

Dissertation Abstract

In my dissertation, *Feeding Fascism: Tabletop Politics in Italy and Italian East Africa, 1922- 1945*, I examine propaganda, ephemera, built environments, and kitchen objects to illustrate how both women and the Italian State attempted to control food in its many manifestations - cooking, feeding, and eating - to assert and negotiate power. Because the Fascist government physically touched the populous through the production and consumption of commercial goods and spaces, food is an ideal medium for uncovering the mechanisms of national politics at work in everyday life. To that end, my thesis focuses on four topics: (1) negotiations between women and the regime in terms of the industrialization of breastfeeding to decrease infant mortality, (2) debates over proper kitchen design and use to economize domestic work, (3) arbitration of the *mondine*'s (female rice workers') political identity through women's work songs and regime propaganda, and (4) commercial attempts to cast East African women and their labor as Italian consumer products. My organizational trajectory carries the reader from the intimate to the foreign, in terms of both location (moving from the nursery to the marketplace) and geography (moving from Italy to Italian East Africa). It also traces a natural progression among four different Fascist obsessions: pronatalism, rationalism, autarchy, colonialism, and back to pronatalism, to reveal the intimate in the foreign. This structural arc reflects my argument that women continually created and expressed their political subjectivity in direct relation to the places where they lived and worked and the objects that they owned and borrowed. Against the dominant characterization of women's response to regime dictates as one of passive consent, I argue that female citizens and the State actively negotiated for sovereignty over women's labor in through material culture on a daily basis, ultimately demonstrating the ordinariness of power.

In the first chapter, "How to Build the Perfect *Mamma*: Taylorist Breastfeeding, Rationalist Clinics, and the Construction of Industrial Motherhood," I interweave evidence from propagandistic film, periodicals, and clinic architecture promoted by the National Bureau for the Protection of Maternity and Infancy (known by the Italian acronym O.N.M.I.) to compare recommended and actual use of clinics, ultimately arguing that the State tried to control breastfeeding by framing it as a public, medical practice. In my study of propagandistic film (*Alle Madri d'Italia* [*To the Mothers of Italy*]), I analyze how the film's dichotomization of the midwife/home and the doctor/clinic used gendered characterizations to denigrate female healthcare practitioners and practices as old-fashioned, dirty, and immoral. I contend that this move creates a professional lacuna to be filled by male State-affiliated medics. Next, I analyze O.N.M.I. periodicals (*Maternità e Infanzia* [*Motherhood and Childhood*]), and clinic financing, construction, layouts, and rules to compare the intended and actual use of these spaces. In propagandistic film and periodicals, clinics house organized rows of women breastfeeding at timed intervals overseen by a foreman-like doctor, a practice that I term "Taylorist breastfeeding." I demonstrate that the coerced shift in breastfeeding location from the home to government-run clinics illustrates the struggle for control over maternity and the future body politic.

My second chapter, "Invisible Servants for the Modern Hostess: Rationalism, Practicality, and the Politics of Kitchen Design," compares the organization and use of kitchens to explore how women and the State conceived and made use of the symbolic relationship connecting the individual home to the homeland. Specifically, I examine how architecture journals such as *Domus* and *Casabella's Costruzioni* (*Constructions*) advocate rationalist kitchens design in the new *case popolari* (public housing projects) to increase the productivity of women's domestic labor. But I contend that convenience, rather than consent, motivated women to adopt these practices or not: by tracing the narrative treatment of autarchy in best-selling household manuals as well as articles and cartoons in women's almanacs from major publishers, I show that women appropriated the rhetoric of economy and war to justify food purchase decisions and preparation methods that promoted the good of the family over the good of the nation. Similarly, I compare the aesthetics and use of kitchen appliances

and objects (toasters, tea and coffee sets, bread plates) to show how women used Italian designs to inscribe foreign foodstuffs and rituals, like afternoon tea, within the acceptable definition of domestic products and practices. Overall, my analysis suggests that the State used the relationship between the home and the homeland to advocate economizing time and ingredients in the kitchen to benefit Italy's economy, whereas women made use of this relationship to elevate the status of their family's needs to a matter of national importance.

In my third chapter, "Singing Truth to Power: How Agricultural Workers used Music to Manage Pain and Politics," I investigate how the *mondine* (female rice weeders) interacted with State demands for the labor of female bodies to feed the nation. Interviews and songs clarify how women reconciled their disagreement with elements of Fascist policy with their agricultural work on behalf of the regime's call for alimentary autarchy. I frame these tactics against State narratives that attempt to cast the *mondina* as a symbol of productive Fascist womanhood, regularly producing rice and infants in accordance with State policies of alimentary autarchy and pronatalism. The design process by which the graphic artists for the National Rice Board (Ente Nazionale Risi) constructed photocollages for propaganda reveals the regime's persistent challenges in posing the *mondina* as a figure of consent. Finally, I trace rice, the finished product, from its place of production, the Northern fields, to a State-contested zone of consumption, the Southern kitchen, to demonstrate how both the government and private companies used *ricettari* (propagandistic recipe pamphlets) to push Southern women to adopt Northern food ways. The visual and textual strategies used in this attempt at culinary nationalization and homogenization speak to a broader debate between citizens and the regime regarding who has the right to taste. In sum, the State's call for increased domestic production of both consumers and consumables played out both on and in the female body. Fascism's vision of hyperproductive female bodies nationally engaged in alimentary autarchy ultimately disintegrated in the face of women's insistence on the right to consume a varied and flavorful diet.

My fourth chapter, "Black Milk: Consuming Africa in Italy" uses menus, diaries, scrapbooks, and oral histories to investigate how Italian female colonists and East African women negotiated for control over food and foodways in Italian East Africa (modern-day Somalia, Ethiopia, and Eritrea.) I argue that Italian manipulation of food and foodways in sub-Saharan Africa drew power from scripted ways of cooking and eating and suggest that women subverted these scripts through culinary translation, rewriting Italian recipes with Ethiopian, Eritrean, and Somali ingredients. By focusing my historical study on tabletop politics to reveal women's political agency in everyday life under Fascism, I will frame the contemporary issues of literary, bodily, and culinary production across East Africa and Italy within the larger questions of authorship, agency, and taste. To examine women's daily lives in Somalia and Eritrea, I analyze female colonist's diaries and scrapbooks in relation with East African women's oral histories of domestic work in Italian homes to trace the lines of race and gender in terms of cooking and feeding. Specifically, I investigate how female colonists' narratives of East African women's intimate labor, such as interracial wetnursing and the preparation of African foods for Italian children, in relation with East African women's oral histories of feeding work. To contextualize these personal histories, I examine colonial menus, cookbooks, and culinary propaganda in relation with East African and Italian women's diaries, scrapbooks, and postcolonial oral histories to investigate the legacy of alimentary politics in migrant communities. The postcolonial narratives of authors and poets like Gabriella Ghermandi, Igiaba Scego, Cristina Uba Ali Farah, and Ribka Sibhatu echo domestic concerns from the colonial period in their novels and their poetry and demonstrate how oral history influences transnational literary culture today, revealing how social roles in colonial homesteads continue to shape work in contemporary homes.

Collectively, these four chapters contribute a new perspective to recent debates in women's cultural history, particularly those concerning women's personal use of State ideology and food's role in reconstructing women's history. Most past discussions have posited two opposing approaches, suggesting either that the using food, cooking, and feeding to decipher women's daily political lives recreates patriarchal power structures and reduces women to domestic roles or that the culinary does not constitute a sufficiently serious topic for inclusion in the history of gender. In contrast, I argue for a food-based material culture studies reading in this context. I argue that the study of food and foodways is important precisely because women spent much of their daily lives engaged in this activity. Excluding consideration of food from women's history means ignoring how many women spent much of their time. Further, I contend that ignoring this aspect of women's history reflects the historic denigration of practices, work, and spaces associated with women. In many ways, my work tries to address and build on the impasses that characterized critical discussions regarding the historical and geographic specificity of gendered bodies and power. Specifically, scholars have pointed to the need for concrete and detailed evidence to understand culture in the private sphere, as well as increased emphasis on individuals' choices to evoke the diversity of women's history. To contribute to these scholarly debates, my dissertation situates new examples of material culture within the broader context of power negotiations between women and the State, ultimately adding an adaptive and resourceful approach to the scholarship of the modern history of gender and culture.