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INDICE

FROM THE EDITORS

We are delighted to share the fifth issue of *I.S. Med. Interdisciplinary Studies on the Mediterranean*, which continues to entertain the complexities of the region and the exciting areas of exploration ranging from the humanities and arts to the social sciences, women's and gender studies. This issue includes an interview with Megan Carney (one of our prestigious board members) and her anthropological work on the Mediterranean, six articles on the analysis of food practices and communities within the literary, historical, and legal contexts as well as three book reviews on the same subjects. We would like to welcome our new Book Review Editor, Jessica R. Boll, from Carroll University. We are thrilled to work with her.

While we pursue ongoing inquiries on the Mediterranean through the attentive written analyses of our diverse scholars, we continue to organize annual symposia to encourage stimulating discussions and possibilities of collaboration. Our last symposium was held, with great success, in Palermo, in June 2024; our next one will take place in June 2026, in another breathtaking location. In the meantime, feel free to contact the authors directly: their emails are provided in the contributors' section of each issue.

Thanks for your ongoing support!

INTERVIEW WITH MEGAN CARNEY

Megan Carney, Associate Professor of Anthropology at the University of Arizona, is a sociocultural and critical medical feminist anthropologist with specializations in critical migration and diaspora studies; food and water insecurity; migrant health; women's and youth migration; social reproduction, social solidarity, and the politics of (collective) care; critical food studies; and intersectional and diasporic feminist methodology and pedagogy. She conducts community-based collaborative research in the western United States and in Italy, specifically Sicily. From 2021-22, Dr. Carney was a Fulbright Scholar with the Fulbright Schuman European Union Affairs Program. She is a former Udall Public Policy Fellow (2019-20) and Public Voices Fellow with The Op-Ed Project (2018-19). Currently, she serves as Director of the UA Center for Regional Food Studies. She has published *The Unending Hunger: Tracing Women and Food Insecurity Across Borders*. Oakland: University of California Press. (Winner of the 2015 CHOICE award) and *Island of Hope: Migration and Solidarity in the Mediterranean*. Oakland: University of California Press, 2021. She is working on a third book entitled *Exit from the United States: Emigration, Carcerality, and Abolition Feminist Futures.*

Q. Can we start by asking about your role as Director of the UA Center for Regional Food Studies?

A. I started as Director of the Center when I was first hired at the University of Arizona in 2017, at which time the Center was a very new entity but had the mission of transforming food systems and strengthening the Arizona-Sonora borderlands foodshed through interdisciplinary and applied research. During the decade or so leading up to my appointment, I had been immersed in critical food studies both as an undergrad and then as a graduate student while also organizing for food systems change with students and activists across the country. It's to say that I really arrived at food studies by way of organizing. At UCLA for instance, I campaigned with

the California Student Sustainability Coalition to advocate for the adoption of sustainable food policies within procurement and dining services at college campuses across the state, and I co-founded the campus garden where students could grow food, host classes, and lead workshops. That was 20 years ago, and the campus garden still thrives today! I continued to organize for sustainable food systems on university campuses as a graduate student at UC Santa Barbara and also led the process of establishing a regional food policy council.

Overlapping with these phases of community organizing, I conducted research on alternative food systems in Italy – specifically in and around Firenze – and food insecurity in the U.S., particularly in contexts of transnational migration and displacement. Collectively, these are some of the experiences that I brought with me to the Center for Regional Food Studies. In my time as Director, we have prioritized decolonial and feminist pedagogies such as through The Future of Food and Social Justice Youth Storytelling Lab (Bellante 2024; Bellante et al. forthcoming), public-facing initiatives such as Arizona Water for All, and community-engaged research, much of it specific to southern Arizona, such as the Dunbar Wellness Project (Carney et al. 2024, 2023, 2022). We seek to co-produce knowledge with students from groups that have been historically underrepresented at institutions of higher education as well as with community members.

Q. We had the pleasure of reading and also publishing a review of your book *Island of Hope: Migration and Solidarity in the Mediterranean*, 2021. Can you briefly comment on this research and whether this interest and connection are ongoing?

A. This interest and connection are definitely ongoing! I spent almost a decade doing research in Sicily prior to publishing the book, but its publication by no means marked the end of my relationship with the people there. Several of the Sicily-based research partners that I continue to collaborate with are involved in migrant solidarity initiatives and/or mobilize around social, economic, and environmental struggles on the island. For example, my long-time collaborators from the Palermo-based organization Zabbara, my colleague Sara Vannini from the University of Sheffield, and I have been working together through the FunKino participatory film and storytelling lab. We received an Engaged Research Grant from the Wenner-Gren Foundation in 2022 and have been publishing on some aspects

of our collaborative work, in addition to producing short films (see Carney et al. 2025).

The politics of representation, of self-determination, control over local resources, and the right *not* to be displaced, remain urgent matters in this setting. More recently, I'm beginning to examine the problem of water insecurity that affects much of the Mediterranean and compounds with migrants' experiences of environmental displacement, threatens agriculture and food production in the region, and also generates new forms of displacement and dispossession across Sicily. This work also connects to community-based collaborative research that I'm doing on water insecurity (and justice) in southern Arizona. As both regions – Sicily and southern Arizona – are situated in arid environments and geopolitical borderlands, I'm hoping that we may facilitate a knowledge exchange and engage in cross-border dialogues about the future of water, among other vital resources, in these diverse locales.

Q. Your previous book, *The Unending Hunger: Tracing Women and Food Insecurity Across Borders*, and your most recent article focus on food insecurity and women (and women's activism). Could you expand?

A. Much of my work on food – and food justice – has been focused on the labor, particularly unpaid, reproductive *caring* labor, that is necessary for the very mundane activities of eating and feeding. This carework is generally devalued in society and also creates additional burdens, particularly emotional and psychological, for those performing it. I think heightening the visibility of this labor, the ways that it has been marginalized, and its connections to systems of violence and the expansion of neoliberal, racial capitalism, is of the utmost importance, especially as we mobilize for women's rights, racial justice, migrant justice, food justice, and climate justice. This is essentially the argument that I make in that recent article which was part of a special issue of *Global Food Security* on migration (Carney 2024).

As a continuation of this work, I'm collaborating with grassroots organizers to co-author a book that will draw on case studies from the US Southwest and the Mediterranean to examine the lived experiences of women displaced as a result of food, water, and climate apartheid. We are conceptualizing migrant women's health vulnerability as a site of racialized gender violence perpetrated through food, water and climate injustice.

Q. Are you presently working on another book or project on similar topics?

A. Yes, I'm writing a book about contemporary desires among U.S. citizens to permanently leave the United States as well as state attempts to control exit. There has definitely been an upswell of interest in the topic following the recent U.S. presidential election and as with the previous Trump presidency, many citizens are threatening to leave. But really, the focus of my book, and the stories shared by the several dozen aspiring and current U.S. emigrants that I interviewed (as well as the 550 or so individuals who completed my survey) hinge on something much larger than electoral politics or the political environment. It is much more about the disillusionment that people feel with the so-called American Dream and the unfulfilled promise of freedom, as well as the carceral logics that dictate mobility in U.S. society and override investments in care.

As suggested by my book's tentative title, *Exit from the United States: Emigration, Carcerality, and Abolition Feminist Futures*, I'm interpreting desires or manifestations of exit within the broader context of state violence. I'm also interested in how differential mobilities and carceral logics connect to or shape psychosocial wellbeing. Ultimately, I'm arguing that as an ethnographic object, exit not only reveals the carceral logics that produce violence and constrain mobility, but also points to the possibilities for liberation.

Q. How do you see the connection between food studies and Mediterranean Studies? How can this inform other disciplines' connection with food studies?

A. There is a clear affinity between food studies and Mediterranean studies, partly because "food" and the "Mediterranean" are closely linked in popular imagination – sometimes for better, sometimes for worse. Consider for instance, global commodification of the "Mediterranean diet" that has been promoted as a means to achieving health and longevity, especially in the global North. In the specific case of Sicilian food, there is some observable degree of both commodification and appropriation. One finds Sicilian restaurants and eateries across much of Italy, so it seems that the culinary practices of Sicily are very much celebrated, even though the culture of Sicily is oftentimes denigrated and mistakenly blamed for the economic problems experienced by the rest of the country. Tourists flock

to Sicily from all over to experience the "flavors" of Sicily; the region has become a veritable bastion of gastrodevelopment (Joassart-Marcelli 2021), observed for instance in the popularity of agritourism and wine tourism. But this also strikes me as a case of "eating the other" (bell hooks 1992), or a form of neocolonialism. It is salient here to keep in mind the impact of tourism on resource-related struggles, such as around water, that are disrupting local livelihoods and food practices.

I share these reflections in part as a warning to those connecting regional studies with studies of food. We have to be mindful about how the knowledge we're producing exacerbates some of the conditions that we wish to critique. In general, I think that most food scholarship would benefit from embracing a move toward the political, exercising more reflexivity, and engaging more directly with the politics of knowledge production.

Q. Do you think food culture and identity are related? And if so, especially in the case of Mediterranean Studies, how does it develop particularly in a modern and contemporary perspective which is inevitably characterized by migration of people?

A. As a cultural domain, food practices are dynamic, rather than static, and so always changing. Food practices are also sites of cultural exchange and diffusion, meaning they bring together a range of influences. From this perspective, it would seem that preoccupations with "authenticity" seem misplaced or shortsighted.

Identity is a very subjective category and often works through creative self-expression. The fusion or hybrid cuisines that are emergent across much of Sicily as a result of recent migration through the Mediterranean – and building on centuries of mobility and culinary exchange through this region – are important examples of how food practices are fluid and articulate with identity but are also generative and may yield to subversive identities such as using food as a tool of political mobilization.

Q. Food continues to draw a lot of attention from any kind of media: TV is packed with food shows; Instagram full of food videos; preparation of dishes; cinema has been producing movies for at least the last 30 years where food is central. What do you think is the relationship which links food and media? Do you think aesthetics surpasses the importance of flavor?

A. I'm certainly not an expert of aesthetics, but I believe the question opens up a rich line of inquiry. Regarding food media, we know that food is a very sensory experience and that there might be something therapeutic or mesmerizing about observing the care that goes into preparing food. The popularity of food media may also be explained in part by the ephemerality of food. I'm thinking here about how my children love to watch the series *Is It Cake?* which is much more about aesthetics than taste and plays on viewers' anticipation of destruction at the end of the creative process.

Our curiosity or fascination with aesthetics also serves as an apt example of how food is incredibly symbolic. As an undergraduate at UCLA in the early 2000s, I took a course on the history of Italian gastronomy with Professor Luigi Ballerini that engaged with a variety of texts, primarily cookbooks authored by figures such as Maestro Martino and Pelligrino Artusi. And I recall when examining the late Medieval period and Renaissance, we spent a good deal of time analyzing these elaborate descriptions of banquets that were much more about indexing wealth through aesthetic grandeur than savoring particularly tasty (or even remotely appetizing) dishes.

Does aesthetics then surpass the importance of taste or flavor? Perhaps sometimes. But should it? Probably not. I'm reminded of Carlo Petrini and the emphasis on taste which has been championed through the Slow Food movement, which of course began in Italy and has had significant global traction over the past few decades with the Terra Madre Salone del Gusto hosted every other year in Torino. One of the most resounding critiques made by Slow Food activists is that an emphasis on aesthetics has been detrimental to the struggle against industrial food. I'm reminded here as well of what one market vendor from Firenze's Mercato Sant'Ambrogio disclosed to me almost 20 years ago, when I was conducting fieldwork there. Concerned that people were increasingly relying on *supermercati* for all of their shopping needs and shying away from specialty stores and open-air markets – and where they could more easily touch, smell, and taste the foods being sold –, he made an observation about the misplaced importance of aesthetics: "Le persone comprano con gli occhi."

Q. Another big obsession is food and wellbeing. In your research what is the relationship you found between food and wellbeing? How do people approach the theme and how it affects both the consumption and/or the way of cooking?

A. Obsession is a keyword here. When we talk about food and its connection to health or wellbeing, the conversation can too easily spillover into a preoccupation with diet. I have found through many years of teaching especially and writing for broader publics that we have to be very careful with how we frame wellbeing in this context and put into circulation notions of "healthy eating."

When I teach anthropology of food for instance, I usually begin by emphasizing to students that there is no singular or universal definition of what constitutes "healthy" and that it is very place- and culturally-specific and connected to particular ecologies, bodies, and epistemologies.

Part of the focus of our feminist collective Nutrire CoLab is to de-emphasize diet when thinking about or examining chronic illness and to bring attention to the myriad other factors that shape wellbeing, such as toxic exposures in the environment, structural constraints on access to healthcare and potentially life-saving treatments, social stressors such as racism, exclusion and discrimination, etc. (Gálvez et al. 2020). Rather than simply health or wellbeing, our collective has been asking about nourishment and, in particular, exploring the transformative potential of nourishment as praxis (Valdez et al. 2022; see also Garth 2019; Yates-Doerr 2024).

Q. Do you have any advice to give to current and/or future scholars of food studies?

The advice that I usually give to my own students is that they find an anchor in something complementary to food studies. One reason is that it is fairly easy to be pigeon-holed, as I have discovered throughout my own career. But a more important reason is that, as Psyche Williams-Forson (2011) explains, food is intersectional, i.e., connected to everything, and requires an intersectional approach. While food can be a powerful lens for understanding so many aspects of human society, it proves rather shallow when looked at on its own.

I use the modifiers *critical* and *feminist* food studies because we cannot lose sight of power and the inequities that pervade our relationship to food across time and space. I have found that food studies as a field is often conflated with "food appreciation" and that those doing food studies research readily identify as gourmands, food snobs, etc. That is not to deny that

many of us may feel very passionate about food, but critical food studies is not apolitical, ahistorical food appreciation.

Without feminist and other critical perspectives, food studies itself risks becoming a space where power hierarchies get reproduced. My colleagues and I have been writing on these themes and alluding to the problems for instance, with the whiteness of food studies (see Bellante et al. forthcoming, Carney 2022). Black feminist, decolonial, and Indigenous scholars have persuasively argued for approaching the study of food as an opportunity to challenge and dismantle systems of white supremacy, cisheteropatriarchy, settler colonialism, and carcerality (Alkon and Agyeman forthcoming; Antonio et al. 2025; Chao 2022; Garth and Reese 2020; Reese and Sbicca 2022; Williams-Forson 2022). Again, because food is a site of politicization, I believe food scholarship must engage in the political, and by that, I mean foreground analyses of power.

Q. How do you see your role as an educator and an anthropologist for the future generations and their relation to food?

A. As an educator and anthropologist studying the relationships between food and mobility, my goal is to help people understand the origins of their food—not just in the immediate sense, but within a broader historical context. Over the past 500 years, periods of violent colonization and African enslavement, particularly in the Americas, played a crucial role in shaping the global-industrial food system we have today. The model of American agriculture was not only exported but also imposed on much of the world through various development schemes, deeply influencing modern food production (Garth and Reese 2020). In short, I hope future generations understand this history in being able to challenge power in our global food system and show greater compassion and care toward people from migrant backgrounds, recognizing mobility as essential to our survival – just like food itself.

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ARTICLES

FOOD RITUALS AS SIGNS OF SUBMISSION AND SYMBOLS OF FEMININE MARGINALIZATION IN MARIA MESSINA'S WRITINGS

Daniela Bombara*

Abstract

Maria Messina (1887-1944) portrays women confined to subservience, unable to challenge male dominance and resigned to their fates, during a transitional period between enduring patriarchy and an unattainable modernity. Her works depict a world fixated on decorum and tradition, a stifling reality where attempts at change merely reaffirm the existing order. The assertion of male authority is deeply intertwined with rituals dictating domestic life, particularly those related to meals. In *La casa nel vicolo* (1921), the despotic Don Lucio enforces strict schedules and precise procedures for meal preparation, using them to test the loyalty and submission of the women under his control. These rigid customs suppress any aspiration for independence. On the other hand, Messina's women are often unaware of their subjugation. In *La porta chiusa* (*Le briciole del destino,* 1918), Ienna, confined to her room by illness, nostalgically recalls her kitchen 'domain', but this perceived authority is illusory, as her husband's affair with the maid elevates the latter to the true mistress of the household. Attempts to defy traditional roles end in failure: in *L'amore negato* (1928), Severa's rejection of her role as a house-wife leads to her downfall. Unlike later Sicilian literature, Messina refrains from lavish descriptions of meals. Her female characters eat hurriedly and in isolation, excluded from sensory enjoyment. Food, consumed without savor, becomes a potent metaphor for lives stifled by emotional and existential deprivation. These women, resigned to barren existences, are left only with 'the crumbs of life', as poignantly reflected in the title of Messina's 1918 collection.

Keywords: Maria Messina, patriarchy, food rituals, subjugation, Sicily

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> The official rhetoric of the Risorgimento and the ideology it upheld – which lived on well into the years of post-Unification – had assigned women an extremely important moral role in the ideal society of the new Italy. […] By selflessly assuring her husband the warmth and material comforts of a smoothly-run home, the Italian woman was silently helping him to perform his duties as a citizen; and by providing an example of domestic austerity, sacrifice and devotion, she was offering her sons a living example in the private sphere of what was expected of them in the public domain. This latter role was seen as particularly important in a country as desperately lacking in modern and efficient public educational structures as was post-Unification Italy.[1]

The ideals of the Italian *Risorgimento*, enhanced by the urgent needs of a newborn Nation, lead to a mythology of a domestic femininity. The Italian woman, 'angel of the hearth,' represents the moral center of a family steadily nurtured and nourished, as it constitutes the basic unit of the society and the core of the State as *mother*land.[2] The house/shelter of Romantic heroines, terrified by dangerous outdoors, becomes a 'realm' to be governed with wisdom and caution. Food is an integral part of this management: purchasing, preparation, provisioning, table setting, and organization of the convivial places. Between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, there is a remarkable proliferation of cookbooks and household manuals, addressed to an increasingly broad female audience;[3] the middle-class woman is thus trained to perform a well-defined, spatially localized role as wife and mother.[4]

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1 Lucienne Kroha, *The woman writer in late-nineteenth-century Italy: gender and the formation of literary identity* (Lewiston, N.Y.; Queenston, Ont.: E. Mellen Press, 1992), 11. See also Gabriella Romani, "Introduction. Scenes from Nineteenth-Century Italy: Delightful Stories on Those Long, Long Winter Evenings," in *Writing to Delight: Italian Short Stories by Nineteenth-Century Women Writers*, eds. Antonia Arslan, Gabriella Romani (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 3-18. A special thanks to Jolie Cuminale for the translations of the Italian texts.

2 See Alberto Mario Banti, *Sublime madre nostra: La nazione italiana dal Risorgimento al fascismo* (Bari: Laterza, 2014).

3 See Maria Paola Salvatori Moroni, "Ragguaglio bibliografico sui ricettari del primo Novecento," in *Storia d'Italia,* v. 13, *L'alimentazione,* eds. Alberto Capatti, Alberto De Bernardi, Angelo Varni (Torino: Einaudi, 1998), 887-925; Elisabetta Maffia, "Donne e cibo tra letteratura e storia," *Dimensioni e problemi della ricerca storica*, no. 2 (1998):155-174.

4 Fiorenza Tarozzi, "Padrona di casa, buona massaia, cuoca, casalinga, consumatrice. Donne e alimentazione tra pubblico e privato," *Storia d'Italia,* v. 13, *L'alimentazione,* 645-79; Stefania Aphel Barzini, *Fornelli d'Italia* (Milano: Mondadori, 2014).

Within this framework, the novels and short stories of Maria Messina[5] stand out for their uniqueness, as they aim to unveil the contradictions and fault lines in the ideological system of Post-Unification Italy, particularly its coercive and conservative dimensions. Parental feeding activities, which could allow women to express their creativity, become, in Messina's text, a heavy and exhausting burden—a sign of submissive obedience to the male authority. This occurs also because the area of nutrition is not exclusively a woman's domain: the master dictates the rules even in this traditionally feminine sphere, imposing mandatory, repetitive, and unvarying practices to suppress any rebellion.[6] Hence, the domestic female dominion is transformed into a stifling and secluded prison; any attempt to transcend the narrow confines of the household is perceived as a major transgression that could result in marginalization and dishonor.[7] The biological function of every woman—sustaining the existence of her progeny and favoring their evolution through nurture—, is turned against her, leading to depression, or even to a loss of dignity and identity.

Women's submission to male dominance is, therefore, enforced through obsessive *food rituals*: procedures, timetables, and eating habits are pre-

5 Maria Messina (1887-1944), a Sicilian novelist active in the first half of the twentieth century and rediscovered by Leonardo Sciascia in the 1980s, chooses to represent the difficult transition period between the patriarchal world—focused on decorum and preservation of tradition—and the increasing industrial society, from the point of view of the most disadvantaged groups in Italy at that time, namely women of the lower-middle class. Her correspondence with Giovanni Verga, who praised her first collection of short stories, *Pettini fini* (1909), helped her to publish other collections with well-known editors (*Le briciole del destino,* 1918, *Il guinzaglio,* 1921, for Treves; *Personcine,* 1921/24, for Vallardi; *Ragazze siciliane,* 1921, for Le Monnier), and novels: *Alla deriva (*1920), *La casa nel vicolo* (1921), *Un fiore che non fiorì* (1923), *Le pause della vita* (1926), for Treves*; Primavera senza sole* (1920) *for Giannini; L'amore negato* (1928) for Ceschina.

6 The motif, recurrent in Messina's works, echoes a widespread belief of the period, which in turn derives from an ancient contempt for the female intelligence: "Alle mani delle donne si è sempre lasciata la risposta alle necessità quotidiane, tra cui quella dell'alimentazione, il di più, la raffinatezza dei cibi, lo studio di piatti originali viene dalle mani maschili. Il mestiere è donna, l'arte uomo" ["The responsibility for meeting daily needs, including food, has always been left in the hands of women. However, the extras, the refinement of dishes, and the creation of original recipes come from male hands"] (Fiorenza Tarozzi, "La società contemporanea," in *Donne e cibo: una relazione nella storia*, eds. Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli, Fiorenza Tarozzi (Milano: Mondadori, 2003), 134).

7 Mariella Muscariello, "'Una straniera di passaggio'. Lettura della novella 'Casa paterna' di Maria Messina," in *L'occhio e la memoria. Miscellanea di studi in onore di Natale Tedesco* (Caltanissetta: Lussografica 2004), 463.

scribed by the householder and regarded as 'homages' and affirmations of his power. The focus on food discourse in the author's writings—an issue not yet deeply explored by scholars[8]—offers the opportunity, I argue, to recognize the modernity and innovative dimension of Messina's poetics. The Sicilian writer portrays, with disenchanted realism, the unsolvable negative status of women, who are forced to identify themselves solely through feeding practices manipulated by male figures to enslave them. The privileged position of the woman in Post-Unification Italian society as 'Queen of the house' reveals its *propagandistic nature*. In the author's works, this ideal is overturned, depicting women in passive role of unpaid and exploited laborers.[9] Leaving the confines of the stifling home is ultimately a false escape, as the outside world fails to provide stable working opportunities, once again confining women in their love-hate role as housewife.

Briefly, the public sphere mirrors the private one, reflecting the same male dominance that the female protagonists experienced within the walls of their homes. Women—and also young men, the weakest figures in a patriarchal context—bear a double imprisonment. In the domestic space, food and beverages, meticulously prepared and served, function both as symbols and as instruments of subjection.

Nurturing practices as obligation and slavery

In Messina's second novel, *La casa nel vicolo* (1921), nurturing and nutritive activities already constitute a complex structure that reinforces—one

8 Some suggestions, not so much of the food motif, but about the negative condition of woman as housewife, in Clotilde Barbarulli and Luciana Brandi, *I colori del silenzio. Strategie narrative e linguistiche in Maria Messina* (Ferrara: Tufani, 1996), 12-13; Cristina Pausini, *Le briciole della letteratura: le novelle e i romanzi di Maria Messina* (Bologna: Clueb, 2001), 73.

9 "Through Messina, we are able to see the effects of a patriarchal system that forces women at all social levels to acquiesce to the men in their lives" (Fred Gardaphè, "Preface," in Maria Messina, *Behind Closed Doors: Her Father's House and Other Stories of Sicily* (New York: The Feminist Press at CUNY, 2009), vi). Messina's geographical viewpoint is particularly significant, as "the sanctity of the family, primacy of motherhood, and cult of domesticity were deeply entrenched values in the conservative South, as was uncontested male authority" (Elise Magistro, "Introduction," in Maria Messina, *Behind Closed Doors,* 9). However, Messina's analysis of societal constraints on women and young men can apply to Italian society as a whole, during the period, which was smothered by the ideological closure of the Fascist dictatorship (Lara Gochin Raffaelli, "Shades of Ambiguity: Maria Messina's Writing during the Fascist Era," *Italian Studies in Southern Africa*, XV, no. 1 (2002), 59-69).

might say—the asymmetric relationship between man and woman.[10] The plot follows a linear trajectory: the docile Antonietta, upon marrying Don Lucio, invites her sister Nicolina to join her in her marital home. In the large but gloomy dwelling, the two sisters lose their freedom, subjected to the will of the paterfamilias, who moreover repeatedly abuses Nicolina, viewing her as his possession. In this "torture room," to paraphrase Giovanni Macchia speaking on Pirandello,[11] filled with hate and grievances "[e]ventually another, innocent family member [Antonietta's son, Alessio] comes to pay for the sinister web of relationships that evolve within the confines of this doomed domestic arrangement;"[12] after the tragedy, Antonietta goes mad, while Nicolina decides to remain in the house, serving everyone.

Throughout the novel, the despotic Don Lucio expects to passively receive drinks, lunch, and dinner at predetermined hours, sometimes monitoring the preparation process to measure the capability and fidelity of the woman responsible. Right in the first pages of the book, Nicolina is assigned a *heavy* responsibility:

> Doveva preparare il bicchiere d'acqua che il cognato sorseggiava lentamente, due ore dopo aver cenato. Strizzò poco meno di mezzo limone nell'acqua, badando che col succo non cadesse qualche seme; aggiunse tanto vino quanto bastava a tinger l'acqua; vi sciolse un cucchiaino scarso di zucchero; agitò, rimestò, lasciò riposare. Poi guardò il bicchiere contro il lume, per accertarsi che la bibita fosse perfettamente limpida, come sapeva prepararla Antonietta. E finalmente portò il bicchiere, su un piatto, cautamente.[13]

10 Feeding activities become in effect performative gender norms, as they force women to act under men's rules; see Judith Butler, "The Question of Social Transformation," in Ead., *Undoing Gender* (New York: Routledge, 2004), 212; by this way they are expression of a "'social power' imposed on women by the male tyranny" (Silvia Tiboni-Craft, "The Stole Identities in Maria Messina's Novel A House in the Shadows", in *Representations of Female Identity in Italy: From Neoclassism to the 21st Century,* eds. Silvia Giovanardi Byer, Fabiana Cecchini (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2017), 126 n. 9). The gastronomic rites, once created to hold together the cohesive structure of rural ancient society, have now become tools of social constraint, as noticed in Cristina Benussi, "Cibo e storia nel romanzo italiano moderno," in *A tavola con le Muse. Immagini del cibo nella letteratura italiana della modernità*, eds. Ilaria Crotti and Beniamino Mirisola (Venezia: Ca' Foscari, 2017), 20.

11 Giovanni Macchia, *Pirandello o la stanza della tortura* (Milano: Mondadori, 1981).

12 Lynne Lawner, "Enslavement in Sicily". *The New York Times* (22 April 1990), 31. Don Lucio, upon learning that Alessio has to pay a debt, not only refuses to help him but also sharply criticizes the boy, who commits suicide.

13 Maria Messina, *La casa nel vicolo* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2009), 14-15.

> [She had to prepare the glass of water that her brother-in-law was wont to sip slowly, two hours after his supper. She squeezed slightly less than half a lemon into the water, taking care that no seeds fell with the juice; she added just enough wine to tinge water; dissolved in it a level teaspoonful of sugar, shook it, stirred it, and let it settle. Then she held the glass up to the light to make sure the drink was perfectly limpid, the way Antonietta prepared it. And finally, cautiously, she brought the glass on a saucer].[14]

The *limonea*/lemonade possesses the elusive nature of an alchemical process: the approximate quantities of its three simple ingredients, determined by subjective evaluation, challenge the male claim of a perfect 'solution'. This ideal is even harder to achieve because it depends entirely on the trial and judgment of the master. This *very simple* recipe does not require specific skills but only the ability to adapt to Don Lucio's tastes and desires. The *limonea* becomes an emblem of the suffocating family life—a ritualistic performance[15] so significant and essential to the householder that, in its name, even a small pleasure such as an afternoon walk can be denied to the women: "E inoltre avrebbe dovuto alterare le comode abitudini. Addio fumata del dopopranzo, addio limonea da sorseggiare senza fretta…"[16] ["And besides, he'd have to alter his comfortable habits. No more after-dinner smoke, no more lemonade to be sipped unhurriedly"].[17]

The function of repeated actions and routines is to nip in the bud any hope of changing, any opportunity of escaping. "Sì! La felicità si trova nell'abitudine!"[18] ["Yes! Happiness consists of habits"][19] exclaims Don Lucio, superimposing his will and vision of life on others.

Another *female* ritual is the coffee preparation, described step by step.

> Nicolina portò sulla tavola la macchinetta e tutto l'occorrente, ché Don Lucio voleva vederlo preparare, il caffè, e sentirne tutto l'aroma. Nicolina si mostrava tranquilla nel compiere il suo dovere con la consueta precisione. Ecco che macinava, buttava un cucchiaio di caffè nel bricco fumante, copriva, rimestava appena si levava il bollore, tornava a coprire e finalmen-

14 Maria Messina, *A house in the shadows,* trans. by John Shepley (Marlboro, Vermont: The Marlboro Press, 1989), 2.

15 Also relevant is the fact that the entire ritual takes place in silence, a lack of sounds that emphasizes the dialectic tyranny/submission, with the former seeking to tame the woman's will while also suppressing her voice. For a discussion on the role of silence in Messina's works, see Barbarulli and Brandi, *I colori del silenzio.*

16 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,*53.

17 Messina, *A house,* 29.

18 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 54.

19 Messina, *A house,* 29.

> te spegneva la fiamma senza che una goccia d'acqua si fosse versata o un po' della nera schiuma del caffè avesse imbrattato il bricco pulito, lucente, che pareva d'argento.[20]
>
> [Nicolina brought the coffee pot to the table, along with everything else that was needed, since Don Lucio liked to watch her prepare the coffee and to smell its aroma. Nicolina looked calm as she carried out her task with her usual precision. She ground the coffee, put a spoonful in the steaming jug, covered it, stirred it as soon as it came to a boil, covered it again, and finally extinguished the flame without a drop of water being spilled or a spot of black foam staining the clean shining jug, which looked like silver].[21]

In this passage, the food-drink *ceremony* reveals its theatrical nature: the result—*the coffee*—is not important, but rather the performance, which stages the absolute submission of Nicolina. Her body, exposed during the preparation, is left unprotected before the rapacious desire of her owner.[22]

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20 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 159.

21 Messina, *A house,* 102-103.

22 Nicolina's body, *reduced* to mere pleasure, is also mechanized, transformed in an extension of the coffee machine, operating accurately without thoughts. The enslaving task of supplying food is therefore carried out by Nicolina, who nullifies herself in the process. At the beginning of the story, the girl is described while preparing Lucio's breakfast: "Stese la tovaglia, imburrò il pane bianco (si faceva a parte col fiore di Maiorca per lui solo) e versò il latte, non troppo caldo e non troppo freddo. Mentre egli mangiava – un dottore gli aveva consigliato di masticare il boccone trenta volte lentamente, – Nicolina non tralasciava di servirlo. Andava e tornava dalla cucina (sul fuoco c'erano altre fette di pane in caldo), si trovava pronta a imburrare, ad aggiungere latte o zucchero, senza vincere la pungente paura di non accontentare il cognato. Intenta a servirlo, non si curava di sbrigare le molte faccende che l'aspettavano, o a preparare la colazione per sé e per Antonietta" (Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 25) ["She spread the tablecloth, buttered the white bread (it was made separately, for him alone, with the most expensive flour), and poured the milk, not too hot and not too cold. While he ate—a doctor had advised him to chew each mouthful slowly thirty times—Nicolina did not neglect him for a minute. She went back and forth between the dining room and the kitchen, where other slices of bread were toasting on the fire, she stood ready to butter them, to offer more milk or sugar, and still without overcoming her nagging fear of not satisfying her brother-in-law. Intent on these duties, she refrained from tackling the many other chores that awaited her, or preparing breakfast for herself and Antonietta"](Messina, *A house,* 10). The English translation overlooks the obsessive repetition of words associated with servitude (*servitù*), though it retains the use of the third-person masculine pronoun (he, him) throughout the text, emphasizing a unilateral focus on the master. For him, special and valuable foods are reserved—such as bread made from Maiorca flour, exceptionally white and highly nourishing.

After a while, Don Lucio, "centellinava il suo caffè voluttuosamente"[23] ["sipped his coffee voluptuously"],[24] a clear metaphor for the sexual abuse he has been inflicting on the girl. The scene occurs at a crucial moment in the story: Alessio, cruelly reproached by his father, is not coming; the two sisters are deeply distressed and beneath their quiet obedience lies an impatience that Don Lucio cannot perceive, secluded in his *bestial* delight. Indifferent to his son's fate, "gli occhi socchiusi masticava adagio adagio, assaporando il cibo"[25] ["his eyes half closed, he chewed slowly, savoring his food"].[26] A large quantity of food is consumed by Don Lucio's wiry body; his thinness underscores the true significance of the food—not as nourishment, but as an offering to a deity who guarantees the household's economic stability. Unlike Don Lucio, the sisters dare not eat; "Del resto, loro donne si adattavano facilmente con un pò di pane e un pezzo di ricotta mangiato in piedi"[27] ["Anyway they, being women, were used to getting along with a piece of bread and a little ricotta cheese eaten on the run"].[28] The denied female conviviality is a *leitmotif* in the novel: for Antonietta, her daughters, and Nicolina, food is a simple means of survival, necessary to maintain an efficient workforce. It is, however, a male pleasure—not in and of itself, but as a tool for monitoring the women's 'proper sphere', contaminating it with a gender-oriented will of dominate. Messina never describes the adult women sitting at meal; even the little girls are neglected and forced to eat the remains in a space normally reserved for the servants:

23 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 159.
24 Messina, *A house,* 103.
25 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 158.
26 Messina, *A house,* 103. The bestiality and brutality of Don Lucio are highlighted by the exaggerated depiction of his mouth, always in motion—chewing, savoring, swallowing—offering a clue to an exclusive and egocentric self-absorption. When Alessio arrives home for lunch, visibly upset after hearing a quarrel between the sisters, Don Lucio, absorbed in chewing slowly for good digestion, fails to notice his son. The disgusting slowness of his chewing and "il sordo 'mpe mpe delle labbra di Don Lucio che succhiava placidamente la pipa" (Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 57) ["the muted smacking of Don Lucio's lips as he sucked placidly on his pipe"](Messina, *A house,* 31), grotesquely reduces the character to an ever-open orifice, ready to receive the tribute of his slaves. Lucio's mouth continuously works—absorbing food, smoke, spitting out words of reproach and condemnation to quash any rebellion—ultimately devouring the identities of the two sisters, like a parasite that destroys the hosts it feeds on. The sound of the pipe been sucked is also central in the scene of Nicolina's rape.
27 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 26.
28 Messina*, A house,* 10.

> Perciò [Nicolina] ingollava dopo un boccone, assieme a Carmelina che aspettava in cucina, come un gattino, sperando che la zia riportasse indietro qualche rimasuglio dei delicati manicaretti preparati a parte per il capo di casa.[29]
>
> [Thus [Nicolina] would have a bite to eat in the kitchen, along with Carmelina who waited like a kitten, hoping her aunt would bring back a few scraps of the choice dishes specially prepared for the master of the house].[30]

Indeed, when Don Lucio goes outside, cooking is regarded as superfluous; nourishment activities, detached from their ritual context, become simple and essential, with standing up to eat becoming a daily behavior.[31] The female and male worlds are presented to the reader as opposites and disconnected: quickness versus slowness, nibbling versus savoring, marginality versus centrality. However, the latter is no more enviable than the former, given a state of discomfort (headaches, indigestion) that Don Lucio frequently complains about. The predatory attitude of the man is subject to a sort of counter step, symbolized by his continuous indigestion. No quantity of Tot,[32] a brand of digestive aid widespread at the time, always on the table when Lucio eats, can dispel the hodge-podge of the frustrations and the grudges by which he is nourished, dominating from a banquet table reversed into a torturous place. No one can end the meal without the man's permission, nor speak or move; the waitstaff's service must be quick and precise, the temperature of food must be tested, and no delays are allowed in serving or in arriving at the predetermined time for eating.[33] Those who

29 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 57.

30 Messina, *A house,* 31. Scholars have noticed that Nicolina's humiliation is pervasive in her role of servant-nurturer. The key lies in her spinsterhood: the girl can be only a substitute for wife and mother. This 'in between' condition, suspended in the midst of old and new, is potentially subversive and must be strictly controlled. Nicolina is able to express her own identity only in a liminal space, such as the balcony, where she is not forced into an everlasting state of giving without receiving—this being the essence of her existence. (See Tiboni-Craft, "The Stole Identities").

31 Both Antonietta and Nicolina experience their relationship with food without genuine interest or pleasure; it is merely a barren and stressful duty. The book makes no mention of any recipe—aside from the symbolic *limonea*—nor does it highlight any notable skill the sisters demonstrate in cooking, nor is there any appreciation from the master.

32 The reference to the well-known brand of digestive has been neglected in the English translation.

33 As Massimo Montanari notices: "Sempre, la tavola rimane il luogo per eccellenza attorno a cui si concentrano valori e ideologie, si scambiano segni e messaggi, si esprimono sentimenti e passioni. Sempre, la tavola rimane—per lo storico—un

break the rules are immediately punished, and the tool—a riding crop—is inserted into the back of the chair, thus becoming part of the table's furnishing, as a significant site of parent-teenager, male-female tensions.[34]

But the despotic power of the *paterfamilias* is frail, inwardly corroded—a sign of the advancement of the industrial age, which is symbolically alluded to in the text by his sickness. At the end of the story, when the family is disjointed, Don Lucio, sadly, will be cooking his own simple dinner, a blatant symbol of the passing of his dominance. Now, for him as well, feeding is no longer a pleasure but a need; his condition is therefore akin to women's. But Nicolina's destiny has an even more tragic essence: 'devoured' by a patriarchal system that has had its day and can survive only by eliminating those who cannot defend themselves, she experiences a situation of emptiness, highlighted in the text by a disheartening gastronomic metaphor: she feels "come un limone spremuto che si butta in mezzo alla strada"[35] ["as a squeezed lemon thrown in the middle of the street"].[36]

Questioning the identity-form role of women's nurturing

In subsequent works by Messina, food and nurturing, as relevant components of the female personality and identity, are often portrayed in a sur-

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luogo particolarmente idoneo all'osservazione dei rapporti fra gli uomini e dei modi in cui quei rapporti vengono rappresentati" ["The table has always been the quintessential place where values and ideologies converge, where signs and messages are exchanged, and where feelings and passions are expressed. For the historian, the table has always remained a particularly suitable place for observing relationships between people and the ways in which those relationships are represented"]. (Massimo Montanari, *Nuovo convivio: storia e cultura dei piaceri della tavola nell'età moderna.* (Bari: Laterza, 1991), 2.

34 "La finisci? Non imparerai mai a stare composta? – ammonì Don Lucio toccando il frustino che teneva infilato nella spalliera. Carmelina si rannicchiò tutta, come se fosse stata già battuta" (Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 105) ["Can't you learn to sit still?" Don Lucio admonished, touching the riding crop that he kept hanging on the back of the chair. Carmelina cringed, as though she had been struck"] (Messina, *A house,* 65).

35 Messina, *La casa nel vicolo,* 112.

36 Messina, *A house,* 70. In this novel, as in other works by Messina analyzed in this essay, food has a clear connotative and structural function, as it reflects the characters' personalities and influences the development of the story. See Silvana Ghiazza, *Le funzioni del cibo nel testo letterario (*Bari: WIP, 2015), 39-76; 105-136.

real or fairy-tale context, which actually disavows their positive function. Alternatively, the feeding activities are depicted as a 'privilege' whose loss indicates the marginality of the subject; lastly, they are portrayed as a tool of deception. Rarely do Messina's characters firmly refuse the burden of nurse that the patriarchal society assigns to them, but this extreme position is doomed to failure.

An example of the first narrative pattern can be found in the short story *Villeggianti*: a married woman, Leda, feeling inadequate as a mother, entrusts her child, Chicchi, to a baby-sitter, Annetta, a very young and unreliable girl, always made up with red lips and bleach-blond hair, dangerously far from the traditional model of 'broodmare'. The girl's expressionistic description, "una bella ragazza con due ciuffi troppo biondi sulle orecchie, grandi denti, grandi occhi viola, labbra sottili e ridenti troppo rosse"[37] [a beautiful girl with two very blonde ponytails hanging over her ears, big teeth, large violet eyes, and thin, smiling, too-red lips], positions her as an inverted double of the mother, whose inexperience – the weaning takes place too soon – kills the baby; the lack of milk, a basic and vital food, makes the infant sick and weakens him with surprisingly quickness.[38] The vampire image of the nurse, who seems to absorb the child's life, and the final scene, when the narrator comments, seeing the child lying on his deathbed, "Oh! Era diventato più lungo il piccolo Chicchi!"[39] [Oh! Little Chicchi had become too long!], classify the story as non-realistic, instead of a parable of diverted and consequently punished motherhood. The mother, named Leda, like the mythical betrayer, also 'betrays' her familiar duties and is sanctioned with an abnormal '*growth by death'* of her son.

The second aforementioned theme, which is realistic, is related to food deprivation—in both the giving and receiving it—as a sign of social marginalization. This is the painful experience of Vanna in *"Casa paterna"* (from the collection *Le briciole del destino*, 1918), who is married to a career man. He always eats outside, avoiding the meal as a time for sharing, even when he comes back home with his friends. The girl, prevented from even providing food, realizes her nullification. Vanna then seeks shelter

37 Maria Messina, "Villeggianti. Novella", *Nuova antologia di lettere, scienze ed arti,* Serie 6, v. 232 (1923), 329.

38 Tarozzi ("La società contemporanea", 127) quotes the traditional belief about nannies, whose appearance had to be wholesome, both physically and morally; Anna Colella, in *Figura di vespa e leggerezza di farfalla: le donne e il cibo nell'Italia borghese di fine Ottocento* (Firenze: Giunti, 2003), 63, recalls the medical prohibition on the earlier weaning.

39 Maria Messina, "Villeggianti", 333.

in her father's house but is barely tolerated by her sisters-in-law and is rarely invited to join the family's food rituals.[40] Her exclusion from her native community is highlighted by the breaking of the nutritive stream. An '*in-between'* character who illustrates the discrepancies in both rural and urban-modern societies, Vanna cannot nourish herself, nor feed others, in either of these environments. The focus on nurturing activities clearly shows the tragic condition of sentimental dryness and incommunicability to which the protagonist is condemned. The only resolution, however negative, is to be swallowed by the sea, in whose waters Vanna immerses herself in an attempt at suicide. This extreme action must also be seen as a way to rejoin the 'other,' satisfying a desire for harmony with the whole that the interrupted flow of nourishment and care had questioned.

The first and the second themes are blended in the short story "*La porta chiusa"* (from the collection *Le briciole del destino*), in which the referential data are organized within an oneiric atmosphere. Ienna suffers from heart troubles and cannot access the upper floor in her house, where the kitchen is located. Dethroned, the woman is separated from her 'realm' by a locked door. This leads to a sense of dispossession and loss of identity, particularly since the protagonist now depends on a hideous old maidservant, Savatura, who neglects her mistress by giving her insipid and cold soups, and replaces Ienna in all respects, maliciously pointing this out. At the beginning of the story, Savatura is in Ienna's room, leaving some freshly baked bread, the fragrance of which should remind Ienna of her inanity. The smell is a strong olfactory signal—no matter how subliminal—of the

40 "A l'ora del caffè e latte, Viola preparava per tutti e poi diceva: – Mi scordavo di Vanna… – e riempiva un'altra tazza" Maria Messina, "Casa paterna," in Ead, *Piccoli gorghi* (Palermo, Sellerio, 1988), 167. "When it was time for morning coffee, Viola prepared it for everyone and would then say: "Oh, I've forgotten about Vanna…" and she would fill another cup" (Maria Messina, "Her Father's House", in Ead, *Behind Closed Doors*, 96). The exclusion of the guilt through a nutrition symbology had been previously in Verga's *Malavoglia,* when the young 'Ntoni comes back home: "Venni per vedervi. Ma dacché son qui la minestra mi è andata tutta in veleno" Giovanni Verga, *I Malavoglia,* ed. Giulia Carnazzi (Milano: Rizzoli, 2015), 305. "I came to see you all. But since I have been here the food seems to poison me" Giovanni Verga, *The House by the Medlar-tree,* trans. Mary A. Craig (New York and London: Harper &Brothers, 1890), 296. Vanna is excluded also because, having left her husband, she has no means of support. Food as a social gradient, as in Verga (Dora Marchese, *Il gusto della letteratura. La dimensione gastronomico-alimentare negli scrittori italiani moderni e contemporanei,* Roma: Carocci, 2016, 69), is a central theme in Messina's *Primavera senza sole* (1920), where the dialectics of both the lack and abundance of food reflect the financial position of the characters.

current role reversal: the servant is the authentic hostess in the house, as she fills every space and interstice with a sensory trace of her feeding activity, namely of her core function in the domestic space. The dominion is not limited to the culinary field: the maidservant satisfies Ienna's husband both gastronomically and sexually, as the protagonist will soon discover. When Ienna is able to reach the upper level of the house, she finds a dirty kitchen, an open cupboard, and a dining room left in squalor; a reversed world that mirrors the upheaval of the slave-master relationship, where negligence and waste replace control and conservation. Though everything in the servant's room is clean, a table is set for two in the middle, and

> sulla tavola c'erano anche due graziose coselline di pasta, come le manipolava lei prima, ogni volta che si faceva il pane. Figuravano due lettere; e una, attorcigliata a serpentello, pareva una esse.[41]
>
> [on the table, there were also two beautiful pieces of dough, as she, too had kneaded before, each time she made bread. They looked like two letters; and one, twisted as a snake, looked like an 's']

The adjacency between the laid table and the bed—the meal is eaten in the servant's bedroom—illustrates in the story the identification of food with sex, a motif already mentioned but not particularly developed in *La casa nel vicolo*. If Ienna can no longer be a cook, she also looses all her attractive traits in the eyes of her husband, who is involved in a sexual relationship with Savatura. It is also meaningful that the female protagonist has no children, another deficiency that underlines the inability to nurture, thus creating a reversed image of the typical traditional woman. Food, and the social clichés associated with it, become a tool of deception in the text; Savatura seduces Ienna's husband merely by feeding him. This interpretation, however, leaves some meanings obscure. Ienna is a young woman, while Savatura is old, ugly, and somehow terrifying, as the storyteller notes, expressing Ienna's thoughts: "Sì, era una strega, Savatura, con gli occhi freddi e chiari che parevan di vetro, le labbra più sottili di un fil di spago, sigillate."[43] [Yes, she was a witch, Savatura, with clear, cold eyes that seemed made of glass, her pursed lips thinner than a string of twine]. The man's choice would be inexplicable, so it seems to stem from a kind of spell, and

41 Maria Messina, "La porta chiusa", in Ead, *Piccoli gorghi,* 179.
42 All translations are mine unless otherwise indicated.
43 *Ibidem*.

the small shapes of bread highlight both the 'possession through food' and the submission of the male: his first initial is interwoven with an S, which stands for Savatura but also snake, both a symbol of Satan and of Eve's sin.[44] The servant, with her witch's face, taking hold of the nutrition ritual, exerts a devilish power over the house, stimulating a morbid desire in the man, and perhaps exacerbating the illness—partly psychosomatic—in the woman.[45] The story is suspended between reality and a fantastic atmosphere, which highlights how the centrality of food practices in a conservative context can become obsessive, leading people to live in disturbing domestic spaces, marked by atrocities such as an unreasoned imprisonment or disgusting adultery.

As a tool and emblem of the woman's unjust subjugation to the father, the discourse on food is always marked by deep tensions and intense sorrow. Within this framework, the short story "Demetrio Carmine" (from the collection *Le briciole del destino*) stands out in bold contrast, as it depicts a harmonious world where man and woman collaborate in preparing meals and tasting food without overpowering one another. Demetrio, a dentist, and his sister Caterina, a homemaker, share every task in the nutritional sphere. They constitute a small, atypical family, based on two-way, symmetrical relationships: Demetrio provides the raw materials and sets the table, Caterina cooks with passion. The perfect microcosm is dismantled by a stranger, Claretta, a typical seductress: despite being a working and emancipated woman (she is a teacher, a 'professora'), Claretta wishes to settle down, attracted to Demetrio by his wealth. She therefore pretends to perform traditional behaviors, exhibiting a deep interest in cooking.

> Una domenica si chiusero in cucina per fare un certo budino toscano. Claretta dosò, pestò, finse d'aiutar Caterina che s'affannava a manipolare una pasta dura come un ciottolo, mentre Demetrio la serviva e rideva come un ragazzo girandole attorno. Sprecarono un sacchetto di Maiorca, dieci uova, un barattolo di zucchero, la cucina fu messa a soqquadro; e finalmente Caterina levò di forno un empiastro bruciato duro che sapeva d'amaro. Pure fratello e sorella si profusero di elogi. Ciò che faceva Claretta era sempre ben fatto.[46]

44 The servant's name is certainly a speaking name, used in an antiphrastic sense, as the female Savior is, in fact, a destroyer.

45 Culinary art is considered a form of magic in ancient cultures, as evidenced by the Greek word *magheiros*, meaning cook, See Gilberto Pierazzuoli, *Mangiare donna. Il cibo e la subordinazione femminile nella storia* (Milano: Jouvence, 2016), 137-139.

46 Maria Messina, "Demetrio Carmine," in Ead, *Piccoli gorghi,* 250.

> [One Sunday, they shut themselves up in the kitchen to make a particular Tuscan pudding. Claretta measured, mixed, and pretended to help Caterina, who became breathless trying to knead a particularly tough dough that was hard like a pebble, while Demetrio served her and laughed like a boy, circling around her. They wasted a sack of Majorca flour, ten eggs, and a jar of sugar, and reduced the kitchen to shambles; finally, when Caterina pulled a burnt mess from the oven, which was hard and smelled bitter, both brother and sister praised profusely. Everything Claretta did was, after all, well done]

The joyful execution of the recipe hides, beneath a superficial gaiety, worrying signs: Claretta is unable to cook and, as Caterina is going to notice while looking at her manicured hands, she is not used to doing any housework. The girl is lying; moreover, she introduces a sense of useless waste into the well-balanced life of the brother and sister: the dispersion of precious ingredients—once again, the refined Maiorca flour is mentioned—foreshadows the severe loss that Caterina will suffer when Claretta persuades Demetrio to relocate his dental practice to the North of Italy. As Savatura, though in a different way, the 'professora' uses food as a weapon of deception. If feeding is a substitute for sex in the world created by the old, uncanny servant in a conservative environment, Claretta adapts her behavior to a more democratic context, highlighting the game-like nature of nurturing, which had previously been a means of sharing experience and feelings joyfully for Demetrio and Caterina. When Claretta becomes engaged to the man, she refuses to cook the traditional dishes that Caterina prepared for Demetrio, such as the *frittedda,* a Sicilian recipe made of fava beans, peas, and artichokes, thus severing her fiancé from his native country. Claretta therefore uses the widespread image of woman as 'queen of the house' as a mask, concealing her double nature, which is surprisingly similar to that of the Tuscan pudding she tries to prepare: seemingly sweet yet actually hard and bitter. Like Ienna, Caterina is unable to react to the devastation of her family and of her conservative world; the two women do not realize that the patriarchal value system is outdated. They remain, as Sapegno notices for the majority of Messina's characters—and the same could be said for Antonietta and Nicolina—on the threshold of consciousness.[47]

The last novel of Messina, *L'amore negato* (1928), seems to go a step further: Severa, the protagonist, outrageously refuses the woman's role as the dispenser of food. Instead, she intends to make a career as a milliner.

47 Maria Serena Sapegno, "Sulla soglia. La narrativa di Maria Messina," *altrelettere,* 2012 www.altrelettere.uzh.ch/article/view/al_uzh-3/304 (last consulted: 11 december 2024).

To achieve her goal, she doesn't hesitate to deceive, even depriving herself of family affection and all kinds of emotion. Her repressed passions return – in a Freudian sense – when Severa, now a mature woman, falls in love with a young man, Marco, whom she hired as an accountant. The character then neglects her atelier, which goes bankrupt. Finally, Severa, left in the lurch, goes mad.

The novel opens by describing Severa's family at lunch, a crucial moment that focuses on the characters' vision of life. The mother, Emilia, is a typical housekeeper, and her personality is expressed through cooking, an agreeable labor. She had "il viso rosso e lustro perché s'era staccata allora allora dai fornelli, ed era tutta affannata."[48] [a shiny red face, having just pulled herself away from the stove, and was completely out of breath]. Similar to the mother, the younger sister Miriam sets the table accurately and reproaches Severa, who is nibbling on the bread. Severa, in turn, accuses Miriam:

> Che piccola anima di serva tu hai! […] Tu somigli a nostra madre che non sa vivere senza cucinare e sfrigolare per portare a tavola manicaretti e budini![49]
> [What a small, servile soul you have! You are just like our mother, who has no idea how to live without cooking and sizzling, in order to bring delicacies and puddings to the table!]

The protagonist criticizes not only the subjugation that preparing food involves but also the hedonistic component of nourishment—a pleasure she cannot afford. Another diner is the teacher Corinna, a tenant in the house, who lives between tradition and innovation, taking the best from both. She is an efficient worker but is also capable of appreciating Emilia's recipes, cheering at a dish of "bruciate," hot chestnuts. This simple food is mentioned later, along with wine, when the storyteller reminds the reader of the love story between Severa's parents.[50] The combination of wine and hot chestnuts is central in the opening depiction of the meal, when the drink is glorified in a quote from gastronomic literature: Severa prevents her father from drinking wine, so Corinna recites some verses from *Bacco in Toscana* by Francesco Redi, which enhances the power of wine as an an-

48 Maria Messina, *L'amore negato* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1993), 17.

49 Ivi, 21.

50 On the literary motif of chestnut as natural and humble food, see Elisa Curti, "Castagne," in *Banchetti letterari. Cibi, pietanze e ricette nella letteratura italiana da Dante a Camilleri*, eds Gian Mario Anselmi and Gino Ruozzi (Roma: Carocci, 2011), 85-91.

tidote to the pain of man's existence. Hot chestnuts and wine testify to the naturalness of food, which Severa sees only in a gender-oriented perspective, instead of as a means to foster affectionate bonds. Denying herself the pleasure of food, Severa removes herself from conviviality, friendship, and the needs of her body. She displaces onto her family the responsibility of a 'lack' she feels, interpreting it as a deficiency of opportunities—her parents did not have enough money to pay for their daughter's education. The protagonist, instead, has a neglectful personality. It is noticeable that the Freudian displacement is depicted using a gastronomic metaphor: "Era destino che la famiglia dovesse prepararle un boccone amaro ogni volta che le pareva venuto il momento di poter godere![51] [It seemed destined that her family prepared a bitter bite for her every time it seemed to her that a moment of enjoyment had finally arrived!] Severa feels she is not well-fed enough—and the prohibition to eat the bread has, for her, this proper meaning—while it's her responsibility not to accept everything (food, help, interest) that could come from her relatives. When she meets Marco, she subconsciously attempts to seduce him, and it is no coincidence that it happens while she offers him the daily dinner in a sumptuous setting, which reveals the woman's sexual availability within a master/ employee dynamic.

> Lui non avrebbe voluto accettare sera per sera. Gli pareva di lasciarsi fare l'elemosina! […] Ma l'offerta era così amichevole! [ ] Anche la piccola tavola bene apparecchiata, con le stoviglie che luccicavano nello splendore di due grandi lampade velate di seta gialla, lo invitava a restare senza tanti complimenti.[52]
>
> [He wouldn't have wanted to accept every evening. It seemed as though he would be taking handouts! […] But it was such a friendly offer! […] Even the small table beautifully laid, with the place settings that gleamed in the radiance emanating from the two large lamps shaded with yellow silk, invited him to stay without many compliments]

Marco eats voraciously, disregarding all etiquette; Severa looks at him eagerly, confronted with an example of mere instinct and pleasure, which she has removed from her own experience. The woman is dazed and overwhelmed, thorough food, by her body's demands and by an irrepressible awakening of senses:

> A Severa piaceva vederlo mangiare. Aveva denti grandi, sani, labbra un po' grosse che dopo cena gli diventavano più rosse e più tumide. Certi momenti,

51 Messina, *L'amore negato*, 72.
52 Ivi, 87.

> nel guardarlo mentre addentava a quel modo, socchiudeva gli occhi assalita da uno struggimento penoso e piacevole nello stesso tempo, aspettandosi di sentirsi baciare, tutt'a un tratto.[53]
>
> [Severa enjoyed watching him eat. He had large, healthy teeth, and full lips, which after dinner, became redder and tumider. In certain moments, while watching him biting in that way, she would close her eyes assailed by a grief, which was both punishing and pleasing at the same time, waiting to be kissed all at once].

Once again, the food/sex equivalence takes on a crucial hermeneutic role, revealing to Severa that her strategic design to conquer independence as a woman is unachievable, as it creates in her a 'vacuum' that blocks her capacity for action. To offset the emptiness in her personal life, the woman fills Marco with food. In this sentence and in her actions, nourishment becomes a glaring substitute for the sexual act. From this point on, the depiction of Severa's body as shriveled and deprived of nourishment intensifies in the novel.

In my opinion, the key to reading *L'amore negato* through food representations better illustrates the author's intention than other interpretations. Severa's behavior is penalized in the text not because, as Verga might have portrayed, the woman tries to exceed the limits of her role and social class, but because she denies her own physicality and her need to nurture. The protagonist's solution is flawed, as it nullifies its own goal upon reaching it: the correct path to achieving female independence does not involve rejecting one's femininity.

Conclusions

Messina's works, therefore, offer an in-depth reflection on food as an expression of gender relations, women's marginalization, and the awareness of the female body. One should now wonder what exactly the author's point of view is on the world described. It has been noted, in fact, that Messina holds a conservative ideology, as she does not propose improvement strategies regarding women's condition.[54] Evolution is not envisioned

53 *Ibidem*.

54 See Maria Di Giovanna, *La fuga impossibile. Sulla narrativa di Maria Messina* (Napoli: Federico & Ardia, 1989); "La testimone indignata e le trappole del sistema. Il percorso narrativo di Maria Messina," in *Donne e scrittura,* ed. Daniela Corona (Palermo: La Luna, 1990), 337-345.

in a narrative that finds its basic element in the 'eddy'—the static nature of oppressive situations, its basic element.[55] Even when viewed from the perspective of food-centered activities, Messina's characters generally do not rebel against their enslavement, of which they are only vaguely aware. However, the representation of the motif—through the slow, exhausting rituals of food preparation and serving, the despotism shown by the master and father, who is 'nurtured' like a god, and the excruciating nature of the dining spaces—clearly reveals the author's strong vein of criticism. This, in turn, stimulates in the reader a distancing from the idealized image of the woman as 'Queen of the house.' Messina's works dismantle many clichés surrounding the role of women in society and also warn against easy solutions, such as Severa's, who tries to assert herself in a male-dominated world by eliminating her corporeality.

Actually, women's social action spaces are minimal, mainly due to the ideological regression of the fascist era. Female marginalization is an undeniable fact, and the only possible action is to become aware of it.[56] Forced to care for others and confined to liminal spaces in the home, the Messinian woman is sentenced to a malnourished and barren existence. She is destined to receive only, paraphrasing the title of Messina's collection published in 1918, often quoted in this article, 'the crumbs of life'. The innovation and modernity of Messina's discourse lie in its ability to reveal the squalor and the latent injustice of these 'crumbs' in contrast to the insatiable voracity of men.

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55 Mariella Muscariello, "Vicoli, gorghi e case: reclusione e/o identità nella narrativa di Maria Messina," in *Les femmes écrivains en Italie (1870-1920): ordres et libertés,* ed. Emmanuelle Genevois, *Croniques Italiennes*, n. 39/40 (Paris: Université de la Sorbonne Nouvelle, 1994) 329-46.

56 See Barbarulli and Brandi, *I colori del silenzio,* 61.

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CUSTARD SLICE (KOTORSKA PAŠTA): TRACING THE CULINARY JOURNEY FROM FRENCH ORIGINS TO KOTOR'S LOCAL IDENTITY

Ane Ferri*

Abstract

This paper is dedicated to the study of custard slice—a cake that represents a significant part of the cultural heritage of the Bay of Kotor, while also carrying a deeply rooted Mediterranean cultural heritage. Starting from the theoretical foundations of Claude Fischler, who asserts that food is an inseparable part of identity, and Massimo Montanari's starting point that food is culture, I explore the historical background, the making technique, and the cultural importance of this dessert that arrived in Kotor via Italy. The dessert's unique position within both local and broader Mediterranean cuisine highlights how food reflects the cultural complexities of the region. The gastronomic identity of this area was shaped by recipes of the most diverse origins, through constant contact with different people, who came, left, stayed, and assimilated with the local population. These interactions—be they cultural, economic, or political—created a culinary landscape that is as diverse as the people who influenced it. Considering the long-term presence of this delicacy in the gastronomy of Kotor, the aim of this paper is to document, for the first time, the evolution of *kotorska pašta*—not *cremeschnitte*, as it is often mistakenly called—by analysing historical sources, recipes, and narratives of individuals from the local community. This study reveals the ways in which this dessert has evolved, not only as a recipe but also as a symbol of local identity and continuity. By looking at the shifting contexts in which the custard slice has been prepared and consumed, this paper discusses how it reflects the social and cultural changes in the region over the centuries. My intention is to revive the story of this culinary masterpiece, understanding its importance in the local context and beyond. In doing so, I aim to connect the dessert's rich history with its modern-day variations, highlighting its enduring relevance in Kotor's culinary traditions. The methodology of this paper includes the study of historical documents, interviews with local residents, and the analysis of recipes that have been passed down from generation to generation. These sources offer unique insights into how the custard slice has maintained its place in the local culinary repertoire, even as it has adapted to changing tastes and influences. The combination of these methods allows me to create

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a comprehensive representation of the custard slice, from its beginnings to contemporary adaptations. The paper contributes significantly by documenting cultural heritage through the lens of Mediterranean food culture, enriching the global understanding of local culinary traditions. The study of this dessert provides a powerful example of how food is a living element of culture, constantly evolving yet retaining its roots. In exploring the custard slice, we gain deeper insight into the interplay between culture, identity, and the ways in which food continues to shape and be shaped by the communities that sustain it.

Keywords: Custard slice—kotorska pašta, Kotor, Mediterranean cuisine, cultural heritage, gastronomy.

Introduction: Food and Cultural Identity

Food is not merely a practical necessity; it is a cultural expression deeply embedded in the identity of individuals and communities. As anthropologist Claude Fischler argues, food is a "marker of identity" that not only satisfies physiological needs but also shapes individual and collective self-perception.[1] The relationship between food and culture is fundamental to understand how food functions beyond sustenance. The preparation, consumption, and sharing of food help form the narrative of social interaction, memory, and belonging. In this light, food transcends its material properties, acting as a medium through which personal and communal identities are constructed, communicated, and preserved. The cultural significance of food is particularly evident in the Mediterranean, a region historically defined by its diverse culinary traditions, geographical influences, and intercultural exchanges. As Carol Helstosky notes in *Food Culture in the Mediterranean*, the region's cuisine reflects a rich tapestry of historical interactions and environmental factors.[2]

Massimo Montanaro's assertion that "food is culture" underscores the idea that food traditions are not static; rather, they evolve, adapt, and reflect the ongoing dialogue between individuals, society, and history.[3] Food is imbued with symbolic value that ties individuals to their heritage, their community, and the larger world. The act of sharing a meal, or in this case, a dessert, can be seen as an embodiment of cultural practices and values, one that transcends generations. In this sense, food functions as a living tra-

1 Claude Fischler, *Food, Self and Identity*, translated excerpts, Social Science Information, Vol. 27, No. 2, 1988, pp. 275-292.
2 Carol Helstosky, *Food Culture in the Mediterranean*. Greenwood Press, 2009, 45.
3 Massimo Montanaro. *Food Is Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2004, 12.

dition, embodying the accumulated experiences, beliefs, and social norms of a community. The culinary landscape of any region, particularly one like the Bay of Kotor, is shaped by both external influences and indigenous practices, illustrating a dynamic exchange of cultural knowledge.

The culinary traditions of Kotor, with their profound Mediterranean roots, provide a vivid example of the intersection between food and cultural identity. As Fischler notes, food offers a means of preserving cultural memory. It serves as both a personal and collective history, binding individuals to their ancestors and their environment.[4] The *kotorska pašta*, a custard slice, exemplifies this process. While it originated in France, its adaptation and eventual establishment in Kotor highlight the region's broader historical and cultural interactions. Its inclusion in the Kotor culinary repertoire represents not only a historical connection to the French culinary tradition but also the region's unique way of integrating external influences while preserving local customs. The presence of such a dessert in Kotor is not a mere coincidence but a testament to the evolving nature of food as it adapts to the specificities of place, people, and tradition.

In considering the role of food in shaping identity, it is also essential to engage with those who have questioned the significance of food in cultural representation. Some critics argue that food alone cannot be a definitive marker of identity. Sociologist Arjun Appadurai, for example, discusses the idea of food as part of "global cultural flows" in which food becomes commodified and detached from its original context, thus losing its cultural meaning.[5] While this critique brings valuable insights into the complexities of globalization, it overlooks the ways in which food continues to function as a symbol of local identity and cultural continuity. Even as food circulates globally, it is frequently reinterpreted and localized, maintaining its role as a site of cultural negotiation and identity formation.

Moreover, as food continues to globalize, some critics argue that its significance as a cultural identifier diminishes in favour of globalized tastes. For example, John Urry posits that global flows of food products lead to the erosion of distinct culinary identities, particularly when popular fast foods and industrialized food systems dominate local markets.[6] However, such views can be countered by the persistence of local culinary traditions,

4 Claude Fischler, *Food, Self and Identity*, translated excerpts, Social Science Information, Vol. 27, No. 2, 1988, pp. 275-292.

5 Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996, 33.

6 John Urry. *The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Society*. 2nd ed. London: Sage Publications, 2000, 51.

which adapt to globalized food cultures while still asserting their unique identities. The *kotorska pašta*, in its current form, is a case in point. Though it is part of a broader European dessert tradition, it has been shaped by local tastes, available ingredients, and cultural preferences, thus maintaining its significance within the local community.

Furthermore, the analysis of sweet foods, especially desserts like the *kotorska pašta*, is particularly insightful. Sweet foods, often associated with indulgence and celebration, hold symbolic meaning within various cultures. As culinary historian Sidney Mintz suggests, "Sugar, and its related products, have come to symbolize prosperity, indulgence, and hospitality."[7] In the Mediterranean context, sweets are not only consumed for their taste but also for their cultural and social significance. Desserts often mark special occasions, celebrations, and social rituals, reinforcing communal ties and shared values. The *kotorska pašta*, with its layers of rich custard and flaky pastry, is a dessert consumed during significant moments, whether for family gatherings or festive occasions. Its sweetness is symbolic of the joy of sharing, the celebration of life, and the expression of hospitality that defines Mediterranean cultures. This emphasis on hospitality is deeply rooted in the Mediterranean lifestyle, where conviviality and strong community bonds are central elements.[8]

As we explore the evolution of the *kotorska pašta*, we also explore the continuity of Mediterranean foodways, which reflect both the historical depth and the resilience of local culinary practices. The pastry's journey—from France to Italy and to Kotor—serves as a metaphor for the broader process of cultural diffusion and adaptation. It highlights the role of food as both a cultural artefact and a dynamic force of change, linking past traditions to contemporary practices.

Historical Origins of the Custard Slice

The custard slice, or *millefeuille*, has a rich and intricate history that reveals the interconnectedness of food, culture, and historical evolution of culinary practices and techniques. The journey of this dessert from its early origins in France to its spread throughout Europe and

7 Sidney W. Mintz. *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*. New York: Viking, 1985, 98.

8 Xavier F. Medina, et al. "Looking for Commensality: On Culture, Health, Heritage, and the Mediterranean Diet." *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, vol. 18, no. 5, 2021, p. 2605.

eventual arrival in Kotor, Montenegro, provides valuable insights into the ways in which culinary practices serve as conduits for cultural exchange and identity formation. Understanding the origins and evolution of the custard slice not only enriches our appreciation of this dessert but also offers a lens through which we can examine the broader history of Mediterranean cuisine and its influence on southern European culinary tradition.

The earliest recorded version of the custard slice, known in French as *millefeuille* (meaning "thousand layers"), is attributed to the late 17th century, specifically to the French chef François Massialot. Massialot, a prominent figure in the court of King Louis XIV, was instrumental in shaping the culinary landscape of France during this period. His cookbook, *Le Cuisinier Royal et Bourgeois* (1691), contains a recipe that closely resembles the modern custard slice, featuring multiple layers of puff pastry and custard cream. Massialot's work, which was part of a broader culinary movement aimed at refining French cuisine, reflects a growing emphasis on both aesthetic presentation and technical precision in pastry making. The fact that Massialot is often credited with the creation of the *millefeuille* suggests that France, particularly the royal court, was at the forefront of the development of sophisticated pastries during the late 17th century.

Massialot's *millefeuille* was not an isolated invention but rather part of a larger culinary tradition that sought to elevate food to an art form. The late 17th century saw the development of a sophisticated French culinary style that emphasized both aesthetic presentation and technical precision in pastry making, as evidenced by Massialot's own cookbook, *Le Cuisinier Royal et Bourgeois*, which illustrates the growing trend of transforming cooking into a noble pursuit.[9] The proliferation of such desserts in French culinary culture speaks to the role of food as a symbol of both social status and artistic achievement. However, the custard slice's history is not confined to France alone. Its subsequent spread across Europe provides a striking example of how food travels through both voluntary and forced means, reflecting the complex interactions between politics, war, and trade. For instance, the Napoleonic Wars in the early 19th century saw French culinary traditions, including pastries like millefeuille, being introduced to other parts of Europe as French chefs were captured or relocated due to military movements. Similarly, the expansion of European trade routes during the colonial period facilitated the exchange of

9 Peter Ferguson. *The Culinary Arts in France: A Historical Perspective*. Culinary Institute Press, 2004.

ingredients and culinary techniques across borders, further influencing the spread of such pastries.[10]

One of the most significant events in the history of the custard slice's diffusion was the military campaigns of Napoleon Bonaparte in the early 19th century. Napoleon's conquests, which spanned much of Europe and into Russia, were not only military in nature but also cultural. As Napoleon's armies moved across Europe, they carried with them not only the language and political ideologies of France but also its culinary traditions. The custard slice benefited from this cultural transfer. The dessert, known as *Napoleon* in several countries, is a direct result of the cultural diffusion that accompanied Napoleon's military campaigns.[11] As food historian Jean-Louis Flandrin notes, the spread of culinary practices during this period was often intertwined with the expansion of empires, serving as a reflection of the political and cultural dynamics at play.

The spread of the custard slice during the Napoleonic Wars illustrates how food serves as both a cultural artefact and a medium for identity formation. In the case of *millefeuille* and its variations, such as *Napoleon* in the countries Napoleon conquered, the dessert became not only a symbol of French culture but also a sign of political power. The name "Napoleon" itself reflects the direct association of the dessert with the French emperor, underscoring the close relationship between food and national identity during times of conflict.

As the custard slice (it was made with three thin layers of puff pastry and two equally thin layers of creamy custard. On top, it was decorated with a smooth icing sugar glaze, beautifully complemented by an intricate chocolate lattice pattern) moved beyond France, it found particular resonance in Italy, where it became especially popular in the Friuli Venezia Giulia region. After Napoleon's conquest of Venice in 1797, the dessert made its way into the local Italian culinary tradition. This movement was not just a simple culinary transfer but rather an adaptation of the *millefeuille* to suit local tastes and available ingredients. As culinary scholar Giorgio Meloni argues, food migrations often involve a process of adaptation in which the

10 A. F. Smith. *The Oxford Companion to Food*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2001. David, Harvey. *The Culinary History of Europe: Trade, Politics, and the Spread of Food*. Cambridge University Press, 2005.

11 The spread of the *millefeuille* and its variations is linked to the political and military influence of Napoleon's empire. Desserts like *Napoleonka* (in former Yugoslavia, particularly in Croatia and Serbia) and *Napoleon* (in Russia) adapted the original French recipe, reflecting local tastes and influences during this period of cultural exchange (Davidson, 2006; Ferguson, 2004).

local context plays a crucial role in shaping the final product.[12] In Italy, the dessert was given local names such as *carsolina* and *sfoiada*, reflecting the regional culinary vernacular. The adoption of the custard slice in Italy also led to important modifications. Italian versions of the dessert were typically larger than the French *millefeuille*, measuring about 6x12 cm, or twice the size of the original.[13] Also, there are local variations in the additions to the cream, which also make a significant difference in the taste between the French millefeuille and the Italian sfogliata. This adaptation was likely influenced by Italian preferences for heartier portions and a more practical approach to dessert serving sizes.

The fact that the custard slice was adapted to suit local Italian tastes demonstrates how food traditions are not static but constantly evolve in response to changing cultural, geographical, and historical contexts. The lack of glaze on the Italian *sfogliata*, for example, reflects a preference for simplicity and a desire to focus on the flavours of the pastry itself rather than on decorative elements. The larger size of the Italian version, meanwhile, may have been influenced by the regional practice of sharing desserts in a communal setting, where a larger portion size would be more conducive to group consumption. The lack of glaze on the Italian *sfogliata* can be viewed as part of a broader culinary trend in the late 17th and 18th centuries, which emphasized simplicity and the natural qualities of ingredients. This shift in culinary aesthetics aligned with the broader philosophical movements of the *Enlightenment*, a period that championed rationality, simplicity, and the rejection of excess in both art and daily life. As thinkers of the period began advocating for a more straightforward approach to living, the same ideals were reflected in culinary practices. The *sfogliata*, with its minimalistic presentation, was emblematic of this cultural shift, where the focus was placed on enhancing the natural flavours of the pastry rather than on elaborate decorations or heavy embellishments.[14] This desire for simplicity was not just a culinary preference, but also a reflection of the cultural and intellectual currents of the time. The Enlightenment's emphasis on clarity, balance, and natural beauty found expression in many aspects of life, including food.

12 Giorgio Meloni. *Il Cibo e la Storia: Tradizioni culinarie nel Mediterraneo*. Bologna: Il Mulino, 2011.

13 Maria Bertoli. *Cucina del Friuli-Venezia Giulia: Tradizioni e innovazioni*. Trieste: Edizioni del Litorale, 2010.

14 Alan Davison. *The Oxford Companion to Food*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2006. Peter Ferguson. *The Culinary Arts in France: A Historical Perspective*. Culinary Institute Press, 2004.

From Italy, the custard slice spread to the Adriatic region, eventually reaching the coastal city of Kotor in Montenegro. Kotor, with its rich history of trade and cultural exchange, was an ideal setting for the introduction of new culinary traditions. The custard slice was embraced in Kotor, where it was known by its first local name *švoljata*. The dessert's arrival in Kotor can be traced back to the 19th century, likely as a result of trade and cultural interactions between Kotor and Italy. The local adaptation of the dessert is indicative of the broader Mediterranean culinary exchange that took place during this period, as goods and ideas travelled across the sea, bringing with them new food traditions. The adoption of the *sfogliata* in Kotor initially highlights the city's cultural contacts with other Mediterranean regions, as it reflects the exchange of culinary practices. Over time, however, it has become a marker of cultural identity for the Kotor community, symbolizing the blending of various traditions into a distinct local food culture.

The custard slice's journey from France to Italy and finally to Kotor is a testament to the power of food as a tool for cultural transmission and identity formation. The dessert, which began as a French court pastry, has become a symbol of the cultural exchange that occurred during the Napoleonic era and beyond. As culinary historian Elisabeth Rozin notes, "food is a dynamic reflection of both local and global forces, shaped by the interplay of history, geography, and human agency."[15] In the case of the custard slice, its evolution from a French creation to Italian and Montenegrin delicacies reflects how food can transcend national borders and become part of a shared culinary tradition. However, it is important to note that while these desserts share common origins, they are often presented as distinct and authentic delicacies, shaped by the cultural and national identities of each region. This phenomenon raises the question of whether this shared culinary history is truly a reflection of collective heritage, or if it serves the purposes of gastronationalism, where food is used to reinforce national identities.[16]

15 Elisabeth Rozin. *Culinary Traditions in Europe: A Comparative Approach*. New York: Routledge, 2004.

16 Arjun Appadurai. *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*. University of Minnesota Press, 2001. Michele DeSourcey. *The Globalization of Food: Culinary Identities and the Rise of the National Food Culture*. Journal of Food Culture, 2010.

The Arrival of Custard Slice in Kotor

Kotor, a charming coastal city in Montenegro, was part of the Venetian Republic from 1420 to 1797, a time during which its culture, architecture, and culinary practices were heavily influenced by Venetian customs. The Venetian Republic, as a maritime empire, not only facilitated trade but also the movement of people, ideas, and food across its vast territories. As A. G. Appadurai (1981) emphasizes, "The movement of people across borders is not merely the movement of individuals, but of their ideas, customs, and culinary traditions, which travel with them, adapting to new contexts while maintaining traces of their origins"(495). Kotor, with its strategic location on the Adriatic coast, absorbed the culinary influences of Italian coastal cities, particularly those in the Veneto region, which were already interwoven with similar food practices due to their shared access to the Mediterranean. Thus, it is not surprising that the early culinary landscape of Kotor reflected a strong Italian influence.

However, the specific introduction of Italian pastries such as the *kotorska pašta* (custard slice) occurred much later, in the 19th century. This pastry's journey can be traced back to the gradual spread of French pastry techniques across Europe, which were then embraced and modified by Italian bakers. As Italy became more interconnected with France and other European regions in the 1800s, these French-influenced pastries began to surface in Italy before reaching the Adriatic coast, and eventually Kotor.[17] By around 1895, this new wave of pastry culture reached Kotor, introduced by the Rainis family, who played a pivotal role in the local culinary scene. The Rainis family, originally from Udine in northern Italy, opened the first pastry shop in Kotor, known locally as *pašticerija*, in 1895. Andrea Rainis, who had moved to Kotor five years prior to the shop's opening, became a central figure in bringing this culinary innovation to the city. The pastry shop, located in the heart of Kotor's main square,[18] quickly became a beloved establishment for locals and visitors alike. "The introduction of a new pastry was not just the arrival of a treat," as noted by culinary historian C. L. Threlfall (1992), "but the beginning of a social ritual where food becomes a symbol of the meeting between two cultures."(532) The Rainis

17 Alan Davison. *The Oxford Companion to Food*. 2nd ed. Oxford University Press, 2006. Massimo Montanari. *The Culture of Food*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2006. Lidia Guarnaschelli. *The Food of Italy: A Journey for Food Lovers*. New York: Rizzoli, 2012. M, Hess. *Cuisine and Culture: A History of Food and People*. New York: Routledge, 2007.

18 Currently, Prva banka is located at that place.

family brought with them not only pastries from their homeland but also regional specialties such as the "švoljata," a custard slice, which would eventually become the *kotorska pašta*. These pastries, alongside other Italian treats like "fave dei morti" (almond cookies),[19] "bigné" (today's cream puffs or today's profiteroles) were warmly embraced by local pastry chefs, who integrated them into Kotor's evolving food culture. *Pišinger* was also present in Kotor at the time. While it is commonly accepted that *pišinger* is originally a Viennese specialty, its arrival in Kotor reflects a complex interplay of historical and cultural influences. It is plausible that this delicacy was introduced to Kotor through Italian channels; however, it is essential to contextualize this within a broader historical framework. The region of Friuli Venezia Giulia, including cities such as Udine and Trieste, was not part of Italy in the modern sense before the mid-20th century. Instead, these areas were integral to the Habsburg Monarchy for centuries prior to World War II.[20] This historical context is significant not only in terms of shifting political borders but also in understanding cultural and culinary exchanges. The deep ties between these northern regions and Austria, particularly Vienna, fostered a strong culinary connection, wherein pastries, confections, and techniques from the imperial capital permeated local traditions.[21] The Habsburg presence in Kotor from 1797 to 1805 further reinforced these influences, embedding Central European elements into the local gastronomy. Thus, while *pišinger* may have reached Kotor through Italian connections, its true origins lie within the Austro-Hungarian culinary sphere, exemplifying the intricate fusion of Mediterranean and Central European traditions that have shaped the region's gastronomic identity. Recognizing this layered history is essential for understanding not only the trajectory of individual recipes but also the broader cultural framework within which cuisine of the Bay of Kotor has evolved. Kotor's culinary landscape serves as a testament to the region's historical position at the crossroads of empires, where Mediterranean ingredients and techniques intertwined with Austro-Hungarian influences, creating a gastronomic heritage that defies simplistic classification. Over-

19 These delicious sweets with a lemon flavor are prepared for the Day of the Dead and All Saints' Day.

20 Thomas Stigler. *Cultural History of Viennese Cuisine: Recipes and Anecdotes from the Time of the Habsburg Monarchy*. Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015.

21 Daša Ličen. "Reinventing Habsburg Cuisine in Twenty-First Century Trieste." Folklore, vol. 71, 2018, pp. 85-106. Retrieved from: https://www.folklore.ee/folklore/vol71/licen.pdf

looking this historical and cultural complexity would mean disregarding the very essence of the Bay of Kotor cuisine: a dynamic interplay of maritime trade, imperial legacies, and local adaptation.

The transmission of these culinary traditions was not limited to specific dishes like *pišinger* but extended through the families and individuals who carried them across generations. The influence of the Rainis family extended beyond just the introduction of pastries. Andrea's children,[22] particularly his daughters, played a role in spreading these culinary traditions further. Two of his daughters, Elvira[23] and Marcella,[24] married in Kotor, further embedding the Rainis family's culinary legacy within the local community. The third daughter, Marietta,[25] moved to Buenos Aires, Argentina, with her husband between the wars. In the 1990s, Captain Vjeko Radimir from Kotor,[26] visiting Buenos Aires, stumbled upon an original *kotorska pašta* in a random pastry shop, suggesting that Marietta had taken the recipe with her to Argentina, thus linking the two continents through this beloved dessert.

Following the departure of the Rainis family to Zagreb due to the onset of World War II, the tradition of the custard slice continued in Kotor through other local pastry chefs. Among them was Mr. Pero Bošković, a well-known pastry chef, who opened his own pastry shop in Kotor's Saint Tryphon square after the war. At Bošković's pastry shop, according to the memories of Kotor residents, there were wonderful cakes. Pero had three sons and two daughters. Our interlocutor, Mr. Dender, knew two of his sons, Jovo and Branko. Pero's wife, Eugenia was Italian. Given the well-documented culinary exchanges between Italy and the Adriatic region, it is plausible that Eugenia introduced certain cake recipes from her homeland. Likewise, Pero's interactions with the Rainis family suggest that local adaptations of foreign pastries were shaped by personal and professional networks. Such processes align with broader patterns of culinary diffusion in port cities, where migration and trade facilitated the blending of diverse gastronomic traditions. Bošković's version of the *kotorska pašta* began to differ from that of the Rainis family's *švoljata.* His custard slice is the one that most closely resembles the current kotorska pasta. Unlike the

22 Andrea Rainis and his wife Andrijana had five children, three daughters and two sons.

23 Elvira was married to Dušan Mijatović, and their son Željko was the husband of the aunt Tonka, the aunt of Mr. Aleksandar Dender, who was our interlocutor and provided valuable information from his family during my research.

24 She was married to Mato Brozičević. Their sons, Nino and Atiglio, lived in Zagreb (Croatia).

25 Her married surname was Duhović.

26 Captain Vjeko Radimir from Kotor was our interlocutor.

Rainis version, Bošković's custard slice was firmer, with three solid layers of pastry and two layers of filling, while Rainis's version was flakier, with crisp pastry layers and a softer filling, which often included maraschino,[27] giving it a unique flavour. His innovative adaptation of the custard slice became the standard in Kotor and remains a symbol of the city's pastry tradition for a while.

The *kotorska pašta* would eventually become a key feature in other pastry shops across Kotor, including *Zdravljak,*[28] which had been a prominent pastry shop in the city prior to and after World War II. Known for its exceptional pastries, Zdravljak became famous in the 1960s for its custard slice, as well as other delights like *pišinger* and *štrudel*. Famous Kotor pastry chefs, including Mr. Gojko Vujović, worked at Zdravljak, where they honed their skills and contributed to preserving and evolving local pastry traditions.

The evolution of *kotorska pašta* took another turn in the 1960s, when, unfortunately, the pastry shops in Kotor began to close, and with them, the presence of this dessert gradually diminished. During the 1960s, Yugoslavia implemented economic reforms aimed at decentralizing the economy and increasing efficiency. However, despite these reforms, the private sector remained restricted, particularly in areas such as hospitality and retail. The state favoured socially owned enterprises, leading to a decline in the number of private businesses, including pastry shops. One of the key factors was the introduction of high taxes and strict regulations on private entrepreneurs, making it difficult for small private businesses to operate. Additionally, state policy often prioritized collective and state-owned enterprises, further marginalizing the private sector.[29] Despite these challenges, local women in Kotor continued to preserve the tradition of pastry making, but in a more informal manner—often preparing pastries at home or for special occasions. The absence of private pastry shops did not signify the end of the culinary tradition, but rather its transition into domestic kitchens, where women maintained and adapted these practices.

27 Maraschino is cherry liqueur, distilled from the Marasca variety native to the Dalmatian coast, was particularly associated with Zadar, where production had been established since the 18th century. Its distinctive aroma and subtle bitterness made it a prized ingredient in both confections and beverages across Europe.

28 It was first located on the main square "Pjaca od oružja," on the ground floor of the Bjeladinović house, until the mid-1970s, when it moved to the Dojmi tavern (in front of the old town), and later to the square of Saint Tryphun.

29 Milford Bateman. "Small Enterprise Development in the Yugoslav Successor States: Institutions and Institutional Development in a Post-War Environment." *European Journal of Development Research*, 2000, 12(2), 12-38.

This shift reflects broader socio-economic changes in the region, where the state-controlled economy reshaped both the food industry and cultural practices surrounding food. Thus, the decline of local pastry shops in Kotor during the 1960s was not solely driven by changing consumer tastes but was deeply rooted in the political and economic context of socialist Yugoslavia. However, the tradition was not entirely lost. A handful of Kotor women, including Mrs. Melita Krivokapić, Nada Zef, Violeta Milošević and others, began to preserve and make the pastry at home, ensuring that the recipe as adapted by the pastry chef Gojko Vujović, survived in its modified form. Mrs. Krivokapić, who learned the craft from Darka Filipović[30] before her passing, began making and selling the *kotorska pašta* again fifteen years ago, reviving the tradition for future generations.

As local culinary traditions continue to evolve, the *kotorska pašta* stands as a testament to the city's rich cultural heritage, shaped by centuries of migration, trade, and cultural exchange. It is not just a pastry but also a symbol of Kotor's unique position at the crossroads of Adriatic and Mediterranean influences. The persistence of this dish through generations underscores the significance of food in maintaining cultural identity and continuity in a world marked by constant change.

A Comparative Analysis of Traditional and Contemporary Recipes

This section examines the original Italian recipe for "pasta sfoglia" and its adaptation into the contemporary *kotorska pašta*, highlighting the modifications in ingredients and preparation methods that have occurred over time.

Original Italian Recipe: Pasta sfoglia[31]

This original recipe, considered the first documented and preserved version used in Kotor when the custard slice first arrived, holds significant

30 Mrs. Darka Franović, originally from Herceg Novi (Montenegro), completed her pastry apprenticeship in the early 1950s. In 1953, she began working at the Zdravljak pastry shop in Kotor, where her supervisor was Mr. Gojko Vujović. He taught her the recipe that was made at the Zdravljak pastry shop in Kotor. (These valuable pieces of information were provided to us via email by Mrs. Melita Krivokapić, in response to our inquiry).

31 The original Italian recipe was provided by Mr. Aleksandar Dender, President of the Italian Community of Montenegro, during an interview in 2023. We take this opportunity to express our sincere gratitude to him for the invaluable and insightful information he has generously shared with us.

historical value for the region's culinary heritage. Passed down through generations, it was carefully preserved within the Rainis family, with Tonka, Mr. Aleksandar Dender's aunt, playing a key role in safeguarding this traditional recipe. Its importance lies not only in its culinary authenticity but also in its contribution to understanding the evolution of Kotor's gastronomic identity. As part of the broader Mediterranean heritage, this dessert reflects the rich cultural exchanges and culinary traditions that have shaped the region for centuries, connecting local taste with wider Mediterranean influences.

Mr. Dender provided us with a photograph of a yellowed handwritten Italian recipe. The document is composed in a continuous narrative, without distinct sections or bullet points, resembling a letter rather than a list. The handwriting is elegant yet challenging to decipher due to its style, the document's age, and the discoloration of the paper. Despite these challenges, we have transcribed the content. The importance of preserving such traditional recipes cannot be overstated, as accessing the original texts was a challenging task due to their age and the difficulty in interpreting handwritten documents. The act of transcribing this historical recipe is essential in safeguarding cultural heritage and ensuring that both the knowledge of the recipe and the embodied skills required for its preparation is passed down to future generations. As the culinary historian Jean-Louis Flandrin has emphasized, "Recipes are more than just instructions; they are the history of a culture's creativity, identity, and adaptation."[32]

Pasta sfoglia[33]
¼ farina 2 rossi d'uovo
½ bicchier d'acqua
il succo di mezzo limone
si fa un panetto poscia
si fa uno sfoglio entro si
mette ¼ di farina con ½ lb.
di burro fresco che col ¼ di
farina si avrà ben stemperato.

32 Jean-Louis Flandrin. *Food and Society: A Social History of Food*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000, 45.

33 The original recipe for *pasta sfoglia* is attributed to the Italian chef Andrea Rainis, whose detailed instructions have been preserved and are now presented here. The text is transcribed exactly as it appears in the original. Since it was handwritten on paper, the words that were split at the line breaks on the page are also preserved in the transcription. Additionally, it was transcribed with all errors, which have been faithfully retained in this version.

Sfoglio che resti come una
massa si lavora molto colle
mani morbida quando è tutto
amalgamato si piega e
ripiega un 10 volte a mo
di fazzoletto si fanno che forme
si vuole o sfogli cartacee ecc.

Here is the English translation of the original Italian recipe, broken down into ingredients and preparation method for clarity:

Ingredients:
¼ flour
2 egg yolks
½ glass of water
juice of half a lemon
¼ flour
½ lb. of fresh butter

Preparation method:
combine the flour, egg yolks, water, and lemon juice to form a dough.
roll out the dough into a thin sheet (sfoglia).
then, add ¼ of the flour to ½ lb. of fresh butter, mixing it well to create a smooth paste.
once the dough is smooth, work it by hand to make it soft.
after everything is well combined, fold and refold the dough about 10 times, similar to folding a handkerchief.
shape the dough into any form desired, such as paper-thin layers (sfoglie), etc.

The modern *kotorska pašta*, as prepared by Mrs. Melita Krivokapić,[34] a master pastry chef from Kotor, incorporates several modifications to the traditional recipe:

34 This recipe was provided to us during our research and the interview conducted in 2023 by Mrs. Milita Krivokapić, to whom we extend our gratitude. Not only did she share the recipe orally, but she also generously offered to demonstrate each step of its preparation. Additionally, this recipe, under Mrs. Krivokapić's guidance, was printed for the first time by the Kotor Tourism Organization during the summer of 2024 in the form of a brochure. With the invaluable assistance of Tourism Organization staff members Mrs. Vanja Petrović and Mr. Marko Cicović, I was granted access to the printed version of the recipe prior to its official release, which coincided with the celebration of the Kotor custard slice festival ("Fešta kotorske pašte"). This early access allowed me, with their permission, to present it at the 4th Mediterranean Studies Symposium, held in Palermo from June 13 to 16, 2024. I take this opportunity to express my deepest gratitude to all

Ingredients:
500 grams of vegetable shortening
500 grams of flour
250 ml of cold water
1/2 tablespoon of salt
7 eggs
1 litre of milk
120 grams of flour
300 grams of sugar
2 packets of vanilla sugar

Making the pastry:
Mix the flour with a portion of the shortening. Then add the water and let the dough rest for 20 minutes.

Incorporate the remaining shortening into the dough and roll it out into a rectangular pan.

Folding the dough is essential to achieve a layered texture. Fold the dough eight times, folding twice consecutively (repeat four times), then let the dough rest for 15-20 minutes.

Bake the pastry on the back of a baking tray for about 15-20 minutes at 220°C, depending on the oven's strength.

Once the pastry is baked, poke it with a fork.

Making the cream:
Wish the eggs and some cold milk in a bowl. After whisking, add the rest of the hot milk. The whisked mixture is then added to the dry mixture of flour and sugar.

Cook the cream over low heat for 20 minutes until it thickens.

Once the cream is done, add 20 grams of butter to melt, and after stirring, the cream becomes glossy.

When filling, it is crucial that the pastry is cool, and the cream is hot.

Comparative Analysis

The evolution of the traditional Italian *pasta sfoglia* into the contemporary *kotorska pašta* reflects significant adaptations driven by ingredient availability, culinary preferences, and environmental factors. While the original Italian recipe omits the cream—likely because *crema pasticciera* was considered a standard and therefore unnecessary to specify—Mrs. Melita Krivokapić's recipe provides a detailed guide for both the pastry and

persons involved for their recognition of the importance of publishing all this information provided by them in an academic paper, thereby preserving it for future generations.

the cream. Her cream preparation method, which involves whisking eggs with cold milk to prevent curdling, demonstrates a precise and thoughtful approach aimed at preserving the smooth texture of the cream.

This adjustment aligns with the requirements of modern palates and kitchen environments, where control over ingredients and their interaction is paramount. One notable change involves the omission of lemon juice from the dough preparation, a key element in the original recipe. Mrs. Krivokapić explained that locally grown lemons are not available in Kotor throughout the year, and during that time, even supermarket lemons were not consistently available. The lemons that were available were often imported and of lesser quality, making it impractical to include them in the recipe. This highlights a pragmatic adaptation to local conditions, where ingredient availability directly influences culinary practices. Another significant change involves the substitution of lard with vegetable shortening. Mrs. Krivokapić opts for vegetable shortening produced by fabric Zvijezda (Croatia), citing the odor of lard as a deterrent, likely influenced by changes in livestock diets that affect an aftertaste that was less desirable in the pastry. She acknowledges a slight difference in the taste of the pastry layers when using shortening but emphasizes its practicality. Additionally, she highlights the seasonal challenges of working with shortening, noting that summer temperatures soften the fat, complicating the layering process and requiring chilled ingredients to ensure a successful outcome. Interestingly, while powdered milk was used in the past by workers at the pastry shop Zdravljak, Mrs. Krivokapić refrains from using it, as contemporary powdered milk often carries an unpleasant aftertaste that can detract from the cream's flavour.

Her meticulous choice of ingredients reflects a dedication to preserving the authentic taste of *kotorska pašta*, while making concessions to modern ingredient standards and availability. This balance reveals an ongoing negotiation between tradition and innovation, where Ms. Krivokapić adjusts certain elements to adapt to contemporary circumstances without compromising the dish's essence. For example, the substitution of lard with vegetable shortening helps to avoid the undesirable aftertaste influenced by modern livestock feed, while the seasonal unavailability of locally grown lemons led to her practical decision to omit them, ensuring the pastry's continued relevance without sacrificing its core identity. In addition, there is no longer any alcohol in the cream that affects its flavour. The transformation of the recipe also underscores the cultural significance of *kotorska pašta*. Since its arrival in Kotor, the pastry has consistently comprised three layers, maintaining its core identity while allowing for innovations. Mrs. Krivokapić shared with me that the prepa-

ration of just three layers can take up to three hours, emphasizing the labour-intensive nature of this pastry and the skill required to perfect it. Reflecting on the broader implications of these changes, it is evident that culinary traditions evolve in tandem with societal and changes in available resources. This includes factors such as the availability of local ingredients and modern production practices, which influence how traditional recipes are adapted over time. As Michael Pollan notes, "The way we eat represents our most profound engagement with the natural world".[35] This sentiment aptly captures the dynamic relationship between tradition and adaptation in the case of *kotorska pašta*, where the recipe's evolution mirrors the changing socio-economic conditions, lifestyles, and resource availability, all of which influence daily food practices.

Festival of Kotorska Pašta

The Festival of kotorska pašta, held annually in Kotor since its inception in 2014, represents a cornerstone of the city's culinary and cultural heritage. Initiated by the late Mrs. Dragana Knežević (1958-2023), then-president of the local community of the old town, the festival has become a beloved tradition that continues uninterrupted, even during challenging times like the pandemic. This year's 11th edition, scheduled for June 15th, stands as a testament to the resilience and enduring significance of this unique celebration.

In the course of researching, we reached out to Mrs. Knežević, hoping to gain deeper insights into her motivations and vision for establishing this significant event. However, despite her goodwill, the advanced stage of her illness prevented her from responding to our specific questions. Tragically, she passed away shortly thereafter, leaving behind a legacy that speaks volumes even in her absence. While we lack her direct answers, we offer here our interpretation of her vision, as inferred from her enduring contributions to the community and the festival itself. The dedication and foresight of Mrs. Knežević were instrumental in establishing the festival as a means of safeguarding and promoting *kotorska pašta* as an emblem of Kotor's identity and local cuisine. Her work has left a lasting legacy that extends beyond the festival itself, ensuring that the skills, recipes, and cultural importance of *kotorska pašta* are preserved for future generations. In

35 Michael Pollan. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York: Penguin Press, 2006, 10.

recognition of her contributions, last year's festival (2024) is being held in her memory, with a special dedication included in the official brochure, prepared by the city of Kotor and the local tourist organization.

As a symbol of Kotor's rich culinary tradition, the festival serves a vital role in preserving and passing down the art of making *kotorska pašta*. The event features workshops where participants, including younger generations, are taught the techniques necessary to prepare this intricate dessert. Each year, approximately 1,000 pieces of *kotorska pašta* are distributed to visitors, ensuring that this delicacy remains accessible to locals and tourists alike. By involving the community in these efforts, the festival fosters a shared sense of pride and continuity, bridging the gap between past and present. The festival also includes a competition aimed at encouraging young people to take an active interest in learning how to prepare *kotorska pašta*. This initiative not only ensures the preservation of traditional skills but also instills a deeper appreciation of Kotor's culinary heritage. As Sarah Pink aptly noted, "Food is not simply a means of sustenance but a powerful symbol of cultural identity."[36] The Festival of kotorska pašta embodies this principle, using the custard slice as a medium to celebrate and sustain the cultural narrative of Kotor.

In addition to preserving culinary traditions, the festival contributes significantly to the development of local tourism. Held annually in June, the event attracts a diverse audience, from local residents to international visitors, drawn by the promise of experiencing an authentic aspect of Kotor's cultural life. According to Timothy and Ron, "Heritage tourism plays an essential role in linking communities to their past while creating economic opportunities for the present."[37] Workshops, competitions, and the distribution of *kotorska pašta* are integral parts of the festival's itinerary, offering an immersive experience that goes beyond mere consumption. Visitors are invited to engage with the process of creating *kotorska pašta*, fostering a deeper connection to Kotor's culinary and cultural identity. The event thus serves as a model of sustainable cultural tourism, where local traditions are celebrated and preserved while contributing to the city's economic and social vitality. The Festival of kotorska pašta has always been more than a celebration of a dessert; it is a reflection of the community's resilience, creativity, and shared heritage. As the festival continues to grow and evolve, it remains a shining example of how local traditions can be preserved in

36 Sarah Pink. *Doing Visual Ethnography*, 3rd ed. (London: SAGE Publications, 2013), 25.

37 Dallen J. Timothy, and Ron Amita. *Cultural Heritage and Tourism: An Introduction*. Bristol: Channel View Publications, 2013, 56.

the face of modern challenges. In the words of renowned historian Eric Hobsbawm, "Traditions are invented as much as they are preserved, and their reinvention reflects the needs and values of the societies that celebrate them."[38] While *kotorska pašta* can be seen as an 'invented tradition' in the sense that its recipe and preparation have evolved over time to reflect the changing cultural and social context of Kotor, it also draws upon a deep historical legacy of local pastry-making, blending both innovation and preservation. The Festival of kotorska pašta is a living tradition, embodying both continuity and adaptation, ensuring that Kotor's rich cultural legacy remains vibrant for generations to come.

Discussion: kotorska pašta – A Unique Culinary Tradition

In Kotor, the traditional dessert known as *kotorska pašta* holds a special place in local culture. The name itself is a localized adaptation of the Italian term "pasta sfoglia," where "pasta" typically refers to a variety of foods made from dough, such as pasta or pastry, while "sfoglia" refers to the layered puff pastry dough. This term, when translated directly into English, can cause confusion because the word "pašta" is commonly associated with pasta in many languages, especially among tourists or non-locals. As Mr. Aleksandar Dender mentioned in our conversation, he believes that the name "pašta" is misleading, as in Italian, "pasta sfoglia" refers to the pastry dough, not the dessert as a whole. Therefore, the term *kotorska pašta* might mislead people into thinking it refers to a pasta dish, which is not the case.

However, from a linguistic and cultural perspective, the name *kotorska pašta* proves to be an incredibly fitting choice. It represents a local interpretation of an Italian and French culinary tradition, transforming these foreign influences into something uniquely from Kotor. Today, the local community not only preserves the recipe but also connects it to the region's rich history of cultural exchanges. This dessert serves as a tangible reflection of Kotor's ongoing interaction with diverse culinary practices, offering a narrative of how external influences were adapted and integrated into the local food culture. The word "pašta" has been seamlessly integrated into the local vernacular, reflecting how language adapts over time to mirror cultural shifts. According to sociolinguist David Crystal, such cultural adaptations in language are not merely random changes, but rather reflections

38 Eric Hobsbawm and Ranger Terance eds. *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 5.

of the social dynamics and cultural identity of a region.[39] In this context, the term *kotorska pašta* links Kotor's culinary heritage to the broader Mediterranean tradition while simultaneously distinguishing it as a distinctive local dish. The use of "pašta" in this context allows the dessert to retain a connection to its Italian roots, but it also reinforces the sense of local pride and uniqueness that the city of Kotor fosters. Edward Sapir, a noted anthropologist, emphasized that "food names are more than just practical descriptors—they are symbols of collective memory and identity, binding communities to their history and culture" (Sapir, 1929). In this way, *kotorska pašta* not only serves as a testament to the region's culinary history but also to its continued relevance in shaping the city's cultural narrative.

Some countries in the region have similar desserts but with different names and taste. For example, in Slovenia, the famous "*Blejska kremna rezina"* consists of two layers of puff pastry with a rich vanilla custard filling in between. Additionally, it differs from the Kotor version in that it contains a layer of whipped cream further altering its texture and flavor. In Croatia, the "Samoborska kremšnita" is similarly made with two layers (instead of three as in *kotorska pašta*) of puff pastry and a custard filling. The custard slice of Samobor has also a small amount of egg white cream on top. Additionally, it is typically served warm, while the *kotorska pašta* is traditionally served cold. These variations in the recipe demonstrate the uniqueness of *kotorska pašta* and its adaptation to the tastes and ingredients available in Kotor, reflecting the local culinary identity. These distinctions are significant because they highlight how regional cuisine is deeply tied to cultural heritage. In this light, *kotorska pašta*, with its unique name and preparation method, is a vital part of Kotor's cultural identity and the broader Mediterranean culinary tradition.

Conclusion

The significance of *kotorska pašta* extends far beyond its delightful taste, embodying a unique intersection of culinary tradition and local identity. As this study demonstrates, the dessert is not merely a regional specialty—it is a living representation of Kotor's rich history, cultural evolution, and Mediterranean heritage. The name *kotorska pašta*, although it may cause confusion to outsiders, carries a deep cultural resonance, rooted

39 David Crystal. *English as a Global Language*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003.

in both language and tradition. While the word *pasta* commonly refers to pasta dishes in many languages, in Kotor, it denotes the layered puff pastry unique to this dessert. This adaptation of the Italian term *pasta sfoglia* highlights how food evolves to reflect specific cultural contexts, enriching both the language and the culinary landscape. At the heart of this study lies the understanding that food plays a vital role in the formation and preservation of cultural identities. In the case of *kotorska pašta*, the dessert has become a living tradition, passed down through generations. Its preservation is not only a result of meticulous preparation but also a collective commitment by the community to celebrate and safeguard it. The annual *kotorska pašta* festival stands as a testament to this commitment, serving as both a cultural safeguard and a vibrant expression of local pride. By honouring this dessert, the festival reinforces Kotor's connection to its past, ensuring that the recipe and the cultural knowledge it carries remain vibrant for future generations. Food, especially desserts, is intricately tied to the identity of a culture. In the Mediterranean, where food is closely linked to both the landscape and the people, these dishes transcend mere sustenance—they are powerful expressions of culture. As we have seen with *kotorska pašta*, the combination of pastry and cream serves not only as a treat for the senses but as a narrative tool, telling the story of Kotor's historical influences, from Venetian rule to the interaction of local Italian and French culinary traditions. With its balanced textures and flavors, *kotorska pašta* becomes a vessel that preserves and transmits the memories and customs of Kotor's people, offering a tangible connection to their cultural heritage.

Through the *kotorska pašta* festival and the continuous practice of passing down the recipe, the dessert also offers a lens through which we can examine the broader Mediterranean cultural landscape. Scholars such as Appadurai (1986) have shown that food functions as a form of cultural production, carrying meanings that extend far beyond the sum of its ingredients. The process of making and consuming *kotorska pašta* is not only about taste; it is about connection—to one's heritage, community, and shared history. The *kotorska pašta* festival provides a space for these connections to be celebrated, where both locals and visitors engage with Kotor's rich culinary heritage, fostering a sense of belonging and continuity. The Mediterranean diet, renowned for its emphasis on fresh, local ingredients, plays a fundamental role in shaping regional identities. While it is true that the ingredients used in *kotorska pašta* may not always be sourced directly from local producers, this dessert can still be seen as a part of the Mediterranean culinary narrative, reflecting the broader tradition of combining accessible, familiar ingredients to create meaningful regional dish-

es. In the context of Montenegro, where food heritage is deeply intertwined with Mediterranean influences, desserts like *kotorska pašta* represent not only the historical exchange of culinary practices but also the adaptation of those practices to the evolving realities of modern food production.

As scholars such as Mintz (1985) and Counihan (2009) suggest, food is deeply intertwined with our understanding of identity and place. While the ingredients and flavors of *kotorska pašta* are similar to those of other regional desserts, its significance lies in its role within local traditions and its status as a beloved part of Kotor's culinary heritage. By preserving and promoting this dessert, Kotor ensures that its culinary traditions continue to thrive amidst global cultural influences, reminding us of the importance of maintaining a connection to the past while embracing the future. It is of utmost importance that the authentic *kotorska pašta* continues to be served in Kotor's cafés today. This dessert serves as an ambassador for the culture it represents, and any poor imitation i.e. any attempt to replicate *kotorska pašta* with inferior ingredients, such as poor-quality cream or dry pastry layers could lead to a negative perception of Kotor's most renowned sweet treat. The preservation of the original recipe guarantees that the dessert remains a true representation of the city's heritage, a cultural landmark that endures and continues to be cherished. Ultimately, *kotorska pašta* is more than just a dessert—it is a reflection of Kotor's broader cultural significance within the Mediterranean context. The efforts to preserve it through community-driven initiatives like the annual festival emphasize the importance of food not only as a cultural artifact but also as a means of cultural expression. As food continues to shape both local and global identities, the legacy of *kotorska pašta* stands as a testament to the enduring power of tradition, identity, and community. This study contributes not only to the academic understanding of Mediterranean food heritage but also highlights the critical role food plays in maintaining the balance between local traditions and global influences. By preserving *kotorska pašta*, we ensure that the culinary identities of small communities, like Kotor, remain vibrant, relevant, and meaningful for future generations.

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THE FOOD OF *IL GATTOPARDO*. HISTORY, CUISINE, AND SOCIETY IN THE LIFE AND WORKS OF GIUSEPPE TOMASI DI LAMPEDUSA

Paolo Militello*

Il Gattopardo (*The Leopard*) is the famous novel by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa (1896-1957) published posthumously in 1958.[1] Initially criticized, but later considered one of the most important works of Sicilian and Italian literature, the book became a worldwide bestseller and has been translated into more than 40 languages (in English for the first time in 1960).[2] Director Luchino Visconti also produced a famous film based on the novel in 1963.

The novel has been the subject of numerous studies[3] but also of interpretations that have distorted its meaning, especially from a historical and historiographical point of view (it is, after all, a literary work and not a historical essay). As early as 1988, David Gilmour, author of a famous biography of Tomasi di Lampedusa, noted the obvious presence of many personal memories in the novel, and that the descriptions of certain places were "absolutely authentic,"[4] but it remains a novel set in 1860-1910, written in the 1950s, and largely based on the author's personal memories that date back the early 20th or late 19th century at most. For instance, one of the most famous sentences of the novel is still today the most misunderstood: Tancredi's famous line, which we will discuss later. – "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change" –, "which was widely seen as Lampedusa's view and even as his philosophy, although in the end, it is ex-

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1 Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Il Gattopardo* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1958).

2 Giuseppe di Lampedusa [sic], *The Leopard*, trad. Archibald Colquhoun (London: Collins and Harvill, 1960). Any additions or corrections to quotations are included in square brackets.

3 For an essential bibliography see Nunzio Zago, "Tomasi, Giuseppe, duca di Palma, principe di Lampedusa," in "Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani," vol. 96 (2019), https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/tomasi-giuseppe-duca-di-palma-principe-di-lampedusa_(Dizionario-Biografico)/ (accessed March 2025).

4 Letter to Guido Lajolo, 31-03-1956, in Andrea Vitello, *Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa* (Palermo: Sellerio, 1987), 334.

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plicitly rejected by Don Fabrizio himself. Francesco Renda considered this 'interpretation' as 'sterile' and 'distorted' […]."[5] This sentence becomes the basis of a historiographical thesis formulated by Denis Mack Smith in his *A History of Sicily* of 1968.[6] Mack Smith, "who took on the notion of 'transformism' as the original theme behind the history of the unification of Italy", observed, in the history of the island, a tendency towards immobility profited by, above all, the aristocracy "which, in order to preserve stability and privileges, gave Sicily to 'foreign owners', and blocked every domestic growth with corruption and criminality…". A tendentious theory, which – as also Maurice Aymard highlighted in those same years – was based on a modest critical and documental level bibliography.[7] A thesis that in recent decades has been rejected by deeper historiographical research.[8]

Preferring to therefore avoid perilous overinterpretations and misunderstandings, we will attempt to reconstruct and contextualize one particular aspect of the novel and its author: the attention to the culture of food and cooking.[9] Our analysis will be primarily historical, socio-cultural, in an open dialogue with literature: specialists will forgive us if, for reasons of space, we do not delve into critical theories relating to the topic of food in literature.[10]

Starting from the experience and creativity of Tomasi di Lampedusa, but also integrating several nineteenth-century historical sources, we attempt to reconstruct the relationship between food and society in Sicily between

5 David Gilmour, *The Last Leopard. A life of Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa* (London: Quartet Books Ltd., 1988), 179.

6 Denis Mack Smith, *A History of Sicily. 2. Medieval Sicily. 800-1713*; *3. Modern Sicily after 1713* (London, Chatto & Windus 1968).

7 Maurice Aymard, "Mack Smith (D.), A history of Sicily (vol. I-II)," *Rivista Storica Italiana*, vol. 82, 1970, 481-483.

8 Paolo Militello, "The Historiography on Early Modern Age Sicily between the 20th and 21st Centuries," *Mediterranea Ricerche Storiche*, n. 36, aprile 2016, 101-118.

9 Cfr. Massimo Montanari, *Food is culture*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006. On Italian cuisine, see Gillian Riley, *The Oxford companion to Italian food* (Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

10 Gianpaolo Biasin, *The Flavors of Modernity. Food and the Novel* (Princeton-New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), *Chapter 4. A Wise Gourmet: Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, Il Gattopardo*, 65-77; Giovanna Jackson, "Of Cabbages and Roses. Some Considerations on the Food Images of Lampedusa's Il Gattopardo," *Italian Culture*, 6 (1985), 125-141; Mary Taylor Simeti, *Pomp and Sustenance. Twenty-Five Centuries of Sicilian Food* (New York: Knopf, 1989) and *La tavola del Gattopardo. La cucina siciliana tra letteratura e memoria* (Palermo: Futurantica, 2 ed. 2006).

the 19th and 20th centuries. In those centuries, the millennia-old Sicilian gastronomic tradition had already fully absorbed Spanish influences (from 14th to 18th century, and even beyond, Sicily was closely linked to the Ibero-American world), Italian, French, and, more generally, Euro-Mediterranean influences of the preceding three to four centuries, demonstrating that the island was, and has always been, 'open' to the world.[11]

Tomasi di Lampedusa: a writer who is part flâneur *and part* gourmand

Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa's relationship with food and conviviality was certainly influenced by his life experiences. Born in Palermo (by now part of the Kingdom of Italy) in 1896, son of the Duke of Palma and nephew of the Prince of Lampedusa, Giuseppe was the last heir of an aristocratic family that was heading towards extinction, following the economic collapse. Despite this, he had a pleasant and 'aristocratic' childhood, spending winters in the vast Lampedusa palace in a poor area in the center of Palermo, and summers in the 'countryside' at the Santa Margherita palace in the Belice valley, about seventy kilometers south of Palermo. It is precisely in Santa Margherita di Belice that one of his earliest food-related memories dates back–the 'quintessential' countryside trip, with the whole family to Venarìa, a little hunting lodge about four miles out of Santa Margherita:

> Cooks had left that morning at seven and had already prepared everything; when a boy look-out announced the group's approach they thrust into the ovens their famous *timbales* of macaroni *alla Talleyrand*, (the only macaroni which keeps for a period), so that when we arrived, we had scarcely time to wash our hands before going straight out onto the terrace, where two tables had been laid in the open air. In the *timbales*, the macaroni was steeped in the lightest glaze and, beneath the savoury crust of flaky [not sweet], absorbed the flavour of the *prosciutto* [ham] and truffles sliced into match-like slivers.
>
> Huge cold bass with mayonnaise followed, then stuffed turkey and avalanches of potatoes. One might expect strokes from over-eating […] Next, all was put to rights by the arrival of one of those iced cakes at which Marsala, the cook, was a past-master. Wines, as always in sober Sicily, were of non-im-

11 On the history of food in Sicily in the medieval and early modern age, Maurice Aymard and Henri Bresc's essay, "Nourritures et consommation en Sicile entre XIVe et XVIIIe siècle," *Mélanges de l'École française de Rome*, 1975, 87-2, 535-581, still remains valid. Most recent is Henri Bresc, *Il cibo nella Sicilia medievale* (Palermo: Palermo University Press, 2019).

portance. The guests expected them, of course, and liked their glasses filled to the brim, ("no collars" they would call to the footman) but in the absence of a collar to their glasses they emptied but one, at the most two.[12]

It was a countryside breakfast, a *déjeuner sur l'herbe*, but decidedly aristocratic. Even the 'maccheroni' (macaroni), the typical 'peoples' dry pasta of the Neapolitans (mancia-maccarruna; i.e., macaroni eaters) and the Sicilians (as the scholar of popular traditions, Giuseppe Pitré, asserted in 1889),[13] was ennobled in its version of *Timbale à la Talleyrand* (macaroni pie), with chicken quenelle stuffing, black truffles, madeira sauce and espagnole sauce.[14] After all, if Italy was the land of pasta, Sicily, at that time, was still one of the most important granaries of the Mediterranean.

In addition to an aristocratic lifestyle (despite economic difficulties), Tomasi di Lampedusa also had a cosmopolitan education, enriched after World War I by long stays in central-northern Italy, in almost all of the European countries 'of major interest' (except Spain and Greece) and, especially Paris and London in the mid-1920s. His stay in London coincided with the period when his uncle, Pietro Tomasi Marquis of Torretta, was ambassador (from 1922 to 1927, during the fascist era). In London, Gilmour informs us, Giuseppe often accompanied his uncle to official ceremonies and was frequently invited by ministers and ambassadors.[15] The years spent in England undoubtedly fomented Tomasi di Lampedusa's 'anglomania.' In London, the author also met his uncle's Baltic stepdaughter, Alessandra Wolff-Stomersee, known as Licy, a Freudian psychoanalyst, whom he married in 1932. From that moment, the couple's life was divided between the palace in Palermo and the castle of Stomersee in Latvia, although "Giuseppe, in spite of his cosmopolitanism, remained emotionally tied to Pal-

12 Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Places of my Infancy. VII. Excursions* (trad. Archibald Colquhoun), in *The Siren and selected Writings* (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), 47.

13 "Sicilians today enjoy calling Neapolitans "mancia-maccarruna" (macaroni eaters). This qualification applied to Sicilians two or three centuries ago […]; later, perhaps out of antipathy, it stuck to the Neapolitans, but they are still great eaters of macaroni, as claimed by Ortensio Lando, who was not Sicilian." Giuseppe Pitré, *Usi e costumi, credenze e pregiudizi del popolo siciliano* (Palermo: Pedone Lauriel, 1889), 73.

14 *La cuisine classique. Études pratiques, raisonnées et démonstratives de l'école française appliquée au service à la Russe*, di Urbain Dubois et Émile Bernard (Paris: Chez les auteurs, 1856), 228.

15 Gilmour, *The Last Leopard*, 46. See also *Viaggio in Europa. Epistolario. 1925-1930*, ed. Gioacchino Lanza Tomasi and Salvatore Silvano Nigro (Milano: Mondadori, 2006).

ermo, Licy, despite her travels, was firmly attached to the Baltic."[16] From the young Tomasi di Lampedusa's frequentation with European aristocracy and familiarity with the receptions of the *establishment* and international diplomacy, he will draw inspiration, as we will see, for the *haute cuisine* dishes mentioned in *Il Gattopardo*.

The quiet and worldly life will, however, be interrupted by World War II, a war that represented "a continual source of personal worry and unhappiness as well as a spectacle which disgusted him."[17] The beloved Lampedusa palace was rendered uninhabitable by the Allied bombings of 1943 and the author was, therefore, forced to evacuate to Ficarra, in the Nebrodi mountains (the 'house' was subsequently "literally razed to the ground" when the "bombs brought from beyond the Atlantic searched her out and destroyed her").[18]

There were moments of serenity, however, such as the writer's short but frequent stays in Capo d'Orlando, at the villa of his Piccolo cousins, on the northern coast 120 kilometres from Palermo. "Standing in one of the greenest corners of Sicily, the house was surrounded by citrus groves and gardens of orchids, palms and hydrangeas. For Giuseppe it had always been an enchanted place, an Arcadia to flee from the problems of Palermo."[19] Here, in addition to learned conversations and countryside walks, the food was one of the main pleasures.

> On Easter Sunday 1942 Giuseppe – Gilmour informs us, citing the letters of Tomasi di Lampedusa – described to Licy a typical dinner of lasagne, vol-au-vent with lobster, cutlets in breadcrumbs with potatoes, peas and ham, 'an admirable tart from a recipe of Escoffier' (puff pastry, cream and candied cherries) – and 'all in their usual quantities!' The manner in which the Piccolos were able to insulate themselves from the horrors of the Second War is remarkable. Throughout the summer of 1942 while massive armies confronted each other in Russia and Africa, there was no shortage of food at Capo d'Orlando: on 9 June Giuseppe reported 'tender and tasty beefsteaks two inches thick', exquisite cakes, a slice of tuna fish 'literally as large as a car tyre'. On another day Giovanna [Tomasi's cousin] announced that they were having a light and mainly cold lunch as it was summer, and afterwards Giuseppe listed for Licy's benefit the contents of this 'light' meal: 'real *fettuccine'* with butter and parmesan cheese, an enormous fish with various sauces, a *pâté de lapin* made 'according to the rules of the old game pâtés: liver purée, black truffles, pistachios

16 Gilmour, *The Last Leopard*, 68.
17 Ivi, 73.
18 Ivi, 81-82.
19 Ivi, 76.

and consommé jelly; a very successful product of Giovanna's art'; and finally meringues with real chocolate ice-cream.[20]

With the end of the war, the post-war years in the now republican Italy were characterized by monotonous daily life. Tomasi di Lampedusa lived in a new house that he did not cherish, and consequently spent most of the day outside. "Rising about seven, he would be walking down the Corso Vittorio Emanuele towards the centre of the city by eight. Turning west at the Via Roma or a little further on at the Quattro Canti, he then walked westwards until he reached one of his favourite cafes, the Pasticceria del Massimo in via Ruggero Settimo. There he had a long breakfast and read one of the books he had brought with him. He ate cakes and pastry with particular pleasure [recalled Francesco Orlando, his young disciple],[21] if he had before him a volume of sixteenth-century French poetry."[22] And, when he left the pastry shop, he carried a leather bag always overloaded with books and cakes to last him for the rest of the day. After stopping by the Flaccovio bookstore, Lampedusa would go to the Caflisch café, where he would join other intellectuals, such as the historians Virgilio Titone and Gaetano Falzone. ("who shared the prince's intellectual interests as well as some of his historical views"),[23] even if he rarely took part in conversation.

This routine was interrupted in 1954 by the decision to write *Il Gattopardo*. From then until the spring of 1957, Tomasi di Lampedusa dedicated himself to writing. That same year, he stopped visiting the Caflisch café: "in the diaries of his last years, where visits to cafes and restaurants are meticulously recorded, the Caflisch is scarcely mentioned. Its place was taken by the Mazzara, another cafe in an ugly modern building off the Via Ruggero Settimo. Lampedusa did not go there for company but to read and later to work on his novel."[24] During the last thirty months of his life "he worked almost every day on his novel and stories, writing painstakingly [with a] blue biro at a table at the Mazzara cafe or in his library at home": even in the final period, he would use a 'café' table as his desk.[25] It is certainly surprising that the lavish scenes of the Gattopardo's receptions were

20 Ivi, 79. For Tomasi di Lampedusa's correspondence see Caterina Cardona, *Un matrimonio epistolare. Corrispondenza tra Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa e Alessandra Wolff von Stomersee* (Palermo: Sellerio, 2023).
21 Francesco Orlando, *Ricordo di Lampedusa* (Milano: Vanni Scheiwiller, 1963), 11.
22 Gilmour, *The Last Leopard*, 92-93.
23 Ivi, 93.
24 Ivi, 98.
25 Ivi, 128.

written in a modest café and equally modest restaurants or places like the Pizzeria Bellini in a square behind the town hall, next to the small Norman churches of San Cataldo and La Martorana.[26]

On July 23, 1957, the writer died at the age of 60 in a clinic in Rome. On November 11, 1958, *Il Gattopardo* was published posthumously by Feltrinelli, edited by Giorgio Bassani.[27]

The novel Il Gattopardo*: 'culinary' classes and food hierarchies*

The well-known plot of *Il Gattopardo* unfolds irregularly from May 1860 (when Garibaldi lands in Marsala with the Expedition of the Thousand) until May 1910, the celebration of the fiftieth anniversary of the landing, "marking the irreparable decline (the *cliché* of leopardism does not take this into account!) of a great family and of the same noble privilege."[28]

The point of view is that of the Prince of Salina, Don Fabrizio, who in 1860 witnesses, apparently, unperturbed and disenchanted, the ruin and transformation of his own aristocratic class with the inexorable rise of the 'bourgeoisie'. The Prince is fascinated by his young nephew Tancredi, a daring nobleman, who pronounces to Tomasi di Lampedusa the most famous, and as we have seen, most misunderstood, phrase of the novel. ("Unless we ourselves take a hand now, they'll foist a republic on us. If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change").[29] The Prince allows Tancredi to marry the beautiful daughter of Calogero Sedara, a very cunning and wealthy farmer, representative of the new class of *parvenus*: Tancredi is poor and needs a rich dowry to remain among the 'dominators.' As for himself, the Prince refuses a seat in the new Senate of the Savoy Kingdom of Italy, proposing Calogero Sedara in his place. Fifty years later, in 1910, the last Leopard awaits only his death and, with it, the end of his lineage.

The literary, but also socio-historical background that Tomasi di Lampedusa constructs for his novel – the declining aristocracy, the rising bourgeoisie, and a series of characters interacting with these two social classes – seems to be reflected in the convivial scenes and descriptions of foods and dishes. We will retrace the most significant ones, following the order of the novel.

26 Ivi, 112.
27 Zago, "Tomasi."
28 *Ibidem*.
29 Giuseppe di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*, 31.

The first part (or first chapter) is set in Villa Salina, a holiday residence outside Palermo, and serves as the backdrop for the introduction of the main characters, the arrival of Tancredi, and the news of the landing of the Thousand (May 11, 1860). Here we find the first scene of the novel that describes a dining room and a dinner with guests:

> Ding! Ding! ding!" rang the bell for dinner […]
> Dinner at Villa Salina was served with the slightly shabby grandeur then customary in the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies. The number of those taking part (fourteen in all, with the master and mistress of the house, children, governesses and tutors) was itself enough to give the dining-table an imposing air. Covered with a fine but mended lace cloth, it glittered under a powerful oil-lamp hung precariously under the Murano chandelier […] The silver was massive and the glass splendid […] but the plates, each signed by an illustrious artist, were mere survivors of many a scullion's massacre and originated from different services. The Prince ladled out the *minestra* himself […] symbol of his proud duties as paterfamilias.[30]

This passage is a merciless portrait of the 'slightly shabby grandeur' of the aristocracy and the 'style' of a kingdom in decline, but also a signal to duly consider all of the lavish banquet scenes that follow.

Shortly after, the writer introduces a different scene: the midday meal, consumed after receiving news of the landing of Garibaldi and his Thousand.

> The midday meal was the chief one of the day […].
> At the end of the meal appeared a rum jelly. This was the Prince's favourite pudding, and the Princess had been careful to order it early that morning […] It was rather threatening at first sight, shaped like a tower with bastions and battlements and smooth slippery walls impossible to scale, garrisoned by red and green cherries and pistachio nuts; but into its transparent and quivering flanks a spoon plunged with astounding ease. The Prince enjoyed watching the rapid demolishing of the fortress beneath the assault of his family's appetite. One of his glasses was still half-full of Marsala […] He drained his wine in a single gulp.[31]

The culinary direction changes: no longer a soup, but an 'aristocratic' rum jelly. This almost seems to symbolize the Bourbon Kingdom of the Two Sicilies, "threatening" and "impossible to scale." It is, however, "quivering" and destined to yield to the assaults of a spoon that

30 Ivi, 19-20.
31 Ivi, 43-45.

is "plunged with astounding ease," while the prince, sly as a leopard, watched "the rapid demolishing" and, in the end, he toasts with only a half-full glass of Marsala.

In the second part of the novel describes the journey and stay in Donnafugata, one of the Prince's fiefs, in August 1860. Here, the nobility 'descends' among their 'people,' granting them the honour of sharing moments of conviviality. Our writer seems to enjoy observing the effects produced by this mingling. For example, as soon as the family arrives in Donnafugata, the faithful don 'Nofrio, a steward of the estate highly esteemed by the Prince, is subjected to the "torture of tea": "Don Fabrizio had two cups brought, and with death in his heart Don Onofrio had to swallow one."[32]

Even more amusing is the description of the first lunch at Donnafugata, an event that the Prince wanted to earn "the stamp of solemnity": "children under fifteen were excluded from table, French wines were served, there was punch *alla Romana* before the roast; and the flunkeys were in powder and knee-breeches."[33] At the same time, however, the Gattopardo clearly understood that solemn lunches had to be adapted to the stature of the guests:

> The Prince was too experienced to offer Sicilian guests, in a town of the interior, a dinner beginning with soup, and he infringed the rules of *haute cuisine* all the more readily as he disliked it himself. But rumours of the barbaric foreign usage of serving an insipid liquid as first course had reached the citizens of Donnafugata […] So when three lackeys in green, gold and powder entered, each holding a great silver dish containing a towering macaroni pie [timballo di maccheroni], only four of the twenty at table avoided showing pleased surprise: the Prince and Princess from fore-knowledge, Angelica from affectation and Concetta from lack of appetite […] The burnished gold of the crusts, the fragrance of sugar and cinnamon they exuded, were but preludes to the delights released from the interior when the knife broke the crust; first came a smoke laden with aromas, then chicken livers, hard boiled eggs, sliced ham, chicken and truffles in masses of piping hot, glistening macaroni, to which the meat juice gave an exquisite hue of suède.[34]

Here the famous "timballo" (macaroni pie) of *Il Gattopardo* appears for the first time in the novel, not, however 'à la Talleyrand', as in the memoirs, but simply as 'macaroni timballo' (half a century earlier Federico de

32 Ivi, 62.
33 Ivi, 72.
34 Ivi, 75-76.

Roberto also had his Benedictines eat it in The Viceroys).[35] This 'lowering' of the nobility to non-aristocratic customs and traditions is revisited in the traditional visit to the Monastery of Donnafugata, where the Prince "the nuns' watery coffee drunk with tolerance and the pink and greenish macaroons ["mandorlati", sort of nougats "which the nuns made from an ancient recipe"] crunched with satisfaction."[36] Or when the day of Plebiscite, following the vote for the annexation of Sicily to the Kingdom of Italy, the Prince was invited for "a little glass" of *rosolio* liqueur, taken by the new mayor Sedàra from a small low table with "a plate with some ancient biscuits covered with fly droppings and a dozen little squat glasses brimming with rosolio wine: four red, four green, four white, the last in the centre: an ingenious symbol of the new national flag [of the Kingdom of Italy] which tempered the Prince's remorse with a smile. He chose the white liquor for himself, presumably because the least indigestible and not, as some thought, in tardy homage to the Bourbon standard [vexillum]. Anyway, all three varieties of rosolio were equally sugary, sticky and revolting."[37]

Conversely, there was no shortage of negative judgments from the 'common people' towards the sometimes overly sophisticated and tasteless cuisine of the aristocracy. When Father Pirrone visits his parental home in the 'tiny hamlet' of San Cono, "from the kitchen arose the centuries-old aroma of [ragù], simmering stew of essence of tomatoes, onions and goat's meat ["castrato", i.e. castrated sheep], for macaroni [indeed 'anelletti'] on festive occasions"; and as the priest began truly enjoying his 'anelletti': clearly, the writer notes, "his palate had not been spoilt by the culinary delicacies of Villa Salina."[38]

In this sense, Tomasi di Lampedusa is even more explicit in the novel *Gattini Ciechi* (*Blind Kittens*), which follows on from *Il Gattopardo*, unfortunately interrupted at the first chapter. When accountant Ferrara, the

35 "The Benedictines' kitchen had become a proverb in town. The macaroni pie [*timballo* di maccheroni] with its crust of short pastry, the rice-balls [*arancine*] each big as a melon, the stuffed olives and honey-cakes [crespelli melati, frittelle], were dishes which no other cook could make; and for their ices and fruit-drinks [*spumoni*] and frozen *cassata*, the Fathers had called specially from Naples, Don Tino, [the younger] from the Benvenuto café. All this made in such quantities that it was sent round as presents to monks' and novices' families, and the servitors would sell the remains and get four, and some six, tarì each for them daily": Federico De Roberto, *I Vicerè* (Milano: Casa Editrice Galli, 1894), 177 (transl. by A. Colquhoun).

36 Giuseppe di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*, 82-84.

37 Ivi, 102-103.

38 Ivi, 177.

Prince of Salina's attorney, is invited to eat at the protagonist's house (don Batassano Ibba, a 'quasi-baron' *parvenu*), he judges the lunch prepared by the wife as "excellent". The lady "offered Sicilian cuisine raised to another level—to its cube, in fact—in terms of the number of `portions and the abundance of sauces, thus rendering it lethal. The macaroni veritably swam in the oil of their sauce and were buried under avalanches of caciocavallo cheese; the meats were stuffed with fire salamis; "zuppa a 'mprescia" (a typical sweet blend) contained three times the prescribed amount of liqueur alchermes, sugar, and "zuccata" (candied squash). All this seemed exquisite to Ferrara, "the pinnacle of truly good cuisine", also because "his rare breakfasts at the Salina house had always disappointed him due to the blandness of the food." The following day, however, back in Palermo, Ferrara (who knew "the Prince's preference for the 'coulis de volaille' from Pré Catelan and the 'timbales d'écrevisses' from Prunier") described the lunch and "described as horrors what had seemed to him merits; greatly pleasing to Salina in doing so."[39]

In *Il Gattopardo*, there are, however, moments of reconciliation and sharing between the 'culinary classes', such as the hunting trip that the Prince takes in October 1860 with Don Ciccio Tumeo, the organist of the church of Donnafugata. When lunchtime arrives,

> the Prince and the organist rested under the circumscribed shadow of cork-trees; they drank tepid wine from wooden bottles with a roast chicken from Don Fabrizio's haversack, ate little cakes called *muffoletti* dusted with raw flour which Don Ciccio had brought with him, and local grapes [of Inzolia] so ugly to look at and so good to eat; with hunks of bread they satisfied the hungry dogs standing in front of them […] Under that monarchic sun ["sole costituzionale", in the original Italian version] Don Fabrizio and Don Ciccio were dozing off.[40]

Returning to the aristocratic world, the most famous scene dedicated to conviviality and food is the ball at Ponteleone Palace, two years after the landing of the Thousand, after the Aspromonte affair, when the situation had already placated and "the few hundred people who made up 'the world' never tired of meeting each other, always the same ones, to exchange congratulations on still existing."[41] The writer provides a page-long description of the buffet hall. First of all, the *tables à thé:*

39 Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Blind Kittens (Chapter I of an unfinished novel)* (trad. Archibald Colquhoun), in *The Siren and selected Writings*, 90-91.

40 Giuseppe di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*, 97-98.

41 Ivi, 196-197.

> Beneath the candelabra, beneath the five-tiers bearing [tray] towards the distant ceiling pyramids of home-made cakes ["dolci di riposto" with almond paste] that were never touched, spread the monotonous opulence of tables à thé and big balls: coraline lobsters boiled alive, waxy chaud-froids of veal, steely-tinted fish [spigole: branzino] immersed in [soft] sauce, turkeys gilded by the ovens' heat, rosy foie-gras [pies] under gelatine armour, boned woodcocks reclining on amber toast decorated with their own chopped guts, [galantine [dish of meat, ndr] of the color of aurora], and a dozen other [ten more] cruel, coloured delights. At the end of the table two monumental silver tureens held limpid soup [consommé], the colour of burnt amber [and limpid]. To prepare this [dinner] the cooks must have sweated away in the vast kitchens from the night before.[42]

Followed by the dessert table, so loved by the writer.

> Scorning the table of drinks, glittering with crystal and silver on the right, he moved left towards that of the sweetmeats. [There], huge blond *babà*, chestnuts [*sauri*] like the coat of horses, Mont Blancs snowy with whipped cream, cakes speckled [beignets Dauphine] with white almonds and green pistachio nuts, hillocks of chocolate-covered pastry [profiteroles], brown and rich [fat] as the top soil [humus] of the Catanian plain from which, in fact, through many a twist and turn they had come, pink ices [parfaits], champagne ices, coffee [dark] ices, all parfaits and falling apart with a squelch at a knife cleft, a melody [with violins: "sviolinature"] in major of crystallised [candied sour] cherries, acid notes [timbres] of yellow pineapple, ant those called "Triumphs of Gluttony" [The Sicilian dessert is made of layers of sponge cake, marzipan, yellow cream and ricotta cream, apricot preserve and jelly, ed.], filled with [opaque] green pistachio paste, and shameless "Virgin's cakes" shaped like breasts. Don Fabrizio asked for some [two] of these and as he held them on his plate looked like a profane caricature of Saint Agatha [showing off her sliced-off breasts]. "Why ever didn't the Holy Office forbid these puddings when it had the chance? ["Triumphs of Gluttony" (The gluttony, mortal sin!)], Saint Agatha's sliced-off breasts sold by convents, devoured at dances! Well! Well!"[43]

Apart from the final anticlerical quip[44] (given that in Sicily food and religion have always been closely related), here reappears the passion and gastronomic expertise of Tomasi di Lampedusa, an aristocrat who attended

42 Ivi, 214.

43 Ivi, 214-215.

44 Tomasi di Lampedusa "in some ways was an old-fashioned anti-clerical who, according to one acquaintance, might have accepted the Church in a Protestant country but was too aware of Catholicism's shortcomings in Italy to be able to support the Roman Church" (Gilmour, *The Last Leopard*, 110).

receptions all over Europe (recalling, however, that these pages were written in modest cafés in Palermo).

Particularly interesting is the description of the small mounds of chocolate profiteroles, described as, we saw above, as "brown and fat as the humus of the Catanian plain from which, in fact, through many a twist and turn they had come": clear reference to the economic wealth of the fiefs that financed the lifestyle of the Sicilian aristocracy. Just like the grand palaces with their superb halls, the banquets were also not simply a 'petrification' and a use of the income that, in any case, guaranteed the maintenance of the luxurious goods sector (consider the craftsmen involved); they were also a tangible and visible representation of the peculiarity and identity of a social class. As Maurice Aymard and Henri Bresc have pointed out, through food, a social hierarchy "based on quantities and qualities" was also expressed: at the top, the aristocratic tables, characterized by ostentation, and the conventual ones. At the bottom, the rural and popular world. In the middle, a predominantly "bourgeois" and urban diet, "which manages to create and animate the commercial circuits of livestock, large vineyards and olive groves, some oases of irrigated or intensively cultivated gardens."[45]

Moreover, food and conviviality are also culture and identity.[46] And this identity was beginning to be appropriated by the new class of *parvenus*. In some cases, showing their own "vulgarity," as when Sedara – "his quick eyes were moving over the room, insensible to its charm, intent on its monetary value" – approaches the Prince and exclaims: "Fine, Prince, fine! They don't do things like this nowadays, with gold leaf at its present price!" (and then the Prince "felt a loathing for him").[47] In other cases, ready to conform to the style of the aristocratic class. With Angelica, we offer our final example related to food. It is Tancredi who educates her: "look at everything and praise everything […] but as you're not just a girl from the provinces whom everything surprises, always put a little reserve into your praise; admire, but always compare with some arch-type seen before and known to be outstanding." And Angelica, after putting into practice the teachings through tapestries and paintings, "even of the slice of tart brought her by an attentive young gentleman she said that it was excellent, almost as good as that of 'Monsu Gaston,' the Salina chef. And as Monsu

45 Aymard e Bresc, *Nourritures,* 581.

46 Massimo Montanari, *Italian Identity in the Kitchen, or Food and the Nation* (Columbia University Press, New-York 2013). See, also, Enrico Iachello, *Space and Society in* The Leopard, in *The Territory of Sicily and its representations (16th-19th centuries)* (New Digital Frontiers: Palermo 2018).

47 Giuseppe di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*, 207.

Gaston was positively the Raphael of cooks, and the tapestries of Palazzo Pitti the Monsu Gaston of hangings, no one could complain, in fact everyone was flattered by the comparison."[48]

Conclusions

The analysis of the food culture in the novel *Il Gattopardo* and its author, Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, combined with the consultation of period sources and historiographical contributions, has allowed us to outline some aspects of the relationship between history, food, and society in 19th-20th century Sicily. In these two centuries, the millennia-old Sicilian food tradition, renewed in the late medieval and early modern periods by influences mainly from Spain and France (but also Euro-Mediterranean and extra-European), appeared characterized by a 'food hierarchy' that, while maintaining class identities, became increasingly fluid and open to influences. The close relationship between food culture (and economy) and social status thus adapted to the period of significant transformation of the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, and society as a whole.

The Sicily of Tomasi di Lampedusa – of his history, his memory, and his novel – thus seems to represent and bear witness to a world that changes and adapts to modernity, not only from a social point of view but also economically and culturally. *Il Gattopardo* therefore not only represents a literary work but also a historical source, and the descriptions of its meals, its banquets, and its buffets convey a food culture still alive and representative, even if destined to be lost (but this is recent history) in the globalization of contemporaneity.

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48 Ivi, 203.

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Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa and his wife Licy at the castle of Stomersee in Latvia (1932 circa). Photo n. 212 from Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *Una biografia per immagini* (Sellerio, Palermo 1998).

Prince of Salina (Burt Lancaster) cutting the famous “timballo” (macaroni pie) in a frame from the film *The Leopard* by Luchino Visconti (1963).

FOOD DISGUST IN NARRATIVES OF MIGRANT VOICES IN ITALY. THE REJECTION OF FOOD AS A FORM OF IDENTITY RENEGOTIATION AND RESISTANCE

Michele Baldaro*

Abstract

Following a literary perspective, this paper explores the role of dietary choices in the identity restructuring process of individuals, particularly within the works of migrant writers. According to Vito Teti (2001) and Horn (2010), food serves as a form of cultural defense and community cohesion for immigrants. Additionally, Lorena Carrara (2013) notes that food disgust plays a role in shaping both individual identity and a sense of belonging for social groups. Building upon these premises, the article analyzes the role of disgust within selected texts by migrant and second-generation authors in their process of assimilation, hybridization, or resistance in Italy. Specifically, the research focuses on stories that emphasize the significance of food and rejection of food as indicators of cultural belonging, such as those from the anthologies *Matriciana/Cous cous* (2002), *Pecore nere* (2005), *Mondopentola* (2007), and *Amori bicolori* (2008), as well as Lakhous's novel *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* (2006).

In these literary works, food disgust becomes a valuable key for literary interpretation. Indeed, Montanari argues that different cultures encounter each other primarily through food (2002). Moreover, at the base of dietary disgust there are the omnivore's paradox and the principle of incorporation (Fischler 1980, Nicolosi 2007, Megli 2017). Thus, the rejection of the Other's food or, conversely, the rejection of one's own community's food highlight the diverse outcomes of integration dynamics in the new socio-cultural context for migrants. The potential outcomes of the renegotiation of the migrant's identity, as presented in the case studies, range from the risk of self-annihilation to the resistance against the Otherness of the new host society. In conclusion, by establishing a link between narrative, food sociology, and the analysis of the migration process in Italy, this paper demonstrates how disgust provides a new lens for interpreting the identity restructuring experience in migrant and second-generation writers.

Keywords: food disgust: food and identity; renegotiation; integration processes; Italian migrant literature

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Introduction[1]

Over the past few years, the world of gastronomy and food has carved out an increasingly prominent place in Italian public discourse. Italian cuisine is no longer merely an export product for the international market but has become an apparently untouchable identity marker in the name of tradition.[2] Italianness is thus largely defined through the emblematic dishes that represent it. A range of phenomena and intersecting levels help explain this convergence between Italianness and food: gastropopulism and gastronationalism within political and identity discourses, both state and private initiatives of gastrodiplomacy, and food and wine tourism as an economic driver.[3]

If cuisine plays a key role in the construction of contemporary national identity, then food and one's relationship with it can serve as tools for reflecting on personal and social identity, as well as on the definition and renegotiation of Italianness. Such reflections grounded in food emerge clearly in the writings of migrant authors and second-generation Italians. The sociology of food has long highlighted the close relationship between eating practices, identity construction, and the sense of belonging.[4] In the context of migration to Italy, food has also served as a valuable tool in grassroots social experiments aimed at fostering integration and overcoming urban inequalities, through practices of sharing and intercultural encounter (Fontefrancesco 2023). In contrast, literary studies have often focused almost exclusively on the symbolic value of food for the individual, particularly with regard to identity renegotiation and citizenship.[5]

While also reflecting on the symbolic value of food as a marker of cultural belonging, this contribution proposes an integration of this analytical focus. It seeks to highlight not only food and eating choices, but above all the physical and symbolic reactions of migrant or second-generation individuals to food itself. Specifically, this study focuses on the reaction of food disgust, as it reflects processes of identity renegotiation and offers

1 The English translations from Italian of the primary and secondary resources are by the author.

2 Grandi (2018), however, argues that the invention of an Italian culinary tradition is a relatively recent phenomenon, dating back to the 1970s.

3 See: Naccarato, Nowak and Eckert 2017; Parasecoli 2017; Fino and Cecconi 2021; Mendelson Forman 2024.

4 See: Fischler 1988; Rozin 1990; Teti 2001; S. Priyadarshini, M.R Bindu, M. Sumathy, and A. Dorathy 2024.

5 See: Hanna 2004; Siggers-Manson 2004; Wright 2004; Horn 2010; Pezzarossa 2011; Angelini 2013; Bellesia-Contuzzi 2017; Fiucci 2019.

a tangible response to the symbolic dynamics of integration. The stories selected for this analysis appear in the anthologies *Matriciana/Cous cous* (2002), *Pecore nere* (2005), *Mondopentola* (2007), and *Amori bicolori* (2008), while one story is drawn from the novel *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a Piazza Vittorio* by Lakhous (2006).

The case studies have been selected based on three criteria: first, the author and protagonist share a 'non-Italian' background, that is, a status originating from a sense of displacement, either experienced directly or inherited.[6] For both migrants and those born in Italy to foreign parents, integration presents complex challenges. On one hand, the assimilative pressure from the host society seeks homogenization, which facilitates cultural integration while simultaneously erasing and rejecting the markers of Otherness. On the other hand, divergent subjects resist in order to maintain community cohesion, although this can at times lead to an *a priori* antagonism. This internal tension demands constant renegotiation, as reflected in migrant and postcolonial writings (Benvenuti 2012).

The second criterion concerns the centrality of food and the presence of rejection or disgust within the narrative. In the Italian context, where national and regional dishes are attributed significant cultural value (Kostioukovitch 2015), food choices constitute a privileged field of study. Moreover, if, as Fischler (1988) suggests, food contributes to both collective belonging and personal identity, then disgust plays a central role in shaping the migrant subject's identity. The confrontation with 'acquired' new foods is a necessary step toward acceptance and integration into the host society. Conversely, 'native' comfort foods often hinder this acceptance while providing a nostalgic link to one's country and community of origin. As a result, within the framework of food culture, the rejection of the Other's food—or, conversely, of one's own traditional food—constitutes a material response that mirrors various outcomes of integration and attempts to define one's social and personal identity.

6 The terminological choice—as well as that of "non-native nationals"—attempts to coherently encapsulate individuals of widely diverse ethnic backgrounds and life experiences, but it remains overly limiting. As Brogi (2011) notes, even labels such as "migrant writers" or "second-generation authors" can be reductive. Nonetheless, as Gnisci (2003) writes, these two categories include both those who have experienced the trauma of expatriation and those who have inherited such trauma—often expressed through the lack of legal recognition for their attempts at identity "creolization". Their work and reflections mirror these complex experiences (see: Ferraro 2008; Serafin 2014).

The last criterion is the historical context of production. The texts analyzed were published between 2002 and 2008, a period marked by national and international transformation. The September 11 attacks had a negative impact on the perception of non-EU foreigners, while Italy debated, passed, and implemented the Bossi-Fini law strictly regulating immigration. In this context, for authors of 'non-Italian' background, writing became an opportunity for reflection and for mirroring the social reality. Questioning one's identity and sense of Italianness had become a pressing urgency. These criteria enable an exploration of how food—as a cultural symbol—and food disgust—as both physical reaction and symbolic response—become a terrain of confrontation for migrants grappling with dynamics of belonging and Otherness.

This contribution is thus structured into two main sections: the first is theoretical and methodological, offering a brief overview of food as a communication system, the origins of disgust, and the role of food as a cultural aggregator for migrants. The second section analyzes the selected texts through the lens of food disgust and rejection. The ambivalent relationship with certain foods, and their refusal, reflects both social and personal identity renegotiation strategies, ranging from the risk of self-annihilation to resistance against assimilation, and intercultural acceptance and hybridization.

A Matter of Taste. Food Disgust

From a sociological and anthropological perspective, food cannot be reduced to a mere means of satisfying individual nutritional needs. Instead, it can be considered a complex system of communication and signification, one that relies on shared symbolic-cultural codes for its correct understanding and interpretation, and is thus deeply interconnected with the cultural practices of a community.[7] Within this system, taste acts as a key for decoding and cannot therefore be seen merely as the sum of exclusively individual dietary preferences and aversions. In fact, in its earliest stages of formation, taste is shaped not only by personal experience but, more importantly, by collectively socialized dynamics, which progressively narrow the potentially inexhaustible range of dietary possibilities through in-group processes.[8]

7 For a detailed discussion on the affinities between food systems and linguistic or communication systems, see: Barthes 1961; Le Breton 2007.

8 Rozin (1990) and Guidetti and Cavazza (2014) identify the family context and peer group as the primary social influences on individual food preferences and aversions.

Only secondarily does individual action influence the specific formation of personal taste. As a result, individual eating habits and dominant tastes primarily reflect the selections made by the community, reinforcing its cohesion as a group, and only marginally reflect purely personal preferences.

When this collectively shared and personal taste encounters a food that cannot be processed within its prevailing interpretative framework, a reaction of rejection occurs, manifesting as disgust.[9] From a strictly biological standpoint, the function of disgust is rooted in the protection of the body from potentially harmful foods, triggering unpleasant sensations and even physical reactions of expulsion (Carrara 2015). However, reflecting the ambiguous relationship between humans and nourishment, physiological disgust integrates also three foundational cultural invariants: classificatory thought, the omnivore's paradox, and the principle of incorporation.[10]Classificatory thought shapes dietary systems where certain foods are permitted while others are forbidden—such as taboo foods, which differ across cultures. This taxonomy of edible versus inedible often reflects conflicting symbolic, religious, and identity-related considerations rather than purely rational criteria. This reveals a community's internal boundaries, reinforcing collective identity through exclusion as much as through inclusion.

The second invariant, known as the omnivore's paradox, captures the tension inherent in the human condition as a species that can adapt its diet but remains bound by the dependence on a potentially risky variety of foods. This duality creates an ongoing tension between *neophilia*—the attraction to novelty and the drive for change—and *neophobia*—the fear of harmful contamination, corresponding to discomfort with the unknown. As a result, dietary choice becomes a site of anxiety, where the desire to explore new flavors conflicts with the need for safety and familiarity.

This paradox, in turn, originates from the third invariant, rooted in magical thinking: the principle of incorporation. To ingest a food is not merely to consume its nutrients but to absorb its magical-symbolic qualities, po-

9 Barthes (1989) argues that the existence of taste is tautological, as it is grounded in the binary opposition between what is pleasant and what is unpleasant. According to Carrara (2013), the existence of the unpleasant consequently gives rise to disgust as a corollary of taste.

10 Within the field of the anthropology and sociology of food, Fischler's work (1990) remains the most comprehensive analysis of the three invariants underlying taste and eating habits, though it is notably influenced by the research of food psychologist Paul Rozin. His foundational approach inspired the work of numerous scholars, such as Nicolosi (2007), Carrara (2013), and Megli (2017).

tentially altering the consumer's Self. In order to preserve group members from such physical-symbolic alteration and contamination, communities have often established more or less rigid dietary norms. Thus, the rejection of certain foods is not merely a matter of personal idiosyncrasy and repulsion, but rather reflects socially mediated anxieties about identity, belonging, and self-preservation.

However, the exclusionary function of disgust is further amplified on a symbolic level when considering the role of cuisine. Montanari (2002) argues that traditions and collective identities get embodied in cuisine through forms that are easily accessible and replicable, providing the most immediate form of contact between cultures. Through cuisine, understood as a specific cultural system, a community materially conveys information and expresses a shared belonging among its members, while also marking its difference from others. Yet, as in any intercultural relationship, encountering foreign dietary diversity often triggers a confrontation between the familiar and the unfamiliar, the accepted and the excluded. This can lead to various reactions, including disgust and rejection, as the boundaries of taste and identity are negotiated and redefined.

This dynamic is particularly evident within contexts of migration and nationals with a 'non-Italian' background, where food and cuisine contribute to reshaping the sense of belonging. Here, the tensions between inherited culinary norms and the new gastronomic influences encountered in the host society reflect broader processes of social inclusion and exclusion. In such a framework, food disgust offers a valuable lens through which to analyze how migrants and second-generation Italians navigate the complex interplay between belonging and displacement, revealing how the boundaries of taste often reflect broader processes of social assimilation, adaptation, and resistance.

Therefore, in the perception of 'non-native' nationals, food assumes a particular cultural significance, one that is deeply linked both to the experience of displacement and to the historical context and immigration and integration policies of the host society.

Food and Belonging in Italy of the Bossi-Fini Era

Caplan (1997) and Horn (2010) argue that food acts as a cultural and identity marker for a community, actively contributing to the definition and expression of both social and personal identity. At the same time, food is a tangible reality in which different cultural systems may intersect and

contaminate one another—or, conversely, cancel each other out and oppose culinary Otherness.

Within the migratory process, Cipolla (1997) observes that food ensures a symbolic as well as material connection with the homeland and its traditions. Migrants' eating behaviors respond to three primary needs: identity, belonging, and place. Uprooted from their original context, expatriates can only evoke their homeland through memory. As a result, they experience a precarious sense of belonging, as they simultaneously belong to and remain outside of both the community of origin and the host society. This condition forces the individual into a tension between preserving one's roots and assimilating into the new social fabric in order to be accepted. Consequently, the individual is compelled to continuously renegotiate their social identity as a member of a group—without any certainty as to which group they truly belong to. This questioning of one's social identity inevitably impacts one's personal identity as a self-standing individual, often creating confusing overlaps between the two levels.

Recognition and identification within a community become particularly urgent when the new context radically differs from the original one. The preservation and adaptation of food habits—two dynamics that are not mutually exclusive—manifest this need. As Teti (2001) notes, the migratory process entails the coexistence of continuity and change, tradition and innovation. This dynamic contributes to the construction of a new symbolic order while preserving a vital point of reference and imagined return. Migration thus serves as a transformative element in dietary behavior and consumption, while encouraging both conservatism and nostalgia. Amidst this tension, ongoing contact with the dietary habits of the host society fosters behavioral changes. Meanwhile, nostalgia for home and its lost flavors drives efforts to symbolically reconstruct and preserve the social and emotional bonds of the original community.

In the writings of authors of 'non-Italian' background, food therefore emerges as a marker of belonging.[11] These writers express their continuity or divergence from Italian society through the preservation or modification of their eating habits. Yet, their divergence from a supposed standard of Italianness—also in culinary terms—can imply

11 Chiara, Romaioli, and Contarello (2023) observe that the "food and cooking" class accounts for a significant 6.2% of the textual and lexical segments examined within a large thirty-year corpus of narratives identified as "Italian postcolonial literature."

the fear of being perceived as threateningly different and consequently being rejected. This concern offers another lens through which to read these case studies and is closely linked to the historical context in which these narratives are produced.

In 2002, in Italy the prevailing perception of foreigners was markedly negative, particularly toward individuals of non-European origin and Islamic faith. Massari (2006) notes that pre-existing prejudices in Western public discourse were exacerbated to construct an idealized "enemy image" in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks. On the legislative front, the center-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi passed the Bossi-Fini law (Law 189/2002)—still in effect today—which criminalizes irregular migrants and introduced stricter controls on those already residing in Italy.[12] Furthermore, Italian citizenship is granted solely through *ius sanguinis*, while migrants and second-generation Italians face numerous obstacles and restrictions in obtaining legal recognition.[13] The Otherness of the new Italians is thus institutionally sanctioned.

Such a context pushes individuals to question their degree of "Italianness"—a condition they may live, yet which is often unacknowledged—and to ask themselves what this "Italianness" truly is, if it even exists in a stable form.[14] In a society like Italy's, where cuisine is felt as a fundamental trait of communal identity, to narrate food and one's physical reaction to it means to reflect on one's social identity—often confused with personal identity—and on one's belonging to one or more communities.

In the following paragraphs, the protagonists of these stories will attempt to respond to such questions and to define themselves within society. As one might expect, their answers will be varied, deeply personal, and marked by inner conflict—offering multiple perspectives and insights on the topic.

12 For a summary of the evolution of immigration laws in Italy, see: Maisto 2013.

13 Marchetti (2010) and Clò (2012) note that in order to apply for citizenship, non-EU foreigners must prove they have legally resided in Italy for ten consecutive years and that they have sufficient income for sustenance. Conversely, individuals born in Italy to foreign parents can only apply for citizenship upon turning 18, provided that both they and their parents have legally resided in Italy since birth.

14 Fiucci (2019) and Raimo (2019), in contrast to the most nationalist-conservative positions, rightly point out the historically variable and constructed nature of the concept of Italianness.

Dangerous Assimilations. Rejection of Familial Food and Loss of Origins

In Laila Wadia's short story *Curry di pollo*, the main character is Anandita, a second-generation teenage Italian born to Indian parents. She considers herself fully Italian, having been born and raised in Milan, and asserts her complete Italianization. Because of this, she feels ashamed of her parents' Indian roots, viewing them as "Indian Flintstones who still think they live in a mud hut." From her perspective, they are not "normal," not "like [her] classmates' parents" (Wadia 2005, 39). She cannot understand their "stubborn nostalgia" (40) or their attachment to traditions from a country she does not consider her own. She stigmatizes their traits of Otherness in relation to the norms of Italian society, relegating them to a marginal position. Conversely, Anandita feels fully integrated, proudly claiming to share the same experiences and tastes as her Italian peers, even when those clash with her parents' preferences (39). Following a dynamic observed by Genovese, Filippini, and Zannoni (2010, 61) in many second-generation Italians, she conforms "to behavioral models typical of the host society, which are little understood, if not outright rejected, by [her] parents" in order to carve out her own space of independence within the family setting. A generational conflict thus intertwines with the process of redefining her cultural—or rather, social—identity.

This conflict manifests itself in her antagonistic relationship with food. Her father dismisses her breakfast as "junk," while praising the virtues of Indian cuisine (Wadia 2005, 43). Anandita, on the other hand, is intimately repelled by traditional Indian food:

> They don't even know […] that I throw away the bag with the Indian bread stuffed with vegetables strangled in oil and spices that Mom makes me take to school for a snack. What they don't know can't hurt them. (45)

For her, the food her parents cherish is devoid of quality—it is a lifeless emblem of a diversity she seeks to reject (46). Anandita wishes to belong solely to Italian culture, renouncing every trace of an Otherness she finds shameful. Her desire for belonging is directed exclusively toward a community of peers who are fully integrated within the standardized framework of Italian society, leaving no room for a multiple or hybrid sense of identity.

When she invites Marco, her secret boyfriend,[15] and her friend Samantha over for dinner, she firmly insists her mother not to cook "curry or other

15 Marco's character provides a link between the story and the broader political context of the time, as his relationship with Anandita is described as "clandestine."

Indian stuffs" (46). Anandita's mother had inherited the curry recipe from her mother-in-law, who "knew how to make the best chicken curry in all of Mirapur" (47). There is a deep connection between the dish and the family's roots. Since it is "loaded with cultural connotations" (Angelini 2013, 250), the chicken curry stands as a symbol of the culture and identity that the protagonist wishes to reject. Anandita perceives the dish as a marker of difference and alterity, one that could jeopardize her integration into the social group she identifies with, undermining her carefully constructed Italian identity. In a moment of social interaction with members of her in-group, Anandita hides and refuses to present a traditional dish that would evoke her belonging to the Indian community as well.

Given her still-fragile sense of being Italian, she tends toward hyper-identification with the dietary norms of Italian society, accompanied by the anxiety this conformity entails. For this reason, she insists on serving only simple pasta with tomato sauce, which Angelini (2013, 255) defines as "a symbol of the cultural and social identity of an entire nation", namely Italy.

During the dinner, food rejection shifts to her father, who struggles to eat the pasta, swallowing it "like a pelican" and comparing it to "rubber tubes" (Wadia 2005, 49–50). Most shocking to him is Marco's admission that he enjoys curry—in unconventional forms like "pizza with mushrooms, cream, and curry" or "shrimp and curry rice" with "a spoonful of Parmesan" (50). For Anandita's father, such reinterpretations of traditional cuisine are intolerable. However, since there is no curry left from the previous meal, he can only describe the recipe to the guests, doing so with evident passion, revealing an intimate and nostalgic bond with the dish (51). For him, curry is not just food—it is part of his personal history and identity as an Indian migrant living in Italy.

The conflicting attitudes toward curry embody two opposing processes of identity construction. On one hand, Anandita's parents find in the dish a tangible link to their family, their community, and their past—a sense of belonging that allows them to feel both Indian and individually affirmed. As Horn (2010, 64) notes, despite living in Italian society for many years, they resist cultural dilution and the pressures of the dominant culture in order to preserve their extra-Italian identity. On the other hand, Anandita rejects the values and culture that her family tries to maintain. She identifies more with the dominant culture of her peers, which she sees as her true point of refer-

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Marco's parents are Lega voters who consider the Bossi-Fini law too lenient toward immigrants, while Anandita's parents remain outside the political sphere—either by choice or due to lack of access.

ence, and her personal and social identities begin to merge. As an Italian girl seeking validation of her Italianness, she develops an aversion to curry, especially in socially controlled situations. The food representing her heritage is categorically rejected, becoming a source of shame and potential social stigma. This refusal reveals a deep desire for full acceptance and assimilation into Italian society, interpreted as a homogeneous group. Anandita views Italian society as her only true community of belonging, even at the cost of erasing her origins, her family history, and her culinary heritage.

In Anandita's story, the desire for assimilation becomes entangled with the search for an individual identity that is emancipated from her family but embedded within her in-group. However, complete assimilation and homogenization do not necessarily align with a desire for emancipation and social recognition. In some cases, the willingness to assimilate into a new society and culture is not a choice but an indispensable prerequisite for acceptance. Yet, renouncing one's roots—even partially—is a decision that carries considerable emotional pain.

In the short story *Estraneità* by Muin Masri (2008), simulating food appreciation or rejection in accordance with the social context is perceived as a necessary effort for the migrant to be accepted. The Arab protagonist, Rashid, feels the need to be accepted by his fiancée Roberta's family and, by extension, by Italian society. The opportunity arises during a family lunch, in which sharing a meal represents both hospitality and a reaffirmation of roles through mutual recognition as equals. For this reason, Rashid forces himself to politely compliment the still-undercooked lasagna (109). Carrara (2013, 129) reminds us that appreciating the food of the Other is a tool for fostering fraternity, thereby enabling acceptance. The alternative, conversely, is mockery and discomfort. Rashid's meeting with the priest to discuss the wedding underscores this tension:

> "I get it, you don't eat pork; Allah forbids it"," he laughs. "But what can you do, son? We're in Italy, not Arabia… Mind you, I have nothing against your religion—it's a great culture—but we're just so different. Even our food is different, and that's the most basic thing in the world. But we're not here to talk about food, are we? We're here for something more serious, if I understand correctly". […] "Oh, sorry, I forgot you cannot drink wine either". (Masri 2008, 115)

Despite Rashid's efforts to integrate, the priest reproduces the most common stereotypes about Muslims. He projects these assumptions onto Rashid, expecting confirmation of his preconceived notions. Forbidden foods and drinks become a source of misunderstanding and ridicule, re-

inforcing Rashid's inescapable Otherness in the eyes of a society he has lived in for years. He is not fully recognized as Italian, but he no longer feels entirely Palestinian either. Once the priest leaves, the only space of agency left to him is to drink precisely that wine which had been denied to him. Feigning aversion thus becomes a survival strategy: a means of easing interaction with the host community by validating its existing prejudices—albeit at the cost of one's own dignity.

The inner conflict between personal and social identity becomes even more pronounced in Tahar Lamri's short story *Il caffè* (2007). For the protagonist, returning to Algeria after twenty years in Europe means reconnecting with his family and with his deeper sense of self. However, Majid paradoxically desires to feel like a stranger in his own home. He no longer identifies as Algerian but rather as European, and he fears that reuniting with his family might jeopardize the independence and emancipation he has worked so hard to achieve (111). This internal tension first surfaces in his discomfort at the dining table:

> First the smells, the spices, then the colors. Accustomed to first courses, second courses, desserts, to order, in short, to the rectangular table, here I find myself at home and disoriented. (111)

The lack of order in the courses and the overwhelming sweetness and unfamiliarity of the flavors leave him without reference points, hesitant in front of the meal. At the same time, as Bellesia-Contuzzi (2017) notes, traditional food involuntarily evokes his personal memories and past. Thus, what initially appears to be repulsive—the disorder, the "orgy" of flavors moving "from salty to sweet and from sweet to salty"—becomes, unexpectedly, an expression of regained freedom (Lamri 2007, 113). Through food, Majid rediscovers an "immobile purity wrapped in familial affections" that offers a momentary sense of home in his perpetual migration (Pezzarossa 2011, 106).

However, his voluntary departure from the homeland creates a rupture between the individual and his community, revealing "the trauma of an impossible *nostos*" (107). During the coffee ritual, Majid, now accustomed to drinking "insolent, bitter Italian espresso" (Lamri 2007, 113), nearly spits out the overly sweet coffee prepared by his mother, involuntarily reacting with disgust. Witnessing this, his mother no longer recognizes him:

> "Do you know that my son is dead?"
> "What son, mother? I don't know of any brother who died while I was away!"

> "I had a son… He left one day, twenty years ago… They came to tell me he had died abroad, but I didn't want to believe it. Today, I am certain". […]
> "You are not my son. You've taken my son's place, and I don't know why."
> "[…] my son loved sweet things; he couldn't drink bitter coffee. It's impossible". (113-114)

For the mother, the son who emigrated died long ago. She sees his altered taste as proof that he is no longer the child she once knew (Bellesia-Contuzzi 2017, 93). Majid is no longer considered part of the community he left behind. Taste becomes a tool for classification, marking inclusion for those who are alike and exclusion for those perceived as different (Carrara 2013, 113). Majid's rejection of the sweet coffee symbolically severs a fundamental link to his belonging. His original community cannot—or will not—fully reaccept the self-excluded individual. While the encounter with traditional family food rekindles a personal identity still deeply tied to Algeria, the revulsion toward the overly sweet coffee makes clear that this identity no longer aligns with his social identity, which is no longer recognized within the family context.

In the end, although his mother eventually accepts her son's preference for bitter coffee, the reconciliation leaves an open wound. The protagonist remains a foreigner in his own home, his original identity questioned and denied by his own family. The rejection of a familiar flavor from the past becomes a source of existential fragility, one that may culminate in the loss of identity—stretched between the one personally felt and the one socially acknowledged.

In the short stories discussed, the protagonists renegotiate their identity through a process of assimilation in which food plays a central role. Often unconsciously, adopting the tastes and food habits of the host society becomes a strategy for seeking recognition and acceptance. As Ricorda (2015, 66) aptly observes, in a dynamic of integration-incorporation, food enables the foreigner to enter the new community—not merely as a passive recipient of inclusion, but as an active agent seeking to be accepted. Nevertheless, this interpretation tends to absolve the host community of responsibility, placing the burden of incorporation entirely on the agency of the individual.

Moreover, uncritical assimilation can lead to two radical consequences. On a societal level, it tends to erase complexity and enforce a rigid, homogenous and immutable model of cultural belonging. On an individual level, it risks annihilating one's uniqueness, collapsing the distinction between personal identity and social identity—until the former is entirely subsumed by the latter. This dynamic is reflected in the object of the disgust expressed

in the stories. The characters' aversion is directed toward foods with which they once maintained deep emotional and symbolic ties, or foods the host society expect migrants should refuse. These dishes, once familiar, are now physically rejected because they are perceived as incompatible with the social identity the characters seek to affirm.

Rejecting New Dietary Habits. From Resistance to New Awareness

Adopting the food habits of the host society to assimilate and conform can degenerate into a form of (self-)exclusion. Anandita does not seek to reconcile her belonging to two distinct communities; instead, she chooses to reject the one she inherited. Rashid embraces the role of the stereotypical and, consequently, excluded foreigner as a way to be more easily recognized—if not accepted—by the host society. Majid, by contrast, discovers that his exclusion has already been enacted and sanctioned by his community of origin.

In *Scontro di civiltà per un ascensore a piazza Vittorio* by Amara Lakhous (2006), Amedeo-Ahmed acknowledges that his passion for pizza "has mingled with [his] blood" (33). His preference is not merely a matter of taste; it is a tangible symptom of his Italianization. Pezzarossa (2011, 104) rightly notes that Amedeo-Ahmed feels compelled to erase his Algerian origins in order to embody an Italian identity that is socially accepted. To adopt a new, legitimate social identity, he must suppress markers of alterity—at least in the public sphere.

Conversely, the Iranian character Parviz represents the opposite pole. He clings to his original identity, expressed through his intense disgust for pizza:

> […] I saw an Italian girl devouring a pizza as big as an umbrella. I felt nauseous and almost threw up!
>
> […] My hatred for pizza is unparalleled, but that doesn't mean I hate everyone who eats it. […] I have no hatred toward Italians. (11-12)

His near-physical revulsion toward pizza reflects a conflicted and distorted attitude toward Italian society. Pizza—widely recognized as a symbol of Italian identity—becomes, in this context, "an effective trope that allows a migrant writer to also manipulate stereotypes about Italianness" (Parati 2005, 77). Rejecting pizza thus equates to rejecting an idea of Italianness perceived as an imposed norm. Parviz exhibits a complete refusal to adapt to Italian cuisine. Although he was a respected chef in his home-

town, in Italy he refuses to learn local ingredients or cooking techniques, compromising his role at work. His integration fails, not due to obstacles imposed by others, but because he has no desire to even attempt it. He remains deeply tied to Iranian culinary culture. For him, cooking becomes an act of memory, a ritual that reclaims the past:

> I immediately start preparing various Iranian dishes, such as *gormeh sabzi*, *kabab kubideh*, *kashk badinjan*, and *kateh*. The smells that fill the kitchen make me forget reality, and it feels as if I'm back in my kitchen in Shiraz. (35)

Parviz's actions and sensory experiences confirm Teti's (2001) observation that cooking provides "a momentary return to the homeland, whether real or imagined." Food allows the migrant to rediscover "familiarity with lost foods" and to "find meaning and a place in a new location" (590). By recreating traditional Iranian recipes, Parviz reconnects with his cultural identity and familial roots. He views Italy as a temporary refuge, not a place where he belongs, especially given his status as a non-EU migrant (Lakhous 2006, 26). His almost militant culinary conservatism becomes a means of resisting assimilation and asserting his right to hate pizza (13).

Yet Parviz's hatred for Italian food remains deeply ambiguous. On one hand, it likely stems from his inability to feel included in Italian society and from his ongoing hope to return to Iran (21). On the other hand, his refusal to embrace Italian food may reflect a fear of forgetting Iranian cuisine and, by extension, his authentic self (34). Culinary practices are burdened with layers of personal and symbolic meaning. Parviz defines his identity through food—he is, above all, an Iranian cook living in Italy not by choice, but by necessity. Adopting the cuisine of the host country would mean compromising, even betraying, his origins and the essence of who he is. This need to keep his sense of belonging to the country of origin alive—without accepting a heterodirected affiliation, but only one that is self-directed—is reflected in his unconditional and a priori admiration for Iranian cuisine and the belittlement of Italian food, especially pizza. His evaluation relies on a comparison that favors his own in-group, thereby enacting a dynamic of self-favoritism.[16]

Parviz's culinary disgust thus becomes a form of resistance—both to preserve himself and to oppose a dominant culture that seeks to flatten

16 From a psychosocial perspective, Mazzara (1998) defines this mechanism as "self-favoritism," a common dynamic that emerges when comparisons are made—especially interethnic ones—between two groups, typically privileging one's own group of belonging (152).

out difference. His categorical rejection of Italian cuisine, symbolized by pizza, fuels an underlying resentment toward Italy itself. His nostalgic devotion to the food of his homeland produces a double effect: it shields his identity from cultural erasure, but it also entrenches that identity so rigidly that it resists any possibility of negotiation or transformation.

Conversely, Igiaba Scego's short story *Salsicce* (2005) offers a more complex resolution of identity. Processes of resistance to assimilation and processes of adaptation merge, giving rise to a new awareness of self and of an as-yet undefined sense of Italianness for the protagonist—a young Italian woman of Somali origin.

The story is set in Rome during Ferragosto, coinciding with the implementation of the Bossi-Fini law. Under this law, non-EU citizens holding temporary residence permits are required to register their fingerprints. Although the protagonist is already an Italian citizen, her Somali heritage prompts her to reflect on what it truly means to be Italian. As Hannah (2005) notes, her legal status compels her to ask whether she sees herself as Italian or as an "immigrant." Being Italian becomes not just a matter of paperwork, but of skin color and habits.

Yet, Somalia and Italy coexist within her—both legally and somatically. At one point, she creates a list of what makes her feel Somali and what makes her feel Italian (Scego 2005, 29–30). The result is a balance, confirming her status as "a woman without an identity", or rather, "with multiple identities" of equal value (28). Buying sausages becomes a symbol of her inner conflict. As Siggers Manson (2004, 83) argues, food marks the boundary "between her Italian and Somali personalities." The protagonist feels that eating and incorporating the sausages into her body would signify her complete transformation into an Italian. Being born in Italy and participating in everyday life in her neighborhood is no longer enough—she must be recognized as Italian:

> […] If I swallow these sausages one by one, will people understand that I am as Italian as they are? Just like them? Or will it all have been pointless bravado? (Scego 2005, 26)

Her inclusion in Italian society appears contingent on a sacrifice: the ingestion of *haram* food, pork sausages. This act would mean renouncing her Somali identity and physically incorporating Italianness, transforming even her body into that of the 'ideal' Italian. The pressure to belong demands a physical change.Through a kind of magical thinking, the sausages are believed to have real, transformative power:

> […] Perhaps eating a sausage would turn my neutral fingerprints into authentic made-in-Italy fingerprints. But is that what I want? (31)

However, her inner conflict triggers unease and constant changes of mind. Her decision to eat pork clashes with her lack of knowledge about how to cook it (31). Even the smell of the sausages provokes disgust, leading her to vomit before she can even taste them (32). This physical reaction works in tandem with her evolving self-awareness, giving form to emotions and reflections that had yet to fully surface.

Indeed, this visceral rejection brings clarity:

> I look at the sausages and throw them in the trash. How could I even think of eating them? Why do I want to deny myself just to […] please the sadists who introduced the humiliation of fingerprinting? Would I be more Italian with a sausage in my stomach? And less Somali? Or the complete opposite?
>
> No, I would still be the same—the same mix. And if that bothers people, from now on I won't give a damn! (35)

The disgust provoked by food imbued with a normative idea of Italianness becomes an opportunity to reconfigure a hybrid identity. As Angelini (2013) points out, the protagonist realizes that her attempt to become someone else is nothing more than a forced posture, capable only of producing superficial and temporary effects. She ultimately accepts both the traits that make her Somali and those that make her Italian—her multiple roots forming the core of her identity. There is no loss of self; rather, there is an affirmation of self, grounded in the very tension between those roots.

As Wright argues, "the coexistence and interplay of multiple identities openly challenges any reductive, essentializing attempt" (2004,105). The protagonist's newfound awareness lies in her recognition of three distinct levels of identity: personal, social, and legal. While her legal status forces her to question her Italianness, it does not and cannot override the other two dimensions, which validate her dual belonging.

The agentive resistance of the individual thus becomes a challenge to society itself. It reveals the latter's inability to grasp the complexity of lived experiences—experiences in which individuals may simultaneously belong to multiple communities without this being a form of dilution or loss. In *Salsicce*, identity is not a zero-sum game but a negotiation, in which food becomes both a site of tension and a vehicle for personal truth.

The protagonist of *Salsicce* and Parviz both use food as a tool of active resistance against the limits imposed by the host society. Denying oneself and one's sense of belonging is not a viable option, except at the

cost of self-erasure. In Parviz's case, resistance to adopting foreign tastes stems from a crisis brought on by the migratory experience. It is an effort to maintain a strong connection to his roots and a sense of cultural distinctiveness. In his situation, Wadia's (2007) statement rings especially true: "food is a refuge, a symbolic umbilical cord to the homeland often left behind reluctantly" (10). However, his resistance is primarily antagonistic and rigid, resulting in complete social isolation. By contrast, the story presented in *Salsicce* demonstrates how disgust can serve not only as a form of resistance, but also as a catalyst for reflection on the very idea of Italianness. While this concept can be legally codified in racially exclusive terms, it remains—on a lived level—a deeply permeable community.

Though difficult to define, Italianness does not derive from skin color or from culinary openness. Rather, it stems from a shared sense of belonging. The protagonist's rejection of the sausages, instead of alienating her further, leads to a self-affirming realization: she does not have to choose between identities since they can coexist. Her disgust becomes a moment of clarity, allowing her to reconcile and affirm her hybrid self.

Spicy Trials and Culinary Mistakes. Reciprocal Recognition and Hybridization

While belonging to a community—or resisting assimilation into it—may leave ample room for individual agency, it is ultimately the community itself that validates recognition and confers the right to belong. Manifestations of food-related disgust can therefore also emerge from the host group or society's perspective. Rejecting the food of the Other signifies a failure of integration, whereas appreciating their cuisine—regardless of how unfamiliar or divergent its flavors may be—represents a form of mutual recognition and successful inclusion. As carriers of individual difference, dishes with flavors unfamiliar to the dominant Italian palate become a space of either connection or confrontation between the migrant and the host society. Disgust, or its absence, thus reflects two equally possible outcomes of this encounter.

In Amor Dekhis' short story *La salvezza* (2002), the central tension revolves around *harissa*, a traditional Algerian spicy chili paste. The protagonist is invited to a multicultural dinner among friends and acquaintances (103). Aware of the compromises multiculturalism often demands (108), he decides to bring a dish that might suit everyone's tastes, but also adds

a small container of *harissa*, prepared in the traditional way. This sauce becomes "a means of expressing identity" (Goody 2002, 106) in a context meant to promote sharing and exchange.

However, when another guest tries the *harissa*, the protagonist's expression of cultural identity quickly turns into a source of conflict. Because it was not adapted for European palates, the sauce causes physical discomfort—"it felt like fire blazing down the esophagus" (Dekhis 2002, 109). The woman accuses him of being a murderer and warns the others not to touch his food (108). What was intended as a moment of conviviality and bonding ends in rejection and isolation:

> I saw it in their oblique glances: the party was over for me. […]
> I had nothing left to declare, as I was battling the monster of hostility invading my heart. I realized I was failing even at small tasks, that I was tolerated only for others to take advantage of me, and that I could not stand anyone in return. I was well and truly cooked in my damned isolation. (109)

Pezzarossa (2011) rightly argues that the diners' physical reaction becomes a symbolic rejection of Otherness, embodied in the *harissa*, and leads to the protagonist's exclusion. The test of mutual understanding fails. His dish—bearing the markers of his personal and cultural specificity—is repudiated. The community he had hoped to become part of proves incapable of welcoming his difference. The absence of reciprocal recognition results in exclusion and resentment.

This episode thus offers a critical perspective on multiculturalism in its practical application and contradictions. The rejection of the *harissa* reduces multiculturalism to a superficial coexistence of different culinary traditions—one that tolerates only sanitized, homogenized versions of difference. When cultural particularities are deemed too excessive or divergent, they are excluded rather than embraced.

Conversely, Gabriella Ghermandi's short story *Pranzo pasquale* (2007), while also revolving around the theme of spiciness as a challenge to acceptance, offers a contrasting resolution. In this case, food explicitly functions as a test. Alem's grandmother wants to assess her granddaughter's new Italian boyfriend, as "a man who cannot endure spiciness on his tongue will not be able to handle the fiery character of Ethiopian women" (74). However, this trial causes anxiety for the narrator, as it could result in either the boyfriend's rejection by the family or his own retreat:

> "Did you use a lot of spice?"
> "No, child, just the right amount," she replied, but I didn't believe her.

> She was accustomed to using spiciness as a trial by fire, defeating all the few White boyfriends I had brought home. (74)

Contrary to Grandmother Berechtì's expectations, the man not only endures the excessive spiciness—so strong that even Alem finds it overwhelming—but enjoys it, eating heartily. He also demonstrates familiarity with Ethiopian dining customs (78). When he accepts a second serving of *tibsi*, a dish of meat and chili, and compliments the cooking, the grandmother's skepticism gives way to admiration. The final test comes with the traditional coffee ceremony: drinking a scalding cup of coffee, which he handles with ease (79). By embracing and appreciating Ethiopian food and traditions, the Italian boyfriend earns the grandmother's approval. The sharing and acceptance of food here ensure mutual recognition, made all the more meaningful by the underlying risk of rejection that ultimately never materializes.

Gastronomic and cultural differences do not necessarily constitute insurmountable barriers. Rather, food becomes a site of both challenge and connection. Different cultures can coexist in mutual respect, without requiring hybridization or fusion. Simply accepting and appreciating one another's distinctiveness becomes enough to foster a shared sense of belonging. The effectiveness of the process of mutual integration, however, appears to depend on a reciprocal effort—both from the individual seeking recognition and from the community from which such recognition is sought. Lastly, the fear of provoking disgust may arise from a simple mistake. Yet such a mistake can also lead to success within an explicitly multicultural perspective of hybridization.

The premise of Gabriela Preda's short story *Piatto parigino dei Balcani in salsa veneziana* (2007) is the preparation of a personal and multicultural dinner by the protagonist. However, it reflects a distinct kind of multiculturalism:

> To make the usual "everyone bring something" a bit more appealing, I chose an *à la carte* ethnic menu that reflects my origins and my beloved homeland. Even though, to be honest, I'm not quite sure what "ethnic" means for me, given that I'd like to include not only something Romanian and Greek but also a Russian dish, maybe some Chinese specialties I tried in London, or even Italian pasta… In short, a dinner that truly speaks about me. (61)

This takes place in a safe and informal setting—an international student gathering before Christmas—where the community already exists by virtue of its cultural diversity. Unlike in Dekhis's story, the dinner here does not represent the guests' various backgrounds, but rather that of the host

herself. For the young woman, food serves to "form rather than express an identity" (Goody 2002, 118). She is already aware of her multifaceted identity, shaped by living in multiple countries, but she now needs to give it tangible form.

The long and careful preparation allows her to organize her thoughts and recreate her nomadic experience. Particular attention is paid to *salată de boeuf*, a Romanian variation of Russian salad, which evokes strong childhood memories (Preda 2007, 61-62). However, when dinner is served, she realizes she forgot to cook the chicken. So, she searches for a backup plan:

> I tossed a can of Manzotin [canned meat] into the salad, mixed it again, and… voilà! My *insalata beuf*, the star dish of the "Paris of the Balkans", was ready to be eaten! With a Venetian "sauce" and a hint of Manzotin flavor, but fingers crossed! […] They especially loved the *insalata beuf*, "because you can't really taste the meat—it has such a delicate flavor". I was about to faint. After six hours in the kitchen baking moussaka, Manzotin stole the show! […] Today, I feel like I made history, witnessing the birth of a new Balkan-Italian dish: *Insalata Beuf* à la "Parisienne of the Balkans" with Venetian Manzotin Sauce and Venetian Wine. A masterpiece. (63-64)

Though the Manzotin was a last-minute solution, it is precisely this improvisation that makes the dish unintentionally unique. The fear of having ruined the dinner—and, symbolically, of being rejected—turns into a modest triumph.

The dish's accidental blending of cultures and flavors becomes a reflection of the protagonist's layered identity. The *salată de boeuf* is not rejected by the guests; on the contrary, it perfectly and unintentionally embodies her experience. It becomes "the true triumph of culinary métissage" (Pezzarossa 2011, 107). The mistake gives rise to a rare moment of gastronomic syncretism, where multiple cultural threads merge through hybrid preparation (Morrone, Scardella, and Piombo 2009).

In these three stories, culinary trials and errors become a lens through which we observe processes of hybridization. This reflects a sincere form of intercultural integration, one that requires mutual acceptance by both the individual and the host community. The presence or absence of disgust confirms the outcome of this process.

In cases of successful hybridization, dietary habits blend, creating a multifaceted and cohesive identity that embraces both the individual's past and the present context without conflict or exclusion. Yet even successful hybridization carries a risk: it may become a tool for merging differences into a vague and indistinct multicultural homogeneity, ultimately resulting in erasure rather than enrichment.

Conclusive Remarks

The relationship between food and human beings encompasses multiple dimensions. The cuisine and the dining table are not merely spaces of conviviality among peers, nor are they solely about satisfying physiological needs. Through food, individuals can reflect on their personal identity and find affirmation of their social identity and sense of belonging to a community. This becomes particularly visible in the case of expatriates and second-generation nationals. The longing for lost traditional foods cannot cure but can partially process the trauma of separation from one's homeland, thereby restoring a sense of recognition.

Food thus acts as a tool of identity reappropriation, serving as a link to and marker of one's roots. For this reason, it often becomes a battleground in the processes of individual identity redefinition. The attachment to native cuisine and the pressure to assimilate into the host society create internal conflicts for displaced individuals. Italy's migratory context in the early 2000s is no exception.

In this regard, food-related aversion offers a unique analytical lens. Indeed, the presence or absence of disgust, as well as the specific foods it targets, provides a literary mirror through which authors with 'non-Italian' backgrounds reflect on their role and sense of belonging within the host community. A reaction that is both biological and cultural, disgust operates as a physiological and tangible expression of rejection toward elements perceived as threatening to personal and social integrity.

In the works of Wadia, Masri, and Lamri, we witness a rejection or partial negation of one's roots and distinctiveness. The newcomers enact a kind of hyper-identification with the host community. The desire for assimilation becomes entangled with the flattening of both social and, to some extent, personal identity, potentially leading to the erasure of one's origins and uniqueness in favor of homogenized conformity.

Conversely, in Lakhous's novel or Scego's short story, disgust toward the host society's food underscores the need to resist the erasure of individuality and Otherness. Yet the implications differ. For displaced individuals like Parviz, rejecting the host society's food and longing for specific native dishes aligns with the recovery of a deep emotional connection to the homeland. However, such polemical denial of the dominant taste can result in complete closure to dialogue. Disgust for the host society's cuisine becomes symbolic of a broader rejection of society itself, and a retreat into an exclusive and nostalgic sense of belonging to one's original community. By contrast, in Scego's story, such rejection signals a refusal of forced assimi-

lation and opens a space for the emergence of a new self-awareness—albeit one that is conflicted and continually renegotiated. For the protagonist, it is precisely her multiple affiliations that define her identity, even as they clash with the nationalist logic underpinning dominant notions of Italianness.

Lastly, the fusion of flavors and culinary practices introduces new challenges, as seen in the stories by Dekhis, Ghermandi, and Preda. The acceptance and recognition of a creole, multifaceted, and personally experienced identity often clash with a system that resists even the culinary incorporation of Otherness. However, when mutual recognition occurs, it opens up small yet meaningful opportunities for a society more attuned to transcultural openness. Coexistence thus becomes possible through genuine democratization rather than exoticization.

Within this literary analysis—framed through the lenses of food, disgust, identity, and belonging—several aspects stand out. First, these texts cannot be understood as self-contained or purely artistic products; rather, they draw nourishment from their historical, cultural, and social contexts. In ways that are sometimes subtle and sometimes explicit, they participate in the public debate on what it means to be Italian for migrants and second-generation Italians within a historical period marked by regressive trends in immigration policy and public sentiment. The question of what it concretely means to "be Italian" remains unresolved, though it seems intrinsically tied to the notion of belonging to a community perceived alternately as exclusive and closed, or as potentially permeable.

A particularly revealing insight is the way identity renegotiation processes described by these authors lead to an overlap—or even confusion—between personal and social identity. This points to a fundamental human need for belonging, while also exposing how societal pressure can result in a convergence of being and performing.

Finally, these texts present a complex challenge to society itself, laying bare the contradictions inherent in both individual and national responses. Forced assimilation and a naïve multicultural fusion both risk producing homogenization and erasure—strategies that ultimately serve to absorb or nullify difference, reinforcing a reactionary ideal of national purity. On the other hand, a defensive form of identity resistance risks undermining dialogue altogether or leads to an elevation of difference for its own sake, without effecting real change. Instead, syncretic contamination and mutual acceptance appear to offer the most constructive path forward. Yet achieving this still requires dismantling social barriers within a context of policies centered on the exclusion and criminalization of diversity—policies that demand the surrender of intimate individuality in exchange for social recognition.

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THE (UN)HOLY ALLIANCE AT MEALS: SHAPING A RELATION BETWEEN FOOD, CONSCIENCE AND THE LAW

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Abstract

It is commonly recognized that Mediterranean cultures show a certain level of accordance in their own lifestyles, customary rules, accepted affective values. This substantially correct scientific stance, however, easily turned into a caricatural position when that assumed collective framework is elevated to the standard of a universal rule. When the recognition of similarities implies to undervalue the importance of meaningful differences the cultural pattern does not work anymore. Keeping in mind this methodological prudence, it is a still fruitful hermeneutical experience to try to reach a structured study about the common roots in the qualified relationship between the not only symbolical sense of the food, Mediterranean heritages and confessional legal orders based on monotheism. Regarded from this point of view, the theme undoubtedly offers a historically founded influence of ethics and religions in conceiving a net of rules even in the mere act of eating. While often hidden, food is at the base of Mediterranean religiosities more a fact of discipline than a way of liberation: the ancient beliefs prescribed a deeply extensive series of rules to define the right time to eat and to avoid to eat (especially in, but not limited to, the Jewish tradition), the forbidden types of food and the licit ones, the universal condemnation of heathen uses, considered as blaspheme kinds of actions (this was an element absolutely peculiar, but again not exclusive, for Muslim scholars, thinkers and guiding personalities). It seems finally time to restart a different consideration, describing even a typical legal and formal approach, underlining the opportunity of a study on food, not hiding the duties and the virtues of cultural religious usages. The task is to step away from the barely coercive contents of them and to widen the sense of conviviality, dialogue and collaboration. The Jewish rituals on prayers and purification have meant an undeniable ethically directed reflection on the core sense of being clean, first of all, to ourselves: a personal interrogation with a not strictly confessional and religious element of self-critique. The first Christian communities adopted a joyful praxis of meals that expressed a vivid alternative to the aristocrats and their conception of common alimentary uses to establish relations of power in a hedonistic atmosphere of richness. The apparently more

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defined and stronger Islamic approach was also a positive revolution in giving the meals a different quality of collective presence: against the clan and tribe tendencies, the weakest were again admitted to the experience of eating together at least once a day. According to Albert Camus, if the most distinctive element of a Mediterranean behavior stands in its own warm attitude, what the biggest monotheistic cults realized at the time certainly was a not secondary brick to build that sense of conviviality.

Keywords: Mediterranean Sea, Islam, Jewish legal tradition, religious freedom, history of religions

Methods and evolutions of a theme: ancestral and so current

Food is not just about feeding our body. If we get this assumption considering a legal point of view, the meaning of the sentence is almost the same: it gets probably even deeper. The act of feeding ourselves is the immediate answer to a lot of more or less formally defined obligations: the healthcare, the prosecution of the species, the legitimacy of our rights, the elementary form of reaching a peaceful satisfaction of our primary needs. If just considered in a structured circle of legal obligations, however, the entire theme of food nutrition remains very vague: how to obtain pleasure from a duty? How to respect the duty without considering its proper component of choice, freedom, and self-realization, too? This is the very way the social formations have crossed to create collective practices of food eating: regular, sometimes solemn, often well normatively organized, but spontaneously ordered on the idea of a common occasion of conviviality. The communitarian element is not specifically able to overrule a basic individual stance (the right of eating,[1] the right of eating what we prefer, the right of doing this selection not by limiting the others and not by being limited by the others), but also the individual pleasure of eating has a peculiar root in the existence of a net of customary rules.

It could certainly seem apodictic, but the main thesis of this research consists in an original attitude across Mediterranean cultures to give the collective uses of food (and cooking, too) a general sense deserving the shaping of an institutional legal protection: a continuous combination of informal autonomous conducts and even traditionally or orally codified rules of social cohesion. In spite of huge doctrinal tendencies, trying to focalize on a specific theoretical framework able to include the evolution

1 Taket, *Health Equity, Social Justice and Human Rights*, 19-21.

of the theme across countries and historical periods,[2] the task of this article will differently be to explain a catalogue of significant phases and case studies, without any attempt to recreate universal rules or all-encompassing figurative models. It is certainly an expositive limit to try not to give to give a guiding, static, and unmovable code, but our purpose, for the moment, is to get a very first overview concerning the collective rituals of food, embracing social changes and cultural customary praxes, even risking an ethical, individual, canon of justification. The vitality of evolutionary customs seems more important than a precise scheme,[3] because it makes possible to more directly consider singular events and attitudes. The thesis of the work consists in the recognition of a permanent convivial representation of common meals: we are not trying to find an archetype, but the expectation is to mention paradigmatic examples of that collective form of eating. The hospitality and the spontaneous, but somehow chaotic and hard-fought,[4] cultural turnover, typical in the Mediterranean history, are extraordinary sceneries to gather the sense of community and encounter, not always rational records, mainly immanent and not transcendent, but records of a type of thought, lifestyle, mentality. The rite of food implies a relationship with a special element characterizing that level of relation: it needs the shape of the intimacy, the recognition of mutual feelings, the birth of a sense of an equally perceived *dining table*, more immediate than strictly formalistic.[5] Protocols and ceremonials appear later: the substantial aim and the constitutive practice of a collective repast came much before; they cause a sense of community; they implicitly draw a border against the ones outside the perimeter of that conviviality.[6] In exercising this process religions were the most relevant actors.

Many of the religiously characterized kinds of food are now getting a level of general appreciation not specifically linked to their own proper theological base. Mediterranean regions were the ones most interested in the original development of these culinary styles, but the worldwide increasing trend of them is moderately happening. In some metropolitan

2 This perspective includes the individuation of specific ways to prepare the meal, as distinctive parts of the human experience on the planet. A classical study, facing the importance of preparations based on the use of fire and cooking, is unanimously considered Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked.*

3 Crowther, *Eating Culture. An Anthropological Guide to Food*, 9-11.

4 Kamen, *Early Modern European Society*, 240.

5 Mannur, *Intimate Eating. Racialized Spaces and Radical Futures.*

6 Then the extraneous reaches the different and unconceivable space of the dirt, the wrong, and the perilous, as noticed in Douglas, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*.

areas, such as Rome, Milan, Paris, several typical halal bars and restaurants have a concrete commercial success,[7] which reasonably came from an initial request taken on by migrants' communities.[8] It is widely justifiable even considering that the common reading against migrant groups (juvenile delinquents, so poor to mainly achieve their earnings by small illegal activities, almost complete ignorance of national official languages)[9] is false and not trustworthy. Second and third generation migrants, on the contrary, want to start smart economic enterprises:[10] the food market is open, modifiable, quick; a perfect form of short business to family companies, not highly learned manpower, ethnic little groupings. Kebab booths, Turkish style pizzerias, authorized retails, usually standing in station quarters or suburbs, have reached a widespread diffusion, intercepting the appreciation even from local middle and low classes residents: it is a predictable way to spread a culture, a first recognition of religiously and ethically born praxes, a new taste in intending the mass scale fast food satellite activities. This market-oriented tendency demonstrates, at least, a partial differentiation if compared to the strong orthodox approach preferred by the most intransigent religious opinions.

The structure of the critical point stands clear: what is advertised as halal food is not always rigidly halal, and that split is more unpleasant if related to a religiously comforting propaganda. Hence, the movement is dual: on the one hand, religiously based paradigms of food eating constantly meet a not only religious audience; on the other hand, their successful commercial capillarity makes them less credible to the more radical stalls of observant consumers. This condition does not regard peculiarly Islamic food prescriptions, though the issue, perhaps, gains, into Islamic public opinions, a stronger symbolical weight, and the aim of this research is not the purpose to uncover how halal traditions can be betrayed into a capitalistic organization of foreign food companies. Quite the opposite, the same concern has historically involved kosher practices, and every type of alimentary technique based on confessional and theological prerequisites. By now, the main element to underline, aside from a more exegetical discourse on authenticity in adopting religious etiquettes to not properly religious series of

7 Farouk, "Overview on halal issues," 8.
8 Fischer, *The Halal frontier*.
9 Thus, the food market finally begins to be considered as an intercultural strategy to make the social security a real target of both individual and mutual economic activities. Rizzuto, "Le difficoltà di accesso al credito per l'impresa agraria multifunzionale".
10 Betts, *The Wealth of Refugees.*

products, is that the Mediterranean area was a fruitful crossroad to make different alimentary precepts coexisting, also in case of harsh religious and political conflicts.

Paradigms of banqueting: Mediterranean Sea, cultures and religions

The ideal type of meal emerging from the classical Mediterranean cultures was anyway and anyhow connoted by a concept of splendor, ostentation, and luxury. This did not mean that the sumptuous atmosphere regarded the entire population (we are talking about legal orders still permitting slavery, moreover, not only tolerating that, but almost explicitly giving the condition of slavery a peculiar basement in the system of production and domestic affairs). An imaginary is usually determined by the highest classes – at the time: aristocracy, military forces, conquerors, landowners, notable people from the magistratures, the nobility, and the commerce, too. Considering both the urbanistic and demographic elements, this part of the cities was absolutely a minority, even if a minority consistently by force, in the accepted social and juridical powers. The Greek culture generated at least two different paradigms of ideal meal – with a not common accent on the ritual and the mutual element of that.

The first one was about the Olympus:[11] goddesses always involved in libations, clashes, and frivolousness. The banquet unveiled its hypocrisy: fighting dining companions captured in the moment of their festive binge and orgies. The cupbearer was a solemn role: Ganymede was a master of ceremonies, not just a supporting actor. The other pattern was a more political one, because it did not represent the divine, but a typical human faction: the symposium.[12] It is widely agreed that the notorious collective factor was about drinking, and not eating, but the terms of the question do not significantly vary, at least in terms of human relationships and condition of equality and almost literally fraternity.[13] Between a confidential confraternity and an immaterial space to freely jointly talk, it was the smithy of the Greek thought on political discourse and artistic styles. The symposium paradigm was a pagan component of an identically heathen society, but it recaptures fragments also adopted by the monotheistic civilizations. It needed a condition of equal position between participants,

11 Sissa, Detienne, *La vita quotidiana degli dei greci*.
12 Lynch, *Symposium in Context*, 49-73.
13 Boisvert, *I Eat, Therefore I Think. Food and Philosophy*, 108-109.

although a guest of honor was usually invited.[14] The prevalent feeling was about unity and friendship, even tackling legal, political, and lyrical disputes; it sometimes even became the headquarters of a sedition, a coup, or a place to celebrate a conspiracy. Roman society introduced a different approach, except for an important case study we will separately consider. The framework of the banquet was mainly based on patronage. That point was a precise legal consequence: the prevalent net of juridical relationships was founded on a typical person. A man who has family, worths, lands, affairs, slaves; the center of the discourse on legal responsibility and contractual liberty;[15] the banquet was not a meal: it more correctly is the moment of alliances, confrontation between different patrimonial consistencies, public or private agreements. The expansion of the Roman Empire deepened this initial difference between the concept of eating in the ideal, frugal, original imaginary[16] and its concrete development in an empowered society. The patrician turned into a large-scale political lobbyist: the feast was his throne.

The sense of discontent could have been huge, spanning two different, but equally legitimate, critical perspectives. The axis of social justice was constant, but it has made more singular tumultuous protests emerge than effective political reform hypotheses. The conception of eating in the weakest classes was inferior, however never getting the level of a systematic change into cultural dominant patterns – monotheisms openly criticized the Roman emphasis on banqueting as a proper symbol of an evil (more than heathen) empire.[17] The poorest were not only formally excluded from this perception of power and strength. The lack of equality and freedom in the slow but incoming Roman political crisis was censured not only for the increasing evidence of troubling economic discriminations (the quest for a public law universal citizenship was exactly the other side of a rising dissatisfaction and even that claim was only tardively intercepted). The mentality assumed as a real force and expression of the ruling class seemed a constriction for the most fragile classes and created a partial, first, embryonic sense of opposition in a well-known, but not hegemonic part of the progressive side of the notables.

14 Sheffield, *Plato's Symposium*, 202-203.

15 A classic point of view in Buckland, *A Manual of Roman Private Law*, 60-61; more recently, Consorti, *Introduzione allo studio del diritto canonico. Lezioni pisane*, 6-7.

16 Stolleis, *Storia del diritto pubblico in Germania*, 26-27.

17 This is a point of view typically developed in Paglia, *Storia della povertà.*

A Greece oriented group of intellectuals (since Gracchus, Horace, Catullus) introduced a humanist approach even in sharing common habits:[18] salacious, sensitive, less compromised in military affairs and public corruptions. It was not a strong radical opposition, but it certainly was the beginning of a new sensibility in conceiving both public and inner spheres of participation. It is not a case that this claim for literature, ethics and equity was well received by the subsequent emerging Christian belief, in the next two centuries, which a series of scholars on many issues not ascribable to an orthodox religious perspective, but forerunners of some aspects later defended even from a Christian point of view (forgiveness, hospitality, humility).[19] A different conception of conviviality was obviously a very part of the process.

If embracing a new religion (considering the revealed attitude of monotheisms we are talking about cults that aim to be the truth, the only real one) means to shape a religious form of community, it is obvious that the rituals of collective eating are not a merely figurative part of this sense of coexistence and faith. In a certain way, the mentioned Greek symposium could even share something in common with the intimacy, the secrecy and the confidentiality of the Christian meal in the period of the assemblies officiated into the catacombs. It obviously was not a political movement, but in its developing stage, the beginning of a collective thought about power was increasingly perceivable,[20] even if a social difference remained: a primarily aristocrat setting in Athens,[21] an interclass phase of evangelization in the early Christian Rome.[22]

In the development of a long-term substantial mechanism like that, many things happened and the Mediterranean area, even meeting different cultures, sometimes explicitly clashing with each other, started to demonstrate a common level of alimentary praxes. A Mediterranean diet, as formally codified or, at least, codifiable, by nutritionists,[23] was not properly univer-

18 Reale, *Il pensiero antico*, 341.

19 Spiazzi, *Cristianesimo e cultura*, 124-125; Sordi, *I cristiani e l'Impero romano*, 194-195.

20 Duplouy, "Pathways to Arcaic Citizenship", 40-41.

21 This aspect is clearly linked to an unsurpassed critique of the elitist conception of the political constitution in the *polis* (a common juridical field between citizens, admitting slavery and treating in a different way the foreigners). This context emerges in a classical reader of the Ancient Greece urban society like Schmitt Pantel, *La Cité au Banquet. Histoire des repas publics dans le cités grecques,* 297-298.

22 Garrison, *Redemptive Almsgiving in Early Christianity*, 15-17.

23 Abenavoli, Procopio, Boccuto, "Nutrition and COVID-19 Pandemic: the case of Mediterranean diet", 648-649.

sally accepted, but a comprehensive scenario of similar food preferences absolutely affirmed its own prevalence.

The space of the law and the role of the traditions: hermeneutical variables and opportunities

This widely used variety was the very first base of a normally considered very recent definitional strategy to identify the Mediterranean diet (the syntagma has reached its recognizable meaning since the late Seventies). Main dishes and more frequent concrete nutritional choices were quite simple, but in a certain way effectively unique: plant-based general usage, a regular consumption of small and fresh fish, a mixture of legumes and more treated carbohydrates, a contained amount of meat (specifically limited to the red one, with a more permissive favor to the other ones).[24] It is not easy to clarify if religious precepts were favorite in their food duties thanks to the general alimentary regime. Dynamics may vary and it is probable that both the elements have influenced each other: the confessional prescriptions in detail described a table of practices changing and modelling everyday consumption of food; on the other hand, those rules were part of a cultural and popular condition where some specific tendencies and preferences were already common, acceptable, and respected.

Religions forced the scenery introducing meticulous food norms, the most of them absolutely not textually in the original religious legal sources.[25] This type of development is predictable, understandable, known, and probably almost totally recognized by scholars (even the legal ones). Legal disciplines on food mean a kind of community where it is fruitful and necessary to apply them and both restrictions and concessions are peculiarly observed by the people because of the importance of food in every single individual and collective aspect of life. Our research does not concern these elements, but we can notice in the described evolution a similarity with legally permitted sexual behaviors.[26]

Many authors have expressed the same question about it: why did religions, born to give humankind immediate prescriptions to preserve the safeguard of the souls, often want to conceive complicated regulations, sharp

24 Abenavoli, MIlic, Peta, Alfieri, De Lorenzo, Bellentani, "Alimentary Regimen in non-alcoholic Fatty Liver Disease: Mediterranean Diet," 16831-16840.

25 Fuccillo, *Il cibo degli Dei*, 70-81.

26 Caputo, *Introduzione allo studio del diritto canonico moderno*, VII; Ferrari, *Status giuridico e orientamento sessuale*, 19-20.

prohibitions, and articulate limits?[27] Was it really the best argumentative and theological strategy to defend the concepts of bliss and beatitude? If we want to retrace a relevant hermeneutical Canon law controversy (with some echoes in both Islamic and Jewish laws),[28] the universal framework of this formulated question consists in the relation between religious salvation and the law. Are the widening of positively recognized rights and the constant stratification of rules allies in reaching the salvation? Is it sustainable that the excess of written rules is an enemy, a contorted and controversial human argumentation very far from the evidence of God, the revelation, and the divine law? Accepting the risk of being too brief and apologetic, a balanced point of reasoning could probably be to admit that the law needs an appropriate level of accuracy, particularly when talking about confessional legal orders, and a superficial sense of obscuring the formal element from the religious practices is not the right strategy.[29] The opposite solution is insufficient, as well: the overproduction of semi-administrative rules is a symptom of bureaucracy, that is to say a secular mentality normally extraneous to the idea of religious belonging.[30]

Religious prescriptions on food and beverage nevertheless evolved not just because we are living a consumerist lifestyle. The current and generally more tolerant and indulgent application is based on a different purpose: the difficulties of a slavish reiteration and the opportunities to put compliance and forgiveness near each other focusing only on the main and the most restrictive bans, usually the most important and the less dispensable ones. We will easily verify that behind this series of theologically founded hard limits, the preservation of already applied traditions stands still, describing in the Mediterranean zone a legal framework, quite hospitable to cultural differences, acceptable conditions of religious freedom, and conservation of food customs.

Between ethics and prohibitions: case studies and some conclusions

Two interesting prohibitions seem to reach a substantial consensus in the experience of organized Abrahamic religions, even considering a partial reconsideration in Catholic theology trough centuries: the ban of pork

27 Jobani, *The Role of Contradictions in Spinoza's Philosophy*, 66-69; Hashemi, *Religious Legal Traditions, International Human Rights Law and Muslim States*, 93-98.

28 Blankenship, *The Divine Law. Religion and Christianity*, 100-102; Hayes, *What's Divine about Divine Law?*, 6-10.

29 Berlingò, *Giustizia e carità nell'economia della Chiesa*, 44-57.

30 Barberini, Canonico, *Elementi essenziali dell'ordinamento canonico*, 100-102.

meat and the idiosyncratic repulsion against the alimentary use of blood. We will primarily consider the Roman Catholic position just because the already faded prohibition still effects somehow the common perception (it does not obligate anymore, but its original scriptural foundations have peculiar projections in religious cultures). Pigs are associated with demons due to a strictly literal interpretation of the gospel referred to the episode of Jesus driving away evil spirits, by moving them in a pig herd thrown from a precipice.[31] That scene probably had a significant role in a basically Jewish audience (a community used to consider pigs with disdain: Jesus is a Jew, his human roots were founded in that context of religious convictions and convections).[32] The ban concerning the use of blood for eating and cooking is even more radical. The scriptural sense probably was about the importance of leaving behind violent revenges, wars, and assassinations. The meaning assumed since the first communities appeared much more literal, and it still shows its consequences in other religions, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses.[33] For them, the scriptural sense was enormously emphasized to disapprove even the blood transfusions – quite strangely, that was a medical procedure ignored at the time of Jesus.[34] As we will soon verify, anyway, both Islamic and Jewish law scholars elaborated an articulate definition of rules to conceive an effective implementation of those limits and prohibitions.

Monotheisms keep a paternalistic view of God, also when they consider him in a position of total domination of humankind. A meat prohibition against both pork and boar, not differently from ritual prescriptions about the sacrifice of the fast (penance, sacred offering to God, health habit), was justified by hygienic motivations: pigs and wild boars snuffle and eat everything, even unhealthy garbage. The inner connection between impurity and blood is clearer in many other hypotheses: Islamic law forbids carnivorous beasts and predator birds, because they eat other living beings, drinking and assuming their blood. Seafood prohibitions are more difficult to correctly understand, uniting elements of superstition, common fear and, however, a permanent attention on a good health religious perspective. The Mediterranean cuisine has probably a partial influence on it, but those bans involve not only extraneous or uncommon kinds of

31 France, *The Gospel of Matthew*, 341-342; Hauw, *The Function of Exorcism Stories in Mark's Gospel*, 47-48.

32 Calimani, *Gesù ebreo*; Melli, *L'ebraicità di Gesù e dei Vangeli*.

33 Knox, *Jehovah's Witnesses and the Secular World*, 234-236.

34 On that often jurisdictional conflict, Dalla Torre, *Lezioni di diritto ecclesiastico*, 68.

seafood (sharks and whales): they extend their efficacy also on typical regional fish such as squids and swordfish. The bond of derivation from the blood somehow survives as it is maintained to discipline the licit use of fish ova (licit, if it is licit the entire fish itself). Fishes have to come out alive from the water – they cannot be "carcasses" – and the type of fishing is normally irrelevant, in part because, especially in the poorest sea areas, these types are various but simple and not predatory. Unsurprisingly, the exegetical debate on the use of shrimps is open: it is the sign of a concretely evolutionary doctrinal confrontation, also on apparently less significant aspects.

Christian bans are now very limited: everyday applications seem already diminishing, less important than it was in the past. Jewish legal schools are more intense about it, in line with the Arab-Islamic sensibilities (their limitations, if they still show a relationship with the Mediterranean regional territories, are often based on customary rules deriving from internal not maritime Middle East zones). This not the priority element of our analysis, but an opportune reference should be made to the long-standing quarrel about the habit of drinking wine: Muslims reject it almost completely,[35] though Eastern European communities sometimes defend the possibility of it,[36] arguing that this use was local long before the Islam proselytism and dominance; moderate legal schools think that a quantity not able to change human mind could abstractly be considered safe; Christians and Jews have overruled the existence of an assumed biblical ban, and they just limit their condemnation to abuses and not ritual preparations. Wine is a symbol of paganism and alteration,[37] but it is a typical Mediterranean product, too: where is the balancing point in the religious obligation of preserving a safe body and a sage mind, as established by the scriptural commandments?

About the meat consumption, Judaism appears more complete, because it recreates an entire table of specific alimentary rules starting from a peculiar licit conception of meat usage. A consistent majority of rabbinic opinions is ongoing in forbidding the hunting game in its entirety. The main impression is a general sense of distrust and disgrace about the hunting activities, though some winged animals are traditionally permitted also due to their substantially easy and frequent attainability (for instance, the goose is not considered a bird of prey). The most demanding task obviously consists not in a formal identification of the kosher food, but in a detailed

35 A graduation of perspectives in Fatoohi, *Abrogation in the Qur'an and Islamic Law*, 100-101.

36 Bringa, *Being Muslim the Bosnian Way*, 246.

37 An overview on the Christian transition in Unwin, *Wine and the Vine*, 142-144.

technique of butchery and slaughter.[38] Ecological tendencies, in the Jewish doctrines, reconnect this attention to a religious oriented approach between humankind and animals, modeled in order to avoid useless cruelties and violent praxes: this progressive interpretation, however, is not always accepted, through the presence of precise rabbinic references.[39]

Jewish cuisine, as much as the previously mentioned Islamic law prohibitions and lately softened Christian ones, is a good litmus test to reveal the adaptive nature of the Mediterranean crossing-cultures food experience: a sapient mixture of the preservation of beliefs and the acceptance of thinner borders between communities. Especially in cities characterized by huge and dating ghettos, food preparations, accounted for the respect of Jewish legal limits, are now part of a wide regional food tradition: universally, not only specifically religiously compatible – that phenomenon is frequent in Tuscany, as well in Rome and Venice.[40]

It is undoubtedly clear that religious prescriptions have had a significant role in increasing the common relevance of confessional orders in everyday life, because they represented the concrete application of theological principles and precepts otherwise destined to disappear, if perceived just as coercive and distant rules.[41] On the other hand, it is true, too, that the exactly opposite dynamics were anyway enforcing the sense of belonging and believing. Nutritional advertisings were easier to be applied, if linked to a universally recognized ethical and healthcare framework. Religious precepts and even more cultural customs stand still much more than the secularization penetrated in confessional legal orders: to survive a warm interpretation of a principle of adaptability is fundamental,[42] in addition to an ongoing Mediterranean inclusive attitude.[43]

Elements linked to food and its subsequent collective practices (not only intending the wealth and health affairs, but also considering specific rituals, modes and trends, continuously evolving and safeguarding a stable orientation) will probably be maintained correctly, according to the incisive research of the historian of religions Paolo Scarpi.[44] In a collection of selected essays, food does not appear as a basic form of union between God

38 Toselli, *Kosher, halal, bio*, 83-84.
39 Tabory, "The Legitimacy of Reform Judaism: the Impact of Israel on the United States", 222-223.
40 Toaff, *Mangiare alla Giudia.*
41 Magrì, *Dal volto alla maschera*, 149-151.
42 Boff, *Faith on the Edge: Religion and Marginalized Existence*, 13.
43 Foxlee, *Albert Camus's The New Mediterranean Culture*, 51-73.
44 Scarpi, *Il senso del cibo.*

and humankind (the nutrition as a grace of God is anyway a very accepted topic in religious exegesis): it reveals its real significance in representing the most effective connection between human beings and the reality surrounding them in everyday life. In its true and even rough co-presence with the most concrete phenomena of life, food usage simultaneously shows more importantly the marker of an always establishing and reinventing community.

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TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF MEDITERRANEAN RESISTANCE: THE SAHRAWI WOMEN'S STRUGGLE

Laura Paulizzi*

Abstract

This communication aims to explore the cultural complexity of the Mediterranean region not so much from a geopolitical perspective, but rather as an open and metaphysically conceived cultural space. This perspective is analyzed through the political and social experience of Sahrawi women in Western Sahara, who have played a leading role in building and administering a democracy founded on steadfast and radical resistance. Firstly, it will emerge how the absence of patriarchal logics has created favorable conditions for this political experience, which took shape with the establishment of the *Union nationale des femmes sahraouies* (UNFS). Secondly, the core principles of this movement will be linked to key aspects of feminist theories that enrich the Mediterranean and global debate, particularly Islamic feminism (Fatima Mernissi et Asma Lamrabet), Ecofeminism (Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies), and Decolonial feminism (drawing from Françoise Vergès' work). Such a comparison allows for a rethinking of concepts such as tradition, no longer as a synonym for immobility, and for a reconsideration of the Mediterranean space in light of cultural intersections and anti-colonial resistances, freeing it from a patriarchal, Eurocentric, and Islamophobic vision.

Keywords: Sahrawi women, feminism, gendered resistance, emancipation, Western Sahara

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Unfolding the Margins: The Mediterranean as a Critical Space

The most fruitful Braudelian legacy in the study of the Mediterranean space lies in the critiques it has provoked. It is, in fact, in response to that approach—totalizing and stretched across the *longue durée*—that reflections have emerged capable of interrogating the very epistemology of Mediterranean history, freeing it from unitary, Eurocentric, and unilateral visions. The Mediterranean is thus reinterpreted through the lens of its discontinuity and plurality, rejecting any ideological form of historical regionalization.[2] In line with the radical rereading offered by Iain Chambers, the Mediterranean we begin from is a "critical space, a site of interrogations and unsuspected maps of meaning,"[3] a narrative device told through marginalized voices, like those of the Sahrawi people. This article, by focusing on a social minority such as the Sahrawi people, also serves as a critique of the ways in which knowledge is preserved and transmitted. Crucial, in this regard, is the reflection of Paul Ricoeur who, in dialogue with postcolonial perspectives, questions how historical memory and narrative are constructed, and who holds the power to tell history. In *Memory, History, Forgetting,*[4] Ricoeur warns against the risk of a historical narrative dominated by official, selective memories that serve the interests of power. In dominant historiography, history tends to be reduced to institutionalized collective memory, without adequately addressing silences, omissions, and absences. Even Braudel, despite the merit of proposing a global reading of the Mediterranean, ends up—according to Ricoeur—flattening the complexity of local conflicts and histories, offering a narrative centered on the European point of view and marginalizing non-Western sources.

2 This ideological dimension has been problematized in the collective volume *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, which offers a systematic critique of the very idea of the Mediterranean as a "natural" category. The borders and regional categories are not given by nature but are the result of political decisions, ideological conflicts, and practices of inclusion and exclusion that have shaped the perception and reality of the region. See William V. Harris, ed., *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010.

3 Iain Chambers, *Mediterranean Crossings: The Politics of an Interrupted Modernity,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2008, 34; See also *Postcolonial Interruptions, Unauthorised Modernities,* London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2017, where Chambers further develops the discourse on interrupted modernity, demonstrating how the Mediterranean, as a critical space, challenges the linear temporality of Western modernity and reveals its internal contradictions.

4 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, history, forgetting*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.

It is, to use Jack Goody's words, a "theft of history"[5]—the kind carried out by certain historical narratives that, while seemingly embracing global perspectives, continue to ignore the role of non-Western societies, reducing the plurality of cultural exchanges to a Eurocentric hegemonic view. The sacrifice of the particular in favor of a universal flattening leaves out the more complex and localized dynamics which, despite their apparent marginality, have been fundamental in shaping the region. Ricoeur's and Goody's studies appear to contribute to the development of a "situated knowledge," a concept that would be further elaborated by Donna Haraway in the context of post-structuralist feminism in the 1980s and 1990s. This concept advocates for knowledge rooted in the partiality and position of the knowing subject, as opposed to the illusion of objective and universal knowledge. It is also particularly interesting to consider these critiques from a methodological standpoint, as they challenge central conceptual pairs—such as abstraction and concreteness, universal and particular—which, if reconfigured in dialectical rather than oppositional terms, offer a way to overcome a binary view of the Mediterranean space.

In recent decades, a significant portion of critical reflection on Mediterranean studies has questioned the dominant approach for its systematic exclusion of female subjectivities, gender relations, and everyday practices, Julia Clancy-Smith,[6] for example, investigates the cross-border movements and experiences of women, workers, and minority religious communities within the Mediterranean and colonial context. Her perspective is heavily influenced by the theoretical approach developed by Joan Wallach Scott,[7] who has emphasized how the category of gender is not merely an analytical tool, but a real epistemological and political structure that shapes historical production, influencing what is remembered, how it is narrated, and who is considered the subject of history. These studies deconstruct the vision of the Mediterranean as a unified and harmonious world, emphasizing the gender and power asymmetries that define the region. They challenge the construction of a masculine and patriarchal Mediterranean, which excludes female voices and marginalized knowledge.

5 Jack Goody, *The Theft of History,* New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012.
6 Julia Clancy-Smith, *Mediterraneans.*
7 Joan Wallach Scott, *Gender and the Politics of History,* New York: Columbia University Press, 1988.

A Sahrawi Genealogy of Gendered Resistance

The present investigation is part of the broader field of Mediterranean studies, distinguished by a philosophical-speculative approach. Specifically, it follows the research initiated in 2017 by the group *Filosofia in Movimento,*[8] where the Mediterranean is considered a "non-place" in constant flux, animated by a shared critical thought that emerges from the heterogeneous dialectic of cultures inhabiting the basin.[9] The philosophical perspective here is enriched by a gendered reading that positions the Western Sahara as a privileged terrain for investigation. The Sahara, in fact, plays a crucial role in the construction of the Mediterranean space, sharing with it both contradictions and a hybrid character: while it can be seen as a divisive barrier, it also serves as a vital place of transit and cultural bridge. Rethinking the Sahara in this way also entails deconstructing the image of the Mediterranean as a space of conflict and death, an image often perpetuated by populist and fascist political propaganda that fuels anti-migratory and xenophobic ideologies.

In this context, the Sahrawi people emerge as a political and cultural subject that inhabits and redefines this liminal space, transforming it into a place of symbolic elaboration and concrete resistance. The concepts of resistance and anti-colonialism, central to this collective identity, provide a lens through which to rethink not only feminism as a universal value in its heterogeneity and plurality, but also the very concept of the "universal." This is no longer understood as an abstract and totalizing category of Eurocentric origin, but as a movement of thought, open to the coexistence of differences.[10]

8 https://filosofiainmovimento.it/

9 This international research group has devoted several papers to this topic, see in particular: Antonio Cecere, Antonio Coratti, eds., *Lumi sul Mediterraneo: politica, diritto e religione tra le due sponde del Mediterraneo,* Milano: Mimesis Jouvence, 2019; Antonio Cecere, Laura Paulizzi, eds., *Utopia e critica nel Mediterraneo,* Milano: Mimesis Jouvence, 2021; *Giornale di Filosofia*, vol. 1, no. 1 (2021), *Mediterranean Enlightenment,* https://mimesisjournals.com/ojs/index.php/giornale-filosofia/issue/view/91.

10 This perspective is in the groove of postcolonial and decolonial thought, as suggested by Walter Mignolo, who has critiqued Western universalism as a geopolitical device of epistemic exclusion, and by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, who highlighted how subaltern voices are systematically marginalized by the theoretical canons of the West. See Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity,* Durham: Duke University Press, 2011 and *The Idea of Latin America,* Malden: Blackwell Pub., 2005; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak *Can the subaltern speak?: reflections on the history of an idea,* New York: Columbia University Press, 2010, see also *A critique of postcolonial reason: toward a history of the vanishing present,* Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1999.

To fully understand the meaning of this reflection, it is essential to trace, even briefly, the history of the Sahrawi people, an emblematic story of marginalization and struggle that reveals the deep contradictions of modern political and legal categories. Often referred to as "Africa's last colony,"[11] the Sahrawi people are at the center of a forgotten conflict, victims of prolonged occupation and systematic cultural and political erasure. Their history is one of dispossession and exile, but also of tenacious resistance, which has expressed itself over time not only through armed struggle but also through an extraordinary capacity for social and institutional organization.

The creation of the Polisario Front in 1973 marked the beginning of organized political mobilization for independence from colonial rule. The following year saw the birth of the *Union nationale des femmes sahraouies* (UNFS), representing the intertwining of national liberation and female protagonism in the construction of a resistant collective identity.[12]With Spain's withdrawal in 1975 and the immediate Moroccan occupation of the territory, a conflict emerged that continues to this day. On February 27, 1976, the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (SADR) was proclaimed, in exile and in the complete absence of military and financial support, as a political and symbolic act of self-determination.

In 1980, Morocco began the construction of the separation wall, known as the Berm, a fortification over 2,700 km long, littered with anti-personnel mines. Besides being an imposing physical barrier, the Berm serves as a symbol of colonial authoritarianism and the inertia of the international community, which, despite numerous UN resolutions, has never managed to secure a just and lasting solution.[13] The ceasefire signed in 1988 under the aegis of the United Nations was supposed to lead to a referendum on self-determination in 1991, managed by the MINURSO mission (United Nations Mission for the Referendum in Western Sahara). However, due to Morocco's ongoing obstruction and substantial international disinterest, the referendum never took place, and the issue of Western Sahara remains an open wound in international law to this day.

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11 Toby Shelley thus defines Western Sahara by analyzing its geopolitical dynamics in depth, see *Endgame in the Western Sahara: What Future for Africa's Last Colony?,* London: Zed Books, 2013.

12 Allan Joanna discusses extensively how the Polisario Front has emphasized women's prominence in the construction of Sahrawi national identity: see "Imagining Saharawi Women: The Question of Gender in POLISARIO Discourse" in *The Journal of North African Studies,* 15, no. 4 (2010): 377–392.

13 This passage is discussed extensively by Stephen, Zunes and Jacob Mundy, *Western Sahara: War, Nationalism, and Conflict Irresolution,* New York: Syracuse University Press, Syracuse, 2022.

According to Embarka Hamoudi Hamdi,[14] the history of the Sahrawi people can be understood through three basic phases. The first, from 1976 to 1979, is marked by the stabilization of the refugee camps, where the Sahrawi community faced forced exile and the challenge of survival. The second phase, from 1979 to 1990, is characterized by the empowerment of women, who played a central role in the resistance and the reconstruction of the community. Finally, from 1991 to the present day, we observe the return of men and social reorganization, a complex process that continues to evolve in response to the political difficulties and daily challenges of the struggle for self-determination.

The story of the Sahrawi people also fits within an international legal framework that legitimizes their cause. The *African Charter on Human and Peoples' Rights*[15] (1981) enshrines fundamental rights that resonate deeply with the identity of this people, such as the right to self-determination and liberation for oppressed peoples. It serves as a testament to resistance against occupation and identity-building, intrinsically linked to a broader international commitment to human rights and decolonization, as evidenced by the Charter's principles of freedom, equality, justice, and dignity. This legal instrument establishes, among other things, a commitment to eliminate all forms of colonialism in Africa and to promote international cooperation.

In particular, Article 12 of the Charter guarantees every individual the right to choose the state in which they reside, the right to leave it, and the right to return, as well as the right to asylum in case of persecution. Article 19, which recognizes the rights of peoples, and particularly Article 20, form the heart of this battle. Article 20(2) states that colonized or oppressed peoples have the right to free themselves from their condition of domination using all means recognized by the international community. Furthermore, Article 20(3) enshrines the right of peoples to international solidarity, declaring that all peoples have the right to receive assistance from the member states of the Charter in their struggle for liberation against foreign domination, whether political, economic, or cultural.

Morocco's systematic violations of the Sahrawi people's rights are not only a serious affront to international legality but also a clear example of

14 Hamoudi Hamdi, Embarka, "Las mujeres saharauis 30 años después" in *Trabajadores de la Enseñanza CCOO*, 271, 2006, 8-9. Reference also present in the study of Enrique Bengochea Tirado, "La movilización nacionalista saharaui y las mujeres durante el último periodo colonial español" in *Revista Historia Autónoma* 3 (2013): 113–128.

15 Fully available here: https://au.int/fr/treaties/charte-africaine-des-droits-de-lhomme-et-des-peuples.

the global community's political inertia. This inertia is particularly evident when confronted with the vitality of the Sahrawi resistance, which does not end with the defense of territory but expresses itself above all as a struggle for dignity and fundamental rights. The Sahrawi question transcends the simple geopolitical context: it is a claim for historical justice, a concept intertwined with philosophical reflections on decolonization.

Indeed, Frantz Fanon[16] had already strongly denounced how occupation is not merely a matter of economic exploitation but represents an act of cultural and psychological violence capable of undermining the entire social order of the colonized people. This analysis found an important reworking in Achille Mbembe's philosophy of decolonization. In *On the Postcolony,*[17] Mbembe demonstrates how colonial domination is mainly exercised through the internalization of a symbolic hierarchy that permeates cultural, affective, and cognitive structures. His reflection enables us to understand the occupation of Western Sahara as an act of systemic violence that extends far beyond the control of territory: it operates deep within subjectivity, making Sahrawi resistance not only political but also ontological and epistemological.

The violation of Sahrawis' rights, therefore, goes far beyond mere control of resources; it is symbolic of a violent and patriarchal imposition that lacks even a convincing economic justification, and thus takes on significant philosophical meaning. The fact that the costs of occupation outweigh the economic benefits of exploiting local resources makes it clear that every war, occupation, or form of colonization is never solely a material matter. On the contrary, it is always an exercise of power aimed at imposing a symbolic and political order: denying autonomy, silencing difference, and repressing subjectivities that resist. This manipulative narrative is also legitimized by the support of powers such as France and the United States for the Moroccan regime, support that helps reinforce the imperial logic hiding behind supposed economic rationalities and feeds an oppressive system that reduces the Sahrawi people to a condition of invisibility.

Rather than being based on a vision of decolonization as mere liberation from a colonial power or a return to an original state, this study takes resistance as a central and constitutive category. The experience of the Sahrawi people, in this sense, represents a privileged vantage point for thinking about resistance not as a passive reaction or nostalgic recovery of the past, but as an active

16 Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth,* New York: Grove Press, 2004, 10.

17 Achille Mbembe, *On the Postcolony,* Berkeley*:* University of California Press, 2001, 79.

practice of liberation. Resistance, in fact, is itself a process of decolonization: it not only opposes colonial domination, but it opens up new spaces for political and cultural subjectivation, producing continuous transformations of identity.

From this perspective, it makes no sense to speak only of liberation from external domination, since colonization, even once formally concluded, continues to act deep within the social body, leaving persistent traces in mental and relational structures and cultural codes. What is really at stake lies in defusing those invisible sedimentations of colonial power that continue to operate in everyday life. Precisely because colonial trauma does not disappear with the departure of the colonizer, but survives as a historical and psychological memory, a profound political and cultural work is necessary, which only the creative and transformative action of resistance is capable of activating.

This leads to a reflection on the experience of the Sahrawi people, who are distinguished by their ability to oppose not only external colonial domination but also the risk of 'internal colonization' of their social and cultural structures. Its history, marked by dispossession, resistance, and the struggle for self-determination, is configured as a complex process, in which a decisive role is played by a dimension that is often marginalized in political-military narratives: female and feminist resistance, which constitutes its essence. In this context, the figure of the Sahrawi woman does not merely represent a reaction to repression but embodies the transformative resistance of a people that renews itself through critical thinking and the production of new meanings. Female and feminist activism not only redefines the modalities of the struggle for self-determination but also affirms the collective capacity to elaborate new paradigms of justice, rights, and freedom.

Such a process, however, has not been without contradictions. The transformation of women's roles within the Sahrawi struggle has been intertwined with broader political tensions that have run through the movement. The democratization of the Polisario Front was the result of long and difficult internal processes of contestation and reform. The uprisings of 1988-89, in particular, were crucial in redefining the collective management of power and in reconfiguring the active presence of women within political and social structures. According to scholar E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, the Polisario strategically reduced its emphasis on Islam and traditional cultural practices in order to attract international support.[18] However, in-

18 In particular, she pointed out that, in the contemporary geopolitical context marked by concerns about Islamism and terrorism in North Africa, the Polisario has promoted an image of 'religious tolerance' and 'secularism' in its interactions with various non-Sahrawi interlocutors, aiming to present the Sahrawi camps as ideal

terpreting this choice solely as an opportunistic strategy entails a biased analysis, which risks falling into a typical Western-centric perspective that reduces the complexity of the Sahrawi political vision. Even before the foundation of the Polisario Front, the Sahrawi people had developed a social structure that, in many respects, can be defined as matriarchal. The valorization of the female figure was a constant in community organization: women were not only responsible for the day-to-day running of the camps and the education of their children but also played a central role in the transmission of knowledge, in the cohesion of the social fabric, and in collective decision-making.

The Polisario Front represents a form of political organization that, from its origins, has embodied an anti-patriarchal model of civil society, opposing traditional tribal structures and actively promoting women's participation in all spheres of society. In this new political space, women have assumed a central role not only in armed struggle but also in defining an alternative vision of community and justice. A concrete testimony to this political approach is the founding in 1974 of the *Union Nationale des Femmes Sahraouies* (UNFS),[19] whose activities are articulated on several levels: from direct mobilization and political training to the occupation and creation of spaces—both physical and symbolic—of daily resistance in the refugee camps and institutions of the Sahrawi Arab Democratic Republic (RASD).

We come to the core of the proposed thesis. The feminism of Sahrawi resistance is not a consequence of the political process, but rather the sine qua non of its success. Without the protagonism of women—without the assertion of a social model that rejects patriarchy—the Sahrawi resistance would not have been effective. The rejection of patriarchy, intrinsic to the Sahrawi vision, is a prerequisite for the success of the struggle, not a re-

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spaces of interfaith coexistence. See: Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena, "The Pragmatics of Performance: Putting 'Faith' in Aid in the Sahrawi Refugee Camps" in *Journal of Refugee Studies,* 24, no. 3 (2011): 533–547, 535; her book *The Ideal Refugees: Gender, Islam and the Sahrawi Politics of Survival,* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2014, represents one of the most comprehensive and theoretically articulate studies on the experience of Sahrawi women in the Tindouf refugee camps. The author analyzes in depth the central role assumed by women not only in the management of daily life, but also in the political, cultural and symbolic construction of the Sahrawi nation in exile. The study highlights how women were presented – internally and internationally – as "ideal refugees," becoming key figures in the narrative of resistance and in the elaboration of a collective identity capable of combining emancipation, Islam and anticolonial struggle.

19 The official website can be accessed at: https://www.arso.org/UNFS-1.htm.

sult of it. Dolores Juliano[20] highlights how, unlike other Islamic nationalist movements, Sahrawi women have not separated the struggle for gender equality from the fight for political independence. Sahrawi feminism does not merely claim equality but pursues collective emancipation that includes the liberation of the entire people. Here, gender claims are not the ultimate goal, but a means to emancipation: women's rights are inseparable from political independence.

It is precisely this that makes Sahrawi resistance not merely a reactive response to external colonial power, but a process of radical transformation, resulting in the recreation of meanings, values, and relationships, including those of gender. This recreation was made possible by the condition of exile, which profoundly redefined the political and social organization of the Sahrawi people, and by the reality of the Sahara as a laboratory for concrete utopian social and political rewriting. In this condition of prolonged separation, men—and some women—dedicated themselves to armed struggle, while women assumed the role of administrators of the government, based on a democratic model. Juliano defines this form of women's activism as an "implicit claim,"[21] based on lived practice rather than theoretical elaborations or ideological declarations.

This perspective is particularly relevant because it questions the very concept of tradition, understood in a conservative sense as the custodian of an immovable value or as a closed normative system. In the context of Sahrawi culture, made even more complex by the intersection of Arab, African, and Muslim women's identities, tradition does not merely preserve the status quo, but, in keeping with the paradigm of resistance, becomes a terrain for action and experimentation. This conception of tradition aligns with two timely studies in this regard: on the one hand, Eric Hobsbawm's,[22] who considers tradition an active historical construction, defining it as "invented," often intentionally formulated to provide symbolic continuity in moments of discontinuity, crisis, or redefinition of identity; on the other,

20 Dolores Juliano, *La causa saharaui y las mujeres: siempre fuimos tan libres,* Barcelona: Icaria, 1998.

21 Dolores Juliano, "Género, cooperación y cultura en los campamentos saharauis: una reivindicación implícita" in *África diversa: estudios y testimonios sobre realidades africanas*, Raquel Sebastián and Aída Bueno, eds, Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata, 2009, 111–127.

22 Eric Hobsbawm, "Introduction: Inventing Traditions" in *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger eds., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983, 1–14.

Stuart Hall's,[23] who emphasizes that cultural identity is never a stable or natural essence, but a process of articulation and re-inscription that occurs in specific historical and political contexts.

In a global context that frequently reduces questions of identity and tradition to xenophobic weapons, the complexity of the Sahrawi experience stands as a valuable model for initiating political dialogue and enriching the contemporary anti-colonial debate.

Decolonizing Feminism: Challenging Universal Models of Emancipation

The feminist experience of the Sahrawi people is a political and social praxis that precedes any theorization, resisting crystallization into a universal model. However, an analysis of some of its specificities opens the door to a dialogue with feminist movements that transcend the dominant paradigm, helping to deconstruct the very concept of universality—or rather, its hegemonic claim as formulated by some Euro-Western feminist theories. This model, while presenting itself as inclusive, often excludes black, Arab, indigenous, and Global South female subjectivities, as though the only legitimate form of emancipation were that elaborated in a Western context.[24] The imposition of a universal model of female emancipation reinforces the very colonial narrative that many feminisms claim to deconstruct. As Chandra Talpade Mohanty has pointed out, the representation of women in the so-called Third World as passive subjects to be 'liberated'[25] reproduces a colonial logic within feminist discourse itself. In this way, 'gender coloniality' becomes an integral part of the colonial project, imposing sexual categories and gender roles according to Western models.[26] Donna Haraway's reflections[27] marked a turning point, rejecting any claim to universal objectivity and instead affirming the notion of "situated knowl-

23 Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora" in *Identity: Community, Culture, Difference*, Jonathan Rutherford ed., London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1990, 222–237.

24 Bell hooks had already emphasized the importance of recognizing the intersectionality of race, class, and gender, critiquing a feminism that marginalizes Black and poor women in its theoretical and political discourses. See the important contribution *Ain't I a woman: black women and feminism,* London, Routledge, 2015.

25 Chandra Talpade Mohanty, "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses," *boundary 2,* 12, no. 3 (1984): 333–358, 353.

26 Maria Lugones, "The Coloniality of Gender," in *Worlds & Knowledges Otherwise* 2 (Spring 2008): 1–17.

27 Donna Haraway, *Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,* College Park, Md: Feminist Studies, 1988.

edge"—knowledge that arises from concrete, embodied, often marginalized positions, which, precisely for this reason, carry essential political and epistemological truths.

Criticism of a universalist model of female emancipation is a hallmark of Islamic feminism, which, in line with the liberal reading of the Koran undertaken by Sahrawi women, is rooted in a radical critique of the patriarchal interpretation of the sacred text. As Fatima Mernissi[28] pointed out, and later echoed by Asma Lamrabet,[29] it is not the content of the Koran itself that is chauvinistic and misogynistic, but the historical interpretations shaped within contexts dominated by patriarchal power structures. By unmasking the distortions introduced by centuries of male exegesis, one can recover an original message of justice and equity, consistent with the spiritual principles of Islam. From this perspective, the rereading of the sacred text is not only a religious act, but also a political action that challenges cultural hegemony and offers a concrete alternative to the universalist and Eurocentric narrative of women's emancipation.

The second point of comparison is with ecofeminism, which, like Islamic feminism, emerged as a critique of a universalist and dominant model. Developed by thinkers such as Vandana Shiva and Maria Mies, ecofeminist theory denounces the structural intertwining of patriarchy and capitalism, illustrating how the exploitation of women and nature are expressions of the same logic of domination. In their joint work *Ecofeminism*, Shiva and Mies argue that the Western development model—based on extraction, unlimited growth, and the commodification of life—is built on the denial of local knowledge and practices, particularly those related to care, reproduction, and sustainability.[30]

In the Sahrawi context, this perspective finds concrete expression in everyday practices that challenge the colonial paradigm of 'development' and foster community-based self-management. Forced exile and the desertification of the territory have made Sahrawi women key players in strategies of environmental and social resilience, rooted in relationships

28 Fatima Mernissi, *Islam and Democracy. Fear of the Modern World,* New York: Baisc Books, 2002; *The veil and the male elite:a feminist interpretation of women's rights in Islam,* Cambridge, Mass.: Perseus Books, 1991.

29 Asma Lamrabet, *Women in the Qur'an: An Emancipatory Reading,* Markfield: Square View, 2018; *Women and Men in the Qur'ān,* Cham, Switzerland: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.

30 In the context of a broader critique of science increasingly detached from politics, the authors also stress the need not to confine the discourse on ecofeminism to a purely academic sphere: see *Ecofeminism,* London: Zed Books, 1993, 43.

of reciprocity and collective resource management. Their central role in the construction and survival of refugee camps, as well as in the distribution of water, and the organization of food and education, demonstrates how caring for the territory—even in extreme conditions—becomes a political act, a form of resistance, and a collective affirmation. As Mies and Shiva argue, care is not an individual, privatized task, but a *lebenspraxis* (life practice) that links the environment, body, and community. In this light, Sahrawi women's knowledge emerges as situated ecopolitical knowledge, capable of offering concrete alternatives to the colonial and capitalist development model.

A third interpretive key frames the Sahrawi experience as a form of epistemic resistance,[31] which aligns closely with the decolonial feminist theories of authors like Françoise Vergès, María Lugones, and Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui. This form of resistance addresses epistemological racism, which, in the aftermath of colonialism, has systematically excluded or subordinated the knowledge produced by indigenous, black, and subaltern women. This strand of thought rejects the hegemonic narrative of Eurocentric feminism and advocates for epistemic pluralism, grounded in the lived experiences and historical and geographical positioning of subjects.[32] The legacy of colonialism is further perpetuated through a 'civilizing feminism' that seeks to impose models of emancipation developed in the global North.[33] In this light, the Sahrawi struggle exemplifies epistemic resistance, producing political knowledge and transformative practices from a position of structural marginality.

Ecofeminist and decolonial reflections closely intersect, as both reveal a convergent structure of exclusion: what does not conform to the dominant (Western, male, capitalist) rationality is deemed inferior or irrelevant, both cognitively and socioeconomically. The knowledge produced by women on the margins of the world-system—black, indigenous, Arab, Muslim, from the global South—has been systematically excluded from the dominant circuits of knowledge production. Similarly, the work traditionally associ-

31 Mignolo uses the term epistemic disobedience, emphasizing the importance of recognizing and valuing local and indigenous epistemologies as legitimate forms of knowledge, in opposition to the universalist claims of Western epistemologies. See "Epistemic Disobedience and the Decolonial Option: A Manifesto" in *Transmodernity*, no. 1(2) (2011), 44-66.

32 See María Lugones, "Heterosexualism and the Colonial/Modern Gender System" in *Hypatia* 22, no. 1 (2007): 186–209; Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, "The Notion of 'Rights' and the Paradoxes of Postcolonial Modernity: Indigenous Peoples and Women in Bolivia" in *Qui Parle*, 18, no. 2 (2010): 29–54.

33 Françoise Vergès, *A Decolonial Feminism,* London: Pluto Press, 2020.

ated with women—care, social reproduction, community organization—as well as that of nature—regeneration, balance, sustenance—are regarded as passive or unproductive, as they do not conform to capitalist logic.

The points of reflection emerging from the comparison between Sahrawi resistance and anti-colonial feminist theories are multiple, offering various angles to address women's emancipation from a perspective that challenges dominant structures of oppression. One crucial aspect to explore is the critique of the logic of *rattrapage*—the idea that the Global South must 'catch up' with the Global North. This narrative not only justifies inequality but perpetuates a vision of domination that dismisses local and indigenous alternatives. This critique is closely linked to discussions on demographic policies, often constructed without considering the actual needs of communities. The myth of overpopulation and racialized policies targeting the birthrate of poor women reflect a patriarchal view of society that sustains structural inequalities. Presented as solutions to poverty or environmental crises, these policies are ultimately instruments of control, disproportionately affecting women from subaltern classes and former colonies. Such policies reinforce patriarchal power structures by focusing on the female body, while neglecting the education and responsibility of men. The regulation of subaltern populations, therefore, is filtered through the centrality of the female body, reduced to a mere resource to be controlled.

The importance of engaging with different feminist theories lies, among other things, in their ability to represent diverse perspectives, shaped by heterogeneous geographical and cultural contexts that cross the divides between North and South, East and West. This pluralism enables them to articulate a complex critique of global forms of domination, shedding light on how oppressive dynamics manifest in differentiated yet interconnected ways. Their dialogue, even if implicit, contributes to constructing a theoretical framework in which the Sahrawi experience is not viewed as an exception, but rather as a paradigm of resistance that transcends Eurocentric narratives, recognizing the plurality of emancipation experiences in the Mediterranean and beyond.

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BOOK REVIEWS

Digestible Governance. Gastrocracy and Spanish Foodways. Eugenia Afinoguénova, Lara Anderson, Rebecca Ingram. Nashville: Vanderbilt University Press, 2024, ISBN: 978-0-8265-0708-2. pp.318.

This exceedingly well-researched volume contains a collection of chapters that connect governance to foodways (the sourcing, preparation, distribution, and consumption of food) in Spain. Specifically, the editors use Spanish philosopher Fernando Savater's term "gastrocracy" not only to examine power dynamics in relation to foodways, but also to understand questions of identity in its many facets: gender, class, religion, race, and cultural differences. This is achieved by relying on the work of scholars from multiple areas of study as contributors to the volume: historians, anthropologists, contributors from in the multifaceted fields of Spanish Studies, Catalan Studies, Hispanic and Latin American Studies and in the field of economics and social history, and those working in Sephardic culture and literature and Ladino Studies.

Grounded in a Cultural Studies approach, the editors use Henri Lefebvre's ideas of everyday life to think about possibilities for food (and all the discourses surrounding it) to be mobilized as a form of resistance, and Michel Foucault's concept of biopolitics, which looks at how official institutions exert control over the body. The compelling work of Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson about "food talk" which serves to "craft identities and construct social worlds" is an effective frame for the chapters in the volume, as is that of Hannah Arendt on labor, work, and action, as the editors explicitly mention their wish to recognize the foodways-related contributions of women and other minoritized populations (6).

The introduction to the volume details the history of how women's importance in crafting national discourses was largely ignored in late 19th century Spain since male intellectuals controlled the narratives in works like the first gastronomic treaty, *Letters Exchanged between the Dining Room and the Kitchen* (José de Castro y Serrano and Mariano Pardo de Figueroa), published in 1877 (7). This treaty emphasized highlighting regional cuisines to create a national food culture to educate citizens and expose them to diverse recipes.

Appreciating the uniqueness of regional cuisines was overtaken by a desire to create a national food culture during both the Primo de Rivera and Franco regimes. The Franco dictatorship's failed experiment with autarky to produce a national food culture gave way to ending autarky in the late 1950s and early 1960s, when the government's focus on the tourism

industry opened possibilities for innovative ways to sell Spanish food to new audiences.

During the later years of the dictatorship and the transition to democracy, regional cuisines would be celebrated again, as evidenced in numerous texts mentioned by the editors. They consider the pertinent work of Germán Labrador Méndez about the transition to democracy and the connections between gastronomies, social engineering, and governance in relation to peripheral regions such as Catalonia and the Basque Country, areas that have utilized cuisine to mark difference before and after the transition (8). In the post-1975 era, both these regions have harnessed their culinary heritage, either through promoting *Catalanidad* via the Generalitat de Catalunya (see Mercer and Song) or via initiatives like Euskadi Gastronomika in the Basque Country.

Immigration to Spain has altered foodways, although this is not always recognized in hegemonic narratives of 21st century Spain such as the work of Manuel Vázquez Montalbán. Rather, emphasis has been placed on diversity within the country's 17 autonomous communities. However, the editors do well in pointing out that "racialized Spaniards" (*personas racializadas,* as they are known in Spain) like writers Chenta Tsai Tseng (Putochinomaricón) and Quan Zhou Wu (author of *Gazpacho agridulce* and other texts) mobilize food metaphors in their autobiographical work to critique dominant narratives and celebrate their diverse identities. This relates to Elizabeth Zanoni's ideas about the "movement of people and foods" being "deeply intertwined and critical to understanding nation-building, globalization, and the formation of migrant marketplaces" (9). Despite their contributions to the latter, the editors point out that migrants and racialized Spaniards are too often marginalized due to their socioeconomic conditions. Afinoguénova, Anderson and Ingram thus invite more research on acculturation, hybridity, and assimilation of the food and foodways of these groups.

The four sections of the volume are divided into the politics of gastronomy (Part I: Gastropolitics); the ways in which gastronomy articulates identity debates (Part II: Ingestible Identities), the institutions of gastronomy (Part III: Gastrocratic Institutions), and the political resistance channeled through gastronomy (Part IV: Hard to Swallow). While mostly focused on 20th and 21st century Spain, some chapters do reference the country's history dating back to the Middle Ages.

Part I includes three chapters, beginning with "Public Control over Private Trade: Barcelona's Market Hall Food Retailing System" by Montserrat Miller, which traces the way in which Barcelona's city government asserted

authority by controlling both the supply and distribution of food from the medieval, early modern, and modern times, detailing the importance of public market halls in the cityscape that retained their relevance and durability even while other European cities saw their demise, and today, boasting "more markets per capita than any other city in Europe" (47). Their power and continued success in Barcelona is owed to advancing the common good and to the prevalence of women-owned and operated enterprises.

The next chapter, "Regenerating Catalan Cultural Identity" by H. Rosi Song, looks at Ferran Agulló's 1928 cookbook titled *Llibre de la cuina catalana,* detailing how the cookbook's origin is related to loss and nostalgia for an idealized past, and connecting the cookbook to the history of 20th century Catalan nationalist politics, noting how it served to both define a nationalist cuisine and to shape Catalan nationality (*nationalitat catalana*) via its cooking and eating practices (explicitly linked to the landscape) that persist to the present day, cementing the significance of cookbooks as influential texts, which is too often neglected.

"Francoist Food Culture in Post-Authoritarian Spain: Culinary Maps, Centralism and Food Memories," a chapter written by Lara Anderson, considers the persistence of and nostalgia for Franco's gastronomical unification project related to biopolitics, despite the present-day strength of regional food cultures. She examines popular culture manifestations like television shows, culinary maps, royal banquets, Francoist restaurants, and food memories as "acts of remembering," a particularly fascinating part of her analysis, for their power derives from the potency of sensory and bodily memories.

Part II comprises three chapters. "Food Fights: Nativism and Culinary Xenophobia in Europe" by Aitana Guia explores the relationship of xenophobia to migrant cuisines in Spain and other countries like Denmark and France, dubbed "culinary xenophobia." Guia considers the "ideological uses of pork" in areas such as advertising, school lunch menus, and historical city centers, beginning with the importance of who consumed which foods as signifiers of religious identity, dating back to the Christian conquest of Islamic Spain ending in 1492, and continuing into current debates about offering halal school lunches in Spanish public schools. This xenophobia is also seen in opposition to erect Chinese arches in an area with many Chinese-owned businesses in Valencia, Spain.

"*Kashrut* in Spain: Religious Observance, State Tolerance, or Niche Market Entrepreneurship?" by Silvina Schammah Gesser and Susy Gruss examines *kashrut* ("*kosher* food, eating rules, and cooking practices"), a practice of belonging, stemming from religion, channeled through food,

and rooted in Hebrew scriptures. As expressed in 20th and 21st century Spain, applications of *kashrut* represent the "re-initiation of Jewish life in the country" (128). Interestingly, the authors note that Spanish food and wine producers use *kashrut* practices to harness economic gains for other sectors of society—the prohibition of mixing dairy and meat can attract vegans and people who are lactose intolerant, and *kosher* wines from Spain are now exported to the U.S., Israel, France, and the U.K.

"Culinary Conflict or *Convivencia*?: *Halal* Food Practices, Perceptions, and Promotion in Spain" by Jessica Boll provides an excellent complement to the prior two chapters in this section. *Halal,* or permissible in Arabic, references products and behaviors sanctioned by Islamic law. Boll describes the surge in *halal* food products and production in Spain due in part to immigrants, Spanish converts, and Muslim tourists. Despite the myriad benefits of *halal* foods and methods, such products are unfortunately disdained by some sectors due to Islamophobia. However, Boll posits that products like *halal jamón* (made with lamb and beef) connect both a link to the past and a sense of belonging, which are fundamental to culinary identity, ending on a hopeful note that perhaps "*halal* fare in Spain has the potential to bring together historically opposed peoples and practices" (164).

Part III consists of three chapters. "The Institutionalization of the Asturian *Espicha* during the Franco Regime" by Luis Benito García Álvarez explains the state intervention in rituals of tapping alcoholic cider barrels called *espichas*. This valuable chapter, about both a drink and a region not spotlighted enough, traces the changes in the cider industry due to 19th century industrialization and subsequent growth in the cider industry (even serving Asturian communities in the Americas) to the ritualization of cider connected to other social activities and social mobility in the early 20th century. When Franco's dictatorship limited "rights of assembly, demonstration, and association," the rituals around cider consumption were altered and subsequently institutionalized by civic associations and government entities instead of private business owners (180; 185).

"Cava's Place" by Bob Davidson offers an engaging account of Catalan cava's production and reception, including a recent effort by producers to create a distinctive sparkling wine called Corpinnat, whose identity, unlike cava, is grounded in *terroir*, the complete natural environment in which the wine's production occurs. While cava is often associated with Catalonia since 95% (the vast majority) is produced there, in Penedès, in the rest of Spain, boycotts in the early 2000s against Catalan nationalism promulgated the consumption of non-Catalan cavas. Davidson, thus, connects cava to

ideas of social class, politically motivated boycotts, and territorial identity, elegantly deeming it a "moveable" drink in all these spheres.

"Food, Heritage, and Tourism: On the Uses of Food Heritage and Its Relations with Culture, Politics, and Socioeconomic Development" by F. Xavier Medina focuses on thinking about gastronomy and foodways as ways to construct heritage in Spain, which is ever evolving. Medina argues that language about heritage is connected to identity, and tourism discourses draw upon food heritage for promotion of local products and recipes. Importantly, this chapter touches on gastronomic tourism, which he sees as an area with potential for further research, especially at a time when tourism is both great generator of economic profit and the bane of many people's existence in Spain due to cost-of-living increases and overcrowding that come with over-tourism.

Part IV includes two chapters. "Ideology 'à la Carte': Food Politics in Franco's Spain" by Suzanne Dunai frames gastronomy as a form of soft power, detailing how the Francoist New State's policies influenced everything from home cooking and consumption of food to legislating the food supply. Dunai's analysis of the regime's control of foodways, in both public and private spheres, carves out a place for resistance despite the authoritarian politics of the time: the private life of the home, a space that is not given enough credence for its influence. The author blames autarkic policies that resulted in both scarcity and shortages during the *años de hambre* and "the inconsistency of food policy implemented by the regime" as reasons for unsuccessful imposition of practices surrounding foodways, noting that varying tastes, health, access to food, and differing religious preferences meant that Spaniards were neither as uniform nor as obedient in their production and consumption of foods as the regime may have hoped.

"Creating a 'Land of Charcuterie': Cured Meat Producers, Culinary Marketing, and the Construction of Gastronationalist Discourses in Twentieth-Century Catalonia" by Alejandro J. Gómez del Moral tackles the topic of cured meat, a thread discussed in different ways throughout this volume, noting that "in Catalonia as in the rest of Spain, cured pork is serious business—both in a literal sense, but also in cultural and political terms" (281). Gómez del Moral looks at the Catalonian context, specifically related to self-determination as producers and marketers engage in nation-building through their efforts, concluding that cured meat products and the ways they are marketed can reproduce ideas of an imagined Catalan national community.

An afterword by Carolyn A. Nadeau titled "Future Directions on Food Studies and Politics in Spain Today" is a wonderful '*repostre*'—an unexpected extra dessert served after the initial dessert—to close the volume. Nadeau does well in acknowledging the excellent work accomplished previously by the volume's three editors, which equipped them to expand upon and shepherd more food studies work into being. She also details the broad theoretical strokes and connections between the chapters in this volume, including their attention to the history of food practices connected to "government, private businesses, ethnic and religious groups, and other entities" (296). Other themes she highlights are regional foods and nationalistic discourse, and the power of food "to unite people through a common gastronomic identity" or, contrastingly, to be a "divisive instrument" (299). Nadeau raises several interesting questions based on the chapters in the volume that invite future research, including what the issues raised in the Spanish context might suggest for the larger European framework.

In conclusion, while this collection does mention the gastronomic significance and contributions from Spain's peripheral regions, even including a chapter about Asturias, it is somewhat imbalanced in its coverage of Catalonia, with three chapters out of eleven dedicated to this region. Of course, no volume can cover every aspect of a nation's culinary heritage. Gladly, the editors plan to expand the volume to a version in Spanish, including more attention to the Basque Country, which is largely missing from the present volume despite its centrality in creating culinary narratives, traditions and trends, and hopefully other regions such as Galicia. Undoubtedly, the well-researched contributions in *Digestible Governance* are highly valuable in that they build on work done by the editors and others to bring Spain into the forefront of Food Studies, as it is often wrongly ignored, despite its prominence on the world stage in all things gastronomy.

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Food: The Next Global Transition. Carlos Francisco Echeverría, independently published, 2023. ISBN: 979-8864661185. pp.232.

From environmental threats to malnutrition, current debates around the production and consumption of food are complex and urgent. There is much scholarly and institutional information available, but public under-

standing of the problems and potential solutions around food systems is not always straightforward. The goal of Carlos Francisco Echeverría's recent book, *Food: The Next Global Transition*, is to tackle this issue, and the text offers a clear and engaging way into the vast, scientific world of food, climate change and sustainability.

With a professional background in politics, business and communication, Echeverría is particularly skilful in keeping simple the language and structure of the text and in weaving curious facts into the narrative. From stating that around 20% of the agri-food system's methane emissions originate from rice fields to naming the five countries that host more than 50% of the world's plastic waste, Echeverría sparks curiosity in his readership without overwhelming them with numbers—and this is particularly important, since his focus is on an "interested but not specialised" audience.

Food: The Next Global Transition is divided into two parts with eight chapters each. The first part, entitled "How We Got Here," brings together reflections on the history and current state of our food systems. The second, "The Possible Roads Ahead," highlights strategies and case studies of innovation, research and practice on food and sustainability. This past–present–future approach works well, as illustrated by the two complementary chapters on fishing and oceans (Chapters VII and XIV). Whilst the first of these sets the contemporary scene with discussions on exploitative fishing practices and water pollution, the second emphasises the importance of establishing more marine protected areas and considers the pros and cons of aquaculture.

It is interesting—and helpful—that many of the chapters are structured around ingredients or food groups. Chapters III and IV, for example, take a closer look at popular yet problematic crops: namely, corn (described as cheap and abundant), soybeans (the "nutritional prodigy") and sugar (an "expensive addiction"). Echeverría strikes a good critical balance in articulating economic, cultural and health-related knowledge, although the section on sugar could have been longer to contextualise the sociopolitical impacts of the slave trade in more detail. Corn resurfaces in Chapter XII, alongside information on the production of other grains (such as rice, oats and quinoa), legumes, roots, tubers, and fruit and vegetables. Here, Echeverría succeeds in demonstrating how good practices of water management, agrobiodiversity and integrated multitrophic crops, as well as the consumption of "basic ingredients," can build a strong foundation for sustainable food systems. Other highlights include Chapter V, which uses flour and bread to talk about mechanic progress and loss of nutritional value, and

Chapter XIII, which touches on controversial themes such as palm oil and meat substitutes.

Technology is another strong thread in the book, and Echeverría often exposes the gap between scientific knowledge of transformative practices and the political will to effect change. The chapters in the first section do an excellent job of tracing the genealogies of techniques and tools in modern food production and in explaining how the development of agri-food businesses has taken place. A strong example of this is Chapter VIII, which initially showcases the environmental benefits of preserving certain ingredients and ends by presenting convincing problematisations of plastic packaging and ultra-processed food. Chapter VI, which explores the consumption of meat and animal products, also has an interesting section on refrigeration, and Chapter II makes a very strong case against the privatization of seeds and genetic material. In the second half of the book, discussions around greenwashing (Chapter IX) and genetically modified organisms (Chapter X) are particularly timely. They demonstrate the importance of thinking about food under economic and political prisms and deserved to be fleshed out in more detail.

While the author claims to have adopted a global approach to his research, and includes interesting examples from Latin America and Asia, the book feels very much focused on a readership in the Global North. Echeverría makes a case for this by stating that "the agri-food transition in European nations and the United States is decisive due to their material and cultural influence worldwide." However, at times, the book relies heavily on references from Spain and the US, and it would have been productive to include more scholarly perspectives from different geographical contexts. A similar point can be made about the articulation of dominant narratives within the book. In Chapter XV, for example, the author delves into gastronomy and how chefs are engaging with sustainability. However, with the exception of the *Gastromotiva* project in Brazil, which has a clear focus on marginalized communities, the examples selected by Echeverría are drawn from the mainstream. This feels like a missed opportunity to call attention to lesser-known practices of resistance, solidarity and collective action, which might have offered the reader more inspiration to do their part in relation to activism and consumer culture.

However, as the author reminds us throughout the book, learning about and acting on this subject is a continuous process. Despite some problematic generalisations, *Food: The Next Global Transition* is an accessible first step for audiences wanting to find out more about our current food systems

and the opportunities to transform them. May the food for thought it provides continue to encourage more research and practice in this field.

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Mediterranean Flows: People, Ideas, and Objects in Motion. Anna Usacheva, Jörg Ulrich, and Siam Bhayro, eds. Brill Schöningh, 2023. ISBN: 978-3-506-79513-7. pp. 210.

Mediterranean Flows: People, Ideas, and Objects in Motion (2023), edited by Anna Usacheva, Jörg Ulrich, and Siam Bhayro, takes readers on a sort of voyage through time and space by exploring the movement of people, ideas, and objects in the Ancient Mediterranean. Starting with a stimulating introduction written by Emilia Mataix Ferrándiz and Anna Usacheva, followed by nine fascinating chapters, the volume's authors underscore the fixed and fluid elements that fuel cultural identities, so often anchored in texts, things, ideas, people, animals, and boundaries (xi). *Mediterranean Flows* takes an inclusive, multidimensional approach to movement and connectivity in the ancient world, emphasizing how "migration, trade, travelling objects, knowledge exchange and the dissemination of books" (ix) complemented the movement and exchange of animals, plants, and objects throughout the Mediterranean.

Mediterranean Flows opens with Greg Woolf's broad study of mobility, titled "The Roman Mediterranean as a Fluid System." Establishing a conceptual core for all subsequent chapters, Woolf's chapter analyzes "connectivity" with respect to material flows (6), the "flows of living things" (9), and the "flows of information" (13), while examining factors such as the region's political economy, the mapping of networks, and how the Romans characterized their "others," the Barbarians (13). Following this is David Inglis's "The World Flows with Mediterranean Wine: On the Roles of *Mare Nostrum* in Global Wine Dynamics," which challenges the common perception of wine as a product originating in the Mediterranean, disregarding the "multiple globalisations throughout history of the Mediterranean and its wine world" (xv). Inglis traces the process by which wine became "mediterraneanized" and how socioeconomic factors impacted wine's move westward, leading to a normalization of daily wine drinking

(23) and a bridging of the Dionysian and Christian traditions (32), which extended into colonial empires beyond the Mediterranean.

Antti J. Lampinen's "Condemning Mobility: Nativist and Exclusionist Rhetoric in the Second-Century 'Sophistic' Discourse on Human Movement" analyzes "xenophobic anxieties" with respect to population movements though a comparison of Greek and Roman notions of autochthony (53). Lampinen's study is critical for understanding the role of fear and unease regarding human migration within the Roman empire, which often drew from "expressions of nativist or exclusionist rhetoric about immigrants or recently arrived individuals or groups" (47). Building on this is James Gerrard's chapter, *Travelling Brittania*: A Diachronic Perspective on Romano-British Mobility," in which the author analyzes ancient travel narratives beyond the archaeological focus on origins, endpoints, and "cartographic distance," in favor of seeing "travel as an experiential mode" (81). Gerrard analyzes the "social context of travel" (83) by looking at how humans tamed, trained, and rode horses, underscoring the "entanglements of animal, person, materiality and landscape" (90).

Following these initial chapters, the volume transitions from an emphasis on the movement of people, plants, and animals, to the topic of how ideas, words, and texts travelled throughout the Mediterranean region. Pieter B. Hartog's "Reading Acts in Motion: Movement and Glocalisation in the Acts of the Apostles" examines the literary practices and travel narrative element in the Book of Acts. Hartog analyzes "the central role that travel, motion, and mobility play in the Acts of the Apostles" (99) and how the Book of Acts "uses motion as a topos to describe the early Jesus movement as a global, supra-ethnic group in which Judaeans and non-Judaeans come together" (99). The two chapters following Hartog's build on his study through detailed textual, biblical and theological analyses, emphasizing how translations disseminated meanings beyond the local. Sigurvin Lárus Jónsson's "Sabbath as a Temporal Marker in Luke-Acts" analyzes the biblical terminology denoting time and the "motif of urgency and future-oriented eschatological outlook" that was fundamental to the Christian Mission (118). This temporal framing was punctuated by the Sabbath as a narrative device and a marker of "eschatological rest" (xvii), a pause integrally tied to the dissemination, flow, and extension of the Christian Ministry (126). Following Jónsson's study is Samuel Fernández's "Words and Concepts in Motion: Hilary of Poitiers between East and West," a close textual reading of Hilary's Latin translations of Greek technical terminology during the Arian controversy, whose primary weapons were letters, pamphlets, and other documents (129). Hilary's translations of these texts

from Greek to Latin made debates accessible to the Latin-speaking religious leaders of the west, but not without creating some confusion among western bishops.

Emphasizing the interrelation of mobility and ideas are the final two chapters of the volume, Anna Usacheva's "Educational and Ritual Aspects of Reading and Publishing Practices from the Greek Philosophical Schools to Latin Monasticism" and Jessica van't Westeinde's "Miles Make the Mind: Jerome on Travel, Learning, and Knowledge Exchange," which looks at the travels and teachings of the theologian Jerome. Usacheva analyzes how "the practice of reading, publishing, and book circulation encapsulates the concept of motion in both theoretical and material domains" (148). Usacheva focuses on how the textual practices of the philosophical schools dating from the first century BCE became transformed, thanks to the spread of Christianity, into an integral part of the spiritual, exegetical reading practices Christian monastic communities (160). Van't Westeinde builds on the Usacheva's mention of Jerome's work, showing how Jerome used his travels throughout the Roman Empire to expand not only his status, networks, and library, but also to facilitate the dissemination of his writings to prospective patrons and students, on the one hand making "accessible the knowledge and ideas of Greek authors to his Latin audience" (209) and, on the other, casting Jerome as a "prototype and catalyst for the mobile mind" (210).

One interesting element of *Mediterranean Flows* is its relevance to today's world, with several chapters establishing important parallels to contemporary understandings of both immigration and globalization, while noting the destructive impact of dehumanizing practices both then and now. The authors in this extraordinary collection of essays demonstrate the critical importance of approaching the study of the ancient Mediterranean through interdisciplinary and inclusive lenses, through careful and nuanced readings of texts and language, and through an understanding of how the migration of people, ideas, and objects enrich the human experience.

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