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**Juan Carlos Galeano**

### **Matter as Cosmic Poetry: In Conversation with Serenella Iovino**

In this interview, recorded in 2019, Serenella Iovino discusses with the Colombian poet and documentarist Juan Carlos Galeano about her personal roots and the inspiring principles of her interpretive practice as environmental philosopher and literary critic. Serenella Iovino is Professor of Italian Studies and Environmental Humanities at UNC-Chapel Hill. Working in the framework of the new materialisms, she has contributed to the development of material ecocriticism and is one of the leading animators of the environmental humanities debate. A co-founder and former President of the *European Association for the Study of Literature, Culture and Environment*, she is a member of the ASLE the Executive Council and a delegate of the MLA Forum Executive Committee for 20th-21st century Italian. She's author and editor of ten volumes and over a hundred essays and articles. Her books talk about landscapes and bodies, literary visions and artistic resistance, nonhuman companions and alien intimacies, earthquakes, pollutions, environmental justice, and cosmic creativity. With her volumes *Filosofie dell'ambiente* (Carocci, 2004), and *Ecologia Letteraria* (ed. Ambiente, 2006, 2015) she has contributed to the development of the environmental cultural debate in Italy. Her publications in English include the collections *Material Ecocriticism* (Indiana University Press, 2014), *Environmental Humanities: Voices from the Anthropocene* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017, both co-ed. with S. Oppermann), and *Italy and the Environmental Humanities* (co-ed. with E. Cesaretti and E. Past, University of Virginia Press, 2018). Her monograph, *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance, and Liberation* (Bloomsbury, 2016) was awarded the Book Prize of the American Association for Italian Studies and the MLA Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize for Italian Studies. The book will soon appear in Spanish translation from the publisher Comares and in Italian from Il Saggiatore. Iovino's most recent work is *Italo Calvino's Animals: Anthropocene Stories* (Cambridge University Press, 2021).

**Juan Carlos Galeano** How have your ideas about ecocriticism and matter as cosmic poetry come to be in your life?

**Serenella Iovino** My history is an emotional one. In the 1990s I was a philosophy student, and I found myself in Germany studying the age of Goethe, the German poet, writer, and philosopher. I was fascinated by the way poets were also philosophers. And philosophers were investigators of nature. All these intersections between philosophy, poetry and nature were central in my imagination. What enthralled me the most was the way Goethe was able to write a poem like *Faust* and then scientific works like *The Metamorphosis of Plants*, or the *Theory of Colors*. He wrote about physics and meteorology, about animal anatomy as well as about stones. Although it would be imprecise to call him a forerunner of Darwin,

Goethe was convinced that there was kinship between all life-forms. In fact, he discovered the existence of the intermaxillary bone in the human skull, which he saw as proof of that kinship, a sign that all animals were “created equal”, in a way. Because of his discovery, of which he was so proud, he was ostracised by a large part of the European community of scientists. At that time, in fact, it was thought that this jawbone, more visible in the animal skull, was something that discriminated between the humans and ‘lower’ animals: it was connected to chewing, to the ingestion of food. It was commonly believed that humans didn’t have it because they were creatures whose essential features were speaking and thinking, not eating. Goethe, however, insisted that the human skull had this bone, and found the evidence after many years of research in comparative anatomy. Goethe was thinking in the framework of the monistic and pantheistic vision formulated a century earlier by the philosopher Baruch Spinoza. In Goethe’s age poetry, nature and philosophy went hand in hand because of Spinoza’s philosophy. The idea that God and nature were the same thing was very powerful, a subterranean river that connected 18<sup>th</sup> century thinkers with the Renaissance and the ancient philosophers. I was completely captured by the spirit of this age, and I decided to specialise in this period. However, after I finished my doctorate in German Philosophy, I was in a crisis. Evidently, I was not the only one to be fascinated by Goethe’s age, and it was very difficult to find my voice in a field which had been so thoroughly explored over the previous two centuries. The crisis took a turn after an intense reflective session with my partner, who is also a scholar, on an autumn afternoon. After many conversations, he invited me to contemplate a question: What would those philosophers of nature do today, what kind of thinkers would they be? And the answer was: they would no longer be *Naturphilosophen*, philosophers of Nature, but environmental philosophers. That was my shift to environmental philosophy and, from there, to ecocriticism. Ecocriticism, I discovered, was one of those disciplines that finally and with a fresh perspective could enable me to link literature and poetry with the world “outside the page”, as Kate Rigby says: landscapes, other beings and things, and the living imagination of the more-than-human world. That was a new key for me to understand reality. In the following years, I wrote two books in Italian about environmental philosophy and ecocriticism which are still in print and used in classes. That was the beginning of my pathway as an environmental humanities scholar. Even if today I am no longer a Goethe scholar, this gives me hope if I ever wanted to return to my ancient passion: as the work of the Germanist ecocritic Heather Sullivan brilliantly shows, it is still possible to find something unseen and unexpected even in much-studied classic authors like Goethe. For me, this is the power of ecocritical research: by exploring the infinite ways the human and nonhuman world intersect, you find new keys to rethink what has already been thought for centuries or millennia.

**JCG** Speaking of your personal upbringing and your sense of place, were you brought up in the city or in a rural area?

**SI** I was born in the foothills of an active volcano. I am from an ancient city near Naples, Torre Annunziata, by Vesuvius. The place I was born is exactly halfway between the volcano

and the Mediterranean Sea. I wasn't born in a hospital. My mother preferred to give birth in the house with the help of a midwife, surrounded by her mother and sisters. (My father was a medical student at that time, and he was himself overcome by this wholly 'traditional' – and yet so natural – experience!) I was born in a room that faces the sea. Therefore, in a way, I consider myself to be a creature who is half marine and half volcanic. The beaches by Vesuvius, as you can imagine, are black: the sand is pulverised lava. So, if you will, I have components of earth, water, and fire, too. And the wind – which in this area is often a land-wind, we call it *vento di terra* – is a steady presence here. In my personality there is this very mixing of elements.

**JCG** What you say takes me to the notion of the “storied matter”, which is suggestive of the powerful agency of all elements in our life. I can see, presented in your personal accounts, a desire to pay homage to matter, a suggestion of a cosmic genealogy for all beings.

**SI** This is a very ancient idea that goes back to the Greek philosophers. Their idea is that matter has imagination. In fact, the Greeks speak of phantasy as a sort of imagination of matter – the power matter has to produce its own forms. And the way matter produces forms is a sort of cosmic poetry. Let's say it in Greek, cosmological *poiesis*. The material progression of producing forms is how this imagination materialises in time and space. We, along with everything else, are ways in which matter's imagination plays with its forms. We are all expressions of this cosmological force that we can call cosmopoiesis.

**JCG** I think this is an important point of intersection for you and me. What you just said is readily apparent in the Indigenous cosmologies of Amazonia. For them, the river is not only a giver of life, but also a producer of stories. And those are stories meant to teach the inhabitants about their surroundings. All of their myths, all of the supernatural creatures, in reality are poetic representations of the physical lands of Amazonia. The land is felt by this traditional culture as animated and sentient like us humans.

**SI** Yes, I think that there are so many of these archetypes, if we'd like to name them, all over the planet. I see many of these elements in the ancient Greek philosophers. When for example Thales of Miletus says that water is “full of Gods”, he is saying that water, as an element, is endowed with a profound and infinite creativity. He says that everything that we can imagine is already here, already with us. This imagination of matter is what, I believe, makes matter something sacred, almost mystical – as Jane Bennett says at the end of *Vibrant Matter*. Something that we take for granted, such as water for example, is instead full of Gods.

**JCG** It obviously positions you, positions us as humans in relationship with water – an element which is so demystified and desacralised in our Anthropocene epoch. All of this also provides you with new perspectives about the world, it even changes the way you look at society. It gives you new ways of seeing yourself.

But what is the extent of our entanglements with the elements and the world? And how is the world, in its materiality, entangled with us?

**SI** After these philosophers, the research in quantum physics also teaches us how things are entangled. This is something that my co-author Serpil Oppermann has explored in her own ecocritical path. Quantum physics tells us that there is an intra-action between observer, scientific instruments, and observed reality, for example. In other words, when observed through an apparatus, matter reacts to the presence of an observer, for example. So, to think of matter as inert is to disregard its intrinsic force. This is, I think, another way to neutralise the world that we can't understand with our anthropocentric mentality which destroys anything that is independent from us, even though we pay the consequences of our hybris. I am not a physicist, but as a student of environmental and ecological phenomena, I have learned that everything in the world, from bigger entities, dynamics, and phenomena to smaller individual entities, is in and of this big entanglement. And I think that children, with their animistic sense of reality, are very aware of this. Unfortunately, as they grow, they tend to lose such important view of the world.

**JCG** You are right, people move away from that animistic thinking which plays such a big role in the symbolic narratives of traditional cultures all over the world. Such non-dualistic cosmovisions have been present in cultures since the dawn of our species.

**SI** Our contemporary world still experiences so many versions of cultural imperialism. To call indigenous cultures 'primitive', for example, is one of these acts. Still, to ignore that these cultures are in fact bearers of co-evolutionary entanglements, stratified over the eons, is to refuse to visualise the connections of humans and nonhumans in the world.

**JCG** Well, I wanted to go back to touch on the notion of poiesis. How is such a new way of seeing the world articulated through the first notion of poiesis?

**SI** The word *poiesis* in Greek means a doing, a making. Therefore, in principle, there is nothing culturally 'high' or spiritual in *poiesis*. *Poiesis* is something material, and as such something active. It is everything that is in-the-making – everything we do. But *poiesis* is also a making of matter, a making of life which is in-the-making: *physis*, the Greek word for "nature." Exactly like the Latin word *Natura*, the Greek word *physis* means something which is being born, which comes to light (*phōs*, in Greek). All these notions convey a material sense of making/becoming/coming to light. *Poiesis* might be the way *physis* manifests itself causing things to be made. *Physis* is therefore a first, radical form of poetry, a *poiesis*. And then, of course, we humans, we translate. In our thinking, we humans dematerialise this notion of *poiesis*.

**JCG** True. We dematerialise and get lost in constructing webs of meaningless words and concepts. And we have been lost in such labyrinths of concepts for a good couple of millennia.

**SI** Concepts are crucial to 'unlock' the world. The problem comes when they get completely separated from their material referents. For instance, if you have a key and do not have a door to open, this key is of no use to you. But the difference between the key and the door is that the door could exist perfectly well without keys. Therefore, a world without concepts is still thinkable, but a world without material *poiesis* is not. You can have a world without humanly elaborated concepts, but you cannot have a world without beings, things, or matter. You can imagine a world full of doors, but a world just made of keys, with no door in it, doesn't make much sense.

**JCG** And for our matter, the importance of constructing the right concept is key if we want to create a better understanding of our world.

**SI** Let me give you an example by using the concept of 'storied matter', which Serpil Oppermann and I elaborated in our research on material ecocriticism. What are the doors that I want to open with this key? Storied matter is an idea that I connect to everything which is around us. Everything is storied matter, our bodies are storied matter, because if you read a body as a story, as a text, you can see so many different meanings in this text. You can see narratives in it. These might be, for example, genealogical threads. But they can be the narratives that come from the intersection between your bodily presence and the bodily presence of the place in which you are situated. So, for example, you may think of the way your body and this place react with one another. If you live in a polluted place your body will carry the stories of pollution, of toxicity which characterise the story of that place in connection with many other places and substances, as Stacy Alaimo's notion of trans-corporeality so brilliantly explains. For example, your body will be a text in which the story of an industrialisation of a city is written, or the story of the colonisation of a region is written. There are many stories next to one another, which are readable in the way your body has reacted to all these intersections and these encounters. If you live near the Niger Delta, for example, your body will be an expression of a story of colonisation, of exploitation, dispossession, global capitalism. There are so many bodily narratives in the Amazon, as your beautiful books of poetry and documentaries also show. Indeed, storied matter is not only about human bodies but also about places. Places are also storied matter. Also in places you can read stories of imagination, of encounters, of manipulations, of pollution. If you don't look at places as mere settings, then different levels of knowledge are open to you. And you can see all the layers of a region, as if they were a chapter of a big narrative. This is for example the subject of my book *Ecocriticism and Italy: Ecology, Resistance and Liberation*. I tried to read some places as storied matter. In the book these places are Naples, Venice, areas struck by earthquakes in the north as well as in the south of the country, or Piedmont, which is the region where I have lived for almost twenty years. These are all examples of places where ecological stories are interlaced with human stories, with stories of ideas, of imagination, of art, and with stories of bodily presence – stories of land, stories of agriculture, stories of pollution, stories of violence, stories of politics, criminal violence and political violence.

**JCG** And at the same time, this notion of storied matter carries the idea of matter as a producer of stories, as a co-producer as you say.

**SI** Yes, also co-producer because we humans are cognitive beings, we can elicit meanings from these bodily texts. We co-produce stories. Interpretation is not a mere projection of imagination: it is an encounter between our cognitive involvement and the ways matter narrates and builds its own (and our) stories.

**JCG** That is right, we have a medium, a fluid code, a language that produces stories. Animals produce stories with their bodies, plants produce stories, etc.

**SI** Biosemiotics is illuminating in this respect. As the study of how signs are intrinsically produced by life, it considers life itself as based on information. Information is carried at all levels, in the process of organisation of life from the cell up to more complex systems, such as organisms or forests in their entanglements with the species that live within them, including the human, as Eduardo Kohn has explored in his *How Forests Think*. Biosemiotics tells us that producing and interpreting signs is not an exclusive capacity of the human mind. DNA, for example, is a code, a thread of information which requires to be de-coded, namely, interpreted at a molecular level. Interpretation happens at very low levels of biological organisation. All this is a major reason to question human exceptionalism, as if we really were the thinking “pinnacle of creation” (a creation that we will never be able to prove, whereas, with Darwin and evolutionary biology, we can trace the infinite web of kinships that made life possible).

We humans can interpret texts, but DNA does not need a human reader to develop its host of information: life develops and happens independently from our interpretation. If we think of the DNA of a dog, all the elements that characterise that dog come from how the cells of her body interpret the “code” inscribed in themselves. Cells read and develop this inner information. Or think of cancer cells. A cancer cell develops by sending other cells misleading messages. This also is storied matter.

**JCG** Going back to the notion of cosmic poetry, in regard to the ecocentric, ecopoetry of our current times, could you mention some European and North American poets whose works make a timely contribution to contemporary environmental culture?

**SI** Of course, every answer I give you will be necessarily incomplete. But, if I may be partial, let me mention at least two great European poets: Giacomo Leopardi and Goethe. Both active in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, they really are bearers of cosmovisions in their poetry, namely of visions in which the human self is a fragment of the world’s imagination. We already mentioned Goethe and saw how his vision based on the immanence and continuity of living forms was a source of inspiration for the age that was named after him, the *Goethezeit*. One of Italy’s foremost poets, Giacomo Leopardi, was a younger contemporary of Goethe’s. He was also a philosopher – a materialist one, and his images of Nature are disquieting,

threatening. Nature to him was not necessarily a benign force, it was a force that most of the time overwhelmed the human with its fierceness and indifference. But how huge and telling are the images of 'infinite silences', 'interminable spaces', of beings, of constellations that for him are in a deep and intense communication with human subjects. Going back in time, if we speak of the European tradition, I cannot help mentioning that the very roots of our philosophy were poetic in their origins: think of Empedocles, Parmenides, Anaximander, Thales, all authors whose philosophical thought was expressed in long poems titled simply *Peri physeos*, "About Nature". Lucretius's *De rerum natura* also belongs to this lineage. Therefore, all the ancient theories about the nature of reality were cosmovisions expressed in poetic form, enacting this connection between *poiesis* and *physis* which to their eyes was so immediately clear.

**JCG** Now if you were to think in general about a couple of 20<sup>th</sup>-century writers in the Western world whose ideas have also been so pivotal in contributing to this environmental imagination?

**SI** Well, here, too, I will be partial. As an Italian, I think about Italo Calvino. He is one of the few writers in the Italian tradition whose position is genuinely non-anthropocentric. In his work you can recognise all the topics that later became important for the environmental debate. Already at the end of the 1950s Italo Calvino had concerns about the environment. For example, in a book titled *A Plunge into Real Estate (La speculazione edilizia)*, you can find a clear representation of the real estate speculation that affected Italy after the Second World War, leading to profound transformations in landscapes and ecosystems. In another novel, titled *Smog*, everything – the city (probably Turin), the protagonist, things – are always surrounded by a cloud of pollution. Calvino had also this incredible capacity to narrate for adults and children at the same time. In the book *Marcovaldo*, the protagonist is a poor guy, a Charlot-like character, who is always on the lookout for 'nature' in the industrial city. Yet, the 'nature' that he finds is 'compromised with artificial life' and 'mischievous'. For example, he is enthusiastic about finding mushrooms near the tram station. However, once these mushrooms have been cooked and eaten, they turn out to be poisonous and so Marcovaldo, his family, and even their neighbors, all end up in the hospital. In another tale, to heat his poor house, he decides to send his children to collect wood, but there are no trees in the city, and so the kids, who have never seen a tree in their lives, end up cutting billboards from along the highway. Published in 1963, the book is meant for children, but these are stories that speak to adults as well. Another Italian author who I consider extremely important for the development of environmental culture is Laura Conti. She is considered "our" Rachel Carson, and – yes – Carson is one of the really pivotal figures, certainly one of the major figures of literary environmentalism of all times.

**JC** Well, let's talk about her. Who is Rachel Carson for Serenella Iovino?

**SI** Rachel Carson is a source of inspiration for all of us. I think that a huge number of people working in this field started under the inspiration of her *Silent Spring*. With her writings and personal engagement, she has become an icon of ecological struggles and environmental culture. What she was fighting for was the spreading of environmental knowledge coupled with cultural models: the way we treat our environment depends on our knowledge of it. In *Silent Spring* she contrasts our primitive knowledge and ecological awareness with the violence of our technological attacks on ecosystems. Armed with the weapons of chemistry, we attack creatures and living systems, without really understanding the consequences of our actions. As long as our cultural tools are inadequate to the challenge, *this* science is in a state of war against nature. If there is something we have to improve, it is not only our behavior but also our culture, the way we think about the environment, about our presence in the world. And the solutions are not just to be found in science. Now I believe that the environmental humanities, this big disciplinary umbrella, are providing us with a vision that goes beyond the great divide of the so-called “two cultures”, hard sciences and the humanities. The environmental humanities are a way to bring history, literature, anthropology, geography, media, philosophy into conversation with sciences such as biology, chemistry, climatology, geology, ecology. Only if we have a conversation between these alleged ‘two’ worlds, can we prompt and create a cultural shift. How can we really begin to solve complex problems such as climate change, loss of biodiversity, issues of environmental justice, if we don’t really understand their many intersected layers? We need to create a new way of framing things which does not isolate science and humanities from one another. We humans are not only made of numbers, formulas, equations. We need philosophy, we need history, we need poetry and definitely a poetic vision of the world. This is something that the ancient thinkers, who were at the same time poets, philosophers, and scientists, had understood. Of course, we now have much more refined research tools. But the model they offer, putting together inquiry and enchantment, is still an example from which so much, I believe, can be learned.

**Juan Carlos Galeano**, born in the Amazon region of Colombia, is an international poet, environmentalist, filmmaker and academic. Galeano, a mythographer and ‘translator’ of Amazonian ecological spirituality for Western audiences, is the author of the book *Folktales of the Amazon*, several books of poetry, among them *Amazonia* (2003, 2011, 2012) and *Yakumama (and Other Mythical Beings)* (2014), translator of various American poets, and the director of the documentary films *The Trees Have a Mother* (2009) and *El Río* (2018). For eight years, he was the director of the FSU Service/Learning Program: Journey into Amazonia in the Peruvian Amazon rainforest. He lives in Tallahassee, Florida, where he teaches Latin American poetry and Amazonian Cultures at Florida State University.

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