Italian Culture, Special Issue: “Territory” and Its Discontents

Deadline: Dec 15, 2026

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The term territorio — not easily translatable into the Anglo notion of “territory” — has long been considered an architectural, geographical, economic, legal, and environmental term, often denoting heritage, purity, safeguarding, maintenance, and quality control. The use of territorio in food certifications, for example, guarantees the quality control of a gastronomic product, defined through a link between product and territorio, while the political and figurative use of territorio denotes not only location but also the people associated with the location, being an all-encompassing term that promotes a unity between human and land.

To define an environment as territorio therefore means to ascribe legal possession to an environment. It is as much a question of protection as it is of exploitation and extractivism: a preservation of cultural heritage, identity, and belonging that equally promotes preservation alongside its commodification, diffusion, and transformation. Inspired by postcolonial thought and the environmental humanities, this special issue asks: how might a transnational study of Italy prompt a rethinking of Italian “territory” and its implications for the study of Italian history, literature, visual culture, and, ultimately, the very idea of Italy as a national formation?

Discussions of “territory” are hardly new to the humanities. The Deleuzian notion of “de-territorialization/re-territorialization” has been reimagined and repurposed as a metaphor for ongoing transformations of power and ownership, no longer tethered exclusively to transnational capital or traditional forms of state power, as articulated in A Thousand Plateaus (1987). Deterritorialization features especially in discussions of postcoloniality and human (-centered) mobility, particularly when articulated in collective terms, often evoking a positive sense of defiance, triumph, and liberation. Yet this affirmative framing risks treating deterritorialization as an emancipatory break from dominant powers, while overlooking how every act of deterritorialization is accompanied by a reterritorialization that does not eliminate territorial power so much as redistribute its terms and sites of operation. The question of territory has also, in recent decades, found fertile applications in Italian cinema, migration and border studies, and media theory (Ponzanesi 2012, Zucconi 2026); Renaissance Studies (Larkin 2010, Piffanelli 2018); as well as cultural studies, biopolitics, and critical theory (Toscano 2004, Esposito 2010, Brighenti 2010, and Welch 2016).

It is perhaps this instable feature of territory that makes it a productive but fraught critical category. At the core lies a constitutive tension between territory as a political technology of modern imperial consolidation — manifest in European nationalism, colonialism, and contemporary regimes of border surveillance — and territory as a critical framework for grasping the situatedness of postmodern epistemologies, in both their material and figurative expressions of fluidity,

relationality, and heterogeneity. The Mediterranean Sea, for example, epitomizes precisely how territorial thinking is inherently paradoxical: it continually unsettles its own assumptions even as it generates new ways of imagining space between rigidity and liquidity (Fogu 2020, Chambers and Cariello 2025). Therefore, what methodological possibilities emerge from engaging with an environmentally, politically, and geographically significant term such as “territory,” and what limitations do we encounter?

Works Cited

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Submission Instructions

For this special issue of Italian Culture scheduled for publication in Spring 2028, please consider submitting a 500-word proposal with an essential bibliography, 6-8 keywords, and 200-word bio note by December 15, 2026 for a research article (of 7500 words maximum). Articles focusing on modern and contemporary Italy and/or its transnational contexts are preferred; however, contributions adopting transhistorical approaches are also encouraged.

Topics may include but are not limited to:
- Territories of possession, extraction, and labor
- Fluid, watery, and oceanic territories; atmospheric territories
- Territorial transformations over time (e.g., ephemeral territories, informal urban settlements)
- Territories reshaped by geopolitical/environmental challenges (e.g., war, migration, climate change)
- Technological interventions, biopolitical management, and media of territorial formation/dissolution (surveillance, securitization, militarization, control, and insurgencies)

- Territories and/as critical media infrastructures

Timeline:

500-word proposals (with essential bibliography, keywords, and a 200-word short bio) are due by December 15, 2026. Please send your materials and any related inquiries to the special issue editors, Lydia Tuan (lydia.tuan@vanderbilt.edu) and Qian Liu (liu.12199@osu.edu). Notification of acceptance will be sent by early January 2027. Authors of selected proposals will be asked to submit their articles (7500 words maximum, inclusive of notes and references) by June 1, 2027. This special issue of Italian Culture is scheduled for publication in Spring 2028.

Reference:

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