

The logo for the Anthropology Book Forum, featuring a stylized blue and white circular design on the left.

Anthropology Book Forum

Open Access Book Reviews

Mathews, Andrew S. 2022. *Trees Are Shape Shifters: How Cultivation, Climate Change, and Disaster Create Landscapes*. Yale Agrarian Studies Series. New Haven: Yale University Press, 320 pp., ISBN 978-0-300-26037-3

Keywords: Italy, landscape politics, climate change, historical ecology, biomass energy, disasters, care

In the Monte Pisano, a mountain range in Tuscany, Italy, people have been living in human-altered landscapes for millennia. Here, histories of peasant cultivation of chestnut and the slow ongoing disasters of plant disease, state abandonment, and capitalism have left marks on the landscape. In *Trees are Shape Shifters*, Mathews walks the reader through the villages, hillsides, and forests of the Monte Pisano, teaching us how to read these long-term processes from the graft scars of individual trees and the shapes of ancient terraces. As diverse temporalities and overlapping histories are sown together, these past forms leave an echo that affects climate policy in Italy today.

In these landscapes haunted by “ghostly forms” (p. 45) and trees that change shape, an abstract and nebulous global ‘climate change’ resonates less than the changes in relationships between people, plants, soil, and weather that constitute people’s daily experiences. Unlike ‘climate change,’ these changes implicate local histories, political responsibility, and landscapes that are intensely social. Through scaling from individual trees all the way to climate policy, *Trees are Shape Shifters* offers a commentary on climate change as a global discourse and how it encounters other ways of knowing landscapes and climate.

Trees are Shape Shifters is also a methodological proposition, an invitation to pay attention to the morphologies that record histories of encounters and slow processes that may not be captured by interviews or archives. Diagrams, drawings, and trusting one’s senses are key to this, and the strength of Mathews’ contribution lies in its clear formulations and the way that the text itself

serves as a methodological example. This is also, vitally, a more-than-human attentiveness that foregrounds the political.

Trees are Shape Shifters contains eight chapters and three interludes. The interludes are lush passages that drop the reader in the chestnut groves or smokey skies of the Monte Pisano, while inviting the reader to apply similar methods of noticing to their own more immediate landscapes. In doing so, they serve as a kind of training in the methods of sensory noticing that Mathews proposes. Throughout the book, too, diagrams and images provide sensory prosthetics that serve not as skippable examples of larger arguments, but as the argument themselves.

In Chapter One, Mathews follow the history of chestnut cultivation in the Monte Pisano; human care has allowed chestnut to find a footing on the slopes. It is precisely through caring about trees that people have come to care about and reshape landscapes in a “biogeomorphological politics” (14). *Longue durée* relationships between people and trees in the Monte Pisano affect contemporary environmental politics, as—through ideas of proper landscape care—plants come to be political.

The second chapter moves from morphologies of individual plants to morphologies of landscapes, as Mathews begins to attune the readers’ attention to “landscape structures.” As Mathews walks the reader through these forests, we see patterns emerge from low-growing charred pine scrub and higher altitude chestnut stumps that—combined with 19th-century cadastral maps—reveal how these structures are a product of agricultural abandonment and long-forgotten chestnut disease. Through this attention to morphology and reliance on diagrams, Mathews reads larger social and political patterns—namely histories of international trade, industrialization, and state retreat—from the shapes of trees and landscapes.

Chapter Three looks further into these fast and slow disasters, arguing that, rather than a result of an abstract global ‘climate change,’ forest fires are seen by people in the Monte Pisano as stemming from land abandonment and the loss of practices of litter-raking. While these vernacular political ecologies implicate an indifferent state and individual criminality, the histories of 19th-century invasive plant disease that devastated fire-resistant chestnut groves are largely forgotten.

The fourth chapter moves from forest fires to landslides in the Monte Pisano, where extreme weather events are seen as expected rather than unusual in what Mathews calls a “vernacular model of climate” (p. 110), and a biogeomorphological “politics of landscape instability” (p. 109) drives care for particular morphologies in a landscape that is “always potentially in motion,” (p. 112). Here—in opposition to North American conservation narratives that see a healthy landscape as separate from human intervention—human care is required for healthy landscapes. Notably, this is a care that attends to relationships between weather, plants, soil, and people, pushing against “official theories of climate change” (p. 125) that de-link and abstract disaster from its attendant parts.

Mathews expands on this biogeomorphological politics and its relationship to official climate change narratives in Chapter Five. ‘Climate change’ as a global narrative does not resonate with people who see disasters as a matter of political responsibility and state abandonment, and extreme weather as a usual feature of the landscape. While Mathews’ interlocutors generally believed in climate change, it is seen as talk for scientists and less salient than the material changes in landscapes that are ascribed to local political failings.

‘Climate change’ as a discourse is examined further in Chapter Six, which looks at how climate change knowledge is produced from concrete places by juxtaposing landscape thinking—that produces, for example, knowledge about plant disease and landscape in the Monte Pisano—with systems thinking—that can simplify and abstract processes into models that inform international climate change policy. In re-localizing this knowledge, Mathews shows that climate models are also produced out of situated and phenomenological knowledges.

Chapter Seven looks at the transformations that occur when international climate change policy collides with landscapes in the context of biomass energy politics in Tuscany. At the international level, climate models inform ideas about climate where burning biomass makes sense as a renewable energy, driven by the simplifying logic of carbon accounting. At the national level, Italian policymakers ‘find’ unused forests in Tuscany to convert to biomass energy, while the marginally-legal networks of firewood cutters disappear from official view. In contrast, regional politicians bring biogeomorphological politics into policy by invoking job creation and the

stabilization of hillsides through logging. ‘Climate change’ as a concept is less salient to people than the biogeomorphological features of the landscapes in which they live.

Chapter Eight picks up here, in the meeting between biomass energy and a particular landscape, to examine the failure of a biomass energy project in the Monte Pisano. While both supporters and opponents of the biomass energy project claimed significance for sensory experience of the landscape, distrusted the state, and “agreed that this landscape was uncared for,” (p. 209) they diverged on which political histories were relevant and how best to care for the landscape. Here, “popular understandings of energy, landscape, and atmosphere largely constrained state and capitalist efforts to build a new energy system” (p. 218). Biogeomorphological politics can impact global climate policy; caring for plants and landscapes is deeply political.

The Epilogue succinctly wraps up the monograph’s main arguments. The figure of an ancient chestnut tree looms heavy, both a “modest hope” (p. 225) for the possibilities of long-term care and a warning about succumbing to narratives of inevitable disaster that justify salvage capitalism. This ancient chestnut invites us as researchers to “trust our senses” and “expand our methods to include diagrams and drawings” (p. 228) to notice these long-term projects of care, and it invites us as humans to look for those processes and patterns that are obscured by stories of destruction or techno-capitalist fixes.

Trees are Shape Shifters is a beautifully written, sensuous ethnography that can be read as a call for a pluriversal politics where, despite divergences, alliances may be drawn across different ways of knowing climate. The writing is clear and accessible (much of the more theoretical musings are relegated to the footnotes), although there is sometimes a bit of repetition between chapters. In addition to anthropologists and historians interested in environmental politics, it should also be valuable for climate policy makers or anyone operating at the interface between climate and landscape politics.

Emma Cyr is a PhD researcher at the Department of Social Anthropology at Stockholm University. She is interested in environmental and more-than-human anthropology. Her current research investigates the socio-ecological implications of aquatic biodiversity changes in Italy, exploring how notions of 'good biodiversity' are constructed and contested within shifting lagoon ecologies.



© 2025 Emma Cyr