Altre **Modernità** / Otras **Modernidades** / Autres **Modernités** / Other **Modernities**
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American Uncles and Aunts: Generations, Genealogies, Bildungs in 1930s Novels[1]

by Cinzia Scarpino

> *A generation is sometimes a more satisfactory unit for the study of humanity than a lifetime; and spiritual generations are as easy to demark as physical ones.*
>
> Mary Antin, *The Promised Land* (1912)

This paper stems from a larger research project aimed at considering diverse morphological aspects of a wide corpus of American novels written between 1929 and 1941, such as the intersection of certain chronotopes in particular genres and subgenres, and the reconfiguration of the sociological premises and narrative structure of American Bildungs.[2]

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[2] In defining the corpus of my study I followed two main criteria, one of inclusion (bestsellers and Pulitzers along with proletarian novels, noir and generally acclaimed "canonical" works), and one of exclusion (the absence of an American setting). Since a genre's unity is defined, in Bakhtinian terms, by its chronotope, the sixty-two-novels corpus has been divided into four main genres: the historical novel; the social novel (a large container for a number of works set in America in the first three decades of the 20th century which can be divided into three main genres: novels of initiation, novels of development, and noir); the proletarian novel (strike and conversion novels, urban-ethnic novels, bottom-dogs novels); the modernist epic (Dos Passos's *U.S.A* and parts of Jospehine Herbst's *Trexler Trilogy*). By intersecting time and space settings, I have analysed the recurrence of some macro-locales along the axis of time (novels set in colonial, and frontier past; novels set during the Civil War; novels set at the turn of the century; novels set in the first two decades of the XX century; novels set in the 1920s and 1930s).

More specifically, while studying that corpus in the light of the structural interrelation between a generational discourse and the novel of self-development, a "minor" and so far little critically noticed theme has gradually emerged: the presence in a small group of novels of uncle and aunt figures who contribute decisively to the education of their nephews and nieces and the formation of their class, ethnic, and gendered identities. Therefore, the analysis of these otherwise ancillary presence will serve as an exemplifying case of an ongoing research on the culturally and literary "enlarged" genealogies of the Great Depression, their relation to the renewed centrality of sociological and anthropological studies, and their effects on possible re-adaptations of American "novels of formation".[3] The case-study part will thus focus on two ethnic Bildungs (Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep*, 1934, and Pietro Di Donato's *Christ in Concrete*, 1939),[4] and two female, nonethnic and nonurban Bildungs opened to trilogy cycles (Josephine Herbst's *Pity is Not Enough*, 1933, and Katherine Anne Porter's long story or short novel *Old Mortality*, 1937).

The novelistic outlining of possible (or impossible) Bildungs (be them ethnic, proletarian, female, or a combination of the three) in the 1930s runs parallel to a historical, socio-cultural and literary context nourished by the flourishing of disciplines like sociology, anthropology and ethnology which are increasingly oriented towards archival inclusiveness and cultural relativism (Krupat 1992: 84-85). Financially supported and promulgated by New Deal FWP (Federal Writers' Project) agency, the researches carried out by field work anthropologists and ethnologists promoted the mapping of genealogies that had been previously written off from official records and mainstream chronicles (those of Native Americans, African Americans, and non-Anglo Saxon immigrants). At the same time, Parkian sociologists continued their empirical charting of the urban underworlds and their marginalized population (drunkards, prostitutes, gangs, juvenile delinquents) (Cappetti 1993: 20-58). By making room for wider genealogical trees within a national "usable past",[5] the combined work of cultural anthropology and the FWP helped affirm the vitality of a composite anthropological legacy.

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[3] As I will later explain, I use the term "Bildungsroman" not as a historically and geographically specific term defining a group of German novels written in the 18th-century but as a more open form designating the protagonist's growth into adolescence and young adulthood.

[4] Whereas Paul, the protagonist of *Christ in Concrete*, is almost an adolescent and his story is definitely a coming-of-age one (with his entering the adult world exemplified by his first job as a bricklayer), David, the protagonist of *Call it Sleep*, is a six-year old boy and his story can be defined as one of initiation rather than of formation/Bildung. However, since 1920's and 1930's immigrant novels of the ghetto stage the hardships of street and tenement life, the borders between middle childhood and adolescence often pale, thus blurring the differences between initiation and formation. That is, by growing up in a poor neighborhood immigrants' sons are often forced to compress their childhood and adolescence into a single, very brief, period of education before adulthood

As America started dealing with its "marginal" genealogical stratifications on a national scale, second-generation ethnic writers as well as working-class writers and a few mainstream authors took to writing overtly or covertly autobiographical novels centered around a confrontation between "fathers" and "sons" which often resulted in the latter's search for alternative adult figures.[6] Reflecting both a national experience historically shaped by flexible familiar patterns, and a conjuncture marked by heightened intergenerational tensions, some novelists conveyed the possibility of a generational "side model" through the representation of uncles and aunts. In a country which had based its first indigenous literary genre – the Puritan jeremiad – on a generational paradigm and whose national identity had been ceaselessly shaped by further ethno-genesis (Bercovitch 1978; Sollors 1986), the social crisis of the Great Depression added tremendous pressure on parent/child dynamics, exposing it to new definitions.

In fact, the novelistic representations of the 1930s recurrently stage parental figures who are either enfeebled (humiliated as they cannot provide for their families) or absent (with fathers on the lam, or dying on the job, and mothers perishing from childbirth), and sons/daughters caught in-between the lack of material opportunities and the longing for private and collective rebellion. It is in these sociological hiatuses that uncles and aunts enter the intergenerational conflict and their nephews' education: not from the front door, but from the rear door.[7]

No wonder then, that in *Christ in Concrete* Paul's father, Geremio, dies after the first chapter at the construction site and in *Call It Sleep* the biological paternity of David's father turned out to be questioned by the protagonist; while in *Pity Is Not Enough*, Victoria's father is already dead and in *Old Mortality*, Miranda's mother died when she was still a child. These very interstices of parental loss and absence form the narrative space in which the characters of Luigi, Bertha, Catherine and Amy are inserted and play both a sociological and an attantial function in their nephews' Bildungs as somewhat eccentric adult models.

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[5] In fact, the roots of American Studies date back to the 1930s, when the urgency of an intellectually "usable" past informed the writings of Vernon Parrington and Perry Miller, and a long-abiding scholarly and teaching paradigm. (See Izzo 2004: 80-83).

[6] I'm thinking of Michael Gold's *Jews Without Money* (1930), Jack Conroy's *The Disinherited* (1933), Edward Dahlberg's *Bottom Dogs* (1929), Nelson Algren's *Somebody in Boots* (1935), Thomas Bell's *Out of this Furnace* (1941), Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl* (1939, 1978), Agnes Smedley's *Daughter of Earth* (1929), James T. Farrell's Studs Lonigan Trilogy (1932, 34, 35), Tillie Olsen's *Yonnondio* (1974), Carson McCullers' *Heart is a Lonely Hunter* (1940), and also bestsellers like Pearl Buck's *The Good Earth* (1931), M. K. Rawlings' *The Yearling* (1938), Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936), John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* (1939), Erskine Caldwell's *God's Little Acre* (1933) and *Tobacco Road* (1932).

[7] It is worth noticing – and worth further inquiry – that the presence of uncle and aunt figures is not central to some other "enlarged" genealogies represented in Bildungs of the same period such as in African American novels presided by the acephalous families of Richard Wright's *Native Son* (1940) and Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (1937), and proletarian novels representing young protagonists running away from family to take to the road and embark upon the communist cause. As for Richard Wright, interestingly enough figures of uncles and aunts who do not enter his debut novel will flood his 1945 memoir *Black Boy* which represents three aunts and four uncles.

Whereas in Herbst and Porter's novels the role played by uncles and aunts seem to renew their presence within an American literary lineage of nineteenth-century domestic narratives written by white upper-class, Anglo-Saxon women (such as Louisa May Alcott and Harriet Beecher Stowe), in Roth and Di Donato's works the appearance of these figures can be traced back to some characteristics of the books written by immigrants in the previous decades. In unraveling the problematical status of the familiar yet concealed characters of uncles and aunts as central to their nieces' Bildungs, Herbst and Porter come to terms with a matrilineal narrative and a fragmentary, discontinuous and anti-hierarchical quest for truth. Meant to undermine official history, the "side" narratives concerned with Aunt Catherine and Aunt Amy originate in the least promising events and places and in the sentimental testimony. Conversely, Uncle Luigi and Aunt Bertha's influence on Paul and David tends to confirm the ineluctable impossibility of any ethnic Bildung at this point of national history (Japtok 2005: 28): the vitalistic evocation of the "tenement" and "street" chronotopes in which these characters exert such agency stage a "cycle of the defeated" that ultimately attests to the inaccessibility of any social "development" to young second-generation immigrants.

BILDUNG, GREAT DEPRESSION AND GENERATIONS

If we were to stick to etymology, we would introduce the strategic (re)appearance of American uncles and aunts in the above mentioned group of novels by going back to the thematic root *Gen-*, from Greek *gignomai* ("I am-am born-become"), which (Webster 1961: 944) includes the semantic fields of race, descent, kinship, sexuality, and genre (species). "Generation", "genealogy", "gender", and "genre" derived, through ensuing combinations, from that same root.

If the portrayal of the role played by the secondary characters of Luigi, Bertha, Catherine and Amy in the development (or aborted development) of the four protagonists can be read at the intersection of generational and genealogical discourses with gender and genre, it is necessary to place those narratives within the historical, cultural and literary period to which they belong. To do so means to highlight how socio-cultural phenomena and epistemological transformations worked, consciously or inadvertently, upon 1930s novelists' imagination in terms of motifs and forms.

No other period in United States history as the Great Depression has fueled a broader and more systematic cultural and political program devoted to the geographical, anthropological, ethnological, and artistic revaluation of genealogies rooted "in the American grain" which had been long dismissed by mainstream and national chronicles as "regional" or "vernacular" culture (Cappetti 1993; Steiner 1983; Miller 2004). The social and economic urgency of that decade encountered an extraordinary intellectual ferment and ushered in the not rarely joint work of federal agencies (whose goals was to reclaim the dignity of recording the existence of geographical margins and the socially marginalized), anthropological studies (aimed at the recognition and preservation of oral traditions), and artistic manifestos (committed to giving voice to the subaltern or, better, to letting the subaltern speak for themselves).[8]

It should come as no surprise that 1930s novelists faced with such enlarged genealogical plots would turn to the *Bildungsroman*: a genre almost morphologically founded on intergenerational patterns (*gignomai*: or, "I'm born"), and formally engaged in providing a "new articulation of national space" (Moretti 1998: 45). As for the critical opportunity of using the term "Bildungsroman" in an American context it is necessary to refer to the definitional dispute proliferated amongst scholars ever since 1987, the year in which a very influential essay by Frederick Amrine came out, and Franco Moretti published *The Way of the World: the Bildungsroman in European Culture* in which he held that the genre was geographically and historically bound to 18th- and 19th-century Europe (Germany, France, England).[9] Without lingering here on Moretti's exclusion of American novels from his study (I will say later of his exclusion of proletarian novels), and aware of overlooking other possible literary genealogies concerned with "formation" and "development" in the New World, I will pay special attention to how some American adaptations/appropriations of the *Bildungsroman* seem to reach maturity in the 1930s.

During the Great Depression, immigrants' tales of transformation consciously mirror genealogies inhabiting two worlds and consequently informing two-faced narrative choices derived from linguistic and formal negotiations between old and new models (Japtok 2005: 25). As Martin Japtok maintains in his study of African American and Jewish American *Bildungsromans*, autobiography and *Bildungsroman* often blur and subtly merge into each other in works like James Weldon Johnson's *The Autobiography of an Ex-Coloured Man* and Anzia Yezierska's *Bread Givers* but both genres (and both books) rest on the portrayal of "the hyphenated self's attempt to make it in America" (Boelhower 1991: 133) and "flourish in unstable times" (Japtok 2005: 24).[10] In fact, the representation of self-development in Jewish American novels adapts and rewrites the motif of the most autochthonous American genre: Benjamin Franklin's self-made man archetypal *Autobiography* (Bolaki 2011: 20-22). By the end of the nineteenth century, the same thematic and morphologic nucleus is not only reworked in the Horatio Alger's novels "from rags to riches" and in *The Rise of Silas Lepham* (1885) by W.D. Howells, but becomes the ideal model for the autobiographical construction of immigrant selves in Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912). Antin, a first-generation Jewish American writer, inscribes her symbolic Bildung on an autobiography which rests on the evocation of the passage from the Old World to the New World (and her rebirth as an American citizen) and the consequent transformation of herself ("I was born, I have lived, and I have been made over", Antin 1912: xi) and her narrative stance: "I could speak in the third person and not feel that I was masquerading. I can analyze my subject, I can reveal everything; for *she*, and not *I*, is my real heroine" (*Ibid.*).

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[8] See Cappetti (1993: 164-168) about Algren, Farell, and Wright's Chicago novels and their thematic as well as formal indebtedness to their previous or simultaneous work with FWP.

[9] For a brief bibliographical survey see the following bibliographical references in the works cited: Moretti 1987; Amrine 1987; John H. Smith 1987; Jeffrey Sammons 1988; Rita Felski 1989; James Hardin 1991; Marc Redfield 1996, G. Summerfield, L. Downward 2010; Stella Bolaki 2011; Ellen McWilliams 2009; Jed Esty 2012; Boes 2012. For a thorough and detailed state-of-the art on the topic see Boes 2006.

That is, Antin writes the autobiography of her life before and after the "exodus" from the "Jewish Pale" of the Russian Empire to the United States but announces that being reborn in America she is ready to switch to a novel in the third person.

Beside self-made man parables appropriated by Jewish American immigrants (Mary Antin and Anzia Yezierska), and the first examples of ghetto novels (Abraham Cahan), one should not forget the line of female, nonethnic, *(Ver)Bildungs* (themselves descending from the "Novels of Development" written by women between 1820 and 1870): Kate Chopin's *The Awakening* (1899), and Edith Wharton's *The House of Mirth* (1905) which portray white upper-class protagonists consecrated to stifling Bildungs (Summerfield, Downward 2010).[11] Even moving down the social ladder and intersecting "rags to riches" and "young of the provinces" archetypes as in Theodore Dreiser's naturalistic urban novel *Sister Carrie* (1900), the possibilities of positive female Bildung are doomed to failure (Holman 1979: 168).

In the Thirties, these different genealogies of literary Bildungs are remodeled through the cultural watershed marked by the Wall Street Crash: for the most sensitive intellectuals as well as novelists the economic crisis is a physical and metaphorical crack-up, an earthquake capable of investing the borders and boundaries of American literature, its settings and characters (Swados 1966; Wilson 1964).

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[10] In his study on ethnic autobiographies William Boelhower also states that "the rigid and stereotypical narrative pattern that generally emerges can be read as a negative of the liturgically sustained model self of Anglo-Saxon origin." (Boelhower 1991: 133).

[11] Giovanna Summerfield proposes the use of the term "novels of awakening" when the protagonist commits suicide; "novels of development" when she survives by accepting compromises, and "novels of action" when "female development goes hand in hand with social, political, and economic development" (Summerfield and Downward 2010: 6, 152).

Thus, significant changes in the literary aesthetics of the Depression are produced not only by the common awareness of the economic and social collapse of the country but also by the contributions of the FWP which between 1935 and 1943 hires thousands of writers (Nelson Algren, Richard Wright, Anzia Yezierska, Jerre Mangione, Ralph Ellison, Jack Conroy, Zora Neale Hurston and John Steinbeck, just to mention some of the most notable names) and employs them in documenting American folklore and oral histories, and in gathering materials for migration studies (Mullen 2004: 361-62). It is also thanks to the broad sociological, ethnographic, and political discourses and practices to which writers are exposed within New Deal agencies and intellectual left-wing circles that in a substantial corpus of novels the "decisive experience" in the protagonist's development is, to go back to Moretti, no longer the encounter with the *alien* (American Indian, Afro American or "the savage") but the *alien*'s encounter/confrontation with America (Moretti 2000: 3, note 1). Furthermore, if one considers that the proletarian novel, the subgenre most specifically tied to the Great Depression, is informed by female/male workers' narratives of self-development, one may dispute also the second "morphological" exclusion claimed by Moretti, the one regarding working-class Bildungs.[12]

Although the inclusion of marginal voices within the central axis of literature is by no means a new phenomenon in American letters, critics by the likes of Michael Denning, Barbara Foley, and Paula Rabinowitz acknowledge that a renewed interest in their representation emerges in the 1930s (Denning 1997; Foley 1993, Rabinowitz 1991). The return of narratives focused on the underclass and the outcasts may be read against the background of an era in which social sciences are guided by the assumptions of cultural relativism. In addition to the sociological researches of the Chicago School, the anthropologists led by Franz Boas at Columbia University (among whom Ruth Benedict and Margaret Mead) foster an epistemological revolution in their discipline also by relying on federal financial support (Darnell 2001: 327). The combined work of Columbia anthropologists and New Deal programs aimed at mapping the poorest neighborhoods of American cities as well as the most destitute and less-travelled regions of the country is shaped by an underlying archaeological design to chronicle and catalogue "folk history".[13] Among the most original contributions accomplished under the aegis of the FWP are thus folklore collections (also thanks to the supervision of John A. Lomax) and migration and ethnic studies such as *The Italians of New York* (1938, on which we will have more to say later), and *Jewish Family Circles of New York* (1939).

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[12] One "may" dispute but then, as we will see, *Call It Sleep* and *Christ in Concrete* – which are both written by working class and self-taught novelists – represent young male protagonists' arrested development or anti-Bildungs. To further emphasize the analogies between English working-class Bildungs (e.g. D.H. Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*) and American ones, Morris Dickstein associates *Call It Sleep* with "the emotional intensity of D.H. Lawrence." (Dickstein 2009: 38).

[13] The 1930s see the publication of socio-scientific studies as *American Humor* (1931) by Constance Rourke, *Patterns of Culture* (1934) by Ruth Benedict, *Of Mules and Men* (1935) by Zora Neale Hurston which "became virtual bestsellers in their own right". (Miller 2004: 375).

While the federal institutions are busy constructing a national archive wherein to entrust, preserve and classify the traces of an American past (from oral legends to vernacular architecture), in 1942 Margaret Mead looks at some recurring generational dynamics within American society, reaching her well-known conclusion that "we are all third generation" (Mead 2000: 30-31; Sollors 1986: 208-230). Within the main national generational pattern, Mead writes, it is not important what generation Americans belong to by descent but what generation they embrace by consent. Mindful of the Puritan jeremiads, she argues that second-generation Americans cannot help but lack the strength of the first-generation to which they nevertheless continue to strive. Hence, biological "filiation" is overcome by national "affiliation" to the Founding Fathers (the ideal first generation).

Then she adds:

> Most Americans are third generation, they have just really arrived […] Almost any one of them who inspects his own ancestry, even though it goes back many more generations than three, will find a gaping hole somewhere in the family tree (Mead 2000: 31).

In a culture that, in Werner Sollors' definition, derives many of its motifs from "the stresses of adolescence and ethnogenesis (the individual and the collective 'coming of age' development and accomplishment after separating from a parent/country)" (Sollors 1986: 211), the anthropological turn of the 1930s is replete with literary implications: the ideal project embraced by consent can be imagined as part of a more inclusive past, a narrative heritage capable of encompassing larger genealogies. Beside the lineage of Pilgrim Fathers and Founding Fathers, Boasian anthropologists and New Deal reformers start studying Native American, African American and recent immigrants' ancestries by simultaneously recognizing the multiplicity of national genealogical chains and codifying their missing links and discontinuities.

The process of acknowledging and representing a more complex country's heritage along historical, cultural, and literary genealogies is often structurally contained within the discourse of intergenerational narratives which, in turn, mirrors both the discontinuities and porosity of oral histories and the sociological tensions of the era. It is also within this fissured sociological and anthropological terrain that the minor and secondary figures of uncles and aunts come to the fore of cultural production in Walt Disney's cartoons and comics. With its acephalous families made of appeasing uncles and yielding nephews, [14] *Mickey Mouse* bypasses any father/son confrontation and hints at the possibility of a side variation which does not cancel the second generation *tout court* but divests it of any parental authority.

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[14] In 1928 Walt Disney produced the first Mickey Mouse cartoon. And early in 1931 a syndicated Mickey Mouse comic strip appeared.

Although the importance of uncles and aunts in 1930s fiction is not as conspicuous as in Walt Disney's creation, it is nevertheless illustrative of at least two novelistic generational representations: immigrants' sagas and female genealogies. In the former, as we will see, Aunts Sally and Aunt Polly are renamed into the exotic accents of Italian-American and Jewish-American writers through a modernist elaboration of realistic sketches and impossible Bildungs, while in the latter they are turned into dramatically round characters and offered to modernist queer closures which deny the marriage and paternity (McCrea 2011:7) and maternity.

GENRES, GENDER, GENEALOGIES

The characters of uncles and aunts who play significant roles in Great Depression novels do so in relation to the development of teenager protagonists and are not numerically but morphologically relevant.

On closer inspection, the limited cluster of uncle and aunt figures emerging from an otherwise extensive corpus may be read as the consequence of the structural absence of a genre – the expanded family saga able to accommodate enlarged family trees – that has not fare well in American letters up to that moment. With the exception of two epics of the previous decade – *In the American Grain* by William Carlos Williams (1925) and *The Making of Americans* by Gertrude Stein (first edition, 1925) – only during the 1930s, with William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha sagas, John Dos Passos' a-genealogical epic (*U.S.A.*), and James T. Farrell's naturalistic Irish-Chicagoans *Studs Lonigan* trilogy, broad generational and genealogical plots seem to enter the American literary imagination as never before.[15] And yet it is not in Faulkner, Dos Passos, and Farrell's novels that one is to find uncles and aunts but in two nonethnic writers who open up their narratives to a cyclical pattern and rework the domestic novel of formation in a modernist perspective,[16] and two second-generation ethnic writers who set their novels out of the epic realm and well into the Bildung.

If studying the figures of aunts and uncles in Herbst's *Pity Is Not Enough* and Porter's *Old Mortality* may suggest the usefulness of looking at some, not unproblematic, continuities with the genealogy of the domestic or sentimental novel flourished in postbellum America, their sociological and literary affiliation needs nevertheless to be measured against cultural genealogies rooted in the historical becoming of their own time.

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[15] "Perhaps the most striking and unsettling aspect of *U.S.A.* is the lack of any coherent connection between the characters: no family or set of families constitutes the world of the novel […] Dos Passos's lists of characters are just that, not the epic genealogies that epic novelists ordinarily create" (Denning 1997: 182).

[16] Alcott's short story "Eight Cousins, or the Aunt Hill" (1875) tells of the importance of aunts and uncles in the formation of Rose, the orphan protagonist.

In her revised introduction to the second edition of *Women's Fiction*, Nina Baym ascribes pre- and post-bellum women's fiction not to the *Bildungsroman* ("which value self-expression over self-discipline") but to the novel of education (aimed to forward and accomplish self-discipline), laying claim to the didactic (let alone Protestant) nature of female protagonists who "represent instances of the character that the author wants the reader to become" (Baym 1993: xix).

The horizon of expectations of this huge and commercially successful fictional genealogy is domestic and bourgeois, private in the settings, political in its attempt to stabilize the middle class, and definitely anti-suffragist (*Ibid.*: x-xxxiv). To read the novels by Herbst and Porter – two writers born into middle- and upper-class families and then turned into committed members of the Popular Front and the Communist Party – in the light of Baym's categories means to point out some necessary developments of those narrative forms over the last decades of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth, when the struggles for women's emancipation enter (upper-class) female *Bildungsromans* labeled as "novels of awakening" (Chopin and Wharton), and women's suffrage is achieved.

In *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics*, Rita Felski subsumes under the genre "novels of self-discovery" – which would, in turn, appropriate the *Bildungsroman* by "thematizing gender as the central problem for women attempting to reconcile individual and social demands" (Felski 1989: 122) – two possible variants of the novel of "formation": the first one, defined as feminist *Bildungsroman*, describing and promoting social commitment to a group, activism, resistance, and movement outward into the public realm; the second one, indebted to romantic individualism, depicting a process of awakening as a "retreat from society into narcissistic care of the Self" (Boes 2006: 235) and placing "truth and meaning in an edenic past rather than in the future" (Felski 1989: 126). Whereas Herbst's Victoria responds to the feminist participatory variant of female Bildung, Porter's Miranda seems to experience a more mixed kind of individual "awakening". In both cases, though, the protagonists' development is made possible through oral tales which gradually reveal themselves as a vehicle of gender oppression and whose ambiguity is often unraveled by the recovery of dusty documents from attics and parlors.

Pity Is Not Enough opens the so called "Trexler trilogy" (completed with *The Executioner Waits*, 1934, and *Rope of Gold*, 1939) and may be read as a "revision of the domestic novel" based on the "accumulated (hi)stories of several generations" handed down to the protagonist (Victoria Wendel-Change) and her sisters by her mother (Anne Wendel) "in the form of […] reminiscences and the letters she kept in her attic" (Rabinowitz 1991: 139, 158). Victoria's formation, which will be fully fledged in the third volume, emanates from her mother's stories on the Reconstruction, a historical background displayed through the digressive and non-linear perspective of a familiar saga presided by uncles and aunts. In *Old Mortality*, Miranda's formation is itself open to further narrative developments but is not disclosed against a defined and recognizable historical context. Inspired by Aunt Amy's model, her "awakening" is nevertheless affected by a double and equally firm departure from the oppressing cultural context of the patriarchal South and the feminist and suffragist cause.

One might then wonder why in the same years that see the publication of Herbst and Porter's female Bildungs uncle and aunt figures are not to be found in second-generation immigrant women's novels. To begin with statistical evidence, among the emerging women writers of the era (Agnes Smedley, Meridel Le Sueur, Tess Slesinger, Clara Weatherwax, Grace Lumpkin, Mary H. Vorse, Lauren Gilfillan, Tillie Olsen, Herbst and Porter, but also Margaret Mitchell, Carson McCullers, Zora Neale Hurston, M. K. Rawlings, Mary McCarthy) only Olsen and Slesinger come from first-generation immigrant families, and yet neither *Yonnondio*, published in the Seventies, nor *The Unpossessed* (1934) thematize ethnicity. With the exception of Herbst and Porter (who are nevertheless two of the most influential writers of the decade), the little relevance of uncles and aunts in the works by other women novelists could also entail a question of style. Acclaimed by Michael Gold and his leftist articles in the New Masses as the only genre suitable to working-class revolutionary narratives, the "strike and conversion novel" is intended to nurture an oppositional class-consciousness through exemplary collective Bildungs, showing limited if no interest in recovering familiar histories. It is hardly unexpected then that despite Roth, Di Donato, Herbst, and Porter's political engagement with the Left, *Call It Sleep* would be dismissed in a paragraph by "an anonymous reviewer (who sounds very much like Gold)" (Sollors 2008: 141), while Herbst's trilogy (especially the closing volume, *Rope of Gold*, dedicated to Victoria's Bildung) would receive mixed reviews by the Marxist intellectual and editor of the Partisan Review Philip Rahv (Coiner 1985: 182).

In Michael Denning's definition *Call It Sleep* and *Christ in Concrete* are "ghetto pastorals", "tales of growing up in Little Italy, the Lower East Side, Bronzeville, and Chinatown, written by plebeian men and women of these ethnic working-class neighborhoods", impossible Bildungs "of children with no future" (Denning 1997: 230, 248). This group of novels are indebted to those written by first-generation immigrants inasmuch as they derive some motifs (life in the ghetto, the trope of the arrival at Ellis Island, the chronotopes of the tenement and the street), and, inevitably, some formal and linguistic features (the autobiographical mold, the use of mother-tongue interpolations), and reconfigure them. In Italian American literature, for instance, the novelties introduced by second-generation writers lay in language and genre. As stated by Martino Marazzi in *Voices of Italian America*, Italian American writers who mature in the Thirties are interested in "refashioning […] the overly autobiographical modes of the first books by Italian immigrants, which had appeared during the previous decades". Second-generation authors such as Garibaldi Lapolla, Pietro Di Donato, and John Fante who abandon Italian and turn from memoirs to short stories and novels, forge their own language "to express the social, psychological, and political plight of a different kind of Italian […]" (Marazzi 2004: 184).

In Jewish American literature, the linguistic discourse had been already "settled" in the first two decades of the Twentieth century: by 1925, Abraham Cahan, who extensively used Yiddish in his writings, had published his two "ghetto novels" *Yekl: A Tale of the New York Ghetto* (1896) and *The Rise of David Levinsky* (1917) in English, and Mary Antin's *The Promised Land* (1912), and Anzia Yezierska's short-story collection *Hungry Hearts* (1920) and autobiographical novel *The Bread Givers* (1925) had come out.[17] But there was still room for morphological innovations of the genre of the novel of formation. If *Call It Sleep* can be read as "a paradigmatic, Jewish novel of initiation" (Materassi 1996: 39) the freshness and complexity it achieves originate in the different kind of Bildung at stake: no longer a young man's but a child's.

The characters of uncles and aunts who emerge in *Christ in Concrete* and *Call It Sleep* function as unaware generational references in their nephews' Bildungs and end up contributing to their condition of physical as well as metaphorical entrapment.

CI LUIGI AND TANTA BOITA

Pietro Di Donato (1911-1992) was born in West Hoboken, New Jersey, the son of Italian immigrants from Abruzzo. He started working as a bricklayer after his father's death at a construction site, an ur-theme which would be the nucleus of his first short story, "Christ in Concrete" (1937), built around Geremio's tragic end stifled in concrete under collapsing scaffolds. That story would then become the first chapter of the novel by the same name focused on Geremio's firstborn, Paul, and his hopeless initiation to bricklaying and life in the ghetto. Closer to a juxtaposition of episodes than to a real novel, and written as if Di Donato "had no idea of the future that awaited these characters" (Gardaphé 1993: xii), the book was preferred to Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* in 1939 Book-of-the-Month-Club and signaled the existence – and value – of a then emerging second-generation Italian American literature. Mari Tomasi's *Deep Grow the Roots* (1940) and *Like Lesser Gods* (1949), Jerre Mangione's *Mount Allegro* (1943), both hired by FWP, and John Fante's *Wait Until Spring, Bandini* (1938), *Ask the Dust* (1939), and *Dago Red* (1940) bear witness to the vitality of that extremely fecund season.[18]

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[17] One of the few exceptions is Sholem Asch, who will publish the English version of *Uncle Moses* "only" in 1938.

[18] One of the stories collected in *Dago Red* (1940), "One of Us" is built around an uncle whose son dies. *Mount Allegro* also features many uncles and aunts, see in particular chapter "Family Party" and Jerre Mangione's evocation of Uncle Luigi and Uncle Nino's talks about Sicily: "Santa Maria! You mean to tell me you don't know what Sicily is? My uncle Luigi was shocked by such question. "What do they teach in school, anyway? At your age […] I knew all about the United States. Can you name the forty-six

As David Minter states while analyzing 1930s working-class and bottom-dogs writers, it is hard to tell what is fictional apart from what is autobiographical in the works by Jack Conroy, Edward Dahlberg, Thomas Bell and Pietro Di Donato as they all write "memoirs that resemble novels and novels that resemble memoirs" (Minter 1996: 187). In Pietro/Paul's Bildung the character of Zio Luigi (Nunziata's brother and Geremio brother-in-law) comes to life after Geremio's death. A bachelor lodged in a miserable boarding house where he sleeps in a bunk, Luigi is also victim of an accident on the job and is thus forced to quit working as a bricklayer. Taken to a hospital after the accident, Luigi's sufferance is due less to physical pain than to moral anxieties about his sister (now a widow) and nephews. His broken English is typical of the linguistic peculiarity of Di Donato's novel which conveys, in Denning's words, "a sense of claustrophobia" through the use of "broken sentences: prayers, chants, curses, epitets, conversations between unidentified speakers, people talking past one another" (Denning 1997: 243). The beautifully crafted sentence "Nurse-Nurse, I *sense* badly…Nurse-doctors, I *sense* ill" (Di Donato 1993: 87) with which Luigi addresses his nurse does not just epitomize his effort to translate *sentire* into a word that sounds closer to Italian than "feel" but also the author's will to use the actual meaning of the verb "sense" to designate an instinctive awareness that goes deeper and beyond the impossibility to see, hear, or understand rationally. Sharing the experience of many first-generation Italian Americans, Luigi *senses* danger, tragedy, and pain but he cannot tell it. Out of the hospital, Luigi goes to live with Nunziata and the kids at Geremio's house, where he will sleep in "a little bunk in the parlor" (*Ibid.*: 104) and will start "cutting through rolls of embroidery" (*Ibid.*: 151) with the circle of women gathered around Nunziata's kitchen, thus undergoing a triple emasculation: cripple, jobless, and relegated to women's work. Only his belated marriage to Cola seems to regain him some virility albeit in the carnivalesque mood of the wedding celebrated at Nunziata's place in which the paesanos "reconstructed the beautiful terrain of Abruzzi and tenderly restored their youths and the times of Fiesta and Carnival" (*Ibid.*: 194).

If the almost mock-heroic figure of Luigi is the only male model available to Paul's development into a young adult, it does not come as a surprise that this element should contribute to its fragmentary nature. Embodying neither the working-class/peasant breadwinner providing for the biological survival of the household (as symbolized by the somewhat larger-than-life figure of Geremio) nor the alternative of an educated and secularized *pater familias* (as represented by Paul's Russian Jew cohort's father), in his nephew truncated Bildung Luigi is far from being a male model

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states in the union alphabetically?" "There are forty-eight states, Ziu." "There were forty-six when I learned them […] Don't contradict me. Don't they teach you the meaning of respect in school?" […] "Don't fill the child's head with a lot of nonsense about culture," said my redhead Uncle Nino, who was more cultured than any of my relatives. "Sicily is beautiful, yes. […] But it is also terribly poor. […]. (Mangione 1998: 17-21).

to look up to. Paul's development is thus a twofold failure investing both work and school.

Di Donato's difficulties in conceiving of his alter-ego's following transition into adulthood must have also led him to the twenty-year gestation of the completion of the trilogy begun with *Christ in Concrete*. Still concerned with Paul's tormented youth, *This Woman* came out 1958, while *Three Circles of Light*, published in 1960, goes back to Paul's childhood before Geremio's death. To some extent, Paul's social and cultural impasse is well described in the second chapter of *The Italians of New York*, the already mentioned ethnic study financed by the FWP. Entitled "Second-Generation Tendencies", it contains a simple yet deft generational survey on Italian American immigrants:

> Born for the most part under circumstances of great economic stringency, surrounded from the beginning by influences that encourage disrespect for their parents' tradition, and at the same time denied many of the educational and social advantages which would assist them to function creditability in the new world, the native-born children of the less fortunate Italian-born immigrants often find the cards of life heavily stacked against them. (Federal Writers' Project 1938: 52)

The chapter goes on to delineate criminal tendencies among second-generation Italian Americans living in New York thus offering a sociological account attuned to the cinematographic representations of Italian Americans in some of the most popular gangster movies of the times, from *Scarface* (1932) to *The Public Enemy* (1931). Yet, the criminal model does not apply to Paul's Bildung. Interestingly enough though, *Give Us This Day*, the 1949 film inspired by *Christ in Concrete* and directed by Edward Dmytryk (then blacklisted as a member of "the Hollywood Ten") and ostracized from the US film industry, expunges Paul's Bildung altogether and focuses on Geremio's perspective. The film also depicts Zio Luigi as a more dramatic character who gets injured before (and not, as in the novel, after) Geremio's death, and who gains prominence as the story progresses. The very last scene of the movie is set in the State Compensation Bureau, where a Board is appointed to assess Geremio's compensation insurance after hearing Nunziata who, differently from what happens in the novel, is accompanied not only by her sons but by her brother too. The closing shot frames Luigi walking down the empty hall of the building with his lame gait. His mutilated and mute figure thus emphasizes the hopelessness of his family's fate and the injustice of a bureaucratic system whose law is inaccessible to the poor.

In some ways, the parable of Henry Roth's David Shearl bears close resemblance to Paul's. Like Di Donato's novel, *Call it Sleep* is also largely autobiographical, with a second-generation American Jew protagonist modeled on the author's own arrival at Ellis Island from the Austro-Hungarian province of Galitzia when he was still a child. The similarities between the two novels are also remarkable in their representation of arrested Bildungs as the protagonist's development, even more than Paul, was not allowed a second act: after the publication of *Call it Sleep*, in fact, Roth never managed to write the long-awaited sequel centered on David's youth in the Village.[19]

Aunt Bertha's influence on David is intrinsically complex. More than a mother substitute, Bertha is outlined as the only character who can confront Albert, David's alleged father, and reply forthrightly to his abuses. She is also the one who with gritted teeth forces her sister, Genya, to confess the truth about her past relation with a Gentile organist and her arranged wedding to Albert. Bertha, Genya's younger sister, makes landfall at Ellis Island after her and joins her household adding to the already choleric attitude of her brother-in-law. Extrovert and vulnerable, Bertha has a very special bond with David, she both protects him from his father's verbal and physical offence and offers him a less submissive and compliant female model: "Like the sweat that pours from her body, Bertha brings everything to the surface" (Wisse 1996: 66).
One of David's major moments of initiation occurs during a Sunday visit to the Metropolitan Museum with his aunt (*Ibid.*). In spite of her linguistic and cognitive limitations, Bertha, unlike Genya, does not hesitate to venture out into the unknown parts of the city with his nephew and to take him out of the Lower East Side for a brave (if exhausting) ride on the Elevated train:

> On a clear Sunday afternoon in July, David and his aunt set out together toward the Third Avenue Elevated. They were going to the Metropolitan Museum. […] David began to feel uneasy at his aunt's loud voice and Yiddish speech both of which seemed out of place here (Roth 1964: 147, 149).

For David the visit proves to be a wearing and frustrating experience: besides having to mediate between his aunt and the city on their way to the museum, once they arrive there, he is exposed to a cultural heritage personified by "miles and miles of armor, tapestries, coins, furniture, and mummies under glass" (*Ibid.*: 149) which cannot help him thrive in the ethnic maze of the Lower East Side and its culturally and linguistically diverse universe. For the first time in David's young life, the painful and complex clash between consent and descent becomes clear.

A spinster of awkward and ungraceful manners and neglected aspect, Bertha realizes all too soon that her only way out is not her fatiguing job in a sweatshop but a comfortable marriage to a mediocre well-off Jew. Her otherwise unhappy marriage gains her a sweet shop of her own and guarantees access to those goods which she deems to be the only blessing of the Golden Land:

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[19] "'I had tried to write a second novel. This novel was to start where *Call It Sleep* ends and follow the progress of the immigrant child to the world of Greenwich Village; the ghetto youngster coming to awareness in the world of art. But I never managed to write this second novel'" (Henry Roth, quoted in Sollors 1996: 158).

> Aunt Bertha only lamented the more, "Why did I ever set foot on this stinking land? Why did I ever come here? Ten hours a day in a smothering shop-paper flowers! Rag flowers! Ten long hours, afraid to pee too often because the foreman might think I was shirking. […]
> "Blessed is this Golden land," she let herself be carried away by enthusiasm. "Such beautiful things to wear!" (*Ibid.*: 158, 155)

In David's eyes, Bertha's interested marriage confirms the mere biological and economic function of that institution: although she is more courageous than Genya, she nevertheless curb her autonomy by marrying with a man she can barely tolerate, let alone love.

Bertha's role is also crucial in indirectly revealing to David some information about Genya and Albert's marriage. While eavesdropping on a conversation in Yiddish and Polish between Genya and Bertha, David reconstructs the possible meaning of those foreign words by creating "an alternative past for himself, one in which his father is the Christian organist who signifies a romantic gentile world" (Wirth-Nesher 1996: 4). It is therefore thanks to Bertha – who insists on her sister disclosing her secrets – that David must grasp that in between the Old and the New World genealogies can, at least on the paper, be rewritten ex novo, or, in Hana Wirth-Nesher's words: "His biological paternity palls beside the suggestion that the young man has been reborn as an American who can assume an English voice and a gentile past. This is the covenant of America" (*Ibid.*: 7).

Bertha continues looking after David until the end – she will even defend him from her husband's accusations of allowing the sneaky Leo Dugovka to corrupt their own daughter in the cellar. She cannot however save her nephew from Genya's morbid affection or prevent him from retreating into the spiritual sleep which symbolizes the implosion of his Bildung. Bertha's narrative and morphological function is thus to promote David's awareness of the painful and torn condition entailed in the process of growing up. In the last scene of the novel, when David is saved by the crowd from dying of a short circuit on the electric rails of the trolley tracks and, ultimately, from delirium, Aunt Bertha is not among the voices arising from the street as a polyphonic personification of the tenement. On both an actantial and a semantic level, she cannot be one of those voices because she has triggered that delirium.

If *Christ in Concrete* and *Call it Sleep* prove to be anti-Bildungs or "frozen"[20] Bildungs significantly affected by the low-mimetic and somewhat defeated figures of Zio Luigi and Tanta Boita, Miranda and Victoria's developments in *Old Mortality* and

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[20] "Frozen" youth is also a term used by Jed Esty in his *Unreasonable Youth*, by which he defines a key trait of both the central period of European modernism and modernist semi-periphery. Esty does not focus on United States literature. (Esty 2012).

Pity Is Not Enough are more likely to be considered as open to possibilities also thanks to the moral ascendancy of tragic aunt figures over their nieces.

AUNT AMY AND AUNT CATHERINE

Born in Texas in 1894 into a family descending directly from the frontiersman Daniel Boone, Katherine Anne Porter, whose mother dies prematurely, is brought up by her grandmother from Kentucky, her father, her uncles and aunts. Porter's traditional Southern Belle's apprenticeship and strict upbringing are nevertheless interrupted when she is only sixteen and decides to run away from a Catholic convent school and get married. In 1919, after her very short marriage, she moves to New York and starts her writing career. Leaving Texas and more generally the South is thus an act of rebellion against a patriarchal world which regards a woman who wants to write as "a freak" (Schwartz 1997: 260). However, throughout her work, Porter will always go back to the world of her childhood, evoking its cultural heritage and human contradictions.

Old Mortality is published in 1937 but will be also part of her 1939 collection of ("short" or "long") stories, *Pale Horse, Pale Rider,* along with the eponymous story, thus forming the so called "Miranda cycle". Centered on the protagonist's "gradual recognition of the violence and deceit underlying patriarchal ideology" and her "achievement of an autonomous subjectivity" (Scacchi 2011: 359),[21] Porter's 1937 story can be considered as a *Bildungsroman*.

Old Mortality is divided into three parts (1885-1902; 1904; 1912) and portrays Miranda's development and self-discovery through her progressive attempts at ascertaining the truth about her Aunt Amy's affairs, short marriage, and early death (Hendrick1988: 54-59). Lacking a real mother figure, Miranda is left to rely on an idealized memory of her mother as household angel – "'My mother was a perfectly natural woman who liked to cook. I have seen some of her sewing,' she said. 'I have read her diary'" (Porter 1979: 217) – which cannot however fully respond to her need to identify with different female models within her family. In Miranda's Bildung, Aunt Amy's story thus becomes "a narrative of gender definition" (Jones 1997: 180), and the deconstruction of the contradictory and often nebulous family tales about Amy's intriguing personality is a formative part of the construction of Miranda's own identity. Still a child, Miranda must detect the many discrepancies in her father's story about Aunt Amy. For once, her aunt is always referred to as a hypnotic beauty but a scrutiny of her photograph tells otherwise: "The woman in the picture had been Aunt Amy, but she was now only a ghost in a frame, and a sad, pretty story from old times. She had been beautiful, much loved, unhappy and she had died young" (Porter 1979: 173).

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[21] The English translation is mine.

The incongruities between her father, grandmother and cousin Eve's accounts of Aunt Amy's life and controversial personality are pivotal in determining the female role model Miranda will measure up to as an adult. By reading her family history in the light of half-buried and half-choked domestic tragedies – "[…] two great-uncles had committed suicide and a remote ancestress had gone mad for love" (*Ibid.*: 180) – Miranda shapes her identity.

Aunt Amy's story is one of an anti-conformist charming woman with many suitors who will not give herself to any of them, not even to her second-cousin Gabriel whom she reluctantly decides to marry after a five-year courtship. At her wedding-funeral she wears a silver gray dress and her face is mortal pale:

> "Tell me again how Aunt Amy went away when she married." "She ran into the gray cold and stepped into the carriage and turned and smiled with the face as pale as death. […]
> "Amy's wedding dress," said the grandmother, unfurling an immense cloak of dove-colored cut velvet, spreading beside it a silvery-gray watered-silk frock, and a small gray velvet toque with a dark red breast of feathers. […] "She would not wear white," said Grandmother. […] But Amy surprised me. […], 'I shall wear mourning if I like,' she said, 'it is *my* funeral, you know.' (*Ibid.*: 176-182)

Miranda's difficulty at interpreting Aunt Amy's puzzle is further complicated by the version of the story given to her by Cousin Eva, a forty-something ugly spinster who devotes herself to the teaching of Latin and the suffragist cause:

> Eva, shy and chinless, straining her upper lip over two enormous teeth, would sit in corners wathing her mother. […] She wore her mother's old clothes, made over, and taught Latin in a Female Seminary. She believed in votes for women, and had traveled about, making speeches. (*Ibid.*: 178)

Eva's almost instinctive hostility towards Amy's pulchritude is well epitomized in the old saying used by the former while talking to Miranda, who is now a married woman: "Beauty goes, character stays" (*Ibid.*: 215). After giving up legends of romantic love and rejecting Southern Belle's apprenticeship, Miranda is at a loss and struggles to find her place in the world (DeMouy 1979: 146-48; Stout 2005: 192-94). On the one hand, she is conditioned by a patriarchal ideology which views physical ugliness in women as the outcome of the deforming force of "a strong character" and Eva's political passion as both a compensation for and an effect of her "spinsterhood", unattractiveness, and unpleasant manners: "Your uncle Bill would say, 'When women haven't anything else, they'll take a vote for consolation.'" (Porter 1979: 183). On the other, Miranda is drawn to cousin Eva's perspective and increasingly aware that marriage will not provide the key to her identity quest:

> She knew now why she had run away to marriage, and she knew that she was going to run away from marriage, and she was not going to stay in any place, with anyone, that threatened to forbid her making her own discoveries, that said "No" to her. (*Ibid.*: 220)

In Miranda's unsettled and doubtful condition, Aunt Amy plays an ambiguous role. By dying right after her short and tardy marriage, Amy sticks to the conventional ending of heterosexual romance narratives (and according to Leslie Fiedler's famous thesis, American novels in general), in which the woman is either married or dead (Jones 1993). If the manifold reconstruction of Amy's story shows Miranda the possibility of distancing herself from Southern traditions and mores, she must nevertheless recognize how mixed and partial that option is. Eva, who in W. Jones's words "has reduced love to hormones and marriage to economics", embodies a more radical break with Southern patriarchal genealogies but "is unhappy and bitter" (*Ibid*: 184). On a narrative level, Miranda's choice to be skeptical about how stories on women are culturally constructed is formally conveyed through a "modernist ambiguous ending". Miranda's only partial dismissal of marriage and paternity – which are, as Barry McCrea argues in his study on family and narrative, "the rites and rituals of genealogy" (McCrea 2011) – mirrors her only partial acceptance of "the feminist politics of reading experience" (Jones 1993: 177). The closure of *Old Mortality*, unlike the story of Aunt Amy, leaves the door open to the protagonist's further development:

> Her mind closed stubbornly against remembering, not the past but the legend of the past, other people's memory of the past, at which she had spent her life peering in wonder like a child at a magic-lantern show. […] I don't want any promises, I won't have false hopes, I won't be romantic about myself. I can't live in their world any longer […] Let them tell their stories to each other. Let them go on explaining how things happened. I don't care. At least I can know the truth about what happens to me, she assured herself silently, making a promise to herself, in her hopefulness, her ignorance. (Porter 1979: 221)

Thus, in *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, dedicated to Miranda's coming of age, she is represented as independent (like Eva), looking for love (as Amy), and divorced (as Porter herself).[22]

In the "Epilogue" of *Labor & Desire*, Paula Rabinowitz briefly considers the possible analogies between Porter's *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* and Josephine Herbst's "Trexler Trilogy" and argues that the two works are not similar although they were written "at the same time, by two women who maintained a friendship". What they do not have in common is the development of "female subjectivity within movements for social change", an aesthetic trait that can be found in Herbst's trilogy – as well as other future women's novels, from Alice Walker's *Meridian* to Marge Piercy's *Vida* – but not in Porter's story collection (Rabinowitz 1991: 179). Rabinowitz's argument is undeniably legitimate and also explains why at the end of *Pale Horse, Pale Rider*, Miranda's development implodes by her going back to fantasizing about a past lover and unsatisfactory relationship, while *Rope of Gold* terminates the "Trexler Trilogy" by presenting Victoria as an activist and journalist serving the proletarian cause. However, both Miranda and Victoria's narratives share a common feature in the early stage of their Bildung: their formation through childhood and adolescence is shaped by the agencies of two aunts and adumbrates Porter's and Herbst's own biographies.

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[22] On the autobiographical elements of Porter's fiction, she said: "I'm not going to write my autobiography. Every book I pick up these days has something about me in it, right or wrong. So I don't have to bother" (Quoted in Grumbach 1987: 184).

In her posthumous memoir "Magicians and their Apprentices", Josephine Herbst – born in Sioux City, Iowa, in 1892 – will evoke the seminal importance in her education of "her mother's tales her 'roving brothers'" as "our first oral library" (Rasmussen 1998: xxi). As Mary Ann Rasmussen states in her "Introduction" to *Pity is Not Enough*, those oral stories constitute the cultural heritage of a future writer (who would graduate from Berkeley, move to New York and live in Berlin for a while) and political activist who became aware of "the injuries of class and the inequities of gender long before she entered the radical scene" (*Ibid.*).

The "Trexler trilogy" – *Pity Is Not Enough*, *The Executioner Waits* and *Rope of Gold* – retraces the story of the Trexler family from postbellum America to the 1930s. Bearing many resemblances to Herbst's own family history, the Trexlers' epic is unraveled through a matrilineal narrative in which Victoria Wendel gradually emerges as both the protagonist and the author's alter ego. The first two volumes of the trilogy are particularly based on Herbst's fictional reworking of her family's tales, letters, diaries, and legends (Roberts 1996; Bevilacqua 1985).

Pity Is Not Enough, the first volume of the trilogy, retrospectively chronicles the hopes, frustrations, and failures of the Trexlers' on the background of the Gold Rush and the Reconstruction. The beginning of the novel is set in 1905, in Oxtail, Iowa, where Anne Wendel and her four daughters (lest we should forget Alcott's trilogy…) are all sheltered in storm cellar after escaping a cyclone which is, the narrator says, "an annual event" always accompanied by Anne's tales about her family stories. The fulcrum of these stories is Joe Trexler, Anne's older brother, a somewhat diminished hero who managed to help his whole family out of economic hardship at the cost of being destroyed by railroad scandals in postbellum Georgia. By interspersing the narration with interchapters which, as Rasmussen writes quoting Barbara Foley, often function as repository of the interpretative ideological interconnections within the novel, Herbst "presents the writing of history as a collective yet deeply personal interpretative act shaped by the historical moment in which the writer positions herself and is positioned" (Foley 1993: 431, 441; Rasmussen 1998: xxi).

Besides Joe, Victoria's motherly family tree includes two more uncles, Aaron and David, and aunts, Hortense and Catherine, with the latter intimately tied to Joe by mutual affinity. Although the official cause of Catherine's premature death is "brain fever" and despite her siblings' guilty reticence about the real nature of her tragic end, Anne's four daughters, especially Victoria, soon realize that there must be a relation between their aunt's death and uncle Joe's financial and judiciary collapse.

In the chapter "Catherine Dispossessed", we find Catherine who has just received the news about Joe's flight after the railroad scandal. She is depicted as feverish and exhausted, worn out by an entire life spent according to the "code of domesticity": "She felt like a nun, closed in and shut tight from the world. She was earning her living, helping the family, went to church, wrote to relatives…" (Herbst 1998: 175). Annihilated by the ruin of her beloved bother, Catherine decides to go to the attic to look for the trunk containing documents and newspapers' clippings regarding Joe's trial. The chapter closes on Catherine who obsessively goes through Joe's papers reading them over and over again, while "several black wasps buzzed around her head" (*Ibid.*: 184).

In the following interchapter, the narrator stance shifts from the third person to Victoria's first person, who goes back to Aunt Catherine's death and reveals the gender oppression which underlies it:

> We, Anne Wendel's children, never really knew how Catherine died. That thick emotion our mother felt was all we had to go by. Where did her life end and why? They called it brain fever and when we were older, in the detached way of the curious we looked up that term to find its symptoms and to see just how the young girl had suffered. Fever, delirium and then unconsciousness. […] To the minds of those who saw her die, brain fever was a disease caused solely by worry and anxiety, and she left that burden on them and especially on her brother Joseph. […]
> This guilt made it impossible for the two Trexler girls when they married to show the whole true Catherine to their children. Where they talked at all, they told separate stories, Hortense out of her own need [...] Neither sister would have breathed a word against their brother Joseph, and about his death too they kept a mysterious silence. (*Ibid.*:196)

Once she has read and understood Aunt Catherine's death – and the consequent mental derangement of her Uncle Joe – Victoria embarks on a "raw and unsettling" Bildung which will lead her to the barricades:

> The meaning of these deaths had to wait. Later to all four children it had a different meaning, dependent each upon our different ways of living. […] The two older girls had beaus, a settled way of life would soon be theirs, but the two younger girls were raw and unsettled in their way of living. (*Ibid.*: 197)

Commenting on the shift of narrative voice from "we" to "I" and then "they" in this interchapter, Rasmussen observes that it speaks "both of what connects the sisters to their mother and of what divides them from each other" thus contributing to define the trope of the daughter narrator as steeped in "materialist-feminism".

Also the "materials" used by Herbst in her story are, according to Rasmussen, to be read as tools of materialist-feminist genealogies: minor events, buried lives, dusty or lost documents (Rasmussen 1998: xxi, xxv). What Herbst and Porter do, then, is to regard uncles and aunts' half-buried and half-dimmed lives and half-forgotten stories as an important part of the enlarged and mainly matrilineal generational narratives of their works.

By way of conclusion, let us take a fifty-year leap in American literature. It may be possible to read some novels written by second-generation immigrant women writers between the 1970's and the 1980's as formally originating in the encounter between 1930s' female genealogies (*à la* Porter and Herbst) and ethnic Bildungs (as in Roth and Di Donato). Works like *The Woman Warrior* (1976) by Maxine Hong-Kingston, "Goodbye and Good Luck" by Grace Paley (1956) and *Praisesong for the Widow* (1983) by Paule Marshall are, after all, novels, novels/memoirs, and short stories in which the narrative development of growing-up young female protagonists with strong autobiographical traits entails the fundamental presence of uncles and aunts. A possible literary genealogy for these late-twentieth-century works portraying pivotal uncle and aunt characters could and should be traced back to the 1930s. In that era, also thanks to the official acknowledgment of different genealogies within American past and present history, a narrative space was created that could both accommodate and renew immigrant and female Bildungs, and that would lay the basis for female-ethnic Bildungs to come.

To read the survival – or longevity – of uncle and aunt figures within the works of the literary heirs of this double lineage (ethnic and female) is to recognize those figures as topical elements in the formation of second-generation Americans. A heuristic perspective open to further research.

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