

In July 2022, [Italian](#) and [international](#) newspapers published articles announcing that the Po, Italy's longest river and largest freshwater reservoir, was dying. This past summer marked one of the most severe droughts experienced in the Po River valley over the last 70 years. The five Italian regions traversed by the Po River declared a state of emergency as the Po's death also marked a crisis for the agricultural and industrial sector dependent on this watershed. July 2022 also marked the collapse of the Italian government and the announcement of general elections in September with the impending possibility of a right-wing populist government coalition coming to power. My project is situated at the meeting of the Po River and the Adriatic Sea, exploring the politics of drought and populism at a sinking and eroding deltaic edge.

My research focuses specifically on rice and mollusc (clam, mussel and oyster) farming, which occurs in transitional spaces between wetness and dryness: flood-irrigated paddies and lagoons. Adjacent to, over, and under these cultivations are the large-scale infrastructural presences of the energy and fossil-fuel sector: kilometres of electric trellises and their cables, an offshore natural gas platform, bio-gas silos, underground methane gas pipes and a 250-meter chimney of the Porto Tolle Power Station. The physical proximity of farming and energy in the Po River Delta emphasizes the necessity of exploring these two industries as entangled and co-constitutive. Therefore, my research ponders the past, present and future of monocultures and energy along the banks and levees of the Po River, and the coastlines of the northern Adriatic.

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In these at times sandy, at times salty, at times brackish and at times muddy waters, I explore the material, semiotic and bureaucratic aspects of farming and energy transition existing in a delta at once composed by both too little (fresh) and too much (salt) water.

At the same time, I consider how these regions are also embroiled in the geographies of populist right-wing politics. The Po River and its floodplains have long held symbolic and ontological significance for the right-wing Northern League party, which in the 1990s proclaimed the river as the dividing line for its movement for secession from the rest of Italy. While, the League has since discarded its separatist politics, the presence of Matteo Salvini, the League's leader, and Giorgia Meloni, the leader of the neo-fascist party Brothers of Italy, in promotional visits and billboards along roads underscores the importance of considering how specific land/water scapes become harnessed to advance specific notions of autochthonous belonging and nativism.

For the scope of the **HMUI grant** I have completed an associative map of these relational fields, accounting for the verticality (and thus emphasizing the interconnection existing between land, water, and air) of these shifting boundaries and natures. The piece uses mixed media (actual sand, pieces of wood, netting and string as well as printed images from online). Therefore, my associative map also asks what it might mean to come to know and see a delta from perspectives other than representations solely from a bird's eye view. (Krause and Harris 2021).

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Close up detailing a fishing net with blue crab and algae, eels, mussels, flamingos, abandoned *casoni* and women collecting clams overlaid on a topographical map from the Consorzio di Bonifica Delta del Po. This section highlights in part species labeled as “invasive” (the blue crab believed to have been brought by oil tankers docked offshore) vs. “lucrative” (mussels and clams) vs. “traditional” (eels) It also emphasizes the role of women in the fishing sector as a new development occurring after the collapse of the textile industries in the region in the 1970s.



Close up detailing the Porto Tolle Power Station. Until its closure in 2015, it was a coal fired plant that generated 8 percent of Italy's electricity . Situated close to the sea and the river, it was able to use the river water as cooling and was connected to the global oil market via a pipeline from Ravenna. The station was officially closed in 2015 and is now being converted into a tourism village. The chimney, which stands at 250 meters height, is the second tallest building in Italy. Juxtaposed to the chimney is a roadside poster I photographed in Rovigo for Giorgia Meloni's political party. Italy's large dependence on Russian gas has made electricity and gas a central topic in the upcoming elections at the end of September 2022.



A *nutria* (coyupú) is paired eating a corn husk and standing on rice. These rodents were introduced in the region for their fur, which was used to make fur-coats. After the 1980s and shifting fashion trends, their fur was no longer in demand and the coyupú became labeled as an “invasive” species. Rice and corn farmers (among others) lament the destruction caused by the coyupú, who not only eat the crops but also tunnel in the banks of the canals and levees sometimes leading to the collapse of the banks and the destruction of fields.



Watermelon and sugar-beet are shown over sand. This represents the rise of fruit and vegetable farming in the sandy soils close to the coast-line, which require immense amounts of water due to the lack of water retention in sandy soil. Farmers I spoke to this summer partly blamed the drought on these water-intensive agriculture. Soy cultivations have also increased in the region as well as a result of being a cash-crop. Salvini is shown speaking to mollusk farmers during a visit at the beginning of August 2022, promising to bring money and infrastructural support to the mollusk industry as part of his campaign for election in September.

by Mariachiara Ficarelli

Acknowledgements

Many of the images included in the relational map are sourced from different internet websites and were printed and cut by me. I do not own the rights to these images and are being used solely for educational purposes.