

Elena Lamberti

Pearl Buck, a Nob(e)le Lady

Speaking to/of the Masses in/from the Land of Logocracy

Abstract

The paper proposes an analysis of Pearl Buck's Nobel Prize for Literature (1938) in the light of the then forming transmedia storytelling and populism. It cross reads Buck's literary productions in relation to the film adaptation of her masterpiece The Good Earth, as well as of the mass culture of her time; the goal is to show the appropriation of cultural production to facilitate public euphemism and mainstream 'historical' storytelling, as well as Buck's counter-narratives and original poetics.

Keywords: *Pearl Buck, masscult, literature and society storytelling, Anglo-American Literature*

1. The Nobel Prize, WWII and American Imperialism

In 1938, Pearl Buck was the first American woman writer to receive the Noble Prize for Literature “for her rich and truly epic descriptions of peasant life in China and for her biographical masterpieces” (“Nobel Lecture”). That prize came the year after the great success of the film adaptation of her most celebrated novel, *The Good Earth*; released in 1937, that movie won two Academy awards out of five nominations,¹ was a success at the box office internationally and consolidated the success of Buck's novel. However, the Nobel also came at the end of a very sad year that, in between September and December, saw an escalation of the tragic events that accelerated the outburst of WWII. In September, Mussolini and his Fascist regime issued the racial laws, fostering the ferocious crackdown of Jews. In October, following the shameful Munich Agreement (a political defeat of Western democracies which accepted the annexation of the “Sudetenland” in Western Czechoslovakia by the Nazi), Winston Churchill

¹ *The Good Earth* received the best cinematography and the best actress awards, the latter awarded to Louise Rainer, in fact a German-American-British actress who played the Chinese wife O-Lan. It was nominated also for best picture, best director and best film editing.

called upon the United States of America and Western Europe to prepare for armed resistance against Adolph Hitler. In November, the *Kristallnacht pogrom* marked the radicalization of the Nazi's Jewish policy. In the same period, the second Sino-Japanese war opposing the Republic of China and the Empire of Japan was fast escalating. Ironically, on October 30 1938, Orson Welles caused panic in various regions of the United States with his radio adaptation of H. G. Wells' *The War of the Worlds*; three years later, live broadcast from Pearl Harbor caused a more tangible panic as the Japanese aerial attack was no adaptation at all.

Given this international scenario, the choice of Buck for the Nobel could be read as an intrinsically political decision that, nonetheless, does not diminish her literary merit. Following the fast-evolving geopolitics and fearing the winds of a total war then in the air, Western democracies were urged to reconsider some of their lasting cultural preconceptions and fast. In fact, within a few months, China and not Japan would become a strategic territory in the Far East for the USA and their allies. If, until that moment, Chinese people were often portrayed as "inferior" or primitive or as "idiot savant" Yellow Kids,² it became strategic to reinvent them through more sympathetic approaches. The successful cinematic rendering of Pearl Buck's "epic descriptions of peasant life in China" came at the right time, and contributed to popularize a different understanding of that far away reality. Buck was acclaimed as a trans-national cultural mediator, nurturing the idea of an *international friendship* based on the rediscovery of values that brought people together in spite of their diverse nationalities: the love for the earth, the hard life of the lower classes and the hope for a better future that would come through hard labor. Immediately, *The Good Earth* created a bond between Chinese and American farmers at a time when the latter were still facing the outcome of the 1929 crisis, navigating through the hard times of Roosevelt's New Deal.

Similarly, starting from 2018 and in the wake of the celebrations for the 80th anniversary of her Nobel Prize, Pearl Buck has been rediscovered mostly as a writer and an activist welcoming otherness and encouraging an inclusive dialogue across nations. At a time when populism generalizes complex local and international issues into plain and polarized identity discourses, once again she is praised for her cultural openness. Strategically, as new policies on import/export duties complicate the commercial relations between China and the USA, Buck is

² The American comic strip "The Yellow Kid," conceived by Richard F. Outcault, was published from 1895 to 1898, first in Joseph's Pulitzer *New York World*, and later in William Randolph Hearst's *New York Journal*. It was "a satire on urban slum life, peppered with ethnic slurs: the eponymous 'kid' was a Chinese-looking urchin, and a kind of manic idiot savant," even though he 'was' Irish and only stereotypically Chinese (Sabin 2005, 20.)

celebrated mostly as a literary ambassador to encourage the interchange across East and West winds (of economic war).

Therefore, comparing the two historical moments, we can deduce that, when discussing Pearl Buck, critics tend to interpret her idea of otherness through *ethnicity* or *nationalistic approaches*, a fact that is, of course, undeniable. However, what if we adopt a broader understanding of the very idea of otherness? In addition to ethnic and national differences, why not also include differences of census and welfare—meaning economic/incomes otherness; as well as class otherness and non-equal opportunities? In fact, what if we include differences in the real chances people have to pursuit happiness? Clearly, we must be ready to run a risk, as this is an idea of *otherness* that transcends international relations and forces each nation to look at what is going on first inside its national border, to question fairness, equality and justice, in spite of the national mythmaking. In fact, such an idea could induce the USA—and several Americanized realities—to question a certain idea of liberal capitalism, the same that Buck criticized for its being responsible for the USA new imperialism of her time.

Certainly, today as yesterday, to adopt a critical attitude toward American international geopolitics does not imply to embrace Chinese communism tout court, something that Buck always opposed. However, it implies to accept to take into consideration the possibility that there could be other forms of doing business inside national borders, as well as outside; this is what Buck suggested through her more political writing, during and after WWII (Buck 1942; 1943; 1945; 1946; 1947; 1949; Shaffer, 1999).

Per se, this is a reason good enough to rethink Pearl Buck's official icon and introduce a revelatory variable. At the dawn of WWII and all through her life, she certainly fostered a noble cause encouraging trans-national friendship; however, the paradox is that she became a threat to the establishment precisely for truly believing in that cause, always opposing the Western (in fact American) new imperialism of the 20th century. All through her life, Buck denounced and contrasted the economic exploitation of faraway countries to maintain a certain state organization at home—performed through either a direct or indirect involvement in wars, through either a direct or indirect control of local policies—that a certain Western public euphemism calls, then and now, *exporting democracy*. In all conscience, Buck's idea of international friendship was more dangerous for the domestic scenario, than for the international one; in fact, her approach to that idea naively implies a certain *vulnerability to otherness* that leads to question one's own system of principles, one's own societal organization to accommodate or include otherness. During WWII, in the Cold War years, and during the Vietnam War, Buck's idea of international friendship was perceived as a potentially dangerous

one, as it was based on a real interest and openness to otherness, not on a blind defense of the American way of life. Hers was an idea framed as a subversive patriotism, so much so that the Federal Bureau of Investigation monitored Buck for years; not surprisingly, her files have been declassified only recently (Gennero 2011).

2. Nob(e)le iconography

Pearl Buck knew China better than many diplomats of her time did. Raised and educated in China, she acquired a sound knowledge of the language, the culture, the traditions, the history and the complex reality of China. However, because of her subversive patriotism, the American establishment never took her seriously, neither as an expert, nor as a consultant. Already in September 1933, Buck renounced her missionary function for the Presbyterian religion in open controversy with the most conservative majorities of her own Church, also following the censoring of her speeches and articles in favor of the “Hocking Report” by William Ernest Hocking, a Harvard Professor, on “Re-Thinking Missions: A Laymen's Inquiry After One Hundred Years” (1932).³ Similarly, also the Chinese revolutionary government considered her as a seditious person: not only was she from an imperialist country, the daughter of American missionaries in China, but she also was a fierce opponent of the new Chinese communism: she never supported the “people’s revolution” (Hunt 1977).

Forced out of China by the revolutionaries, she continued her career in America as a writer, as an intellectual and a public speaker, as well as a philanthropist. Her Welcome House Inc. and the Pearl Buck Foundation played a crucial role in facilitating interracial adoptions, fighting poverty and children discrimination—often the consequence of American overseas operations—in the Far East countries, including Korea, Vietnam, the Philippines and Thailand. Through the years, Pearl Buck became an internationally acknowledged icon standing for a charitable

³ To attempt a revival of religious missions abroad—and in the Far East in particular—and with financial support from John D. Rockefeller, between 1930-1932 William Ernest Hocking led a commission that conducted field investigations in India, Myanmar (Burma), China and Japan in order to identify shared problems and propose solutions. Among the recommendations of what remains in the records as the “Hocking Report” are: a greater attention to the education and well-being of converts; the recognition of greater autonomy for local groups; an evangelization activity that expressed greater respect for local institutions, traditions and religions. The Report also suggested the creation, in the United States, of a single joint organization of all Protestant missions. Buck expressed herself in full favor of the Report, supporting the need for a humanitarian effort by all to improve the working, educational, medical and health conditions of the communities in which the missionaries worked. However, the Report did not have a positive following with any Protestant sect, including the Presbyterian sect even if, from that moment on, the liberal component became majority.

trans-national solidarity. In fact, motivated by the Noble Prize, Pearl Buck's public (and mass-mediated) persona was framed as that of a writer of exotic but humanitarian sagas. In the imagination of millions of people, of vast international audiences, Buck became the philanthropic writer-activist nurturing the good conscience of Americans (and Westerners) at a time when the American establishment was exporting democracy outdoor while consolidating a more and more commodified freedom indoor. As Marshall McLuhan wrote in his Media Ecology classic, *The Mechanical Bride*, in those days (and still in ours), "the tyrant [ruled] not by club or fist, but, disguised as a market researcher, he [shepherded] his flocks in the ways of utility and comfort" (McLuhan 2002, v). Consistently, Buck's overwhelming image as a philanthropic lady writer got inside the collective public mind and blurred more political approaches to her work and thought.

Buck herself, though unconsciously, contributed to that public image, as she helped in creating her personal iconography, at once reassuring but stereotypical; in fact, a typical "noble lady" iconography. While her writing was about the harsh life of Chinese peasants and about the materiality of smells and dirt of the poor people's reality, in an incredible number of photographs Buck appears always sophisticated and calm; she wears pearls or hats, poses as an inspired writer, seats at an elegant desk, embraces children with her reassuring smile. It is an iconography that places Buck poles apart from peasants and poor people. Certainly, it is an iconography that does not immediately lead you to associate such an aristocratic-looking woman to battles for socio-economic equality. It is not surprising that, naively, Buck herself fashioned her lady-like image; after all, she was a woman born and educated before World War I, when a certain idea of decorum was still part of what was expected from women. In fact, there are ethical and aesthetic reasons that could make us think of Buck as a Noble lady, not only as a Nobel one.

The more aesthetic reasons, those that immediately relate to her public iconography and decorum, might appear as either frivolous or non-relevant to a discussion on her political or literary legacy (in fact, on the ethics embedded in her literary works and life actions). Instead, they encourage speculating on the subliminal power that all forms of symbolic communication have to manipulate the audience's sensibility. In fact, Buck's iconography, built upon a repeated image of a charming and decorous lady, well dressed and surrounded by adoring children, affected the appreciation of the political and sociological ideas that have shaped her poetics, here understood in the wake of Umberto Eco's famous definition. The poetics of a writer combines an operative project and a form, which is at once original and traditional as it originates from the writer's temperament, in dialogue with a repertoire of aesthetic models (Eco

1990, 142-3). Buck's literary form is certainly in dialogue with both American realism and the Chinese popular tradition, as she clearly explained in her Noble Prize acceptance speech. As said, her "operative project" was quite original and ambitious for her time, as it aimed at more equal international relationships; it stood as an illusion, at the dawn of a world war that soon led to a divided geopolitical world scenario.

Buck's overwhelming iconography did not help the appreciation of her advanced and inclusive political views; the aesthetic of her projected image blurred the ethics of her deeper message. What might sound like a hyperbolic statement is justified, instead, by the complex communicative scenario that was consolidated all through the 20th century. The brief century, in fact the American century, is also called the age of the image (Apkon 2014), the century of simulacra and simulations induced by media that have evolved to become not only "the extensions of man" (McLuhan 2003), but also an interconnected and interdependent "environment," namely a "global village" (McLuhan, 2011 36). Inside such a pervasive setting, politics, too, has become more and more dependent on a mediated language conceived more to seduce than to engage the audience. All through the previous century, and still today, visual storytelling has become instrumental in creating public opinions. Media, politics and power entwine in sophisticated ways that, nonetheless, appear more and more "natural." "Charisma means looking like a lot of other people," said McLuhan ("What Television Does Best"), commenting on the new trends in political discourses of his time, declaring (and proving) how, in 1960, Kennedy won over Nixon not only for his political message, but also (and perhaps mostly) because he sold it better on TV (Corelli 1960, 25). Instead, Buck's public appearances, just like her mass-mediated iconography, gave the impression of her as a woman from a different age, a well-dressed lady far from the cultural revolutions then in the air, detached even from the stories she wrote. The medium was the message and her image (her old-fashioned "form") affected her comments (the challenging and very political "content").

A case in point is the nine-minute interview that Buck gave on September 16, 1966, on the Merv Griffin Show, to launch *For Spacious Skies. Journey in Dialogue*, the book she co-wrote with Theodore F. Harris on their experiences in working for the welfare of children of American servicemen and Asian mothers in Far East countries. Ironically, the softness of her voice, the elegance of her eloquence, her witty but sophisticated sense of humor somehow lessen the strength of her political message. As early as 1966, she speaks of "stateless children," who are an "entirely new group of people" and a growing one since the Korea war. Because in Asia children "belong to the father," children born from American fathers "are being sort of wasted." They do not get registered at birth; Asian think of them as Americans, but Americans—"we" as

she repeats—do not. She makes it clear that her Foundation has been conceived as “a tool given to American people,” to let them know about that situation, about those beautiful, wasted children, and do something. She therefore encourages a call from within America, speaking to those who have, urging them to do something for those who have not, due to what America was doing in faraway countries. In addition, asked to comment on what the future of China would be, she clearly says: “What we make of it, I suppose.” Her urge is to turn Chinese from enemies to friends, as communism is changing, being an “impossible scheme of life,” both psychologically and economically. While the Vietnam War was in its prime and China was still a communist nation, Buck’s comments were certainly subversive or, at least, potentially so. However, even though her host let her speak, he certainly succeeded in mitigating the strength of her denunciation of the side effects of American imperialism in the Far East, insisting on her writing, on her autobiography and on her wit. Television, the new medium of the time, was becoming part of a communicative system always balancing people’s free will, mass consumerism, entertainment and public euphemism. In short, television was a new tool that, together with the press, radio, movies and advertising, helped the establishment (itself a combination of political and economic lobbies) to create “consent without consent,” as Noam Chomsky would later put it (Chomsky 1998). Moreover, the establishment knew (and knows) how to employ mass communication to educate and entertain *the people* while protecting *the few*.

3. Writing for the people, not for the few

For the American establishment, Buck was a dangerous woman not simply because her ideas on imperialism destabilized American foreign policies in the Far East; but mostly because those ideas risked questioning the essence of American capitalism within national borders precisely because she was a true defender of *the people*, not of *the few*.

As we know too well, *We the people*, the opening line of the American Declaration of Independence, is a motto that was created not by the people but by the *political intelligentsia* of the time (and not by chance, a motto that, with a linguistic slip, regained a certain fortune in the 1950s, during the cold war). Certainly, speaking of the first revolution in modern history, that statement cannot but be read as the foundation of a new modern and democratic state organization. However, following Washington Irving’s idea of America as a *logocracy* (Irving 1911), it is plausible to appreciate that statement also as a masterpiece in the history of public euphemism and modern communication strategies. In fact, *we the people* marks the beginning of a process of “democratization” of the people deeply based on new communicative discourses,

the same process that today has reached its apex the moment we say, as a political slogan, that “one equals one” (in fact a disturbing eco of Orwell’s famous sentence in his *Animal Farm*). *We the people* marks not only the beginning of a new form of government, but also a new understanding of the ideas of leadership and charisma that, through time, has led to the making of the mass-mediated populism of today. Notwithstanding (or perhaps because of) its ambiguous and indefinite (in fact open) meaning, the statement “We the people” marks the moment when the new culture of printing transforms the relation between people (former subjects, now citizens) and power (the new leaders, no longer inherited but elected by “the people”), as discussed by Michael Warners in his study on *The Letters of the Republic* (Warners 1990). If, in the ancient times, the leader was perceived as someone who distinguished himself for virtues, temperament and attitudes, in modern times (and even more so in recent times), the leader is more and more perceived as someone who *looks like us*, someone with whom we can easily identify. Yes, as McLuhan said, “Charisma” still means “looking like a lot of other people,” perhaps even more today than in the past. The leader is *one of us*; he or she *looks like us*. However, there is a huge gap between what we perceive and what, in fact, lays under the opalescent surface. Today, political leaders (or, for what matters, star-system celebrities) look like us (or vice versa) but the process of identification remains a visually constructed strategy functioning to preserve a carefully conceived order (and power organization). Various forms of communication and mass-media play a role, of course; but so do intellectuals, as they are often part of the same manipulative circuit. These are the people that, through her public speeches, Buck opposed most.

Buck’s political ostracism has been discussed in various important essays, commenting, for instance, on Buck as an FBI target at the time of the Second Red Scare and McCarthy’s witch-hunt. Scholars have started to explore the ostracism of intelligentsia in her time (Melvin 2006). However, I think that the latter still offers a greater potential for further investigations. In fact, most essays comment on the fact that the American intelligentsia dismissed her typically based on aesthetic principles. Buck was targeted because, after her great success, she wrote mainly *commercial novels*, good for women and the *Reader’s Digest*; she was not interested in literary stylistic explorations and therefore was not part of the radical-chic intelligentsia. Her fault was to be part of what Dwight McDonald defined as “Midcult,” a concept that he discussed in his essay on “Masscult and Midcult” (1960), further expanded in his classic *Against the American Grain* (1962); and a concept retrieved by Umberto Eco in his 1964 volume *Apocalittici e integrati* (Eco 1964), in a chapter discussing the structure of “bad taste” in kitsch and mass culture. Pearl Buck’s “fake-biblical prose” in *The Good Earth* is described by McDonald as “a style which seems

to have a malign fascination for the midbrows” (1960b, 596), the perfect example of Midcult presented as a “dangerous opponent of High Culture because it incorporates so much of the avant-garde” (1960b, 606). Commodified to seduce and comfort, the Midcult (and Buck’s style) has no aesthetic value precisely because it “exploits” (1960b, 605) and debases the arts.

Ironically, Buck’s literary detractors resemble the “Chinese scholars” that she exposed in 1938, in her acceptance speech at the Nobel Prize ceremony, when she confirmed herself not as an artist, but as the writer of novels *created by the people*. There is a subtle irony in many of her statements, such as this one:

The novel in China was never an art and was never so considered, nor did any Chinese novelist think of himself as an artist. The Chinese novel, its history, its scope, its place in the life of people, so vital a place, must be viewed in the strong light of this fact. It is a fact no doubt strange to you, a company of modern Western scholars who today so generously recognize the novel. (“Nobel Lecture”)

Buck explained to that “company of modern Western scholars,” that in China “art and the novel [had] always been widely separated;” that “in the past the scholars found their rules in art. But the novel was not there, and they did not see it being created before their eyes, for the people created the novel, and what living people were doing did not interest those who thought of literature as an art.” Her speech contains many similar passages that prove her honest claim in favor of “the street” where you find men and women who are not perfect. Those men and women “are ugly and imperfect, incomplete even as human beings. But they are people and therefore infinitely to be preferred to those who stand upon the pedestal of art.” These are statements that, at first glance, seem to reaffirm the interpretive cliché framing Pearl Buck in our imagination as an active but old-fashioned lady who patronizes a noble yet a populist cause. However, these statements do not equal those of today’s politicians who say that they stand for the people but then rank the people based on ethnic variables and nationalities to navigate fear instrumentally. In fact, Buck was delivering a deeper, more pervasive and potentially dangerous message that her detractors strategically neglected to favor another one useful to navigate other fears of the day. At the dawn of WWII, Buck’s speech was appreciated mostly as a confirmation of her Nobel Prize motivation that, in turn, was not at all a naïve (or a merely literary) one. As many critics have noticed, both her work and that Prize contributed to a change in the Western understanding of Chinese people and traditions; a change that, strategically, prompted popular consent to new Western strategies in the Far East at a very delicate moment in history. The deeper message that went unheard was, instead, a message addressing a thorny issue within the West, something that modern Western scholars knew too well. Pearl Buck was not

just giving a lecture on the Chinese literary tradition; she was using that tradition to discuss a universal condition that, across nations, differentiated those *who have* (the elites, intellectuals and leaders alike) and those *who have not* (the people, the peasants). While fostering international friendship, she was warning about the gap existing between the *real* people on the one hand and the fewer “*we* (the people)” on the other hand. More than that, she dared to expose how the new elite of a growing mass-mediated society was preserving its power: through the new mass media of the time. In front of modern Western intellectuals and leaders, she was unveiling (and opposing) the strategies underpinning their mass mediated but elitist *logocracy*. Her final statements clearly comment on mass culture and the people, insisting on the fact that people’s truer senses “are unspoiled, and their emotions are free.” It is a magnificent understatement to say that, instead, the few (the intellectuals and the scholars) were using their art to stir passions to create neither empathy, nor understanding, but to preserve a condition of public helplessness.

Yes, while speaking about the Chinese division between novelists and scholars, she sided in favor with popular forms of narrative created by the people and for the people (not by the artists and scholars for their audience). She challenged the modern Western scholars and cast her die when she said:

And like the Chinese novelist, I have been taught to want to write for these people. If they are reading their magazines by the million, then I want my stories there rather than in magazines read only by a few. (“Nobel Lecture”)

It was a very threatening message especially if one considers that, in the Western world, in 1938 popular culture was no longer a vaudeville-like instrument to entertain people and ridicule high-brown culture. New forms and technologies of communication had turned popular productions into a mass-mediated cultural weapon to be used to create consent without consent. Not by chance, a fierce opponent of Buck’s work and actions was a man named Henry Luce, an American magazine tycoon. He knew very well how to dominate American visual perceptions on politics, society and culture through his illustrated newspapers and picture magazines. What critic Patricia Leavy now calls iconic events (Leavy, 2007), that is mass-mediated iconographies that contribute to the construction of collective cultural memory and identity, date back precisely to Luce’s mid-1930s media system.

Buck was honest in her intent. She trusted “the people” sincerely (and certainly naively); whereas for an increasing number of democratic Western establishments those people were more target-customers than citizens, knowing that they could use popular forms of

communication to create a sensibility for the time. Buck knew that, and made it explicit in her speech: she, too, knew how to reach millions of people. She, too, had a message to convey. She insinuated a dangerous idea of *soft power avant-la-lettre* (Nye 2005), a sort of crack in what Lewis Mumford calls *The Pentagon of Power* (1974).

At the dawn of WWII, when opposing ideologies were all claiming their actions were *for the good of the people*, Buck *embedded* a different idea of what that good might be. She opposed both capitalism shifting towards imperialism, and communism suppressing free will. However, the point is that she saw something these two opposing ideologies (and in fact all ideologies) shared; that is, they both depend on the strategic interplay of new media and the few elites to manipulate people and create consent. George Orwell depicted communism as a Big Brother forced upon the people. Marshall McLuhan explored capitalism as a system relying on a subliminal version of Big Brother thanks to mass-mediated forms of culture. In fact, starting from the first decades of the 20th century, as Edward Bernays clearly proved, there has been no difference in the subliminal psycho-perceptive mechanisms employed by political or commercial propaganda (Bernays 1928). This is a truth that Pearl Buck knew when exposing the persisting and perturbing otherness within Western democracies, in fact making visible the figure in the carpet. At a time when “many thousands of the best-trained individual minds have made it a full-time business to get inside the collective public mind [...] to manipulate, exploit, control” (McLuhan 2002, v), an old-fashioned lady acted to reverse the process. She told simple stories from far away not to distract or entertain Americans; her detachment from her own national actuality was only apparent as she was revealing more than just the harsh life conditions of Chinese farmers. She was uncovering the eternal divide separating the rich from the poor by so doing questioning not only the ancient Chinese feudal system, but also the real essence of American democracy and freedom.

Elena Lamberti, *Associate Professor of North American Literatures, is a specialist of Modernist Literature, Cultural Memory, Literature and Media Ecology, War Literature. She is the author of many volumes, essays and book-chapters on Anglo-American Modernism and American/Canadian literature and culture. She pursues an interdisciplinary methodology of research where literature stands at the core of innovative investigations of complex ecosystems. Her volume Marshall McLuhan’s Mosaic. Probing the Literary Origins of Media Studies (2012) received the MEA 2016 Award for Outstanding Book in the Field of Media Ecology. She serves in a variety of editorial boards including Explorations in Media Ecology (EME); Wi: Journal of Mobile Media; The International Journal of McLuhan Studies; as well as book series. She has*

been invited as visiting scholar and course director in various North American and Chinese Universities. She is affiliated to the Mobile Media Lab, Concordia University, Montreal. At UNIBO she directs the research group on “Storytelling and Civic Awareness” (<https://site.unibo.it/wetell/en>).

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