

Profile of Dr. Eileen Ryan

Interviewed by Eric Perinovic

Tell us a bit about yourself.

I grew up in North Carolina. My father was a philosophy professor at East Carolina University. I did my undergrad at UNC Chapel Hill where I majored in religious studies and Italian. After college, I taught English in Japan for a few years, and then I went to graduate school at the University of Chicago where I earned my MA in religious studies. I received my PhD from Columbia University in 2013.

What sparked your interest in studying history?

I came at it through religious studies. History was my favorite class in high school, but when I went to college I wanted to major in religious studies because I felt that I didn't understand much about religion. At the time it was so prevalent in politics with these big debates on school prayer, and I wanted the tools to understand it. When I started my MA at the University of Chicago, I was in a field known as History of Religion that at the time was in a state of crisis. One of the founders of the department was uncovered as a Romanian fascist, and there was a great deal of institutional turmoil over it. So then I segued into history at Columbia, and found Victoria De Grazia to explore something about Italy and the modern Mediterranean. I started taking Arabic there and I knew I wanted to do something on the intersection of Islam and Catholicism and the modern Mediterranean. I took a class called "Empire, Nation, and the State" and that's where I learned that there had been

this colonial moment in Libya that's really absent in public discussions of Italy's past.

Tell us about your research.

While at Columbia, I started reading Italian ethnographies of Muslims in Libya, which were readily available and accessible. They were all talking about this group of Sufi notables called the Sunusiyya in Eastern Libya. I started to realize that I wanted to find out what it meant to be part of the Sunusiyya at the start of the 20th century. The more I read, the more I realized that I was chasing a ghost. What these sources told me instead was how Italian imperialists conceived of themselves and how thought of their religious and imperial identity in relation to how they thought of the Sunusiyya, and they invented themselves through the reflection of the Muslim other. In the process my book also investigates and rethinks the history of Islam in Libya in the colonial era and takes serious the strategy that Muslim elites used to carve out autonomous political power in the colonial context.

Because I'm not able to go back to Libya anytime soon, the next book is more Italian-based. I'm working on two distinct projects. The first is about Italian decolonization, British occupation, and the lives of people in the Italian colonies and metropole that were stuck during this period. Settlers classified as refugees that navigated a bureaucracy designed to get them home against their wishes to stay and people that were in Italy at the end of the war who became colonial subjects in spite of their Italian citizenship.

The other project, which I'll probably write first, is a book on black Italians. I came to that topic by looking at stories of

black African colonial subjects and citizens that were stuck in Italy during and after the Second World War and thinking about how I could contextualize that into a broader history about black bodies in Italy. I saw a film by a black Italian filmmaker called *Blaxploitalian* that explores the history of black people in Italian cinema. In it he mentioned Andrea Aguyar, who was a formerly enslaved black man from Uruguay who fought and died with Garibaldi in Italy. I had read about Aguyar before, but that really sparked this project.

What I want to do is use the story of Aguyar as a place to start telling stories of race, slavery, and abolition in 19th century Italy and how they relate to nationalism and unification. I want to focus on a different person in each chapter as a way to investigate major political moments in Italian history. I'm thinking about it more in terms of studying blackness in Italy in relation to the ambiguity of whiteness, especially in the South. Recent waves of immigration are clearly not the beginning of this racial ambiguity, as the notion that Southern Italians are not quite white has long been at the heart of Italian identity. I want this book to highlight the longevity of stories of black people in Italy and also to explore the ambiguity of whiteness in Europe as a whole by looking at this country that is something of a borderland for Europe.

What book do you think should all historians read? Why? How has it influenced you and your scholarship?

What I've been thinking about the most recently is Ginzburg's *The Cheese and the Worms* and the tradition of microhistory. I've also been thinking of Michel-Rolph Trouillot's *Silencing the Past*. What I have

found most frustrating in my work as a historian is in giving the historical figures that I examine, the people that are left out of colonial archives, the kind of detailed voice that Ginzburg articulated. That's inspiring me to be more creative about how I approach narrative and think about the line between fact and fiction. I think that historians should all be reading novels and paying close attention to narrative. It's important that we be methodologically sound and tell factual narratives, but at the same time we have a moral obligation to make the history we write accessible to a wider audience by paying attention to narrative, form, and the art of storytelling.

What methodological/historiographical trends have you excited?

This attention to narrative is exciting because of its potential to expand our reach. I'm excited about focusing on black European histories as it forces Europeans to come to terms with a longer history of relationships between whiteness and blackness in the region.

How did your association with CENFAD contribute to your time here at Temple?

I think one thing that is wonderful about CENFAD is how it promotes a global perspective of history both by focusing on how the US relates to the world and looking at global issues beyond the U.S. perspective. If you think about the original mission of CENFAD to study force and diplomacy, imperialism is all about how those two work together. My first book is a close study of a relationship based on negotiating contracts that had a level of coercion and force underlying them. Thus, the relationship between force and diplomacy is pretty obvious. It's

less apparent in my second book, but by studying the history of blackness in Italy, what I'm doing is examining Italian history from a more global perspective with an African diaspora lens, which is global in nature. The first story I'm telling in this book is how Garibaldi's experience in Uruguay was critical to his role in Italian unification. Part of my mission as a historian is to tell a story of Italy that places it in the broader world, which I think is in line with CENFAD's mission.