

“If You Dance Alone, You Cannot Be Healed”: Relational Ontologies and “Epistemes of Contagion” in Salento (Italy)*

Giovanna Parmigiani

I hold anguish in my chest/ that is consuming me/ and never stops/ The earth is shaking under my feet/ my falling down/ never stops/ What I eat/is tasteless/there's no more light for me/ and no colors/ People knew how you could cure yourself /if your illness was called taranta / And now that times have changed/who can feel/my pain?/ Who can bring me the healing water?/ To whom I should ask for the grace/ of being healed?/ I don't know if it is taranta that got me/but it does not leave me/ and makes me crazy/ If it is taranta do not abandon me/If you dance alone you cannot/ you cannot heal /If it is taranta let it dance/if it is sadness/ let it out.¹

April 17, 2020. Italy, strongly impacted by COVID-19, is in total lockdown. People are confined to their homes with the hope of curbing the spread of COVID-19. The hospitals throughout the country are overwhelmed, and many are struggling to adapt to the abrupt life-changing consequences of a pandemic. A video of a *pizzica* dancer goes viral on Facebook and YouTube. Originally posted on Facebook by Sara Dimastrogiovanni, the filmmaker, the post is accompanied by the caption “We are resisting🇮🇹.”² The dancer, dressed in black, with flowing hair and skirt, is video recorded while dancing alone, stomping her feet, and frantically whirling in an eerie, empty main square of the city of Lecce, the principal city of the Salento area of Italy. She dances to the music of *Taranta*, the song whose lyrics are translated above, written and recorded by the local *pizzica* group, *Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino*.

This video was extensively shared during the COVID-19 pandemic—within and beyond Salento, in Italy and internationally—and discussed by many viewers in various languages and from different countries, all somehow “connected” through the lockdown experience. Coen M., for example, writes in a comment to the video on YouTube: “Here from the Netherlands. May this angel *dance for us all* in these trying times” (my emphasis).³ Why dance *pizzica* during the COVID-19 pandemic? Why is a local dance from a small area at the southern periphery of Europe perceived as an antidote to the suffering of a community, a country, the whole world? What does this tell us about how “connections” can be understood, framed, and imagined? In this

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¹ Canzoniere Grecanico Salentino, *Taranta*, 2015

“Io tegnu nu tormentu intra lu piettu/ca me consuma e nu se ferma mai/me tremula la terra sutta li peti/nu c'è mai fine pe lu miu cadire/quiddhu ca mangiu nu tene sapore/pe mie nu c'è chiui luce ne culore/la gente sapia comu t'i curare/ci lu tou male se chiama' taranta/e osce ca li tempi hannu cangiati/ci è ca po sentire lu miu dolore/e ci me porta l'acqua pe sanare/a ci chiedu la grazia pe guarire/nu sacciu ci è taranta ca me tene/ma nu me lassa e me face mpaccire/ci è taranta nu me abbandunare/ci balli sulu nu te puei curare/ci e' taranta lassala ballare/ci e' malencunia cacciata fore.”

Unless otherwise noted all translations are the work of the author.

² This is the YouTube version of the video CareonVR 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDzPQuTRnVk>.

³ Interestingly, although the dance shown in this video is not (officially) associated with any magical or contemporary Pagan practices, many of the commenters seemed to instinctively associate this music and dance with “witchcraft” and “magic.”

article, I will address one of the “epistemes of contagion” that have been shaping discourses and practices around the COVID-19 pandemic in Salento. In particular, I will focus on the “neo-animist,” relational ontologies that are active within and beyond local contemporary Pagan communities who are at the center of my ethnographic research.⁴ By addressing case studies such as the aforementioned viral video; the *Xylella fastidiosa* epidemics (currently, allegedly, extensively affecting the olive trees population in Salento); and “No TAP” activism—i.e., activism against the construction of the Trans Adriatic Pipeline that transports natural gas from Azerbaijan—I will argue that many Salentinians today are reacting to contemporary suffering by engaging in a relational ontology that considers human and non-human persons alike as kin. This perspective is important both in political activism and in the pursuit of health and well-being, and it has been particularly active through the COVID-19 pandemic. By highlighting the interconnectedness of human and non-human persons embedded in contemporary Salentine understandings and practices around health and well-being, I will offer, in conversation with the philosopher Roberto Esposito, examples of ways of being in the (postmodern) world in which “contact, relationality, and being in common” are not “liquidated” but fostered and put at the center of personal and collective practices of well-being, and political activism (Esposito, Welch, and Lemm 2012).

Pizzica

The particular music and dance portrayed in the aforementioned viral video is called *pizzica*—a traditional musical genre found in the Salento area of Italy.⁵ In the past, it was also associated with specific healing practices related to the bite of tarantula spiders (*tarante*) that were thought to be responsible for a malaise that affected mostly women and that, in this area of Italy, went by the name of *tarantismo*.⁶ The latter is a widely studied phenomenon that has been controversial since the Middle Ages. With, possibly, pre-Roman origins, it lasted into the 1980s. Often described in the form of mental and physical suffering—sometimes also as a form of “possession”—*tarantismo* was thought to be cured through various private rituals and a public one in Galatina. The private rituals involved the performance of *pizzica* music, used as a cure or antidote, and were associated with a rowdy “ecstatic dance” that could last for hours.⁷ The yearly public ritual took place in and around the chapel of St. Paul in Galatina, in occasion of the Festival of St. Peter and St. Paul on June 29.⁸ This public ritual was a result of the centuries-long appropriation of the aforementioned healing practice by the Catholic Church by associating it with the cult of Saint Paul. During this ritual, women who had been “bitten” by the spider used to

⁴ With the term “neo-animism,” as I will explain in more detail below, religious studies scholars refer to spiritual and religious relational engagements with humans, more-than-humans, non-human persons, and the environment. It is important to note that, in spite of the recent academic and non-academic success of this term, the choice of using the word “animism,” even if behind the adjective “new” or “neo,” is not a “neutral” one. Given the colonialist implications of anthropologist Edward Tylor’s use of “animism,” it might be argued that opting for an alternative terminology could be beneficial to both scholars and those who adhere to various relational and non-anthropocentric worldviews. For this reason, in this article, I prefer to use the expression “relational ontologies.”

⁵ CareonVR 2020: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FDzPQuTRnVk>

⁶ On *tarantismo* see, among many, e.g., De Martino 1976 [1961]; Lapassade 1994; Lanernari 1995, 2000; Mina and Torsello 2006; Apolito 2000; Pizza 1999, 2004, 2015; Magliocco 2004; Parmigani 2019; Lüdke 2005, 2008, 2012; Inserra 2017; Biagi 2004; Del Giudice 2003, 2005; Pandolfi 1990; Saunders 1995.

⁷ Lüdke 2012, 70, n. 5.

⁸ See, e.g., Daboo 2010, 146–161.

gather in the town of Galatina from the countryside, begging the saint to heal them from their suffering through this particular “dance of possession.”

The most influential study of this phenomenon remains the one conducted in June 1959 by Ernesto de Martino and his *équipe* that resulted in the book *La Terra del Rimorso*. The success of this book, among scholars and non-scholars alike, cannot be underestimated: his legacy is so important and his fame so widespread in Italy, that, long after his death, it is still an out-and-out protagonist of current debates, practices, and representations of *tarantismo*. De Martino understood *tarantismo* to be a result of a crisis of presence in history. The latter refers to “an individual’s loss of referents in the surrounding world, an experience of the self as unreal and unrelated to present circumstances, and ... seen to result, above all, from traumas caused by socioeconomic and natural adversity” (Lüdtke, 2014: 41). De Martino’s interpretation was groundbreaking and had extremely important political implications. According to him, *tarantate* belonged to what could be called the “subaltern class”—the part of the population that was politically, socially, economically, and geographically subordinate *vis-à-vis* the Italian state. This peculiar positionality was understood as being both the cause underlying *tarantismo* and the horizon of its cure. If structural dimensions such as patriarchy, extreme poverty, and social invisibility influenced the onset of *tarantismo*, de Martino did not dismiss its ritual cure as an ineffective superstition, or a “relic” of the past. Rather, against biomedical interpretations of the phenomenon popular at the time, in his analysis of *tarantismo* the healing effects of *pizzica* were taken seriously and considered as culturally specific strategies to cope with structural oppression, inequality, and the consequent hardship that people experienced at an individual level.

Tarantismo, as described by de Martino (1976), disappeared from the public scene at the end of the 20th century. At the beginning of the 21st century, with the modernization of the region, it ceased to be performed as a predominantly healing practice while reemerging mainly as a popular culture musical phenomenon. As some scholars have noted, re-appropriations of *tarantismo* (similarly to re-appropriations of forms of “vernacular magic” throughout Italy) emerged in Salento and elsewhere in the country at the turn of the century in conversation with scholarly studies on the phenomenon. In reference to *tarantismo*, these re-appropriations, called *neotarantismi*, have been read as identity phenomena or as forms of “patrimonialization” (see Apolito 2000, Pizza 2015, Parmigiani 2019). Moreover, they have been linked to the practice of a form of ecstatic dance conceived as a post-modern critique of rationalism, or as a version of “*meridianismo*.”⁹ In recent years, though, as my research has shown, a new form of *neotarantismo* started to spread and become more visible in Salento: a “spiritual” one.

“Spiritual” Pizzica

Salento. Early December 2015. Two weeks before, a series of interrelated terrorist attacks, carried out by three suicide bombers, had left Paris, France, and all of Europe in shock. With 130 casualties and more than 400 wounded persons, these attacks were some of the deadliest in Europe in years. In response to these attacks, Luna and Stella, with the help of other friends, decided to organize a ritual: they danced *pizzica*; they danced it for peace. They danced for the dead and the injured, for the victims and the perpetrators, for Paris and for the whole world. Dressed in long flowing skirts and accompanied by a “shamanic” drum, they danced, barefooted, many *pizziche* in a row, with the heart full of sorrow and hope. They knocked with their

⁹ See, e.g., Cassano 1996; Alcaro 1999; Pizza 2015, 200–202; see also Inserra 2017.

feet at the door of Mother Earth, asking for her help in transforming grief in love. They rose their hands towards our Father sky, asking for blessings and peace.

Stella and Luna are members of a contemporary spiritual group called “*il cerchio*” (the circle) and are the protagonists, together with the other members (called “Sisters”) and some of their friends, of my ethnographic research since 2015. Luna, Stella, and my other interlocutors who live in this area of Italy could be defined, in different ways, as Contemporary Pagans.¹⁰ “Neo-paganism, or contemporary Paganism as many of its practitioners prefer to call it, is a loosely affiliated group of religions or spiritual paths that share a notion of divinity within nature, typically celebrate both a male and female element to the divine, and in most instances practice forms of divination and magic” (Lippy and Williams 2010, 1539).

In contrast to many Pagan groups studied in Italy and in predominantly Catholic countries,¹¹ the Sisters of the *cerchio* worship different deities and do not have a high priestess in charge of the rituals. They are not hierarchical and do not require any specific initiation. Moreover, they do not perform counter-identities vis-à-vis their sociocultural and religious Catholic context. What keeps them together as a *cerchio* is their involvement in particular aesthetic—“sensory” and “artistic”—performances. Specifically, what links the members of the *cerchio* is the practice and “interpretation”¹² of the “traditional” of *pizzica*, in connection with its healing dimension and with *tarantismo* (Parmigiani 2019) Some of the women of the *cerchio* dance *pizzica*, some others play it or sing it. It is for all of them a way to connect with themselves, with each other, and with that particular land—including its human and non-human inhabitants. Moreover, in so doing, *pizzica* represents a way to promote and foster healing and well-being—for the individual and of their community—human or otherwise.¹³ Paraphrasing the song I translated at the beginning of this essay, the Sisters and their friends believe that if one dances alone, without embracing their connection with their more-than-human community, they cannot be healed. This understanding and practice of *pizzica*, inspired by a re-reading of *tarantismo* of the past within a framework that stresses the relationality among human and non-human beings, is what I call “spiritual” *neotarantismo*. The specifically curative understanding and practice of *pizzica*, together with such a relational approach to the world that stresses connections over individuality, similarities over difference, analogies over ruptures, is what informs the rituals of the *cerchio* and of their dancing *pizzica*—including the dance for peace that they organized in the aftermath of the Paris terrorist attacks.¹⁴

¹⁰ See Parmigiani 2019.

¹¹ On contemporary Paganism in Catholic countries, see, e.g., Howell 2008, 2013, 2018; Parmigiani 2019; Fedele 2009, 2013a, 2013b; Rountree 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015; Mapril and Llera Blanes eds. 2013; Puca 2018, 2019; Palmisano and Pannofino 2020.

¹² Lambek 2014.

¹³ Healing—as the anthropologist Sarah Pike (2004) and the scholar of Western Esotericism Wouter Hanegraaff (1996), among others, have shown—is at the very core of New Age and contemporary Pagan practices.

¹⁴ “Healing,” in the understanding of my interlocutors (in line with its ubiquitously quoted etymology of “making whole”), puts together personal and communitarian health, well-being, and social justice. The latter dimension is particularly relevant in the activism of the *Il Popolo degli Ulivi* and of the NO TAP movement. As a matter of fact, Salento’s economy was linked for centuries and until fairly recently to agriculture and to the presence of latifundia: large land estates owned by a landlord, often worked by a large number of (often underpaid) peasants. Traces of this economic history can still be found in the local language and social structure. It is not uncommon to meet people who refer to the parcel of land they own and cultivate—mostly as a leisure activity—as *fundu* (a term in the Salentino dialect clearly linked to the term *latifondo*). The cultivation and handling of tobacco, in particular, played an important economic and political role in this area until the past century: as Santoro and Torsello point out, in fact, “an endemic class conflict between the rich owners . . . and the masses of peasants and female workers (*operaie*

As Above, So Below

“We are all one”—my interlocutors keep telling me and reminding themselves—“we are all connected”: human and non-human persons. Love is how the Salentine Pagans with whom I am working call the substance of the universe: Love is what makes everything grow, thrive, expand—humans included. Love is what makes the universe and is also what makes us. People, animals, plants, waters, rocks: we are all connected with one another through this powerful force called Love. This belief in the interconnectedness and relationality of the universe is something that informs not only contemporary Pagan spiritual practices in Salento but also the ways in which Pagans approach both knowledge and other-than-human presences. In other words, “interconnectedness” and the “love matrix” are not only ontological issues but also epistemological ones for the Sisters of the *cerchio* and their friends—linked, for example, to their “ways of knowing” generated by their “participatory” experiences intrinsic to their magical practices.¹⁵ They also have political implications, as individual wellbeing depends on the wellbeing of others: nature, humans, and, sometimes, spirits.¹⁶ Since we are all one, we are connected, co-dependent, related. Therefore, one’s flourishing is not only a personal enterprise, but it is a responsibility towards others and all that is. In other words, Salentine Pagans really follow the Medieval and Renaissance alchemist principle stated in the hermetic text *Tabula Smaragdina* (Emerald Tablet): “It is true, without lying, sure and certain: what is below is like what is above. And what is above is like what is below.”¹⁷ This is why relationality is a key concept and practice in their craft. This is why when they dance, they never dance alone.

Relational Ontologies in Salento (and Beyond)

In an article titled “Being Known by a Birch Tree,” writer Priscilla Stuckey explores the implications of considering humans “not but one extension of Earth’s many-faceted ability to know.”¹⁸ By recalling a personal experience of knowing and being known by a birch tree planted in the yard of her parents’ house when she was born, she investigates the epistemological implications of “neo-animist” ontologies. In line with works of authors such as the scholar of religion Graham Harvey, the anthropologist Nurit Bird-David, and the philosopher David Abrahams, Stuckey defines “neo (or new) animism” as a vision of the world that, “departing

tabacchine) also developed around the tobacco economy” (2005, 28; on the cultivation of tobacco in Salento, see also Barletta 1994). See also Federici 2018.

¹⁵ See, for a comparison, the literature on “New Animism” or “neo-animism.” For example, see Graham Harvey 2006 and 2019. On the understanding of magic as “participatory consciousness,” in the legacy of the anthropologist Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, see, e.g., Greenwood 2009; Magliocco 2004a, 2012, Tambiah 1990, Parmigiani 2021.

¹⁶ For a thorough description of similar attitudes towards the world, see, e.g., Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion*.

¹⁷ My translation. The original text reads: “Verum, sine mendacio, certum et verissimum: quod est inferius est sicut quod est superius. Et quod est superius est sicut quod est inferius.” What is known today with the term “contemporary Paganism” and/or “New Age Spirituality” could be considered as part of a wider and multifaceted phenomenon called (Western) Esotericism. This body of knowledge and of practices is deemed to be the representative of a corpus of theories and systems that, with the unfolding of Modernity, were “rejected.” “Rejected,” here, is not a synonym of “disappeared.” In fact, the dialectic between mainstream modernities and what was referred to as the “occult” has always been central to Modernist discourses, albeit within a framework that wanted to delegitimize, marginalize, stigmatize, and ridicule both the “hidden knowledge” itself and its followers. On (Western) Esotericism see, e.g., Faivre 1994; Campbell 1972; von Stuckrad 2005a and 2005b; Hammer 2001; Partridge 2004, 2005; Hanegraaff 2012, 1998.

¹⁸ Stuckey 2010.

from Edward Tylor’s definition of animism as belief in souls or spirits, uses the prism of relationship for understanding interconnectedness with beings of all sorts, including human and other-than-human.”¹⁹ In other words, those who follow a relational ontology, such as the Salentine Pagans from the *cerchio*, see and experience the world as populated by different persons—some of them human, and some of them not—impacting Pagan experiences and understandings of individuality, selfhood, and personhood.²⁰ Notably, Stuckey observes in conversation with the work of feminist scholar Karen Barad that within such a framework, as a matter of fact, there is no pre-relational self for those who share this kind of relational ontology: the world is believed to be continuously made and remade in the interactions that we have with it, in the *fili*—webs—of relationships that connect human and non-human persons. This point is particularly important for understanding the ontologies that I found in Salento, both among and beyond Pagan *milieus*. While, on the one hand, relational ontologies certainly help framing the constellation of meanings around the aforementioned *pizzica* performance and its virality, they could also shed some light on other aspects of Salentine “epistemes of contagion”—in which “neo-animist” discourses, both linked to and decoupled from spiritual practices and beliefs, are central.²¹

This relational attitude towards non-human persons is something that goes beyond Pagan practices and beliefs, today.²² In order to show the pervasiveness of relational ontologies discourses in connection to health and wellbeing, and their political and philosophical implications, I will address two Salentine activist contexts: the one vis-à-vis the *querelle* around *Xylella fastidiosa* and the one related to the construction of the TAP—Trans Adriatic Pipeline. These two, together with spiritual *pizzica*, will show how attitudes of relatedness between human and non-humans persons inform current practices and understandings of health, well-being, and justice in Salento.

Il Popolo degli Ulivi

An elderly man is walking in an olive tree orchard. His gait is uncertain, as he proceeds with the help of a cane. “I always had a big passion. As I had it for my children, so I had it for the plants. As I raised my children, the same I wanted to do with my plants.” While, with an emotional voice, the man explains his story, with his hands he carefully cleans a stone sign at the foot of an olive tree. The sign reads “Praxilla Sec. XVI” (Praxilla XVI century): the name and age of the plant.

¹⁹ Stuckey 2010, 188. As Harvey points out, neo-animism is inspired by Irving Hallowell’s early-twentieth-century research among the Anishinaabeg in southern central Canada rather than by Edward Tylor’s theorizing about religion (2019, 198).

²⁰ Some scholars believe that the “ontological turn” in anthropology shows that “people do not just see the world differently, but occupy altogether different worlds” (Stacey 2021, 87)

²¹ For a discussion on “dark green religion” and its possible manifestations (supernaturalistic or naturalistic, spiritual or agnostic), see Taylor 2010.

²² Rountree interestingly points out that (2012, 307), “Pagans’ categorization of other beings as kin challenges the fundamental separation of human beings from all other beings, which is customary in Western societies; it attempts to re-frame human relationships with other beings and thereby to re-frame conventional notions of ‘family’ and ‘the social.’ Perhaps inevitably, the ways Pagans use the term ‘kin’ derive from its usage in the societies with which they are most familiar, where ‘kin’ is typically associated with relationships characterized (ideally) by close connection, interdependence, solidarity, mutual respect, love, and loyalty. [...] In other societies, the reckoning of kin is often more complex and comprehensive: the lineage, clam, totemic group, tribe, sub-tribe or extended family may be more important than the collective identity and status of one’s kin group.”

The old man then continues: “In 1899: the first oil mill. I am 85 years old, and I always had this passion. And now that I can’t do anything, my passion is still there.” He then slowly approaches another olive tree, with another stone sign: Ambra, XIII century. Possibly, one of the oldest, among his children.²³

This is the opening scene of the third episode of the documentary “Xylella Report,” by the journalist Marilù Mastrogiovanni. In this documentary, a promotion for her book (2015) the Italian journalist retraces the results of her documental research on the emergence and regional, national, and international handling of the olive tree pandemic, allegedly caused by *Xylella*. *Xylella Fastidiosa* is the bacterium that is believed to be at the root of the Olive Quick Decline Syndrome. Referred to in Italian as the *Complesso del Disseccamento Rapido dell’Olivo* (CoDiRO), this is a disease that has been affecting Salento’s olive trees since 2013 (see, e.g., Bleve et al. 2016, Schneider et al. 2020). Apparently, Xylella arrived in Salento from Costa Rica.²⁴ As Schneider et al. describe: “This species is considered one of the most dangerous plant-pathogenic bacteria worldwide. The bacterium is naturally transmitted by insect vectors, which feed on the xylem of host plants. If expressed in susceptible plant hosts, symptoms of Xf include, among others, leaf marginal necrosis, leaf abscission, dieback, delayed growth, and death of plants through the obstruction of the xylem and a lack of sufficient water flow through the host. The multiplication of the bacteria with the associated clogging of the xylem will first result in declining yields and reduced fruit quality due to a decrease in water and nutrient flow. Eventually, this shortage will result in the host’s death” (2020, 9250).

The responses to the desiccation and death of olive trees by local, regional, national, and European political authorities, of the scientific community, and of the Salentinians have been quite variegated and, sometimes, controversial. In 2013, right after the discovery of a then-isolated population of olive trees impacted by the disease, and in order to curb the diffusion of the bacterium considered responsible, the regional government, the national government, and the European Union recommended drastic policies, including the eradication and felling of hundreds of healthy olive trees, in addition to the infected ones, in the name of precaution. They established “buffer zones” within a 100-meter radius from infected trees and supported the felling of olive trees, sick or otherwise, within this radius. These radical measures have been strongly opposed by a significant percentage of the inhabitants of Salento, especially by those who go by the name of “*Il Popolo degli Ulivi*” (The People of the Olive Trees).²⁵

²³ “Ieu ho tenuta una passione grande. Come l’ho tenuta per i miei figli, l’aggiu tenuta pe’ le piante. Comu aggiu crisciutu i miei figli così aggiu vulutu cu crescu le mie piante” (Mastrogiovanni 2015b).

²⁴ See, e.g., Simpson 2015.

²⁵ The same opposition, for only partially overlapping reasons, was enacted by the Prosecutor’s office of the city of Lecce (Salento’s provincial administrative center). In 2015, the latter, openly questioning the opinion of the scientific community, halted the felling of the trees on the basis of controversial accusations and undisclosed (and, later, disproved) scientific data, claiming that the data available at the time did not show any direct correlation between the Olive Quick Decline Syndrome and *Xylella Fastidiosa*. This intervention from the Lecce Prosecutor’s office produced, de facto, a situation of stall, during which many more olive trees got sick and died, multiplying the areas of Salento infected and, with this, the “buffer areas” involved. In 2016, the European Union fined the Italian government for failing to address the *Xylella Fastidiosa* epidemics. Since then, the regional and national governments started enacting policies targeted at the containment of the spread of the disease, rather than to the eradication the bacterium (at this time, an impossible pursuit)—working, for example, on the insect population of *Philaenus spumarius*, considered co-responsible of the spread of the disease, and implementing the cultivation of a variety of olive trees that seems to be resistant to *Xylella Fastidiosa*. See, e.g.: Bucci 2019; Burdeau 2019; Cristini 2017; “Gli interventi per il contrasto al batterio della Xylella fastidiosa,” 2022; “Puglia,” 2021; “Xylella,” 2015. As of 2021, the disease started impacting the olive trees in the province of Bari, a city 150 kilometers north of Lecce. It

The *Popolo degli Ulivi* emerged spontaneously as a grassroots movement, that involved activists from different political contexts and personal affiliations. The *Popolo degli Ulivi* defines itself as a:

...community of citizens of good will who want to save the Apulian centuries-old olive trees. Anyone can contribute and is welcome: associations, committees, political parties, researchers, entrepreneurs. ... “*Il Popolo degli Ulivi*” community is based on knowledge and networks: the sharing of information helps the whole territory grow. May the centuries-old and millennia-old olive trees of Apulia be the occasion to re-think new forms of economy and horizontal organizational models, and to rediscover, in a modern way, what our Messapic, Greek, and Roman ancestors already knew: we are the olive trees.²⁶

Even at a first glance, the aforementioned issues well exemplify why that of *Xylella Fastidiosa* in Salento could be considered a *querelle*. From environmental concerns to those of an involvement of organized crime, from anti-scientism to conspiracism, the emergence of *Xylella* and its developments fostered several different reactions.²⁷ As a matter of fact, there is still no agreement on how to address CoDiRO, nor a common vision on its causes and on the status and agency of its main protagonists: the olive trees.

While much has been written on many aspects of the *Xylella* affair, one has been ignored thus far: the ontological dimensions underlying environmental activism around the tutelage of olive trees enacted by the variegated assemblage that is called the *Popolo degli Ulivi*. While within such a variegated group of persons there is a certain variability in terms of opinions and positionalities, it appears that many of those who belong to *Il Popolo degli Ulivi* share two connected elements that are particularly important for the sake of this article. First, they feel personally connected to olive trees. Second, their understanding of CoDiRO is quite different from that of the European Union and of the mainstream scientific community. The *Popolo degli Ulivi* argue that the problem of the olive trees is systemic and impacts the human and non-human population of the area in similar ways. In particular, these activists have been focusing on the pollution of the soil and of the groundwater caused by an extensive and indiscriminate use of the herbicide glyphosate—a very popular and often overused “*medicina*” (medicine) that Salentinians have been administering to their olive groves for decades, with the goal of facilitating the hard task of olive harvesting.²⁸ The use and abuse of glyphosate is at the base, according to many within the *Popolo degli Ulivi*, not only of the CoDiRO, but of an “environmental plague” that affects human and non-human persons.²⁹

is important to mention that a series of wildfire, especially in the summers of 2020 and 2021, added to the already critical situation of the olive trees population.

²⁶ See the group’s Facebook page, “*Il Popolo degli Ulivi*,” 2015.

²⁷ On conspiracy theories and New-Age and Pagan spirituality in Salento see Parmigiani 2021.

²⁸ Unlike elsewhere in Italy, the way in which professional and amateur farmers informally refer to glyphosate (or its commercial name Roundup) is “*medicina*” (medicine/medication) and not “herbicide.” *Medicina* is the world that, in Italian, specifically refers to medicinal products targeted to humans (and, sometimes, pets).

²⁹ Many, among *Il Popolo degli Ulivi*, to different degrees, believe that *Xylella* is not responsible for the olive tree disease. As Pietro Perrino, a former director of the *Genetic Bank of the CNR* (National Research Center, NdT) of Bari claims, “*Xylella* is not the cause of the withering of the olive tree, but, if present, it is only a consequence” (Perrino 2018a). This position appeared also in some of the national press. See Perrino 2018b.

For some activists, both these elements seem in line with, and could be better understood in relation to, human and non-human relational stances and ontologies. In the words of Ada Martella, on the website “Xylella Reports”: “The olive trees are the anodes of Salento, whose land has been sick for some time, but whose fruits also feed those who live there. I cannot keep silent, in this dark story: the southern part of Apulia has the highest rate of mortality due to cancers of environmental origin in Italy, even without an industrial tradition, as in the North. The ‘plague of olive trees’ and the increasingly crowded oncology wards are the obvious symptoms of the same disease, caused by a wicked way of mistreating the environment. These huge brown patches that are now part of our landscape [i.e., the dead olive trees], the puzzlement of hundreds of unarmed peasants in front of their suddenly extinguished olive trees represent the most evident, are the most ‘spectacular’ manifestation—just like the skin eruption of malefic blisters on a sick body—of a poisoned land. Perhaps I may seem apocalyptic to you, but I guarantee you that all of us here are witnessing an epochal change” (Martella 2020).

Interestingly, Ada Martella, in the quote above, refers to the adjective “apocalyptic.” Originally meaning “revelation,” “unveiling,” apocalypse is a word that has a special significance, in the context of Salento. As a matter of fact, de Martino theorized what he calls “cultural apocalypses” in his *La Fine del Mondo*.³⁰ In a quotation translated by Ilaria Vanni (2013), de Martino writes that:

Cultural apocalypses, in their general connotation, are manifestations of cultural life that involve, in the context of a given culture and historical moment, the theme of the end of the current world, regardless of the way in which this end is actually lived or represented. In this more general connotation the theme is not necessarily linked with religious life as traditionally understood, but it can surface—such as in the case of the diverse modern and contemporary apocalypses of the bourgeois society— in the secular sphere of the arts, literature, philosophy, customs: it does not necessarily entail the end of the worldly character of human existence, but it can also take on the social and political traits of the end of a certain historical world and the coming of a better one, such as in marxist apocalypses: it is not necessarily explicit in the consciousness of the historical actors involved in these apocalypses, but it can become more or less explicitly manifest in the actors’ *Stimmung*, in their behaviour, in the direction and affective tone of their thoughts; and finally a cultural apocalypse does not refer necessarily to collective movements, to overall tendencies of an epoch or of a society, but it can concern in a particular way a singular historical actor, who within the frame of certain environmental circumstances, opens up or renews a particular cultural sensibility to the end of the world. (De Martino quoted and translated by Vanni 2013, 162–163)

This “apocalyptic tone” is present, in connection to the felling of olive trees, also in another context, in Salento: that of NO TAP activism.

³⁰ The book—a series of notes, in fact—was published posthumously by Clara Gallini. See Ernesto de Martino, *La Fine del Mondo: Contributo All'analisi Delle Apocalissi Culturali*, ed. Clara Gallini (Torino: Einaudi, 1977).

Olive Trees Are Persons: NO TAP Activism in Salento

“Women and men hugging trees, to prevent them from being hurt. The noise of the chainsaws is deafening and contrasts with the sweetness and depth of this gesture of love. A hug, like that of a child to an elderly mother, of a brother to a sister to protect, at the cost of one's life. Love against violence for those whom we have the duty to defend, for the fruits it gives us, for the importance it has in our history and in our present. Those olive trees tell us about our grandparents, about those who cared for and loved them before us, they tell us of a rural Salento that lived off the products of the earth, about our grandmothers who found shelter in the shade of the majestic foliage, after a hard day of work under the scorching sun. They tell us about a Salento that today we have the duty to defend from the grotesque interests of a monster that is destroying it. In place of those olive trees, a construction site will be built, the narrow streets marked by dry stone walls will be replaced by large concrete esplanades to pass a pipe that will carry gas, fossil energy that keeps us anchored to a past of ecological ignorance, of destruction of the ecosystem. With all the repercussions on health and climate change. We dream and expect a different world, in which renewable energies allow us to warm up, to move and to live in harmony with that small part of nature that we have not yet destroyed. We want a turnaround and let's start right here, from above these olive trees” (Movimento NO TAP 2017).

In a public Facebook post, dated November 1, 2017, the aforementioned text accompanies a video in which NO TAP activists try to stop the removal of olive trees.³¹ Some activists are climbing on the trees in the attempt to stop, literally with their bodies, the operations. Others are hugging the trees—with similar intentions. As a matter of fact, in addition to the spread of *Xylella*, recently Salento has been facing another perceived ecological threat. This is the construction of the TAP (Trans-Adriatic Pipeline).³²

The TAP pipeline project, recently completed, was strongly opposed by many Salentinians. It aims to transport natural gas from Azerbaijan to Western Europe, through Greece, Albania, and Salento, and it is believed to severely impacting one of the most beautiful coastlines of Southern Italy, the san Basilio beach in San Foca, in the municipality of Melendugno. The placement of the pipes required the removal and re-plantation of olive trees.³³ Approved by the EU and Italian government, allegedly superseding a referendum, the realization of TAP has been opposed by local communities—including mayors of the impacted areas. The aforementioned protest was not an isolated one: many protests have taken place since 2011, to the point that some activists have been under trial. Within NO TAP contemporary ecological activism in Salento, variations of the trope “olive trees are kin” had a special place.³⁴ In other words, in the NO TAP case as well, discourses around the stewardship and protection of olive trees are

³¹ “MOVIMENTO NOTAP. Contro il corridoio Sud del gas, per la tutela e la salvaguardia dei territori. Per l'autodeterminazione delle popolazioni che credono in un modello di sviluppo sostenibile, diverso da quello imposto, contro la speculazione finanziaria a scapito delle comunità” ([“Movimento NOTAP,” N.D “Movimento NOTAP.” n.d. <https://www.notap.it>.]; “NOTAP MOVEMENT. Against the southern gas corridor, for the tutelage and the protection of the territories. For the self-determination of the populations that believe in a sustainable development model, different from the one imposed, against the financial speculation at the expense of communities”).

³² “TAP is a Transmission System Operator (TSO) and an Independent Transmission Operator (ITO), providing capacity to shippers interested in transporting gas in a safe, reliable and efficient manner. TAP works to national and international safety and operational standards...Connecting with the Trans Anatolian Pipeline at the Greek-Turkish border, TAP crosses Northern Greece, Albania and the Adriatic Sea before coming ashore in Southern Italy to connect to the Italian natural gas network.” See <https://www.tap-ag.com>.

³³ The olive trees were eradicated and replanted after the pipe was erected.

³⁴ See, for example “No Tap,” 2017.

intertwined with anxieties regarding the destruction of the world (as we know it)³⁵ and have been inflected through “neo-animist” language and imaginaries. While it is probable that most of the non-Pagan Salentinians who consider and treat olive trees as persons are not aware of scholarly and spiritual debates around “neo-animism” in religious studies, it is my claim that focusing on the relational ontologies, epistemologies, and discourses present (knowingly or not) in Salento could shed some light on the pervasive role of the latter in thinking about health and wellbeing at present.

Rethinking Community and Immunity

Long before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito explored the relationships between community and immunity, modernity and contagion. On the one hand, his voice and intellectual work could be understood as in line with the post-Heideggerian attempt of some political philosophers, including Jean-Luc Nancy and Giorgio Agamben, to redefine “community.” On the other hand, Esposito’s reading of Foucault’s work on biopolitics, within such a context, opens up unique perspectives: namely, a reflection—that could inspire political action—on what he calls “affirmative biopolitics.”

Esposito’s understanding of community and immunity stems from the connection between the etymologies of these terms, that both include the word *munus*—meaning, in Latin, “gift,” “obligation.”³⁶ While *communitas* stresses the “cum” the “togetherness” of reciprocal obligations, *immunitas* stresses the lack thereof. Immunity, in fact, it is used both in biomedical and juridical contexts, and refers to a status of protection and exoneration.³⁷ Therefore, Esposito claims that community should not be understood primarily in contraposition to society,³⁸ but to immunity, and that this “immune dispositif” (Esposito and Hanafi 2013, 89) is something that developed with Modernity.³⁹ In his reflections on immunity and political philosophy, Esposito

³⁵ Vanni points out that “*Le apocalissi culturali*, according to de Martino, are historically determined and culturally situated. They do not articulate an end of the human world as such, but rather the end of a historical, cultural or political period or of a specific lifeworld. Apocalypses brought about by specific circumstances, or traversing historical periods, can be tonalities, moods to which individuals become attuned. Finally, cultural apocalypses provide the possibility of resolution of crisis and renewal” (2013, 162).

³⁶ It could be argued that, in Maussian terms, *munus* contains the element of reciprocity and, in particular, of the “spirit of the gift. With “spirit of the gift” Mauss refers to the fact that, with the gift, “one gives away what is in reality a part of one’s nature and substance.” Therefore, receiving “something is to receive a part of someone’s spiritual essence” (1967 [1925], 10). Esposito writes that “I shifted attention from the sphere of the *cum*, which was the focus of Nancy’s analysis, to that of the *munus*, which he had somehow left in the shadows.” (Esposito and Hanafi 2013). On “animism” and the gift see also Ignatov 2017.

³⁷ “If *communitas* is what binds its members in a commitment of giving from one to the other, *immunitas*, by contrast, is what unburdens from this burden, what exonerates from this responsibility” (Esposito and Hanafi 2013, 84). Moreover, Esposito claims that: “If you think about the term and the concept of ‘common,’ it has three opposites—the concepts of ‘proper,’ ‘private,’ and ‘immune’—which differ but converge in their contrastive effect. All three, in different ways, are opposed to the semantics of the common in the differing but converging forms of appropriation, privatization, and immunization” (Ibid., 88).

³⁸ Ramirez 2011, 114.

³⁹ “In the twilight of early modernity, when these categories came into direct contact with the horizon of biological life, the erosion of the common good—which was everybody’s and nobody’s, nobody’s because it was everybody’s—it became even more intense. Environmental resources were the first to be privatized—water, earth, air, mountains, rivers; then the city spaces, public buildings, roads, and cultural assets; and finally intellectual resources, the communication spaces, and information tools. All of this while waiting for organs of biological life to be legally available for sale and purchased by the highest bidder” (Esposito and Hanafi 2013, 89).

claims that: “Although immunity is necessary to the preservation of our life, when driven beyond a certain threshold it forces life into a sort of cage where not only our freedom gets lost but also the very meaning of our existence—that opening of existence outside itself that takes the name of *communitas*” (Esposito and Hanafi 2013, 85). Esposito compares this “excess” of immunity to autoimmune diseases, which cause the body to fight against itself.⁴⁰ To avoid, and sometimes overcome, the effects of the “excess” of immunity, Esposito re-reads the work of Michel Foucault on biopolitics and develops the idea of an “affirmative biopolitics”—one that is “*of* life and no longer *on* life” (Ibid., 89, my emphasis).⁴¹ Esposito’s “affirmative biopolitics” can be described as the result of a “singular and plural logic in which differences are affirmed as the bond that holds the world together, living and enacting the global system of differences,” or as something that “would connect a diversity of impersonal singularities rather than individuals caught up in exclusionary identities” (Kioupkiolis 2017).

While theoretically fascinating and valuable, the concept of affirmative biopolitics is hard to translate into real-life policies. If, as Esposito claims, it is important, “...*even before acting*, to think within horizon, to think around and even from within the common” (Esposito and Hanafi 2013, 90, my emphasis), the domain of action is and should remain an important political concern. In other words, to quote the political theorist Theodoros Kioupkiolis, we should think about “politicizing the common,” after having “commoned the political” (2017). In this respect, I claim that the neo-animist Salentine discourses and practices that I described above might shed some light on one way to “common the political,” while suggesting further directions of analysis worth exploring in our attempts to “politicize the common.” What happens when we de-center the “human” in talking about community and *munus*, and we include the “more-than-human” and the “other-than-human”? What can neo-animist ontologies and relationalities add to Esposito’s claims about community and immunity? What is their relationship with an affirmative biopolitics, with a politics *of* and not *on* life—in other words, with healing, well-being, and justice?

Regardless of the different positions and orientations vis-à-vis the COVID-19 pandemic, two aspects seem undeniable. Firstly, we cannot dispute that we are all connected and that the health and well-being of some depends on the health and well-being of all. Second, we cannot deny that our health and well-being depend on the health and well-being of non-human animals, too—bats or otherwise. This interconnectedness, that Salentine neo-animists have been reclaiming way before the COVID-19 pandemic, is particularly important and telling in the light of what happened, globally, since the end of 2019. As anthropologist Mariella Pandolfi has recently claimed, during the COVID-19 pandemic, some elements have emerged of what she calls *Homo pandemicus*:

Torn between the risk of contagion, confinement, fear of the symptom, but even more of the probable asymptomaticity, autonomy, heteronomy, self-sacrifice, frustration and a progressive sense of loss, the pandemic subject oscillates between therapy and self-pathologization, between the desire to recover a utopian freedom and the necessary security that he fights potential external enemies, but

⁴⁰ Nazism, according to Esposito, is an example of this excess of immunity, that produced “thanathopolitical developments” (Esposito and Hanafi 2013, 87). See also, e.g., (Esposito, Welch, and Lemm 2012b).

⁴¹ “... the challenge for an affirmative biopolitics, of life and no longer on life, is staked precisely on this possibility: on our capacity, even before acting, to think within this horizon, to think around and even from within the common” (Esposito and Hanafi 2013, 89–90).

even more himself as an internal enemy. [...] *Homo pandemicus*, although a product of the mystification of liberalism, is now something else [...] The fear of the virus, of contagion, of contamination has created another horizon of meaning in the progressive loss of meaning, and *Homo pandemicus*, blinded, staggers, advances in the grip of an anguish which, on the one hand, confronts him naked in front of the his own life and, on the other hand, leaves him abandoned in the face of a total loss of himself-as-other, while the other is now a protean enemy ... How, therefore, can we imagine one's survival if not abandoning the other, but submitting oneself to the law? (2021, 129, 133–134)

To react to the (neoliberal) way of being-in-the-world of the *Homo pandemicus*,⁴² Salentine activists propose and embody a different way of being human—one that does not “imagine survival” by abandoning the other, but one that sees it only in connection with a community—of human and non-human persons.⁴³ To an isolated, immune subject who sees the other as a “protean enemy,” Salentine neo-animists contrapose a subject that recognizes the *munus*, the gift and obligation that builds multi-species communities. In response to the anguish (i.e., a “fear without its object” [Pandolfi 2021, 133]) of the *homo pandemicus*, the Salentinians I presented above react by claiming, instead—to paraphrase the song that opened this article—that “if alone, we cannot be healed.” To an “episteme of contagion” based on an “immunity *dispositif*” they contrast one based on the idea of *munus*: an episteme based on the privilege and responsibility of our interconnectedness.⁴⁴

Conclusion

In this article, by analyzing some elements of my ongoing ethnographic research in the Salento area of Italy, I explored one “episteme of contagion”: one of the ways in which the current global situation interrogates our being-in-the world. This particular neo-animist episteme is based on an idea of community that includes both human and non-human persons, and, understood through Roberto Esposito’s philosophy, it engages and validates the *munus*, the gift and responsibility that humans and non-humans share in their “being in common.”⁴⁵ This widened perspective on what it means to be connected re-orientes Esposito’s “affirmative biopolitics” and suggests new existential and political possibilities—including a “multi-species” approach to *bios*, health, well-being, and justice.

This exhortation to take a multispecies approach to health and well-being is not an isolated one. Recently, for example, some medical anthropologists have been stressing that “...we cannot

⁴² As a matter of fact, while Pandolfi does not mention this, *homo pandemicus* seems to be in line with the notion of responsabilization described by Wendy Brown, where the “neoliberal self” is held accountable and responsible for their own well-being and for the well-being of the economy. As Wendy Brown notes, “Responsibilization discursively and ethically converts the worker, student, poor person, parent, or consumer into one whose moral duty is to pursue savvy self-investment and entrepreneurial strategies of self-care” (2006, 9).

⁴³ “The bare life—and the fear of losing it—is not something that brings humans together, but something that blinds and separates them” (Agamben 2020, quoted by Pandolfi 2021, 132, my translation).

⁴⁴ As Lynch (2019, 366) notes, “[f]or Esposito, community is not a coalition of subjects but the visceral exposure of contingent relations.”

⁴⁵ “... the battle for an affirmative biopolitics ... must start precisely by breaking the vise grip between public and private that threatens to crush the common, by seeking instead to expand the space of the common” (Esposito and Hanafi 2013: 89).

see human lives as separate from other species, especially in the contexts of health and care” (Fuentes 2019, 158),⁴⁶ and more and more work is being done to “reframe” medical anthropology in order to include other-than-humans (Brown and Nading 2019, 6). A multispecies approach to health and wellbeing is not seen only as a pragmatic necessity or an intellectual enterprise: it is considered an ethical one, in the Anthropocene—opening up ontological questions as well as new understandings of biopolitics (Brown and Nading 2019).

Multispecies approaches to health and wellbeing have been often read in dialogue with the work of well-known intellectuals such as feminist scholar Donna Haraway (e.g., 2008, 2015), anthropologist Tim Ingold (e.g., 2000), and feminist Karen Barad (e.g., 2003, 2007; See also Stuckey 2010). I chose, instead, to do so in dialogue with the work of Roberto Esposito (see also Lynch 2019) and alongside my own ethnographic observations.⁴⁷ Similar to recent developments in medical anthropology that stress how “Humans *are* multispecies communities and are *in* multispecies communities” (Fuentes 2019; 157, emphasis in the original), Salentinians show that engaging with the idea of community could be a productive way to re-think not only well-being but also political practices and actors, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Such a neo-animist approach could support, through the idea of *munus* and of multi-species communities, what medical anthropologists are already telling us: “multispecies care” is not unidirectional, but always “bidirectional” (Brown and Nading, 10). After all, as the song goes, “if you dance alone, you cannot be healed.”

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⁴⁶ “But much contemporary health-related theoretical orientation, especially in the biomedical realm, remains disconnected to multispecies approaches. Medical anthropology can, and should, be at the forefront of developing new ways to theorize, engage and examine these processes.” (Fuentes 2019, 158) See also, e.g., (Sharp 2019; Brown and Nading 2019; Cartwright 2019). On a “nonsecular” medical anthropology, instead, see, e.g., Whitmarsh and Roberts 2015; Roberts 2015.

⁴⁷ Heather Lynch (2019) analyses the relationships between humans and bedbugs in Glasgow by explicitly engaging with the work of Esposito and, in particular, with his “affirmative biopolitics.”

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