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**Abstract:** Under Mussolini's dictatorship, both the physical abuses of a misogynist state and the political power of female friendship were written in the sensory details of agricultural workers' everyday lives. This article uses archival and melodic evidence from the sensorial world of interwar Italy to explore four interlinked case studies, ultimately revealing what is at stake in women's work songs. First, written testimonials and transcriptions from oral interviews show that, for many *mondine*, as the women workers in the rice paddies were called, their first moment of class consciousness occurred in transit. In train cars and depots, rice weeders came to understand their bodies as under reform by their migrant agricultural work. Upon arrival in the rice paddies, they gathered straw for mattresses to sleep in horse stables. Next, anger and resistance bloomed through work songs that privileged communal, turn-taking formats. It was a way to practice for alternative styles of rule. Finally, with songs like “The Union” (“La Lega”), women articulated their vision of the future: through battle hymns like this, they would raise the flags of Socialism and Communism. By swelling the union ranks, women vowed to bring about an egalitarian future in direct defiance of Fascism's autocratic rule.

**Keywords:** mondine, rice, Fascism, monda, lega, rice paddy, agriculture, friendship, song

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# Riding the Stock Car to Sleep in the Stables: Migrant Agricultural Labor and Songs of Rebellion

DIANA GARVIN

From the dark heart of the Fascist *ventennio*, female rice workers (*mondine*) sang songs of sadness and of protest. The choral format of these melodies informs the concordant, overlapping structure of this article's guiding question: in the context of Italian Fascism, how did the material world of the rice paddy shape women's politics? What tactics did the *mondine* use to manage power from above (the state, the *capo*, the landowner)? And most centrally: How did the *mondine*'s work and working conditions shape their resistance?

This article examines the physical world of the rice weeders drawn from over thirty regional archives and *mediateche* spread across the Italian Po Valley, the *mondine*'s ancestral home.<sup>1</sup> Records include diaries, work songs, and photographs. Materials of the sensory world, often written in the first-person, attest to what it felt like to weed the paddies, sleep in the stables, and dance in the fields. Methodologically, I approach these historical places and objects as scripts that encourage, but do not command, meaningful bodily behaviors, in this case songs of rebellion and acts of protest.

Prompts—not performances—constitute the artifacts of this historical catalogue. If we look and listen carefully, examination of this catalogue can produce new knowledge about the sensorial landscapes of past experience. Rural, working-class women like the rice weeders were often treated as secondary historical subjects. Later, so too were the quotidian materials and regional archives that record their history. This article will use women's own words to describe these critical moments whenever possible, the better to center them as subjects. These testimonials largely come from the Archivio dei Diari in Pieve Santo Stefano, outside of Arezzo in Tuscany. Because testimonials constitute memories of the past composed in the present, their interpretation requires consideration of the context in which these women recorded their stories. To interpret these materials, I draw on Luisa Passerini's approach, "All memory is valid, the guiding principle should be that all autobiographical memory is true; it is up to the interpreter to discover in what sense, where, how, and for which purpose."<sup>2</sup> In the context of the testimonials, I take this historiographic approach to mean that every *mondina*'s history blends objective and subjective information. These forms of evidence are equal in value—they simply offer different kinds of information.

Historiography of the *mondine* originally focused on nineteenth-century anthropological accounts of rice women's weeding work, and later on ethnomusicology of their work songs in the 1950s *Riso Amaro* era, just prior to Italy's economic boom. For instance, the *mondine* played a crucial role in female workers' mobilization both before and after Fascism, as noted by Barbara Imbergamo. In its citation of local experts in town-level histories of the *mondine* from scholars like Cristina Ghirardini and Nunzia Manicardi, it highlights the divergences and catalogues the continuities of Northern Italian women's rice weeding work over time. Moreover, it builds on more general oral histories of countrywomen's work under Fascism, including oral historians like Nuto Revelli and labor historians like Perry Willson. This article builds on these histories by providing in-depth accounts from individual rice weeders, cast in their own words. As such, it stands on the shoulders of critical works

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on this subject, please see Joan Scott, "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis." *The American Historical Review* 91 no. 5 (1986); Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981; Peter Filene, "Integrating Women's History and Regular History." *The History Teacher* 13, no. 4 (1980): 483; Susan Pedersen, "The Future of Feminist History." American Historical Association Conference Presentation for the Committee of Women Historians. Essay printed in *Perspectives on History*, October 2000; Bonnie Smith, "Women's History: A Retrospective from the United States." *Signs* 35 no. 3 (2010): 723-747.

<sup>2</sup> Passerini, *Fascism in Popular Memory*, 27.

from musician-scholars like Giovanna Marini, as well as more oral history accounts like those from Marco Minardi and Franco Castelli.

In reflection of the style and structure of the rice weeders' own stories, the following four sections examine those moments of the 40-day *monda*, or weeding period, that women return to over and over in their memories: the departure from their hometowns in the *carri bestiame* (train cars for stock animals), the pleasures and irritations of dormitory life, the physical conditions of labor in the fields with special attention to its effects on the female body, and the political content and broader significance of *mondine* protest songs. I include the five additional testimonies to offer alternate catalogues of specifics of the *monda* as well as the broad body of evidence to guard against essentializing Chierici's account. Ultimately, this leader-ensemble format evokes the range of women's voices, in both their diversity and their harmony. By linking these singular accounts from the Fascist period to these broader studies, I hope to show how this particular form of agricultural work changed under the dictatorship. At stake in this question lies the politicization of women's bodies.

Antonietta Chierici provides a particularly vivid reflection of the physical travails of rice weeding under Fascism. Her observations provide primary evidence across the case studies examined here. Chierici recorded her early memories of her family's rural *bracciante* household in the town of Correggio, in the inland Emilia region of Emilia Romagna, North Central Italy. The heart of her story, written in 2006, beats with the sayings, habits, and movements of her mother, who remains paradoxically nameless in this testimonial. Chierici narrated her *mondina* mother's interwar experiences through her careful inventory of material specifics.

Her catalogue of daily life evokes a politicized countryside. Photos of Togliatti, Gramsci, Lenin sat next to images of the Jesus, Mary, and Joseph on her parents' dressers. Copies of *Grand Hotel* hid under her mother's straw-filled mattress. The scent-scape of woodsmoke from the hearth and winter mold emanated from the walls. Her father spoke with evident pride of her mother's "robust and agile worker's body," its rosy muscles shaped by her work as a *mondina*. "Sei il mio uomo di casa" (You're my man of the house) he cooed to her when she returned from the fields.

This evocative account of a *mondina*'s daily life provides one voice in a larger chorus: Laura Scalabrini, Angela Baldi, Ermanna Chiozzi, Ivana Cipolli, and Maria Verzani also lived in Emilia Romagna and worked as *mondine* during the Fascist period. Their five testimonies refer to the same arc of time, and were recorded in the contemporary period (from 1960, and from 1997 to 2010). These women share Chierici's central positioning of female family members in their narrative construction, as well as her emphasis on the early sensory impressions of everyday life and their lasting effect on the women's conception of themselves as gendered- and classed-subjects. Selections from Marco Minardi and Franco Castelli's transcribed interviews from 108 *mondine* from across Northern Italy help to contextualize the detailed recollections in these testimonies. Such materials center women's jokes, songs, laments, and vows. Their words, not mine, matter most.

These materials largely come from the Archivio Nazionale Diaristico in Pieve Santo Stefano, a small town outside of Arezzo in Tuscany. With over 6,500 autobiographical diaries, workbooks, albums, and letters to choose from, the National Diary Archive provides critical first-hand accounts of working-class Italian women's experiences. Many women who contributed materials to the archive received only a year or two of formal schooling, but learned to read and write later in life. As grandmothers and great-grandmothers, they wanted to pass on their wartime experiences to their younger family members, and to historians as well. While these records by no means present a complete account of life under Fascism, they do provide an incredibly important account of history from below. That is, they speak to the experience of those who—because of their gender, their poverty, and their seasonal agricultural work—were among the most exposed to the dictatorship's

cruelties. Their anti-Fascist work songs provide an extraordinary roadmap for resistance. They tell us what happened to rice workers under Fascism, starting with the return of the swallows each spring.

*Riding in the Stock Car: Departure for the Rice Paddies*

Every year in early May, Northern Italian train depots turned yellow with the characteristic straw hats of the *mondine*. In 1938, 62,500 of these migrant agricultural workers flooded the stations on their way to the yearly *monda* (the annual rice weeding period that ranged from 40 to 60 days) in the fields surrounding the Lombard cities of Vercellese, Novarese, and Lomellina, towns that centered Italy's rice belt.<sup>3</sup> Some came from nearby, arriving by bike. Others came from up to 100 miles away, riding in the *carri bestiame*, train cars that typically carried animal rather than human cargo (Fig. 1).<sup>4</sup> Scalabrini recalled the sensation of distance between her hometown in Castel d'Ario in Mantua to Vercellese, "era come oggi andare a CUBA," (it was like going to CUBA would be today).<sup>5</sup> Rest stops provided festivity and refreshment, as women entertained themselves by singing or cooled off with a drink of water (Fig. 2). Whether memories of their departure were negative or positive, many women pointed to the space of the train depot and the moment of departure for the *risaia* as an emotionally resonant threshold.<sup>6</sup>



Fig. 1: Photograph of *mondine* in a *carro-bestiame* (Camera Generale di Lavoro [CGIL], Modena, Italy)

<sup>3</sup> *Campagna monda del riso anno 1938*. Rome: Confederazione Fascista Lavoratori Agricoltura, Ed. Franco Angelini. 1938, p. 11. Statistics break down departures from Alessandria to Vicenza, with arrivals in Vercelli (24,200 rice workers), Novara (14,000), Pavia (22,900), and Milan (1,400).

<sup>4</sup> Speaking of stock cars with human cargo during the Fascist period inevitably recalls the concentration camp transport system, both in Italy at Risiera di San Sabbia and Renicci di Anghiari, and in Europe at large. For an in-depth study, see [Stefano Maggi](#), *Ferrovia e identità nazionale*, in *Tutto Treno*, 248. January 2011.

<sup>5</sup> Scalabrini, "Sette pater ave e gloria," 4. Capitalization in original.

<sup>6</sup> This mode of *mondine* transport dates back to the late 1800s, to Italian Unification. Connecting the countryside via rail was one of the first major infrastructure projects undertaken by the new state. In the Rice Belt, the [Società per le Ferrovie dell'Alta Italia](#) (SFAI), laid 2 200 kilometers of track, including those discussed in this article. Francesco Ogliaari, *Storia dei trasporti italiani*, vol. 21.



Fig. 2: Photograph of *mondine* in a train stop (Camera Generale di Lavoro [CGIL], Modena, Italy)

Riding in stock cars inevitably raised questions of class status. Some *mondine* recalled that this mode of transportation equated them with work horses. The Parmentese *mondine* frequently lodged complaints with the prefecture and police headquarters, asking for “carrozze normali, riservati ... Un modo di viaggiare un po’ più umano,” (normal cars, reserved ones ... A more humane mode of travel.)<sup>7</sup> Whistle-stop respites brought these questions to the fore, as women of vastly different social classes met. Chierici, voicing her mother, recalls a “humiliating episode” at a train depot, where she overheard a mother and daughter “of clear bourgeois extraction” chatting about the *mondine*.

“Sono le mondine e vanno a mondare il riso nelle risaie”  
 —spiegò lei —  
 “Poverine!”  
 — esclamò la bimba con compassione e la madre per tranquillizzarla le rispose:  
 “Ma sono donne fatte apposta!”  
 Dal vagone sentirono e si indignarono e gridarono verso la donna:  
 “Vergognati di dare questa riposte! Noi siamo donne fatte come te!”<sup>8</sup>

This interchange speaks to the contested role of the *mondina*’s body in defining her social standing. The *borghese* woman claims that the *mondine*’s bodies predestine them for physical labor. She speaks about the *mondine* in front of the *mondine*, apparently not considering the likelihood that they would talk back. Dehumanizing the group in this way works to justify their treatment. The *mondine*, for their part, are insulted (*si indignarono*) by the implication of her reply—that they are more body than mind. The terms of their response echo the woman’s words even as they invert them. Their pride is

<sup>7</sup> Minardi, *La fatica delle donne: storie di mondine*, 22.

<sup>8</sup> Chierici, “Mia madre: una donna dell’Emilia,” 5.

“They are rice weeders and they’re going to weed rice in the rice paddies”  
 — she explained —  
 “The poor things!”  
 — exclaimed the daughter with compassion and the mother to calm her replied:  
 “But they’re women made for that!”  
 From the wagon they heard and they were filled with indignation and yelled at the woman:  
 “You should be ashamed to give that reply! We’re women made like you!”

wounded, but the *mondine* say that the *borgnese* is the one who ought to be ashamed. They are embarrassed by the *borgnese's* suggestion that they are made for work, and assert instead that they are all made the same way. Both parties invoke the female body, but whereas the *borgnese* focuses on the body to connote difference, the *mondine* highlight their common status as women. By telling the woman that she ought to be ashamed of herself, the *mondine* state that it is the *borgnese*, not the *mondine*, who lacks dignity and elegance, the very characteristics that purportedly mark high social class. Further, the *mondine* appeal to the commonalities of gender inherent in the *borgnese's* reference to women as a binding factor, enlarging the collective we of the *mondine* to swallow the *borgnese* as well. They use gender equivalence to subsume class difference. In this dialogue, the *mondine's* address to the woman in the informal *tu* form, as well as their use of the collective subject *noi*, are both typical of the recorded speech of the *mondine*, and uncommon for interclass dialogue at the time. The group-based strength of the communal pronoun allows these women to feel at ease using the informal “you” to address a woman of a higher social class.

Whether as a positive or negative space, women recalled the liminal juncture of the train depot with heightened sensory detail in comparison with their accounts of the workday in the fields. This narrative treatment, whether intentional or subconscious, points to the women’s destination, the rice fields, as a space of exception, and, for many of the younger women (ages 14 to 18), a sort of coming-of-age ritual. Although adult women from ages 14 to over 65 worked in the rice fields, and despite the fact that many *mondine* returned year after year for work, most former *mondine* highlight their teenage years in the testimonials.<sup>9</sup> They point to these 40 days as their first significant move away from their families, and to the joys and sorrows associated with this shift. Mothers and daughters alike describe life in the female dormitories as a double movement: away from their own families, and towards temporary but deeply felt female-female connections. As Ermanna Chiozzi summed up, “...tra le persone di una stessa tenuta vi era grande solidarietà” (between people of the same upbringing there was great solidarity).<sup>10</sup>

### *Sleeping in the Stable: Arrival at the Rice Paddies*

As soon as the women arrived at the *risaia*, a mad rush to fill their sack mattresses with straw provided by the landowner typically ensued (Fig. 3). It took several prickly nights to crush the straw to an endurable softness, but by then fleas had often moved in as well.<sup>11</sup> Former *mondine* often characterized these social bonds as a being like those that men typically experienced in the army, referring to their housing structures as a sort of *caserma* (military dormitory) for women. As Anna Quintavalla put it, “Le novizie avevano le loro penitenze [risata] ... Era un po’ come a miliare” (The novices had to pay their dues [laughter] ... It was a bit like being in the military).<sup>12</sup> In a continuation of the work horse metaphor suggested by the stock cars, women slept in converted horse stables (Fig. 4). Because these structures slept between 40 to 60 women, introverted and extroverted *mondine* reacted quite differently to this massive female collective. Someone was always singing, gossiping, or trying to sleep.

<sup>9</sup> Minardi, *La fatica delle donne: storie di mondine*, 17.

<sup>10</sup> Ermanna Chiozzi. Testimony of Ermanna Chiozzi “Ermanna nella storia fra arte e racconti,” 1933-1946. Transcript of manuscript MP/Adn2 04629, Archivio dei Diari, Pieve Santo Stefano, Italy.

<sup>11</sup> Minardi, *La fatica delle donne: storie di mondine*, 58.

<sup>12</sup> Minardi, 44.



Fig. 3: Photo of Women's Dormitory Interior, pre-mattress stuffing, Vercellese, Italy, 1912, in *Supplemento al Bollettino del Ufficio di Lavoro* 14, Rome, 1912 (Economics and Public Affairs Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)



Fig. 4: Photo of Women's Dormitory, Vercellese, Italy, 1912, in *Supplemento al Bollettino del Ufficio di Lavoro* 14, Rome, 1912 (Economics and Public Affairs Division, New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden Foundations)

Pranks were common as well: a common favorite involved wearing one's underwear on one's head and parading about the dormitory. As Milena Scalabrini accounts, "...guardavo quella gente e mi sembravano matti, chi aveva le mutande in testa, chi era in camicia di notte, chi portava il maiale in braccio avendo solo quella risorsa, altri che pregavano con il rosario in mano, io mi guardavo attorno inconsciente..." (I looked at those people and they seemed crazy to me, one with underwear on her

head, one in a nightshirt, one carrying a pig under her arm having only that resource, others praying with the rosary in hand, I looked around in disbelief...). Anna Quintavalla recalled how her adopted *mamma* would play pranks, such as hiding stinging nettles in her mattress that forced her to remake the bed from scratch. She further recalled “Dopo aver cenato tutte fuori in cortile, c’era chi cantava, chi giocava ... a cavaluccio, a scacchi ...” (After having eaten outside in the barnyard, some sang, some played ... piggyback riding, chess ...).<sup>13</sup> The fact that these women engaged in a variety of physical and intellectual games in their rare spare time underlines the variety of personalities among the collective.

The female gender of the occupants marked this arena as a separate space from the mixed-gender reality of the outside world, allowing women to demarcate the dormitory as their own. Many further characterized this zone as being outside the rules of normal class relations and property ownership as well. Time spent within its walls, rather than money paid to build them, dictated possession. Velia Tarroni remembers,

Una volta venne il padrone, viene dentro, all’improvviso, con uno del paese, un gradasso *neh*... E *alor a go dit*: “Chi vi ha detto di entrare?” E allora lui, il padrone, ha detto: “Sono a casa mia...” “No. Adesso no, in questo periodo lui qui non comanda. Adesso andate fuori, chiedete permesso e se noi diciamo permesso potete entrare altrimenti ve ne state fuori.”<sup>14</sup>

In Tarroni’s account, the social rules that govern the dormitory vary according to whether or not the *mondine* currently occupy it. The boss considers the dormitory his because he has paid for the property, but the *mondine* maintain that during the *monda*, their residence in the dorm marks the space as being outside of boss’ command. The interchange turns on the defense of physical borders, which echoes a more general concern for maintaining the sanctity of an explicitly female space. The women’s treatment of the dormitory suggests a metaphoric extension of the female bodies that temporarily occupy it. This line of reasoning suggests that the body that uses or works at particular area becomes its de facto owner. The *mondine* argue for a multiplicity of senses of ownership, recognizing the validity of the *padrone*’s understanding while also asserting the logic of their own alternate form.

Just as the *mondine* treated the dormitory as a house of women, they similarly cast their friendships in the domestic terms of female family. Older *mondine* often adopted new arrivals, who alternately describe their relation to the more experienced women as that of a daughter to a single woman or of a mascot of the group.<sup>15</sup> As Anna Quintavalla recounts, women often forged such connections in intense episodes of semi-public affirmation in the dormitories,

Una volta, quando ha visto che piangevo così tanto, mi ha chiesto: “Perché piangi?” “Perché ho mia mamma a casa, la lontananza...” E lei: “Ho anch’io una bambina a casa. Non ti preoccupare, che io sono tua mamma. Stai vicina a me e vedrai che non tribolerai.” E un’altra signora, sempre qui di Zibello, anziana come lei: “E io sono tua nonna!” E una di Ragazzola: “E io sono tua zia!”<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Minardi, 51.

<sup>14</sup> Minardi, 45. “One time the boss came, he came in, all of a sudden, with another guy from the area, a blowhard huh [Lombard dialect]... And so said: ‘Who told you to come in?’ And then he, the boss, said ‘I’m at my house...’ ‘No. Not now, in this period he doesn’t command here. Now go back outside, ask permission, and if we say you can, you can come in otherwise you stay outside.’”

<sup>15</sup> Margherita Lucchini in Minardi, 35.

<sup>16</sup> “One time, when she saw that I was crying so much, she asked me: ‘Why are you crying?’ ‘Because I have my mom at home, the distance ...’ And she: ‘I too have a child at home. Don’t worry, because I am your mom. Stay close to me, and you’ll see that you won’t have any trouble.’ And another woman, also there from Zibello, older like her: ‘And I’m your grandmother!’ And one from Ragazzola: ‘And I’m your aunt!’” Anna Quintavalla in Minardi, 61.



As Quintavalla's account suggests, women often defined their "family" structure based on the relative age of the women involved—the most common link type being a "mother-daughter" connection between a relatively older *mondina* and a teenaged arrival. Women often explicitly declared the nature of these intense connections at their moment of origin, often when a young *mondina* appeared lonely, lost, or otherwise in emotional distress. By contrast, friendships between *mondine* of the same age group developed in more open, capillary structure. Like those of the mother-daughter pairings, cohort friendships often lasted for years. But unlike the more intense, family-like bonds, women often defined the nature of these relationships and their value to the individual in retrospect, rather than at their moment of formation. Although these friendships lacked the explicit declaration of social bonding characteristic of the mother-daughter bonds, they nonetheless matched their emotive intensity from the start.

The importance of the moment of naming the relationship seems to stem from traditional family structures in Northern Italy. Because one could have many sisters but only one mother, forging this latter relationship often involved a formal declaration by the mother-*mondina*. Many *mondine* recalled their memories in the collective "we," noting their enjoyment of being around so many other young women, how much they cared for one another, and their feelings of solidarity (Fig. 5). This latter aspect would become particularly salient with the Fascist push towards autarchy, and would reveal the political power of female friendship.



Fig. 5: Photograph of *mondine* in the fields (Camera Generale di Lavoro [CGIL], Parma, Italy)

*Working in the Fields: Sting and Song*

Why did the Fascist regime consider rice weeding, a labor-intensive activity that took workers far from their homes and families, to be “women’s work”? At first glance, this anomaly appears to have arisen from expedience pre-dating the rise of the regime: male *braccianti* would need to be in their physical prime, in good health, and regularly employed to pay for rent, food, fuel, and basic supplies. Soaring food prices and the unpredictability of seasonal labor meant that women and children also had to work to support the precarious household economy. With male *braccianti* typically employed in semi-regular work at local farms, women were available for less desirable forms of labor further afield. This gendered division of agricultural work appears to be hierarchical, with male laborers obtaining forms of fieldwork that were better paid, more reliable, and less physically taxing. Thus, while this division of labor upholds a gender hierarchy, it also gives the lie to the idea that women were incapable of extreme physical exertion.

Many women used racial subjugation to characterize this gender imbalance, blending the two under the aegis of economic suppression. One unnamed former weeder connected the *mondine’s* work and song culture with that of African Americans in the United States,

Ma sì, cantavano le risaie, però non era il canto delle donne del campo di riso, che è un po’ come il blues dei negri ... E’ un canto corale ma non di gioia. E’ il blues della risaia. Sì, il vero canto della mondina il blues della risaia. Era duro il lavoro, il calore, la putrefazione, dormire sul pagliericcio, il poco riso che mangiavi. Era duro. Perciò non poteva essere un canto gioioso.<sup>17</sup>

The dominant simile in this reflection connects the song of the Italian *mondine* to that of the American Blacks through a chiasmus of the music’s structure and emotive quality and the working conditions that produce it. Four times the speaker returns to the rice paddy, insisting on the physical location of song production as a powerful generator of mournful music. Enumerating descriptive associations of weeding (hard, work, heat, rot) not only evokes the dull strain of repetitive work but also strengthens the comparison between the labor and music of two different demographic groups an ocean apart. This association permeated the workscape: in the Piemontese dialect, “women weeders” translated to *mondine*, but also to *schiaivandari* (slaves).<sup>18</sup>

The *padrone* (landowner) typically employed the *capo* or *caposquadra*, who in turn hired squads of 20 to 60 *mondine* and oversaw their work in the fields. In some cases, the *capo* would also select the *capa* or *prima mondina* (the first riceworker), an experienced *mondina* who helped the *capo* to maintain the women’s rhythm of long, light, quick steps through the field, assuring a steady pace of labor throughout the 8- to 12-hour workday. Often, but not always, the *capa* also led (*intonava*) the rice workers’ songs, belting the call and timing choral response. In other cases, the *mondine* themselves elected this female authority, and in these instances a feeling of solidarity prevailed, a sentiment often marked by laughter and gentle teasing in later interviews.

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<sup>17</sup> Minardi 38-39. “Oh yeah, the rice paddies sang, but it wasn’t the song of the women of the rice field, which is a bit like the blues of the Blacks ... It’s a choral song, but not of joy. It’s the blues of the rice paddy. Yes, the real song of the rice worker is the blues of the rice paddy. It was hard, the work, the heat, the rot, sleeping on a straw mattress, the little rice that you ate. It was hard. That’s why it couldn’t have been a joyful song.”

<sup>18</sup> This term eclipses the issues of pay and forced labor. Whereas slavery implies forced labor and no pay, rice-weeding offered low wages for contracted work. Although one could argue that Italy’s dire economic situation drove women into the fields, such a situation does not equate to, for example, the enslavement of Africans for labor in the American colonies.

After noting her deep respect for her *capa*, Maria Giusta Catella comfortably joked about her strident singing voice with the interviewer when asked about call and response patterning, “Chi intona?” “La Lucia, ha la voce più forte.” (Who leads? Lucia. She’s got the loudest voice).<sup>19</sup> As this interchange suggests, the *mondina* selected by the *squadre* to serve as the *prima* did not necessarily have the best voice. Instead, the *mondine* determined her capacity to lead based on character and knowledge of the local *mondine* culture, often connected with years of experience at a particular field. Because the choice of songs and their succession depended on the general condition of the *monda*, the *prima* who proposed the songs, in addition to having a strong voice, also needed to maintain a host of positive positions such as a leader, singer, worker, and friend.

Being the *capa* required, “prontezza, memoria, umore, capacità di interpretare le situazioni scegliendo con il canto ‘adatto’ alla situazione” (readiness, memory, temperment, capacity to interpret situations, choosing the ‘appropriate’ song for the situation).<sup>20</sup> By reducing the *capa*’s real forms of authority to the mock honor of being “the loudest,” the *mondine* not only overturn social dictates that valorize the silencing of women, but also enhance feelings of collectivity by suggesting the ultimate commonalities between themselves and the *capa*—she is a woman, like them. According to jest, any “loud” woman could potentially serve as a *capa*. This humorous form also provides a mask for the *mondine*’s democratic exercise of self-rule by hiding the fact that experience and respect were required for election. Castelli’s group interview with the former *mondine* of Marossio includes the telling interchange, “C’è una caposquadra, fra voi?” “Sì, quella lì ... Siamo tutte caposquadra ...” “Cosa vuol dire essere caposquadra?” “Non sappiamo [Ridono] ... No, fra noi caposquadra non ce ne sono. Non abbiamo delle caposquadra.” (“Is there a boss among you?” “Yes, that one over there ... We’re all the boss.” “What does it mean to be the boss? “We don’t know [laughter] ... No, there aren’t any bosses among us. We don’t have bosses).”<sup>21</sup>

### *Barefoot and Bent Over: Sexualization of Agricultural Labor*

But within that “we,” internal divisions emerged. Whereas the *borghese* mother at the train depot inherently defined her class difference from the *mondine* as one of bodily conformation, the *mondine* identified differences among themselves primarily on the basis of geography, which they used to denote personal character and sexual mores. As Chierici recounts,

Anche i piemontesi le consideravano donne di facili costumi quando vedevano la domenica a ballare sulle aie, a piedi scalzi per non consumare le scarpe, pensando che avevano lasciato a casa i mariti e i figli. E pensare che la cosa più dura per mia madre, dopo il matrimonio, era proprio la lontananza dai figli.<sup>22</sup>

Dancing barefoot meant different things to the dancer and the audience: for the migrant *mondina*, her motive was clearly economic, but for the local Piemontesi, the naked foot implied sexual abandon. Local workers (*avventizie*) and migrant workers generally did not socialize with one another. However, both groups paid close attention to the habits of the other. Testimonials are rife with comparisons

<sup>19</sup> Castelli, *Senti le rane che cantano*, 12.

<sup>20</sup> Castelli, 220.

<sup>21</sup> Castelli, 73.

<sup>22</sup> Chierici, “Mia madre: una donna dell’Emilia,” 5. “The Piemontesi also considered them women of easy custom when they saw them dancing in the barnyards on Sundays, barefoot so as not to wear out their shoes, thinking that they had left their husbands and children at home. And to think that the hardest thing for my mother, after marriage, was just that – the distance from the children.”

between the singing styles and essential personalities of women hailing from different townships. In fact, an entire sub-genre of the *mondine's* narrative songs chronicles this last category. “Munfrinòte e trapuline,” a song named for two different groups of *mondine* hailing from the right and left banks of the Po River, exemplifies the strict social dichotomization typical of the songs in this category. It also points to their narrative emphasis on the divergent sexualities of the two groups. Here, the *munfrinòte* of the wine-making regions come across as traditional and socially conservative, all the more so when set next to the *trapuline* of the plains, who the song suggests are open, modern, and promiscuous.<sup>23</sup>

Not only did difficulty of rice weeding focus the *mondine's* perception on their own bodies, but the conditions of the labor forced them to adopt habits that called others' attention to the femaleness of their bodies as well, ultimately leading to a popular conception of all *mondine* as promiscuous. Living outside of the family house away from male supervision likely contributed to this stereotype, as did the sartorial customs of riceweeding work. Baring the leg up to the lower thigh allowed the *mondine* to keep the majority of their clothing clear of the knee-deep swamp water, but also created a spectacle in a time and place that considered revealing the calf area to be risqué. Economic conditions also pushed the *mondine* to work and relax barefoot, a choice associated at the time with licentious behavior.

Moreover, rice-weeding required women to assume a bodily position that mimicked the sexual position *a pecora* (“sheep-style,” wherein one partner assumed a prone position while the other partner stood behind them). Standing upright on the *argine* (dry mounds of land between the troughs of water and rice) and armed with a phallic switch or stick, the *capo* walked behind the women, who were bent over, their skirts hitched up around their waists. Little wonder then, that the *mondine* characterized their relationship to the *capo* in sexualized terms of dominance and control. As such, the economic disadvantages that pushed women into the rice fields required them to assume what was, for both local townsfolk and for the *mondine* themselves, a symbolic position of female sexual submission and abandon as well.

The tough physical conditions of the labor, coupled with gendered division of labor in the field (20-60 women and single male authority of an only slightly higher socioeconomic class) point to a number of social binaries. In contrast to the *mondine*, who wore cheap, naturally dark materials like muslin and wool, the *capo* and the *padrone* typically dressed in white linen pants (*braghe bianche*), a symbol of a higher social class. The refrain of the popular Piemontese dialect song “Sciur padrun da li béli braghi bianchi” (Mr. Landlord with the Nice White Pants) explicitly connects this item of clothing to with access to liquid capital, repeating, “Sciur padrun da li béli braghi bianchi, fora li palanchi ch'anduma a cà” (Mister Landlord with your nice white pants, pull out your money so we can go home).<sup>24</sup> Metonymically, the switch and the shorts constituted both the *capo* and the *padrone* as potent symbols of oppression in the *mondine's* songs. Similarly, water snakes (*bisce*) and mosquitoes (*zanzare*) often stood for the total conditions of the rice field. Songs rarely mention the damp, the cold, the heat, and the glare; rather, the lyrics fold these conditions into a generalized totality: the “tormento” of working the fields all day long.

After selling their sweat for the day, many women who had recently given birth worked an additional twilight shift as wetnurses, selling their breastmilk to local *signore* (middle-, upper-class, or noble women). Marchesa Colombi highlighted this concept of the economics of the female body through hyperbole in her 1878 book *In risaia (In the Rice Fields)*. In this novel, the *mondine* sell their blood as well as sweat and milk. Working knee-deep in the swamp water, the *mondine* of the novel allow leeches to attach to their legs. At the end of each workday, they collect the leeches to sell in the town pharmacy for 20 *centesimi* apiece. Dry cobwebs collected from the barnyard staunch the bleeding each night. This literary amplification of the female body's economic productivity, wherein secretions

<sup>23</sup> Castelli, *Senti le rane che cantano*, 488-489.

<sup>24</sup> Castelli, 394-401.

are bought and sold, suggests that the monetary value of bodily processes connects the intimate to the mercantile. As Colombi intimates, to cut off the leech prematurely was to “kick fortune out” ([dare] i calci alla fortuna).<sup>25</sup> While this Italian proverb refers to luck in a general sense, the fiscal overtones of this particular context strip the characters’ unnervingly broad interpretation of permissible bodily labor down to an elemental exchange: blood for money.

And yet the expressive tone and register cloaking these symbols ranges broadly from fearful to ironic to carnivalesque—as such, they cannot be reduced to a simple binary structure of male oppressing female or of rich oppressing poor. Rather, meaning thickens around these particularly identifiable symbols, creating a number of interchangeable tesserae for these particular actors, times and places that constitute a broader mosaic of gendered female labor, much like the *mondine*’s songs themselves.

*And We Who Are Women, Fear We do not Have: “La Lega” and Female Bravery*

Why did the *mondine* sing? According to their own testimonies, the *mondine*’s songs made their work feel easier and made the workday pass faster. In short, they sang to change their own perceptions of the labor, to alleviate its physical effects with an activity that required light mental concentration and moderate physical participation. Women sang as a direct response to the physical demands of their work. Reciprocally, their songs then affected their work, in terms of its speed and intensity. Although the *mondine* never termed it as such, the women used the old-fashioned method of song towards the modern end of pacing their weeding, effectively rationalizing their work in the fields.<sup>26</sup>

In a 1935 editorial for *Difesa sociale: rivista mensile d’igiene, previdenza, ed assistenza* (Social Defense: Monthly Magazine of Hygiene, Social Services, and Assistance), a freelance writer “E.F.” argued for the utility of whistling in maintaining morale and quick work in the urban, male context of car manufacturing plants. The editorial framing of this article suggests the controversial nature of this claim. In a time and place that held modernization in industry to mean reducing all wasted physical effort to improve productivity, an argument for whistling, with its rustic and antiquated overtones, would have jarred with this method-focused ethos. In reduced terms, E.F.’s imaginary foe argued for the importance of the means over the end, suggesting that rationalist methods should be used to promote efficient workflow regardless of their effect on output. If these means were both traditional and worker-controlled, as whistling was, then even the most laudatory of ends, like increased productivity, did not justify their use.<sup>27</sup> Against this omnipresent enthusiasm for rationalist methods, E.F. argued for the use of an old-fashioned tool to meet new standards in efficiency.

Such an argument inherently undermines the tautological claim of rationalism. It demonstrates that using rationalist methods all the time is irrational, because sometimes apparently irrational methods, like whistling, can sometimes result in greater productivity. Along similar lines, the *mondine*’s songs were not rationalist in the sense of being Taylorist methods to streamline labor and improve output. Nonetheless they accomplished what rationalism set out to do. They may have even been more effective due to their widespread and voluntary adoption.

For this reason, the high correlation of repetition and popularity in song lyrics and musical structure warrants scrutiny. The song “La Lega,” provides an appropriate exemplar its wide diffusion

<sup>25</sup> Colombi, *In risaia*, 67.

<sup>26</sup> As with manual workers’ pervasive embrace of collective authorship in song writing, the use of singing to regulate labor is common to agricultural workers from many different countries.

<sup>27</sup> See E.F., “Piccoli passatempi musicali che possono aiutare o impedire il lavoro,” *Difesa sociale* (Nov. 1935) 504.

and intense popularity.<sup>28</sup> Short, repetitive verses interspersed with musical shouts like *li-o-le-o-le-o-le* support the execution of similarly short, repetitive, difficult physical movements required of rice weeding. And perhaps most importantly, many *mondine*, Ermanna Chiozzi, Angela Baldi, and Ivana Cipolli among them, remember “La Lega” as being particularly “good to sing.” The oral qualities of the lyrics help to account for its lasting, widespread popularity. Because of its simple, rhythmic sentence structures, the *mondine* could easily change the words and cadence to fit the *squadra*’s mood and to speed or slow their work pace. As such, “La Lega” not only suited the work of rice weeding, but it also provided a particularly useful base for song creation in the field. Given its generative capacity and pervasive influence, “La Lega” might be considered the “mother” *mondina* song, giving birth to a thousand choruses.

### La Lega

Sebben che siamo donne  
Paura non abbiamo  
Per amor dei nostri figli (x2)

(Ripeta strofe)  
Socialismo noi vogliamo

(Coro)  
O li o li o la  
E la lega la crescerà  
E noialtri socialisti (x2)

O li o li o la  
E la lega la crescerà  
E noi altri lavoratori  
Vogliamo la libertà

E la libertà non viene  
Perchè non c'è l'unione  
Crumiri col padrone (x2)

(Ripeta strofe)  
Son tutti da ammazzar

Coro

Sebben che siamo donne  
Paura non abbiamo  
Abbiamo delle belle buone lingue (x2)  
Sebben che siamo donne  
Paura non abbiamo  
Abbiam delle belle buone lingue  
E ben ci difendiamo

Coro

E voialtri signoroni  
Che ci avete tanto orgoglio  
Abbassate la superbia (x2)

### The Union

Although we are women  
Fear we do not have  
For the love of our children (x2)

(Repeat verse above)  
Socialism we want

(Chorus)  
O li o li o la  
And the Union will grow  
And we socialists (x2)

O li o li o la  
And the Union will grow  
And we workers  
We want liberty

But freedom does not come  
Because we're not united  
The scabs with the boss (x2)

(Repeat verse above)  
They should all be killed

Chorus

Although we are women  
Fear we do not have  
We have good tongues (x2)  
Although we are women  
Fear we do not have  
We have good tongues  
And we defend well

Chorus

And you fine gentlemen  
Who have such pride  
Let go of your pride (x2)

<sup>28</sup> “La Lega” appears in every testimony, every songbook, and every interview examined for this chapter.

E voialtri signoroni  
 Che ci avete tanto orgoglio  
 Abbassate la superbia  
 E aprite il portofoglio

And you fine gentlemen  
 That have such pride  
 Let go of your pride  
 And open your wallet

O li o li o la  
 E la lega la crescerà  
 E noialtri lavoratori (x2)

O li o li o la  
 And the Union will grow  
 And we workers (x2)

O li o li o la  
 E la lega la crescerà  
 E noialtri lavoratori  
 I vuruma vess pagà!

O li o li o la  
 And the Union will grow  
 And we workers  
 We want our pay!

Coro

Chorus

Portions of these lyrics reappear in other songs, quilted into new configurations. For example, the concluding section of “Noi vogliamo l’ugualianza” (We want equality) borrows the opening of “La Lega,” rewriting it as “E ancor ben che siamo donne/ noi paura non abbiamo/ per amor dei nostri figli/ noi in lega ci mettiam” (And although we are women/ fear we do not have/ for the love of our children/ we will unionize).<sup>29</sup> Similarly, “Siamo gente di Molinella” (We are the people of Molinella) borrows the second non-choral section of the song, reworking it as “La libertà non viene/ perché non c’è l’unione/ crumiri col padrone/ son tutti d’ammazzar” (Liberty does not come/ because there isn’t union/ scabs with the boss/ they are all to be killed).<sup>30</sup> “Evviva il primo di maggio” “Long live the first of May,” a song celebrating International Workers’ Day,<sup>31</sup> simply reorders the first and third non-choral sections of “La Lega” and adds a new opening section “Evviva il primo di maggio/ e chi lo ha inventato/ sono stati i comunisti/ e che l’hanno festeggiato” (Long live the first of May/ and who invented it/ it was the communists/ and they celebrated it).<sup>32</sup> Otherwise, “Evviva il primo di maggio” is the same song as “La Lega,” sung to the identical tune. What might account for the reappearance of “La Lega’s” lyrics across so many other songs? And more generally, how does meaning emerge from the iterative and cumulative creation of the *mondine’s* songs, widely considered by the *mondine* themselves to be frameworks for continual reinvention rather than finished products?

“La Lega’s” ability to capture and voice a general mood of discontent primarily accounts for its popularity with the *mondine*, with the specifics of its Socialist content secondarily emphasizing this first quality. In interviews regarding other similarly political songs, the *mondine* suggest that the lyrics of the song were not always significant. As Castelli points out, some *mondine* did not know the meaning of all of the esoteric terms and historical allusions in their songs. One *mondina*, named as Signora Balocco, objected to being asked the definition of *trabussi*, “Ma stia zitto, ci chiedevamo anche noi che cosa erano i trabussi, dice che sono una roba di governo” (But be quiet, we too wondered what the *trabussi* were, they say they’re a government thing).<sup>33</sup> As Castelli notes, *trabussi* refer not to things but to people: Odilio Tabusso, Vercelli’s vice-Chief of Police (*vicecommisario della polizia*) in the 1910s, infamous for repressing the *mondine’s* strikes for reduced work hours and better pay.

<sup>29</sup> Manicardi, *Il coro delle mondine*, 27).

<sup>30</sup> Manicardi, 36.

<sup>31</sup> In 1890, Italy began to celebrate May Day as a workers’ holiday, highlighting achievements in their struggle for better hours and pay. The Fascist Regime abolished this holiday, and substituted the Festa del lavoro italiano (Holiday of the Italian Labor) in its place. This festa took place on April 21, the date of Natale di Roma, when ancient Rome was allegedly founded.

<sup>32</sup> Manicardi, 38.

<sup>33</sup> Castelli, *Senti le rane che cantano*, 38.

If the *mondine* did not understand all of the historical allusions in their songs, then was their value purely an aesthetic one? No: although the *mondine* did not understand all of the political content in the song corps, many understood a good deal of it. To return to the instance of Balocco, she correctly identified the governmental context of the term *trabussi*, despite not knowing the associated historical context of *mondina* oppression that his name was meant to evoke. Borrowed sections from “La Lega” also point to the importance of a varied body of political themes regarding work.

If we assume that the *mondine* borrowed lyrics on the basis of their capacity to evoke deeply felt concerns, then the lyrics of “La Lega’s” most common loan sections indicate that many women saw their role as political agitators for economic change as deriving primarily from their role as providers for their children. However, the borrowed lyrics suggest that the *mondine* framed their collective past and future goals as workers within the broad category of womanhood rather than motherhood. Frequent edits to the first lines’ conjunction attest to an interest in and contestation of the value of womanhood to the Socialist cause, in that they often changed the opening to “E noi che siamo donne” (And we who are women) staking womanhood as the mark of bravery. And yet there are no such changes to the category of *donne*, in the same opening line. Alternate lyrics emphasizing the *mondine*’s status as matriarchal would have fit in just as easily: “Ancor ben che siamo madri” (Although we are mothers) or the more familiar “Benché siamo mamme” (Although we are moms) would have both scanned in to the song’s rhythm and rhyme. Analyzing the content of the borrowed lyrics and their reiterations suggests why the *mondine* focused on their status as women. The lyrics speak to a general desire for freedom in their work and the specific need for unionization. Taken as a whole, these borrowing patterns accomplish a simple and fundamental task: they focus on commonalities across the varied demographics of the *mondine* to promote the social and political solidarity that comes from collective identity.

### *L’ultimo riso: Mondine after Fascism*

Despite the intensely political content of the *mondine*’s work songs and the imperialist aggressions that led to the importance of rice as an autarchic food stuff, the *mondine*’s recollections of the rice paddies appear to exist outside of time, in an ahistorical, almost mythic context. The picture that emerges from these documents is one that is hyper-local, and yet fundamentally entrenched within broader national context of Fascism. In many cases, the *mondine* carried their identities as migrant agricultural workers and singers of protest songs forward in time, through the postwar Boom, Years of Lead, and up to the present.

Along the way, they participated in cultural and academic productions, enshrining the *mondina* as a figure of contemporary Italian folklore. Musician and ethnomusicologist Giovanna Marini, alongside fellow luminaries like Pier Paolo Pasolini, Italo Calvino, Roberto Leydi, Gianni Bosio, and Diego Carpitella, rediscovered popular Italian music and contextualized its storytelling as a form of oral history. In 1964 in Spoleto, Marini’s “Bella Ciao” show caused a scandal among the elegant, classical concert-going public when it attempted to incorporate these political and social songs into the canon. In tandem with high profile events like these, many *mondine* quietly formed choirs in their later years, many of which were popular during the student and worker movements and Hot Autumn of 1968. As in the United States, many protesters turned to folk music to express the Leftist sentiments of the day. The *mondine*’s song corps offered a natural fit for the mood of agitation and social change. Loose affiliations between academic and workers groups developed, leading to extensive archivization of the *mondine*’s testimonials, memories, and songs with city- and town-based Mediateche and the Confederazione Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL). These small archives have published many small-scale studies of the *mondine*’s work.



Further, the influence of oral historian Luisa Passerini led many academics to conduct extensive interviews with the *mondine*, although surprisingly few ethnographers have analyzed these materials. Within the discipline of history, a general move towards oral history coincided with Italy's feminist movements of the 1970s, such as the foundation of the Biblioteca delle Donne in Bologna and the literary and artistic works of *Diotima* in Milan. Because many *mondine* were still alive and interested in relating their stories, and because their songs were particularly well suited to this particular methodological stance, the *mondine's* experiences are incredibly well documented compared to other types of women's work. This extensive and detailed body of evidence provides a unique benefit for the Feminist cultural historian in its focus on individual women's stories, told in their own words. By recording their day-to-day lives in the field, in all its pain and humor, the *mondine* may be said to have had the last laugh (*l'ultimo riso*).

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