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Author: Ruth Glynn

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Escolar, Marisa. *Allied Encounters: The Gendered Redemption of World War II Italy*. New York: Fordham University Press, 2019. Pp. 248. ISBN 978-0-8232-8449-8. \$ 35.00 (paperback).

Recent years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in Allied-occupied Italy and its cultural representation. In the Anglophone world, the republication of key works has been accompanied by substantial reviews in prominent newspapers and literary magazines, suggesting the relevance of World War II Italy to the contemporary presence of the US and UK military forces in Afghanistan and Iraq.¹ In Italy, the resurgence appears confined as yet to Naples, capitalizing perhaps on the prominence of the city in contemporary culture. In academia, the new wave of scholarship addressing the Allied occupation of Italy is indebted to the “transnational turn” in historical studies, and to new theoretical frames relating to race, gender, and postcoloniality.

Marisa Escolar’s *Allied Encounters* brings to the new wave of scholarship a detailed interrogation of cultural representations of the Allies’ presence in Italy, deriving from both Italian and Anglophone contexts. At the heart of this fascinating study is the question of Italy’s potential for redemption, in the wake of the 1943 armistice and the country’s break with Nazifascism in favor of political and military realignment with the Allied forces. As the subtitle implies, the analysis centers on the gendering of Italy in discourses relating to the country’s redemption, and their indebtedness to the historical and allegorical construction of Italy as a fallen woman, in the Dantean tradition. Balancing nuanced cultural critique with detailed historical contextualization, Escolar explores how the discursive construction of Italy’s redemption interacts with the realities of sexual encounters between servicemen and civilians in the “contact zone” (12; Pratt 1991) of World War II Italy.² In accordance with that conceptualization, Escolar’s study is underpinned by an acute awareness of the asymmetrical relations of power at work in such encounters and of their entanglement with race as well as gender. Escolar sheds light on the interconnections between the construction of Italy and Italians in US discourse and the racial makeup of the Allied forces, which include not only African American “buffalo soldiers” and Italian American GIs but also the colonial troops of the British and French armies. Constantly working to expose how interracial sexual encounters between “black” Allies and “white” Italians trouble both the traditional colonizer/colonized dynamic and the conventional rhetoric of “white masculine US redeeming black, feminized Italy” (7), she argues that the promise of the US to redeem Italy cannot be disentangled from the US’s racialized understanding of Italians or its domestic race relations.

Allied Encounters makes a compelling case for the centrality of cultural representations of Italy’s experience of liberation/occupation to the understanding of gender, race, and sex in World War II. The selected corpus ranges more widely than has been the case heretofore. Though largely focused on literary texts deriving from both the Italian and Anglophone world, the analysis also targets a small number of cinematic representations and previously untapped sources. One significant innovation is the inclusion of military guidebooks issued to US soldiers in advance of their deployment to Italy; another is the critical interrogation of neglected texts, especially by female authors, which bring a different perspective to bear on the feminization of Italy and the gendering of redemption.

Allied Encounters comprises six chapters, bookended by an introduction, providing historical and theoretical context, and a short epilogue. The analysis is organized geographically, centering on Rome and Naples. The first chapter addresses military guidebooks and traces the evolution of their discursive construction of Italy, from the first edition published prior to the Allies’ invasion in July 1943, through a revised edition following Italy’s military realignment, and on to a series of postwar

¹ Republications include Norman Lewis *Naples ’44* (2005); Curzio Malaparte’s *Kaputt* (2005) and *The Skin* (2013); John Horn Burns’ *The Gallery* (2013); and Alfred Hayes’ *The Girl on the Via Flaminia* (2018).

² Mary Louise Pratt, “Arts of the Contact Zone,” *Profession* (1991): 33-40. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25595469>.

editions (1952-87). It identifies in the earliest edition a paradoxical propensity to both virilize Italians as colonial aggressors and feminize them as primitive victims, while also portraying Italian women as the embodiment of the seductive “allure of false Italy” (22). Analysis of the numerous revisions relate the increasing feminization of Italy to a repositioning of the country as an exotic, beautiful, and primitive place, redeemed for consumption, tourism, and leisure. Comparative analysis of military guidebooks to Germany and France underscores the peculiarity of feminization to US constructions of Italy.

Chapters Two and Three are dedicated to “liberated” Rome and eschew canonical texts in favor of lesser known or neglected representations. Chapter Two reads two novels by US serviceman Alfred Hayes, *All Thy Conquests* (1946) and *The Girl on the Via Flaminia* (1949), against the critically marginalized Rome episode of Roberto Rossellini’s *Paisà* (*Paisan*, 1946). In a nuanced and highly perceptive critique, Escobar argues that, while confirming the stereotype of a feminized and sexualized Italy, the foregrounding of the prostitute in all three texts represents an attempt to divert attention from contemporary events that might threaten the myth of redemption or, by evoking widespread practice of lynching in the US, pose a challenge to “the civic health of the supposed redeemers” (47). Chapter Three’s focus on true romance novels by Luciana Peverelli, *La lunga notte* (*The Long Night*, 1944) and *Sposare lo straniero* (*Marry the Foreigner*, 1946), provides a valuable corrective to male-centered representations of the “fallen” Italian woman. Engaging explicitly with the gendered violence of occupation and the gendering of redemption, Peverelli’s novels posit women as “borderline” spaces for the renegotiation of postwar Italian identity and, in a further critique of official rhetoric, relocate redemption outside of the patriarchal institution of marriage and within the transnational bonds of friendship between Italian war brides.

The second half of the book focuses on Naples and sheds light on the transnational dimension of the Allied encounter. Chapter Four addresses John Horne Burns’ *The Gallery* (1947) and establishes the centrality of its transnational narrative to its recuperation of queer bodies and spaces and its reconceptualization of Italy as a site of queer redemption. The following chapter treats Curzio Malaparte’s *La pelle* (*The Skin*, 1949) and brings to the gendered discourse of redemption a nuanced appreciation of its intersection with race. Moving beyond exploration of how the gendered, racialized bodies of Neapolitan women, black US soldiers, and Franco-Moroccan *goumiers* intertwine with historical referent and allegory, Escobar’s perceptive critique unveils the bias of *La pelle*’s redemptive conclusion and locates its origins in unresolved traumas surrounding slavery, colonization, and mass rape. A particularly welcome addition to scholarship is the final chapter’s blistering critique of Norman Lewis’ *Naples ’44* (1979), read alongside Patierno’s cinematic adaptation (2015) and against *La pelle*. Escobar exposes the extent to which Lewis’ supposed “diary” borrows from Malaparte and rewrites with sober realism and “under the cover of British objectivity” (146) grotesque accounts of sexual practices and gender violence originally presented with hyperbole to make readers question their veracity. The critique invites a more skeptical approach to Lewis’ account of gender relations in Allied-occupied Italy and a reassessment of its historical reliability.

The Epilogue’s discussion of *Quel giorno trent’anni fa* (*That Day Thirty Years Ago*, 1975) by aristocrat Maria Luisa D’Aquino reaffirms once more the alignment of the personal and the national in the discourse of gendered redemption explored throughout *Allied Encounters*. However, as Escobar argues, D’Acquino’s rejection of the “fallen woman” frame and her establishment of an allegorical connection between herself, as “mutilated widow”, and the “mutilated” nation reinscribes at the center of representation both the female body, in all its physicality, and an assertive female voice.

Positioned as it is at the nexus of historical and cultural critique, *Allied Encounters* will be of broad interest to students and scholars of Italian history and culture. Its theoretical sophistication and critical acuity result in a highly sensitive reading of the multiplicity of encounters at the heart of Allied-occupied Italy, encounters that “renegotiate conventional rhetorical alignments of gender, sexuality

and nationality, as they intersect with, and are troubled by race” (7). The interrogation of previously overlooked sources and critically neglected works by female authors alongside reinterpretations of canonical texts sheds significant new light on transnational encounters, and it establishes the Allied Occupation of Italy and its representation as fertile terrain for further enquiry. Scholars would do well to treat Escobar’s study as a model.

RUTH GLYNN
University of Bristol