



PennState

Regulating the American Physique

Five questions for graduate student Rachel Louise Moran

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research study entitled America's Big Fat Problem: Government by Advertising in the 1950s and 1960s

This spring, Rachel Louise Moran—a Penn State doctoral candidate in History and Women's Studies—was awarded a Doctoral Dissertation Fellowship by the Charlotte W. Newcombe Foundation, one of only 21 graduate students (out of nearly 600 applicants) to receive this honor. Melissa Beattie-Moss of the Office of University Relations recently sat down with Rachel to learn more about her work, her time at Penn State, and her hopes for the future.

The foundation, founded in 1979 as a bequest from the estate of the Philadelphia philanthropist of the same name, bestows a \$25,000 award on twenty-one of the most promising graduate students in the humanities and social sciences, specifically those writing dissertations addressing questions of ethics and religious values. The Newcombe Fellowship is the largest and most prestigious such award in the nation, and many of those who have held the fellowship as graduate students have gone on to distinguished scholarly careers.

I sat down with Rachel to learn more about her work, her time at Penn State, and her hopes for the future.

1. What led you to pursue research on the politics of gender and physique?

I came to graduate school at Penn State to take advantage of the unique dual-degree doctoral program in History and Women's Studies. I knew I was interested in researching gender, politics, and power relations and took a course on "Gender and Welfare" taught by Jennifer Mittelstadt (now at Rutgers) my first semester here. I've always had an interest in food and physique, so I began to research the history of food stamps in the U.S. I was surprised at how much was at stake in this understudied program: issues of families, consumption, poverty, and state-citizen relations. This research became the focus of my Master's degree, and then an article in the *Journal of American History* ("Consuming Relief: Food Stamps and the New Welfare of the New Deal.")



The President's Council on Physical Fitness urged the shrinking of the American waistline through advertising campaigns, as in this ad from the early 1960s. Cold War anxieties made physical fitness into a major priority of Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, at the same time the post-war economic boom made for more sedentary Americans." — Rachel Louise Moran

I so much enjoyed merging my interests in state politics and food/body issues that I just couldn't let it go when it came time to pick a dissertation topic. Debates over food stamps in the 1930s often included anxieties about malnourished, underweight, and weak men, men who were unable to adequately serve the nation in work and war. I was particularly interested in this early discussion of "underweight" men, and the interest of government agencies in regulating the weights of citizens. With the help of Lori Ginzberg (History and Women's Studies), I began to consider the relationship between masculine strength and the government, and with the assistance of Greg Eghigian and Chloe Silverman, I started analyzing the ways that the development of standardized weights and measurements fed these federal interests. A National Science Foundation Dissertation Improvement Grant enabled me to conduct an extraordinary amount of primary source archival research. I've worked at the National Archives, the National Library of Medicine, the National Agricultural Library, the John F. Kennedy Library, and the Dwight Eisenhower Library, among others. And going through these seemingly endless boxes, I have found that the U.S. federal government has long been interested in the weight and physique of its citizens, often in specific, numerically oriented ways. From 4-H health contests in the 1920s to Civilian Conservation Corps weight-gain statistics in the 1930s, from Selective Service rejections during World War II to the development of President's Council on Youth Fitness in the 1950s, measuring Americans has consistently been a state interest. This seemingly personal or individual realm, then, is historically actually a very public concern.

2. How will being a Newcombe Fellow help you—in practical terms, as well as more broadly—with the research you're doing?

The Newcombe, in its simplest form, frees me from teaching or research responsibilities for twelve months. In other words, I'll have a full year to finish my dissertation with no other obligations in the way. It's a truly incredible opportunity, allowing me not only to finish my dissertation in a timely manner (by spring or summer 2012) but also to finish it thoughtfully and painstakingly, not in the hectic final push so many graduate students are forced to finish in. It is also, of course, an incredible honor to receive such a well-regarded award, and I'm sure it will not hurt to have it when I go on the job market!

3. What was reaction to the news that you'd been selected for the Fellowship?

I had been told I was a finalist a couple weeks prior to the final announcement—but there were a good seventy finalists. It genuinely was, as the cliché goes, an honor just to make it that far. When I received the email stating that I actually was one of this year's twenty-one fellows I was ecstatic. I re-read the email a couple of times just to make sure it was real, and then rushed to tell my advisors. They were also really excited for me of course, especially Dr. Ginzberg, who had won the Newcombe herself when she was a graduate student. When I have looked at the lists of fellows, both for this year and years past, I've been so impressed by the previous winners. They have these really fascinating projects, which approach issues of ethics from all sorts of disciplinary angles. It's an extraordinary feeling to know that now I am on that list.

4. How has being at Penn State nurtured your work and growth as a researcher?

Penn State has been such an incredible institution at which to work. I believe that only one other university in the country has the dual-degree program I've pursued here. I have also worked closely with the University's Richards Civil War Era Center, a unique resource

that has been a bastion of intellectual and financial support. I've also had access to travel and fellowship funding that has made my rather time-consuming project possible. This includes funding from the Department of History, the College of Liberal Arts, and the Rock Ethics Center. This past year I have had the fantastic honor of holding the Crawford Fellowship in Ethical Inquiry, which has allowed me to focus exclusively on my dissertation and travel extensively.

5. Where do you see your research interests growing from here?

I absolutely love to research and analyze history, so there is no question that I want to pursue an academic career. I look forward to a career of writing and teaching. In particular, I know I continue to be excited by the development of the U.S. state and how it mattered in people's day-to-day lives. I don't know exactly what I am going to look at next—finishing the dissertation and then turning it into a book manuscript is plenty to work on - but it will undoubtedly entangle histories of U.S. politics, gender, and the social sciences.

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