

Session Title:

Transnational Purchasing Power: Gender, Ethnicity, and Consumption in the Americas

Session Abstract:

[REVISE as per 2022 updates] What does it mean to be an ethnic consumer? How is ethnicity commodified and marketed? How and why are such processes gendered?

This formal session is comprised of three historians and one chair. It will explore the intersections between consumption, ethnicity, and gender throughout the twentieth century.

This session examines the Italian diaspora as one example of how ethnicity is ‘packaged and sold’ in North and South America. It is interested in what defined the consumer culture of Italian ethnics; the consumption of Italian goods, and discourses of Italianness in popular media as a site for consumption.

This session brings together three scholars intrigued by the ways in which a consumer culture can mobilize “ethnicity” (broadly understood) for various aims.

Each scholar explores the creation and curation of carefully crafted images in a so-called ethnic space, reflects on the motivations behind these choices, and explores their community reception.

The session seeks to probe the ways in which global diasporic communities live shared representations and experiences by addressing the encounters of Italians across North and South America (specifically Canada, US, and Argentina) within a transnational framework. It is interested in the ways that Italians abroad lived a shared consumer culture, but also how they engaged with their sites of settlement, with their country of origin, with other minorities, and with other Italian communities abroad as well.

It also seeks to contribute to growing scholarship on intersectionality, by posing questions about how race and gender impact the immigrant and ethnic experience in the Americas. The relevance of these questions is not yet completely understood, and such a panel would be of interest not only to scholars of the Italian diaspora, but to those working with other immigrant or ethnic groups more broadly, as well as scholars of popular culture, media, and consumption.

Short Session Abstract (for meeting app)

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Session Chair

TBC

Session Organizer

Abril Liberatori, York University

Presentation Titles

“Don’t Stand So Close to Me: Race, Citizenship, and Public Consumption among Puerto Ricans and Italians in New York, 1930-1960” by Simone Cinotto

Fascist Propaganda Abroad: Youth, Objects, and Imperial Power in “Il tamburino della gioventù italiana all’estero” (1931-1943) by Cecilia Tossounian

“A Wife with a *Nonna*’s Virtues:” Shifting Gender Ideals in postwar Toronto’s *Corriere Canadese*” by Abril Liberatori

Presentation Abstracts

The paper analyzes the racialization of Italian and Puerto Rican migrants to New York in the New Deal age in a relational and diasporic perspective. At the time of the 1930 Census, Italians were the largest ethnic group in New York City (1,070,000 first- and second-generation immigrants). The most populous community in East Harlem neighbored with El Barrio, the largest Puerto Rican community outside the island—35,000 strong. By 1960, 600,000 Puerto Ricans lived in New York City, half of them in El Barrio. When the first 1,153-unit public housing project was open in the heart of East Harlem’s Italian section in 1940, under Mayor LaGuardia, Italians successfully lobbied to keep the Puerto Ricans out. When the fifth public housing project in East Harlem, Jefferson Houses, went up in 1959, there were few Italians among the tenants. During those thirty years, the Puerto Rican problem had replaced the Italian problem in the attention of the public and religious welfare agencies that had turned East Harlem into the world’s largest laboratory of social work aimed at the urban poor. New Deal welfare programs were racialized at the source and their fruition, in turn, significantly produced race (Cybelle Fox, *Three Worlds of Relief*, 2012). The paper will illuminate Italian immigrants’ consuming practices of social policies (David Roediger, *Working Toward Whiteness*, 2018) and their acquisition of a full cultural citizenship through the racialization and gendering of people of color as, instead, principal beneficiaries of the welfare state. The paper will focus on Puerto Rican-Italian relations in the access to public housing (Michael Zipp, *Manhattan Projects*, 2012), social work, public school, and the unionization of women’s labor in the garment industry (Daniel Soyer, *A Coat of Many Colors*, 2005) in the age of state liberalism.

During the 1930s, fascist propaganda encouraged young Italians living abroad to connect with their homeland. Many children responded positively to this invitation, becoming avid readers of fascist magazines specially designed for the descendants of Italian immigrants. These children used to read stories about brave boys flying airplanes or fighting the enemy in colonial contexts. They also read about the experiences of young expatriates who traveled to Italy to spend their summer in one of the several

colonies that the regime had organized for them or who attended one of the many Italian schools present among Italian communities abroad. Through these stories and testimonies, fascism tried to create a shared feeling of Italianness. Fascism conceived youth as a central actor of the regime and schools, youth organizations and publications as an important propaganda instrument. The children of Italians residing abroad, especially in countries with important Italian communities, such as Ethiopia or Argentina, became the main target of this imperialist policy. This paper examines “Il tamburino della gioventù italiana all'estero” (1931-1943) – a magazine for young Italians living abroad - to explore the role of youth in the fascist program of imperial expansion. More specifically, it analyzes how some objects, such as the fascist uniform and paraphernalia -from the obvious photos of the duce to the less evident toys and photo cameras- worked to emotionally connect youth with “home” and with an imperial identity. Youth abroad, however, was never simply the projection of fascist propaganda. This paper examines the significance of youth’s lived experiences by analyzing the letters and photos that young readers sent to this magazine. By focusing on objects that were important for the fascist imperial policy, as well as on young Italians’ experiences with these objects, the paper considers imperial youths as varied, relational, and mutually constituted.

The paper will reflect on how the *Corriere Canadese* disseminated conceptions of what it meant to be an ethnic Italian woman in post-WWII Toronto, Canada. The *Corriere Canadese* was an Italian-language newspaper founded in 1954 after the mass wave of postwar Italian migration to Toronto, and it served as a lifeline for the growing Italian communities there in myriad ways. This presentation explores the ways that the *Corriere’s* articles and images displayed an idealized version of Italian femininity to new immigrants. Three sections of the *Corriere* will be explored in more detail: prescriptive sections telling women how to dress and comport themselves properly; advice columns engaging specifically with women immigrants and their unique concerns; and general interest content reflecting on the changing role of the woman in Italy or North America. I argue that the *Corriere* content displays a general anxiety in the Italian immigrant community about the ways in which migration affected traditional gender norms. The pages of the *Corriere* were occasionally used as a safe space in which to play with or try out new iterations of being female. More often than not, however, they remained ambits of Old-World traditional norms. Although this may have been comforting or helpful in the early years of migration, it became incongruent with the more Americanized perceptions of womanhood that immigrant Italians began to adopt once settled.

Short Presentation Abstracts (for meeting app)

1. The paper analyzes the racialization of Italian and Puerto Rican migrants to New York in the New Deal age in a relational and diasporic perspective. The paper will illuminate Italian immigrants’ consuming practices of New Deal social policies and their acquisition of a full cultural citizenship through the racialization and gendering of people of color as, instead, principal beneficiaries of the welfare state. The paper will focus Puerto Rican-Italian relations in the access to public housing, social work, public school, and the unionization of women's labor in the garment industry.
2. Revise as per above
3. The paper explores the *Corriere Canadese* of postwar Toronto and its depictions of an idealized Italian femininity geared at new immigrants. Argues that content was occasionally used as a safe space in which to try out new iterations of being female, but more often was an ambit of Old-World traditional norms. While this may have been a comfort to new migrants in the early years,

it became incongruent with Americanized perceptions of womanhood after the initial period of settlement.

CV Summaries

Simone Cinotto is Associate Professor of Modern History at the University of Gastronomic Sciences in Pollenzo, Italy. He is the author of *The Italian American Table: Food, Family, and Community in New York City* (University of Illinois Press, 2013) and *Soft Soil Black Grapes: The Birth of Italian Winemaking in California* (New York University Press, 2012); the editor of *Making Italian America: Consumer Culture and the Production of Ethnic Identities* (Fordham University Press, 2014), and the coeditor with Daniel Bender of *Food Mobilities: Making World Cuisines* (University of Toronto Press, forthcoming). Cinotto has been Visiting Professor at Indiana University, New York University, Columbia University, and University of London SOAS. His research interests include the global history of food, migration, and mobility and the history of transatlantic consumer cultures in the twentieth century. He has three books in preparation: *Fascist Coffee, Imperial Bananas: Food in Italian East Africa, 1935-1941*; *The Puerto Ricans and Italians of New York: Migration and Mobilization in the Atlantic World*; *Transatlantic Emotions: The Mental and Intimate Biography of an Italian Immigrant to America, 1905-1942*.

Cecilia Tossounian is a researcher at Argentina's Scientific and Technical Research Council (CONICET) and at University of San Andrés. Her work focuses on gender studies, modern Argentine history, nationalism, and consumer culture. She holds a Ph.D. in History from the European University Institute and served as a postdoctoral fellow at the Free University of Berlin. Her book *La Joven Moderna in Interwar Argentina: Gender, Nation and Popular Culture* (University Press of Florida) came out in 2020. In addition, she has published articles in journals including *Gender & History* and the *Journal of Latin American Studies* and has co-edited the book *América Latina entre espacios: Redes, flujos e imaginarios globales* (Walter Frey, 2014). Currently, she is a visiting scholar at the University of Bologna, where she is working on her new project about Fascist propaganda in Argentina.

Abril Liberatori is Assistant Professor and the Mariano A. Elia Chair in Italian-Canadian Studies at York University in Toronto (Canada). Her research focuses on the experiences of Italian Canadians in the twentieth century. She is particularly interested in ethnic identity formation, as well as gender, transnationalism, and oral history. She has published on topics such as language, memory, music, and food among Italian immigrants in North and South America.

Audiovisual Needs

- Projector with audio
- Laptop for Powerpoint

Contact and Affiliation Information

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