


Ecological Reparation: Repair, Remediation and Resurgence in Social and Environmental Conflict

by Dimitris Papadopoulos, Maria Puig de la Bellacasa and Maddalena Tacchetti (eds.) (2023)
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“There is a crack in everything. That’s how the light gets in”. With this quote from a Leonard Cohen song, Jackson (2014) began his investigation into repair. The world seems to be crumbling, yet on this damaged planet, we can still find a path toward cohabitation. Speaking of repair implies recognizing the inherent fragility of the world and establishing practices of care that dismantle rigid hierarchical systems, colonial forms of thought, and aggressive modes of appropriating Earth’s resources. Repair is fundamentally a mode of caring, and we could expect nothing less from Maria Puig de la Bellacasa who, together with Dimitris Papadopoulos and Maddalena Tacchetti, is one of the three editors of the book reviewed here.

Ecological Reparation is an entangled system of layers of practices, methods of transformation, and conceptual frameworks that deliver a broader idea of what we define as ecology – an “unstable” term, always placed under tension, and capable of generating, through different narratives, a new approach to the planet.

Published by Bristol University Press in 2023, *Ecological Reparation* is a stimulating collection of contributions from scholars and practitioners in fields such as STS, anthropology, environmental humanities, cultural geography, design, and more. The volume addresses the critical question of how to respond to the harm inflicted upon the Earth in the era of extractive capitalism, colonialism, and systemic racism. The authors conceive “ecological reparation” as a process deeply intertwined with social justice, rather than merely a form of technical restoration. In this perspective, Donna Haraway’s notion of “Staying with the Trouble” (2016) resonates strongly, becoming a guiding principle: to co-inhabit a precarious planet by acknowledging and confronting systemic inequities.

In *Ecological Reparation*, the editors explicitly aim to juxtapose the concepts of *ecology* and *reparation*, putting them into tension rather than treating them as separate domains. This approach draws attention to the fact that ecological priorities and reparative claims do not necessarily coincide, and that efforts to advance one may complicate or reshape the other. This deliberate approach questions the idea that “repairing the environment” can be separated from profound social, racial, and economic inequalities. Like an archive, an ecosystem preserves

the layered histories of past exploitation, forced migrations, or chemical contaminations. Through reparation, the authors of the volume argue that mending ecosystems also means rewriting the narratives embedded in these environments, revising modes of knowledge production, and restructuring the institutions that have contributed to causing the damage.

Ecological dynamics can be fruitfully considered as archives, where complex narratives of environmental transformations, harms, and repair processes are stratified. This perspective moves away from static views of nature, interpreting environments instead as living repositories of relationships, material histories, and ongoing exchanges. To conceive ecology as an archive involves adopting an *irreductionist* method – following Latour’s vision – as a theoretical foundation, thus rejecting simplified categorizations and embracing the multiplicity of interdependencies that characterize ecological systems. What might at first appear as a mere stratification of soil, in fact, reveals an active record of human and non-human interactions, shaped over time by cooperation, competition, adaptation, and external shocks.

Ecological archives contain traces of symbiosis and disruptions caused by climate change, pollution, and industrial agriculture. These often-disturbed ecologies record layered histories of collaboration and conflict among organisms, elements, and habitats. Such archives directly influence present and future relational configurations: for instance, the chemical composition of soil determines which species can flourish, while the presence of persistent pollutants shapes ecosystems for generations. This view of ecology transforms environmental inquiry into a practice of repair – an intentional commitment to recovering, mending, and sustaining the complex web of life forms on a deeply compromised planet.

When repair is understood as a method, it implies a practical and ethical commitment to recognizing ecological damage, whatever its cause. This method frames repair as more than a matter of technological solutions: it foregrounds everyday acts of care and maintenance as central epistemic and political practices. Care here is not merely an individual or *therapeutic* act, but a relational modality extending beyond single subjects, embracing ecologies of care encompassing environment, memory, infrastructures, and social relations. This approach resonates with Mol’s (2008) work on care as a situated and embodied practice, requiring continuous adjustments rather than definitive decisions. In particular, *Ecological Reparation* aligns with Mol’s perspective by conceiving care as a series of material and affective acts. Furthermore, just as Mol studies medicine and care as practices carried out through material configurations (tools, protocols, bodies, institutions), this volume explores ecological repair as a practice engaging material entities, damaged bodies and environments, and necessitating forms of attention, maintenance, and repair. Another concept shared by *Ecological Reparation* and Mol’s work is fragility as an intrinsic condition of care: the book does not treat ecological reparation as a process of return to a previous state (an illusion of complete restoration), but rather as a way of navigating fragility and uncertainty.

The book is structured around eight conceptual pairs, each centered on a tension: Depletion<>Resurgence, Deskilling<>Experimenting, Contaminating<>Cohabiting, Enclosing<>Reclaiming Land, Loss<>Recollecting, Representing<>Self-Governing, Isolating<>Embodying, and Growth<>Flourishing. The various sections are presented as pairs of concepts in tension, highlighting how the work of repair occurs in frictional zones – spaces where forms of global power and local initiatives conflict, or where environmental recovery goals collide with historical vulnerabilities. Below is a brief overview of the complex structure of the chapters.

Depletion<>Resurgence examines severely degraded ecosystems and their potential for renewal. In El Salvador, agroecological farmers use composting to regenerate impoverished soils. Elsewhere, Indigenous communities in Chile defend wetlands based on spiritual connections and memories of dispossession. These experiences reveal that regeneration is not only a technical process but also involves moral and political dimensions.

Deskilling<>Experimenting focuses on recovering or creating competencies neglected by industrialization. One chapter describes how British farmers rotate cattle across different pastures, weaving practical experimentation with a deep awareness of the interdependence among soil, animals, and human communities. Another chapter, dedicated to Japanese “Fab Labs”, illustrates how high-tech tools merge with vernacular artisanal skills, reducing dependence on large-scale industrial processes. These examples resonate strongly with Tsing and colleagues’ (2017) emphasis on “collaborative survival”, in which informal alliances among multiple actors initiate processes of repair.

Contaminating<>Cohabiting addresses toxicity, highlighting how pollutants and pathogens become part of ecological archives, determining which futures are possible. Efforts at “rewilding” the microbiome or creatively visualizing air pollution in Seoul show that we cannot simply isolate contaminants; rather, the responsibility to coexist with them becomes crucial, echoing Latour’s (2017) call for “Facing Gaia”, acknowledging mutual vulnerabilities.

Enclosing<>Reclaiming Land emphasizes territorial politics, showing that environmental repair must challenge racial and colonial inequalities in land distribution. One contribution describes the UK-based collective “Land in Our Names”, which analyzes the historical exclusion of communities of color from agricultural land. Another chapter addresses Ireland’s industrially exploited peat bogs, from which post-fossil experimentation movements have emerged. These cases underscore that repair involves not only ecological restoration but also a reconfiguration of territorial sovereignty.

Loss<>Recollecting highlights mourning and memory, asserting that repair cannot be limited to reducing environmental damage. It must also consider immaterial losses: cultures, species, and objects that shape a community’s identity. This is evident in chapters discussing street memorials in post-conflict Colombia or the repair of public benches in the context of austerity in the UK. Such small gestures reveal that mending applies not only to infrastructures but also creates new connections with histories and objects otherwise at risk of being lost.

Representing<>Self-Governing demonstrates how communities can create autonomous forms of governance to repair their environments. “Civic hubs” on the outskirts of Paris or an occupied factory in Italy illustrate local collaborative practices that surpass conventional authorities, reshaping the management of resources and infrastructures. Here, environmental repair merges with political reclamation, aligning with Latour’s (1991) invitation to include non-human actors in democratic processes.

Isolating<>Embodying brings attention to the embodied and artisanal dimension of ecological care. From textile weaving as reworking grief to removing graffiti from urban structures, these examples show that repair emerges from manual and sensory knowledge of precariously balanced systems. This connects to Mol’s (2008) perspective, which sees care as a situated and continuous activity capable of transforming both subjects and their environments.

Growth<>*Flourishing* closes the volume by reconsidering ecological development beyond capitalist logics of unlimited growth. Post-extractivist transitions, practices of algorithmic food justice, and new maps of Colombian *páramos* show how partial alliances can support multi-species well-being, recalling Tsing and colleagues' (2017) idea that even severely damaged landscapes can host unexpected forms of collaborative life.

One of the main strengths of *Ecological Reparation* lies in its integration of diverse methodological and disciplinary perspectives. Ethnographic studies, design interventions, interviews, theoretical provocations, and visual elements converge to convey the complexity of repair on the ground. The use of conceptual pairs in tension clarifies that no single model applies universally; rather, local transformations emerge through ongoing, conflictual negotiations. Another merit is the explicit linkage between ecology and reparation, revealing how environments, understood as archives of past violence, can inspire innovative modes of care. Finally, the anthology proposes a coherent framework: repair requires acknowledging accumulated harms and creating small yet meaningful practices that reshape relations between humans and nonhumans, discovering new ways of cohabitation.

Ecological Reparation engages in dialogue with Haraway's (2016) approach, which invites us to stay immersed in problems to respond constructively, and with Latour's (2017) proposals on how to include nonhuman agents in decision-making processes. It also resonates with Tsing and colleagues' (2017) "Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet", paying attention to how local experimentation can help communities navigate environmental ruins.

Finally, Mol's (2008) "logic of care" provides a foundation for understanding knowledge as emerging from action and moral responsibility.

In summary, *Ecological Reparation: Repair, Remediation and Resurgence in Social and Environmental Conflict* offers a valuable interdisciplinary contribution on how to repair worlds marked by centuries of dispossession and environmental devastation. Placing ecology and reparation in tension demonstrates that no purely technical or apolitical solution can address complex crises. Instead, readers encounter a multifaceted set of methodologies in which everyday care, rethinking democracy for nonhuman entities, and an archival understanding of ecological histories are intertwined. Considering ecology as an archive highlights how soils, wetlands, and other landscapes retain layered traces of contested pasts, actively influencing future possibilities in real-time.

This volume invites readers to conceive repair not as a definitive goal, but as ongoing work that builds alliances across differences. Examples and analyses illustrate the modest yet tangible ways in which communities can reorganize their relationships with land, water, infrastructures, and each other, particularly when memories of past violence are neither hidden nor minimized. For scholars, activists, and policymakers seeking creative pathways to address ecological degradation, *Ecological Reparation* serves as a significant conceptual and practical reference, offering novel perspectives on recognizing and contesting harms, and weaving new forms of collective flourishing. We live in difficult times, and perhaps it is no coincidence that this book closes with an essay by Steven J. Jackson titled "Ordinary Hope", pointing precisely towards hope. Let us conclude, therefore, with his words: *Now let us get to work.*

References

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