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Perspectives

How to cite:

Biasillo, Roberta. “(Under) Grounding Italian Colonialism: Practices of Historical Displacement.” In: “Storytelling and Environmental History: Experiences from Germany and Italy” edited by Roberta Biasillo and Claudio de Majo, *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 2020, no. 2, 78–84. doi.org/10.5282/rcc/9126.

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Leopoldstrasse 11a, 80802 Munich, GERMANY

ISSN (print) 2190-5088
ISSN (online) 2190-8087

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Figure 1
Mica samples (Source:
Central Archives of the
State, Rome, Italy, January
2017)

Roberta Biasillo

(Under) Grounding Italian Colonialism: Practices of Historical Displacement

At the time, my research was nothing more than a vague idea in my mind, an idea of a new exploration into an unknown territory. I was about to start outlining a project on the environmental history of Italian colonialism in Africa, and I did what historians are supposed to do—namely, read books and papers and review archival sources. I remember enjoying this sense of cloudiness and nebulosity, the fascination of an aerial picture crystallizing every now and then in tentative titles and unstructured paragraphs.

I spent days browsing folders and documents under the impression of knowing exactly what I was searching for in amongst the fascist administrative files. And the less you know, the more you think you are right. I thought I was scanning the right collection, yet I was merely passing from one folder to another, getting lost while deeming to be perfectly on track. Several times, I believed I had found what I was after: maps of city plans, cottage house plans, names of agrarian technicians, Mussolini's face carved into African rocks, op-ed pieces celebrating farming achievements, travel reports, inquiries on resources by company rapporteurs, and descriptions of the royal train crossing the empire. All these relics and the environments they capture have migrated into papers, traveled back and forth from Italy to North and East Africa, survived across times, passed from one person to another, and been translated into different media.

While I was literally exploring corridors of boxes and digging through papers of various weights and formats, I came across something different: finally something more solid and weighty in the midst of lightness and flexibility. I found an unopened envelope, and suddenly I was the one to be breaking its wax seal for the first and only time. I was experiencing one of the typical joys of a historian: being the first person to “discover” something.¹ Such discoveries are gifts from the past that collapse the distinction between temporalities. The envelope was an attachment to a document sent in January 1938 from Ethiopia to Italy from a company employee to the Italian Ministry of Colonies containing transparent disks of something in-

1 Talking about discovery, especially with regards to colonialism, is always problematic. If the reader would like to know more, see: Matthew H. Edney, “Creating “Discovery”: The Myth of Columbus 1777–1828,” *Terra Incognitae* 52, no 2 (2020): 195–213, doi: 10.1080/00822884.2020.1779982.

between plastic and glass. I had no idea what I was touching.

Academia is a wordy place, and even in this case it was words that helped me. A label attached to the disks read: “MICA. Società Anonima per le Industrie Estrattive in A.O.I., Milano.” These were mineral samples extracted from the underground of Italian East Africa by a private company that had a concession from the state. Still, I was not able to read what I was holding, so I googled “mica” and found the passage summarized below.²

Micas

Their perfect cleavage into thin elastic sheets is probably the most widely recognized characteristic of the micas, with their cleavages being a manifestation of their sheet structure. Distinct crystals of the micas occur in a few rocks, but when they occur in large crystals, they are often called books. When micas occur as irregular tabular masses or thin plates (flakes), they appear, in some instances, as pages. Flexibility and elasticity, infusibility, low thermal and electrical conductivity, and high dielectric power allow micas to serve as electrical condensers, insulation sheets between commutator segments, or in heating elements. Sheets of particular thicknesses are used in optical instruments. Ground mica is used in many applications, including as a dusting medium to prevent asphalt tiles sticking to one another, as a filler, an absorbent, and as a lubricant. It is also used in the manufacturing of wallpaper to provide a glittery luster.

To cut a long story short, I was in the archives with pages of rock asking to be read, and I felt as though I was dipping into underground Africa. Besides the experience of historical displacement, the finding hinted at something further. In my naive vision of colonial appropriation, precious metals shaped unequal exchanges. I had never heard of micas before, which are neither gold, silver, platinum, nor palladium, so why extract them? Micas are one of the innumerable resources that Italians dug out of the colonies, with metropolitan chemical industries and fascist modernity relying on a huge array of minerals from Africa for their development. Colonialists took everything they could, regardless of its value.

² *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, s.v. “Mica,” accessed 6 April 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/science/mica>.

This material encounter was the missing link I was searching for in amongst the fascist administrative files. The environment of my history lay in the very material traces I found in the unopened envelope, which contained the scramble for resources, records of modernity, competition between empires, and dreams of prestige and wealth.

Archives of the National Institute of Social Security, Rome, Italy, June 2018

In the following months, archival findings helped me refine my research, merging personal and historical pasts to perceive the present. In 2018, I visited the archives of the Italian Agricultural Colonial Institute in Florence where documents were arranged by plants and places, available for consultation in the historical headquarters of the institute. A fascist building with fascist façades, fascist plant and seed samples on exhibit along the hallways, with fascist desks to study at, and a tropical garden in the inner courtyard. During the same year, I had the opportunity to work as a guest researcher at the National Institute of Social Security in Rome. In its archives, traces of environmental flows—humans, animals, plants, concrete, energy, money, nitrogen, water, and boats—literally unfolded in front of me. Thanks to these collections, the Italo-Libyan environment became a synonym for agriculture, and my research idea crystallized into a plant-based table of contents with a focus on select plants.

My encounters with photographs of farming scenes confirmed that I could well be following a fruitful path. Looking at photographs taken in a private plant nursery in ‘Aziziya, a small town in northwestern Libya sometimes described as one of the hottest places in the world, I noticed different soils. The agricultural colonial company “De Micheli” took and sent these images in 1940 with the purpose of selling hundreds of olive trees to the National Institute of Social Security, which at the time was carrying out agricultural colonial enterprises in Libya as a means of tackling unemployment in rural Italy. Soil was not the lead character in these photographs, yet it captured my interest: The sight of the soil triggered memories about my past and displaced me into two very different settings...



Figure 2
'Aziziya, Libya, 1940
(Source: National Institute
of Social Security, Rome,
Italy)

The soil in this first photograph (fig. 2) brought me back to the 2018 Swedish heatwave and drought, with the May and July of that year recording their warmest ever temperatures.

A few years ago, I started spending time in Sweden, including during the spring and summer months. The geography is so different to that of Italy, and I experienced several physical epiphanies while I was there. I have never before felt soil so loose, dry, dusty, and atomic. During the drier months, I noticed it right throughout the house, covering my shoes when I went out for a walk, and layered across the grass in the garden. It was light but created a thick and consistent layer. It disassembled itself from

the ground, flying around and depositing itself everywhere. I have generally associated this volatile characteristic of the soil with hot climates and countries with sandy landscapes and heavy agricultural practices. Yet there I was experiencing it firsthand during a Swedish spring in Stockholm.

Such dryness in an almost arctic region seemed incongruous. Indeed, two summers ago in August, northern Sweden had experienced the unexpected and unusual phenomenon of an arctic wildfire. The term “arctic wildfire” sounded almost like an oxymoron a couple of years ago, yet now it is a familiar term. In July 2018, fires spread easily in the hot, dry weather and raged across Sweden as far north as the Arctic Circle, prompting authorities to ask for international assistance. Given the soil, Sweden was prone to burn.

The soil in this second photograph (fig. 3) looks more like that which used to cover my hometown in Central Italy, midway between Rome and Naples, not too far from

the coast. In this photograph, I can easily see myself at the age of five or six, wearing green rubber boots and messing around with plants and tools in my grandparents' orchard. I can still feel the texture of the soil under and around my shoes—consistent but soft—and I can still see the footprints of my boots on the ground, the tiny little squares arranged in semicircles. Wet, if not soaked, quite dark and heavy, with insects and worms inhabiting it—I had walked on soil like this before.

As in the photograph, the earth of my childhood ran like waves, with the highest crests rich in vegetation and the lowest ones a balance of bare soil and water. Much of my hometown is actually located below sea level, as it is near the coast, with a lake and a system of channels connecting it to the sea. Our relationship with this mesh of soil and water has always been one of both confrontation and cooperation, always boasting high fertility.

Once again, I was in the archives with many photographs of soils just waiting to be read. I felt like I was wrapped in volatile sand, and I could feel my shoes sinking below Africa's surface. Once again, materiality and sensory reflections were the middle ground on which my academic persona met the everyday person, and where my research met my inner-self to make this far-away-in-time-and-space story somehow meaningful. It was here, as my work and personal life crossed paths, that the experience of historical displacement and the recovery of my childhood memories carried along with them the juxtaposition of the two images that would reveal a startling, human-made transformation. I could visualize the trajectory of the fascist colonial scheme: from an arid, light-brown, and sandy soil to one that is wet, almost black, and rich in decaying organic matter.



Figure 3
 'Aziziya, Libya, 1940
 (Source: National Institute
 of Social Security, Rome,
 Italy)

During the early 1920s, the coastal regions of Tripolitania and Cyrenaica (part of modern-day Libya) were deemed to be “a vast sandy box.” Yet its remote past speaks of a hidden and forgotten fertility, which can be uncovered in the myths of Libya as one of the richest Roman provinces. Having first trashed the place, the Romans eventually fancied it for themselves; a new city was built over the ruins of Carthage, and Tunisia became the granary of the Roman Empire. It was this past that the Fascists wanted to resurrect. They envisioned a green colony, and in order to achieve it invested huge amounts of capital, promoting scientific and technological innovation, which also involved the movement of Italian fascists to Libya, displacing Libyans from the most fertile areas.

The soil in figure 2 poses the question: Could a fascist imagine a better place to conduct a radical socio-ecological experiment than a country that is 95 percent arid and infertile and populated by Berber and Arab nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes? The soil in figure 3 suggests that, very likely, the answer is no, and that the Libyan experience both featured and shaped the fascist regime. Libyan soils started to produce fruits and fascists that sustained one another. The North African landscape offered the regime an extreme environment in which equally extreme—even heroic—gestures could be performed, an alien territory to be tamed, appropriated, and radically transformed. Fascist soils, fascist plants, and fascist Libyans—that is what these photographs portray.

Selected Resources

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