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**Singing Truth to Power:
Melodic Resistance and Bodily Revolt in Italy's Rice Fields**

Abstract: This article investigates how the *mondine* negotiated state demands for female bodies to both feed and populate the nation during Italy's Fascist period. Using testimonials and work songs, I rely on the *mondine*'s own words to chronicle their lived experience of field work and the resulting spirit of rebellion that echoed across the rice paddies. I then frame these narratives against the propaganda that attempted to cast the *mondina* as a symbol of productive Fascist womanhood. By emphasizing women workers' accounts of their bodily revolt from labor strikes to inducing abortion, I reveal how the *mondine* sang truth to Fascist power.

Keywords: Fascism, propaganda, women, *mondine*, rice fields, labor, work, agriculture.

Alla mattina, appenaalzata
(coro) O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao
alla mattina appena alzata
in risaia mi tocca andar.

E tra gli insetti e le zanzare
(coro) O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao
un duro lavoro mi tocca a far.
O mamma mia! o che tormento!
(coro) O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao
È così ogni doman!

Il caposquadra col suo bastone
(coro) O bella ciao, bella ciao, bella ciao, ciao, ciao
e noi curve a lavorar.
Ma verrà un giorno che tutte quante
lavoreremo in libertà!
(coro e voce principale, insieme) Ma verrà un giorno che tutte quante
lavoreremo in libertà!

[In the morning just got up
(chorus) Oh bye beautiful, bye beautiful, bye beautiful, bye, bye,
In the morning just awakened
in the rice fields I must go.

And among the insects and the mosquitoes
(chorus) Oh bye beautiful, bye beautiful, bye beautiful, bye, bye,

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A difficult work I must do.
Oh mamma mia! Oh what torment!
(chorus) Oh bye beautiful, bye beautiful, bye beautiful, bye, bye,
And it goes on like this every day.

The overseer with his rod
(chorus) Oh bye beautiful, bye beautiful, bye beautiful, bye, bye,
And us bent over at work.
But a day will come when all of us
will work in liberty!¹
(chorus and lead, together) But a day will come when all of us
will work in liberty!

“Bella ciao” sings the story of one day and every day in the life of the *mondine*, the female rice weeders² annually contracted for forty days of migrant agricultural work in Northern Italy during the 1930s. These song lyrics use an impressionistic, nonlinear temporal framework to highlight the emotionally salient moments of this gendered form of labor. At dawn, the *mondina*, the *bella* of “Bella ciao,” absorbs her family’s anguished goodbye as she departs for the rice fields. By day, she is at work in the field with the other *mondine*, bent over in front of the overseer with his stick (almost a phallic symbol of power and even violence) at their backs. But her emotive focus remains on her faraway family, whose presence pulses through every chorus. Time telescopes, collapsing the emotional wrench of departure into the physical torment of rice weeding, an interminable present of curved spines and hands deep in the water and mud. But in a final push, time shoots forward: the final, collective female “we” cloaks the lead and the chorus, the *mondina* and her family, under a new vision for the future, where the *mondine* will work together in liberty. “Bella ciao” thus condenses three governing themes

¹ Vasco Scansani, *Bella ciao* (Vercellese, written as part of a song competition [*concorso sonoro*] for the Festa della Mondina a San Germano Vercellese, 1952), Italian lyrics cited in Manicardi, *Il coro delle mondine* 37. Although Manicardi cites Scansani, the *bracciante* (laborer) turned songwriter as the author of this text, earlier versions of this song demonstrate that Scansani was by no means the sole author of this song. Manicardi notes, for instance, that Giovanna Daffini added the last section of lyrics to *Bella ciao* in the 1930s. As such, it would be more accurate to say that Scansani was not the author of the song, but rather the first person to transcribe the lyrics for a public forum. CGIL Milan’s digital audio collections possess multiple recorded versions of “Bella ciao.” Similarly, various transcriptions can be found in ethnographic histories such as *La fatica delle donne* and *Senti le rane che cantano*. All of the songs analyzed in this article come from the CGIL and Ente Nazionale Risi repositories. Unless otherwise specified, all translations are my own.

² *Mondina* derives from the verb *mondare*, to clean, or to weed, in an agricultural context. This umbrella term encompassed different forms of field labor related to rice production, such as transplanting the tender young shoots at the beginning of the growing season (Cortelazzo 772).

of women's agricultural labor in the context of Italy's Fascist period: the mutually constitutive formation of women's personal and political identities at collective work sites, the harmonic profusion and diversity of women's voices and concerns, and the primacy of the corporeal in shaping social roles and relations in spaces of food production (the field) and consumption (the home) — three of the interlaced motifs of this article. Specifically, I examine the interplay of working conditions, music creation, and the gendered body within the context of rice production at the national level to demonstrate how state attempts to control gendered work and the goods it produced resulted in numerous points of negotiation between women and the government. Under the Fascist regime, a new emphasis on domestic economy and production required a double sense of women's work, both on and in the body.

But "Bella ciao" also reveals a paradox, borne out by the *mondine's* own words in written and oral testimonials.³ The *risaia* (rice field) constituted a key site for the formation of female identity. Absence of normal social contexts (the family, the parish) and presence of unique social contexts (a near-exclusively female space) pushed working class women to consider their roles at the level of the individual and the group. This exceptional environment provides a case study to examine one specific relationship between the female individual and the Fascist state. Through songs, jokes, dances, and pranks, returning *mondine* instructed new arrivals in a dense local culture of class relations and politics. As such, analyzing the productions of the *risaia* underscores the personal and political significance of women's collectivity in terms of the body and the body politic. The diversity of viewpoints inherent in the choral form of these social productions points to the idea that identity is relational, multivalent, and ever-shifting. And yet a common note rings through each testimony: the *mondine* claimed that labor not only shaped individuals' physical bodies, but also organized the social body into identifiable classes with specific political goals.

The *mondina* song corps taught women to sing truth to power by providing the means to catalogue their difficult labor conditions and to rehearse for political resistance. In the first section of this article, I investigate how the *mondine* successfully used these songs as both collective expressions of culture and as social tools: culture, in that the songs' popularity, persistence, and pervasiveness suggests that they captured common and deeply felt aspects of the *mondine's* work and life; tools in that the *mondine* used them to accomplish a specific goal,

³ These testimonials largely come from the Archivio dei Diari in Pieve Santo Stefano, outside of Arezzo in Tuscany. Because testimonials constitute memories of the past composed in the present, their interpretation requires consideration of the context in which these women recorded their stories. To interpret these materials, I draw on Luisa Passerini's approach: "All memory is valid, the guiding principle should be that all autobiographical memory is true; it is up to the interpreter to discover in what sense, where, how, and for which purpose" (Thomson, Frisch, and Hamilton 34). In the context of the testimonials, I take this historiographic approach to mean that every *mondina's* history blends objective and subjective information. These forms of evidence have different but equal value.

to keep their spirits up even as their bodies flagged. Because these songs derive their creative power from the intersection of the body and the mind, this particular subset of popular Italian music demonstrates how the material conditions of women's labor and the lived experience of the female body affected and reflected women's cultural creations under Fascism.

But what of the relationship between the *mondine* and the regime? In particular, how did the *mondine* negotiate pronatalism (the bearing of numerous children) and autarchy (Italian economic self-sufficiency) through music and metaphor? In this second section, I move from individual *mondine*'s first-hand accounts of physical and emotional work to their collectively authored songs and their symbolic renderings of women's labor.⁴ Testimonial analysis provides specific and concrete examples of the formidable themes intimated through the song corps. Themes of gendered body at work link rhyme to reason: both the songs and testimonials suggest that decisions regarding menstruation, abortion, miscarriage, birth, and breastfeeding emerged as key points of contention between individual women and the regime. The historical specificity of these solos thus underwrites the credibility of the chorus, providing a powerful counter-narrative to the Fascist conceit that the *mondine* happily produced rice and children in service to the nation. Ultimately, the *mondine*'s binary framing of these choices reveals the flaw in the Fascist dream: women could work in the fields or they could have children, but they could not do both at the same time.

Alimentary Autarchy and Pronatalism in Everyday Life

Fascist propaganda rarely addressed the *mondine* directly.⁵ More commonly, the regime spoke to countrywomen (*massaie*) in general, as though women hailing from the northern extremes of Lombardy to the southern reaches of the Mezzogiorno comprised one homogenous group by dint of their common social class.⁶ In an attempt to inspire the *massaie* to support autarchy and pronatalism

⁴ Former *mondine* wrote these testimonials late in life, often in their eighties or nineties. While they recorded their memories for a number of reasons, the vast majority explicitly stated their desire to share their past with their grandchildren. Oftentimes, it is these grandchildren who deemed these personal works "historical" as well as "familial" documents, and donated copies to the Archivio Santo Stefano.

⁵ In line with Forgacs and Gundle, I take propaganda to mean "any communication designed to express the opinions, beliefs, or values of an organized collective group and to persuade others of its truth, or at least of its ideological force" (214).

⁶ Specifically, Benito Mussolini referred to the *mondine* under the broader heading of the *massaie* (countrywomen) or *donne dei campi* (women of the fields). Although the *massaia* can be a countrywoman, the term itself does not indicate geography. Rather, it means every woman (typically a mother or grandmother) in charge of managing household chores. For further information regarding the regime's treatment of rural working-class women and their sociopolitical responses, see Wilson.

through food consumption and production, the covers of cooking magazines like *La cucina italiana* regularly featured photos of women breastfeeding beside quotations from Mussolini's pronatalist speeches.⁷ Inside printed propaganda materials, recipes provided instructions for autarchic cookery.⁸ Recipes prominently featured domestic products and decried foreign imports. They also advocated Italian preparations as patriotic, eschewing French and British preparations. Similarly, *L'almanacco della donna* (a home reference guide) featured photocollages combining images of infants, farm work, nuns, and the Duce with daily work plans to rationalize childcare, animal raising, and home gardening.⁹ As the ideological collisions in these gendered forms of propaganda

⁷ To combat infant mortality among working-class women, the Senate established the National Bureau for the Protection of Maternity and Infancy, known by the Italian acronym O.N.M.I. Originally titled Opera Nazionale Fascista per la Protezione della Maternità e dell'Infanzia, a subsection of law #2277 created this group on December 10, 1925. *La cucina italiana* featured images of breastfeeding both on the cover and throughout the magazine during the Fascist period. This tendency peaked in the late 1930s. See covers of *La cucina italiana*, "Verso la Vita" (August 1937), "La Donna e La Razza" (October 1938), and November 1938 (untitled).

⁸ Delia Notari and Umberto Notari, the co-founders and editors of *La cucina italiana*, enthusiastically supported Fascism, and used the magazine to promote autarchic cooking among middle-class Italian women. Umberto Notari's adherence to Fascist political doctrine appears to have developed in his early 20s, during his collaboration with F. T. Marinetti on the magazine *Poesia*. His enthusiasm for social conservatism in general and Fascist racial policy in particular manifested in many of his publications, from *La donna 'Tipo Tre'* to his signature on *Manifesto della razza* and *Panegirico della razza italiana*.

⁹ Bemporad, a Florence-based publishing company, in connection with *La Donna*, a Rome-based women's magazine, released a total of 24 almanacs from 1920 to 1944. Silvia Bemporad, wife of founding publisher Enrico Bemporad, served as the editor from 1920 to 1936. During this time, her husband regularly sent sample books to the regime, including Italian almanacs. He also sought commercial relations with the Fascist government: in a January 13, 1932 letter, Bemporad offers to supply textbooks to elementary schools in the colonies. Three years hence, Enrico sought protection from the regime as well. A memo from the State Polygraph Institute (Istituto Poligrafo dello Stato), dated April 9, 1935, from the Undersecretariat of the Press (Sottosegretariato Stampa) to Mussolini summarizes his letter. The memo notes that Bemporad's partners (soci) "lo hanno cacciato dall'Azienda" ("chased him out of the business") and that he "invoca un posto di lavoro nel suo campo d'azione dove possa ancora rendersi utile" ("requests a work position in his field where he might still make himself useful"). These behind-the-scenes machinations suggest Enrico Bemporad's increasing dependence on state intervention regarding commercial concerns. Almanac content also replicates this tendency. The 1938 race laws further complicated Bemporad's relationship to the regime. Negative publicity campaigns led by the government denigrated the publishing house for their Jewish leadership, a move that contributed to the firm's pre-existing financial woes and ultimately silencing their editors for the remainder of the Fascist period. See annual memos from Enrico Bemporad to Mussolini (ACS, SPD, CO, b. 509, f. 230). For almanac photo collages referenced here,

suggest, Fascist boards like the National Rice Board (Ente Nazionale Risi) and the Board for the Protection of Motherhood and Childhood (O.N.M.I.) expected women to participate in these projects through the habits of everyday life. In theory, the regime's conservative social politics sought to keep women in the private sphere. But in practice, the success of domestic policies like autarchy and pronatalism depended on women's active participation in public political projects across different social spaces; home, field, factory, and clinic thus provided a series of sites for the daily negotiation of politics between individual women and the regime.

Autarchy took edible form in The (so-called) Battle for Grain, a 10-year propaganda campaign promoting Italy's economic self-sufficiency by convincing women to increase their families' consumption of non-standard grains, such as rice, and to decrease their consumption of pasta and bread.¹⁰ To push rice as a substitute for pasta, the regime established the National Rice Board in January 1928, and established the National Day for Rice Propaganda one month later. Pronatalism, or the increased production of Italian children, might be read as a parallel form of autarchic push. O.N.M.I. produced didactic films, magazines, and pamphlets instructing women in hygienic breastfeeding practices and rational childcare at government obstetric clinics.¹¹ Like autarchy, pronatalism emerged as a guiding principle of domestic policy due to the regime's intense preoccupation with Italy's declining birthrate and its potential implications for Fascism's political dominance at the international level.¹² Both projects thus shared a common goal: to increase different forms of domestic production to increase the nation's autonomy on a global stage. And both identified working-class women's (re)production and field labor as the means to this end.

see Bemporad's *Almanacco della donna italiana 1936*, pp. 5-6 and *Almanacco della donna italiana 1941*, pp. 2-4 (Wolfsonian Collection, Genoa, Italy).

¹⁰ Italy's grain production could not keep pace with domestic consumption. During the early twentieth century, the vast majority of wheat was imported from Turkey (Helstosky 88).

¹¹ Pietro Francisci's didactic films for the Istituto Nazionale LUCE, *La protezione della stirpe* (*The Protection of the Race*, 1933) and *Alle madri d'Italia* (*To the Mothers of Italy*, 1935), exemplify this genre. O.N.M.I.'s monthly periodical *Maternità e infanzia* and pamphlets like Pietro Corsi's *La tutela della maternità e dell'infanzia in Italia* and Attilio Lo Monaco-Aprile's *Protezione della maternità e dell'infanzia* are characteristic of O.N.M.I.'s textual media in their tendency towards paternalistic prescriptions for childcare.

¹² Mussolini's 1927 Ascension Day address emphasized the "'alarming' national decline in rates of marriage and fertility" (Horn 95). Demographic statistics verified regime fears: ISTAT data cited by Carl Ipsen indicates that 35% of all *comuni* experienced a decline in population between the 1911 and 1921 censuses and that "the overall trend was one of decline" (Ipsen 174).

Women's Agricultural Work under Fascism

Migrant agricultural labor implicates questions of social class, as economic necessity typically compels workers to accept the difficult conditions inherent to field work. In the context of the *mondine* working in Fascist Italy, the classed dimensions of rice transplanting and weeding evoked a gendered context as well. Although rural working-class Italian women had historically taken on agricultural work outside the home, they generally did so on a piecemeal basis to augment household income. Rice transplanting and weeding traditions departed from these general working norms in that women planned to participate in the year's *monda* (40-day weeding season) in advance to generate what was often the only liquid capital their families possessed. But convenience alone cannot account for the duration and exclusivity of this peculiar gender breakdown. By the time Mussolini marched on Rome, 80 to 95% of all weeders were women (Zappi 10). National Rice Board propaganda and women's testimonials alike demonstrate that economic concerns account for the predominance of women in the field, but they also suggest that this concern came from the male employers as well as the female workers. Predominant attitudes towards the low relative value of women meant that employers could pay them half or two-thirds as much as they would pay male laborers (*braccianti*) for the same work. The *braccianti* earned 1038 *lire* per year in 1938, at a time when 1 kilogram of rice cost nearly 2 *lire* (ISTAT 1939). For forty days of work at the *monda*, Erminia Confortini recalled being paid 220 *lire*, plus "a few kilograms" of rice (Minardi 29). Ermanna Chiozzi recalled being paid 16 *lire* per day in 1927 (Chiozzi 8). National Rice Board publications offered ad hoc biological arguments for employing women to obscure these economic reasons: they argued that only women had the patience for weeding, that their bodies were lighter and more agile, and the fingers were more delicate, and thus less likely to damage the tender plants. Francesco Pezza, the public health officer of Mortara, went so far as to note that women's flexible backbones naturally suited them for this arduous labor (Zappi 13). Put more broadly, officials like Pezza drew on gendered stereotypes to naturalize occupational gender segregation. Many women bent these arguments to their own purposes, taking pride in their ability to perform work that men could not endure. And yet these same women also seem to recognize the latent justificatory edge of such statements. As Milena Scalabrini recalled, "Nella risaia erano occupate solo le donne perché più brave, svelte, precise, pazienti nel togliere le erbacce e perché venivano pagate meno degli uomini" ("In the rice fields there were only women because [they were] better, faster, precise, patient in pulling the weeds and because they were paid less than men" 1). In the broader context of Italian agricultural labor, the economic necessity of the female presence in the rice fields implicitly contradicted state narratives dictating that a woman's place was in the home. Scalabrini's account speaks to the *mondine*'s awareness of their standing within this larger socioeconomic framework and points to the historical importance of integrating first-person testimonials with state-published accounts.

Cut-and-Paste Consent: The mondine in Fascist Propaganda

In propaganda (Figs. 1-4), the regime celebrated the rice workers as symbols of ideal Italian femininity: robust, florid, rustic, maternal, and working class. Engaged in the twin occupations of producing autarchic staple foods and Italian bodies, they constituted a symbol of gendered hyper-productivity based on and in the female body. But despite the regime's enthusiasm for this particular group of female workers as emblems of a socially conservative national past projected into a hyper-productive future,¹³ the *mondine* rarely reflected a similar admiration for the regime. The vast majority voted Communist: many women recalled carrying red voting cards in their wallets, a colorful if hidden mark of dissent in an era dominated by black, the Fascist voting card color.¹⁴ They did not see Fascism as responsive to their interests, and, indeed, letters and memos between town-level representatives of the National Rice Board and the regime reveal a near-constant state of politicized revolt catalyzed by socioeconomic concerns.¹⁵ Most of these *mondine*'s protests contested the length of the workday, and agitated for better pay. For these women, Leftist politics went hand in hand with their precarious economic status. Many former *mondine* recalled that the older women taught the younger women about politics through songs, explicitly instructing them in international politics and Communist history.¹⁶ Many *mondine* recalled using

¹³ To curry favor with the *mondine*, Mussolini sent regular financial infusions to the Ente Nazionale Risi, earmarked for direct aid to the rice workers. The memo reads, "On the order of the DUCE I send you 10,000 lire for the workers engaged in the next campaign for the weeding and harvest of rice. I would be grateful to you if you would give me the receipt for the sum so that I can order my accounts." This memo, written in the informal *tu* form of address, traveled between two of the highest ranking officials in the Fascist party, from Osvaldo Sebastiani to Achille Starace, indicating the importance that the regime assigned to rice promotion, and to the *mondine* as the means to increase autarchic food production, and ultimately forge new, autarchic foodways based on domestic staple foods. No record exists of how these funds were used, or if they even reached the *mondine* at all. See financial promemorium and record of 10,000 *lire* deposit, Rome, Italy, 1939, in folder *Milano: Ente Nazionale del Riso, Contributi del Duce per l'assistenza alle Mondariso* (ACS, PCM, 1934-1936, b. 509.488, f. 2).

¹⁴ The image of the red versus black card seems to have resonated with many former *mondine*: Antonietta Chierici and Laura Scalabrini repeat this phrasing throughout their testimonies, as do two unnamed *mondine* interviewed in Manicardi.

¹⁵ For a characteristic example, see the 1935-1936 letter and memo exchange between Novarese prefect Aldo Rossini and Benito Mussolini (ACS, PCM, 1934-1936, b. 509.488, f. 2).

¹⁶ The 1909 and 1917 Russian Revolutions appear in many popular *mondine* songs, as do political figures ranging from militant Socialists to the royal House of Savoy, often in the space of a single song. The lyrics of "Giuriam giuriam" "We Swear, We Swear," allude to local political leaders such as the Mayor of Ronsecco and Socialist agitator Camillo Cerrati, a former *bracciante* and rare *mondariso*, as well as to Queen Margherita, King Umberto I,

Fascist song structures and replacing the lyrics with pro-Socialist, Communist, and Anarchist messages. The Fascist hymn *Giovinezza* seems to have been particularly prone to this type of refashioning, often popping up as laments for Socialist politician Giacomo Matteotti, who was assassinated by members of the Fascist secret police in 1924 (Castelli 65). Sometimes, women changed the words of the song to better reflect their personal beliefs. Chierici's mother appears to have done so, as Antonietta recalls the opening to "La Lega" as beginning with the words, "E noi che siamo donne, paura non abbiamo" ("And we who are women, fear we do not have" 16). The common openings contrast women against courage by using a concessive conjunction, typically "sebben che" or "benché," both of which translate to "although." This single word or phrase change serve to reflect Chierici's feminist (in her own words) stance that bravery is constitutive of femininity rather than exceptional or situationally dependent. Other diaries and testimonials from the *mondine* also reveal a gendered dimension to this state of unrest. Writing in retrospect, many characterized their stance against the regime as an intersectional form of feminism deriving from their class-based status as agricultural workers.¹⁷ Chierici's mother, like many other *mondine*, conflated the figure of the *padrone*, and upper-class employers in general, with the Duce. Both bore blame for lauding women's work while paying them half of what male *braccianti* received.

In these visceral terms, the *mondine* seem to have understood how their rice-weeding work fed the Fascist economy. Their words indicate awareness that the regime controlled and regulated the market from the top down.¹⁸ In the specific context of the rural economy, Fascist policies consistently favored landowners over migrant workers, and the land itself over those who labored on it. Political and economic motives meshed: the Fascist party was indebted to the landlords and rich farmers who had provided the money and the arms that cleared their way for victory over left-wing movements in the Italian countryside.¹⁹ As a result of this history, the *mondine* would have felt the heavy hand of the Fascist economy

and their children Vittorio Emanuele and Amedeo of Savoy, and his second wife Maria Letizia Napoleone (Castelli 377-78).

¹⁷ Because many of the *mondine* use and refashion feminist terms dating from later periods to describe these earlier protests, one cannot say with certainty that they envisioned their actions as feminist in the 1930s. But despite the possibility of anachronism, former *mondine* writing in the 1990s and 2000s heavily rely on feminist concepts like "the problem with no name" to make sense of their personal motives during the Fascist period, ultimately underlining the centrality of gender in the construction of political identity.

¹⁸ For an investigation of the Fascist manipulation of the national economy and its effects, see Celli.

¹⁹ See Squeri's study of rural voting records and political payments.

through the regime's suppression of peasant landholding²⁰ and land use (*usi civici*) as well as through the higher taxes that they paid in proportion to their take-home income²¹ and loan-fixing schemes.²² New policies of market standardization and hygiene favored large estates over small farms, as only wealthy landowners could afford to meet the new regime policies for spraying, sorting, and packing agricultural goods. Further, regime policies targeted the products themselves on a classed basis: the purchasing power of commodities produced by Northern commercial farms and the great Southern estates (rice, wheat, tobacco, sugar beets) increased or remained stable during the 1930s thanks to Fascist tariff protection, direct subsidies, organization of markets, and wage cutting. By contrast, the purchasing power of products that provided the livelihood for peasants (vineyard, orchard, and garden crops) enjoyed no such government protections. Their purchasing value dropped precipitously. Taken in sum, Fascist agricultural economics disproportionately benefited wealthy landowners. The effects were striking: ISTAT data show a major reduction in peasant ownership

²⁰ Fascist labor organizations worked through legislation to quash peasant landholding both at the level of the township and at the level of the family. Prior to this period, *usi civici*, a legacy of feudal land policy, allowed inhabitants of rural communities to use nominally private lands for pasturage, wood cutting, watering stock, and in some cases even cultivation and habitation. The Fascist policy of enclosing common lands, begun with the decree of May 22, 1924, abolished this tradition. For the effects of this decree on subsequent land use, see *Annuario statistico* 1936, p. 62. Further, the Charter of Share Tenancy (May 13, 1933) revoked many of the rights gained by Socialist protests in the previous two decades, including guarantee of a minimum income, maximum working hours, pay for overtime, and insurance benefits. See Schmidt 334.

²¹ In theory, the productivist concept (*concetto produttivistico*), the advocacy for capital rather than capitalism, guided Fascist taxation policy. But in practice, farm proprietors rather than farm workers saw the benefits of these policies. For example, on January 4, 1923, the new tax on agricultural income stipulated that, for large farm owners, tax would be based on income remaining after payment of *braccianti* wages or crop shares, but in the case of small farm owners, tax would be based on income before any such payments. This distinction doubled the income tax burden on the peasantry in relation to the gentry (Marabini 219).

²² The borrowing ability of peasants sharply decreased under Fascism due to government consolidation of control over rural banks. When the government centralized the management of far-flung branches, it changed the social dynamic of local borrowing: loan officers were less likely to know the borrower personally and began to insist on property as security instead of reputation. This dynamic once again benefited the landed class and diminished financial options for the peasantry, who lacked the land to access bank loans. Increasingly, small farmers and *braccianti* sought loans not from banks but from large landowners, who charged usurious rates of 50 to 100% per year. For outlines of Fascist agricultural credit reforms, see Costanzo, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, *Foreign Crops and Markets*, September 3, 1936, cited in Schmidt 344.

of small farms and homesteads, and a rise in tenant farming. Between 1921 and 1931, the number of operating owners declined by nearly half a million, while the number of cash-tenants rose by nearly 400,000.²³ The *mondine* were not working in a free labor market, and they knew it. How then could they respond to the economic injustice of the dictatorial state?

Because the figure of the *mondina* held a central place in the regime's propagandistic push for agricultural autarchy, graphic designers had to rely on artistic techniques to reconcile the state's reliance on the *mondina* as a symbol of ideal Fascist womanhood with the reality that many, if not most *mondine*, despised the regime. Figures 1-4 speak to the successive stages involved in creating a propagandistic photo collage, and demonstrate how the regime relied on the artistic process to construct false images of consent. Graphic designers working for the regime used photography to evoke the veracity then popularly associated with the medium. But they also heavily mediated these images by discarding those parts that did not support their message, and combining images taken in different times and places. In Figures 2 and 3, the contrastive scale of the two photographs used for the foreground and background highlights the extensive editing involved in the construction of photocollage. This juxtaposition miniaturizes the agricultural workers even as it aggrandizes the shafts of wheat, suggesting that the two are bound together in a relationship of patriotic production to support the regime's goal of autarchy. Rather than hiding the cut and paste approach, this form of propaganda highlights the extensive editing involved in its construction, casting revision as an artistic move rather than a political one.

This series of images reveals the artistic techniques used by the regime to obscure the *mondine*'s general distaste for the Fascist regime in general, and the Duce in particular. Figures 2 through 4 show a spectrum of obeisance in their finished or near-finished collages. Distant shots (Fig. 3), side profiles (Fig. 4), and turned heads (Fig. 2) all served to hide the *mondine*'s facial expressions, which often evoked unacceptable emotions ranging from neutrality to incredulity to distaste. By contrast, Figure 1, a single piece destined for a larger collage, reveals an almost comical level of contrast between Mussolini's enthusiasm and that of the male and female rice workers present. As Mussolini poses with his hand on his hip in full military regalia, his mouth open in a grin, the *mondina* stares down the audience, poker-faced, as the *mondino* warily glances at the Duce, and continues to work. This frozen scene vividly recalls the menacing warning of "La Lega": "E voi altri signoroni, che ci avete tant'orgoglio, abbassate la superbia e aprite il portafoglio" ("And you other big shots, who are so proud, lower the arrogance and open the wallet"). The rice workers' facial expressions communicate their distaste for the leader of the regime and his transparent bid for

²³ See Istituto Centrale di Statistica, Censimento della popolazione del Regno d'Italia, 1 dicembre 1921 (Rome 1928) and VI Censimento generale della popolazione, 21 aprile 1931 (Rome 1934) IV, part 2.

positive publicity as a hero of workers. Wisely, the regime decided to discard this image, electing to use other, more mediated images for propagandistic purposes instead.

In calling for hyper-productive female bodies to meet the new economic goals of increased domestic production, the regime inadvertently set two of its key goals against one another.²⁴ Implementing pronatalism and autarchy as gendered forms of labor points to the biological limit of increasing the productivity of the female body. In the particular case of rice weeding, the latter absorbed the former. Rice weeding resulted in more productive fields and a higher yield of rice at harvest time, but it directly undermined women's fertility while they worked the fields. To the regime, on the contrary, women's bodily labor had the unique capacity to simultaneously create both Italian food and new Italians.

(Re)production: Managing Menstruation, Birth, and Abortion in the Fields

During the *monda*, female bodily processes became public, political, and economic issues as well as private, social, and personal ones. Because of the hard labor and rough living conditions involved, the *mondine* had to confront politically charged questions of the fertile female body in public or semi-public. The *mondine* knew from the start that the hyper-productive female body was a biological impossibility: the intense labor of rice weeding often stopped women's menstrual cycles for the duration of the *monda*. And since poverty tended to be a pre-condition of working the rice fields, women could not afford to take time off while menstruating, a then-common practice among the middle and upper classes even though their daily physical labor was less taxing.²⁵ On the rare occasions when menstruation did occur in the fields, Laura Scalabrini²⁶ notes that the *mondine* typically attached an elastic or a scrap of cloth around their waists and, using two safety pins (*spille da balia*) one in the front and one in the back, attached a piece of white fabric taken from old bed sheets. This diaper (*pannolino*) would be washed and reused the following month (12). In contrast to other *mondine* accounts, Scalabrini contends that countrywomen did not wear underwear, only an undershirt, often a hand-me-down from the woman's husband or a wool shirt

²⁴ On the regime's legislative and financial support of O.N.M.I. outreach to the *mondine*, see Ciocchetti.

²⁵ According to Antonietta Chierici, Silvana Mangano, star of the 1949 neorealist film *Riso amaro (Bitter Rice)*, discussed menstruation and working conditions with Chierici's mother and other *mondine* while filming. Chierici states that the topic arose when the cast suspended filming for the week of Mangano's menses, on the assumption that working in the water would risk her health. She notes Mangano's surprise that the *mondine* continued to work throughout the month, and her admiration for their ability to do so (5).

²⁶ Scalabrini's account is rare in its detailed descriptions of menstruation, miscarriage, and abortion. As such, I use it as a key to unlock other accounts that use more coded language to describe these processes and events. In terms of inducing abortion, many other *mondine* refer to taking parsley tisanes and "helping things along."

when it was cold. She points to underwear as a semi-visible marker of social status: “I grandi mutandoni legati in vita, ricamati e di mussola di lino leggero, erano riservati a categorie di donne che non avevano bisogno di andare nei campi” (“The big underwear tied at the waist, embroidered and of light muslin linen, was reserved for categories of women who didn’t need to go to the fields” 12). Regardless of whether women’s periods stopped or continued during the *monda*, in their writings former *mondine* cast menstruation as an economic concern, and its cessation as a direct consequence of their physical labors.

For the *mondine*, each birth was embedded in local systems of politics, economics, and social class that stood metonymically for national frameworks of power and control. Women negotiated these systems by making use of the gendered tools at their disposal, namely, their employers’ lack of knowledge of the female body and their friendship with the other *mondine*. As Scalabrini recalled her mother’s situation and her own birth, she writes,

[...] stavo per nascere ma lei testarda non avendo dolori continua a lavorare, tanto che il sior Padron dalle braghe bianche per paura che partorisce in risaia la mandò a casa, appena il tempo di lavarsi e mettersi a letto, io senza levatrice sono nata, quando le sue amiche mondine finito il lavoro passando per la finestra, ‘cosa hai fatto? ... mamma orgogliosa alle amiche dicendo, è femmina ... *negra come un topon!* [Mantuan dialect]... E per tutti sono sempre stata la negra perché molto scura di pelle, come sono nata velocemente la mia vita è sempre stata di corsa ...

(4)

([...] I was about to be born, but she, stubborn, not having pains continued to work, up to the point where the landowner, wearing white shorts [this appellation comes from a popular *mondina* song], fearing that she would give birth in the rice field, sent her home, just in time to wash and get into bed, I was born without a midwife, when her rice worker friends having finished work passed below the window, ‘What did you have?’ ... mamma, proud, said to her friends, it’s a girl ... black as a mouse [dialect].’ And to everyone I have always been the black one because [I am] very dark of skin; just as I was born quickly, my life has always been in a hurry.)

Scalabrini’s testimonial speaks to three themes that characterize numerous *mondine*’s first-hand accounts of their and others’ pregnancies and births. First, female workers and male overseers negotiate the timing and conditions of birth, the former by withholding information about the duration of the pregnancy and the latter by early termination of the work without pay.²⁷ Second, the narrative casts the circumstances of the birth as formative of personal identity. In Scalabrini’s case, she uses the speed of her birth to account for her life’s frenetic pace, using material conditions to account for characteristics and tendencies, all anchored within her family mythology. And finally, the collective nature of

²⁷ Later, a law was established barring women from working the fields while pregnant. See “Stralcio contratto monda,” Article 5, “Iscrizione della mano d’opera,” p. 3 in Minardi, index.

female friendship among the *mondine* reaches beyond the fields. Those bonds provide a traveling version of the state of local culture forged in the *risaia*, allowing women to invert the social value of traditional dichotomies. When Scalabrini's mother celebrates her dark-skinned female child using the local dialect, she inverts the associated value of gender, class, and racial categories. In a small way, she uses the advent of her daughter's birth to rewrite pervasive social values at the level of the country village.

As the story of Scalabrini's birth suggests, many women wanted to restrict their fertility for economic reasons, citing the importance of practicality in the face of emotional distress. For the *mondine*, an ill-timed pregnancy could imperil their work opportunities. When women did abort, they often went to the fields to do so, adding another inflection to the question of women's fertility and production in the rice fields. Further, poverty and lack of access to birth control often trumped legislation, for many came to work in the fields even while pregnant, sometimes resulting in spontaneous miscarriages in the fields. Scalabrini recalled that a neighbor who worked as a *mondina* had given birth to seventeen children, seven of whom survived; compared to the thirty-seven pregnancies she had had, the seven survivors "non erano un gran numero ... Abortiva silenziosamente nei campi dove andava a giornata a zappare la terra" ("wasn't a large number ... she miscarried silently in the fields where she went to hoe the earth according to her daily contract") (12). Scalabrini's neighbor may have chosen to miscarry in the field at night both for reasons of privacy and to avoid the inevitable cleanup. Along these lines, she also draws out the connection between countrywomen's clothing and their practices regarding miscarriages: "Senza mutande era facile, in caso di aborto spontaneo, far cadere i piccoli feti sulla terra nuda dove erano nascoste tra le zolle con un pietoso colpo di zappa e, spesso, con un profondo sospiro di sollievo per quella gravidanza spontaneamente interrotta" ("Without underwear it was easy, in the case of a natural miscarriage, to let the little fetuses fall on the naked earth where they were hidden among dirt clumps with a piteous turn of the hoe, and, often, with a profound sigh of relief for that suddenly interrupted pregnancy" 12). After all, each birth for a *mondina* extracted a double burden, another mouth to feed plus wages lost from missing the *monda*. But Scalabrini's vocabulary points to the angst threaded through the relief of miscarriage. Although the setting of a darkened, vacant field allows her the option of ignoring the infants' bodies, Scalabrini focuses in on the "little fetuses." This two-word characterization shuns euphemistic darkness in favor of description of the body size and stage of development. This directness illuminates this sentence as an amphiboly: a listener with any knowledge of miscarriage would recognize it as anything but "easy." By dividing her audience between those knowledgeable and those ignorant of the physical strain of miscarriage, Scalabrini creates solidarity with the first group by conveying shared knowledge of the female body in doubled language that only this group will understand. In this way, Scalabrini's account exemplifies the complex verbal coding that many

mondine use to critique those who view the female, working-class bodies as inherently robust and insensate by signaling the physical, emotional, and economic tolls of fertility to an audience capable of hearing such a message.

Along these lines, some women considered a pause in their cycle to be a welcome relief from frequent pregnancies. Laura Scalabrini recalled her mother's reaction to her fifth pregnancy: "Sperò con tutte le forze in un aborto spontaneo e per [...] agevolarlo saltò dalla sedia, faticò nei campi e come era d'uso bevve anche un infuso di prezzemolo" ("She hoped with all her might for a miscarriage, and to [...] help it along she jumped from the chair, worked in the fields and, as was the custom, drank an infusion of parsley" 24). The child was eventually born, only to die days later. For years after, Scalabrini's mother dreamt of carrying the live child to a cemetery, leaving her there alone and ignoring the girl's tiny arms as they flailed in silent protest against the closed gates. It is important to note that Scalabrini's tisane is not unique to the *mondine*; the beverage makes shadow appearances across a number of women's accounts of the Fascist period, regardless of social class. This suggests that a common body of folk wisdom concerning abortion existed, and that women responded to unwanted pregnancies in their own kitchens by drinking tea to prepare for abortion in the fields. And indeed, the space of the kitchen served as a key site of regime intervention in the home and daily practices.²⁸ The fact that women induced abortion in this room, either by drinking tea or jumping from the kitchen chair suggests that women made use of this space not only for cooking for, and eating with their families, but also for the most private and personal engagements in questions of consumption, both of tea to induce abortion, and more largely, to end the potential for a life.

Rehearsing for Revolt

While a diverse network of workers' groups and cultural historians has documented the oral history of the *mondine*, few scholars have studied the trove of songs, testimonials, and interview transcripts. In the second section of this article, I hope to contribute a feminist cultural history perspective to the seminal anthropological accounts and ethnomusicological studies of Franco Castelli, Emilio Jona, Alberto Lovatto, and Nunzia Manicardi. In the *mondine*'s songs, the issue of blended authorship, in terms of both lyrics and melody, speaks to the broader issues of women's cultural production, individual voice within a choral collectivity, and the contested definitions regarding the origins and ownership of nationally valued goods. Many of the *mondine*'s songs predate the 1930s; some can be traced back as far as pre-Unification Italy. Their provenance is similarly diverse: some songs derive from tavern songs ("Sul ponte di Verona" "On Verona's Bridge" [Ente Nazionale Risi, Milan]); others from Socialist hymns ("Sebben che siamo donne" "Although We Are Women" [Ente Nazionale Risi, Milan]); still others from work song traditions ("Mondarisi" "Rice Weeders"

²⁸ See Helstosky's *Garlic and Oil*; "Fascist Food Politics"; and "Recipe for the Nation."

[Ente Nazionale Risi, Milan]). But women did not simply repeat those songs. Instead, they consciously and actively changed the lyrics, adapting them to privilege female perspectives and themes. Often, the *mondine* used an older piece of music as a frame on which to hang new words. Finding a new use for old melodies is a typical mode of song (re)creation in the popular Italian tradition. In the words of ethnomusicologist Placida Staro, “L’aria melodica [...] rappresenta un’armatura interna metrico-ritmica per la costruzione di ‘nuovi’ testi” (“The melodic aria [...] represents an internal metric-rhythmic scaffolding for the construction of ‘new’ texts,” Staro 43). As such, one cannot claim that the *mondine*’s songs were exclusively authored or composed by the *mondine*. Rather, the *mondine* made use of pre-existing song structures and shaped them to fit their own needs, evoking a specifically rural, female, working-class genre of cultural production. Over a period that could range from hours to years, and over distances that encompassed the whole of Northern Italy, the *mondine* edited old songs to the point of creating new ones. Traditional notions of authorship simply did not apply.

Because of the difficult conditions in the fields, women were physically uncomfortable and thus very aware of their bodies as they worked. In other words, the physical labor of rice weeding made the female body loud. It is unsurprising then that the place and type of labor shaped, and were in turn shaped by, the musical tradition. Song lyrics describe the environment in the fields and their toll on the *mondine*, as noted in the references to insects and tormented vocatives of “mamma mia” in “Bella ciao.” This focus on the interplay of place and person characterizes the *mondine*’s songs as a group. They render connections of place and body as a minute and specific catalogue of the associations of rice weeding work, like bent backs and repetitive movements, as well as the effects of environmental factors like dampness, cold, strain, glare, insects, and water snakes. Frequently used musical keys and percussive elements reflect the conditions under which the songs were sung. Because the *mondine* sang while bent over the the rice fields, choruses are generally sung in the *ambito di una quinta* (Sib4-Fa4), and more rarely in the eighth (Lab3-Sol4). These keys allow for singing despite prolonged diaphragm constriction (Staro 46). Percussive elements originated from the repeated slapping of mosquitoes on the women’s legs which the women incorporated into the songs at regular intervals. Smacks, claps, and slaps converted the environmental hazards of the rice fields into some of the characteristic features of *mondine* music. Sting transformed into song.

Unlike other song traditions based on the male experience of agricultural work, the *mondine*’s musical tradition emphasizes the trials of gendered labor, such as cooking with few resources, and sexual labor, encompassing both

childbirth within marriage and the travails of prostitution.²⁹ Songs refer to sexually transmitted diseases (“Quando avevo quindic’anni” “When I was Fifteen” [Castelli 315]); infanticide (“Cara Adele” “Dear Adele” [250]; “L’infanticida,” “Infanticide” [279]); and violence against prostitutes (“Il ventinove luglio” “July 29th” [338]) as well as common themes such as seduction and abandonment, the domestic cage (“Bell’uccialin dal bosc,” “Beautiful bird of the woods” [Staro 94]) and the frustrated sexual desires of women at or past middle age (“Ho quarant’anni compiuti” “I have lived forty years” [276]). Although some ethnomusicologists and folklorists have attempted to organize the *mondine*’s song corps by dividing songs into typologies based on predominant song themes (love, politics, work), genres (comic, heroic, tragic), and antecedents (tavern song, political rally song), such typologies mischaracterize the songs by imposing the categories that they mean to describe.³⁰ *Mondine* testimonies suggest that such categorization inserts anachronistic concepts of theme that reflect academics’ conceptions of the *mondine*, but ignores the *mondine*’s opinions. Further, theme and genre do not exist in isolation: gender, class, and politics typically collide in a single song, rendering ad hoc separations illusory. And finally, the boundaries of the musical tradition, and the songs themselves, are porous and flexible, because the *mondine* shaped these songs over time and place.

“Son la mondina” exemplifies the *mondine*’s creative use of temporal drift in its alternating invocations of past political events and possible visions of the future. In the case of “Son la mondina,” the reverberations of the famous *mondine* strike of 1909 for the eight-hour workday resound throughout the song. The lyric “with our bodies under the wheels” refers to the *mondine*’s effective protest tactics in shutting down the Northern Italian railway system “from Vercellese to Molinella,” as memorably captured by illustrator Achille Beltrame for the cover of the popular newspaper *Domenica del Corriere* (Fig. 5).

<p><i>Son la mondina, son la sfruttata</i> Son la mondina, son la sfruttata, son la proletaria che giammai tremò: mi hanno uccisa, incatenata, carcere e violenza, nulla mi fermò,</p>	<p><i>I am the rice-weeder, I am the exploited</i> I am the rice-weeder, I am the exploited, I am the proletariat that never trembled; they killed me and chained me. prison and violence, nothing stopped me.</p>
<p>Coi nostri corpi sulle rotaie,</p>	<p>With our bodies on the train tracks,</p>

²⁹ The economic disadvantages that pushed women into the rice fields required them to assume what was, for both local townsfolk and for the *mondine* themselves, a symbolic position of female sexual submission and abandon as well. Although very few *mondine* engaged in prostitution themselves, the group nonetheless explored these themes in their songs. Like prostitutes, the *mondine* bore a stereotype for promiscuity. Living outside of the family house away from male supervision likely contributed to this label (Castelli 488).

³⁰ Both Jona and Castelli rely heavily on categorization to organize their song catalogues and analysis. For foundational examples of these typologies, see Jona, *Le canzonette che fecero l’Italia* and “Sul cantare in risaia.” See also Castelli, Jona, and Lovatto.

<p>noi abbiám fermato i nostri sfruttator; c'è molto fango sulle risaie, ma non porta macchie il simbol del lavor,</p>	<p>we have stopped our exploiter, there is so much mud in the rice fields, but the symbol of our work carries no stain.</p>
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<p>E lotteremo per il lavoro, per la pace, il pane e per la libertà, e creeremo un mondo nuovo di giustizia e di nuova civiltà.</p>	<p>And we will fight for our job, for peace, bread, and liberty, and we will build a new world of justice and true civilization.</p>
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<p>Questa bandiera gloriosa e bella noi l'abbiám raccolta e la portiam più in su dal Vercellese a Molinella, alla testa della nostra gioventù.</p>	<p>This flag glorious and beautiful, we have picked it up and carried it higher, from the Vercelli region to Molinella, ahead of all our youth.</p>
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<p>E se qualcuno vuol far la guerra, tutti uniti insieme noi lo fermerem: vogliam la pace sulla terra e più forti dei cannoni noi sarem.</p>	<p>And if anyone wants to make war, all united together we will stop him: we want peace on earth and stronger than cannons we will be.</p>
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<p>(Ultima strofa di un'altra versione) Ed ai padroni farem la guerra. Tutti uniti insieme noi vincerem. Non più sfruttati sulla terra, ma più forti dei cannoni noi sarem.</p>	<p>(Final verse of an alternate version) And we will make war on landowners. All united together we will win. No longer exploited on the earth But stronger than cannons we will be.</p>
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Recurrent references to this early strike point to its enduring significance for the *mondine*. The emotional relevance of this event stemmed in part from its physical manifestation of female political collectivity created with the body. As Beltrame's rendering and "Son la mondina"'s invocation of this dramatic episode suggest, the *mondine*'s decision to make their voices heard by using their bodies to obstruct the machinery of production presented a heightened moment when the singularity of the individual's body melded into the collective body politic. The steam-powered train — a single, powerful entity — suggests the ramrod approach of the landowner, dehumanized in his machine-like approach to labor. By contrast, the women appear as discrete individuals with unique facial expressions, collectively engaged in a group effort. The train also evokes the larger system of rice distribution and consumption in which the *mondine*'s productive labor was inscribed. As discussed in the next section, the regime's propagandistic rice trains carried this foodstuff to Southern Italy as an economic inducement to change regional food ways for the benefit of the national autarchic project. Women objected to riding to and from the rice fields in the *carri bestiame* because riding the stock cars inherently associated the *mondine* with the farm animals normally transported in these wagons. Put more broadly, women contested this mode of transport not only for reasons of physical comfort, but also because of their sense of dignity and human value. This protest's potent blend of the concrete and the symbolic gained further intensity in its reversal of traditional dichotomies: the

old-fashioned over the modern, the rural over the urban, the lower class over the upper, and, most significantly, the female over the male, as Beltrame hints with the imaginative addition of the *capo*'s phallic *bastone* in the hands of the *mondine*. In general, such upendings suggest a David and Goliath parable, with the relatively less powerful party ultimately triumphant in halting the local Northern Italian train schedule and gaining the eight-hour workday.

"Son la mondina" provides a case study for the relationship between the individual and the group in its exploration of the relationship between the singer and the chorus through personal and vocal doubling. In the first two verses of the song "Son la mondina, son la sfruttata" ("I am the rice weeder, I am the exploited") the repetition of "son" ("I am") casts the narrative as a personal story stemming from the first-hand work experience. But it also casts the song content as a larger issue of class and labor struggles, as in the charged word *sfruttata*, "exploited." The first person voice, that of a *proletaria*, includes all the women in a similar condition. The "us" contrasts against the plural: *i nostri sfruttatori*, our exploiters: the anonymous group who "killed" and "chained" the *mondine*. While these two violent verbs appear in the *passato prossimo* form, indicating recent past actions, the *mondina* or *mondine*'s refusal to stop (*fermò*) or even tremble (*tremò*) occur in the *passato remoto*, indicating a more distant, perhaps even historic, temporal phase. The *sfruttatori*'s actions and the *sfruttata*'s reactions are, as these nominal forms suggest, intimately connected as forms of cause and effect. But by differentiating these past actions into additional chronological forms, the lyrics assign different historical values to the actors' actions based on the role they played in this event. The *passato remoto* consecrates the *mondine*'s actions as historic and thus significant, even as they relegate their catalyst, the killing and chaining by their exploiters, to the sphere of the recent everyday, which still affects all the *mondine*.³¹ By filtering events from the same temporal period through two different verb forms, the song elevates female protest to the realm of the heroic, neatly overturning gendered historical traditions that emphasize the importance of national events and the names of great men at the expense of lived history and its daily struggles.

And yet, when narrating the events of the strike itself, the collective "we" of the *mondine* shifts to the *passato prossimo*: "Coi nostri corpi sulle rotaie, / noi abbiam fermato i nostri sfruttatori." The reference to this bodily action must have resonated with the *mondine* as they sang this song under a great deal of physical stress in the rice fields. But, furthermore, they speak to the broader value of these labors and to the ever-present possibility of revolt by pointing to a successful past strike.³² These temporal shifts underscore the idea that the past creates the present, and the future too. In a cohesive temporal progression from past to present to

³¹ The song also relies on two verbs in the *passato prossimo* to describe the *mondine*.

³² Zappi, "The First Results of Mobilization" and "Years of Progress, Years of Action, 1903-1906," in *If Eight Hours Seem too Few* (100-66).

future, the Socialist utopia of the final stanza appears built on the struggles of the common historical past established by the first two stanzas of the song. This oral history lesson also provides a course in civics by instructing the young *mondine* in the history of this particular social group, igniting intergenerational solidarity among the newly arrived and more experienced *mondine*.

This song plays out that progression in miniature. Having established the common historical past of the *mondina*, the collective “we” reemerges in more strident terms. Whereas the first stanza uses the first person pronoun “we” once and the second uses the possessive adjective “our” twice, a single line in the fifth stanza emphasizes the collective in each word choice, “Tutti uniti insieme noi lo fermerem” (“All united together we will stop him”).” With five out of six words in this verse indicating collectivity, the *sfruttator* are completely surrounded. As such, this song exemplifies the metonymic collectivity common to both the *mondine*’s songs and first-person testimonials wherein the singer is at once a real individual and the archetypal *mondina*, a general or typical character exemplifying all the female workers’ toils and aspirations.

In addition to the song’s lyrical content, the history of the song also reflects the contested nature of origins and authorship. At stake is the question of the nature of production: is it an isolated moment or a continual process of negotiation and renewal? Castelli’s account of the song’s origins and reworkings suggests the latter. In his history of “Son la mondina,” Castelli notes that Pietro Besate wrote the lyrics in the 1950s for the Federbraccianti workers’ meeting, fitting them to the music of “E la rondinella la va per aria” (“And the swallow goes up into the air”), an older popular song (Castelli 417). However, many *mondine* incorporate snatches of this song in direct quotations of jokes and laments in their memories of the 1920s and 1930s, which suggests that either antecedents of the song could be found by those dates, or that the song already existed in its entirety and that Besate simply transcribed the song, as many male political organizers and folk song writers of the 1950s and 1960s also did. As Castelli himself notes, this song enjoyed a particularly widespread popularity across Northern Italy (417). And the authorship of popular songs, associated with the *mondine* or with other groups, is extremely difficult to determine because of their oral rather than written origins, a fact which also plays a role in the continual nature of their revisions.

The act of rewriting was not simply tacitly permitted but actively welcomed by the other *mondine*, for whom lyric borrowing was equated to invention rather than plagiarism. Many *mondine* make jokes and asides by lightly changing the lyrics, even in spoken and written conversation. Ermanna Chiozzi, for instance, makes a joke that turns on the reader’s knowledge of the standard opening of “Son la mondina” to speak to her experience of being exploited. She recounts a personally significant episode in which the wind blew her straw hat off her head while at work in the rice paddies. She left the weeding line to chase after it, and for this infraction the *padrone* fired her immediately. She wryly sums up the episode with a twist in the song lyrics, “Son la mondina, son la licenziata,” (“I am

the rice weeder. I am the fired one" 19). In addition to tiny but intentional changes that dramatically shifted song meaning, unintentional changes also occurred naturally because of the way that these songs were used in the fields. On this microscopic scale, musical recycling evolved to cultural creation.

Singing Truth to Power

Through song and story, the *mondine* bore witness to the physical and emotional toll of rice weeding, a central form of autarchic food production and thus a key plank in the Fascist platform of economic self-sufficiency. In defiance of state demands for increased production of rice and infants, the *mondine* made use of the cloaking and amplifying properties of choruses and solos to assert their bodily autonomy. By recording their counter-history to the Fascist party line through the gestures and sayings of daily work, the *mondine* voiced resistance and rehearsed revolt, speaking truth to Fascist power. Because many historians of the Fascist period have focused on women's role as consumers, this article has endeavored to address the question of how women's role as producers of food fits into national questions of female agency and political identity.

There are many different ways to feed the nation: directly, by cooking and serving food, and indirectly, by producing the raw ingredients. When the *mondine* provided food sanctioned by the regime for the nation through agricultural production, they held a symbolic role as nurturers. In the realm of rice weeding, the *mondine* not only provided the rice necessary to feed a nation but they also earned several kilograms of it to bring home to their families as part of their payment. This form of doubled feeding of nation and family revealed several awkward contradictions within the Fascist party. First, the social conservatism of the Italian Fascist party claimed that a woman's place was in the home, but strongly supported using a predominantly female labor force in the fields for economic reasons. In this particular case, economics trumped ideology. The cheapest labor force won the contracts to produce a crucial foodstuff. Second, pronatalist rhetoric celebrated the high fertility of the Italian country women but working in the fields temporarily suspended women's fertility. Not only were they away from men for this period, but the difficult labor conditions suppressed menstruation. And finally, the Fascist party celebrated the *mondine* as a positive symbol for rurality, tradition, and sacrifice, even though the majority of *mondine* voted Socialist or Communist because of their identification with the international working class. This last point is particularly relevant to the study of the *mondine* within the larger political context of the day.³³ What does it mean to be celebrated by the state as a human symbol of ideas that you reject?

³³ During the early 1920s, Fascist interference with Italian electoral law diminished the power of proportional representation, allowing Mussolini to consolidate his hold on the government. The Acerbo Law, passed in November 1923, assigned two thirds of parliamentary seats to the party with the largest share, rather than total number, of votes.

“Singing Truth to Power” looks at this question from the point of view of the workers themselves in order to avoid taking the regime’s symbolism at its word. Contrary to the fulsome images of National Rice Board propaganda, the *mondine* did not, in fact, celebrate their iconographic designation as the bearers of an idealized national past, refreshed for the future with a lick of make-up on National Rice Day. Their resistance to this designation played out in both symbolic and literal terms. In the 1930s, as a chorus, the *mondine* sang work songs to condemn the working conditions of the rice fields and their devastating effects on the female body. Using these tactics, women practiced rebellion in collaboration, out in the fields away from normal pressures to conform to state dictates. Later, as individuals, many *mondine* wrote first-hand accounts of their time in the rice fields, recording individual counter-narratives that, collectively, provide a dictionary of specifics to support the generalities of the songs. And in doing so, they brought their wrenching reproductive choices, born of poverty, into the light.

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Fig. 1 Photo cutout for propagandistic collages, Crescentino, Italy, 1932, in folder *Milano: Ente Nazionale del Riso, Contributi del Duce per l'assistenza alle Mondariso* (ACS, PCM, 1934-1936, b. 509.488, f. 2).



Fig. 2 Partially completed propagandistic collage, Crescentino, Italy, 1932, in folder *Milano: Ente Nazionale del Riso, Contributi del Duce per l'assistenza alle Mondariso* (ACS, PCM, 1934-1936, b. 509.488, f. 2).

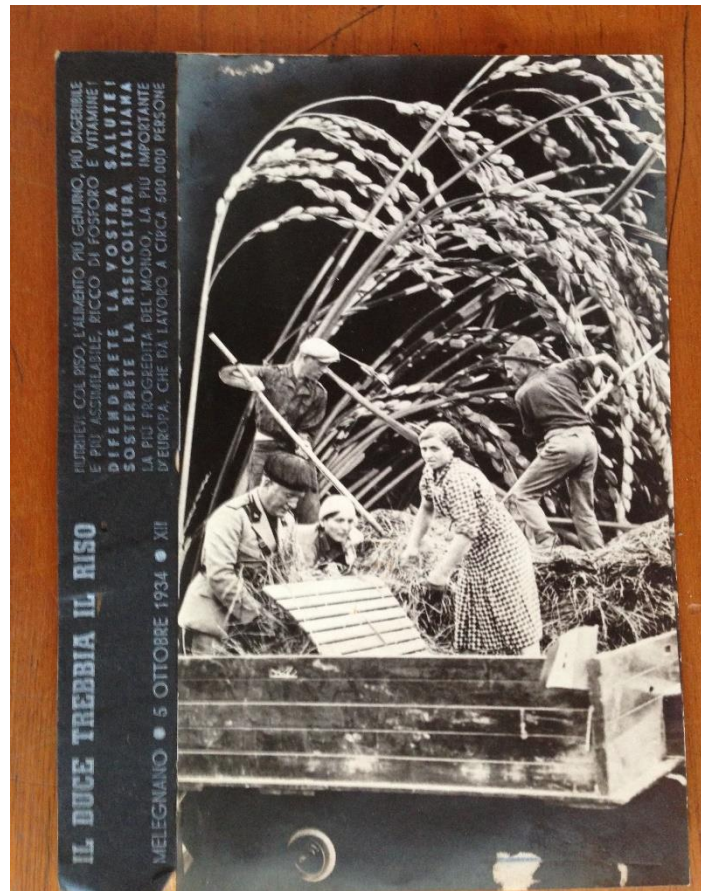


Fig. 3 “Il Duce Trebbia il Riso,” “The Duce Threshes Rice” completed propagandistic collage, Melegnano, Italy, 1934, in folder *Milano: Ente Nazionale del Riso, Contributi del Duce per l’assistenza alle Mondariso* (ACS, PCM, 1934-1936, b. 509.488, f. 2).



Fig. 4 “Il Duce Trebbia il Riso,” “The Duce Threshes Rice” completed propagandistic collage, Melegnano, Italy, 1934, in folder *Milano: Ente Nazionale del Riso, Contributi del Duce per l’assistenza alle Mondariso* (ACS, PCM, 1934-1936, b. 509.488, f. 2).

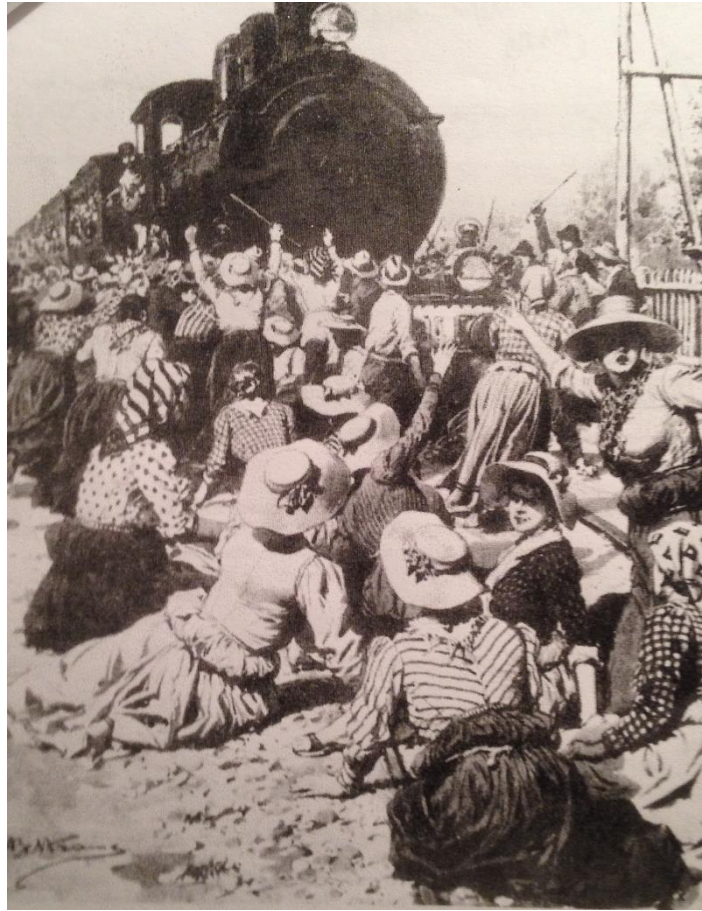


Fig. 5 Newspaper illustration of the Rice Weeders' May 26, 1909 protest, drawn by Achille Beltrame, caption reads, "Dal Vercellese a Molinella," "From Vercellese to Molinella," a reference to the train line running through the heart of Italy's rice belt, successfully blocked by the *mondine* protesting for the 8-hour work day. (*Domenica del Corriere* [June 6, 1909])