Introduction*

Carmen Concilio
University of Torino, Italy.
carmen.concilio@unito.it
ORCID: 0000-0002-0853-7107

Alberto Baracco
University of Basilicata, Italy.
alberto.baracco@unibas.it
ORCID: 0000-0002-5276-4999

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South Reflections: Literary, Ecocritical, Decolonial, and Comparative Readings

Reframing Souths is a collection of scholarly essays that position themselves in dialogue with diverse south(s) — real, geographical, and imaginary — through a variety of disciplinary competences, but, above all, through ecocritical lenses. The fact that the present collection stems from Southern Europe — that is, Italy — helps relativizing and revitalizing the multiple perspectives offered by transdisciplinary scholars — literati, linguists, film and visual studies experts, anthropologists — who adhered to the call and joint research project launched by the University of Torino and the University of Basilicata, and with the partnership of the University of Genoa and the University of Pescara.

By no means "reframing" is to be intended as a way to contain and fix the ideas or ideologies about the south(s), fixing a status or a standard once and for all. Rather, the prefix "re" maintains an open and ever regenerative entry into the wide field of studies around and about the south(s), including the Mediterranean, as well as southern Italy and southern Europe, but also gazing out to the southern Oceans and shores of Oceania, to the South of the United States, to South America and to some African countries. All this within the framework of the Environmental Humanities.

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* This introduction is the result of the joint efforts by the authors. In particular, Carmen Concilio wrote the section: "South Reflections: Literary, Ecocritical, Decolonial, and Comparative Readings", while Alberto Baracco penned the section: "Plural South: Images, Representations, and Visual Cultures".

Perhaps, a first meaning of south — as concept — must be circumscribed: we do not intend to discuss only or merely the Global South, for we share a certain anxiety against this neoliberal, capitalist cultural construct, which inevitably opposes the global North to the global South. As said, for us south starts within the national, Italian — post-Gramscian — literary, filmic and visual tradition, and embraces the Mediterranean Sea and the countries facing that same Sea from its southern shores.

Moreover, our multimedia critical studies include the southern Oceans and some of the countries of the southern hemisphere. To better clarify what we mean with the term "anxiety", we tend to agree with J.M. Coetzee's assumption that there is a circulation of works of art in the south(s), but also of philosophies and theories, similar to the circulation of oceanic currents, that do not necessarily enter the Western or Northern canon, but create a composite reality among them and a dialogue with each other, with no need to be authorized, accepted or judged by- or judged in- the North.

> The term "Global South" originally came into use in the late 1970s to refer to economically disadvantaged nation-states and as a replacement for the term "Third World", thus shifting the East-West framework of European colonialism and Cold War decolonization to a Gramscian North-South vision of power relations in which multidirectional capital flows mostly benefit the geographic North. (Mahler 2015: 100)

Coetzee's establishment of a "J.M. Coetzee Cathedra: Literatures of the South" at the University of San Martin in Buenos Aires, with the purpose to invite writers from South Africa and Australia to present their works there, and then encouraging the translation of South American writers into English and of Anglophone writers into Spanish, is in itself a virtuous experiment in emancipation and decolonization, or even delinking as Walter Mignolo would say — substantially, creating a discontinuity — from the imprint of Northern Institutions, Universities, and Literary Contests and Prizes. Coetzee also insists that he refuses to use the phrase Global South, for this is a way to instill a view of asymmetric power relations, be they economic, political, or cultural. It is worth quoting his words at length:

> Since 2015, I have occupied a personal Cathedra at the University of San Martin in Buenos Aires, where I have dedicated my energies to bring together writers from three continents that are far apart in geography and in language but it seems to me that they have affiliations in their history and in their relation to the land, and I refer to — on the one hand, the vast literature of Latin America, more specifically the Literature of Argentina, and to the less vast, but still considerable, literatures of Southern Africa and Australia. As part of my duties, I have brought writers from Southern Africa and Australia to Argentina to offer courses in their respective Literatures and these courses have been attended not only

> by students from Buenos Aires, but also by students elsewhere from Argentina and Latin America more widely. What have been the fruits of their visits? Some of the fruits, I think, are intangible, some are more tangible. Let me just list some of the more tangible results. First of all, a number of works of fiction by Australian, by South African and by Mozambican writers have been published in Argentina by the Press of Universidad de San Martin, and in the reverse direction, an Australian publishing house has initiated a series of translations of Argentine writers, also through the kindness of Australian tax-payers we have been able to bring some of the Argentine writers to Australia on extended residencies. My overriding concern as professor at UNSAM, has been that students of the three literatures I mentioned should be able to meet and interact with writers from the South, without northern mediation. By which I mean without having to pass the cultural gate-keepers of the metropoles of the North; the people who decide which books from Latin America will be translated into English and which books will not, and decide which figures from the South will be promoted worldwide and which will not. And most importantly, who decides which stories by the South, about itself, will be accepted into the repertoire of World Literature and which will not. You will have noticed that in speaking of Literatures of the South, I have not used the term the Global South. And there is a reason for this: to my way of thinking the South is a real part of the world, with a climate and a flora and fauna of its own, indeed, with more than just natural features in common, but with a strong commonality of history and culture. The commonalities of history include a long and complex history of colonization. The so-called Global South, on the other hand, is a concept merely, an abstraction invented by social scientists, it is the negative Other of the North, a site of absences: absence of wealth, absence of infrastructure, absence of communications. By emphasizing the real, tangible commonalities of the lands of the South, by bringing their poets and thinkers a little closer together, and therefore I am doing my best to counteract the hegemony of the North. (Coetzee 2018: 05:28-10:24; my transcription)

Coetzee's position, although well argumented and quite original, is anyway debatable, for the Spanish language is a colonial language exactly like English. Moreover, the so-called Global North is not necessarily as censorious as Coetzee claims it to be. For instance, the translation industry in Italy, in particular, and in Europe more in general, is quite lively and very active in translating literary works from all over the World. Of course, this is less true for the Anglo Saxon World, which still tends to be monolingual.

With Coetzee, however, we inaugurate a perambulation in the south(s) to provide examples of alternative ways of thinking and looking at reality. Thus, remaining in South Africa, as a way to look at the South and at the North from the southern side of history — of course, depending on the positioning, on the latitude and longitude of one's positioning — the anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff write:

> Western enlightenment thought has, from the first, posited itself as the wellspring of universal learning, of Science and Philosophy, uppercase; concomitantly, it has regarded the non-West – variously known as the ancient world, the developing world, and now the global south – primarily as a place of parochial wisdom, of antiquarian traditions, of exotic ways and means. Above all, of unprocessed data.
>
> But what if, and here is the idea in interrogative form, we invert that order of things? What if we subvert the epistemic scaffolding on which it is erected? What if we posit that, in the present moment, it is the global south that affords privileged insight into the workings of the world at large? That is from here that our empirical grasp of its lineaments, and our theory-work in accounting for them, is and ought to be coming, at least in significant part? […]
>
> Because the history of the present reveals itself more starkly in the antipodes, it challenges us to make sense of it, empirically and theoretically, from that distinctive vantage. (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 5-7)

Having been lucky enough to attend the book launch while the Comaroffs were touring Italy and lecturing in our home town, Torino, it was possible for us to appreciate their argumentation. Europe, specifically, and Euro-America, more generally, should look at the south in order to understand how the world is «evolving toward Africa»:

> That species of action, which tends to be more visible in the south than in the north, takes on many guises: mobilizations against the privatization of the means of subsistence; against rising homelessness and, in particular, against mass eviction from either commons rendered into real estate or zones of abandonment gentrified; against deepening poverty, unemployment, and the absence or withdrawal of government services. (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 41)

Besides the list of the instances quoted above, the impending dysfunctionality of the Health Care System in Italy, and elsewhere in Europe, or the financial cuts to the Education System are just the last examples demonstrating how vulnerable our infrastructures might turn out to be, not differently from what has already happened in countries in the south from which the West might learn strategies of resilience and adaptation. The Comaroffs refer largely to the South African crisis due to the AIDS pandemic, which was partly solved once the situation was acknowledged by the political authorities and antiretroviral medicines started being prescribed and distributed. Interesting, too, is the case of Cuba, where the medical personnel is excellently professional, as demonstrates the fact that not only during the Covid pandemic doctors from Cuba were hired to operate in Italy, but periodically the lack of medical staff in Italy is integrated with Cuban medical doctors or with foreign medical staff. In spite of this, in Cuba there is a tremendous scarcity of medicines. Lately, in Italy

medical screening and testing facilities are being slowly privatized, thus limiting the possibility of public health screenings for all.

More crucially, the Comaroffs argue that it is with discourses and reactions against migrations that the north and south end up resembling each other:

> As northern governments resort to the language of wagon trains and frontiers, as journalists talk of an "apartheid planet", as the post-Cold War world gives way to a state of "ordered anarchy," we may be forgiven for thinking that the colonial societies of the south, and the postcolonies that have grown out of them, may be seen less as historical inversions of Euro-America than foreshadowing of what, in a postmodern world, it might become. Or is becoming. (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 106)

Written in 2012 this essay about «the exclusion of the stranger» as a reaction to «social and economic uncertainties, and the destabilization of borders, set in motion by rising global flows of labor, capital, commodities, and persons» was and is not only true for South Africa as «similar processes are evident everywhere that the nation-state is perceived to be plagued by conditions that threaten to dissolve its borders» (2012: 105), but is dramatically true for Italy now, where migrants are shipped to "detention" centers in Albania.

From the south, indeed, there are lessons to be learned. The reference to the above-quoted Latin American of Piedmontese origins Walter Mignolo deserves to be reproposed here in his programmatic and introductory words that function as a definition of what de-colonial thinking means:

> The decolonial option requires a different type of thinking (Catherine Walsh theorizes it as an-other-thinking), a non-linear and chronological (but spatial) epistemological break; it requires border epistemology (e.g. epistemic disobedience), a non-capitalist political economy, and a pluri-national (that is, non-mono-traditional) concept of the state. (Mignolo and Escobar 2010: 2)

From Australia, for instance, the warning reaches us launched by scholar Kate Crawford about AI. The exhibition she curated together with Vladan Joler, entitled *Calculating Empires. A genealogy of technology and power 1500-2025*, held in Milan at Fondazione Prada (Nov 23, 2023-Jan 29, 2024), shows a panel in the shape of a majestic black flow charter, with images and graphs drawn in white — as if it were white chalk on a blackboard. In the words of Kate Crawford:

> *Calculating Empires* is a visual manifesto. We are offering people a map to help translate, to help locate where they are in these systems, and what is happening at this deeper level. Looking at the relationship between technology and power over five centuries. Beginning in 1500 we see this extraordinary interlacing of the ways in which Empires have used technologies to centralize power. For us the question here is not what kind of world can technology build, but what kind of world do we want to live in? (Crawford 2023: 00:24-01:01; my transcription)

What is quite amazing in this flow-chart about the development of AI is to find a slave ship and European colonial history at the basis of a whole and long history of technology at the service of empire and imperialist powers. What the two scientists Crawford and Joler really want to warn us about are the new possible inequalities AI can produce, the new means of total surveillance and face recognition control that are being enhanced and what kind of extractivism is implied in the development of AI, for artificial intelligence is «an extractive industry» with incalculable anthropogenic impact on our Earth (Crawford 2021: 15).

As a way to mitigate the by now unstoppable rush towards AI, it would be interesting to turn to New Zealand philosopher Carl Mika, who proposes an alternative metaphysics from the one Europe adopted since Plato's times. This view is not dissimilar to what de-colonial scholars call «an indigenous episteme […] based on a model of horizontal solidarity that extends not only to all humans but also to non-humans in the natural and cosmological world» (Mignolo and Escobar 2010: 18). Carl Mika writes more precisely about Maori thinking:

> One thing is never alone, and all things actively construct and compose it. […] A thing emerges in front of the self with its relationship to the whole world. (Mika 2017: 4-5)

> For indigenous peoples the complexity of the world lies in its thorough interconnectedness. Moreover, indigenous peoples understand the world not just as interrelated but animate. By this, I mean that its entities are animate as well. Thus, "the rivers, mountains, land, soil, lakes, rocks, and animals are sentient." (Kincheloe and Steinberg 2008, in Mika 2017: 19)

The impossibility, so to speak, to single out one thing from the entanglements of its relations with the whole world marks the difference between Western or Northern metaphysics and Maori's philosophical thought. This holistic way of perceiving reality is certainly a teaching we might look at as a new model for dealing with human vs more-than-human relations in the Anthropocene, as some chapters of the present volume indeed do.

Among the writers who have explored the polarities of North and South, Jack London stands out for his iconic representations of the Yukon in the extreme circumpolar North and for his adventurous photographic journeys in the Pacific Ocean, in the southern hemisphere. Jack London and his wife Charmian started their sailing on the Snark, on April 23, 1907. London certainly is a man and a writer who has learned a lesson while navigating along the southern shores: there, he and his wife met indigenous peoples who were trying to resist colonization and they became recipient of London's total empathy. His anti-racist and anti-colonial attitudes were voiced in his Hawaiian tale: "The House of Pride". While the South was being transformed from colonial ground

of conquest to colonial ground for tourism, London portrayed the great dignity of Hawaiian surfers, with admiration and a photographic vision that was not exoticizing the Other. The voyage ended up in Sydney, where London had to be cured for a rare tropical illness. London shot 4000 photographs of indigenous peoples not yet all well-known elsewhere. He did not pursue exoticization and did not fall prey of orientalism, rather, he was fascinated by the dignity and individuality of the people he met. The result of this long and rich journey by sea was the volume *The Cruise of the Snark* (1911), a hybrid text made up of photos, a journal, an anthropological essay and a navigational treaty (London 2015).

What the authors and editors of the volume *The Global South Atlantic* (2018) achieved with their research is somehow true also for the present volume about south(s):

> Oceanic regions are neither communities nor polities […]. They do not share a single language, law, or literature – even if there develop common creoles or trade language, sets of maritime and coastal customs, and a circulating literature of the sea. Oceans as human units may not have a single unifying principle, and they do not have a single chronotope, even if the ship—as figure and fact, in Paul Gilroy's "Black Atlantic"—might provide a good starting place for charting sea life. Indeed, the South Atlantic, even more than the North Atlantic, is a multilingual, multitemporal, and multidimensional space. It is, then, an intrinsically comparative and relativizing space (perhaps a sea of comparison), united not by a single language or history, but by multiple intersecting, diverging, dissolving, and overlapping languages, laws, cultures, and histories. (Bystrom and Slaughter 2018: 9)

The collection of essays gathered in the present volume attempts at re-framing south(s) through a variety of perspectives, languages, methodologies. The constellation of the literary scholarly writings clustering the first part of the volume do not respond to a monolithic and rigid project, rather they comply with an opening of the field for discussion, imagination and critical projections that allow a constant re-reading of literary works about various South(s), about south-to-south discourses, and about south-north reciprocity, or the lack of it.

Thus, circling back to the Mediterranean Sea, which represents our closest south, two concepts become urgently relevant.

One is the — already mentioned — conceptualization of a Black Mediterranean, inaugurated by Paul Gilroy and further developed by several Italian scholars in Postcolonial studies. The slave ship has returned in our contemporary world in the boats full of migrants which cross the Mediterranean, not always successfully, thus producing the toll of macabre deaths that we all know too well (Gualtieri 2018).

It is in the south of Italy, in the Mediterranean, that the Nigerian-New Yorker writer Teju Cole met Caravaggio's masterpieces and the suffering of migrants, and from here, he was also able to connect, from south to south, to the migrants along the Mexican border with the US and thus doing he also criticized the divergence between North and South:

> Humanity is on the move. As of 2019, there were some sixty-seven million people in one condition of migrancy or another. […] Part of what draws me to Caravaggio is his imagination for the unhoused, the unhomed. His sympathy for those marginal conditions was shaped by his own experience. When I look at his tender, violent work, I see that experience transmuted into a work of witness. […] When I went down to the U.S.-Mexico border in 2011 to understand better what was happening there, I saw many things that altered my sense of my belonging in the United States; not only my sense of belonging, but also my sense of responsibility. I saw people with swollen feet dropped back from a failed migration, cared for by volunteers in Mexico. I saw border agents practicing their shooting at an open-air firing range. And I saw the Border wall like a gash, like a wound, between the two. (Cole 2021: 198)

Two: the Black Mediterranean of today, once was a body of water that fostered partnership. Along the coasts of the Mediterranean, in prehistoric times, a partnership-oriented society developed, worshiping the Mother Goddess as shown in Riane Eisler's *The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future* (1987). This evidence was drawn from the works — among others — of the archaeologist Marija Gimbutas: i.e., *The Goddesses and Gods of Old Europe* (1982), or *The Language of the Goddess* (1989). This shows that the Mediterranean had been and still might be a different place and should not surrender to becoming a place of death:

> One of the most striking things about Neolithic art is what it does *not* depict. […] There are here no images of "noble warriors" or scenes of battles. Nor are there any signs of "heroic conquerors" dragging captives around in chains or other evidences of slavery. […]
>
> Indeed, this theme of the unity of all things in nature, as personified by the Goddess, seems to permeate Neolithic art. […]
>
> The Goddess-centered art we have been examining, with its striking absence of images of male domination of warfare, seems to have reflected a social order in which women, first as heads of clans and priestesses and later on in other important roles, played a central part, and in which both men and women worked together in equal partnership for the common good. (Eisler 1987: 20)

Riane Eisler goes on claiming that if images of war, use of weapons, male heroes and chieftains were missing, it meant that there were no real counterparts

for them. The basis and reference for this type of certainties derives from the massive archaeological work by Marija Gimbutas:

> This book explicitly seeks to identify the Old European patterns that cross the boundaries of time and space. These systematic associations in the Near East, southeastern Europe, the Mediterranean area, and in central, western, and northern Europe indicate the extension of the same Goddess religion to all of these regions as a cohesive and persistent ideological system. (Gimbutas 1989: xv)

Once upon a time the Euro-Mediterranean region was a peaceful, agricultural, even — one might say — ecological (gylanic, nonviolent, earth-centered culture). Then, «a very different Neolithic culture with the domesticated horse and lethal weapons emerged in the Volga basin of South Russia […]. This new force inevitably changed the course of European prehistory» (Gimbutas 1989: xx). Thus, the symbolic chalice left the place to the blade, patrilineal substituted matrilineal, warfare substituted peace and partnership.

Now that one more of the innumerable wars is being waged in the Middle East, now that the Mediterranean is becoming a solid sea of black corpses, new enslaved black people and people of color, one might ask together with J.M. Coetzee's character, Mrs. Elizabeth Curren:

> The age of iron. After which comes the age of bronze. How long, how long before the softer ages return in their cycle, the age of clay, the age of earth? (Coetzee 1990: 50)

History is proving that there is no hope for tenderness, for softness. Already in 2009, Teju Cole was writing in his novel *Open City*: «the Palestinian question is the central question of our time» (Cole 2011: 121). Similarly, the Nigerian psychiatrist and philosopher based in Chennai, India, Báyò Akómoláfé, whom we had the honor of meeting and presenting in our hometown, in his essay *These Wilds Beyond our Fences. Letters to My Daughter on Humanity's Search for Home* asked pressing questions: «What about the misery at our fences? What about the Gaza Strip?» (2017: 42). We have reached the year 2024 to witness the answer to those questions. Therefore, it feels necessary to conclude with the words by Edward Said:

> Therefore, film, photography, and even music, along with all the arts of writing can be aspects of this activity. Part of what we do as intellectuals is not only to define the situation, but also to discern the possibility for active intervention, whether we then perform them ourselves or acknowledge them in others who have either gone before or are already at work, the intellectual as lookout. (Said 2004: 140)

In this volume we do present writings, films, photographs about a pluriverse of south(s), through new angles, with new methodologies that not only look at the human-to-human relationships but also look at the relationships between humans and non-humans, at landscapes, mindscapes, and ecosystems of an evolving reality that is not the Other of the North, but a multifarious reality with which the North has to "catch up" (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012: 14), or to "re-frame".

Plural South: Images, Representations, and Visual Cultures

At the turn of the last century, during a lecture he gave at the University of Westminster in London, focusing on cultural representations and the inherent processes of signification, the Jamaican Marxist sociologist Stuart Hall argued that any event (cultural or otherwise) «has no fixed meaning, no real meaning in the obvious sense, *until* it has been represented» (1997a: 7)[2]. In this light, Hall observed, «representation doesn't occur *after* the event; representation is *constitutive* of the event» (7-8; emphasis in original). According to Hall's constructivist perspective, media representations are not merely a reflection of situations and aspects of reality; rather, they actively participate in the construction of meanings. Representation is neither impartial nor neutral, nor is it objectively and undeniably determined by the real, and therefore true (or false); rather, it is inherently a political act. For this reason, Hall contends that every society possesses a distinct politics of representation, whereby meanings are established based on positions and relationships of power. No matter how realistic or natural they may appear, the representations that mainstream media offer are constructed upon the dominant and hegemonic ideology of the specific historical context in which they are produced. From this perspective, within the political discourse on representation, Hall considers the role of imagery and visual culture to be central — a relevance that also underpins our endeavor of reframing souths. Echoing Hall's own words, for the second part of this volume we

> choose visual representation because it's a kind of cliché to assert that in the modern world our culture is saturated by images in a variety of forms. The image itself—whether moving or still and transmitted through various media—seems to be, or has become, the prevailing sign of late-modern culture. (5)

Within the realm of visual representation, Hall has extensively examined the themes of marginalization and the representation of otherness, asserting that popular culture is an arena where «a struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle» (1981:

2 Hall's lecture was filmed and edited for the production of the Sut Jhally's documentary *Stuart Hall: Representation & the Media* (1997).

239). In other words, through visual representation, popular culture vividly illustrates the opposition between the dominant, majority group and the minority, marginalized ones. In this regard, in "The Spectacle of the Other" (1997b), Hall defines marginalization as "construction of difference" and creation of the "other". The dichotomy between the dominant social group and the others is thus conceptually constructed, with difference being exaggerated to uphold the hierarchical and hegemonic order.

Visual representations of southern regions around the world have been profoundly shaped by narratives of colonialism and economic inequality, ecological disasters, and identity struggles. These depictions have been imbued with negative elements and stereotypes, often concentrating on backwardness and poverty, crime, and both social and environmental degradation, or, at best, presenting picturesque and folkloric views. Constructed, reproduced, and amplified by mainstream media — particularly cinema and television — these representations have tended to provide a reductive and monolithic image of the South. This has resulted in a one-dimensional narrative that emphasizes humanitarian and environmental crises rather than uplifting stories of resilience, affirmation, and transformation.

These representations underestimate the complexity and plurality of souths, disregarding local voices and the emerging expressions of identity amid contamination and hybridization. In this context, authors such as Arjun Appadurai (1996, 1999), Chandra Talpade Mohanty (2003a, 2003b)[3], Faye Ginsburg (1995, 2008)[4], and Suman Seth (2017)[5] have examined narratives and media representations along with their impact on the perception of the south, underscoring how

3 Distinguished scholar and activist in postcolonial feminism, Chandra Talpade Mohanty has focused her research on transnational theory, anti-racist education, and the politics of knowledge. In her article "Under Western Eyes", she wrote: «I no longer live simply under the gaze of Western eyes. I also live inside it and negotiate it every day. I make my home in Ithaca, New York, but always as from Mumbai, India. My cross-race and cross-class work takes me to interconnected places and communities around the world—to a struggle contextualized by women of color and of the Third World, sometimes located in the Two-Thirds World, sometimes in the One-Third. So the borders here are not really fixed» (2003b: 530).

4 The anthropologist Faye Ginsburg has focused her work on social anthropology, ethnographic film, and indigenous media. In particular, with regard to the need to open a new "discursive space" for indigenous media, Faye observed: «the capabilities of visual media to transcend boundaries of time, space, and even language can be used effectively to mediate historically produced social ruptures that link past and present». In so doing, indigenous media and producers «are engaged in a powerful new process of constructing identities on their own terms but in ways that address the relationships between indigenous histories and cultures and the encompassing societies in which they live» (1995: 260).

5 Suman Seth's work is centered on history of science, race, and colonialism. In his essay on colonial history and postcolonial science, the sociologist acknowledges the role of traditional postcolonial studies in analyzing the binary categories that characterized colonial modes of thought and governance. However, the sociologist emphasizes the need not to reify such binary logic but rather the usefulness of asking how such dichotomies have been produced

the tendency to emphasize oppositions and geographical affiliations confines intricate and hybrid cultures into simplified stereotypes. Among these authors, while critiquing the homogenizing and westernizing perspective underlying the media, Ginsburg notes how indigenous media provide alternative visions for understanding social spaces and present new models of modernity. In her essay "Rethinking the Digital Age", Faye wrote:

> As we all struggle to comprehend the remapping of social space that is occurring, indigenous media offer some other co-ordinates for understanding. Terms such as "the Digital Age" gloss over such phenomena in their own right or as examples of alternative modernities, resources of hope, new dynamics in social movements, or as part of the trajectory of indigenous life in twenty-first century. (2008: 141)

From a similar perspective, Appadurai critiques the traditional theoretical framework that confines identities geographically, socially, and culturally around the concept of nation. He emphasizes that cultures do not embody pure identities; rather, they are syncretic formations that intertwine characteristics and mutual influences. In the context of our globalized world, Appadurai employs the key term "scape" to delineate the various realms — financial ("financescapes"), ideological ("ideascapes"), technological ("technoscapes"), medial ("mediascapes"), and ethnographic ("ethnoscapes") — through which the "global citizen" is formed in a hybrid manner, based on cultures and identities that are typically deterritorialized.

For this reason, with a distinctly transnational approach and through his philosophy of the diaspora, the Nigerian philosopher and poet Báyò Akómoláfé critiques the very notion of objectivity in representation. He argues that the attempt to clarify matters by analyzing a specific and circumscribed domain invariably entails the paradox of excluding other potential and broader perspectives: «the thing with seeing is that it comes with its own set of paradoxes—one which is that greater clarity or higher definition is always a trade-off for panoramic depth [...] It means that "seeing clearly" is a practice of occlusion» (2017: 28). This criticism also encompasses the concept of modernity: «even the idea of modernity is a product of a Eurocentric analysis that looks "back" on "history" and arranges it in convenient thematic clusters amenable to contemporary discourse» (*ibidem*).

In the process of framing (Goffman 1986) and in relation to our discussion for reframing souths, the media play a pivotal role in the creation and dissemination of representations that directly influence perceptions of reality. As the Senegalese scholar and writer Felwine Sarr suggests in *Afrotopia* (2020), «it is necessary to win the battle of representation», because the world will be different if we modify its representations.

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and maintained: «the postcolonial history of colonial science must not be merely resuscitated, it must be re-formed» (2017: 64).

In this direction, through diverse research perspectives and multidisciplinary approaches, what recently tends to emerge is a mosaic of narratives and stories that challenge past stereotypes allowing for a more complex and pluralistic understanding of what souths can express and signify. The work of artists and filmmakers has ensured the composition and affirmation of counter-narratives in which imagery serves not only to enact practices of resistance and socio-ecological criticism but also becomes a distinctive artistic medium through which to convey a cultural and symbolic richness that transcends geographical boundaries and national contexts, engaging with other existential and cultural experiences. Thus, the iconographic representations of the souths unfold as a complex, multifaceted puzzle, each piece deriving from different and sometimes conflicting horizons, or even seemingly irreconcilable perspectives, yet managing in some way to relate to and engage in dialogue with one another.

In our endeavor to trace and examine southern iconographies, the idea of "constellation"[6] proves particularly illustrative. This notion is aligned with the processes of hybridization, transculturation, and transnationalism that underpin our ecocritical research. It should therefore be regarded not merely as a compilation of case studies (the "stars") but rather as a methodological and ecocritical perspective that encompasses a shift beyond national contexts towards dialogical and interactive practices.

The historical, cultural, and social connections among the various southern realities and the diverse souths of the world can be explored with the tools of ecocriticism through shared artistic practices and cultural projects. These intersections have the potential to engender new forms of relationships and mutual understanding. Rather than attempting to delimit and codify southern iconographies into a strict definition, which would be inherently reductive given a constellation of regions that is by its very nature composite, fluid, and constantly evolving, the idea underlying this volume is to endeavor to interpret, from an ecological standpoint, the images of the souths through a constellation of distinct productions and artistic creations. This gives rise to a cluster of essays that is inherently varied and porous, allowing for other configurations and opening the door to new readings and differing interpretations. It can be envisioned as a cohesive whole, yet also examined and analyzed by isolating and reflecting upon its distinct chapters. As a constellation of images (and gazes on these images), this southern iconography encompasses and fosters dialogue among various disciplines and artistic methodologies, taking into account both traditional media and new digital technologies and social platforms.

When contrasting and engaging in dialogue among different geographical areas, cultural forms, and historical-social contexts, relationships, affinities, and

6 The term "constellation", which was drawn from a prior article by Brian Bergen-Aurand (2010) on the Mediterranean cinema, has inspired a recent work edited by Rosario Pollicino and Giovanna Summerfield and published on the *Journal of Italian Cinema and Media Studies* under the title "Navigating the Mediterranean" (2024: 4).

resonances that warrant consideration may emerge. For these reasons, the collection proposed here organizes the essays based on the issues they raise and the artistic practices they explore, rather than adhering to a regional or thematic-disciplinary coherence. Such comparisons are inspired by an endeavor to acknowledge the agency of the various southern regions of the world in the production, distribution, and reception of audiovisual works, grounded in a rich and intricate spectrum of visual culture, which is not preconceived or defined in a binary opposition to an ostensibly global North. Current production technologies and the subsequent dissemination of visual works have advanced to such an extent that it is arguably less appropriate, and indeed less beneficial, to speak of a marginalized South (and consequently mythologized and iconized), cut off from the world and excluded. While transcending borders produces a direct experience of inequalities, discriminations, and ideological and political dissonances, it also simultaneously fosters the perception of a broader world that inevitably generates and refracts into more intricate images and narratives. As a result, artistic practices, as well as the processes of reception and viewing, are influenced and shaped by increasingly complex and intertwined cultures.

While photography, and documentary and fictional cinema have often endeavored to portray the places and peoples of the south through a distinctly realist lens, aiming — at times mythically — to present an authentic image of those territories, it has repeatedly been noted that these images simultaneously exert a direct influence on the definition and construction of identities. Thus, a consciousness has emerged within the ecocritical discourse regarding a continuous shift from the function of representation, as well as narration, denunciation, and testimony, to a role of reflection and self-recognition, wherein the image plays a crucial and active role in the processes of identification and understanding (and transformation).

In the second part of this volume, by examining various sources and approaching the southern question from ecocritical, aesthetic-anthropological, and historical-philosophical perspectives, we aim to present an initial collection of case studies centered on iconographic contributions, photographic reports, and audiovisual productions that have contributed to the expression of diverse realities of the south. This exploration highlights the aesthetic and cultural motivations that, in the post-war period, inspired illustrators, photographers, and filmmakers to visually investigate these territories. Considering the culture of the image across such a broad spectrum — including media and visual studies, film ecocriticism and ecocinema, as well as the aesthetics and philosophy of film — the contributions gathered in the second part of this volume represent an endeavor to de-westernize and decentralize ecocritical research by employing an emic perspective inspired by diversity and pluralism.

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