



Dickinson

<http://www.gendersexualityitaly.com>

g/s/i is an annual peer-reviewed journal which publishes research on gendered identities and the ways they intersect with and produce Italian politics, culture, and society by way of a variety of cultural productions, discourses, and practices spanning historical, social, and geopolitical boundaries.

Title: *Italy and the Ecological Imagination: Ecocritical Theories and Practices*, by Damiano Benvegnù and Matteo Gilebbi, eds.

Journal Issue: gender/sexuality/italy, 10 (2023)

Author: Daria Kozhanova

Publication date: 12/01/2024

Publication info: gender/sexuality/italy, “Reviews”

Permalink: <https://www.gendersexualityitaly.com/14-italy-and-the-ecological-imagination>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15781/s6mq-9995>

Keywords: Book Review

Copyright information

g/s/i is published online and is an open-access journal. All content, including multimedia files, is freely available without charge to the user or his/her institution and is published according to the Creative Commons License, which does not allow commercial use of published work or its manipulation in derivative forms. Content can be downloaded and cited as specified by the author/s. **However, the Editorial Board recommends providing the link to the article (not sharing the PDF) so that the author/s can receive credit for each access to his/her work, which is only published online.**



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs 3.0 Unported License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/3.0/)

Reviews

gender/sexuality/italy 10 I-II (2023-2024)

Benvegnù, Damiano and Matteo Gilebbi, eds. *Italy and the Ecological Imagination: Ecocritical Theories and Practices*. Wilmington: Vernon Press, 2022. Pp. 206. ISBN 9781648892257 (hardcover), 9781648895739 (paperback), 9781648895302 (PDF). \$ 86.00, \$ 49.00, \$ 93.00.

The environmental humanities and ecocriticism have proven to be one of the most rapidly evolving interdisciplinary fields within Italian Studies. This is reflected not only in the increasing number of publications but also in the dialogic nature of these works that share approaches and frameworks.

In line with onto-epistemological and ethical stances of Italian ecocriticism, the editors of *Italy and the Ecological Imagination*, Damiano Benvegnù and Matteo Gilebbi, urge to overcome anthropocentrism and the nature-culture divide which lie at the origin of the current environmental crisis. They introduce the volume by discussing an amendment to article 9 of the Italian Constitution that would recognize the protection of the environment, biodiversity, ecosystems, and nonhuman animals as obligations of the State. It would expand the Italian notion of the environment beyond the human-centered category of “landscape”—tied to “the historical and artistic heritage of the Nation,” according to the same article—and shift the focus from the safeguard of the past to protection of interests of future generations (vii).

The collection stems from the contradictions of Italian perspectives on the environment. As the editors put it, “a long-standing and admired anthropocentric representation of the land and its inhabitants as a harmonious pastoral whole” (ix)—an image of Italy as the country of idealized natural beauty—coexists with “alternative, less- or anti-anthropocentric trajectories of ecological resistance and liberation” (x) that the volume aims to investigate. “Resistance” and “liberation” recall Serenella Iovino’s *Ecocriticism and Italy* (2016) and *Italy and the Environmental Humanities* (2018) edited by Iovino, Enrico Cesaretti, and Elena Past, with whom Benvegnù and Gilebbi are in dialogue (they both contributed to that collection). Responding to their call to “defamiliarize the imagination of Italy” (Iovino, Cesaretti, and Past 2018, 6), Benvegnù and Gilebbi put at the center of their work the concept of “imagination” and examine “how our ability to form images and representations can help us to re-create, re-interpret, and [...] re-direct the biological and historical relationships pertaining to that specific dwelling of multispecies communities called Italy” (viii).

Most importantly, the volume is in conversation with international ecocritical scholarship, and one of its goals is “to diffract the ecological powers of Italian imagination to an audience beyond Italian Studies” (xv). The editors explain how the collection resonates with current trends in ecocriticism: the expansion of the field beyond the Anglophone context, a focus on non-literary cultural narratives, and the use of interdisciplinary methodologies (x-xi). Developing the approach of the mentioned *Italy and the Environmental Humanities*, the essays of this volume offer ecocritical interpretations of works of literature, art, and cinema and engage with various frameworks and disciplines—like environmental history (Serena Ferrando on slow violence in Cravasco) and animal studies (Alberto Baracco and Achille Castaldo on the animal gaze in Matteo Garrone’s and Pietro Marcello’s movies).

“The urgent need to rethink our conceptual and practical relationships with the nonhuman world” is reflected in the subtitle and the structure of the volume (viii). The ten chapters are divided into equal sections “Theories” and “Practices”: the essays of the former draw upon theoretical frameworks (such as posthumanism or new materialism), while the texts in the latter explore environmental issues of material realities. Nevertheless, as the editors underline, contributions from the two parts are interconnected (xii). For example, Paolo Saporito’s chapter on a “post-anthropocentric conception of walking” (71) and Jessica Sciubba’s essay on “counternarratives of collective resistance” (124) in women’s struggles for environmental justice are inspired by material

ecocriticism (Serenella Iovino and Serpil Oppermann) and material feminisms (Stacy Alaimo and Karen Barad)—approaches that highlight the agential forces of matter and its narrative agency. Both chapters are linked to Iovino’s contribution on different notions of “resistance” in the Anthropocene. In her reading of Primo Levi’s essay “Segni sulla pietra”/ “Signs on Stone” (1985), Iovino focuses on the “resistance” of matter that has “power and memory” and is “full of signs, which we inevitably interpret, and which we can learn to read as stories” (27). A starting point for her reflections is chewing gum on Turin’s sidewalks—“another little but unforgiving layer of the Anthropocene” (28).

The most intriguing parts of the volume are those essays in which the authors trace unexpected genealogies of Italian environmental thought—in accord with the editors’ intention to engage with “the rich set of approaches that Italian culture has had toward the physical environment and its inhabitants” (viii). As Benvegnù and Gilebbi observe, the humanistic tradition—man as the measure of all things—has been complemented by perspectives that question anthropocentrism as “inadequate to account for the complexity of the relationships between humans and the natural world” (ix). The first chapter, by Massimo Lollini, convincingly demonstrates connections between Giordano Bruno’s alternative religious thought (ideas of *anima mundi* and metempsychosis) and contemporary theories of anti-speciesism and posthumanism.

A different kind of genealogy is proposed by Emiliano Guaraldo Rodriguez who reads Guido Morselli’s post-apocalyptic novel *Dissipatio H.G.* (1977) as a “eco-political manifesto” that can “help us to challenge and expand some of the current socio-cultural implications of the Anthropocene thesis” (160). The very figure of the narrator—the last man investigating the “crime scene” of extinction—embodies a “deep-time archeological gaze of the Anthropocene” (162). Combining analysis of the text with the study of Morselli’s readings and his political background, the scholar concludes that for the Italian writer, forces of technocapitalism will cause the inevitable end of humanity—a critique which differs from some problematic discourses in the debates around culprits of the Anthropocene (overpopulation and “species thinking”). In her theoretically compelling essay, Danila Cannamela provides an original interpretation of the Italian feminism of sexual difference as a peculiar form of ecofeminism, underlining its “intrinsic” environmental thinking, centered on the investigation of language (40). She reads together philosophers of Diotima community (primarily Luisa Muraro’s works on linguistics and maternal language as well as Chiara Zamboni’s 2020 book with a distinctly ecological focus) alongside ecofeminists such as Val Plumwood and Carol Adams. Her analysis highlights how these (eco)feminist thinkers deconstruct patriarchal binaries (nature-culture, body-mind, language-matter) that justify the oppression of both women and nature.

One of the main strengths of the volume is that it features frameworks, such as ecofeminism and especially decolonial theory, that are still underrepresented in Italian ecocritical scholarship. Regarding the latter, Federico Luisetti interprets the works of Giuseppe Penone from the Arte Povera movement as European “earth beings”—as the anthropologist Marisol de la Cadena translates the Quechua word *tirakuna* that indicates entities of landscapes (like mountains and rivers). For Luisetti, similarly to indigenous and decolonial activists, the Piedmontese artist challenges the global environmental capitalist logic that turned “unruly” natural forces into governable “ecosystem services,” to rediscover, instead, “relational, contingent and multidimensional natures” (112).

While several chapters of the volume disclose transnational dimensions of environmental issues, the work as a whole does not engage with a transnational approach to Italian ecologies (see, for instance, recent studies on the environmental history of Italian mobilities: Biasillo, de Majo, and Valisena 2021). Answering the question, “What is Italy in our title?” (ix), Benvegnù and Gilebbi emphasize its “radical geo-cultural plurality,” which does not correspond to the socio-political unity of the Italian nation. However, they do not seem to rethink the very notion of “Italy” as the one that exceeds linguistic and national borders and which, also, is informed by transnational phenomena like

colonialism, migration, and emigration—a perspective that could have been an asset for their exploration of the nature-culture entanglements. Overall, though, *Italy and the Ecological Imagination* is an important and timely guide to Italian ecocriticism that reaffirms the role of humanities in reconfiguring our relationships with the nonhuman world.

DARIA KOZHANOVA
Duke University