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**Dalla Parte del Fuoco. Riti, Visioni, Pratiche di Coltivazione nel Paesaggio /On the Side of Fire. Rites, Visions, Cultivation Practices in the Landscape edited by Luigi Latini and Simonetta Zanon, Treviso: Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche–Antiga, 2024, 192 pp., 120 illustrations. ISBN (Italian): 978-88-8435-471-6; ISBN (English): 978-88-8435-472-3**

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## Book Review

***Dalla Parte del Fuoco. Riti, Visioni, Pratiche di Coltivazione nel Paesaggio / On the Side of Fire. Rites, Visions, Cultivation Practices in the Landscape***, edited by Luigi Latini and Simonetta Zanon, Treviso: Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche–Antiga, 2024, 192 pp., 120 illustrations. ISBN (Italian): 978-88-8435-471-6; ISBN (English): 978-88-8435-472-3

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At the time of writing this review, the Canadian Wildfire Information System (SCIFV) indicates that there are 191 active fires throughout the country and nearly 2,100,000 hectares of forest burned. It is only early June 2025, and yet an area equivalent to the size of Slovenia has already gone up in smoke. Authorities increasingly fear a scenario comparable to 2023, when nearly 220,000 people were evacuated and 17.9 million hectares of forest were ravaged. Experts speak of "mega-fires" to characterize these high-intensity phenomena whose violence makes them uncontrollable, and in this context, military-inspired technical solutions for fighting flames have proven to be of limited effectiveness. Rather than declaring war on fires, everything suggests that it is now appropriate to imagine new alliances with fire. Published in 2024 by the Benetton Foundation for Study and Research, the edited collection *On the Side of Fire* adopts this position, which is then explored in contributions from twenty international researchers in the social sciences, philosophy, art and landscape architecture.

### The History of Fire

Since the end of the nineteenth century, modern Western societies have tended to systematically associate fire with death, danger and disaster. Consequently, it has been increasingly excluded from our lives and our environments. This historical situation is unusual because, as Marco Belpoliti recalls in his introduction, traditional societies lived in a state of proximity and respectful familiarity with fire. They sustained a strong symbolic relationship with this essential and venerable element, as documented by anthropologist Ignazio Emanuele Buttitta in his study of the festivals and rituals that were (and remain) dedicated to it in Europe. Fire also served as a valuable tool for landscape management through slash-and-burn practices and controlled fires, as presented by forest engineer Giuseppe Mariano Delogu (Chapter 1). But these controlled fires intervened on small surfaces and involved relatively low energy. Ultimately, they produced a mosaic of environments in which uncontrolled fires could ignite, but their occurrences were rare and happened on a restricted geographical scale.

If one compares these vernacular practices to the contemporary fires mentioned above, it is clear that we have changed fire regimes. Some use the term 'Pyrocene' to describe our new era, in which fires now calcinate surfaces as large as countries, release gigantic quantities of CO<sub>2</sub>, decimate entire ecosystems and force tens of thousands of people to flee their homes, thereby questioning the habitability of certain regions. Moreover, fires are not only natural events aggravated by climate change and galloping urbanization. They also occur in environments that have experienced notable degradations and that are often characterized by an absence of management for several decades. What is particularly significant is the considerable biomass caused by abandonment that subsequently feeds high-intensity fires. Ironically, in the

environments and territories that today face these catastrophes, controlled fire often had its place. In other words, and even if this may seem paradoxical, many fires are today caused by the absence of fires. When carefully mastered and applied to small surfaces, fire is one of the most reliable companions that societies have to protect themselves from catastrophic fires. In this perspective, Delogu proposes to rehabilitate the traditional ecological knowledge of fire which, long criminalized, can today inspire us.

### **Cultivating Fire**

The synthesis of research applied to the savannas of Réunion Island proposed by geographers Serge Briffaud and Quentin Rivière in “Burn to Protect” (Chapter 3) can be read as a particularly illuminating insight into Delogu’s remarks. On the west coast of this Indian Ocean territory, savannahs have developed which were (and still are to a marginal extent) pastoral grazing lands. Practiced by marginalised populations, livestock farming was consubstantially associated with eco-burning, the main function of which was to renew the nutritive value of pastures. The pyro-pastoral practices that commenced with the anthropogenic transformation of the island in the seventeenth century constituted a specific environment of great richness that lasted until the end of the twentieth century. Yet, during the last decades, these savanna landscapes have undergone considerable mutations. The disorderly increase of urbanization, the development of irrigated crops and the considerable extension of thickets have replaced the vast grass spaces formerly grazed and burned. Consequently, the areas among the most inhabited of the island are now subject to a significant fire risk. For this reason, geographers, historians and landscape architects have worked with inhabitants and local authorities to test an approach to landscape conservation inspired by traditional knowledge and vernacular pyro-pastoral practices. This pioneering experience on the island and in the region appears all the more interesting as it participates not only to a radical transformation of the view on the practice of pastoral fire but more broadly on savanna landscapes in their entirety.

### **Telling the Times of Fire**

Shifting perspective on fire, as the book proposes, also involves developing new ways of writing its history and telling its story. By following for a year the Sardinian communities affected by the terrible fires that ravaged 20,000 hectares of the Montiferru massif in July 2021, screenwriter and director Enrico Pau proposes a touching and moving text that does not simply content itself with chronicling the catastrophe (Chapter 7). Pau experiences the places and engages a human and sentimental relationship with the inhabitants of Cuglieri and Santulussurgiu. He describes not only how the forest, animals and millennial olive trees disappeared but also the trauma experienced by populations who “weeping as if they had lost part of themselves” (p.113). He documents the horror but also during the Four Seasons of Fire the rebirth of the forest and the vitality of a community that seeks to rebuild itself. This way of narrating fire by interweaving temporalities is also at the heart of the beautiful historical study on the great Chicago fire of 1871 by Rosa Tamborrino and Pelin Bolca (Chapter 6). Through historical and iconographic sources of great richness, they show how the 1871 fire transformed the city in the short term, but also how the memory of fire shaped the form of the city over the

long term. They show that this fire and the urban narrative it subsequently generated largely outlined Chicago's urban identity, form and urbanization.

### **Community Fire**

The final part of the book is devoted to landscape creations inspired by fire, captured under the heading “Landscape and Garden Projects”. From this section, it is worth mentioning “Fire Stories”, a contribution by Australian landscape architects Kate Cullity and Marni Elder (Chapter 11). Through performances and installations, documentaries and detailed maps, gardens and landscape creations, Cullity and Elder describe the works of the Adelaide-based landscape architecture practice, TLC, which are founded on an in-depth knowledge of traditional Aboriginal practices of “fire stick agriculture” and can be interpreted as a sustained homage to these communities whose identity and culture is fundamentally associated with fire mastery. Another interesting chapter is “Like Moths Drawn to Light” (Chapter 12) by Robin Winogrand, a landscape architect established in Switzerland, which reflects on the project “The Fire Ring” Located on the banks of Lake Greifen at Uster in the canton of Zurich, the Fire Ring is a circular installation about ten meters in diameter made from tree trunks in which is inscribed a stone disc where inhabitants can light a fire. Around this practice, usually forbidden in public space, inhabitants gather for a barbecue, to warm themselves after a swim, or simply because the "archaic geometry" (p. 151) of fire seems spontaneously to attract and unite them.

This great book is enriched by a video platform<sup>1</sup> featuring a related workshop organised in 2023 by the Benetton Foundation of Treviso. Some readers may perhaps regret the absence of contributions from Asian, African or South American scholars, where the question probably arises in a quite different manner. However, this book undeniably constitutes a reference work on the subject that not only questions mainstream ideas, but also opens paths of great fertility for rethinking our relationship to fire.

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<sup>1</sup> The videos are available on the Vimeo platform of the Benetton Foundation for Study and Research.  
<https://vimeo.com/809093824>