

LITERARY GEOGRAPHIES

***Ri-fiabare*: Methodological Notes from a Geo-Literature Lab, between Geographies of Life and Narrative Re-appropriations of the Places We Traverse**

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Abstract: This paper reflects on the experience carried out for *Ri-fiabare*, a literary geography lab that was launched in April 2024 in Bologna by the authors of this essay and that subsequently took place again in Sardinia and beyond in the summer of the same year, within the context of festivals and events focused on the theme of literary geography. Adopting a multi-voiced approach that combines academic analysis with reflections collected *ex post* from participants in the first three sessions, this article pursues a dual aim. On the one hand, it reflects on the applications of literary geography within creative and lab-placed practices; on the other, it develops a critical perspective on walking as a means of reactivating literary creation, as well as a tool for reading and interrogating the narrative processes through which our present is constructed and inhabited. The theme of walking is analyzed as a creative method for connecting texts to their spatial and relational dimension. In this sense, particular attention is given to the concept of crossing, understood as a movement of re-signification, re-creation and re-foundation of narratives – and to the places with which they engage in a continuous dialogue.

Keywords: geocriticism; literary geography lab; post-representational geographies; creative geographies; literature and active citizenship.

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Introduction

The practice of walking is currently experiencing a marked expansion within the fields of literary geography and applied literary geography. Whether it entails walking through places associated with writers or exploring places and territories by reading, a growing body of recent scholarship attests to a renewed interest in a practice capable of reconnecting literary creation to an experiential and eventful dimension (Hones 2008), while simultaneously fostering social participation and interdisciplinary collaboration.

Within the Italian academic context, for instance, one may point to the work developed within the WALC (Walking Landscapes of Urban Cultures) research programme, led by the Universities of Bologna, Milan, and Padua, which focuses on experimenting with narrative techniques for traversing and socially investigating urban space. Similarly, from a research-creation perspective, the narrative attention exercises (Bouvet 2024) proposed by the Québec-based collective La Traversée aim to re-establish a connection with the living through collaborative and interdisciplinary practices based on itinerancy. These concerns also emerge in the contexts of literary heritage-making and literary tourism,¹ where walking practices are increasingly revalued both as creative tools for territorialising the text and for discovering places through a literary lens.

While this expansion is undeniable, considerably fewer studies have focused on lab-based practices capable of reinterpreting walking as a methodological device – namely, as a progressive exercise in observation and awareness of the multiple narrative layers through which notions such as territory, landscape, and dwelling are perceptually structured. These themes are central to literary geography, and their re-functionalisation within a lab setting opens up productive lines of inquiry regarding the potential of (geographical and ecological) literature as a tool for interpreting and observing the present.

Situated at the intersection of creative geographies (Hawkins 2015) and post-representational geographies – and attentive to the perspectives opened by the so-called ‘géographie après le texte’ (Brosseau 2022) – this article retraces the process of designing and implementing the literary geography lab *Ri-fiabare*, launched by the authors in April 2024² within the framework of Ischìre – collettivo mobile di geografia letteraria.³ The choice of the title *Ri-fiabare* (literally “to re-fable”) seeks to designate a practice aimed at reactivating places and their associated narratives through processes of storytelling, collective experience, and critical reflection. In doing so, the term implies not merely a narrative strategy, but a situated and participatory mode of engaging with spatial memory and literary production, in line with the ethics underlying *Fiabe Sarde* [1978] by Sergio Atzeni and Rossana Copezz, which constitutes both an object of analysis in this essay and the methodological foundation of this lab.

Adopting a multi-voiced approach that combines academic analysis with reflections collected *ex post* from participants in the first three sessions,⁴ this article pursues a dual aim. On the one hand, it reflects on the applications of literary geography within creative and lab-

based practices; on the other, it develops a critical perspective on walking as a means of reactivating literary creation, as well as a tool for reading and interrogating the narrative processes through which the present is constructed and inhabited. In this respect, the proposed approach resonates with the very etymology of the term ‘method,’ understood as oriented towards progression, inquiry, and transformation. On this point, we embrace the proposal put forward by French geographer Thierry Paquot, who advocates rethinking ecology not as a theme or mere academic topic, but as a dynamic and multiscalar method of investigation and interpretation, grounded in processuality, transversality, and interrelationality (Paquot 2021). The choice to adopt a straightforward narrative style reflects our intention to convey, in written form, the dialogical and interrelational dimension of the experience. This will be presented in the following order: (I) questions and implementation objectives; (II) sequence and activation of stages; (III) methodological considerations.

Questions and implementation objectives

The literary geography lab *Ri-fiabare* originated from a constellation of interrelated research questions, articulated around a dual and complementary objective. On the one hand, the project sought to further investigate the relationship between narrative practices and social inquiry, as well as between lived space and narrated space; on the other, it aimed to translate, reconfigure, and ultimately open up the discussion on these topics outside academia, in a creative domain. Indeed, the conception of the lab was grounded in a series of open-ended inquiries that enabled the gradual construction of an experimental methodology – one that proceeds tentatively, ‘by groping its way forward,’ to adopt a deliberately non-pejorative understanding of the expression. Such a methodology is conceived as inherently adaptive, capable of continuous rearticulation in response to the specificities of context, and resistant to any tendency toward abstraction or decontextualization that would detach it from the places and situations in which it is enacted.

Within this conceptual horizon, several guiding questions were progressively formulated. Can a literary text be said to ‘walk’ beyond itself, exceeding the boundaries traditionally assigned to it as a fixed and delimited object? In other words, through what processes can the spatialization of the text occur, and how might such processes be activated within shared practices? Furthermore, can literature be understood as an agent of active citizenship, capable of intervening within and reshaping the socio-spatial dynamics of contemporary environments? From our situated perspective as researchers, these questions are further inflected by a set of methodological concerns: how can we meaningfully ‘walk with the text’ within public space? How can the space of literature be opened, displaced, and reconfigured so as to become a site of encounter, negotiation, and collective reflection?

The responses to these questions did not emerge in a linear or predetermined manner; rather, they were progressively shaped through a prolonged process of dialogue, hesitation, and iterative experimentation. This process unfolded through the interplay of shared practices and fieldwork experiences – particularly within the frameworks of action research and research-creation – combined with subjective impressions, reflexive observations, and

sustained attempts at interdisciplinary exchange. Such efforts were oriented toward the design of a series of exercises aimed at re-evaluating the literary text beyond its conventional instrumentalization as a mere tool for territorial analysis and interpretation – an approach that, while productive, entails the risk of reductionism. Instead, the lab seeks to foreground the literary text as a space of traversal, transformation, and reinvention, capable of generating both individual and collective processes of meaning-making. This was carried out in the light of the foundational hypotheses previously formulated and under the broader conviction of the urgency of rethinking literature – and its processes of transmission and translation – not solely through mimetic or inventory-based correspondences, but rather within a dynamic and circular framework, as a ‘weapon against a reality that must be changed’ (Atzeni 1978).⁵

The primary objective of the lab, therefore, was to construct – through an intersubjective and transdisciplinary dialogue – an experiential framework capable of fostering awareness of the generative power of narratives and their constitutive role in shaping both conceptualizations and practices of territorial organization. This objective was operationalized through a sequence of progressively structured activities, conceived as moments of both construction and deconstruction. More specifically, the lab aimed to identify, expose, and dismantle the multiple ‘toxic narratives’ (Wu Ming 2013) embedded within the processes of domestication and naturalization that affect key concepts such as nature, space, and dwelling. Within this perspective, ecology is not treated as a thematic concern or as a supplementary disciplinary layer; rather, it is reconceptualized as both method and praxis, informing the very structure and orientation of the inquiry. Such a method – much like the act of walking itself – does not unfold along a pre-established trajectory. Instead, it necessarily begins from a point of departure that is at once contingent and situated. In our case, this point of departure is constituted by a collection of fairy tales written collaboratively by Sergio Atzeni and Rossana Copeze, first published in 1978 by the Cagliari-based publishing house Altair. Within both of our research frameworks, the figure of Atzeni occupies a central position; among his works, this particular collection appears especially significant in that it renders immediately visible the potential of literature as both an instrument of critical inquiry and a ‘sensitive scientific tool’ (Tuan 1978: 194) for the reimagining of territorial identities.

The selection of this corpus is grounded in a series of interrelated considerations. Most notably, the collection does not present itself as an entirely original creation, but rather as the outcome of a complex process of re-elaboration and mediation. It draws upon materials collected in the early twentieth century by the glottologist Gino Bottiglioni during his extensive travels across Sardinia, undertaken with the aim of documenting the island’s rich heritage of orally transmitted narratives. As such, the corpus is characterized by its fundamentally fluid and immaterial nature, lacking a fixed textual form and existing instead within the dynamic processes of oral transmission.

Bottiglioni’s work, grounded in linguistic and philological concerns, privileged the phonetic transcription of oral speech, thereby preserving its formal and structural features. However, this approach – while invaluable from a scientific perspective – had the effect of rendering these narratives largely inaccessible beyond specialized academic contexts. In this sense, one could argue that the process of transcription entailed a partial displacement of the

fairy tale from its original social and performative context, limiting its capacity for circulation and transformation.

It is precisely in response to this limitation that Atzeni and Copez's intervention must be understood. Their work can be described as a form of 'active translation', involving not only the linguistic transfer from Sardinian into Italian, but also a series of creative and interpretative operations aimed at reactivating the narrative potential of the corpus within a transformed socio-cultural context. As Copez has retrospectively emphasized, their intention was to 'return' these stories to their original audience – particularly children – through a process that combined selection, adaptation, and rearticulation in a more accessible and contemporary idiom. In doing so, they sought to restore to the fairy tale both its mythopoetic function and its capacity to operate as a form of social agency.

From a theoretical standpoint, this operation may be interpreted, drawing on Deleuze and Guattari, as a form of creative *détournement*: while grounded in the archival reservoir constituted by Bottiglioni's work, it simultaneously opens up new trajectories of meaning, enabling processes of deviation, recombination, and re-signification. Such an approach not only allows for alternative ways of imagining and narrating space, but also suggests the possibility of intervening in and redirecting the narratives through which space itself is constituted. This perspective is underpinned by the conviction that 'reality must be known both critically and fantastically' (Atzeni and Copez 1978: 93), and that the world – conceived as a space in continuous and plural becoming – must be actively experienced in order to be reimagined and transformed.

This conceptual orientation finds a particularly illuminating example in the opening tale of the collection, *The Rebel Dogs* (from the Sardinian *Is canel malos*). The semantic shift from 'wicked' to 'rebellious' constitutes a deliberate and politically charged intervention, aimed at reconfiguring established modes of relating to the non-human world. Rather than reproducing a logic of domination and fear, the narrative proposes an alternative framework grounded in coexistence and relationality. In this sense, ecology is articulated both as praxis and as *oikos*, beginning with a rethinking of language itself as a mobile, dialogical, and transformative medium.

Thus, in spite of the many stories designed to instill fear of the wolf, the fairy tale moves rather toward a counter-morality, thought precisely in terms of reversal and inclusion. Indeed, if we continue to teach children to be afraid of forests and wolves and werewolves, are we not in fact perpetuating the forms of colonization and extractivism endured by the generation that was taught that it is the wolf and not capital that is scary? Are we sure that it is really the wolf the animal we should run from? We welcome in this sense the authors' statement that:

the time has passed when animals in fairy tales (the case of the wolf is exemplary) are inevitably understood as 'bogeymen'. The last wolves of the Apennines are today much closer to children than the 'werewolves' of the past were. This new consciousness can be a tool to create a different relationship between today's generations and nature, or what remains of it, ravaged by those very children who, not long ago, were taught to fear the wind, the dark, and the werewolf. (Atzeni and Copez 1978: 94)

Returning, then, to the conception of the text as a space of passage and of the fairy tale as a site of reinvention, it became essential to align the rhythm and structure of the lab activities with these principles. The fairy tale was thus adopted not merely as an object of analysis, but as both methodological framework and generative matrix. The lab itself was conceived primarily as a space of encounter, exchange, and co-presence, prior to – and in some respects independently of – its function as a tool for dissemination.

From this point of departure, further questions emerged, layering themselves onto the initial set of inquiries and contributing to the progressive elaboration of the lab as a process of sedimentation. What if the fear of the wolf itself shapes the trajectory of the path to be undertaken? What if a reversed narrative constitutes the necessary methodological strategy for deconstructing and reassembling a discipline that seeks to challenge dominant epistemologies? Are ‘wicked’ dogs truly evil, or might they instead be understood as figures of resistance and alterity? And, ultimately, what is the ‘wolf’ that we have been taught to fear, control, or eliminate?

These questions, understood as different strata within a single ongoing process, informed the conceptualization of the lab as a gradual and cumulative experience. Each participant is invited to develop an individual trajectory of reflection, while remaining embedded within a collective and dialogical framework. Through the detailed articulation of the lab sequences – conceived as moments of fragmentation and recomposition – we seek to reconstruct the overall rhythm of the experience and to render visible its underlying methodological logic.

Ultimately, the broader objective of this endeavor is to ‘bring forth’ and share with a wider audience the core issues that underpin our respective research trajectories. This entails an effort to render accessible the complexity of critical academic discourse, which often risks becoming self-referential and exclusionary. By attempting to ‘dilute’ such complexity – without reducing its analytical depth – the lab aims to facilitate the circulation and democratization of knowledge, thereby reconnecting academic inquiry with lived experience and with the situated practices through which territories are continuously produced and reimagined.

Sequence and activation of stages

To situate the lab within its spatial and temporal context, it is useful to outline its main coordinates. The first iteration took place in April 2024, at the opening of the second *Sa Die* festival, hosted at the Circolo Sardegna in Bologna. It was subsequently repeated three times during the summer of the same year in Sardinia, first in Orani and then in Tempio Pausania.⁶ Each iteration unfolded in a different context and involved a differently composed audience. While the first session mainly included university students and researchers connected, in various ways, to the academic environment of Bologna, the later labs brought together more heterogeneous groups in terms of age and educational background. In these cases, however, most participants shared a common territorial background, being largely islanders.

Across these different settings, a key element of continuity was the informal and convivial atmosphere in which the lab took place. This aspect proved essential in fostering the horizontality and openness that had guided the design phase. In line with this approach, and in order to remain consistent with the relational dimension of the experience, we have chosen to include, where relevant, reflections and impressions collected *ex post* from some of the participants. These contributions are not used simply as examples, but as part of a broader attempt to convey a more plural and articulated account of the lab, in continuity with the dialogical dynamics it aims to activate.

Having outlined this context, we can now turn to the structure of the lab, which is presented in the figure below for ease of reading.

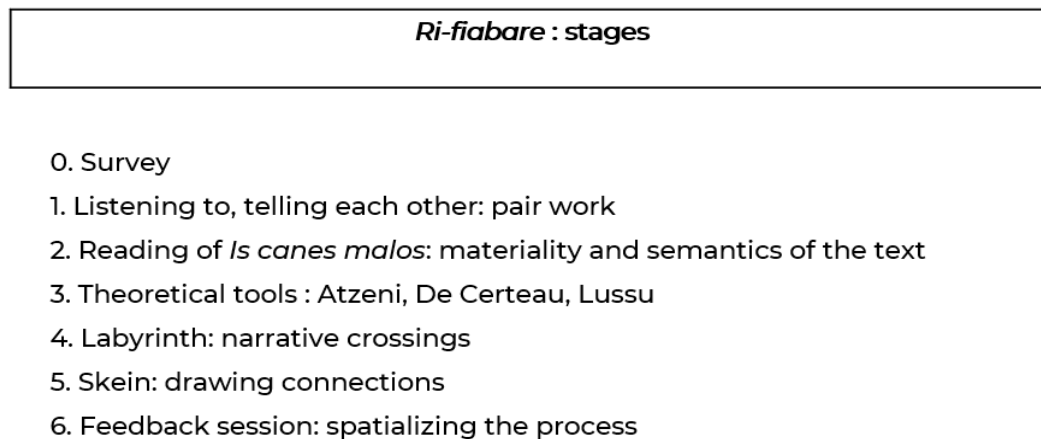


Figure 1. *Ri-fiabare* stages (Realisation by the authors).

Although life stories, literary practices, and present-day geographies are understood here as deeply interconnected, the preparatory phase of the lab consists in the completion of a short questionnaire distributed at the time of registration. The aim is to bring these dimensions into dialogue within the personal and reflective space of each participant, while also allowing us to gain an initial sense of the themes and ‘geographies’ that matter to them. The questionnaire includes the following prompts: ‘Where are you from?’, ‘Which place would you like to talk about?’, ‘How is this place usually described?’, and ‘How would you narrate it?’. Participants are also asked to bring an object connected to the place they have chosen. This initial step serves both to encourage a first moment of self-reflection and to foreground the non-neutral character of the narratives through which places are defined and perceived. At the same time, the object functions as a concrete point of entry into these narratives, allowing participants to engage more directly with the affective and material dimensions of their experience. Across the different iterations of the lab, this element has consistently played a key role in anchoring the personal dimension of the stories shared, highlighting how individual experience contributes to shaping place-based imaginaries.

This dynamic is further developed in the first collective activity (Stage I), designed as an introductory moment while deliberately avoiding the conventional format of formal

presentations. Instead of asking participants to introduce themselves in front of the whole group – an approach that can be limiting or intimidating – they are invited to work in pairs or small groups. Starting from the questionnaire and the object they have brought, each participant shares the story of their chosen place, weaving together personal experience, material elements, and broader territorial processes. At the same time, listeners are encouraged to note what strikes them in the narratives they hear. This initiates a process that can be described, following Haraway (2017), in terms of narrative layering and diffraction. Rather than aiming at coherence or synthesis, this process allows for the emergence of multiple perspectives and interpretations. As the lab unfolds, these exchanges tend to multiply and intersect, generating an increasingly dense network of narrative connections.

From its initial stages, the lab thus establishes a framework based on relationality, attentiveness, and the co-construction of meaning, which underpins the subsequent phases of the experience.

What has been said so far is succinctly and powerfully captured in the words of Giuseppe Florio,⁷ a participant in the first *Ri-fiabare* (Circolo Sardegna Bologna), whose text we quote in full:

Each of us has a place of the soul that we try to carry around, more or less clumsily. Heavy places, for which the use of a suitcase with wheels is advisable; or places that one manages to carry around lightly and would fit nimbly into a pants pocket. These are places that can take the form of words, sounds, and smells and that, therefore and only in this way, can be shared with others. Each of these forms carries with it a legacy, which the listener may have the presumption to grasp only in part, that is made up of collective and personal histories whose gravity is intuitable only from the vibration of the voice and the changes in tone of the speaker.

When I was asked to describe my impressions of the April 2024 *Ri-fiabare workshop* in Bologna, my mind raced to an elderflower jam from some isolated and forgotten village in the mountains of Piedmont. It was the place recounted by my interlocutor. I was telling her about putrid plains, smelly and sacred streams, and industrial concrete that has covered the yards with gravel and dirt and taken away the space for chickens and lizards but not the humidity, which at times is terrible.

This can be summed up as my first practical approach to literary geography and which *Ri-fiabare* mediated to some extent: the possibility of putting in order, in order to be able to tell and make intelligible to an outside ear, the universe of elements that constitute the places of the soul. In this sense, the mapping activity that concluded the session represented a transposition into the abstract, into a comfortable zone, of the personal experiences of each of the participants: an intimacy leaked out by the silence, almost ceremonial, that characterized the activity. Literary quotations offered us a support and a shield to systematize and collectivize personal experiences.

The quotation deliberately anticipates stages that have not yet been described, with the aim of reinforcing the liminal quality of the space-time in which the lab unfolds. This point can be clarified further: much like walking a path, the sequence of activities proposed in *Ri-fiabare*

seeks to bridge a gap that often separates the study or enjoyment of texts from the contexts to which they relate. This separation tends to obscure the almost osmotic exchange between text and territory – an issue already implicit in the need for translation, as highlighted by Atzeni and Copez.

At the same time, one of the aspects most frequently appreciated by participants was precisely the opportunity to engage in a collective and layered reflection on processes of narrative deconstruction and reappropriation – an experience that is both valuable and relatively rare in everyday contexts. In this sense, the lab can be understood as a suspended space-time: liminal, yet not detached from what precedes or follows the shared experience. Rather, it unfolds as part of a broader movement that, from the outset, opens up a trans-geographical mode of reflection, weaving together trajectories that – through both consonance and dissonance – connect places that may appear distant when considered in purely spatial terms.

This is echoed in the impressions of Giovanni Peparello about the first phase of the lab: ‘They had us split into small groups, I sat next to two girls and we talked about the province – not necessarily about Sardinia but through Sardinia, or rather through the narrative of Sardinia and the Sardinian language, through the voice of x and the words of Sergio Atzeni.’ This statement captures, with remarkable clarity, the questions introduced earlier, embodying the idea of the text as a space of traversal, dialogue, and potential reinvention.

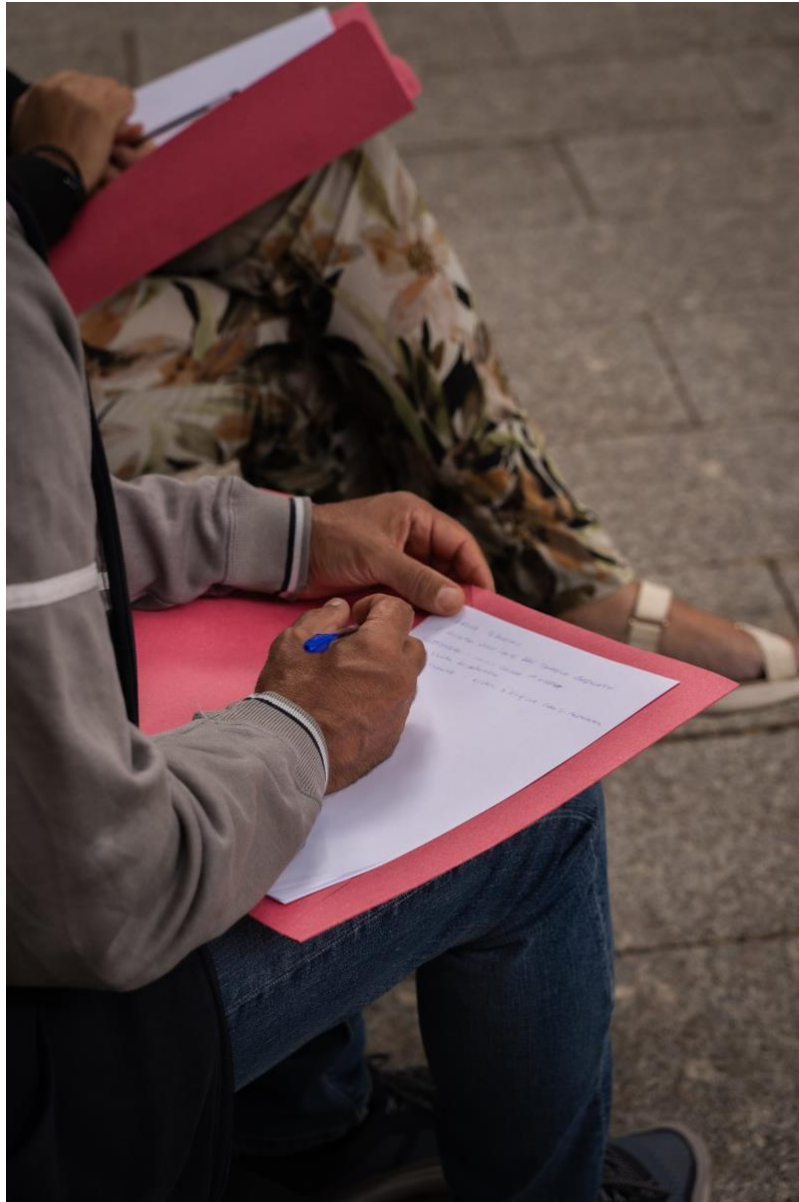


Figure 2. Detail of the first activity (Stage 1): take notes while the peer tells their story about a significant place in their lives. (Courtesy: Sonia Giudici)

Peparello's observation naturally leads to the description of the subsequent phase (Stage II). During the design of the lab, we imagined that, like all participants, we would contribute a story of our own, again starting from an object. The exercise was intended to foreground the sensory and material dimensions of experience while simultaneously activating reflection on socio-environmental processes affecting particular places or, more broadly, on the dynamics of territorialization that would be explored in later stages. These include phenomena ranging from touristification to forms of extractive or energy-related colonization.

In practice, a seemingly simple object could serve as a prompt for complex narrative and analytical connections. For example, the bell of a bicycle might become a pretext for discussing ongoing gentrification processes in Bologna, while a fossilized starfish could evoke reflections on a historical region of Sardinia, the Nurra, which has experienced waves of out-migration, social impoverishment, and, indirectly, socio-environmental exploitation. Through this approach, seemingly disconnected objects and personal experiences are mobilized to trace broader territorial dynamics, linking individual perception with collective and ecological concerns.



Figure 3. Moments from stage 1: listening to others' stories and places. (Courtesy Sonia Giudici)

It is within this same phase that we introduce an approach central to the lab and to our respective research paths, articulated through the Sardinian term *Ischìre*, which simultaneously refers to a sensory experience and to the knowledge derived from it. The concept proposes a reconnection between sensory perception and intellectual abstraction, foregrounding material and sensorial engagement as a primary vector of exploration. Guided by the senses and encouraged to imagine, participants are invited to listen to the tale of *Is canel malos*, first in Bottiglioni's original transcription and then in the Italian rewriting by Atzeni and Copez. The objectives of this exercise are twofold: to foreground the sensorial dimension of the text, activating a tangible and affective experience through listening, and to reaffirm imagination as a tool of comprehension – understood etymologically as grounded in material engagement – thus legitimizing its value within academic knowledge production as a medium for collective reception, personal identification, and transformation.

During the reading of the original version, particularly in the Bologna session, a dialogue naturally emerged regarding the expressive potential of sounds, allowing participants to explore the physical texture of language and its capacities for evocation. This is a territory rarely accessed in conventional academic practice, as it exposes participants to a form of minoritized knowledge: the emotional and non-rational dimension conveyed through the phoné, without the interpretive reassurance of the logos (Cavarero 2003). Confronted with a 'foreign' language, participants are, in a sense, compelled to engage directly with the phonetic material, their bodies responding to the sounds themselves. In this way, a clear parallel emerges between the lab and the practice of walking, insofar as both involve translating bodily experience into a practice of engagement with one's surroundings. As previously discussed, if every traversal of space is also a narrative act, *Ri-fiabare* moves simultaneously through the immediate space of the lab and through a complex, trans-local geography that negotiates thresholds between personal and universal, local and global. It provides tools for rethinking reality as a hybrid space of material and narrative interactions, and literature as a vehicle for inversion and reinvention.

This dual perspective is powerfully captured by participant Elena Sottilotta from the Bologna session, who has long focused her research on fairy tales:

Ri-Fiabare was a collective journey into storytelling, cultural reflection and environmental awareness ... The choice to begin with a Sardinian fairy tale underscored the role of oral traditions in constructing communal identities, offering the opportunity for each participant to share their connections to their own territories. In a society marked by division and disenchantment, (re-)telling fairy tales can be a radical act. Fairy tales hold a unique power to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries: they invite readers and listeners to imagine themselves within the narrative, to inhabit the roles of human and non-human wanderers. In this lab, participants were not mere spectators but active creators of shared narratives.

And Sottilotta adds:

Geography ties us to the tangible and the historical, while storytelling elevates us into the realm of imagination and possibility. Together, they form a bridge between the local and the universal. X and Y cleverly structured the lab around the central idea that both geography and storytelling serve as lenses for reflecting on our plural identities and the places we inhabit...

Returning to the lab's stages, after the collective engagement with *Is canel malos*, Stage III involves the sharing of key theoretical references with the group. These references, which participants explore and discuss, function as interpretive lenses – precisely as Sottilotta observes – guiding reflection toward the deconstruction of hegemonic or toxic narratives and their subsequent reappropriation in creative and transformative ways. The texts selected

include, first, Atzeni's assertion that 'the novel is the real narration of the life of men on this planet; history is fantasy' (Atzeni 1995). Next, participants engage with Michel de Certeau's (2010) distinction between strategy and tactic, focusing on the subversive potential of the latter as a form of counter-movement against structures of authority, whether spatial or discursive. Finally, an excerpt from Joyce Lussu's *L'olivastro e l'innesto* is read, emphasizing the practice of grafting as a mode of territorial participation that challenges static, root-bound conceptions of identity (Lussu 1981). Across these examples, attention returns to the nexus between text and extra-textual reality, and to the subversive and re-foundational potential of literature as a tool for critical engagement with socio-territorial transformations.

Participant Paolo D'Ascanio, who attended both the Bologna and Tempio Pausania sessions, highlights how *Ri-fiabare*, through layering and cross-referencing, fosters a radical questioning of discourses surrounding territory. He emphasizes that this praxis of the text – literary but also broader in scope – resembles the practice of walking as a mode of spatialized knowledge, nourished through encounter with the 'outside' of oneself:

[The lab represents] an opportunity to observe, in an informal and inclusive setting, on the real power of narration in the construction of territory. I believe that the construction of the territory says a lot about who constructs this narrative, whether it comes from outside or inside. And it also says a lot, I think, that a hegemonic narrative is local or external. Coming from an island, Sardinia, where the narrative of the territory has often served to legitimize its use by institutions and companies, the topic particularly interested me. For these reasons it was very useful to collectively experiment whether concepts such as hegemony and subalternity are still relevant today when we speak about states, regions, towns and cities, inland and coastal areas ... I believe that the added value of the lab lies in the horizontal approach ... while [bringing] the attention of all of us to those moments in which hegemony and subalternity are hidden in naturalized discourses in which we are all immersed and in which we participate on a daily basis. Moments like this help converge theory and abstract concepts towards real practices: everything was truly fruitful, and reflecting on it after a few months helped me see the effects of participating in the laboratory in the medium term.

The issue is well articulated by Raffaella Ariano, present at the Orani session, who draws attention to the transformative function of language on places, also insisting on the risk of closure and immobilism contained in the rhetoric of valorization that increasingly accords prominence to authenticity or to the allure of the 'ancestral' and 'uncontaminated'; all forms of 'denial of the present' that, as such, fail to name that being in constant becoming that belongs to every place.

Concepts such as territory, identity, belonging, and culture are historical concepts, that is, they are determined by the space-time in which they are given; the backward movement that implies and imposes the search for the authentic denies the present,

denies change, and prevents historical awareness about them. That is why it is necessary to problematize the words and narratives being made about the territory today. The language we choose to use has the function of shaping the real and our perception of the real. The space that *Ri-fiabare* has offered us is necessary to learn how to collectively construct an appropriate language that is different from the one used at the moment.

The core of the lab, however, is the 'labyrinth of narratives' (Stage IV), in which participants independently explore the hosting space. Prior to the activity, texts are distributed throughout the room, from which participants select those resonating with the place and with narratives previously engaged. These texts, which include literary quotations (authorship deliberately concealed), tourist narratives, and journalistic excerpts, become material through which participants continue to elaborate, complicate, and re-articulate the narratives central to their lab experience.



Figure 4. Stage IV: a participant engaging with the labyrinth's texts during the lab's session held in Tempio Pausania. (Courtesy Sonia Giudici).

The idea is to bring together, even at the textual level, the plurality of narratives that constitute our identities and shape reality. In addition to the physical interaction with the surrounding space, the labyrinth functions as a multiplier of narrative diffraction, as the selected texts often refer to places that have not necessarily been mentioned in the participants' initial discussions. As they move through the narratives, each participant frequently finds themselves, often unconsciously, relating the place from which they began to others that, through similarity or contrast, enter into a dialogical relationship.

Beyond the specific types of narratives presented, the labyrinth also incorporates key words affixed to the floor: *'authenticity,' 'minor,' 'hamlet,' 'identity,'* and *'typical'* are just a few examples, yet they effectively signal the labyrinth's intent. These words – symbolically glued to the ground – cling to places, defining them in essentializing and reductive ways. They are also difficult to resist, as overcoming their influence requires repeated and deliberate effort (in contrast, the other texts are simply laid on the ground and are easily picked up). These recurring words exemplify the so-called toxic narratives and act as carriers of narrative violence – which, when combined with environmental and social violence, contributes to the complex web of intersectional and slow violence described by Rob Nixon (2011).

For all these reasons, the labyrinth constitutes a crucial stage of the lab and ensures a high degree of flexibility. While preserving the methodological framework, the narratives within the labyrinth can be continuously reshaped and reoriented according to the hosting context of the session, with careful attention to the specificity of the place with which we engage in dialogue and to the histories that characterize it. One illustrative example is the Orani session, conducted in memory of Marianna Bussalai, a little-known Sardist and anti-fascist writer, whose texts were extensively integrated into the labyrinth. This inclusion enabled her writings to enter into dialogue with both the other texts in the labyrinth and the participants' own narratives, in alignment with the openness and political-literary militancy characteristic of her thought.

As an individual and silent experience, the labyrinth seamlessly transitions into the next stage, which we refer to as the 'skein' (Stage V). Here, the group reconvenes and gathers around a ball of wool. Each participant contributes their own collection of texts and slips of paper, tangible traces of their passage through the narrative space, in which they have experienced the fluidity with which margins can, among themselves, enter into dynamic relations. This takes place within an ecosystemic and expansive vision – recalling Morton's reflections mentioned earlier – aimed at interweaving bodies and stories within a shared geographic and material context.

Although never explicitly stated, this stage evokes the work *Legarsi alla montagna* ('Tying Oneself to the Mountain') by the Sardinian weaver-artist Maria Lai, which vividly exemplifies the effort of material relationality that we aim to highlight. Through the unraveling of a thread, life stories, organic matter, and social structures are bound and held together (Deleuze and Guattari 1980: 398), creating a network in which individual narratives contribute to a collective tapestry of meaning.



Figure 5. Stage V: teenage participants at the Tempio Pausania's session pass each other the skein while weaving a discussion around the texts they picked in the labyrinth and their relation with what had been said during the lab. (Courtesy Sonia Giudici).

Of all the stages, this is perhaps the one that exerts the greatest impact on participants and, indeed, fully realizes the intention of sharing, through alternative forms, a practice of the text as a space of exchange, critical inquiry, and the re-semanticization of territories. These are territories that are not merely narrated, but, like any lived space, generate and release their own narrative potential. We leave the description of the activity to one of the participants, Matteo Demartis, who attended both the Bologna and Orani sessions:

Maria Luisa and Francesca guided us through various texts and literary passages scattered across the room. Each participant was then invited to select one or two passages that resonated with them, share their chosen excerpts along with their thoughts, and pass around a ball of wool as a speaking token ... Quite naturally, as the ball of wool passed from hand to hand, a topic emerged organically, creating a fascinating web of wool connecting the participants in the room.

The thread of wool became a powerful symbol of the interwoven thinking that this lab fostered. Memories, newspaper clippings, and literary passages flowed together seamlessly, sparking deep and stimulating conversations about identity, places, and their (never neutral) narratives...

Literature can offer an escape from reality ... But it can also bring people together, helping to deconstruct harmful mainstream narratives and enabling individuals to connect with one another in meaningful, new ways. To me, the web of wool on the floor at the end of the lab captured the transformative nature of the experience. What

was once an empty floor was now covered in dozens of interwoven wool threads. This network of connections – and the new story we created together – lay right there, under our feet.

As Demartis notes, at this stage of the lab– now approaching its conclusion – the focus shifts to a dedicated period of dialogic reflection: an open space for encounter, exchange, or even productive tension. Here, the aim is to render visible the cause-and-effect relationships and implicit connections that distance often obscures, yet which, through the symbolic act of the yarn, become perceptible and tangible.



Figure 6. Stage V: circle time during the first session of *Ri-fiabare* in Bologna. (Courtesy Francesco Burlando).

‘The theme of interconnectedness that ran throughout the lab,’ Sottilotta emphasizes, ‘exemplified by the red yarn binding us all, fostered a renewed appreciation for the power of fairy tales [that] invite to see the world not as it is but as it could be.’ This theme is equally emphasized by Gabriele Cananzi (also present at the Bologna session), who describes this moment of collective reading as ‘the creation of a space for storytelling,’ capable of drawing attention not only to the polyphony encapsulated by places (‘the lab made me open and receptive to different perspectives in different places’) but also to their human and interrelational dimensions – the shared thread running through so many supposed differences:

we concluded the experience in a way I personally found the best possible: by connecting, entering multidirectional relationships of communication and sharing. I felt

that spaces and places, despite their diversity, always share something, and we human beings are one of those shared elements.

Federico Mura, who was also present in Bologna, emphasizes the function of conjunction that the thread draws by connecting the bodies and stories of the participants:

A 'red thread' that interconnected participants and showed similarities in their stories was the proposed reading order. The relationships between narratives, as well as between different places, assumed new trajectories and connections in the final poster. Here, each participant, using their linguistic code, was invited to reposition those same narratives, now imbued with new meaning. Thus, the lab shows as while it may not be possible to erase these narratives entirely, new spaces can be recreated where these relationships, linked with new power dynamics, are re-imagined.

The poster referenced by Mura accompanies the discourse toward the conclusion of the lab. The final stage, in fact, is dedicated to the spatialization of the process and involves a collective feedback session, during which all participants collaboratively re-weave the initial story within a shared space – that of the poster. Here, not only symbolically but also visually, each participant's words enter into dialogue with those of others, reconnecting obscured links and reviving previously silenced narratives.



Figure 7. Stage VI: Bologna's session output was a huge poster where everyone wrote their personal re-fabled story. (Courtesy Francesco Burlando).

However, in the case of Orani, the poster – approximately ten meters long – was carried by the participants at the conclusion of the lab as they left the space in which it had taken

place. It functioned as a bridge between interior and exterior, a joint of connection and reunion that, uninterrupted, conveyed the outcomes of the preceding hours into the public space of the town, reconnecting with the streets, alleys, and square from which the lab had begun – positioning the participants in front of Marianna Bussalai's house. The walk, in this sense, framed both the beginning and the end of *Ri-fiabare*: at the outset, the silent stroll through the streets of the small town emphasized sensory engagement, anticipating the reading of the *Sardinian fairy tale*; at the conclusion, the walk operated as a symbolic gesture, whereby treading through the re-fabled space allowed participants not only to traverse it, but, by extension, to inhabit it – at least for the duration of the action – carrying a trace of the experience with them even after returning to their own places.

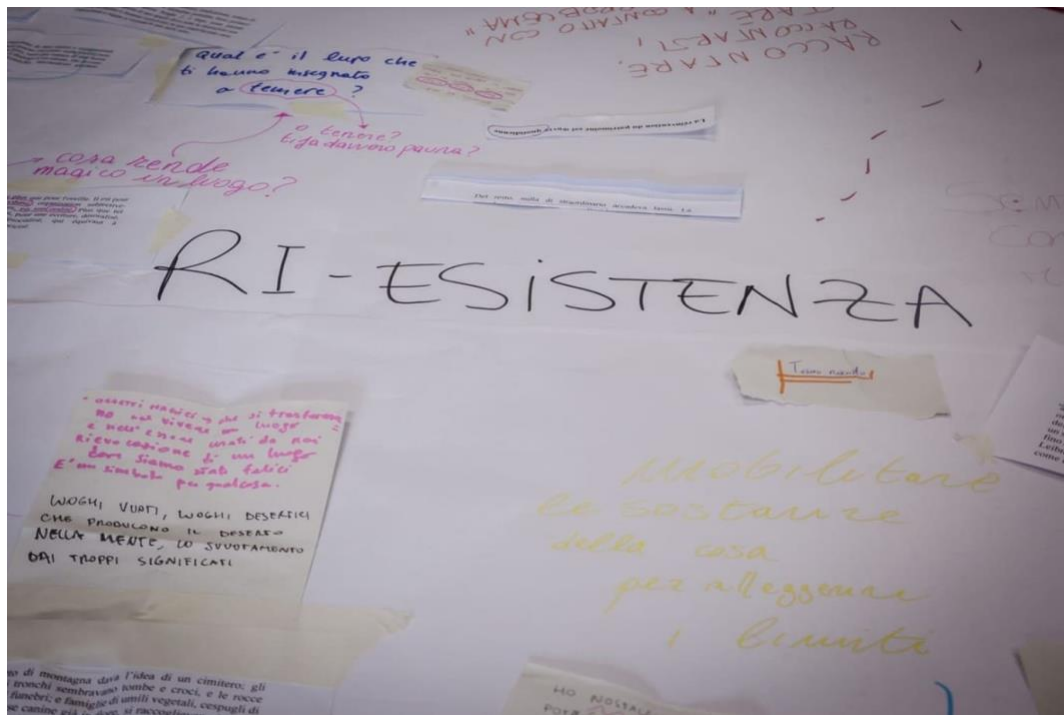


Figure 8. Stage VI: Detail of the poster above. (Courtesy Francesco Burlando).

This final aspect found its fullest expression in the first of the two labs held in Tempio Pausania, which was designed for an adolescent audience. Unlike the previous sessions, with teenagers we chose to entrust the final writing to a more intimate and ‘protected’ format: the letter. Each participant composed one or more brief texts, either reworking narratives selected from the labyrinth or noting spontaneous reflections prompted by the group exchanges during the ‘skein’ activity. Finally, once again walking through the town’s streets, the letters were distributed so as to reach the residents directly – likely unaware of the lab’s occurrence and soon to be surprised by narratives crafted by strangers and deposited within their personal spaces.



Figure 9. Stage VI: a teenage participant of Tempio Pausania's teenage session mailing a letter to inhabitants of the city. (Courtesy Sonia Giudici).

On one hand, the event itself – the seemingly simple act of walking through the town as a group – served as a catalyst for curiosity and engagement among those who encountered the participants in motion. The presence of a cohesive collective moving intentionally through public space invited onlookers to consider the possibilities of interaction, observation, and participation within urban or semi-urban contexts, highlighting how even ordinary acts such as walking can carry performative and pedagogical potential. On the other hand, the letters composed by the adolescent participants, though silent and intimate, embodied a profound desire for intergenerational dialogue, addressing urgent socio-environmental concerns while also engaging with universal themes of personal growth, self-expression, and civic imagination. By translating their reflections and narratives into tangible objects that would reach local residents – often unsuspecting recipients – the participants enacted a subtle but powerful intervention in the public sphere, demonstrating that storytelling is not confined to formal or institutional spaces but can actively traverse the boundaries between private thought and collective consciousness.

In this way, the lab illustrated how narratives can be re-semanticized in highly personal and affective terms, revealing the dual role of places as both subjects and objects of human experience. Places, as the participants demonstrated, do not merely serve as backdrops for human activity; they speak to us, shape our perceptions, and carry the imprint of those who inhabit them. Simultaneously, humans interpret, negotiate, and even reconfigure these spaces through their imaginative and narrative acts. This reciprocal relationship between subject and space underscores the central ethos of *Ri-fiabare*: that literature and storytelling are not passive

reflections of the world, but active instruments through which both the environment and its inhabitants are experienced, reimagined, and, in a sense, co-created.

The outward projection of narrative beyond conventional textual boundaries – beyond the page, beyond the classroom or lab room – found a complementary expression in the adult lab conducted on the same occasion. Concluding on a windy afternoon in the square before the municipal library, the participants brought the literary and spatial work of the day into direct dialogue with the public sphere. That square, with its open, communal character, effectively returned the narrative to the ‘piazza’ evoked in our opening inquiries, transforming it into a site for reflection, exchange, and shared imaginative experience. Through this final act of traversal and occupation, *Ri-fiabare* underscored the continuity between movement, narrative, and spatial practice: the walk, the text, and the communal gathering together demonstrate that literary geography is not merely a methodological tool for analysis, but also a medium for enacting alternative modes of attention, participation, and collective awareness.

In sum, both the adolescent and adult experiences revealed how narrative practices, when coupled with embodied, spatialized engagement, can catalyze new forms of social and environmental consciousness. By walking, writing, and collectively reweaving stories, participants not only explored the material and symbolic textures of their surroundings, but also enacted a subtle form of intervention in public space – reasserting the capacity of literature, imagination, and shared reflection to reshape perceptions, foster dialogue, and cultivate a sense of ethical and relational responsibility toward both human and non-human worlds. In this sense, the final stages of *Ri-fiabare* exemplify the lab’s overarching objective: to make the text, the place, and the community inseparable elements in the co-creation of knowledge, awareness, and imaginative possibility.



Figure 10. Stage VI: Tempio Pausania's session. The adult group ended the activities by discussing in a public square. (Courtesy Sonia Giudici).

Methodological considerations

While drawing a conclusion may appear both difficult and somewhat risky – given the limited number of lab sessions and the vastness of themes that emerged, which resist easy systematization – we believe it is important to highlight a few key points, directly connected to the observations outlined in the introduction and significant for an overall understanding of the experience. First and foremost, the labs demonstrated the value of translating academic knowledge into practical, embodied activity – a translation that fosters genuine engagement with both texts and participants, while avoiding the reductive approximation of places and narratives that we initially sought to question. In this sense, the experience also underscores the effectiveness of a pragmatic interpretation of ecological literature, aligned with the interrelational and processual nature of the discipline, as a means of reasserting the agency of texts as instruments for critically examining reality. The various fragmentations proposed throughout the labs proved essential in this regard, and their inherent dialogicity enabled the sensitive dissemination of literary-geographical theory – a theory that might otherwise be particularly challenging for those unaccustomed to academic language or traditional modes of scholarly transmission.

In short, if it is true that we learn and teach how to walk by walking, the transgressive approach embraced by *Ri-fiabare* allowed for the effective circulation of ideas that we consider urgent and necessary, particularly in light of the ongoing socio-environmental crisis. By fostering awareness of the potential for transformation in the real, the labs situate the act of challenging and overturning narratives within a broader, more radical rethinking of epistemological frameworks and *praxis*. In this way, literature – and the instruments of dissemination that accompany it – can be reimagined as part of the circularity of the public sphere, open to deviations and reinterpretations, rather than confined to the aphasic isolation that academic spaces often impose. Such an approach not only opens the possibility of reconnecting scholarship with lived experience but also restores literature to a relational and civic dimension, where the prospective implications of knowledge and narrative are actively negotiated beyond the walls of classrooms and libraries.

Lab Sessions

- Bologna (inaugural launch session, April 2024)
- Orani, Sardinia (August 2024)
- Tempio Pausania, Sardinia (September 2024)

Notes

- ¹ The most recent conference organized by the Literary Tourism Research Center (TULE) was devoted to the theme of walking:
<https://www.unil.ch/files/live/sites/ital/files/shared/Convegna/2025/PROGRAMMA-TULE.pdf>.
 Likewise, a journal issue edited by M. Labbé and T. Williams., dedicated to the practice of literary promenade in a heritage context, is scheduled for publication in 2027.
- ² <https://www.circolosardegna.net/evento/rifiabare-lab-sadie/>.
- ³ https://www.instagram.com/ischire_collettivogeolett/.
- ⁴ After the initial launch session in Bologna, the lab took place in different locations in Sardinia and beyond, consistently maintaining the same structure with minor variations in its outcomes. This article examines the 2024 sessions, namely the inaugural session in Bologna and the three subsequent sessions held in Orani and Tempio Pausania (Sardinia) in August and September 2024.
- ⁵ All translations by the authors except when otherwise noted.
- ⁶ https://www.facebook.com/comunediorani/photos/di-terra-e-di-storie-sulle-tracce-di-marianna-bussalai-orani-25-agosto-casa-mani/825044939815325/?_rdr ;
<https://www.bookolica.it/programma/laboratorio-di-geografia-letteraria->
- ⁷ This and subsequent quotations are drawn from short texts written by participants in the Bologna, Orani, and Tempio lab sessions, who were invited to provide feedback and to reflect on the most significant moments of their experience. Our translation.

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