From Garlic Hill to Goatsville.
Italians in the American Landscape
Marco Armiero

Looking at the world through a cookies box

Before dying, an aunt of mine, Maria, showed me a collection of pictures taken while she was in Brazil in the 1950s. She might have thought that her strange nephew, with his bizarre job, might be interested in those old pictures. The pictures were interesting indeed, because they showed women and men in what Aunt Maria used to define as a very wild environment. Maria spoke about herself in Brazil as a pioneer and her stories always included the climate, animals, plants and other natural elements. Anyway her stay in Mato Grosso was very short. Unfortunately for her, she didn't find the fortune that she was looking for and soon she came back to Italy, bringing with her not more than those pictures and some improbable stories. Of course, that box testifies that the Brazilian Mato Grosso has left its traces in Maria's life, but I wonder whether the contrary has also been true. In that cookie box there are not only some pieces of Maria's life but also some pieces of Mato Grosso's environment. Moreover, both of them are packed together: the meeting of a young Italian woman with a new exotic landscape is preserved in that box, waiting to be discovered. All my interest in migrants, nature, and the blending of both started from that tin.

The stories of migrants are full of tins like that. As in Maria's case, their memories and the world have been canned together in the same tin; thus, even if you think you are looking at one of them, actually what you see is a hybrid made by the very meeting between those who have moved and the places where they settled. In other words, generally we think of memory as something that humans preserve from their experiences. But it is also true that the places keep the memories of us, for sure they keep the memories of generations of migrants who have tried to adjust themselves to the new environment. Migrants' and places' memories are entangled altogether: this is what the world looks like canned in a tin of cookies. At least, this is what an environmental historian can see looking through it.

Today I will say few things about the challenges and opportunities of studying the environmental history of mass migrations and than I will try to present them through the case-study I am working on, that is, the Italians in the US.

1) So far environmental historians have not been interested in the history of modern mass migrations. Of course, Alfred Crosby first and later Jared Diamond have been extremely influential in including the movement of people, animals, and germs in the history of colonization and geographical exploration. However, I wonder whether only conquistadores or her Majesty's subjects have exerted environmental effects on the new worlds. What about the millions of people moving to Americas and Australia looking for a better life?

2) The issue of sources: is it possible to study the immigrants' relations to nature? Where is the cookies box? I must say that this is the hardest challenge in my research. Patricia Limerick has written something similar about the difficulty to find traces of the lower classes' reaction to new environments. Therefore, I think that a discussion about how to escape the captivity of the sources should be part of a research agenda on the environmental history of mass migrations.

3) Studying the immigrants and the environment means to enlarge our concept of nature. If we are looking for appreciation of wilderness and romantic lure, probably we are on the wrong paths, at least if we are speaking about the age of mass migration. From this point of view, we might say that nature was rather absent in the migrants' lives. But if planting grapes, harvesting the sea, mining coal, or simply surviving in the tenements of the metropolis had a "natural" substance, then migrants do indeed have their environmental stories waiting to be told.

Seeing nature through other eyes
So let's now move to my case-study

How did nature look like through immigrants' eyes? Were the forests of New England, or the Great Plains, or the Southern plantations different for an Italian immigrant? And did those cultural representations affect immigrants' actual, material ways of dealing with nature?
Recollecting his first impressions of California, an Italian immigrant, who later became a well-know wine producer, said: "California, there is no question about it, was a paradise then (in the 1900s). (…) Sonoma County was pretty because of agriculture, vineyards were all over; there was nothing but vineyards and plums. The plums were in very minor quantity, but the vineyards were all over. On top of the mountains, every place that you could look at, you saw vineyards" (Perelli Minetti interview: 82). It was neither a monotonous nor a too tamed landscape. It was a paradise produced by the people's hard work. Wilderness and its beauty did not seem to draw too much attention from immigrants. Indeed, several sources claimed the migrants' hostility toward nature. Louis Warren has analyzed the discourses of protectionists against the foreigners, accused to be poachers and destroyers of the local fauna. Italians, again, were quite famous around the world for their fatal impact on local birds which simply disappeared after their arrival.

Louis Warren and Peter Coates both have quoted the US naturalist William Temple Hornaday who, blaming Italians and the Blacks for their thoughtless hunting of wild birds, wrote: "Toward wild life the Italian laborer is a human mongoose. Give him power to act, and he will quickly exterminate every wild thing that wears feathers or hair" (Coates: 54). A German immigrant, or someone from another "advanced" country, could admire the singing birds flying in the sky; at least this was Hornaday's opinion, shared by others. Mexicans became the target of the same kind of discourses. In 1917 a local newspaper accused the Mexican community of Corona, California, of having ruined two parks in its area. According to the columnist, the only way to make Mexicans care about the park would have been to plant it with potatoes (Alamillo: 48).
Exploitation vs. contemplation, work vs. leisure: migrants' experience of nature has to be understood within these conflicting categories. Clearly, the narrative about the "bad" migrants who killed the birds and the "good" migrants who contemplated them was fictional, even racist. The first wave of immigrants, those who fit perfectly into the pioneers' tale, was anything but compassionate towards other species. Bison and pigeons were not driven to extinction by insensitive and hungry Mexicans or Italians; the damage had already been completed. Fatefully the later immigrants arrived in a different age when a certain idea of conservation already existed; it proposed a sharp separation

between spaces of work and spaces of nature. On the contrary, for those immigrants the frontier between those two spaces appeared porous and in my opinion this porosity was the real problem in this anti immigrants' conservationist discourse, much more than the actual damage they may have caused.

Many times nature was for them the space of work, as was the case of railroad builders or miners lost in the middle of the American wilderness. In his diary as a laborer in the railroad construction in Colorado, Adolfo Rossi remembered hunting for deer and squirrel to economize for food (Rossi: 265). Squirrel stew became a sort of staple in the Italian camps; hence, it has been included in several fictional accounts of the migrants' life, as, for instance, in Melania Mazzucco's acclaimed *Vita* (Mazzucco: 263-4). In the radio drama *L'emigrante* (the emigrant), broadcasted by the Petri Cigar Company Radio Station in San Francisco, one of the character, Mr. Parolin, survived simply hunting deer while he was working in the Shasta County's forest (Della Maggiorana: 51). Indeed the free access to game was a remarkable resource in the life of Italian immigrants employed by the railroad companies (Sturino: 105). But the porosity was not just where nature's presence seemed to be stronger, as in the laborers' camps in the middle of nowhere. What was the otherness of Italian backyards, full of vegetables, rabbits, chickens, if not a different appreciation of land and natural resources? Travelling through the country in the 1920s, an Italian military officer expressed the common opinion on this subject: "Instead of the characteristic green backyard, [the Italians have] legumes and livestock. If undeniably they are an important thrift for the family, they also ruin the posh and clean aspect that is typical of the American neighbourhoods" (Siciliani: 30). On several occasions, their skills in truck farming and grazing small animals, that is, their other way of seeing and using backyards, were the shock absorber to enable them to endure hard times. We have examples of this for the Depression years in the Delta and for several cases of strikes (Canonici: 49; Taylor and Williams: 87).

This was not true only in rural communities. Even if on a smaller scale, the same patterns were found in the big cities of the East and West coasts. In the first decades of the 20th century, Italians were still raising rabbits and chickens in their yards in the Excelsior district in San Francisco (Cancila Martinelli) or were moving to the Bronx, looking for more land to grow their vegetables and breed their goats (Glazer: 187). Again, Goatsville was the nickname for West Englewood, one of Chicago's Italian neighbourhoods in the 1880s (Vecoli, 1986: 296-7). In 1904 Minneapolis Little Italy still preserved a sort of rural atmosphere, populated, as it was, with ducks, chickens, goats, and cows (Bernardy quoted in Vecoli, 1981: 454). As Wilfred Scott said in 1913, the Italians were willing to plant a tree or vine where no American would ever think, even terracing the slopes of Telegraph Hill, in San Francisco (quoted in Pedemonte: 51). While we already have some notions about diversity in immigrants' backyards, we still do not have any clue about their ability to activate the urban commons. Actually, our knowledge about these urban commons is extremely meagre; we still need to analyze what they were and how they worked. But it is clear that our understanding of the immigrants' ways of seeing and accessing nature depend to a large degree on our comprehension of them.

As a matter of fact, we might discover that at the beginning of the 20th century immigrants could see in the urban streets of a New Jersey or Illinois towns things practically invisible to others, as, for instance, the carpet of leaves useful to breed their animals (Fogg Meade: 56-7). In one of his semi autobiographical novels Tony Ardizzone described how the

Sicilian immigrants in the early 20th century Chicago were able to survive gathering food in the unusual wild of an urban environment. When Ziu Griddu found his way to Evanston, leaving the too much explored North Side where, as Ardizzone writes, "hardly a weed or blade of grass could poke the green tip of its head out from a crack in the sidewalk without two hands and two knives diving toward it" – so he found in Evanston a land of plenty which no one but him could see. No roads paved by gold or rivers of milk, but more realistically fields of wild carduni (artichoke thistle). Just to stress the different way of seeing and using nature in the city, for the WASP lady owner of the field those were weeds and she payed ziu Griddu for pruning her field (Ardizzone, 168-170).

According to the environmental historian Ted Steinberg, garbage piled up in the streets was a strategic resource for the immigrant communities which used it as an urban common. Their animals, above all, their pigs, roamed through it, transforming rubbish into cheap protein, at least until the policies of sanitization, which represented, among other things, also the end of this access to an urban common (Steinberg). This was the case, for instance, of the chicken coops in San Francisco, studied by Joanna Dyl. At the beginning of 20th century San Francisco was home to some sixteen thousands domestic chicken yards; the birds were strategic in the subsistence of poor families. Hence, it was a disaster when the 1908 sanitization policies following the plague outbreaks of 1907 made prohibitively expensive to continue to have birds in the city (Dyl: 48-9). Probably, garbage, activated by migrants, has been the most used among these urban commons. In San Francisco for instance, this appears particularly clear. Being scavengers and gardeners, Italians exploited the opportunities of both identities. If as farmers they had the right skills to cope with scarce water supply (digging wells), as scavengers they had access to garbage as a free resource for shaping the soil, both on the surface (leveling it) and in its internal chemistry composition (fertilizing it) (Nicosia: n.p.). So, it was not by chance that the sanitation policy following the 1907 plague targeted specifically the Italians and their double business in the truck farming and manure collection (Dyl: 50).

Through their bodies

"Not only have humans mixed their labor with nature to create hybrid landscapes; nature – already a mixture of human and nonhuman elements – has intermixed with human bodies, without anyone's consent or control, and often without anyone's knowledge (Nash: 209). With these lines Linda Nash introduces a different perspective on the environmental history of mass migration which moves beyond the classical Turnerian plot about taming wilderness and conquered nature. Migrants themselves have been nature on the move. Their bodies have interacted with the new environment which was not simply raw material for the making of their dreams. Healthy or sick, strange as it might seem, migrants understood the environment through these categories (Valenčius: 2). As Coneverey Bolton Valenčius puts it, these categories referred to a different perception of the world, in which the relationships between bodies and nature were much stronger.

There were three possible places where migrants' bodies and nature met: land, race, and work. Obviously, as it was common in the migrants' experience, these places were not separated by rigid barriers; rather they overlapped, both metaphorically and materially. Due to endemic illnesses the land could be unhealthy and dangerous to settle. Difficult to see from the outside, but extremely evident to those who struggled with adversity, malaria and yellow fever were the main hidden features of the new landscape. The relevance of

the health of the land emerged from several sources. In 1875 the Secretary of Agriculture stated that immigrants avoided Michigan due to its reputation as a place of ague and wolverines. (Fourteen Annual Report: 309). In his book "Where to Emigrate and Why", Frederick B. Goddard considered malaria and other diseases among the main variables in choosing a place; if Minnesota seemed particularly healthy, "exempt from malaria and consequently the numerous diseases known to arise from it" (Goddard: 238), the new, warm, and highly fertile areas, were listed as not healthy to unacclimated person.

Mosquitoes were the main actors in the colonization of the Mississippi Delta. All the sources speak about the impact of this disease on the immigrant communities. Malaria was the main agent for the failure of the Sunnyside Italian colony, in Arkansas, for instance. (BEI 1905, 11).

In addition, California was a focus of concern about malaria. In the 1910s, it was common to say that California was the most malarial state in the country (Nash: 87). The same advancement of agriculture seemed to have unwanted effects on the diffusion of malaria, above all with the expansion of irrigation and rice (Nash: 121). But California was also an interesting experience because it was one of the places in which land and race met in the immigrants' bodies. In an escalation of xenophobia and racism, more than a mosquito infestation, it was the immigrant who was considered the vector for malaria. In a publication in 1917 we can read: "Part of the price we paid for finding gold in California was introducing malaria into our beautiful valleys. Dr. Ebright has shown how our immigrant laborers and our present citizens bought in this infection from different parts of the world and it is those carriers that we keep introducing and redistributing throughout California that make a large part of our problem" (Transaction: 12). As Linda Nash has shown all immigrant groups except Northern Europeans were considered guilty of introducing illnesses, above all malaria, into California (Nash: 123). Together with Mexicans, Italians were the most suspected.

Immigrants were blamed not only for malaria. At the end of the 19th century, physicians attributed the spread of hookworm in the California mining camps to Austrian, Italian, and Spanish workers (Nash: 123). The historian Alan Kraut has done extraordinary research on the connections among nativism, immigrants' health and diseases. Just to give some examples: the 1832 cholera epidemic was attributed to the Irish (32-3); Chinese were the scapegoat for several outbreaks in San Francisco, from 1870s smallpox (79-80) to 1900 plague (84); in 1907 Italians were blamed for a polio epidemic and in 1915 for the typhoid infection in Philadelphia (105-7; 111); for long time tuberculosis was defined as a Hebrew disease (155-9). The most common accusation against immigrants was their supposed poor hygiene. According to some health officers, immigrants loved to live in dirt, as Michael M. Davis reported in his 1921 book (Davis: 112). On the other hand, several physicians and social workers advocated a different explanation for the racial distribution of diseases and morbidity. According to Dr. Stella and Dr. Fishberg, as well as the Dillingham Commission and several other sources, it was not the immigrant who brought diseases to America; on the contrary, the new environment and its ways of living and working were detrimental, destroying the health of the newcomers.

Conclusions

Well, I hope I have been able to show you how an environmental history of Italian immigrants to the US might look like.

First, it implies to consider the different perceptions of nature, exploring the connections between cultural backgrounds and practices of using natural resources. Instead of speaking about immigrants' supposed weak appreciation of nature, or at least of wild nature, we might see the porosity of immigrants' relationships to nature; and this can enlighten also some aspects of the history of conservation movements and discourses.
Second, immigrants' perceptions of nature were not independent from the social ways of access and appropriating nature; the immigrants' ability to see resources that others could not and activate commons cannot be understood just in cultural terms, without considering the constrains related to property rights, urban sanitization, and gentrification.
Third, the porosity of immigrants' relationships to nature involved also immigrants' bodies. Once again, environmental historians need to remember that nature is not just out there but it is within humans. Embodying immigrants and their environmental stories do not mean to naturalize or biologyze them; those bodies are nature indeed, but they are also the common ground between the social and the natural; they mirrored the power relations and social inequalities.

In conclusion, in Maria's cookie box it seems to me that there is no gun or steel, maybe some germs, brought and taken. Nor could we find the explanation of the fate of civilizations. We might find the interrelated memories of peoples and landscapes and the challenge would be to go over the borders between them, trying to see the previous reflected, sedimented in the latter. We should be satisfied with seeing just a world canned in a tin.

References

Alamillo, José M. *Making Lemonade Out of Lemons. Mexican American Labor and Leisure in a California Town 1880-1960*. Rubana – Chicago: University of Illinois Press 2006

Ardizzone, Tony. *In the Garden of Papa Santuzzu*. New York: Picador 1999

Bollettino dell'emigrazione italiana (BEI): "Gli Italiani nel Distretto Consolare di Nuova Orleans. Relazione del Regio Console Cavalier Fara Forni." *BEI* 17 (1905)

Cancilla Martinelli, Phlylis. *An Urban Village in San Francisco*. Umpublish. Deposited at the Italian American collection, San Francisco Public Library

Canonici, Paul V. *The Delta Italians: Their Pursuit of "the Better Life" and Their Struggle against Mosquitos, Floods, and Prejudice*. Madison, Miss.: P.V. Canonici, 2003.

Coates, Peter. *American Perceptions of Immigrant and Invasive Species: Strangers on the land*. Berkeley - Los Angeles London: University of California Press 2006

Crosby, Alfred. *The Columbian Exchange; Biological and Cultural Consequences of 1492*. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Pub. Co., 1973

Crosby, "The Past and Present of Environmental History." *The American Historical Review* 100:4 (Oct., 1995)

Davis, Michael M. *Immigrant Health and the Community*. New York and London: Harper and Brothers, 1921

Della Maggiorana, A. *L'Emigrante*. Compendio di XXVII episodi del racconto drammatizzato l'Emigrante radiodiffuso alla stazione krow nel programma della Petri Cigar Company di San Francisco. No place, no publisher

Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steel: The Fates of Human Societies*. New York: W.W. Norton, 1997

Dyl, Joanna L. "The War on Rats vs. The Right to Keep Chickens: Plague and the Paving of San Francisco, 1907-1908". In *The nature of cities* edited by Andrew C. Isenberg. Rochester, NY : University of Rochester Press, 2006.

Fogg Meade. "Gli Italiani nell'Agricoltura". In Sheridan, Frank J., Napoleone, Colajanni, Fogg Meade, Emily *Gl'Italiani negli Stati Uniti*. Rome: Biblioteca della Rivista popolare, 1909

Fourtheen annual report of the secretary of the state board of agriculture of the sate of Michigan fro the year 1875. Lansing: W. S. George & C., 1876
Gabaccia, Donna. *Italy's Many Diasporas.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2000
Giordano, Paul Anthony. *The Italians of Louisiana: Their Cultural Background and Their Many Contributions in the Field of Literature, the Arts, Education, Politics, and Business and Labor*. Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1979
Goddard, Frederick B. *Where to Emigrate and Why*. Philadelphia: The People Publishing Company, 1869
Glazer, Nathan, and Daniel P. Moynihan. *Beyond the Melting Pot; The Negroes, Puerto Ricans, Jews, Italians, and Irish of New York City*. Cambridge: M.I.T. Press and Harvard University Press, 1963
Grove, Richard. *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens, and the Orgins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860.* Cambridge - New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996
Gumina, Deanna Paoli. *The Italians of San Francisco 1850-1930.* Staten Island: the Center for Migration Studies, 1978
Kraut, Alan. *Silent Travelers: Germs, Genes, and the "Immigrant Menace."* New York: Basic Books, 1994
Limerick Nelson, Patricia. *The Legacy of Conquest. The Unbroken Past of the American West*. New York: Norton & C., 1987
Limerick Nelson, Patricia. *Something in the Soil*. New York: W.W. Norton & C., 2000
Mazzucco, Melania. *Vita*. New York: Ferrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003
Nash, Linda. *Inescapable Ecologies:A History of Environment, Disease, and Knowledge* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006)
Nicosia, Francesco M. *Italian Pioneers in California*. San Francisco: Italian American Chamber of Commerce of the Pacific Coast, 1960
Pedemonte, Thomas Arthur. *Italy in San Francisco: "Old Wine in New Bottles."* Thesis (M.A. in History)--Calif. State College, Hayward, 1971
Perelli-Minetti, Antonio, and Ruth Teiser. *A Life in Wine Making: An Interview [with Antonio Perelli-Minetti]*. Berkeley, Calif: Bancroft Library, University of California, 1975
Riis, Jacob. *How the other half lives*. New York: Charles Scriber's Sons, 1890.
Rossi, Adolfo. *Un italiano in America*. Milano: fratelli Treves 1894
Siciliani, Domenico. *Fra gli Italiani degli Stati Uniti d'America. Luglio Settembre 1921*. Rome: Stabilimento Tipografico per l'Amministrazione della Guerra, 1922
Stone, Alfred Holt. "The Italian Cotton Grower: The Negro's Problem."*South Atlantic quarterly* 54:iv (1905)
Steinberg, Ted, "Down to Earth: Nature, Agency, and Power in History". *The American Historical Review* 107:3 (2002)
Sturino, Franc. *Forging the Chain Italian Migration to North America 1880-1930.* Toronto: Multicultural History Society of Ontario, 1990
Taylor, David A. and Williams, John A. *Old Ties, New Attachments: Italian American Folklife in the West.* Washington, D.C.: Library of Congress, 1992
"The Italian and the Public Health." *Medical Record* June 4, 1904
Valenčius, Conevery Bolton. *The Health of the Country. How American settlers understood Themselves and Their Land*. New York: Basic Books, 2002
Vecoli, Rudolph J. "The formation of Chicago's Little Italies," in *Migration across time and nations.Population mobility in historical contexts*, edited by Ira A . Glazier and Luigi De Rosa. New York and London: Holmes and Meier, 1986
Vecoli, Rudolph J. "The Italians." In *They Chose Minnesota: A Survey of the State's Ethnic Groups* edited by June Drenning Holmquist. Publications of the Minnesota Historical Society. St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1981
Warren, Louis S. *The Hunter's Game: Poachers and Conservationists in Twentieth-Century America.* New Haven: Yale University Press, 1997
Wright, Angus. *The Death of Ramón González: The Modern Agricultural Dilemma*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2005