

PREFACE

What is your *one question*—the question all your scholarly work interrogates? I was asked this on a job interview on the car ride between campus interviews and dinner. I answered that it was the connection between knowledge and embodied experience. How does what we know shape what we feel? How does what is within the available knowable reality, which is always so highly contingent on cultural and historical time and place, shape how we make sense of the world through to our deepest somatic registers? My work seems to continually hover around the kinds of things we might experience as most intimate and untethered, then tries to move outward, curious about what knowledge—emergent, institutionalized, structural—frames and molds and sustains it.

My first book, *Labor Disorders in Neoliberal Italy* (2011), examined “mobbing,” a term in Europe and Italy to name workplace harassment, exclusionary and isolating behaviors that typically forced workers into quitting. At the time of my work, mobbing appeared to be proliferating—as evidenced by new counseling centers dedicated to help “victims of mobbing”; a work-related

illness named as a result of mobbing; new occupational laws, regulations, and best practices; new human resources training; and news stories and media dedicated to mobbing. Why was mobbing suddenly capturing the attention of Italians? I found it especially fascinating that this new mounting knowledge about mobbing was disseminated so rapidly and persuasively that a person would understand their own stomachache as “mobbing sickness” or look at a colleague and think, “mobber.” Understanding why such naming was possible, I argued, emerged from a long history of safeguards and cultural expectations about work and longevity, rapid neoliberalizing in the 1990s and 2000s, and an increasing sense of precarity. To identify as a victim of mobbing was wrapped up in a whole constellation of knowledges and structures.

This project began when I heard about national events such as Unified Italy for the Correct Scientific Information (Italia Unità per la corretta informazione scientifica) with the hashtag “Italy4science.” One panel of scientific speakers in Milan was supported by the Democratic Party (Partito Democratico) and European Federalist Radical (Radicale-Federalista Europeo) Party and Left Ecology and Freedom Party (Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà). Why did science need defending? And why was such an event for “correct information” sponsored by left-wing political parties? In 2013, I heard about the work of the Committee for the Investigation of Pseudoscientific Claims (Comitato Italiano per il Controllo delle Affermazioni sulle Pseudoscienze, CICAP) and their Day against Superstition (Una Giornata Anti-superstizione). Why would people want to protest superstition? At the event, I watched as members of CICAP earnestly tried to persuade Italians that black cats, mirror breaking, and salt spilling had no power to bring them misfortune or illness. They encouraged participants to throw the salt and aimed to prove, with the power of a statistical dice game, that superstition was a flawed logic. In this book, I build toward my fieldwork with CICAP in the last chapter (chapter 5) even though it was this very mystery that launched *The Truth Society*. But that image—of CICAP activists trying so earnestly to encourage salt spilling and persuade onlookers of its insignificance and convert them to proper rational understanding of salt—struck me deeply. Why did salt tip from a silly measure of predicting misfortune to a dangerous sign that fellow Italians were believing in false truths? Once again, I began an intellectual journey to understand how particular kinds of knowledge about the world were part of reimagining this familiar ritual, and how seemingly unrelated political and technological material change reshaped its stakes.