

---

## Book Review

---

Francesca Ciancimino Howell, *Food, Festival and Religion: Materiality and Place in Italy* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018), 224 pp., \$114.00 (hbk), ISBN: 978-1-3500-2086-3.

Considerations about ritual, materiality, and sense of place have been among the great absentees in the recent wave of research that attempts to link religion with the quest for a more respectful relationship with the environment. This is an even more surprising gap, given the prominence of ritual in classic environmental anthropology. Addressing it, therefore, is one of the greatest merits of Francesca Ciancimino Howell's last book, *Food, Festival and Religion: Materiality and Place in Italy*.

An independent scholar and Adjunct Faculty at Naropa University (USA) with a diverse background that includes Wiccan service, acting, and environmental activism, Howell is also an Italian-American who knows and 'feels' Italian culture beyond the frequent limits of academic research, having maintained family ties and lived in different locations of Italy for substantial parts of her life. A sharp understanding of tacit nuances in Italian cultural codes and in the relationship with places, food, and communal eating is another of the most convincing qualities of *Food, Festival and Religion*, which is indeed a product of that prolonged frequentation. This prolonged frequentation and understanding are added values that Howell brings to the question of 'how bonds with landscape and community are [...] manifested through material religion, food and feasting, customing, calendrical ritual gatherings and other traditions' (p. 1).

Howell addresses her guiding question and the resulting argument 'that festivals can aid communities, organizers, and participants in engaging with place more deeply' by combining a rather composite theoretical framework and five ethnographic case studies (p. 169). While the theoretical influences are diverse, some authors and terms in particular are key to the argument and recur throughout the book. These include notions like 'liminality' (Victor Turner), 'relational epistemology', and 'dwelling' in the environment (Tim Ingold, Graham Harvey), 'heterotopia' (i.e., manifestations of 'counter' or 'other space' found in all cultures, as theorized by Foucault), as well as discussions of the materiality of nature and the power of place. Chapter 1 introduces these and other conceptual foundations, while the second chapter explores more specifically the role of ritual and festival as community- and place-making moments, with special emphasis on the Italian context. There, Howell underlines the plethora of rituals and festivals encountered in present-day Italy, spanning from actual religious festivities to secular food fairs. In my opinion she correctly takes the late industrialization of the country and survival of many agricultural customs (she will later describe the co-existence of apparently contrasting

cultural elements in contemporary Italy as 'a Latourian hybrid of premodern, modern and postmodern'; p. 145) to explain this wealth of collective celebrations and the ubiquitous prominence of foodways as a ritual focus.

Chapters 3 and 4 are dedicated to Howell's original ethnographic material. The five case studies are all situated in the northern regions of Piedmont and Lombardy, and chosen so as to enable comparisons between a wide range of situations: there is the extremely traditional village festival, attended by a local community of just a couple hundred souls and whose origins are so remote that they are lost in the mist; there is the recently established countryside festival with a broader commercial appeal but still solidly anchored in local productions; and there is the huge event downtown Milano, visited by thousands and loosely inspired by local history. As a methodological choice, Howell does not engage with religious festivals proper and patron Saint celebrations as are found all across Italy, but 'traditional' happenings are still well-represented in the form of harvest festivals and Carnivals. On the other hand, one of her case studies brings an evident wave of novelty to the study of religion and ritual in contemporary Italy, focusing on a gathering of the rather young Italian Pagan movement, to which Howell dedicates all of Chapter 5.

In general, all case studies include a good amount of contextual information situating them historically and sociologically, interviews with organizers and simple participants, and snapshots of the author dealing with her ritual surroundings, whether in the dark streets of an Alpine village or in the lights of Milano's main public park. A surprising and yet convincing finding of this ethnographical work is that, despite their structural differences, all of these events, from the traditional to the more commercial, are experienced by participants as real occasions for performing and reaffirming, often through the communal consumption of 'local' food, bonds to place and community.

The last two chapters are again dedicated to theory. Chapter 6 reprises the framework introduced at the beginning of the book and reviews it in the light of the empirical work presented, while Chapter 7 elaborates a quantitative metric named 'scale of engagement', which aims to analyze and index how strongly the different festivals interact with place and community.

Overall, *Food, Festival and Religion* makes for an enjoyable and interesting read, aided by Howell's light writing, which counterbalances the theoretically thicker parts, making the book accessible to different academic audiences. Some choices both in the analyses and text organization may raise a few eyebrows. For example, the ethnographic accounts may feel somewhat choppy, as each of them is split in a number of subthemes, whereas I would have personally enjoyed a more linear and detailed exposition. Similarly, while agreeing that a tool is desirable for indexing the festivals along some key features, some of the scores assigned on the proposed scale can appear arbitrary at times, making one wonder whether a less strictly quantitative approach would not have better suited the purpose. This being said, these are just minor flaws in a book that has the undeniable merits of capturing the profundity of the links between people and landscapes in southern Europe and shedding light on an ancient but still vital nexus between foodways, ritual, and sense of belonging to places and communities.

Fabrizio Frascaroli, PhD  
University of Bologna  
fabrizio.frascaroli2@unibo.it