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### **PERFECTION SALAD: Cooking for White Futures, 1914-1929**

My name is Morgan Barbre, and I am a graduate student in the Department of Religious Studies at Indiana University. This presentation was adapted from a paper I gave at a CenSAMM's online symposium on the theme of apocalypse and utopia between the first and second World Wars. This was held on February 18, 2021.

My paper concerns how, in that interwar period in the United States, homemaking and national foodways converged to help bring about an envisioned white nationalist utopia. And I begin to think through this by looking to three major inflexion points in the history of American foodways and domestic life. First, World War I necessitated the introduction of a voluntary rationing campaign that targeted married women as soldiers on the home front, calling them to save their nation and, in turn, the world, by being less wasteful in their kitchens and modeling a patriotic servanthood. Most notably, this campaign featured posters with slogans like "FOOD WILL WIN THE WAR," and "THE KITCHEN IS THE KEY TO VICTORY: EAT LESS BREAD." Second, the wake of the Progressive Era and a period of increased immigration to American cities prompted anxiety about the stability of the (white) American family as well as about social hygiene in urban centers. And third, scientific and technological innovation of the period sparked new interest in making domestic life more efficient and healthful.

In these situations, women, and wives more specifically, were framed as the bearers of this responsibility, even as they were barred from much religious or political action on account of their gender.

I want to focus here on home economics, itself, a movement that many more or less view as founded by Ellen Richards on the principles of EUTHENTICS, which concerned maximizing human functioning by way of improving living conditions. Home economists sought to engineer the home in such a way that the family and moral core of the nation might be saved from certain destruction. They worked to engineer away immigrant foodways—goulashes, stews, and other foods that did not easily fit their nutritional science agenda—in favor of more "orderly" dishes. Your meat, starch, and the scant vegetable, not mixing on the plate. This was a scientific endeavor they were on, with incredibly high stakes. It's also noteworthy that in a 1915 editorial letter, one woman wrote about Richards as "a new kind of missionary and a new kind of pioneer...our first great pioneer home missionary."<sup>1</sup>

Now, to this point, and in the constraints of this brief podcast, I have merely signaled some of the flashpoints of this history, but in doing so I aim to suggest that food reform in the U.S. has ALWAYS been a project of nationalism and white supremacy, fueled by progressive millenarian thinking that steady reform would not only improve the standard of living but manifest the ideal of the "shining city on a hill" for the nation. I argue that the start of World

War I, and the US entrance into it, brought to fore what had been pulsing under the surface through that history: that FOOD is WOMEN'S WORK, but also FOOD is PATRIOTISM and FOOD is the way by which whiteness might protect itself.

I want to now look at one way this idea was very materially expressed in the early interwar United States under the umbrella of home economics and domestic work. Congealed salads, of which Perfection Salad was one variety, took off in popularity in the 1920s, peppering the recipe sections and advice columns of *Good Housekeeping*, the pages of home economics cookbooks, and the dinner tables of white families' homes. This is, perhaps, one of the worst examples of white Americana, with meats and vegetables alike suspended in molded gelatin. Now Americans mostly laugh about them and grimace and gag looking at photos of them in old cookbooks and photo albums. But at the time, they celebrated post-war prosperity in that they required refrigeration and newly commercially available gelatin, and they illustrated the era's "VITAMANIA," its new obsession with the science of vitamins and minerals and, as a result, with vegetables. Yes, foods in these salads were combined like the goulash of before, but here the constituent parts were separately visible, and, most importantly, the whole dish was contained, neat, and, at the time, seen as aesthetically pleasing. THIS was what home economists had worked for: cooking that was efficient, utilitarian, innovative, and decidedly feminine. Cooking that celebrated and quite literally congealed all that they thought was crumbling and all they had hoped might be yet to come. THIS was, in part, the product of their reform, and its popularity evidence of just how widespread the gospel of home economics had become.

Now, I want to clarify I am not claiming that reformist thinking is inherently millenarian. But food reform in the US between the First World War and the Great Depression carried with it the hope of a salvation at the hands of white Christian nationalism, and at the hands of whiteness itself as an ontology and religious system all its own.

Thinking about food reform, and the roles white women played in it, is thick with the ideas of empire, of a civilization-saving message incubated in American kitchens. And its mission was legitimated and explicitly stamped as patriotic with the First World War, marrying it even more tightly to the machinery and the devastation of nation and whiteness.

To pay attention to home economics, to food reform more broadly, is to take seriously the humdrum, to interrogate the ways women are implicated in the white supremacist project of the United States, when most academic and popular discourse flags white supremacy and white Christian nationalism as "what men do," as an overwhelmingly masculine force in the world. And it is my hope that this interrogation leads to more—and more sustained—thinking about women's nation-building work and the consequences of the utopian thinking that fueled this movement.

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<sup>1</sup> Lucy M. Salmon, "Mrs. Richards and Our Debt to Her," *The Journal of Home Economics* 7, no. 1 (1915), 27-28.