Moore Lappé and Anna Lappé have argued in their analysis of sustainable agriculture: “it is the quality of human and ecological relationships that determines whether we experience scarcity or not, now and in the future” (5). In a similar way, Diana Ojeda, Jade Sasser, and Elizabeth Lunstrum have spelled out the importance of *removing ourselves* from a narrative solely based on quantities that underestimates the difference between scarcity and unequal allocation of resources: “both poverty and resource scarcity” flow largely from the uneven distribution of resources since capitalism simultaneously “encourage[s] overconsumption by the wealthy and well-connected, and prevent[s] the poor from accessing resources that effectively have been ‘captured’” (8). Too often, neo-Malthusian eco-narratives have manufactured scarcity and precarity into unstoppable “natural phenomena” related to population growth (once again, a matter of quantity) and fostered stories of climate change mitigation or adaptation that do not call for envisioning actual socio-political and economic alternatives. Botanist

⁸ My translation.

Robin Wall Kimmerer has also problematized the meaning of scarcity from an environmental perspective that draws on her Potawatomi cultural background: “economics is about decision-making in the face of scarcity” and “with scarcity as the main principle, the mindset that follows is based on commodification of goods and services” and on the creation of “artificial scarcity through hoarding” (The Serviceberry). Wall Kimmerer suggests to prioritize a set of binding discourses—“relationship and purpose and beauty and meaning”—that escape logics of commodification. She concedes that “market capitalism is [not] going to disappear anytime soon” but exhorts readers to nurture “a gift economy that runs right alongside the market economy, where the good that is served is community.”

Paying attention to the quality of the binding makes the difference by changing the dominant relationship between words and world. In the case of *pasta povera*, subtracting becomes an enriching way to unite people and free them from corporate narratives of environmental care that equate scarcity with fear and deprivation, and abundance with profit and accumulation.

Pane di Castelvetro: Kneading a Porous Dough

Ingredients

800 g Sicilian blond durum wheat flour

200 g timilia flour

800 ml lukewarm water

200 g starter (or mother) dough

20 g salt

Preparation

Put the flours, the starter, and 700 ml of water in a kneading machine. Begin at low speed for 7–8 minutes. Add the remaining 100 ml of water and the salt, and mix for other 7–8 minutes. Move the dough to a bowl and cover it with a cloth for the first proof. After two hours, place the dough on a countertop sprinkled with flour. Roll it with a rolling pin into rectangular shape; then fold up the four sides and join them in the middle. Shape into a round loaf and move it to a baking pan. Let it rise until it has doubled in size (about two hours). Bake the loaf at 260 °C for an hour or until it gets a coffee-colored crust.

Pane di Castelvetro is a Sicilian bread made with *timilia* and at times *russello*, ancient grains that along with *maiorca* and *perciasacchi* (long farro), were dismissed in the 1950s. As a child I never had the chance to savor this bread; at the time, *timilia* was forgotten, replaced with modern varieties of wheat. I stumbled on this recipe much later, in the early 2000s, when local farmers started to retie their lost bond with grains native to the island.

Based on my current field work, this last section highlights the fruitful intersections between feminist perspectives and on-farm experiences. It features conversations with cereal growing practitioners, including Filippo Drago, a miller

from Castelvetro who initiated the ancient grains revolution in Sicily; Silvia Turco, who runs a women-owned organic farm near Enna; and Massimiliano Solano, the manager of Valdibella, a co-op farm at the forefront of sustainable food, in the area of Palermo. Their commitment to retaining old ingredients and recipes has permeated socio-cultural environments by mobilizing different thinking and actions within Sicilian communities.

Kneading Castelvetro produces relations that build a porous structure. The interaction of starch and gluten creates a stable network, able to retain fermentation gas in the dough and prevent the collapse of the bread during baking and cooling (Onyango). When the dough is heated, starch granules absorb water, swell, gelatinize, and lose their semi-crystalline nature. The linear amylose polymers leach out of the granules leaving amylopectin-enriched granules. Being lower in gluten, timilia features a more balanced ratio of starch and gluten than modern grains. The higher quantity of starch allows the dough to retain more air during fermentation, resulting in a loaf pierced with air pockets.

The porosity of Castelvetro bread offers a fit culinary image for the relationships that women kneaded together through the so-called “practice of doing.” Up to 1975, feminist groups had mainly met to talk, but in the mid-1970s women started to do things together: e.g. creating bookstores, libraries, publishing houses, and new meeting places (The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective 81). Collaborating in these enterprises made it possible for “a movement without a unified organization” to come together in order to accomplish particular projects. It appeared that, “in the process of doing, desire can assert itself with the greatest determination without denying the possibility of other desires, other choices” (The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective 82). This work built tight bonds between women while generating porous spaces within the social environment.

Establishing more inclusive venues contributed to fostering a sense of community but also to welcoming and retaining new ideas: “it was understood that doing, and all it brought to light, should be open to reflection so as to transform experience into knowledge” (The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective 82). Through the interaction of work and words, of labor and (self-)reflection, women’s “socialized life” became visible and political, and female politics shifted its focus from gaining “access to consciousness and speech [...] [to activate a] joint transformation of the female body and the social body” (The Milan Women’s Bookstore Collective 84). For the feminists of the Milan Bookstore, binding and mobilizing women through shared work was “more subversive than a showy demonstration” (84–85). In a 1976 article published in the magazine *Sottosopra* they affirmed that “things change to the extent that we strengthen and valorize relations among women, and *on that basis* we make our decisions about what to want, what to do” (85). The feminist practice of doing retained “air” from the outside to build cooperation among women and release new (transformed) energy into the society. This “kneading” process resonates with the idea that eco-narratives can gather communities around ecological issues by

mediating a vibrant exchange between the socio-cultural world and the natural environment.

Beyond the culinary analogy and theoretical application, the action of kneading *pane di Castelvetro* exemplifies a practice of doing that has generated environmental narratives in which manual labor and discourses of positive (ex)change have porous borders. In Sicily, rediscovering ancient grains has led to a broader process of reconnection with the natural-cultural heritage: these crops have bonded people to the complex history of colonization, migrations, and encounters inscribed in this Mediterranean island, and have simultaneously shaped liberating practices against corporate monocultures.

The term *timilia*, or in Sicilian dialect *tumminia*, derives from the ancient Greek *trimenios*, designating a grain that likely originated in Mesopotamia and whose growing cycle takes only three months. *Timilia* is also called *grano marzuolo*, meaning a grain sprouting in March. The names of other ancient varieties are similarly rooted in the linguistic and cultural variance of the island: e.g. *rossello* (or *russello*) takes its name from *russu*, the reddish color of its ears; *perciasacchi* from its long grains that make holes (*perciare*) in the bags (*sacchi*); while the name of *maiorca* likely comes from the whitish color of *majolica* (Venora and Blangiforti 43). For decades, this diverse lexicon has been erased by the monocultural language of modern grains. Between the 1960s and 1970s, in the midst of the “green revolution,” intensive cultivations were introduced in Sicily, controlled by northern agrobusinesses that distributed within the Italian peninsula and across global markets. Wheat underwent a process of artificial dwarfing to prevent the fertilized crop from growing too tall and bent toward the ground. The outcome was the creation of modern varieties, milder in taste and higher in gluten. The richer content of gluten allows the wheat to sustain the high drying temperatures of a faster and more efficient industrial production. However, “the breeding of the biggest, juiciest, sweetest grains has eliminated biodiversity and has resulted in a more-than-ironic unintended consequence” (Morton); speeding up industrial production by using wheat higher in gluten has slowed down people’s digestion and increased the incidence of intolerances. As one of my interviewees, Massimiliano Solano, put it: “food should nourish everybody and taste good; when food pollutes, intoxicates, or enslaves, we should question our choices, and the narratives and relationships behind those choices.”⁹

In Sicily, retrieving narratives from the past and challenging dominant techniques of production began in the late 1990s–early 2000. At that time, ancient grains still inhabited the maternal language of a new generation of farmers across the island: Solano recounted that his grandfather used to call *russello*, *gianti russu* (Sicilian dialect for “red giant”) as the crop was far taller than his grandchildren, and Drago shared vivid memories of his family bringing their *timilia* harvest to the local stone mill on a donkey. For him going back to cultivating *timilia* has created a bridge between the donkey of his childhood and the iPhone of his present, between a remote

⁹ Phone conversation with Solano, on April 27, 2022.

past and current innovation.¹⁰ Coming from a lineage of millers, Drago was among the first to experiment with ancient grains, thanks to the help of Stazione Consorziale Sperimentale di Granicoltura per la Sicilia. Since 1927, the center has kept a record of all the varieties of Sicilian grains that, in 1942, inspired the comprehensive study of Ugo De Cillis, *I frumenti siciliani*. This work provided a map of the physical and morphological characteristics of forty-five types of local wheat, and has offered concrete narratives to farmers interested in the recovery and preservation of this local heritage.

Relearning how to speak the language of ancient grains has reintroduced agricultural practices of cultural and culinary enrichment, and created “pockets” of resistance to agrobusinesses. Unlike modern wheat, ancient grains are more resistant to the drought typical of the Sicilian inland. Being taller—*russello* can reach 1,80 meters of height—these native crops can thrive among weeds, without any herbicides or nitrogen fertilizers. Their cultivation simply requires plowing and seeding the soil. In addition, *russello* can be used in zootechnical activities in place of hay, and plays an enhancing function in grazing grounds during periods of rest. As Turco explained during our conversation, it might sound counterintuitive but the only profitable way to cultivate ancient grains is organic agriculture.¹¹ The use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides would not substantially improve their yield (roughly 1/3 of modern grains). Ancient varieties need more time to be processed into flour and bread, but are more nutritious than “regular” wheat: low in gluten, high in proteins, and rich in microelements and polyphenols, these grains invite people to eat less but eat better.

Ancient crops have engendered subversive supply chain models that defy the laws of corporate agriculture. Strict norms regulate patent law in biotechnology and plant breeding: “the agribusinesses’s ownership of intellectual property of genetic materials limits farmers’ control over their crops because seeds from one year’s harvest legally can’t be set aside, [...] used in the following growing season,” or shared (Parasecoli 108). Corporations like Syngenta or Monsanto/Byer have also filed (and at times obtained) patents for conventional breeding of crops like barley, tomatoes, or broccoli because, while according to European patent laws “processes for conventional breeding cannot be patented, plants and animals stemming from these processes are patentable” (“Patents on plants and animals”). Ancient grains are not patented and therefore farmers can own, save, and exchange the seeds. “Binding” these seeds to the land has marked an act of self-determination and liberation.

Liberation also comes from reconnecting with the history of encounters that has shaped and transformed the Sicilian soil. To strengthen this natureculture nexus, on the occasion of Expo 2015 (the World Expo hosted in Milan)—“Feeding the Planet, Energy for Life”—the archeological park of Selinunte assigned an area within the park to the cultivation of ancient grains. The harvesting was live streamed during an event of Expo dedicated to Mediterranean organic food, while the flour from the harvest

¹⁰ Phone conversation with Drago, on April 26, 2022.

¹¹ Phone conversation with Turco, on April 29, 2022.

went into making the Castelvetro bread served during food tastings in Milan (Ansa). This project, which currently involves a larger area of the park, aims to forge ties to the “agri-cultural” heritage of Sicily, and give visibility to overlooked aspects of bio-cultural diversity.

In a 2017 study, biologists Gianfranco Venora and Sebastiano Blangiforti have highlighted how the actions of seeding and harvesting ancient grains have activated discourses of cultural conservation, raised awareness of health concerns, and developed local relationships of ownership and distribution, alternative to corporate models of vertical integration (46–47). From the perspective of a committed practitioner, Solano has also stressed that the ancient grains revolution can lead people toward a type of sustainable agriculture that would free both farmers and consumers by bringing them closer—as partners willing to strategize together, willing to eat what is in season, what is far from spotless, or what might have an unfamiliar taste. Today, he continued, farmers are used to receiving subsidies to destroy excess harvest. What if those subsidies were used to retain and distribute that excess? The model at which Solano hinted in our conversation would focus on (re)tying people to actual needs: producing healthy, nutritious food for all, enhancing biodiversity and human dignity, and minimizing waste and pollution. This model kneads together personal and political, by linking individual needs with nonmonetizable and “nonquantifiable knowledge [that] corporations and governments refuse to value” (Teare). This view of community-based agriculture envisions a way of living and narrating the world founded on the feminist proposal of granting primacy to contact, contiguity, and contingency while exploring new meanings for the “inseparable transmission of life and language” (Dominijanni, *Il trucco* 168: My translation).

The recipe of Castelvetro bread retells the story of lost *words* that, once retrieved and re-worked, have built a new *world*—or at least areas of resistance—in which cohesion between people and their environment has molded porous relationship, infused with bubbly freedom.

Conclusion

From academia to advertising, environmental narratives are a staple dish of eco-conscious offerings. But, as with food, also with discourses, we rarely stop to think about what we are consuming: What operations turn everyday language into eco-narratives? What are the implications of these processes? And how is making environmental narratives different from feeding green capitalism?

In answering these questions, I resorted to culinary and feminist “recipes”—texts in which the synergy of words, world, and work becomes visible and transformative. The operations of binding and softening, employed to create the texture of a pudding, make eggless fresh pasta, and shape a loaf of bread, have illustrated key strategies for environmental recipes. A starchy language, used both to enhance cohesion and lighten rigid structures, can produce eco-discourses that adapt

to various contexts, resist the pressure of consumerist scripts, and open porous spaces of natural-cultural interaction.

The action of ecological discourses does not uniquely reside in their message but also in the fact that these narratives do not use language to turn reality into “highly processed food.” They employ language as a liberating vehicle of reconnection with a life that, since our childhood, has been mediated (and not altered) by words. Acknowledging that our bond with material, embodied reality originated our ability to speak freely is at the core of the transformative thinking that unites environmental narratives across languages and cultures. Once again, the similarity with the culinary art is striking: like the process of crafting eco-discourses, cooking is a practice of transformation that requires that we bond with material ingredients to enjoy the creative freedom of experimenting with flavors, smells, and textures.

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