Where do the Alps end? Reflections on Practices of Locality and Future-Making in the Italian Alpine Region

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Abstract

Where do the Alps end? This chapter locates the Southern Alps between the local and the global, the highlands and the lowlands, the rural and the urban. Through literature review and ethnography conducted in Lombardy, I reflect the ecological, cultural, and economic dimensions of heritage, and of "working landscapes" as common resources for futurity.

Drawing on recent scholarship on the transformations of the Alpine landscape, and on local discussions on the interplay between socio-economic forces and ecological change, the "alps" emerge as a node in a web of flows, a place of significance for its inhabitants and for the history of the dairy industry, increasingly regarded also for its microbiomic wealth.

This foregrounds an attention to practices of locality, their positioning in more-than-local flows, and their historicity. Central to the development of this argument is the history and ethnography of pasture-use, of dairy farming and cheese-making, and of transhumance and *alpeggio* (*alpage*) in particular. While the sedentarisation of transhumance led to the rich dairy industry in the Po lowlands, the tradition of summer grazing on the higher pastures has been "heritagised" to brand mountain cheese, as a revitalization of local ways of life. The language of typicity is key to this imagery, triangulating between local livelihoods, national and European policy, and global markets.

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Introduction: The Alps as a Node in a Web of Flows

In today's globalised scenario, the identity of the Alpine region seems to blur. Causal interrelations between ecological systems and cultural systems have been diffracted, complicated and reinvented, against the backdrop of global issues such as climate change, demographic challenges, and the vulnerability and inequality of global commodity chains. At the same time the Alps are a topos of various forms of escapes to the country including, for example, digital nomadism, ecotourism, neo-ruralism, and heritagization. This complex scenario warrants the question "Where do the Alps end?". Is there something that pertains to the Alpine region in its own right, warranting an "Alpine turn" for any of the mentioned topics, for example? Building on my research, I will refer in this text solely to the Southern Alps and mainly to the Italian part of it.

Ethnographers have maintained a broad interest in the Alps through various academic generations, albeit under different headings: alongside ethnographic monographs and anthropological fieldwork in and around the Alps there is a rich literature on oral history, material culture, and linguistic anthropology. For example LabiSAlp (Laboratorio di Storia delle Alpi) joins the efforts of the international Association for the History of the Alps (AISA) at the Architecture Academy of the Italian Swiss University in Mendrisio, studying interdisciplinary aspects (economic, social, cultural, demographic and political) of the alpine region.[2] The Museo degli Usi e Costumi della Gente Trentina at San Michele all'Adige has carried out a commendable editorial activity, translating classics of alpine anthropology into Italian and holding a permanent seminar of alpine ethnology (SPEA) with published proceedings between 1991 and 2010.[3]

The Alpine regions have inspired historical and environmental research of contemporary relevance (see for example the works of Jon Mathieu, 2009, and Robert McNetting, 1981). Studies of material culture and local history continue to influence museum practice (see for example Merisi, 2011). Lin-

2 www.arc.usi.ch/labisalp. In 2009 LAbiSAlp held a conference to identify new and ongoing lines of research 'between history and anthropology', to mark the twenty-year anniversary of the publication of Upland communities. Environment, population and social structure in the Alps since the sixteenth century (Viazzo, 1989).

3 See http://www.museosanmichele.it/

guistic anthropologists have rekindled an interest for dialect and mobility as forms of cultural heritage.4 In Italy, the principle of safeguarding historical minority languages was introduced with Law 482/1999, triggering the rediscovery of minority-languages in relation to local identities.[5]

Mobility lies at the heart of the Italian Alps. According to Glauco Sanga (2001), its economy is historically characterized by a binary model, based on gendered labour division complementing (women's) pastoral economy with (men's) migration as seasonal labourers, which was highly structured, skilled, and economically rewarding. For example the Premanesi, inhabitants of Premana in the province of Lecco (Lombardy), migrated seasonally from Valsassina to Venice where they ran an artisan community of ironmongers (Sanga et al., 1979). As Pier Paolo Viazzo's classic *Upland Communities* shows (with particular reference to his study of Alagna at the head of Valsesia in Piedmont), from at least the late sixteenth century until World War II, seasonal migration has been both a structural factor in integrating local economic resource, and an efficient way to control birth rate, as mirrored in the seasonality of birth dates (1989, pp. 129–132). Winter migration would include salaried professions in city guilds of carpenters, lumberjacks, smithies, builders, decorators, stonemasons and carriers.

Until the 1950's in the lower pre-Alps of Lombardy, most of the male mountain villagers would spend a substantial amount of the year in France or Switzerland working as lumberjacks or builders. The end of seasonal migration as a working pattern (after World War II) led to the mushrooming of small and medium enterprises in the carpentry and building sectors. However, with the availability of factory employment in the nearby cities, and sometimes also in the lower reaches of one's own valley, an irreversible tendency to resettlement in the lowlands began. In the valley were I conducted fieldwork, Val Taleggio, this can be clearly traced in the registers of the municipalities. In Vedeseta alone, for example, between 1950 and 1955, 258 people "emi-

4 Jillian Cavanaugh for example has observed a dialect revival in the city of Bergamo (2009). For a thorough linguistic analysis of the Bergamasque dialect, see Glauco Sanga (1987, 3 vols.).

5 Law 15 December 1999, n. 482 'Norme in materia di tutela delle minoranze linguistiche storiche', Gazzetta Ufficiale n. 297, 20 1999. See Porcellana (2007) on the Franco-Provençal linguistic koinè.

grated" (namely took up residence elsewhere). This number alone exceeds the number of current residents (193 in 2022).[6]

Strategies for, and imaginaries of the Italian Alps diverge according to ways of thinking their relationship to the lowlands, and to the global commodity flow. For example, mountain cheese is celebrated as a form of heritage, using the language of *tipicità* (typicity or typicality, Ceccarelli et al. 2013).[7] In what follows, I will reflect on what makes the alps a place, a topos, and a biome, in ways that trouble neat distinctions between the local and the global, the highlands and the lowlands, the rural and the urban. I offer the concept of practices of locality, which I envisage as nodes in more-than-local flows. In particular I will reflect on cheese as patrimony (heritage) and as commons (a working landscape), unsettling traditional notions of tradition as sedentary and bounded. I begin by focusing in the next section on the alps – namely the high pastures, traditionally used for seasonal grazing of cattle herds during the summer season (*alpeggio*). I will show how in this last decade, caring for the alps (grass, cows, and milk) has begun to mean also care for the microbiome and concern for future-making.

The Alps. A Place in the World?[8]

In my work on Val Taleggio I followed the transformation of dairy farming and cheese-making culminating in the bestowing of a PDO trademark for *Strachítunt* cheese, arguing that the logistics of all-year production and the stringent production protocol which anchors it to the boundaries of Val

6 As per the online demographics available at www.comune.vedeseta.bg.it

7 See Bergamo as UNESCO Creative City (https://www.bergamocittacreativa.it/). This recent recognition as Creative City for gastronomy, on a par with Alba and Parma, was sought and obtained in 2019. UNESCO's Creative Cities is a networking program aimed to support designated cities to develop existing economies based on their traditional strengths. In Italy there are another nine creative cities namely Bologna and Pesaro for music, Fabriano, Carrara, and Biella for crafts, Rome for cinema, Turin for design, Milan for literature. In the case of Bergamo, its "Cheese Valleys" were profiled as a keystone for UNESCO recognition, building on local production consortia of cheeses made exclusively in the Bergamasque mountains.

8 A Place in the World is the working title of an unpublished manuscript by Paola Filippucci which has greatly influenced my understanding of practices of locality. I am grateful to have been able to read it in the early years 2000 and to have rediscussed this topic more recently with the author.

Taleggio alone, made of Strachítunt a sedentary reinvention of what was originally a "transhumant cheese" (Grasseni, 2009, 2017). Ageing cheese in mountain caves was a historical trade of Val Taleggio, where family firms still mature and export cheese (nowadays in climate-controlled refrigerated vaults). Transhumant trails to the Lombard plains were part of a broader network which used Alpine passes connecting for example Switzerland and Italy, and which could extend over hundreds of kilometres, walked in a seasonal itinerant cycle (Mathieu, 2001). In his 1882 agricultural survey of the Italian kingdom, Count Stefano Jacini stated that "the word *stracchino* derives from the small soft cheeses produced during the journey from the mountain to the lowland and vice versa. They make it swiftly in their resting stations, with milk from tired cows after their long journey" (1882, p. 25). The image he conjures is that they could not heat the milk and would curdle it at milking temperature, hastily. Transhumant herders were *necessarily* also cheese-makers. They would transform their milk in makeshift stations, while taking the cattle from the upper pastures of the Lombard Alps after summer grazing to the lower reaches of the rivers Ticino and Adda for the winter.

Up until World War II, transhumance was thus simply one of the many mobile professions that complemented income in the mountains of Bergamo. Despite contemporary stereotypes, the transhumant herders and cheese-makers known as Bergamini were not poor – as they owned their often numerous herds. However, they lived like "nomads" contrary to common social conventions (Jacini, 1882, p. 25) and for this reason they were equally scorned by the sedentary but cash-strapped sharecroppers of the lowlands, by waged agricultural workers, and by the resident population of mountain villages (Corti, 2006), who relied on subsistence agriculture (notably animal husbandry, as crops were scarce) and the remits of migrant labour. Unlike the guilds of ironmongers and similar crafts, the Bergamini were not organized into associations: they were individuals related to extended families, according to Jacini (1882, p. 25) owning up to a hundred productive heifers but reduced to herds as small as fifteen cows in living memory (Carminati and Locatelli, 2004, p. 414). Following recent local research on the Bergamini, their culture seems to have been conservative and patriarchal but freed from the bonds of the mountain villages from which they came. They could afford to live a "masculine" life at the borders of acceptable societal arrangements: oral

testimonies register comments about the fact that the Begamini, all male and heads of households, might live away from their families for months or did not bother to go to church (Corti, 2006).

This does not necessarily clash with the communitarian organization of summer grazing in the upper pastures, often entirely delegated to resident women (Sanga, 2001). Transhumance and high pasture grazing (*alpeggio* in Italian, *alpage* in French) are in fact two distinct but overlapping working routines. Transhumance was an all-year-round itinerant model of pasturing. (In the case of sheep flocks, this is partly still surviving, though very marginally.) The transhumance of cattle herds was associated with the travelling cheese-makers and the dairy industry. *Alpeggio* is a shorter displacement of cattle (and sometimes goats) to the higher grazing pastures from the residential mountain village, and continues to this day. In some cases, the *alpeggio* pastures constituted the highest station of longer transhumant trails, too. Both transhumance and *alpeggio* regarded cattle, but cattle transhumance has completely disappeared, also from social imaginary and memories, while *alpeggio* is safeguarded as traditional, mentioned in PDO cheese-making protocols, and subsidized with agricultural aid. One should think of *alpeggio* as a residual, contracted reminiscence of (cattle) transhumance (Corti, 2006).

Mobile, transhumant herders made cheese. But in his report of 1882, Count Jacini doubts their skills, as they would not be able to control or foretell the quality of the cheese they made. His criticism reminds us of how important but hard-sought the craft of cheese-making was, even at the dawn of industrial food manufacture:

> Dairy farmers who make cheese themselves exist, but are few. Generally they sell their milk to dairy industries. But both in the first and in the second case, apt personnel is always lacking, namely, people with that special instruction that is indispensable for good manufacturing. In the year 1881, with so much progress in basic and applied chemistry in the dairy industry, a cheese-maker will talk about the cheese he is making as if it was a gamble. "Will it come out well?" he asks. And in fact some cheeses made in a certain period of the year are called "the gambles" (Jacini, 1882, p. 122, translated by author).[9]

9 Italian original: "I conduttori che fabbricano il formaggio per proprio conto esistono ma sono pochi. Generalmente invece essi vendono il latte ad appositi industriali che eser-

Those who could master the unfathomable art of cheese-making would eventually establish the Lombard dairy industry, which still bears the name of the original families (Arrigoni, Invernizzi, Locatelli, Galbani etc.). Most of these surnames originate in the valleys of Lecco and Bergamo – notably Valsassina, Val Taleggio and the neighbouring Valle Imagna – which together enjoyed access to rich pastures at a relatively low altitude, and the market of Milan. Different branches of the same family set up, over time, large businesses and competing enterprises. In sum, transhumant herds and a diversified all-year cheese-making economy produced rich cheeses for maturing and stationing, while in the high pastures, and fresh cheeses for quick consumption in the winter lowlands. This became the model of the Lombard dairy industry (Grasseni, 2017). With long-distance dairy transhumance gone, the families of cheese-makers eventually settled down in the plains, investing in large-scale dairy creameries, leaving the bothersome business of making upland cheese during the summer grazing season to the (other) mountain people.

Paradoxically, crafts that were historically a ticket for mobility, for connections, for comings and goings, are currently a symbolic device for marketing *locality*. For example, though claiming its pedigree from the practice of *alpeggio*, nowadays Strachitunt PDO is produced all year round and not just in upland pastures. In fact its PDO protocol prescribes that it can only be produced in the four municipalities of Val Taleggio, which is a mid-mountain environment. Borders are created through the strictures of the protocol itself. Using non-reheated raw milk as per the production protocol guarantees the very short distances that milk can travel. It can move from a shed to a creamery, even from one village to another within the same valley, but it cannot travel far. This raw-milk cheese is sedentary by definition – an ironic result, which eventually sedentarizes its original transhumant tradition.

Several other studies have investigated heritage food production in alpine and near-alpine areas, for example in conjunction with the debate around processes of "heritagisation" of intangible cultural heritage (Bendix, 2009).

citano il caseificio. Ma tanto nel primo caso quanto nel secondo, manca sempre il personale adatto all'uopo, fornito cioè di quella istruzione speciale che è indispensabile per il buon andamento dell'industria. In pieno 1881, con tanti progressi della chimica generale e della chimica applicata al caseificio, un casaro vi parla di un formaggio che sta fabbricando come di una giuocata al lotto. 'Chi sa se riuscirà?' dice egli. Ed è perciò che determinate quantità di formaggi prodotti in un dato periodo si sogliono chiamare le sorti".

The alpine territories and their diverse forms of mobile, seasonal and circular pastoral economy (such as transhumance and alpeggio) have harnessed market-oriented dynamics of value-addition (Aime, 2001; Allovio, 2001; Viazzo and Woolf, 2001), national and super-national certifications such as designations of origin and other types of geographical indications (Ledinek, 2021) as well as UNESCO recognitions (Valentinčič Furlan, 2015). However, upland terrains challenge economic models based on "scaling" and standardization (Porcellana and Corrado, 2010). Talking to socio-economic actors that are active in the animal husbandry and dairy sector in Italy, one will not fail to register that added costs due to difficult logistics and (lack of) infrastructure are high up on the list of complaints and concerns. My field interlocutors never fail to point out to city dwellers the effort this implies:

> We have always made these cheeses. My father has made them all his life and my son goes with him to the *alpeggio*. Keep in mind that when we are at our winter station, we say *fondovalle*, bottom of the valley, but that means 1,000 meters above sea level. When we are in the high pastures we are at 2,000 meters. So life is pretty hard all year round. (Aronne, pseudonym. Salone del Gusto Slow Food, 21 October 2004, video recorded)

Taking altitude seriously means considering logistics (thus costs), infrastructure and mobility.[10] This is true of any industry dealing with the specificities of mountain environments (for example lumberjacks). Next I will turn to novel ways in which environmental and cultural specificities of the alps are being researched and theorized.

Alpine Summer Pastures as Microbiomic Topoi

Among the new theoretical approaches gaining traction also within Alpine research, are the multispecies and "microbial" turns (Kirksey and Helmreich, 2010; Paxson and Helmreich; 2014, Raffaetà, 2021), which were preced-

10 See for example the work of the association Dislivelli (www.dislivelli.eu) and their several publications on challenges as well as opportunities of new ways of living in the Alps, for example neo-rural settlements (Corrado, 2010).

ed by environmental anthropological research of longer date (Breda, 2000; see Raffaetà, 2020, p. 33). This research takes into consideration the challenged environment, biodiversity, and microbial patrimony of the Alps. The microbiome co-defines natural and human-made environments, and their reciprocal significance for our own survival (Paxson and Helmreich, 2014). Roberta Raffaetà in particular analyzes the role of ferments and fermentation practices in the production of *alpage* cheese, and their connection to broader "politics of space, heritage, and ownership in times of ecological, social, scientific, and economic transition" (2021, p. 323). Following Munn (1990), she sees cheese-making as a fermentation technology that negotiates "spacetimes" in ways that are relevant and instrumental to future-making. As she puts it, "discussing how fermentation is managed and perceived gives us the opportunity to reflect on who owns the Alps and leads to a debate on how to constitute sustainable and just futures" (2021, p. 323). Furthermore, building on long-term research in medical anthropology and on microbial cultures (Raffaetà, 2020), she states that "fermentation plays a key role in scientific innovation as well as in social innovation as to how the Alps will be assigned value and ownership."

Raffaetà works with the notion of "spacetime" to express the multiple and sometimes conflictual worldviews associated with the *tipicità* (typicity) of mountain cheeses. She critically analyses a labelled certification introduced in 2016 by the Trento Chamber of Commerce, whose protocol prescribes using "a starter made of selected microbial strains found in *malga* cheeses" (*malga* indicating the cheese-making huts traditionally found on the high pastures). Raffaetà asks: "Is it possible to imagine and advance intellectual property as associated not just with the isolation, selection, purification invention, or manipulation of a biological entity but also with the skillful maintenance, repair, and variable reproduction of an entire ecosystem?" (2021, p. 331). This question is compatible with current cheese-makers' claims, to be "keepers of raw milk" and "keepers of molds".[11] Communities of practitioners and local stakeholders are beginning to understand the "alps" (including alpine slopes, grass, cows and milking and cheese-making practices) as a complex socio-ecological systems, with which a deeper understanding of interactions and dependencies becomes relevant, not only to cheese-making techniques and industries, but also to marketing language and potential customers.

11 See for example www.casarrigoni.it

This conclusion can further be employed to explore choices of technologies, for example, regarding milking. Robotics is being embraced in intensive agriculture. For example, milking robots can tend to the cow 24/7, measuring yield and dispensing personalized rations, adapting it to the cow's lactating curve or degree of wellness, as detected through sensors and computed by algorithms. However, adapting this to the alpine terrain and to the smaller scale of family dairy farming is challenging. Mobile milking stations are perhaps more antiquate but sturdier and simpler to repair, and thus more apt to the *alpage* summer pastures. What the right technology might be, and what the right skills for the job are, is identified and deployed case by case, in very specific "practices of locality", which are defined not only by the local scale, but by how this is connected to a global system. A challenge scarcely represented in the language of heritage is the harsh global competition in which local economic actors have to operate. In the words of a cheese exporter from Val Taleggio:

> What I do in my company is trying to understand if and how the breeders, the family, the valley, the economy can still survive in this present moment. Small and medium companies like mine have been bought by huge conglomerates from France, the Netherlands, Germany (I can think of five just in the last six months). So we need to find a marketable space and occupy it … Otherwise not only we miss a good business opportunity, but I will also see my place die. (Adele Arrigoni, 13 October 2022, audio recorded)

The words of this contemporary mountain entrepreneur explain how important it is, not only in environmental and ecological terms, but also in terms of finding an economic edge, to safeguard the alps microbiome as a construct with consequences. Interdisciplinary and inter-regional research takes inspiration from the ecological expertise and knowledge of alpine communities, investigating the role of "the wild" as both an encroaching danger (woods taking over abandoned pastures for example) and its own endangerment (for example the diminishing biodiversity, the precarious state of mountainous slopes and terrains due to overgrowth, erosion, landslides, drought, fires, and lack of maintenance). Scientific research on traditional knowledge and skills calls for cooperation between natural and social scientists, on issues

such as the transformation of traditional dairy farming (Jurt et al., 2015), gender challenges in mountain family farming (Rossier, 2005), or the potential and challenges of transitions to organic farming (Reissing et al., 2015).

In the following section I will explore the implications of these specificities in terms of "practices of locality". First I introduce the notion vis-à-vis relevant anthropological literature on heritage, locality and localism (which does not necessarily focus on the Alpine region), then I give some examples of possible collaborations between researchers and local stakeholders in the Italian Alpine region. Finally I connect this back to the reinvention of the countryside for urbanite uses.

Practices of Locality

Locality is a *locus* of identity and aesthetic formation (Meyer, 2009), shaped by practice as an everyday modality of dwelling (Ingold, 2022), a "life world" (Husserl, 1936) that co-produces places of work, play and learning. The language of heritage (*patrimonio*, *tipicità*) mediates between actual local proactices of making a living on the one hand, and market and (local, national, european) policy on the other.

Meaning-making and future-making are enabled by a "working landscape", namely a landscape that affords the sociality, mobility and economic activities necessary for a community to thrive. Heather Paxson (2012, p. 206) uses the term to describe contemporary Vermont's "post-pastoral working landscape", indicating the homestead architecture that continues to be lived in, despite the fact that the local economy no longer hinges on homesteading. This means paying attention to everyday practices (in their new connections to infrastructure and global flows), as they determine which resources are needed for social and physical reproduction (Appel et al., 2018, p. 2). They become lenses through which we mediate the Alpine landscape.

As Paola Filippucci notes, heritage has been convincingly redefined as a field concerned first and foremost with people. Scholars now theorise heritage as a diverse range of "social practices, processes and experiences through which people invest things, sites and practices with value and sentiment, and claim them in collective ownership or guardianship to affirm continuity, au-

thenticity and identity" (2009, p. 320). To invest certain practices and not others with an identity-value means connecting them to a *habitus* that is profoundly emotional as well as material, viscerally tied to place-making and meaning-making through material culture.

Jaro Stacul (2003), Patrick Heady (1999) and myself (2009) studied localism, regionalism and local identities in Trentino, Friuli and Lombardy, in relation to symbolic, ecologic and technological practices – including the self-stereotypization of mountain people as "hard people" and the notion of boundedness and boundaries as an important metaphor to understand local discourse on valued landscapes. This also relates to local aesthetic formations (Meyer, 2009) including conflicts and litigiousness among neighbouring localities (*campanilismo*) about, for example, the allocation of resources from European development funds, but also the prestige of local food and craft traditions.[12] Claims on the landscape itself, as belonging "to those born and raised in a specific locale, namely, those who have a long-standing working relationship with territory" (Stacul, 2010, p. 231) not only apply to place-based foods in the name of *tipicità*, but also to forestry or hunting (see Stacul, 2003, pp. 70–93).[13] The notion of the rural landscape as a patrimony in need of valorisation (*valorizzazione*) was recorded by Jaro Stacul in Caoria and Ronco in Val Vanoi (Trentino). This register-change followed a shift in policy discourse from a mere agricultural policy to that of a multifunctional, tourist-oriented rural development policy (Stacul, 2010, p. 228).

Based on her fieldwork in Veneto on belonging and locality in and around Bassano del Grappa, Paola Filippucci, an anthropologist working in close conversation with archeology, argues that localism is a symbolic construct that elaborates reflections on temporality and change. She interpretes "practices of locality" as ways of weaving places with memory (Filippucci, 2004),[14]

12 On campanilismo in Central Italy see Pratt (1986, pp. 140–54). Pratt anticipates a link between the language of campanilismo and that of the typicality of local commodities (1986, p. 154).

13 *Tipicità* is variously translated as typicity or "tipicality" (Ceccarelli et al. 2013). It can be breadly understood as 'heirloom' but it does not only define food. It can also be extended for example to rural architecture as seen below.

14 Paola Filippucci, Patrizia Messina, Jaro Stacul and myself presented a joint paper ("Knowing the Territory: Territory, Identity, and Local Culture in Northern Italy") in 1997 at the Annual Conference of the Association for the Study of Modern Italy (London, November 21st) exploring the concept of practices of locality.

analysing the uses of memory to frame the present in Bassano del Grappa and in the valley of the river Brenta (1992), but also in the Argonnes (2004b). Using participant observation, visual analysis of primary sources and material culture (postcards for example, see 2004b) as well as life histories, she examines intergenerational dialogue in the narration and representation of place, and interrogates how they are used to express belonging and locality.

My own 2003 monograph *Lo Sguardo della Mano*, based on fieldwork conducted in *alpeggio*[15] in 1996, 1997 and in the village of Vedeseta in 1998, was about the labour of connecting: through roads, networks of peers, municipal and regional public administrations. Experts, advisors, officers of trade unions and breeders associations were the protagonists of a "politics of agricultural advice" (Grasseni, 2009, pp. 106–116). Today, other tools such as community maps and ecomuseums (Grasseni, 2010) as well as participatory action research (Bonato and Zola, 2009; Povinelli et al., 2022) connect and position anthropologists in alpine communities. Strategies and funding opportunities relating to heritage (*patrimoine, patrimonio*) may involve local residents and socio-economic actors (such as farmers and breeders) but also local administrators and policy-makers, and often consult academics and local scholars. Alpine communities confront not only the peculiarities of their landscape but their positioning in history and geopolitics. At the end of the 1990s, the "practices of locality" I observed in Val Taleggio included diverse, self-conscious social actors (editors of the parish newsletters, local historians, amateur collectors) who interrogated themselves about local identity by cultural practice (through photographic exhibitions, archival research, setting up ethnographic collections, and an ecomuseum). I agree with Paola Filippucci that by reflecting upon temporality and history, people try to clarify to themselves what their being "here" entails, and to inform decisions about how to stay 'in place'. In particular, in the Italian Alps demographic implosion necessitates a reflection on futuring as well as on the meanings of the past. The landscape changes with thinning settlements (for example with the rewilding of pastures and streams, and the associated damage to the "working landscape" through forestification, landslides, erosion, and wild fires). This, added to the extremes more and more frequently caused by climate change, spurs more

15 See above for an explanation of the term, of which, to my knowledge, no English translation exists.

than in other localities, a reflection on which practices of locality continue to be meaning-making and future-making.

Future-Making

Research action and local knowledges have led to the development of ecomuseums in several Italian alpine regions (for example in Piedmont, Lombardy, Trentino, Friuli). While the earlier examples, inspired by the work of Hughes de Varine and the French "new museology" (de Varine, 2005) are mostly to be found in Piedmont (De Biaggi and Testa, 2010), a 2007 regional law in Lombardy funded the establishment of a network of ecomuseums as a "community of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991), as part of the region's "cultural infrastructure" (Garlandini, 2010). By 2020, the Lombard network of ecomuseums included thirty-four officially acknowledged ecomuseums, most of which are in mountainous areas.[16] Ecomuseums build on the working landscape as a common and as heritage, the results of a history of local industries, pasturing, specific forms of cultivation or ecological co-habitation.

The mountainous landscape has inspired several ecomuseums, across the southern Alpine arc, focusing for example on terracing (Murtas 2010), pastoralism (Ecomuseo Valle Stura), or natural resources such as water (Ecomuseo delle Acque del Gemonese, Gemona del Friuli). In other cases the source of inspiration is the identity of a tight-knit community with specific linguistic and material cultural heritage (see for example Porcellana, 2010 on the walser ecomuseum of the Comunità Montana Walser Alta Valle del Lys).[17]

16 See Rete degli Ecomusei della Lombardia, https://sites.google.com/site/ecomuseidellalombardia/home. Of the thirty-four ecomuseums listed at this link, the following nineteen are in mountainous areas: Ecomuseo Valle Spluga, Ecomuseo della Valgerola, Ecomuseo della Valmalenco, Ecomuseo delle Terrazze Retiche di Bianzone, Ecomuseo Valli del Bitto di Albaredo, Ecomuseo centro storico- Borgo Rurale di Ornica, Ecomuseo di Valtorta, Ecomuseo delle Miniere di Gorno, Ecomuseo Val Borlezza, Ecomuseo Val Taleggio, Ecomuseo di Valle Trompia, Ecomuseo Valle del Caffaro, Ecomuseo della Val Sanagra, Ecomuseo della Valvarrone, Ecomuseo delle Grigne, Ecomuseo Val San Martino, Ecomuseo della Valvestino, Ecomuseo della Resistenza, Ecomuseo Alta via dell'Oglio, Ecomuseo Concarena Montagna Di Luce.

17 On the adoption of the French model of ecomuseums in Italy, see Grasseni (2010), particulary the Introduction and the chapters by de Varine and De Biaggi and Testa.

While some ecomuseum projects have been able to mobilise intense participation, through local volunteers groups for example, in some other cases the administrative push to benefit from available funding has brought a certain degree of burocratization and a stop-and-go of participatory projects such as community maps. Oscar Biffi (2014) has comparatively studied two ecomuseums in Piedmont and Lombardy to assess their capacity to engender participation in transitions to sustainable economies. This doctoral research concluded that while in the Lombard case the participatory aspect proved cosmetic, and in fact grassroots associations for sustainable agriculture grew *outside* the ecomuseum's institutional space, in the Piedmont case a sustained conversation between local administration, mountain community technicians and ecomuseum promoters generated some economic return in the long run. The reintroduction of an autochthonous sheep breed (*pecora sambucana*) was however the result of personal synergies rather than of institutional infrastructuring, and the tourist economy generated by the ecomuseum would not suffice to keep the breeders in business.[18]

Some ecomuseums have been developed to favour tourism. A multisensorial experience of the working landscape is made available to visitors in such a way as to market local produce, for example through interactive workshops, enactments, or cultural events. This strategy unequivocally establishes the ecomuseum as a tool to attract tourism and to support local businesses. The interpretation of heritage that is offered, however, is strongly patrimonial rather than communal. As noted elsewhere, *patrimonio*, the Italian word for heritage, is something that is owned and can be handed down but also sold (or squandered). While it includes *priceless* resources such as natural, artistic and historical patrimony, since it combines natural and human-made features in one working landscape, with its indigenous knowledge and local practices, it is not envisaged as a *common* but rather as *owned* (Grasseni, 2017, p. 153).

"Defining landscape is tantamount to defining order", spells out Stacul (2010, p. 229), and certainly, for example, in the case of Val Taleggio, the ecomuseum project proposed a new symbolic, performative and eventually political order (Grasseni, 2015). The "practices of locality" that make a work-

18 Cf. Stacul (2010, pp. 234–235) on a similar ecomuseum experiment in Val Vanoi (Trentino) and its discontents.

ing environment viable for a community as discussed in the previous section, and the reciprocal roles of residents and administrators, producers and consumer, visitors and settlers, are reconceptualized and performed within this framework. For example, the hundreds of abandoned stone huts dotting the valley were publicized as typical (*tipiche*) like the cheese that used to be made in them. But at the same time they were recast in novel terms. One *baita* (mountain abode) was done up and marketed as B&B complete with sauna, for tourists to experience living in a former cow-shed. A separate space would be devoted, not to a predictable ethnographic exhibition but to an interactive sensorial experience of the *Vaccanza* – a pun based on *vacca* (cow) + *vacanza* (holiday). The *Cowliday* is a video installation that reproduces the sounds of a real-life cowshed and invites the visitor to progressively uncover and smell, touch and watch significant samples of the sensorial experience of mountain dairy farming. Hidden in as many drawers of a treasure-hunt chest are hay to smell, wood to touch and a loop of photographs of the scenery, introduced and commented by the voice of a professional actor. Similarly, *Tu, casaro!* (You, cheese-maker!) is a video installation of the Val Taleggio ecomuseum designed to accompany a cheese-making workshop for tourists.

Conclusion

Alpine scholars have commented on the Alps transforming into a locus for urbanite entertainment, naming it "disney-fication" of the Alps (Crettaz, 2011). This (further) integrates them in a commodity chain to service consumers. Following Igoe we could define this a "global economy of appearances" especially when nature is turned into a spectacle (Igoe, 2010). A globalized aesthetics frames the way in which policy discussion and international literature envision sustainable and green spaces, investing also alpine communities and terrains within what Michael Herzfeld defined a "global hierarchy of value" (Herzfeld, 2004). So for example future food production follows specific urbanite aesthetics and implicit models for urban consumption (Wiskerke and Verhoven, 2018). Contextualized within a global canon and design vocabulary, this planning imagination tends to overlook the web of local and grounded relations that inform (for example) the actual food

logistics between city and countryside, mountain and lowland, thus erasing the specificities of local sociocultural actors (for example, the little surviving transhumant pastoralism[19] or the recent traces of transhumant cow-breeding, which some associations are attempting to resuscitate through revivals and folk festivals[20]).

These global dynamics, rhetorics and discourse relativize the meaningfulness of posing the question of the Alps as a region per se. Contemporary social research on the Alpine region in fact has to engage in broader contemporary investigations into neoliberalism, global consumption, and gentrification. The dynamic and sometimes conflictual relationship between the Alps and their cities is a further dimension of past and future research which is worth developing under the chapter of "practices of locality". As we know, it is only at the beginning of the 18th century that the Alps became an object of aesthetic contemplation, of reinvention, discovery and conquest: a landscape – to paint from a distance or to go and visit as a tourist (De Rossi and Ferrero, 2004, p. 41). Commodification followed from this objectification: Sestriere, near Turin, for example was the first winter tourist station developed entirely for tourist purposesin the 1930s (ibid., p. 42). The city of Turin also styled itself as "city of the Alps" on the occasion of the Winter Olympic Games in 2006 and hosts several projects of urban museums and ecomuseums (Jallà, 2007, 2010). What is missing from these tourist industry's attempts is a conscious effort to address the Alpine landscape as more than a scenic backdrop or a vintage backyard: the Alpine cities' relationship with the valleys, rivers, reliefs and mountain passes which historically connected (rather than separate) contiguous regions in flows of merchandise, animals, pilgrims, merchants and armies.

What these representations are missing, and which is still largely under-researched, is also that the Alps are living through important demographic transformations, which not only include depopulation and outmigration, but also return migration, newcomers migration (asylum seekers, carers

19 See Maria Vasile (2023) doctoral research on Mirafiori Sud and its disappearing transhumance pastures, encroached – ironically – by urban regeneration projects focused on sustainable food production.

20 See for example https://festivalpastoralismo.org/

for the elderly, and manual workers), and neo-rural settlements (Raffaetà and Duff, 2013, Porcellana et al., 2016).[21]

Where do the Alps end? Diverse lines of investigation identify the Alpine region and its surroundings as a unique place in the world, tightly connected with the singularity of ecological strategies, linguistic and cultural identities, working environments and practices of locality. At the same time, contemporary global phenomena such as migrations, new mobilities and new concerns for sustainability and environmental 'values' contribute to redefine the alpine world. After the "peasant-ification" of mountain communities, the Alps are now beginning to look like a resource to explore rather than colonize. Nevertheless, they also risk being drawn into global flows and hierarchies of value that are defined on urban standards (as ecosystem services, heritage commodities, or a biodiversity basin). While the various disney-fications and heritage-izations of the Alps have also involved popular formulas for the reinvention of value in mountain communities (such as protected designations of origin for food heritage, and ecomuseums for participative planning and development), truly felt strategies of "emplacement", of finding one's place in the world, such as those identified in working landscapes and practices of locality, remain important points of reference for old and new upland communities. In sum, what keeps the Alps a good place "to think with", is their their capacity to de-centre and unsettle models of livelihood and development, in the light of their diversity, and that of the research they inspire.

21 In this complex context, research inspired by the "communing" literature and by the "diverse economy" network (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013) has developed an "Alpine community economy" project in the framework of action-research led by transformative design.See www.alpinecommunityeconomies.org and www.brave-new-alps.com (a Eurac/EU project 2019-2021).

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