

In 1914, the society section of the St. Louis Post-Dispatch wrote that “Regardless of nationality, the young girl rushes along the crest of the wave, absorbing American life, not only through her mind, but through the very pores in her skin.” In my doctoral work, I seek to characterize and explain how Italian-, Greek-, and Russian Jewish-American women “absorbed American life,” while drawing comparisons to their counterparts in their homelands. In doing so, I hope to open two broad, yet largely uninvestigated questions: how did ethnicity influence female choice, and how was it affected by acculturation in the United States and cultural evolutions in Europe?

At the graduate level, I intend to explore this question vis-a-vis involvement in sexuality, fashion, beauty, food desire, and social movements, focusing on urban centers in the twentieth-century. Multiplicity of identity, I would suggest, was critical in both women’s participation and the reactions they received. Women were constrained by expectations and dictations of acceptability based on their ethnicities, gender and sexual identity, religion, and class. National identity further impacted female responsibility. For Russian-Jewish women, this multiplicity was more complex, because of their nationality as Russian and ethno-religious identity as Jewish. Though I remain apprehensive about committing myself to a topic so early, I hope to use these questions as starting points in a future dissertation.

This project is significant for several reasons. Following the avenues of scholarship done by historians such as Diner, Gabaccia, and de Grazia, I plan to frame immigrant narratives from a cultural perspective, while exploring how social and cultural circumstances affected women. I hope to add to their work by marrying the topics and, true to the transnational framework defined by Ngai, exploring global citizenship and the flow of culture and ideas. These explorations are conducive to discussions of the effects that decision and dictation had on women, while also emphasizing the ways that women were individualized and, to an extent, rebelled. This comparison is scantily explored in the field of transnational history, and will hopefully open up a broader historical conversation.

As an undergraduate, I opted to write an honors thesis, titled “*Paesani* on the Hill: Keeping Italian in St. Louis, 1900-1990, which centers around how Italian immigrants in St. Louis maintained a cohesive ethnic and cultural identity. Galvanized by my academic year in Rome, this project was inspired by a desire to explain how Italian-American culture became so far-removed from that of the motherland. In addition to affirming my passion for modern global history, writing a thesis also gave me practical research experience. My research led me to the collection of oral histories, as well as through a sea of difficult-to-decipher records and unorganized raw data. This research, combined with my women and gender studies coursework, led to a desire to situate the narratives female immigrants, particularly those that I grew up with, in a broader historical context, and compare their experiences with that of their counterparts in Europe.

The University of Michigan is an ideal fit for my research interests. The foremost draw is the strengths of the faculty. I am particularly interested in working with Professors Chin, Cole, Simmons, Gaggio, and Mora. Their respective works in transnationalism and gender, gender in Europe, race and sexuality in the United States, the society of modern Italy, and the historical construction of gender and race in the United States parallel my own doctoral interests. The option of a joint degree in history and women and gender studies exemplifies the strength of Michigan’s program in the field of women’s history, as well as its transnational and interdisciplinary nature. Such characteristics will deepen the intellectual breadth of my work while allowing me to foster relationships with scholars in other departments. The wealth of resources housed in the university’s libraries will provide invaluable source material to inform my work. In sum, the program and faculty’s strengths and the resources it promises make the University of Michigan a perfect fit to continue my studies.