



POISONOUS IMAGES: Taranto's Environmental Crisis between the Visible and the Invisible

JASMINE CLOTILDE PISAPIA
Ca' Foscari University of Venice

 <https://orcid.org/0009-0001-5920-8856>

Enigmas do not call for elucidation but for a certain type of attention—I'd call it “flickering”—the kind that leads us to link together things that a priori have nothing to do with one another, to allow ourselves to be summoned up by signals, possibilities; or, to express it in the manner of fireflies.

—Vinciane Despret, “*Fireflies in Uncertain Times*”

Death suspends the relation to place . . . the corpse is not in its place.
Where is it? It is not here, and yet it is not anywhere else.
Nowhere? But then nowhere is here.

—Maurice Blanchot, *The Two Versions of the Imaginary*

Drawing on years of ethnographic fieldwork in Taranto, southern Italy—one of Europe's most industrially polluted cities—this essay reflects on toxicity's material and discursive entanglements via a set of poisonous images shot in the city's highly contaminated cemetery. Amid the slow unraveling of this

cross-generational ecological crisis, poison takes over not only bodies and environments but also affects, psyches, and subjectivities, permeating everyday life, as well as the realm of the dead. Yet toxicity vacillates between the visible and the invisible, while etiological connections remain difficult to prove. How, then, does one bring this crisis into language and visibility, even if only intermittently? And where does this leave the task of ethnography?

An anthropology of toxicity inevitably contends with the way poisons write themselves not only into bodies and things but also into words and images. To this effect, I am interested in that fragile hyphen between material-discursive registers—that flickering, vacillating movement that through time might undergo strange reversals, slippages, displacements. The present article argues that the photographic image—both materially indexical and semantically ambiguous—functions as an ethnographic hinge between the material and the discursive realities of poison. It is composed of three photographic acts: a set of images captured by anonymous cemetery workers; a picture shot by a performance artist; and, finally, a photograph I took myself during the decontamination of the graveyard. Like pulsating flashes, these images exceed the testimonial to dwell in the interstices between visibility and invisibility, absence and presence, life and death. While they are taken here as both situated ethnographic material and conceptual knots, their juxtaposition suggests flickering as an anthropological method—one that attends to the intermedial co-contaminations between image, text, speech, and the body.

One can begin to seize and give form to the slow violence of toxicity, I argue, by attending anthropologically to aesthetic productions—be they testimonial, artistic, or ethnographic. I approach the aesthetics of environmental crisis here by moving beyond the realm of art into political life and everyday sensory experience. The images and voices of laborers, mourners, and artists gathered in this text unearth a world in which death and finitude are imbued with uncertainty and yet constantly experienced as forms of ecological violence. Porous to toxic matter that disturbs the boundaries between the laboring, the living, and the dead, the cemetery mirrors Taranto's socioeconomic hierarchies, biomedical histories, and, crucially, its poisoned relationship to death. The graveyard *itself* functions here as a photograph of the toxic city. As we will see, it is the physical site that most visibly refracts the incessant blurring between matter and meaning, uncovering the paradoxes of a social world where even practices of decontamination, remediation, and inheritance risk being poisoned.



Figures 1–4. Anonymous photographs. Taken in the cemetery of Taranto, circa 2004.

I. DUST, AT THE THRESHOLD OF EVIDENCE

These photographs were taken by custodians on guard duty at night in the cemetery of Taranto. Rumor had it that some of the workers were falling asleep during nightshifts. To ensure they were awake, the office managers had them take pictures every two hours from different locations inside the cemetery. A date and time signature marks each digital file, proving the custodians were not being paid to sleep. Thousands of images like these were systematically archived over a period of roughly four years. They are gritty, often out of focus. Light flares and architectural fragments appear in the frames, at times exiting its contours or receding into the darkness of night. Every two hours of that night, the guardian was awake, not asleep. The act of photography proved his body's resistance to idleness, to death, and to dreams. The shots enact an auto-surveillance, where those surveilled do not themselves appear in the frame. What *does* appear through the camera's flash is the glitter of dust. This dust is transported by the wind, over the cemetery walls, from a massive factory located a few meters away.

Taranto is home to Europe's largest and most hazardous steel factory owned today by ArcelorMittal. Geographically adjacent to the city's cemetery, the plant came to occupy in the 1960s an area twice as large as the city's original footprint. Taranto and its steel factory became a symbol of southern Italy's postwar

industrialization, an intervention of the developmental state during the country's so-called economic miracle. The factory proceeded to transform the city into one of the most polluted on the continent, putting 200,000 inhabitants at higher risk of premature death, interrupted pregnancies, infant deformities, and health issues ranging from cardiovascular and respiratory diseases to cancers (mainly lung cancer and leukemia) and neurological illnesses.¹ The mill—which to this day employs more than 10,000 workers—is dangerously proximate to and enmeshed with human life and death.

In Taranto's social imaginary, toxicity has the consistency of pervasive dust. To distinguish it from regular domestic dust, it is called *minerale* (*mineral'* in the Tarantine dialect), an ambiguous expression evoking both nourishment and poison. White tombs are colored with the muted pink hue of the volatile iron ores imported from Brazilian mines—containing lead, cadmium, and arsenic. The ores are stocked in expansive, open-air “mineral parks,” where they await the wind that will carry them inside the graveyard. Dust enters your mouth, your eyes. If you caress a tomb, it stains the palm of your hand. Depending on time, oxidation, and the surface it lands on, ore dust can shift color from gray-black to orange, ochre, burnt sienna, or brownish red. Yet not all toxins are this visible—industrial combustion also releases colorless substances containing dioxin, furan, and sulfur dioxide. Each toxin has its own material trajectories and temporal latency. Each also has its own discursive life, marking subjectivity, identity, and class. Dioxin, the invisible killer, emanates in white puffs from the factory's tallest chimney and makes its way to the wealthier suburbs; *minerale* was seen to cover the poor from head to toe. These attributes became the object of jokes: dioxin granted immunity to seasonal flus or allowed beautiful women to keep their youthful looks.

The experience of poison varies, in Taranto, according to proximity to the factory. The citizens most exposed to dust live in the workers' neighborhood closest to the mill, Tamburi. They have inherited a bureaucratic English glossary from the city administration: while *slopping* describes the dust overspilling their neighborhood, *wind days* describe those days when schools are closed and people advised to stay at home because of the intensity of the *minerale*-carrying winds.

The uncanny inscription of dust on nocturnal photographs triggered animated discussions in the cemetery office. I was sitting with a group of gravediggers one afternoon as they scrolled through the images on a computer, commenting on what they saw: “It is true, the monster works most intensely at night.” Production cycles were more intensive during nightshifts, but the gravediggers implied that the mill's destructive impact on the city happened slowly, “while it was asleep.” The flash revealed a ghostly presence in an otherwise deserted

landscape. Was the factory tormenting the dead, they wondered, manifesting itself in the form of dust? Were the dead allowing people to see the invisible catastrophe unfolding, long before anyone knew? Was this a signal for the city to break from its slumber, a general awakening—a push toward political action?

In his “[Little History of Photography](#),” Walter Benjamin (2005) speaks of the prophetic inscriptions that allow some photographs to speak to the present. He describes the optical unconscious as “the spot where in the immediacy of [a] long-forgotten moment, the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it” (Benjamin 2005, 510). The photographs of dust speak to one such moment: while taken around 2004, they took on prophetic significance only years later. This is the temporality of the future anterior, that which “will have been”—the becoming-past of what is not yet. Notably, this is close to the temporality of environmental risk, where “poisons set up the future but are not yet manifest as disease, nor even as an origin from which a specific and known disease will come” (Fortun 2012, 450).

On July 26, 2012, a local magistrate issued an order of sequestration for the factory’s most polluting furnaces, citing new epidemiological studies. The order sparked a tense year of awakening for Taranto—with massive uprisings referred to as the “*Tarantine spring*” (*primavera tarantina*). Workers protesting to maintain their jobs faced a crowd of citizens allied with dissenting workers, who defended the right to a healthy environment. Awareness of the health emergency unfolding took place notoriously late in Taranto, with the sudden pressure to close the factory bringing to light Taranto’s “ecological contradiction” and the painful choice its inhabitants had been forced to make between work and health (Barca and Leonardi 2016).

These events inaugurated a decade-long legal drama pitting local Tarantine prosecutors moved by a personal commitment to the right to life (*diritto alla vita*) against the factory owners, culminating in the ongoing *Ambiente svenduto* (“Sold-Out,” or “Sacrificed” Environment) trial, initiated in 2015.² While the initial trial was unprecedented and resulted in convictions, its verdict was overturned on appeal in September 2024. The reasoning proves significant: the judges, being Taranto citizens and potential victims of the pollution—due to their bodily enmeshment in place—were deemed unable to judge it objectively, so the entire case will now go to retrial.

As the trial is suspended, we are left with courtroom transcriptions, in which pediatric doctors recall seeing and touching toxic dust on children’s feet, between their toes, in the folds behind their ears. In the reports, we also find gravediggers struggling to describe in words the unnameable corporeal experience rendered in their night photographs:

GRAVEDIGGER – I noticed that when I was shoveling the earth, the ground would shine from the inside. It was strange.

LAWYER – While you were working, did you notice this dust rising from the ground into the air?

G – Of course. It has the consistency of flour. If you touch it, it rises. All it takes is a gust of wind; it accumulates on the surrounding cypresses. You find yourself chewing on it.

L – So on windy days, have you felt it in your mouth?

G – Yes, yes. In the eyes, in the mouth.³

Echoing this gravedigger’s words, the cemetery photographs belatedly reveal *inscriptions* of poison. They are “material witnesses” of an elusive environmental harm, even if the trial deemed them too unreliable for forensic evidence (Schuppli 2020). They exceed the testimonial and the illustrative, simultaneously *testifying to* and *providing us with* an aesthetic experience; indexically connected to reality yet devoid of a deliberate function or message, they avoid *aestheticizing* disaster. Aestheticization, Walter Benjamin (2005) warns us, is what happens when beauty, grandeur, and sublimity are instrumentalized for political ends. Ideological and unambiguous, aestheticization robs the viewer of their own aesthetic experience, directing them toward a specific emotional response. In Taranto, sensational images of the factory’s frightening smokestacks abound, yet the subtle, insidious presence of poison in everyday life resists easy representation.



Figures 5–8. Anonymous photographs. Taken in the cemetery of Taranto, circa 2005.

Aesthetics, between Visibility and Invisibility: Toward an Ethnography of the Firefly

In 1975, the Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini invoked the gradual “disappearance of the fireflies” from the Italian countryside due to environmental pollution as an allegory for a new, pervasive form of fascism that was taking shape in Italy after the Second World War—a slow political transformation brought about by modernization, consumer culture, and the growing power of mass media. The image of vanishing fireflies allowed him to name an unnameable event: the erosion of preindustrial worlds, gestures, and ways of life (Pasolini 1999). In recent years, Pasolini’s fireflies have been picked up by many as an aesthetic-philosophical motif, a method to think through times of incommensurable darkness (Despret 2019; Didi-Huberman 2018; Taussig 2020).

In my own work, I have been taken by the implications of flickering, not only because it has brought me, through juxtapositions and constellations, to link unexpected things—that mode of attention Despret describes in the epigraph to this essay. But also because the flicker has allowed me to approach the “enigma” of poison and its quotidian permeation of bodies, environments, subjectivities, as well as the realm of the dead—over slow, stretched-out temporalities: Environments that have strikingly *literalized* what Pasolini expressed as metaphor more than fifty years ago, where material toxicity flickers between the visible and the invisible.

In Taranto, to be summoned by faint lights and improbable links “in the manner of fireflies” means staying with what does not quite resolve into evidence: the sensory, the atmospheric, the half-seen. It also means considering echoes, visual resemblances—or the uncanny resurrection of fireflies in the form of toxic dust. Beyond their forensic or legal potential, photographs of dust, oral accounts of residents interrogated in court, as well as the voices I recorded, transcribed, and translated proffer testimonies of the challenge of articulating and describing unwritten intuitions accumulated over decades. We have vivid images of eventful disasters—of oil spills, floods, ravishing forest fires. But the slow workings of toxic pollution in Taranto present the paradoxical challenge of making slow violence visible “while challenging the privileging of the visible” (Nixon 2011, 15). Images often mark what Sigrid Weigel calls the domain of the “a-visible”—that which hovers at the threshold of appearance without fully entering it (Weigel 2022). Toxicity inhabits precisely such thresholds. Thus, a politics of perception must grapple with pollution’s double invisibility: its relegation to a spatial elsewhere, out of sight in Italy’s south, and its temporal effects, so slow that they remain imperceptible. Whether toxicity *can* be brought into

visibility as a political act depends on toxicity's radically elusive nature. Everyday life in toxic environments thus poses an aesthetic problem (from the Greek word *aesthesis*, the realm of the senses and emotion-feelings they elicit in relation to the material world) (Seremetakis 1996).

In Taranto, the experience of space is mediated by proximity to the factory, the most discussed material source of alterations to the sensible world; yet even then, not everyone *sees* and *hears* the same sensible world. The most exposed citizens (and those in closest contact with the mill) are no doubt more acutely aware of the sounds and sights of industrial contamination. What is of particular interest to me in exploring the aesthetic aspect of these differing degrees of awareness is how different fields of perception are seized not only through explicitly militant content and discursive language but also through the notion that understanding unequal relations to the sensible world makes for a crucial task of any political struggle. A first glance at a map of the city—whether an epidemiological map (where statistics around illness and death can be visualized) or a satellite map (where the dark, rusty color of toxic dust is visibly overspilling the boundaries of the factory)—might help us grasp most starkly this unequal “distribution of the sensible” (Rancière 2013, 39).

To delve into aesthetic experience is necessarily to face the social and political inequalities that shape, and even at times preclude the experience of, and participation in, the common sensible world. This understanding of aesthetics thus exceeds the realm of art. It pertains to the sensory experience of a factory worker, whose time is largely spent inside the bowels of the mill (with its associated sounds, sights, temperatures, and corporeal risks), or that of a housewife from the adjacent neighborhood of Tamburi, who spends hours warding off the dust of iron ores from the domestic sphere, or that of a gravedigger in direct contact with the contaminated space of the dead, or that of a shop owner in wealthier neighborhoods, whose possession of a motorboat might allow him a unique view of sunsets on the endless horizon of the open sea, or that of protesters who struggle to be heard and seen, or that of cancer patients who struggle to even speak.

Aesthetics has proved central to attempts in visual arts, media studies, and ecocriticism to understand how the scope and scale of slow-moving phenomena such as global warming can be made visible while admitting to the opaqueness of such imagery (Davis and Turpin 2015; Demos 2017; Iovino 2016), as well as to address the environmental implications of image-making technologies themselves (Cubitt 2017). Yet approaching the aesthetics of environmental crisis—a crisis of both representation and sensory experience—from an anthropological

perspective means attending to the embodied experience of pollution day by day. The spaces of imperceptible poisons demand an ear attuned to words, rhymes, resonances, echoes, and discursive meanderings in everyday life. It is precisely this messiness of narrative that accounts for Taranto's toxic history and the way residents, including myself, were led to seek out other representational modes—not only different media but also new forms of metaphor—so as to grasp toxicity's flickering presence. This means tending not only to hegemonic toxic discourse (Buell 1998) but also to how poison shapes microhistories, intimacies, and subjectivity. Drawing on southern Italian “toxic biographies” that record narratives of illnesses caused by pollution (Iengo and Armiero 2023), this work stands in conversation with an environmental anthropology that understands toxicity's affects as much as its effects (Morimoto 2014; Tsing et al. 2017; Shapiro 2015; Nading 2020; Murphy 2017)—and more particularly with emergent accounts of images as modes of anthropological thinking and relating in times of ecological crisis (Stevenson and Kohn 2015).

The experience of fieldwork involves a heightened proximity of relations amid poisons—a toxic bond one steelworker I interviewed called the “shared labor of breathing.” Place-based ethnography of the kind I've conducted (three years uninterrupted, between 2017 and 2020, with several fieldwork trips before and after that) inherently invokes the kind of situatedness upheld by feminist epistemologies and the critique of the god trick (Haraway 1988, 589). My own body became directly enmeshed over some years: a listening body, porous to the affects and stories of others, as much as to the poisons they inherit. This embodied perspective inevitably troubles and complexifies the (aesthetic, scientific, juridical) distance implied in forms of representation such as bird's-eye-view photographs, graphs, reports, epidemiological maps and statistics, and, to some degree, artistic productions. The photographs of glittering dust testify to this enmeshment of the nightwatchmen's bodily sensations as they endure corporeal vulnerability. They bring to light the experience of poison as it comes in and out of consciousness.

In cinema, rapid shutter movement reminds us that the invisible is, indeed, inherent to the act of seeing. In the dark gaps of the flicker—that “instant of eclipse,” as Tom Gunning (2017) puts it—our perception steps in to fill the void with its own virtual images, or afterimages. The flash photographs in the cemetery make this interval palpable: what they illuminate is inseparable from what they momentarily eclipse. The flickering appearance of toxicity via the camera's flash coincides, uncannily here, with the oscillating absence and presence of the dead themselves. Thus, while my ethnography both documents and depends on

situatedness, it also calls for another scale—one that involves transcendence outside the logic of the god trick. The narratives gathered here call on the realm of the dead, of dreams, and of spectral presences that are, in some ways, “nowhere.” Maurice Blanchot (1981, 81) proves helpful here: “Death suspends the relation to place.” He asks us provocatively, in the opening epigraph, where the corpse is located. “It is not here, and yet it is not anywhere else. Nowhere? But then nowhere is here.” It is between the invisible and the invisible, between the “nowhere” that is death and the earthly embodiment of singular life-histories—a “situated dislocation” (DiCaglio 2021)—that this ethnography of aesthetics finds its place.

This has implications for the relationship to finitude and death, for a kind of absence *at the heart* of presence. For Blanchot, this is always a flickering movement: reality and imagination are interlaced, doubled, as the image is also constitutive of reality, maintaining an ongoing power to contaminate reality. For him, the image is a paradox stemming from the power of the negative, of death, and thus the corpse is the paradigmatic figure for thinking about the image, in its dwelling between life and death, presence and absence. Image and corpse exist as a concrete truth in the world (as punctual and finite, like the event of death), as well as a force that *destabilizes the finality of events*, disintegrating any fixed beginning or end.

To experience an event as image is not to free oneself of that event, to dissociate oneself from it, as is asserted by the esthetic version of the image and the serene ideal of classical art, but neither is it to engage oneself with it through a free decision: it is to let oneself be taken by it, to go from the region of the real, where we hold ourselves at a distance from things the better to use them, to that other region where distance holds us (Blanchot 1981, 87).

In the image, the distance from the object (its absence and spatiotemporal dislocation) possesses us. It is this *being taken* by the event of death—in both the region of the real and the distant image—that my work traces, in a context where the “real” consists, also, of a toxic bodily enmeshment with environment through fieldwork.

The Only Sure Thing

Just before the 2018 Italian national elections, the New York Times published an article titled “Little Chance for Sun as Italy Slogs to Polls.” Below the

title was an image of workers exiting the factory's gate. Taking Taranto's "dilapidated steel mill" as its backdrop, the article gave a dismal overview of growing right-wing populist parties, alarming unemployment, and an exodus of young jobseekers. It closed with the ironic statement of an anonymous Taranto gravedigger: "In the cemetery, that's where we find work," he said. "*Death is the only sure thing*" (emphasis added).

The gravedigger's words marked a surreptitious inversion. The image of an animate, productive cemetery sustaining the living labor of capitalism eclipsed the fact that the main source of labor in Taranto was in fact the adjacent factory—which also produces death. Amid Italy's economic and political instability, death was the only "sure" thing. Yet the stories about death and the looming threat of illness that I heard in Taranto seemed anything but sure. They formed a murky terrain of suppositions, elaborations, and predictions. The circulating stories involved their own labor of counting, of listening for resonances, patterns, and uncertain correlations. Everyday life alongside poisons fluctuated between the denial of toxic threats and the tacit knowledge that they determine individual trajectories as well as the very fabric of the social world, as the popular saying indicates: "In Taranto, we all have deaths in the family."

During years spent in Taranto, familial stories of illness and death frequently came my way. When my neighbor lost her dog Nikita to a virulent cancer, she asked the veterinarian for the scans of her lungs. A young man recounted his parents' deaths the previous year of the same illness. A friend's aunt and uncle—a similar story. My friend's tenant died, her husband shortly thereafter. Fathers of two friends. A mother-in-law who died in her sleep, as if she'd just slipped away. Many passed away abruptly, even though they were smoke-free, even "healthy as a fish" (*sano come un pesce*), as the saying goes in the maritime town. A woman I encountered on the bus spontaneously recounted the death of her friend's child, who had been hospitalized in the north. She rushed to show me a photograph she held in her wallet. "In Taranto," the child's doctor had told her, "you are like the living dead." Over time, I came to understand that people experienced this reality as a collective curse. I saw how people in Taranto, myself included, looked for signs, provided interpretations, *worked things out*, through experimental forms of knowledge and assessment.

The collective awareness of poison oscillates between realms of sensibility and truth: statistics co-exist with hearsay and rehashed stories, as people establish their own correlations, theories, and conclusions. While studies have detailed Taranto's elevated levels of disease at the level of population, direct causation linking specific deaths to environmental pollution is difficult to prove. What emerges, then, is a "scalar mismatch" between epidemiological abstraction,

juridical standards of proof, and the subtle, embodied attunements through which toxic harm is actually lived and sensed (Liboiron and Lepawsky 2022). As Max Liboiron argues, dominant pollution frameworks rely on threshold logics and regulatory scales that render certain harms imperceptible or non-actionable, even as exposure persists unequally across bodies and environments (Liboiron 2021). Because many Taranto doctors were afraid to publicly establish such correlations, small groups created cancer registries and documented their own list of facts and misfortunes. The environmentalist struggle relied largely on citizen science or civil monitoring (see Alliegro 2020; Benadusi and Rivet 2016; Ravenda 2018). Death stories kept pace with and even accelerated alongside citizen-led research. This was not only a matter of scale in death numbers (in the end, everyone *will* indeed die) but also a question of temporality and velocity, of scalar intensification and density. Death itself had come to be imbued with suspicion and uncertainty. One of the gravediggers had taken it on himself to keep a notebook detailing causes of death when corpses were brought to the morgue. The cemetery became the locus for counting pollution deaths, but also the place where the corpus delicti could be exposed.

The factory of course was known to be a place of death for laborers. The *nourishing mother* had transformed “into a murderous Goddess, MatrIlva” (Vignola 2017, 21). Accidents inside the factory were called “white deaths” (*morti bianche*)—a term that also referred to the death of young infants for unknown reasons—implying an absence of responsibility. Contesting this implication, the expression “labor homicides” (*omicidi del lavoro*) was coined in the 1960s to hold factories responsible for such deaths.

While occupational deaths may be considered invisible (Colucci 2011), pollution deaths proved even more difficult to track. They were made visible by self-organized citizens, often the parents of deceased children—notably during a candlelight procession (the *fiaccolata*) that took place in 2019: one of the first and largest collective mourning marches the city had known.

On the evening of February 25, thousands gathered to walk through the city center’s main street until they reached the open sea. Followed by a wide, silent crowd of torches, a handful of people held large photographs of children with handwritten text: “I should have lived” (*Io dovevo vivere*). Unlike in other politicized environmental demonstrations in southern Italy, the organizers of the *fiaccolata* insisted it be presented as secular and devoid of politics (see Iengo and Armiero 2017). While a unifying discourse around mourning provided the crucial recognition of shared experience, it simultaneously failed to make visible the dissymmetrical distribution of death, the way the state left *some* people to die in Italy’s south (Butler 2016).

This act of collective mourning speaks to a deeper need to bear witness to the suffering caused by the factory, and to ritually puncture the ongoingness of environmental violence. Photography, long intertwined with death, spectrality, and witnessing (Barthes 1981; Belting 2011; Cadava 2021), proves pivotal here. The nightmen's photographs mark time, while providing a belated visual awareness of environmental violence—a temporality close to that of trauma. Bodies and cameras emerged as witnesses, for a moment, to the spectral evidence of a traumatic event, one that will only be uncovered in hindsight (Baer 2002). And while cemetery workers bore witness to these deaths by marking them down in notebooks, and while dust was as inscribed in their bodies as in their photographs, the bodies of mourners and laborers became themselves media of memory, living on.

II. EXPELLING THE POISONOUS IMAGE

This photograph was taken in the cemetery in 2012 by Isabella Mongelli, a performance artist from Taranto. We see the factory's smokestacks sticking out from behind the trees, and in the foreground, placed over tombs, we see framed portraits of the dead, who seem to look back into the camera. Mongelli was one of several artists I encountered during fieldwork who had decided to return to her hometown after years spent in other Italian cities. She had returned to the south, where her family's support and the lower costs of living allowed her to dedicate herself fully to artistic practice. The photograph was made at a time



Figure 9. Photograph of Taranto's cemetery from the photographic series *Visions in Taranto*, by Isabella Mongelli. Taranto, 2013.

that coincides with her return—during the height of political turmoil and awakening in the “Tarantine spring.”

Mongelli began taking pictures as a gesture of self-estrangement, to adopt the point of view of “a person who was born there but who is now a tourist or a stranger, with a short-term passport.” The title of her photographic series, *Visions of Taranto* (2012), conveys not only the act of looking, of seeing, but also the act of witnessing an apparition. Mongelli described this process to me:

Initially I began working on Taranto because it held an emotional resonance with my inner state. I started noticing things and photographing them. I didn’t know yet that photography was such a powerful filter. My visions made reality more real, because my perspective ended up being prophetic of future political events.

I began observing reality, and there were these wide pockets of unencoded reality. . . . An enigma: nothingness, a dark hole. I delineated my cynicism then. That macabre humor. Let’s go in the hole and see what happens! Let’s cut it open, eviscerate it!

What was in this void, this emptiness [*vuoto*]? Take “nothing” and analyze it. Here we’re talking about the power of making things external, making them become objects. What are the components of this nothingness? So, I began collecting these shapes, these traces.

Traces. Whereas the images by the night custodians bore the forensic traces of dust, Mongelli understood her photographic images *themselves* as “traces”—but of what? Some of her images display the material traces of dust, rust, altered colors. Others seize poison’s appearance in public discourse, through photos of headlines tacked on newsstands announcing the poisoning of one of the city’s traditional delicacies: “These mussels must be destroyed!” But most of her photographs capture seemingly unrelated details of everyday life: a clam picker in muddy waters, a stray dog, women shopping at the fish market. Mongelli’s image-making holds a degree of ambiguity. She captures, in her words, unspectacular “pockets of reality without a code.” Outside mainstream industrial imageries, her images display a form of numbness, of dullness, a lack of self-awareness of the catastrophe unfolding. Her images are symptomatic of the representational challenges posed by the event (or rather, the *non-event*) of such a stretched-out crisis. They are

traces of an absence, of a void, of a sense of emptiness reminiscent of what what [Jalal Toufic \(2009\)](#) calls the “withdrawal” in surpassing disasters.

If You Expel It, It Is No Longer Part of You: From Body to Image

Mongelli’s visions offer testimonies of a troubled act of looking, a collection of traces that shed intermittent light on the enigma of a world shaken by new sensory reckonings that recode the past as damaged. She reflects on her photographs *après-coup*, rediscovering in them what [Benjamin \(2005, 510\)](#) called a “future nest[ed] so eloquently” that one, “looking back, may rediscover it.” For Mongelli, photography served not only to bring into visibility, to reveal, but also to therapeutically de-familiarize, estrange, objectify, expel:

Looking at them after the fact, I felt that I was not only creating an archive but that I had *objects* in my hands. Through photography, I began to *intervene* in reality, to objectify it, and make it external to me.

It was like a protective mechanism: instead of hurting you from within, *you put the object outside of you. If you expel it, suddenly it is no longer part of you.*

This separation effort is intimately linked to the interpenetration of bodies and toxic matter, which ecofeminists allude to as “chemical embodiment” or “trans-corporeality” ([Alaimo 2016](#)). As Mongelli once told me, “I am not so interested in the usual rhetoric [*retorica*] around this place. I’m interested in the ways in which the state enters your skin, penetrates subtly into your cells, to the point of modifying them.” Photography appears here as a technique of mediation and expulsion: one moment in a broader *intermedial* circulation between body, image, and discourse.

With time, I realized this “penetration of the state” plays out simultaneously, for Mongelli, at a material and a discursive level. It involves a biological understanding of bodies chemically wounded over generations, as well as the biopolitical techniques of state governance involved in the factory’s activities and biosocial management of health ([Foucault 2003](#)). It *also* involves the penetration of poisons into language and discourse. This crisis cannot solely be read, the artist tells us, through the language of scientific data or explicit political contestation (*retorica*). It also constitutes an epidermal, sensory crisis connected to affects, and an entire set of atmospheres ([Stewart 2011](#)). To locate this penetration of the state, Mongelli attunes herself to the city’s uncanny surfaces and textures

through a performative process of distancing and de-familiarization. Here, photography offers the distance she seeks so as to *expel* Taranto's poisonous image from herself—to avoid being contaminated by it.

Material and Discursive Contaminations: Boundary Crossings

Mongelli's photograph stages the intense physical proximity between the cemetery and the steel mill. The reality is that they stand so close that an entire area of the graveyard, which formerly belonged to the mill, now bears the factory's name: "Zona Ilva," a reminder of a macabre gift offered by the owners of the mill, and of the deaths it would inevitably produce. I became interested in what such a stark proximity produced at an affective, symbolic level. How did it shape the physical and emotional spaces of mourning in the city?

For most of the mourners I encountered, the cemetery was "not what it used to be." Things had changed. Orange tape enclosed many of the fields to keep mourners from approaching contaminated ground; air-filtering facemasks hung around their perimeters. Access to these fields was barred, though most mourners didn't heed the prohibition. A young woman, whom I befriended during my strolls across the graveyard's labyrinthine paths, introduced me to her mother Rosa's grave. Rosa had been buried in a field inside the cemetery in accordance with her will. She wanted her coffin buried in direct sunlight, not in a mausoleum. During the six months following Rosa's death, Rosa's daughter came every morning, stepping on the toxic burial ground with plastic bags wrapped around her shoes. At times, her brothers and sister accompanied her, gathering chairs to form a circle around the small tombstone and flower vase whose water she changed diligently every day.

Despite misgivings about the cemetery, the desire to *be there*, at the physical location of the deceased, persists. The attachment exceeded the risk. Even in its primarily symbolic appeal, the family burial ground served to reinforce the choice of grounding oneself, of enduring, of staying (*stare*), that "displacement without moving" (Nixon 2011, 19). This double bind of the cemetery is replicated at the scale of the city, where attachment is guided by the laws of filial piety and kinship. One's family is buried there, so one intends to be there, to live there and be buried there as well.

Certainly, people expressed dread when burying a loved one at the feet of a factory responsible for their death. For this reason, some opted to cremate their loved ones to keep them in their homes. But in everyday life, this unease was given other explanations—the cemetery was "too expensive," "corrupt,"

“unkept,” “badly managed,” or simply “dirty.” Whether this mistrust and disgust resulted from politico-economic reasons, the *material* threat of pollution, or the discursive associations attached to the cemetery as a spoiled, defaced space proved impossible to untangle.⁴

What was certain was that boundaries had been transgressed. A gravedigger explained this to me: “I was born in the cemetery, essentially. I’m alive. I’m here. You could say *I’m a living dead*.” Poison had blurred the separation between life and death, as much as it transgressed moral boundaries. The living dead elicit contempt but also a degree of fascination. The man recounted consoling mourners on a daily basis. At times, he even became the object of widows’ sexual desires: “I don’t know what they see in me! But it happens. This cemetery is a den of iniquity.” In addition to the women who allegedly pursued him, he witnessed, on quieter days, ardent sex scenes in abandoned crypts. The cemetery made for the best place to cheat, he said—wives told their husbands they were visiting parents buried in the cemetery, “but in reality,” he said, “you’re having sex either with the custodian or someone else!” He even witnessed scenarios where he knew both the cheater and the cheated. “Ma’am, I didn’t see anything, don’t worry,” he told them. “They bribe me with sexual favors to keep the secret, and I say, no, I didn’t see you, take it easy, you’re covered.”

Gravediggers and cemetery custodians often spoke of transgression, drugs, prostitution—of forms of money-making away from the city. Men and sex workers were kept away from the nuclear family, women from their husbands, the living from the dead, or so one thinks. Thus, custodians and tomb cleaners inadvertently witnessed adulterous acts. The cemetery was radically exposed, its boundaries unstable, the co-contamination of immorality and matter exceeding both epidemiological maps and moral boundaries.

What could a process of decontamination look like, in such a context? Luciana, who had been cleaning tombs in Taranto’s cemetery for the past twenty-five years, wondered: “Personally, I don’t see how they will decontaminate [*bonificare*] here. What would I be supposed to do? Do I have to be decontaminated too?” Beyond these images of bodily contamination, the factory was said to modify not only people’s emotional substrata—but also their sense of self.

Re-enactments, from Image back to Body

Mongelli describes feeling emotionally laced by poison. Together with her friend, the sound artist Alessandra Eramo, she has given a name to this affect: *tristezza siderurgica* (the sadness of steel), close to solastalgia and the eco-anxieties

of environmental change (Albrecht 2006). On returning to Taranto, photography had become a strategy for her to distance herself from the suffering this pollution entailed. Yet it is precisely this effort of separation that poisons, in their material and discursive permeability, put into question.

This separation is partial, temporary, always bound to be transgressed, metabolized, reincorporated. What is expelled as image returns, altered, to the body: mediation never secures distance, but stages a recurrent passage between embodiment and exteriorization. Indeed, in 2013, Mongelli re-enacted her photographs in a small theater in Taranto's workers' neighborhood. In her play *my personal taranto*, two characters search for spatiotemporal anchors in the midst of a slow, invisible catastrophe. In the absence of ritual, practices of memorialization, or catharsis, all her characters do is embody those strange instances of life captured by photographic punctuation, seized by the camera from the monotonous, uneventful flow of toxification. Mongelli describes the play as an attempt to capture "life that jumps among poison" (*la vita che salta tra i veleni*). Subsequent performance pieces were later to be developed in conversation with Michael Taussig (2020) and his recent work on the role of aesthetics in times of global meltdown. There, Taussig suggests—contra a Weberian disenchantment of the world—that the "mimetic excess" at play in certain rituals has been *heightened* by the current moment of global meltdown and its correlative environmental crises.

Could the trespassing of normative boundaries through sexual acts be the mimetic excess of the cemetery's material defacement, bringing bodies to re-enact physically and metaphorically the transgressive materiality of toxicity itself—that so-called matter of out of place already there, disturbing the rest of the dead (Douglas 2003)? What to make of this incessant movement between materiality and discursivity, where—as in Mongelli's work—the porousness of the body leads to the creation of distance through an image, which itself is once again re-enacted and channeled through the body? I, too, felt drawn by the ontic possibilities of the space Mongelli explores in her distanced image-making as I entered the cemetery in search of the embodied experience of those who worked and mourned in the cemetery during the events of its remediation.

III. REMEDIATION AND THE WORK OF ABSENCE

I took this photograph (Figure 10) on a hot summer morning in 2019, in an area of Taranto's cemetery referred to as "the field of angels" (*il campo degli angeli*), where children, usually newborns or infants, are buried. A gravedigger with a facemask is digging a hole the size of a small coffin with a mechanical



Figure 10. Photograph taken in Taranto's cemetery in 2019.
Photograph by Jasmine Clotilde Pisapia.

excavator. In the foreground stands an older couple with their backs to the camera. As we stand behind them, our gaze adheres to theirs, making its way down the hole being dug. In Renaissance paintings, these figures were known as admonishers. Their role was to guide the eye of the viewer, to advise or warn them. Here, the couple's gaze invites us to contemplate the place where their first son had been buried fifty-two years earlier.

"My husband buried our child himself," the woman later told me. "He made a small wooden cross to place on the burial ground." On that morning, neither child nor cross were anywhere to be found. Although the image resembles a burial scene, the gravedigger was opening a hole so that the parents could assess whether there were any remains left. This disinterment formed part of a mass displacement of graves forced by municipal policies as part of the city's decontamination project. This remediation project, referred to in Italian as *bonifica*, involved displacing hundreds of bodily remains to replace contaminated soil in the burial ground.

Bonifica: *The Paradox of Remediation*

The Italian word *bonifica* contains *buono* (good) and originally referred to the process of making land adequate for cultivation. This seemingly benevolent word echoes a fragment of Italy's Fascist history: land remediation (*bonifica*) was a symbolically charged project promoted by Benito Mussolini (Bevilacqua 2002). The *bonifica integrale* described the quintessentially modern, technocratic intervention of the Fascist state, geared most famously toward the Agro Pontino region south of Rome, known for its marshes and malaria. The regime prided itself on having given birth to new cities from unsanitary lands, with names evoking neo-classical Roman imaginaries—Latina, Aprilia, Sabaudia. The project went hand in hand with a medication campaign against malaria that promised a *bonifica umana* (human improvement, even purification). While the draining of the marshes was to offer cultivable land free of infectious disease, *bonifica umana* acted “on the public’s bloodstream,” resulting in Mussolini’s motto: “Redeem the land, and with the land the men, and with the men the race” (Hall 2010, 78). Yet Mussolini’s endeavor also meant to distract people from the aftermath of the First World War, giving them hope for land they could make productive through cultivation while leaving the territory with highly uneven results.

Taranto’s cemetery was built in the mid-1800s by destroying an entire olive grove. In the early 1960s, olive trees were again eradicated, at a much larger scale, to make way for the factory. Was this another form of *bonifica*? The state made space for the industrial steel complex of Taranto, thus making the land exploitable and profitable—in other words, *bonificata*. Now, poisoned by the results of that modernist project, the city was undertaking yet another project of *bonifica*—yet in this most recent case, to remediate (*bonificare*). It required the displacement of hundreds of human remains—many of whose loved ones were still alive to oversee the exhumation of bones reduced by time to dust.

On those hot summer mornings, the cemetery’s office manager busied himself sending letters and making phone calls to parents informing them of the upcoming disinterment. If no one answered, the child’s remains would be moved to an anonymous communal grave. People appeared in the office confused and perplexed. Some had the unsettling feeling of being arbitrarily expelled. Parents were called to the cemetery to witness the disinterment of their children (at the cost of 50 euros), to identify their children’s remains, and to dispose of these remains if they lacked the financial means for a second burial. The unburials had unexpected material and emotional effects.

Mariangela, one of the mothers asked to identify remains, evoked how the disinterment re-activated the experience of loss:

You die with your child. There, in that coffin, I had buried my heart [*ho seppellito mio cuore*]. Losing a child is like that. I fell in a depression, I didn't go out of the house, I didn't want to hear or see anyone, I didn't answer the phone. I buried myself in the house [*mi ero sepolta in casa*].

Like most parents I met during this process, Mariangela had lost an infant—a child stillborn, she said, due to environmental pollution. These lives had a fragile, transient place in the world. They bore the names of their grandparents, or the Pope, as was the case with Mariangela's child, Giovanni Paolo.

Given the peculiar, liminal status of stillbirth, the field of angels was filled with stories of religious intensity connected to abortion. The office manager recalled a pious woman who secretly volunteered to deliver aborted fetuses in jars that she herself brought from the hospital to the field of angels, to “give these unborn beings a place.” During our conversation, Mariangela evoked the construction of a secret sanctuary devoted to the Virgin Mary near Taranto, in a place where it was believed satanic cult members were sacrificing aborted fetuses at night. Anxieties around stillbirths—whether as sacrifices to God or as victims of satanic violence—had ideological implications couched in conservative Catholic anti-abortion rhetoric. But what struck me about this unknown woman's unusual volunteer work was how citizens took it on themselves, at times clandestinely, to ensure the protection of the dead.

These initiatives were not unlike those undertaken by several friends in Taranto who chose to keep the ashes of their deceased parents in their homes. At times, this protection of the dead, which included their incorporation into private spheres, was motivated by economic concerns. But it was also a response to institutional failure and a deep mistrust of the state—in this case, for its inability to provide a dignified burial ground. Appalled at having to re-open this wound at her own expense, Mariangela returned the fragments of her son to her home. She fashioned her own “memory”: a blue ribbon (traditionally hung on doors across Italy on the occasion of a boy's birth) and a rock saved from her son's vanishing burial plot. While she had never possessed an image of her son, she brought his “new body,” to borrow her words, into the house where she had “buried herself” in grief years before.

The unburials I attended in Taranto's cemetery prompted improvisational forms of ritual witnessing. The *bonifica* coerced mourners into contributing financially to the effort to separate toxicity from the cemetery and then pay for this collective dismemberment through the painful re-enactment of their loss. For mourning parents, the process was marked by profound affective ambivalence:

the painful opening of a wound was accompanied by the *possibility* of consolidation—an opportunity for mourning that emerged from the encounter with a “surplus of absence” (Fédida 1978).

There Is Nothing

“*There is nothing.*” The two gravediggers with facemasks and a yellow mechanical excavator kept repeating this to me as they placed earth back into the holes they had dug. This experience of visual absence lies at the core of exhumations. The *bonifica* involved its own peculiar scenes of vision. The visible traces of bodies were reduced to dust and declared aloud, time and again, to be “nothing.” This uncanny revelation was redoubled by the fact that some of the infants had barely been seen to begin with.

This paradox lies at the heart of exhumation rituals, which vacillate between disjunction and resurrection, grief and therapeutic relief. In her work on Greek village graveyards, C. Nadia Seremetakis (1991) interviews a young woman in charge of assembling exhumed bones who comments on the moral conduct of the deceased—rumor has it that they had killed their own children. “It is in the material evidence of the exhumed dead,” writes Seremetakis (1991, 192), “that the hidden acts of the living are disclosed.” In Taranto’s exhumations, conversations similarly revolved around questions of moral conduct: Who was a good person? Who was not, and why?

One gravedigger involved in the trial against the factory confessed that most of the parents they encountered in the field of angels were *not good*. They were delinquents. Mafiosi. Who knows *why* their children had died. An illness, or something at birth. Maybe the reckless mistake of a doctor. “Who knows?” In the office, the managers, too, fell into conjecture about possible causes of death and the moral conduct of grieving families, including the transgressive sex of family members in the graveyard. The visible evidence of exhumations gave way to a moral questioning of parents, but also to other suspicions about what goes unseen. Given the well-known child mortality rates in Taranto, the managers told me that many of these children succumbed to blood contamination. The question of environmental justice persists, as an intuitive, unarticulated concern about responsibility.

Why did these children die? Might the exhumations serve as evidence in the trial against the factory—who is responsible, who complicit? Given the intricate connection of city and factory vis-à-vis family members who worked there in the past or continue to do so, as well as those who are beneficiaries of the wealth it

has generated, the exhumation process gave rise to a complex process of negotiating collective responsibility.

Indeed, Taranto's exhumations, or "second burials," involved the sight and assessment of the deceased's remains (Hertz 1960). They were acts of vision, acts of witnessing. Tending to the decontamination process meant witnessing the coming to light of out-of-sight bodies, but also the formless specter of an environmental crime. What was at stake was not only the management of death in the present, but the distribution of toxic inheritances across generations—altered forms of life and reproduction shaped by chemical exposure (Murphy 2017). For Mariangela, this crime and the culpability for it were not circumscribed in the past, but rather temporally extended, with the crime itself entailing an ongoing threat to reproducibility and the theft of the future: "Well, what do we have to leave our children?"

CONCLUDING, WITH UNCERTAINTY

During my fieldwork, the uncertainty surrounding death in Taranto opened its own "surplus of absence": voids and gaps puncturing everyday life, sometimes left blank and silent, at other times filled by discursive and affective excess. I believe this uncertainty to be related to the difficulty not only of grasping the slow cataclysm that besieges the city as a recognizable event but also, for those affected, of having proper burials, mourning, and memorialization. In Taranto, poison is a material force enmeshed with the everyday lives and deaths of the entire social world. It is tied to emotional registers, everyday discourses, politics, and intergenerational bonds. And yet its presence and consequences occur as fleeting apparitions, intermittently.

This intermittence is visible in the images that punctuate this essay. These are rhythmic images that oscillate, following what I perceive as a flickering movement of experience, of a life cut up by interpenetrations of death. As such, these images remain ambiguous. They draw the eye into a flickering practice of linkage—between dust and discourse, the living and the dead—guided by prophetic signals that arrive too late, or too faintly, to become proof. To borrow an expression from Lisa Stevenson (2014, 10), they "capture uncertainty and contradiction without having to resolve it."

While photographs or drawings in notebooks are often considered testimonials that make visible excesses, gaps, and fleeting events inherent in fieldwork, my recourse to images is driven by the impulse to track the failures and displacements of the gaze—the afterimages produced by absence itself, the material absence of poison as trace. It is in this interstice between what appears

and what withdraws that the image becomes, for me, a hinge: not a solution to invisibility, but a way of staying with it. Visibility also carries its own risks—its own exposures to violence. What if, instead, we indeed had to learn to dwell at the threshold of the visible, and to “see in the dark,” as [Rosalind Morris \(2020\)](#) suggests, “as though from the perspective of the dead”?

If these are poisonous images, it is partly because, as images *of* poison, they are marked by poison, and partly because they remain in a relationship of co-contamination with the body, with death, and with the “real,” as Blanchot has it. Yet it is also because they carry the paradoxical nature of the *pharmakon*, threatening to usurp the work of memory and the senses, while opening the possibility—if only for an instant—of locating, giving visibility to, and perhaps even ritualizing what remains an ongoing state of uncertainty. They index, one could say, the unresolvable task of dwelling in and with a poisoned environment, and with the sick earth as at once an inheritance and the malaise of late industrial life.

ABSTRACT

This article explores poisonous images—images that both register and trouble the visibility of toxicity in Taranto, Italy, one of Europe’s most polluted cities due to the continent’s largest steel factory. Centered on photographs taken in the city’s contaminated cemetery, the essay asks how slow violence can be apprehended ethnographically when pollution remains unevenly perceptible and causally elusive. I argue that the photographic image, beyond its forensic or legal promise, functions as an ethnographic hinge between matter and meaning, visibility and refusal, foregrounding aesthetics as a political as much as a sensory problem. Through three photographic acts produced by cemetery workers, a local performance artist, and myself (as anthropologist), the article proposes “flickering” as an anthropological method—attuned to the intermittence between visible/invisible, absence/presence, and the oscillation of death in everyday life. These poisonous images do not stabilize evidence: they pulse in and out of consciousness, capturing uncertainty and unequally distributed exposures and sensibilities. The cemetery emerges as both site and figure for grasping the metamorphosis of death amid the environmental crisis, where mourning and inheritance remain perpetually unsettled. [toxicity; aesthetics; images; photography; death; flickering; environment; intermediality; Italy]

NOTES

Acknowledgments For their careful engagement with this work, I extend my deepest gratitude to Rosalind Morris, Lisa Stevenson, Valentina Bonifacio, Jason Pine, Isabella Mongelli, Gwynne Fulton, Jean-Ernest Joos, Leslie Sabiston, Fatima Mojadeddi, François Pisapia, Francesca Bertin, Sahar Sadjadi, Syantani Chatterjee, Michael Taussig, Marilyn Ivy, Andrea Bordoli, Eduardo Kohn, Leo Stillinger, H el ene Quiniou, and Kirill Chepurin. Many thanks to the two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable feedback, and to Daniel C. Barber for his precious editorial assistance. I also acknowledge the support of the Wenner-Gren

Foundation, the Institute for Cultural Inquiry ICI Berlin, and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. This piece is dedicated to friends, companions, and interlocutors living in and struggling for the city of Taranto.

1. There have been various epidemiological studies issued in the past two decades, though the main reference at a national level remains. See Amerigo Zona, et al., “SENTIERI: Epidemiological Study of Residents in National Priority Contaminated Sites; Fifth Report,” *Epidemiologia e Prevenzione* 43, no. 2–3 (2019): Supplemento 1: 1–208. See also Roberta Pirastu, et al., “Environment and Health in Contaminated Sites: The Case of Taranto, Italy,” *Journal of Environmental and Public Health* (2013): 1–20; and Ida Galise, “L’impatto ambientale e sanitario delle emissioni dell’impianto siderurgico di Taranto e della centrale termoelettrica di Brindisi” [The Environmental and Health Impact of Emissions from the Taranto Steel Plant and the Brindisi Thermoelectric Power Plant] *Epidemiol Prev* 43, no. 5–6 (2019): 329–37.
2. The legal saga surrounding Ilva is long and complicated. In the early 1980s, prior to the implementation of environmental laws in Italy, several magistrates from Taranto found ingenious ways to navigate already existing laws involving natural phenomena, such as the sea, smoke, or wind, to show how these *also* applied to industrial damage to the environment. These “artisanal” legal strategies were used before the 2012 sequestration order. Unprecedented in scope, this trial (based on the first SENTIERI epidemiological report in 2006) accused the factory’s owners, plant managers, politicians, and local officials of environmental pollution, despoiling and poisoning water and food substances, and obstructing environmental protection bodies. In 2021, the Taranto Court of Assizes found several defendants guilty and issued sentences. In 2024, however, an appeal was lodged that successfully overturned the verdict and forced a re-trial of the entire case. See also [Tundo 2024](#) and [Falcone 2019](#).
3. “3e Dossier Processo Ilva: Parlano I lavoratori Ilva e cimitero, gli abitanti dei Tamburi, parti civili” to the *Ambiente svenduto* trial made on January 8–9, 2019, by Slai Cobas.
4. For an account of defacement and its intertwining with the negative sacred, see [Taussig 1999](#).

REFERENCES

- Alaimo, Stacy
 2016 *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Albrecht, Glenn
 2006 “Solastalgia: Environmental Damage Has Made It Possible to Be Homesick without Leaving Home.” *Alternatives Journal* 32, no. 4–5: 34–36.
- Alliegro, Vincenzo
 2020 *Out of Place Out of Control. Antropologia dell’ambiente-in-crisi*. Rome: CISU.
- Baer, Ullrich
 2002 *Spectral Evidence: The Photography of Trauma*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Barca, Stefania, and Emanuele Leonardi
 2016 “Working-Class Communities and Ecology: Reframing Environmental Justice around the Ilva Steel Plant in Taranto (Apulia, Italy).” In *Class, Inequality, and Community Development*, edited by Mae Shaw and Marjorie Mayo, 59–76. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Barthes, Roland
 1981 *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Belting, Hans
 2011 *An Anthropology of Images: Picture, Medium, Body*. Translated by Thomas Dunlap. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.

- Benadusi, Mara, and Sandrine Revet
 2016 "Disaster Trials: A Step Forward." *Archivio Antropologico Mediterraneo* 18, no. 2: 7–15. <https://doi.org/10.7432/AAM180201>
- Benjamin, Walter
 2005 "Little History of Photography." Translated by Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter. In *Selected Writings*, vol. 2, part 2, 1931–1934, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, 507–530. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Bevilacqua, Piero
 2002 "Bonifica." In *Dizionario del Fascismo* [Dictionary of Fascism], edited by Victoria De Grazia and Sergio Luzzatto, 1:179–80. Turin: Einaudi.
- Blanchot, Maurice
 1981 "Two Versions of the Imaginary." In *The Gaze of Orpheus and Other Literary Essays*, edited by P. Adams Sitney, translated by Lydia Davis, 79–89. Barrytown, N.Y.: Station Hill Press.
- Buell, Lawrence
 1998 "Toxic Discourse." *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 3: 639–65. <https://doi.org/10.1086/448889>
- Butler, Judith
 2016 *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* London: Verso Books.
- Cadava, Eduardo
 2021 *Paper Graveyards*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Colucci, Fulvio
 2011 *Invisibili: Vivere e morire all'Ilva di Taranto* [*Invisible: Life and Death at the ILVA Steelworks in Taranto*]. Calimera, Italy: Kurumuny.
- Cubitt, Sean
 2017 *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press.
- Davis, Heather, and Etienne Turpin, eds.
 2015 *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments, and Epistemologies*. London: Open Humanities Press.
- Demos, T. J.
 2017 *Against the Anthropocene: Visual Culture and Environment Today*. Berlin: Sternberg Press.
- Despret, Vinciane
 2019 "Fireflies in Uncertain Times (With a Rhythmic Instinction to be Able to Travel Beyond Existing Forces of Life)." In *Fireflies*, by Philippe Parreno, 129–135. London: HENI Publishing.
- DiCaglio, Joshua
 2021 *Scale Theory: A Nondisciplinary Inquiry*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Didi-Huberman, Georges
 2018 *Survival of the Fireflies*. Translated by Lia Swope Mitchell. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Douglas, Mary
 2003 [1966] *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge.
- Falcone, Francesco
 2019 *Il sequestro nella vicenda giudiziaria ILVA S.p.A. Linee per un ricostruzione* [*The Seizure in the ILVA S.p.A. Judicial Case: Elements for a Reconstruction*]. Rome: Stamen.
- Fédida, Pierre
 1978 *L'absence* [*The absence*]. Paris: Folio.
- Fortun, Kim
 2012 "Ethnography in Late Industrialism." *Cultural Anthropology* 27, no. 3: 446–64. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1360.2012.01153.x>

- Foucault, Michel
 2003 *"Society Must Be Defended": Lectures at the Collège de France, 1975–1976*. Edited by Mauro Bertani and Alessandro Fontana. Translated by David Macey. New York: Picador.
- Gunning Tom
 2017 "Flicker and Shutter: Exploring Cinema's Shuddering Shadow." In *Indefinite Visions: Cinema and the Attractions of Uncertainty*, edited by Martine Beugnet, Allan Cameron, and Arild Fetveit, 55–69. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Hall, Marcus
 2010 "Environmental Imperialism in Sardinia: Pesticides and Politics in the Struggle against Malaria." In *Nature and History in Modern Italy*, edited by Marco Armiero and Marcus Hall, 70–88. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Haraway, Donna
 1988 "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective." *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3: 575–99. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3178066>
- Hertz, Robert
 1960 *Death and the Right Hand*. Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press.
- Iengo, Ilenia, and Marco Armiero
 2017 "The Politicization of Ill Bodies in Campania, Italy." *Journal of Political Ecology* 24, no. 1: 44–58. <https://doi.org/10.2458/v24i1.20781>
 2023 "'Toxic Bios': Traversing Timescapes through Corporeal Storytelling." In *Toxic Timescapes: Examining Toxicity across Time and Space*, edited by Simone M. Müller and May-Brith Ohman Nielsen, 197–221. Athens: Ohio University Press.
- Iovino, Serenella
 2016 *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Liboiron, Max
 2021 *Pollution Is Colonialism*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press
- Liboiron, Max, and Josh Lepawsky
 2022 *Discard Studies: Wasting, Systems, and Power*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Morimoto, Ryo
 2014 "Message without a Coda: On the Rhetoric of Photographic Records." *Signs and Society* 2, no. 2: 284–313. <https://doi.org/10.1086/677923>
- Morris, Rosalind C.
 2020 "Seeing in the Dark." In *For Ever More Images?*, edited by Alexander Strecker, 174–77. Athens: Onassis Foundation.
- Murphy, M.
 2017 "Alterlife and Decolonial Chemical Relations." *Cultural Anthropology* 32, no. 4: 494–503. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca32.4.02>
- Nading, Alex M.
 2020 "Living in a Toxic World." *Annual Review of Anthropology* 49: 209–24. <https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-010220-074557>
- Nixon, Rob
 2011 *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Pasolini, Pier Paolo
 1999 [1975] "Il vuoto del potere" o "L'articolo delle lucciole" ["The vacuum of power" or "The article of fireflies"]. In *Saggi sulla politica e sulla società*, edited by Walter Siti and Silvia De Laude, 404–11. Milan: Arnoldo Mondadori.
- Rancière, Jacques
 2013 *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*. Translated by Gabriel Rockhill. London: Bloomsbury.
- Ravenda, Andrea
 2018 *Carbone: Inquinamento Industriale, Salute e Politica a Brindisi* [*Coal: Industrial Pollution, Health, and Politics in Brindisi*]. Milan: Meltemi.

- Schuppli, Susan
 2020 *Material Witness: Media, Forensics, Evidence*. Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.
- Seremetakis, C. Nadia
 1991 *The Last Word: Women, Death, and Divination in Inner Mani*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
 1996 *The Senses Still: Perception and Memory as Material Culture in Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Shapiro, Nicholas
 2015 "Attuning to the Chemosphere: Domestic Formaldehyde, Bodily Reasoning, and the Chemical Sublime." *Cultural Anthropology* 3, no. 3: 368–93. <https://doi.org/10.14506/ca30.3.02>
- Stevenson, Lisa
 2014 *Life Beside Itself: Imagining Care in the Canadian Arctic*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Stevenson, Lisa, and Eduardo Kohn
 2015 "Leviathan: An Ethnographic Dream." *Visual Anthropology Review* 31, no. 1: 49–53. <https://doi.org/10.1111/var.12062>
- Stewart, Kathleen
 2011 "Atmospheric Attunements." *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 29, no. 3: 445–53. <https://doi.org/10.1068/d9109>
- Taussig, Michael
 1999 *Defacement: Public Secrecy and the Labor of the Negative*. Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press.
 2020 *Mastery of Non-Mastery in the Age of Meltdown*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Toufic, Jalal
 2009 *The Withdrawal of Tradition Past a Surpassing Disaster*. Beirut: Forthcoming Books.
- Tsing, Anna, Heather Swanson, Elaine Gan, and Nils Bubandt, eds.
 2017 *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Tundo, Andrea
 2024 "Annulato il processo all'Ilva dei Riva" ["Trial Against the Riva Family's Ilva Annulled"]. *Il Fatto Quotidiano*, September 13.
- Vignola, Marta
 2017 *"La fabbrica": Memoria e Narrazioni nella Taranto (Post)industriale* ["The Factory": Memory and Narratives in (Post)Industrial Taranto]. Sesto San Giovanni, Italy: Meltemi Editore.
- Weigel, Sigrid
 2022 *Grammatology of Images: A History of the A-visible*. Translated by Chadwick Truscott Smith. New York: Fordham University Press.