Università degli Studi di Padova

Dipartimento di Studi Linguistici e Letterari

Corso di Laurea Magistrale in
Lingue e Letterature Europee e Americane
Classe LM-37

Tesi di Laurea

Resistance and Personal Archives. Gender, Class, and Ethnicity in Italian American Women Writers' Memoirs

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Anno Accademico 2023 / 2024

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INTRODUCTION

In the last two years of my studies, the idea of literature as a radical political act was solidified by the encounter with authors who wrote from different positionalities, and for whom writing provided an avenue to break the silence and shed light on different experiences of marginalization. This contributed to shape an idea of the text as the product of historical processes that are underwritten by multiple socio-cultural phenomena, and that is because the authors that produce these writings are subjectivities whose bodies and minds have been crossed by these events. Therefore, one's positionality is the result of the intersection of different categories, such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, ableism, sexuality. The shaping of one's identity is thus never fixed, and certainly not linear. Within this framework, the text appears as a valuable document that allows both the writer and the reader to re-trace certain paths of identity and establish connections among aspects that are apparently unrelated. This has led me to develop an interest in and engage with readings that often do not fall within a sharp classification in terms of genre, language, or nationality.

My encounter with Italian American women's literature precisely comes from this. Throughout the years 2022-2023 I have attended three courses at university that dealt with migrant and border literature. In one of these, I have found Pietro Di Donato's name mentioned, and I decided to get to know more about his most famous novel, *Christ in Concrete*, which eventually became the subject of one of my papers. What sparked my interest was the fact that for the first time, I had found a text in which a writer with a working-class background and immigrant heritage addressed openly and defiantly the exploitation of immigrant labor. What is more, Di Donato was the son of an Italian immigrant, and I had never found his work mentioned or anthologized in any Italian textbook before. This led me to think about the relationship between literary canons and national borders. It also made me realize that I knew too little about the history of Italian migration to the United States and about the literature produced by writers of Italian descent. Most importantly, I did not have any knowledge on the history of Italian American women writers, and I was interested in exploring working-class themes from a gendered perspective.

The circulation of texts by women of Italian descent – especially those written in the 1930s-40s – was and still is quite difficult, both in Italy and in the United States, mainly because they remained outside the mainstream cultural carries. In addition, the recovery of autobiographical and memoiristic works written before the 1930s is still on the agenda of scholars and critics. Nonetheless, from the 1980s onwards, seminal works have been published with the aim of anthologizing the works and recognizing the experience of Italian American women writers, alongside that of African American, Jewish American, Asian American, Latinxs and Chicanxs writers. Since the 1990s third- and fourth-generation authors have relied upon past generations of writers and critics to creatively reflect on the meaning of heritage, ethnicity, and working-class issues. In this context, the recent historiography on Italian American women's early forms of class-consciousness and grassroots organizations was fundamental to deconstruct stereotypical narratives on Italian American women. The publication of works such as Jennifer Guglielmo's *Living the Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945* (2010), or *Talking to the Girls. Intimate and Political Essays on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire* (2022), edited by Edvige Giunta and Mary Anne Trasciatti signaled the need for a new understanding of the experience of Italian immigrant women and women of Italian descent. These works have also influenced books of fiction and non-fiction in both the Italian and the American contemporary literary panorama. To provide some examples, in the years 2007-2008, the Italian publishing house "Nutrimenti" translated and published two main works of Italian American women's literature: Kym Ragusa's *The Skin Between Us* (*La Pelle che Ci Separa*, 2008) and Tina De Rosa's *Paperfish* (*Pesci di Carta*, 2007). Recently, Italian writer Claudia Durastanti, whose parents emigrated from Italy to the United States and then came back to Italy, claimed to be influenced by Jennifer Guglielmo's studies in writing her latest book, *Missitalia* (2024)[1].

Considering the arising interest and the cultural relevance of the experience of Italian American women, this research has focused on two memoirs written at the end of the 1990s in the United States, namely *Vertigo: A Memoir* (1996) by Louise DeSalvo and *Night Bloom: An Italian American Life* (1998) by Mary Cappello. Despite the shift to conservatism and republicanism, the Italian experience in America is rooted in the

[1] Durastanti referred to Guglielmo's work in a book presentation of *Missitalia* on June, 14th, 2024.

working class, hence both Mary Cappello and Louise DeSalvo deal with class-related issues. At the center of these works there is the authors' exploration of their personal and family memories, as well as the interrelation of the categories of gender, class, and ethnicity. In shaping their own understanding of Italian American identity, these authors deal with themes of ancestry, heritage, and personal genealogies. Indeed, as third- and fourth-generation Italian Americans, the notion of culture of descent and culture of ascent does not quite fit the experience of these writers. Rather, DeSalvo and Cappello are interested in grounding their experience as ethnic women with a working-class background in the history of their families, thus giving new meanings to the concepts of ethnic and immigrant heritage. In doing so, the authors incorporated in their writings visual and textual archives, including photographs, poems, journals and letters.

In this research, I have underscored the role and the importance of archives and personal memory in both the authors' creative reconstruction of the past and in the recent historical research on Italian American communities. Hence, the first chapter is entirely dedicated to providing an overview on the history of Italian Americans in the United States. From the point of view of historiography, I have highlighted how archival work proved to be fundamental for the reconstruction of Italian immigrant women workers' resistance in the early twentieth century. Stereotypical and disempowering narratives on Italian American women were indeed reinforced by the lack of knowledge about early forms of women's solidarity and militancy. In writing this chapter, I have drawn on the works of historians such as Donna Gabaccia and Rudolph J. Vecoli. Vecoli's work especially highlighted the importance of personal experience and collective memory to reconstruct the history of working-class movements in Italian American history. Gabaccia's work, on the other hand, narrowed the focus by concentrating on forms of political engagement in the context of Italian American immigrant women workers. In dealing with such scholarship, my intention was not only to provide a historical base to contextualize class-related themes, but also to re-trace forms of women's resistance in the attempt of deconstructing the dismissing narrative on Italian American women.

In the second chapter I have analyzed how Italian American women have been at the margins of both the American literary canon and the canon of Italian American literature. I have addressed these issues by briefly introducing the genre of Italian immigrant autobiography within the context of ethnic literature, and then by focusing

extensively on the formation of a tradition of Italian American women writers. Here, the concept of genealogy was fundamental to propose an idea of literary tradition that does not fit within the paradigm of the canon, insofar as it challenges both its national and male-centered character. Borrowing from the Foucauldian concept of genealogy and from feminist scholarship, I have underscored how genealogy-making acknowledges the importance of identifying literary foremothers in other ethnic women and historically marginalized voices.

In the third chapter, I have focused on how the creative space of literature counterbalances an inherited sense of disorientation and loss that pervades both DeSalvo's and Cappello's ethnic and working-class heritage. For these authors, literature becomes a sheltering space where they can re-appropriate their memories and their Italian American identity.

CHAPTER 1:
Crossing the Ocean

1.1 Italian Immigration to the United States (1880s-1930s)

In the years between 1860 and 2011 more than twenty-nine million Italians left their homeland. Of these, over 4.5 million arrived in the United States between 1881 and 1920 (Tirabassi 2017: 224). Referred to as "birds of passage", many, if not most, Italians in America were sojourners who came to earn money and return home to Italy. As reported by Maria Susanna Garroni, roughly forty-six Italians out of a hundred returned to their country between 1899 and 1925 (Garroni 2017: 331). Among the 4.5 million immigrants from Italy there was a small percentage of individuals from the urbanized middle class, who should be properly called "expatriates" or "exiles", as Carravetta highlights (Carravetta 2017: 273). This category includes those employed in business, transportation, or government. A restricted number of intellectuals and artists can also be counted. Unlike the majority that consisted of "labor immigrants", expatriates had an educational background. This distinction helps the reader to understand the variety of any diaspora, and the different reasons that might have pushed people to move. However, even when the proper distinctions are put forward, researchers need to get confronted with the fact that addressing the history of migration in the late 19th century (and in contemporary times too) implies facing the opacity of the immigrant subject, their uniqueness, which is however viewed as an impediment to an objective reconstruction of the experience of migration. Here, my use of the term "opacity" derives from Éduard Glissant's definition:

> […] the right to opacity that is not enclosure within an impenetrable autarchy but subsistence within an irreducible singularity. Opacities can coexist and converge, weaving fabrics […] The opaque is not the obscure […]. It is that which cannot be reduced, which is the most perennial guarantee of participation and confluence. (Glissant 1997: 191)

Thinking with Glissant, opacity challenges the Western approach to people and ideas, requiring them to be transparent, that is, self-evident, devoid of ripples, silences, and blank spaces. Within this framework, argues Glissant, difference is understood as opposed to the norm, always. Even though opacity does oblige the researcher to face

linguistic and sociocultural barriers, I believe that acknowledging the position from which one is writing and speaking is fundamental in the fields of Cultural and Migration Studies, as well as in translation practices. Turning to the object of this research, since I will be dealing with ethnic and working-class backgrounds of Italian American women writers, the main topic of this historical introduction will be the reality of what Carravetta calls "the silent majority", i.e. labor immigrants (Carravetta 2017: 274). In light of the aforementioned theory of opacity, it is important to remark that the attribute "silent" comes from the lack of means for either oral communication (linguistic barriers) or written communication (being able to write and to afford paper; the possibility of being read or published). Due to illiteracy and class-related issues, Italian immigrants left relatively few traces, most of them written in their mother-tongue. This had consequences in terms of group- and self-representation: as the immigrant subjects could not speak for themselves, they had no access not only to the means of production, but also to the very possibility of communication, and their social and cultural identities were being constructed from the outside (Carravetta 2017: 274). That is why forms of literature, autoethnography and historiography that venture into archival research are important passageways into the inner reality of immigrants or people with an ethnic background. As Masucci MacKenzie argues, "a dialectical structure of theory interrogating literature and vice-versa indicates how historical studies alone are not sufficient to explicate literature" (Masucci MacKenzie 2003: 2). Therefore, in this first chapter I will try to reconstruct the major shifts in the evolution of historiographical discourses around Italian American identity, addressing the issues of race, ethnic neighborhoods, work, and forms of political organization and class-consciousness. As I will illustrate, from the 1940s onwards historians of Italian American immigration have progressively identified the gaps in previous studies and knowledge, trying to dismantle or verify stereotypes fabricated from the outside, ultimately adopting a bottom-up approach that problematizes mainstream representation.

In the first section of the chapter, I will offer a brief historical outline of Italian emigration, with particular regard to the formation of a post-Unification Italian identity. In doing so, I will try to illuminate the connection between the discrimination against Southern Italians in Italy and the problematic construction of their whiteness in the United States. To this regard, the clash and encounter with other ethnic groups will be particularly

relevant in the context of the new living and working conditions. The ethnic neighborhood and the worksite were indeed the dimensions in which a progressive change in traditional roles and familial structures took place. Specifically, the second section of this chapter will focus on the experience of Italian immigrant women workers and the political grassroots of the Italian American working class through a transnational lens. Finally, in the third section I will focus on the period that goes from the 1940s to the 1960s, when Italian Americans witnessed the enhancement of their living conditions and acquired a new social status. The main consequence of this was the fragmentation of ethnicity along the lines of class, gender, and generations, questioning the Italian American identity.

1.1.1 The background of Italian immigration

Emigration from Italy affected all regions. Starting from the northern regions between 1876 and 1900, emigration reached its peak between 1900 and 1920, when out-migration came mainly from the southern regions. The travel conditions were extremely poor until 1887, when Prime Minister Francesco Crispi introduced a bill to protect and supervise emigrants, with a notable improvement in 1901 when rules of hygiene and required medical officers on board were laid down. However, it was only after 1907 that transatlantic ships sailing to the United States were required to adhere to safety and hygiene standards. Among the reasons that explain such massive migratory waves, economic hardship and persecution for political reasons played a key role. The phenomenon of political exile in particular is connected to the Risorgimento. Subject to high political oppression, peasants, workers, socialists, and anarchists left the country, taking their ideologies with them. Moreover, it was in the aftermath of Unification that the differences between Northern and Southern Italy, which lie at the core of Italian migration, eventually consolidated. The economic crises that took place between 1888 and 1896 stems from deep and problematic differences in the modes and fields of production between the two areas of Italy, generating a number of political phenomena, such as organizations of peasants and workers, as the *Fasci dei lavoratori*. As Tirabassi points out, “emigration was the instrument through which a tenuous integration of the various Italies existing before Unification was realized in the new market economy” (Tirabassi 2017: 247). These premises, rooted in the history of Italy, are crucial to interpret the subsequent life and ideas on Italian communities in the United States after the 1880s. Two important facts are reported by historians. First, the high level of

illiteracy: out of a population of 26 million people, 17 million were illiterates (Ragionieri in Tirabassi 2017: 252). The second, most important fact was that there was no official Italian language, but instead a hundred of local dialects. Therefore, when dealing with the history of Italian migration, with a particular regard to the process of identity-making, one needs to take into consideration that at the dawn of the 20th century, there was no traditional or "solid" Italian identity. It can be argued that it was precisely the continuous confrontation with "the other" that brought Italians to recognize in themselves an Italian identity (Tirabassi 2017: 254).

1.1.2 *Antimeridionalismo* in Italy and "racial in-betweenness" in the United States

Understanding the differences in the perception of northern and southern Italians, as they were fabricated back in the immigrants' original country, is fundamental to analyze and comprehend the way in which American politicians and scholars from the early 20th century formulated the concept of a southern racial inferiority. As showed by Peter G. Vellon, already in 1806, the French author Creuze de Lesser stated that "Calabria, Sicily and all the rest belong to Africa", implying that northern and central Italy were the borderlands of Europe (Vellon 2017: 418). Furthermore, the work of Italian anthropologists and criminologists such as Cesare Lombroso and Alfredo Niceforo gave a purported scientific solidity to racial discrimination against Southern Italians. On the side of Americans, contrary to what is expected, anti-immigration sentiments were already present when the first wave of immigrants arrived. As Carravetta argues, an "Anglo-Saxon complex" dates back to the very founding of the Republic. During the Jacksonian times, such complex started to grow, until the Reconstruction Era, when more attention was paid to foreigners. Within this framework, the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 signaled a paradigm change in American immigration history (Carravetta 2017: 279). As we can see from a New York times article that dates back to 1888, the American assimilationist ideology already had a programmatic and clear approach towards migration waves:

> Upon the whole, however, the contributions to our population from the Teutonic and Scandinavian countries have been assimilable, useful, and even needful (…) objectionable immigration is immigration of a people so alien to us that they cannot become Americanized, either in the first or in the second generation, and that threaten to remain here, so long as they remain at all, as foreign colonists. Such is the emigration from Italy, from Russia, from Poland, from Bohemia, and from Hungary. (quoted in Carravetta 2017: 280)

Furthermore, it is important to consider that, when Italian immigrants landed on the United States at end of the 19th century, Jim Crow policies against African American were launched, and the genocide of Native Americans was already constitutive of the history of America. These premises laid the foundation for the minority discrimination that Italians and other immigrant communities experienced during the Mass Migration times, which, in the case of Italians, is epitomized by two events: the foundation of the Dillingham Commission in 1907 and the period of lynchings.

As David R. Roediger writes "in the early 20th century race and ethnicity were not firmly separated into distinct concepts, and indeed the latter term was scarcely used" (Roediger in Vellon 2017: 415). At the beginning of the twentieth century America was already populated by Celts, Mediterraneans, Hebrews, Slavs, Anglo-Saxons, and Nordic people, among the twenty-six million immigrants that arrived between the nineteenth and twentieth century. In 1907 the United States Congress commissioned an inquiry known as the Dillingham Commission, whose role was to rank and classify people into different races according to their proximity to whiteness, substantiating their research with the scientific literature of the time (Vellon 2017: 416). The Dillingham Commission followed a classification system based on the theory developed by Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, a German physiologist, which distinguished five "great races": the Caucasian, Ethiopian, Mongolian, Malay, and American. In this context, Italians initially benefited from a 1790 immigration law that allowed "free white persons" to enter the United States and naturalize. In spite of that, they were generally perceived as racially inferior to Northern and Western Europeans, and Southern Italians were especially considered an in-between category, a "racial enigma" (Vellon 2017: 421). Negative racial stereotypes emerged together with more "positive" stereotypes that infantilized Italians, portrayed as light-hearted and harmless. To sum up, the Dillingham Commission was important because it marked the consolidation of an institutionalized discrimination, in which science and jurisprudence joined for legitimating *de facto* racial stereotypes (Carravetta 2017: 288).

In the context of Italian racial in-betweenness, elements such as class and education were means to get closer or further to a native-white standard. As pointed out by Vellon, in the eyes of native whites, the Italian immigrant in the South was a racial enigma, and the class proximity of Italians and African Americans legitimized Southerners to utilize the racial surveillance tool of lynching on Italians as well (Vellon

2017: 421). The murder of New Orleans Police Chief, David Hennessy, on 15 October 1890 caused one of the most infamous lynching of Italians. In this case and in many others, lynching was used as a practice of self-justice when native whites reckoned that the juridical system did not fulfil its role. The mass lynching occurred on 14 March 1891 was indeed the consequence of a trial that found the nine Italians indicted for the murder of David Hennessy innocent. Even though Italian immigrants suffered from racial discrimination and violence, it is important to remark that they did not fall victim to the institutional and legal forms of racism suffered by African Americans (Vellon 2017: 423).

During the era of postwar recession, massive strike waves agitated the country and Italian immigrants were subjected to a strict political persecution that coexisted with ethnic prejudices. Radical newspapers in the Italian language were suppressed and prominent political figures such as Luigi Galleani were arrested or killed. The political repression culminated with the execution of Sacco and Vanzetti in 1927. Italian immigrant workers were a significant part of the working class, and their political heritage of radicalism made them the target of Red Scare policies. Racial and political discrimination lay at the core of the Immigration Act of 1924 – also known as the Johnson Reed Act – which prevented the admission to the United States of people judged as "ineligible", because of their ideological or "phenotypical" resistance to Americanization, eventually cutting off the flow from eastern and southern Europe.

1.1.3 Space and identity: Little Italies

An insight on the living and working conditions of Italian immigrants in the United States at the turn of the twentieth century can be found in the pictures taken by the sociologists and "muckraker" photo reporters Lewis Hine (1874-1940) and Jacob Riis (1849-1914), but the evolution of the studies and discourses around Italian American history and ethnicity are particularly relevant when trying to reconstruct and re-imagine the life of first-generation Italian immigrants and their communities. A "community" is defined by the early sociologists from the University of Chicago as a social formation with an internal form of organization, linked to a spatial or geographic dimension, in which the latter is not only descriptive but plays an autonomous role in characterizing the entire group (Garroni 2017: 332). As Garroni writes, the Italian communities appeared to be resistant to quick assimilation, unlike other groups of European immigrants that, from the American perspective, became socially integrated and did not exhibit a threatening

alterity. The Italian neighborhoods – or "Little Italies" became the physical extension of their alterity. As Tirabassi maintains, ethnic neighborhoods either fall into the narrative of ghettos and places of marginalization, or they are seen as the foundational sites of a multicultural society (Tirabassi 2017: 307). Therefore, a neighborhood is always a politically marked space, and the attribution of an ethnicity to it fully shows this political value. In this regard, Robert E. Park argued that:

> Proximity and neighbourly contact are the basis for the simplest and most elementary form of association […]. Local interests and associations breed local sentiments, and, under a system which makes residence the basis for participation in the government, the neighbourhood becomes the basis of political control. (quoted in Garroni 2017: 333)

Investigating the narratives produced on ethnic neighborhoods is particularly important for literary studies too, since they have played a key role in the genre of ethnic autobiographies and ethnic literature in general. In the analysis of Italian American women writers' memoirs, Hoboken (New Jersey), Bensonhurst (New York) and Darby (Pennsylvania) are respectively the settings of Louise DeSalvo's, Marie Laurino's, and Mary Cappello's memoirs. These writers grew up in neighborhoods and schools in which there was no apparent residual of ethnicity, and their social status as "middle class women" also metaphorically removes the previous living conditions of their ancestors. Such blank spaces and apparent removals are the engine and soul that push the authors to question their own feelings on ethnicity and identity. Therefore, as Garroni writes, "it makes sense when wondering about the ethnic affiliations of the descendants of immigrants, to ask what the Little Italies really represented both for their inhabitants and for the cities in which they were situated, and to ask whether it is true that they are returning to life in ways that are both urbanistic and metaphorical", as they became a source of touristic and commercial value since the 1960s, trying to restore a sense of *italianità* that could fit the post-modern panorama (Garroni 2017: 327).

One of the first and most important textual documents that describe the life of Italian immigrants at the turn of the 20th century is the report made by Amy Allemand Bernardy, an Italian American scholar from the University of Florence who later will become the responsible for the Emigration Bureau of the Italian Foreign Affairs Ministry. Bernardy was firmly favourable to Americanization; she maintained that "the fatherland is defended better by a 'citizen' then by a 'dago' " (Bernardy in Tirabassi 2017: 309).

According to Bernardy, creating a close-knit community of people that remains bounded to the Italian traditions, while being geographically displaced, will eventually make them miserable and alien. Instead, she proposes that an Italian should become "an *able-bodied* American", since, in any case, their children will leave Little Italy behind (Bernardy in Tirabassi 2017: 318).

The Italian neighborhoods in the United States are often associated with the tenements, which epitomize the condition of poverty of Italian immigrants in the early 20th century. As reported by Tirabassi, thirty-two tenements, with more or less twenty-eight apartments in each, constituted a "block" in which about 1200 Italians lived. In the reports made by Amy Bernardy, tenements are described as miserable, "tragic and lurid" places, or "caves of pain and misery". Furthermore, it is important to note how Bernardy's accounts of tenements underlie the racial categories that were becoming a standard in twentieth-century America. Bernardy claims that "conditions that in a hut in Calabria can be either painful or picturesque, here become tragic and lurid" (quoted in Tirabassi 2017: 318). Thus, from the American perspective, poverty in Italy can be considered as picturesque, as if it were part and parcel of the Italian socio-cultural tradition, hence it can be seen as typical of the whole country, even fascinating. However, once the element of rurality is removed from the original context and it gets transferred to another, the American one, it turns out to be a tragic condition. Indeed, through Bernardy's descriptions, the space of Little Italies is not featured by buildings and other urban elements, because that aspect belongs to the American context. Rather, it is characterized by scents, sounds of southern dialects, the almost complete lack of American phonemes, the clothing, the markets, "the women in long, shapeless dark dresses, with scarves on their proud upright heads" (quoted Garroni 2017: 329). These people, their phenotype, triggered a specific sense of displacement in the account of Bernardy that she describes this way:

> That you are in a "colony" you sense immediately […] from certain facial creases or poses common to the race that are not yet forgotten and perhaps impossible to forget, that leap out from an unfortunately American canvas with a Latin style that at the same time offers joy and pain. (Bernardy in Tirabassi 2017: 313).

As we can see, the first studies on Italian neighborhoods tended to describe them as *enclaves* where the cultural mores of the motherland resisted assimilation, which would

be later abandoned in favor of the suburbs. Such movement has been interpreted as a clear turning-point that signals the dissolution of the ties with the original country and the quick assimilation of second- and third-generation Italian Americans.

From the 1940s up until the 1980s, notable changes in the scholarship on Little Italies were recorded, both in the field of history and ethnic studies. In *Street Corner Society: The Social Structure of an Italian Slum*, published in 1943 by William Foote Whyte, the Italian neighborhood is not merely described as an isolated place, but rather as a space where new forms of interaction and organization were taking place. This was determined by the contact with surrounding neighbors and the new environment, thus contradicting the notion of an absolute impermeability of ethnic neighborhoods. Later, as Garroni writes, a notable turn in the discussion took place with "Contadini in Chicago: A Critique of the Uprooted" an essay written by Rudolph J. Vecoli for the *Journal of American History* in 1964 (Garroni 2017: 335). Adopting a transnational approach, Vecoli anticipated what would turn out to be the backbone argument of the following historiography on the topic. Reversing the point of view, Vecoli argued that the immigrant's culture of origin did not constitute only an impediment to integration, but instead it was a valuable resource and background knowledge to go through new living conditions. The ethnic revival of the 1970s and the rise of a new social history that emphasized the active and participatory role of the lower classes, created a breeding ground for more accurate studies on migration waves from Italy and a bottom-up approach in analyzing the features of Italian communities and their evolution. As Garroni highlights, "another characteristic feature of the studies of the 1970s was a greater attention to the culture of origin of the immigrants: their values, their goals, their choices" (Garroni 2017: 337). An example of the 1970s innovative scholarship is *The Italians in Chicago, 1880-1930. A Study in Ethnic Mobility* published in 1973 by Humbert S. Nelli. However, truly groundbreaking studies were published between 1980 and 1990. Dating back to 1984, *From Sicily to Elizabeth Street* by Donna R. Gabaccia tries to reconstruct the life and housing conditions of Italian immigrants. Its novelty resides in the fact that Gabaccia fully denied and subverted the impending legacy of Banfield's theory of amoral familism, according to which the core of Italian identity lay in the complete adherence to the nuclear-family *ethos*, which impeded the understanding of the notions of collective and civil society. Building on the case of the Sicilian community living in Elizabeth

Street, Gabaccia maintained that the cultural values considered as typical for Italians, such as loyalty, familial kinship, and the idea of *casa* (home) had been important for creating new patterns of socialization, as well as a new perception of private and public spheres. Mutual help, solidarity and the problematization of traditional roles stem from the proximity of different groups and families in the tenements, something that had never happened before in Italians agrotowns. Of course, the experience of radical and quick changes was traumatic, and it invested every member and structure of the family. For instance, the relationship between parents and children got more complicated. The former could not lean anymore on the complete availability of children in earning money for the family, since they started to go to school, and the latter could not lean on the certainty of economic stability and property. Abandoning the country and the inherited piece of land was indeed one of the most disrupting effects of Italian emigration. The lack of economic stability and the pressure of the rent provoked changes in the traditional family roles. While children started to study besides working, women, when possible, started to work. In the second section of this chapter, I will analyze closely the working conditions of Italian immigrant women and the subsequent effects in terms of political identity and self-perception. In this context, as Garroni argues, the narrow rooms of tenements and the circumscribed space of the neighborhood was also the core of exchanges of ideas and encounters with new forms of sociality (Garroni 2017: 347). The festivities for May Day, for example, allowed for the creation of a political identity that has its grassroots in Italian radicalism.

1.2 A brief history of Italian American Women Workers (1880s-1930s)

In order to understand class consciousness in terms of background and sense of belonging as it is explored in Louise DeSalvo's *Vertigo* and Mary Cappello's *Night Bloom*, I believe that a brief introduction to the Italian American working-class movement and its historiography is required. My research is aimed at analyzing the life writings of Italian American women, trying to propose a transnational, situated and intersectional approach. Because of these three main aspects of the work – which correspond to a precise set of epistemological tools – I will offer a historiographical perspective on Italian American working class in the late 19th century and early 20th century, with a focus on immigrant women workers, whose role and legacy has not been studied enough, or well enough, yet. This is not motivated merely by the fact that the studies examined in this chapter have

focused on women. Rather, it has to do with the ultimate purpose of this research, aimed at exploring the concepts of cultural heritage and political legacy, as well as belonging and descendance. I believe that this cannot be fully understood without considering the intersection of class and gender, i.e. the evolution of the working conditions for Italian American women across generations, together with their perception of their own ethnic identities.

Most of the literature that analyzes Italian American women's experience in the United States provides an incomplete portrayal of these women that often describes them as backward and isolated, thus failing at restoring a fair and concrete perspective on Italian American women. The problem appears to reside mostly in the way in which Italy has been studied and imagined by American historians and, subsequently, how they have pictured the everyday life and occupations of Italians back in their original country. Starting from a notion of Italy's absolute backwardness, partial conclusions were drawn on Italian immigrant workers' behavior in the United States, especially when it came to solidarity among workers. However, between the 1980's and the early 2000's, Italian and American historians began to address historiographical gaps and biased representations, showing how notions of solidarity, class-consciousness, emancipation, and identity-affirmation in the Italian American working-class community had long been interpreted through a liberal, American lens, unable to capture their specificities. As Elisabetta Vezzosi writes, on the basis of this new approach "the history of immigrant women not only finds a more precise place within the context of Women's History, but may also act as a stimulus for a re-definition of outdated historiographical categories" (Vezzosi 1986: 84).

Together with the focus on immigrant women's perspective, a second element that I believe is crucial in the more recent studies is indeed the way in which archives are used to debunk old-fashioned historical arguments. Here, I would like to stress the importance of a parallel archival work as a constant and a key factor that features both Italian American scholarship and literature. Here, archival work is understood as concerned with the issue of establishing a legacy in both historical and literary terms, in the attempt of retracing paths of identity. In his historical but very personal research on Italian American radicalism, Rudolph J. Vecoli argues that the history of immigrant working-class movements was forgotten by Italian Americans themselves, partly as a form of "historical

amnesia" that serves the aim of shielding the community from trauma ("red scare" policies of repression), but such lapse of memory was also connected with ideals of assimilation and social mobility (Vecoli 1993: 301).

In what way is the history of first-generation Italian Americans related to second and third generations? Is there any kind of heritage beyond blood ties and shame? Most importantly, when dealing with marginalized communities, what value does it have to look for ancestors? And if one can choose their own models, is it possible to cross the borders of ethnicity? Such questions will inform every chapter of this thesis, both as stepping stones and lines of demarcation. In choosing to re-tell the history of Italian American women workers, I have decided to investigate such kinships, acknowledging their relevance and existence. I reckon that the importance of genealogies and cultural heritage are crucial elements that dwell on the complexities of the notion of identity, as well as on the dialectics between consent and descent which pervades American identity specifically (Sollors, 1986).

1.2.1 Contemporary historiography and the transnational approach

In the attempt to reconstruct the reality of Italian American working-class women, I believe that the studies carried out by Donna Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta (2002), Jennifer Guglielmo (2002), and Elisabetta Vezzosi (1986) offer a critical evaluation and a thorough picture of the history of immigration and labor from the perspective of Italian women. The transnational approach of these works highlights the interconnection between different migratory movements and the need to analyze them in relation to the policies of the receiving countries, as well as to the common background of migration. Considering the "warfare" governments of the early 20th century, such as Fascist Italy, Gabaccia and Iacovetta argue that the United States, as a receiving nation, was in a strong position to impose their own understanding of the identities of newcomers (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002: 28). In fact, Italian immigrants sometimes acquired the notion of their own *italianità* while abroad. Indeed, a transnational approach on migration studies allows to acknowledge the intersection of categories such as gender and ethnicity in the way in which identity is transformed, and how this informs other categories, e.g. how "whiteness" is built. When it comes to race, Vecoli argues that Italians cannot be considered simply as whites, or "sans ethnicity", inasmuch as such affirmation would exclude the importance of class in the process that determines the notion of "whiteness"

(Vecoli 1993: 296). In doing so, Vecoli puts under debate the traditional American historiography and recent tendencies in cultural studies to homogenize identities, which seem to take into consideration only two groups: Europeans and non-Europeans. Indeed, the development of class consciousness of immigrant women in the United States could not easily be separated from their emerging ethnic and racial identities (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002: 24).

Donna R. Gabaccia and Franca Iacovetta's collaborative volume *Women, Gender, and Transnational Lives: Italian Workers of the World* (2002) provides a brilliant perspective on women workers and militants. In the introduction, the authors clarify the importance of digging deep into the systematic erasures of historiography, i.e. what James Thomas Farrell calls "the silence of history". The purging of radicalism from Italian American history was initially redressed by concentrating on the work of Italian American men and their political activity, with prominent figures such as the anarchist Giuseppe Ciacabilla or Giuseppe Bertelli[2]. However, scholarship long omitted to delve into the history of Italian American women workers. As Jennifer Guglielmo points out, "even though scholars considered the clothing industry as a breeding ground of political ideas and practices, there are very few studies on the role of Italian American women as unionists and political activists" (Guglielmo in Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002: 266). One of the most popular excuses among scholars for avoiding the investigation of Italian women workers and radicals, is simply that they constituted a minority. However, in the attempt to describe the masses of Italian workers and immigrants, acknowledging the existence of a militant minority of women is fundamental for the interpretation of the so-called "majority" (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002: 4). In the case of the Italian American community, such investigation is particularly relevant when we approach the issues of migration and work from a political and gendered perspective.

The political struggles of Italian workers have been dismissed on the basis of previous historical and anthropological studies conducted on rural Italy, where the country was portrayed as unequivocally backward and politically dry. Gabaccia and Iacovetta's book tries to rebut such arguments, emphasizing how family loyalties encouraged activism rather than passivity (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002: 4). Portraits of

[2] See Rudolph J. Vecoli, "The Making and Un-making of an Italian Working-Class," in *Journal of American Ethnic History* 28 (2) (Winter, 2009), pp. 22-29.

late 19th century Italy include studies by non-Italian scholars that have described southern Italy as the quintessence of backwardness, producing stereotypical images of the Italian communities abroad on the whole. In addition, such studies did not take into account the actual regional differences and the complexity of late 19th century Italy in the era that followed the Risorgimento. Outdated studies that confine Italian women to the realm of inactivity, subjected to the Catholic ethos and to Old World values, have contributed, in later historiography on working-class women and immigrant workers, to describing them as disempowered and isolated, as opposed to the political and labor-movement activism of Jewish women. Later studies of Italian immigrant women and working families, including those written from a feminist perspective, have also emphasized aspects of Catholic moral values and a conservative view on sexuality and family which confined Italian women, wives, mother and daughters within domestic worlds at home and abroad (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002: 9).

On the contrary, as Gabaccia and Tirabassi argue, in Italy and other countries of the Latin world, women's struggles for power were collective ones, and often, not always, "maternalist". Therefore, improvements in women's well-being implied improvements for their families and entire communities. This challenges the individualistic way in which early Anglo-American feminists understood women's liberty (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002: 19).

A work that epitomizes such biased representations is *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society*, written by the American political scientist Edward Banfield in 1955, considered to be one of the most influential works in the scholarship on Italian immigrant workers in the United States. Far from embracing a geographically and intellectually situated perspective, Banfield described southern Italy as characterized by the ethos of “amoral familism”. In other words, Italians were seen as creatures concerned only with the interests of their own nuclear families, utterly detached from the notions of collective and civil society. In the full spirit of Western ethnography, Banfield’s work ultimately simplified phenomena such as class exploitation and the economic stagnation of the southern region as the product of a "culture of poverty" (Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002: 19).

How can contemporary historiography on Italian immigration deal with such biased historical representations? Immigrant historian Nancy Green defines the

comparative method adopted by Gabaccia and Iacovetta as a "diverging approach", as opposed to the "converging" comparisons that have traditionally been used by Anglo-American historians. According to Green, converging comparisons highlight cultural differences, adopting a deterministic approach to cultural studies (Green in Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002: 14). From this perspective, variations in immigrant women's work, family, or educational patterns are interpreted as a manifestation and a perpetuation of rooted cultural power dynamics that come from their homelands. Diverging comparisons, by contrast, show how women of similar cultural background respond to a wide variety of circumstances, challenging both the new society in which they are enmeshed, and their own background. In other words, a diverging approach highlights the commonalities among immigrant women from different nationalities in their attempts to adjust to a new society and working environment, rather than offering an exclusive perspective on cultural differences. I believe that such an approach can be useful for studying the evolution of Italian American life across generations, since it validates different dynamics of cultural exchange and challenges.

1.2.2 The role of the factory and the issue of Americanization

When it comes to the transition from a rural society to an industrialized one, the working conditions and the concept of work itself are naturally subjected to even dramatic changes. Historians such as Gabaccia, Tirabassi and Vezzosi have tried to analyze such variations without recurring to traditional stereotypes, analyzing the way in which work and family were not separate spheres in the life of Italian women, either in Italy or in the United States. This should help us to challenge typical biases about emancipation, collectivity, and ultimately, identity.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Italian women immigrants worked mainly in the garment industry, in homework, in seasonal job canneries, in candy and box factories, either alone or with their children (Vezzosi 1986: 84). Therefore, radical changes did not concern so much the modes of work, since women already had experiences in tailoring and homework, but rather came from the new, different environment. They were now part of an industry – the garment industry – and the factory itself was the primal setting where the challenge between mother-country values and the "New World" took place. Thus, an analysis of Italian immigrant women's working life can illuminate other aspects of Italian women's lives that changed in the process of crossing the ocean and settling in a new

environment, as work was not limited to a singular, defined dimension of people's lives; particularly in the case of immigrant women, it invested and transformed many other private aspects of their daily life, such as social relations and family. In addition, the work site was also the place where women came into contact with other people outside their ethnic communities, especially in political activities, as I will illustrate further.

As reported by Vezzosi, for Italian American husbands, as well as for the Italian authorities of Italian Emigration Bureau, the factory was not only synonymous with corruption, but also a dangerous instrument of assimilation (Vezzosi 1986, 84). Amy Allemand Bernardy, responsible for the Emigration Bureau of the Italian Foreign Affairs Ministry, stated that:

> The fascination of the factory is something inconceivable, its contagion spreads from one woman to another […] for the mirage of three dollars [they] often ruin themselves morally and materially, but they are oblivious to this (ibid.)

The conflict between factory work and the ethnic community resulted in immigrant men's preference for their daughters and wives to work at home. Homework allowed a certain control and supervision over the familiar structure, in order to prevent the alleged dissolution of the family. As Vezzosi outlines, the colony tended to attribute a great deal of the "moral degeneration" they believed was linked to the drifting away from traditional values and life-styles, to factory work (Vezzosi 1986: 86). On the contrary, as it will be illustrated later in this chapter, factory employers as well as union workers understood the importance of recruiting immigrant women as factory workers so as to facilitate their modernization. From an assimilationist perspective, the integration of immigrant workers in factories fell within the scope of a broader idea of modernization since it contributed to shaping an American sense of individuality and work ethic. Therefore, Italian immigrant women were the target of double expectations, both on the side of American employers and of Italian men. Their body and inner reality were supervised, controlled, as soon as they emerged tired from a trans-oceanic crossing, ready to be put at work in factory chains or homework. Of course, the actual experience of Italian and immigrant women in general simultaneously eschewed and interacted with these expectations. When Italian women did not reject the opportunity of factory work, they indeed developed a different notion of subjectivity, but it was not exactly the development of a liberal, American sense of individuality and independence. A valuable example of such

experience is Maria Hall Ets' book *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant* (1970), a book filled with continuous references to self-esteem (Vezzosi 1986: 87). After conducted a series of interview with women who were employed in artificial flowers industry in the 1910s, Luisa Cetti stated:

> The most immediate aspects of my own interviews reveal the pride of competence, the self-esteem deriving from the ability to learn "the tricks of the trade" rapidly, the fast and clever execution. (quoted in Vezzosi 1986: 87)

The integration of Italian women into American society appears to be ambivalent and contradictory. In the process of adjusting to a new society and being confronted with familial and relational structures that belonged to their mother-country, Italian immigrant women were indisputably burdened by male expectations, but their personal and collective identities were undergoing a significant change. It was in their daily life and self-perception that such change was taking place. In order to have a deeper comprehension of this ambivalent experience, a thorough research on Italian women's associations and groups scattered throughout the Italian American communities in North America is fundamental, so as to reconstruct a network of informal relationships between immigrant women (Vezzosi 1986: 90) that would allow us to bring into focus who these foremothers were, and what kind of legacy they might have passed onto second- and third-generation Italian-American women.

1.2.3 From sewing to the garment industry

As discussed before, work was one of the most productive fields for the redefinition of gender and ethnicity for Italian American women. Considering the importance of groups and associations of immigrant women in the early 20th century, it is fundamental to turn to the analysis of political gatherings and collaborative activities in unions. In her academic work, historian Jennifer Guglielmo has produced seminal insights into the ways in which Italian American women actively participated in shaping the political life of the whole community[3]. In "Italian Women's Proletarian Feminism in the New York City Garment Trades, 1890s-1940s" Guglielmo points out that so far, literature on Italian American working-class activism has been highly male-centered, because the "usual" forms of political activity in the early 20th century were only accessible to and shaped for

[3] See Jennifer Guglielmo, *Living the Revolution: Italian Women's Resistance and Radicalism in New York City, 1880-1945*, Chapel Hill (NC): The University of North Carolina Press, 2010.

men. This has obscured other forms of political activism, including those of immigrant women (Guglielmo 2002: 249).

As the second largest group of workers in the garment trades, immediately after the Jewish community, Italian women's solidarity and militancy was crucial for unions to organize the strikes that took place between 1910 and 1933. According to Guglielmo, Italian immigrant women did not join unions until the Great Depression. However, unlike what the traditional historical arguments maintain, the author shows how first- and second-generation Italian American women did not remain indifferent or isolated, but rather their activity slipped under the radar, since their political activism was waged outside the mainstream labor organizations (Guglielmo 2002: 248).

Italian women were recruited in the garment industry because they constituted a discernible part of skilled laborers, being trained in needle-craft techniques, such as sewing and embroidery. Back in Italy, women had learnt the craft of sewing through familial kinship, and this represented their heritage. That is why it took them only a brief time before getting a job in local factories: as soon as they arrived in North America, women found themselves enmeshed in the new industrialized sector. Highly decentralized and with production processes that required little or no machinery, the garment industry offered women and children the opportunity for immediate wage work. (Guglielmo 2002: 253). Fashion industries included garments, millinery, and artificial flowers, and women were employed as home- or pieceworkers.

Garment manufacturers had long relied on abundant cheap immigrant labor, which enabled clothing manufacturers to expand their business and make the bigger cities like New York City international centers of garment production (Guglielmo 2002: 250). Entering the garment's labor force in the 1880s, by the 1930s the working conditions of Italian women had significantly improved. They were in fact more privileged than black women, though at a lower rank compared to other European immigrants. When African American, Puerto Rican, Chinese and other Asian and Caribbean women entered the garment trades in the 1930s, Italians held a relative monopoly over the higher-paying jobs. Among the general workforce, women were assigned to the lowest categories, such

as finishers, shirtwaist, and dressmakers; the labeling of their skills and their value, i.e. their wage was of course gender-biased[4].

The formation of the Italian American working-class community – like in all immigrant communities – was primarily caused by the transition from a specific working environment to the factory, but it did not shape up randomly and without coordinates. Italian Americans did have their own political experience, but it was often affiliated to European ideologies, such as Socialism or Anarchism.

As Jennifer Guglielmo points out, during the mass migrations (1880s-1920s), Italians got confronted with a collapsing society and industry at home. In this context, workers were already active in creating unions and gatherings, such as *Fasci dei lavoratori*. Workers were subjected to a strong repression already under Francesco Crispi's government, but this intensified with Mussolini taking power in 1922 (Guglielmo 2002: 251). At this point, women's role was crucial, since it covered mostly direct-action strategies, such as rioting or looting. In Sicily women even had their own sections: *sezioni femminili* and *fasci femminili.* Acknowledging the existence of few, but significant forms of association among workers allows us to illuminate similar experiences in the United States.

An example that shows the importance of a political heritage for Italian immigrant workers is the case of "Il Gruppo Femminile Luisa Michel"[5], a group of French- and Italian-speaking women residing in the northern Illinois's coal-mining community at the turn of the century. By the end of 1880s, migration waves directed people from Italy, France, Belgium, and Poland to mining communities all over the state. Italian, Belgian, and French women who settled in the Illinois valley moved because of their familial kinships, so they rarely moved individually. These people took with them different forms of radicalism, who were transformed through migration itself (Marithew 2002: 223). The Louise Michel anarchist group takes its name and ideology from the "Gruppo Anarchico Luisa Michel", a federation of anarchists in Florence. Shortly after, another anarchist group in Argentina was born with the same inspirational name. At a first level, the transnational character of the group emerges through a genealogy that consciously takes

[4] Homework for example was highly exploitative: women worked for almost eighteen hours a day and earned four or five cents an hour. See Cynthia R. Daniels "No Place Like Home: A Pictoral Essay on Italian American Homeworkers in New York, 1910-1913" in Tropea, Miller, Beattie-Repetti, 1986, pp. 93-113.
[5] Louise Michel (1830-1905) was a French teacher, writer, and anarchist who played a key role in the Paris Commune and in the French Anarchist movement.

from previous and similar political experiences. Second, bringing together Italian, French, and Belgian women, the Louisa Michel group represented a common ground for women with different migration backgrounds, united in their similar journey and predicaments as immigrant women (Marithew in Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002: 225).

According to Guglielmo, surveillance was strict on women workers, and the fear of political bonding and consequent growing dissent was tangible. Despite all efforts by manufacturers, immigrant women managed to create political alliances within their own community, or across the diverse groups of American society in the early 20th century. In the cities where Italian communities had settled, such as Hoboken, Paterson, Newark, Boston, and Lowell, uprisings were frequent. Such political ardor is hardly recorded in the scholarship on working women's labor struggles in New York City. Historians have focused on a few crucial uprisings, such as the famous 1909 "Uprising of 20.000". The event was provoked by the male leader of the International Ladies' Garment Workers (ILGWU) to support Jewish women workers, aligning themselves with middle-class progressives. Guglielmo stresses that scholars quickly delegitimized Italian women's contribution in this event, even though they constituted almost 34% of the shirtwaist labor force. In fact, by that time, Italian women did not have any particular connection with the ILGWU or the Women's Trade Union League (WTUL) (Guglielmo 2002: 256).

Proof of their political awareness is the fact that around the same time, Italian-language newspapers such as *Il Bollettino della Sera* and *Il Progresso Italo-Americano* reported another strike in Hoboken, New Jersey. Here, Italian women textile workers engaged in a month-long strike for decent wages and shorter work hours, as well as demanding better working conditions. The protagonists of this strike were the so-called *pinzettatrici* (pinchers), women employed in one of the worst jobs in terms of payment and repetitiveness in the silk industry.

Another example is the "Great Revolt" of 50,000 cloak-makers in 1910. Three of the strikers among more than 2800 Italian workers, Catherine Valenti, Anna Canno, and Sadie La Porta, organized a separate local branch to mobilize Italian women, often accompanied by their children. In the following years, the ILGWU invested more and more time and resources in recruiting Italian organizers. Through the role of Italian socialist and anarchist men, the ILGWU had previously tried to bring Italian women from the garment industry to the Union, but the strategy did not work at first. The gradual

participation of Italian women in the Union was extremely well thought and, most importantly, it was motivated by other *compagne* (comrades), such as the Bambace sisters, Rosalina Ferrara, Laura Di Guglielmo and more others.

1.2.4 *Lavoratrici coscienti*: gender and women's role in Unions

The issues of emancipation and women's role were crucial in the debates that animated immigrant women's political gatherings. For instance, Jennifer Guglielmo reports that Latin-American, Spanish, Jewish, and Italian women in Brooklyn created a *circolo* called Club Avanti, founded by Sicilian anarchists and-free thinkers (Guglielmo 2002: 259). Such groups became important *laboratori di pensiero*, i.e. moments to discuss and elaborate a collective position, regardless of ethnicity, to address gender discrimination in the workplace and in political spaces. One of the most well-known political activists and among the few Italian women whose story has been told, Angela Bambace, attended similar meetings in Harlem before joining the ILGWU. Bambace would later become one of the prominent organizers of strikes within the Union. Similarly, Tina Cacici, an activist for the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America (ACWA) participated in debates on the emancipation of women in a socialist club in Brooklyn (Guglielmo 2002: 259).

The activities of the female sections of the ILGWU and other unions included organizing meetings and picket lines, distributing leaflets, running educational programs and everything that could shape the figure of a *lavoratrice cosciente* (politically informed or "conscious" women workers[6]). Furthermore, Italian women workers resorted to Italian-language newspapers, such as *L'Operaia*.

1.2.5 Ethnicity in the context of immigrant work

So far, the chapter has focused on the intersection of class and gender in the experience of Italian American women workers in the early 20th century. When it comes to ethnicity, it can be argued that a more concrete perception of Italian Americans' own ethnicity gradually took shape throughout several historical events that occurred during and after the First World War. First, according to Guglielmo, the policy of repression of radical movements and the "red scare" campaigns of that time contributed to the dislocation of the Italian American labor movement history (Guglielmo in Gabaccia and Iacovetta 2002: 267). Arguably, such dislocation might have contributed to the gaps in the records on Italian American women workers' history. The eight-year struggle of anarchists Nicola

[6] As translated by Guglielmo 2002: 264.

Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti is an example of such repression, and "it made clear to Italian Americans that they were perceived by native-born white Americans as inferior and undesirable" (ibid.). In addition, among other historical phenomena, scholars mentioned the racism and anti-Catholicism of the Ku Klux Klan and other nativist movements for immigration restriction, which targeted all those groups who challenged U.S. racist and imperialist ideologies (Guglielmo 2002: 267).

Within this framework, Guglielmo argues that Italian women started to draw on what she defines as "ethnic nationalism", as well as their codes of honor and respect. Indeed, before the 1930s, women gathered in the aforementioned *circoli*, or in Italian-language newspapers, where political meetings and collaborative activities aimed at creating a collective identity based on class, labor, and activism, rather than ethnic background. The shift that occurred in the 1930s is marked by a recorded, gradual movement from radical unions to reform-oriented socialist labor organizations, like the ILGWU, which were less targeted by the American policy of repression. However, Vecoli reminds us that this should not be interpreted as a sign of toning down and de-radicalization. Such shift rather demonstrates the transnational influences that affected the organizations of workers. Indeed, the Bolshevik and Fascist revolutions had a profound impact upon the Italian labor movement in America (Guglielmo 2002: 267). Of course, not all women responded in the same way: some union activists like Margaret di Maggio and Grace de Luise were committed to an ethnic-based organizing strategy, adopted for example by the Italian Dressmakers' Local 89. Some other organizers such as Angela Bambace and Albina Delfino established cross-cultural alliances with women from other communities, mostly the Jewish community, on the common ground of an anarchist transnational approach.

On the overall, Guglielmo argues that this process took Italian American women to mainstream organizational spaces, and the peak was reached with the 1933-1934 Depression-era strike wave. Interestingly, among the main actors of the scene there were already second-generation Italian American women, immigrant and American-born. Italian American women continued to gather in *circoli*, even connected with the ILGWU, with the same exact spirit: they participated in classes and debates on political strategies, Marxist theories of working-class revolution, and whatever could meet their desire for political representation.

To conclude, Italian immigrant women workers' political life was brave and dynamic; ranging from single episodes of resistance to organized actions. Dismissing such legacy has led to historiographical gaps which have contributed to a stereotypical narrative of inertia that affected the Italian American community on the whole, with a specific gender discrimination. The following access to mainstream political organizations in the 1930s led to new forms of community-building and to changing patterns of migration and everyday life in the U.S., but it also made evident the gendered and racial hierarchization in positions of power in the work field and unions.

1.3 Models and Patterns of Acculturation (1940s-1960s)

By the 1930s, but more specifically after the Second World War, the Italian American communities had been through a generation-by-generation progression into the mainstream, together with the enhancement of their living conditions. It can be argued that second-generation Italian Americans are the first to experience the disarticulation of the Italian identity as it was conceived by their parents, since they were born and raised surrounded by American institutions. However, these new generations went through such a process with ambivalent feelings. As Richard Alba maintains, it is a mistake to think that assimilation affects everyone in a group to the same extent, and that assimilation means the obliteration of all traces of ethnicity, including family memories and personal identities. In fact, the younger members of the group were actually the only ones who could respond to new opportunities in education, in the labor market and in social relationships (Alba 2017: 943). Furthermore, they often grew up in mixed neighborhoods and possibly away from any Italian concentration. On the one hand, they became aware of the distance between their immigrant parents' histories and their everyday life; on the other hand, such improvements were dominated by a strong feeling of working-class sense of belonging and, probably, of guilt. Considering the radical changes that Italian Americans have experienced, is it possible to draw a pattern of acculturation and adjustment into a new geographical and cultural context, different from that of assimilation? What are the issues, the removals, and the ethnic leftovers in the history of Italian Americans?

1.3.1 The making and un-making of whiteness

The reasons for exclusion and discrimination for the Italian American community in the early 20th century revolved around three main topics: education, religion and ethnicity.

As I illustrated in the first section of this chapter, Italian inferiority in the American mind had racial features. This was particularly emphasized in the period between 1900-1914, when emigration from the southern regions of Italy intensified. Although the current place of Italian Americans among whites is undebatable, such privilege was the product of a progressive variation in class conditions and levels of education that influence the extent to which an individual is perceived as "white". In the post-war era, Italians retained the status of whites, able therefore to naturalize, as racial barriers to U.S. naturalization existed until 1952 (Alba 2017: 940). They became eligible to serve in white military units during World War II, and to marry other whites (anti-miscegenation laws formally remained in some states until 1967). However, for many Americans, Italians were an inferior form of white person. Besides, Italians got quickly associated with criminality, a prejudice that solidified with the killing of David Hennessy in 1890, the subsequent lynchings, working-class agitations, and Red Scare policies.

The perception of Italians as whites is related to post-war ethnic mobility and the coexistence of different ethnic groups in the same neighborhood, which made the dynamics between whites and people of color more complex. As Susanna Garroni maintains, the Italians of Baltimore, for instance, after an initial attempt at an alliance with the city's black residents, embraced the positions of the whites. Already in the 1930s, food, cultural mores and family values were used by Italian Americans in Harlem to distinguish themselves from African Americans and Puerto Ricans (Garroni 2017: 348). During World War II, large numbers of African Americans had migrated from the South to industrial cities in pursuit of job opportunities, and by the 1950s, most Italian American neighborhoods were inhabited by coexisting minority populations (Krase 2017: 998). Eventually, in the 1960s, suburbs became a catalyst of competition with racial and new immigrant minorities.

1.3.2 From Little Italies to the Suburbs

The analysis of patterns of mobility from the city to the suburbs calls into question the idea of spatial assimilation as derivative of a straight-line assimilation model, revealing instead a more realistic model of *segmented assimilation*, that recognizes variable social and cultural patterns, as groups assimilate into different segments of a highly stratified society.

Donald Tricarico defines suburban settlements as areas just outside official city limits that offered proximity to urban employment (Tricarico 2017: 959). For the upwardly mobile, these locations were opportunities for home ownership away from congested tenement districts. It can be argued that two main factors have contributed to the large-scale mobility from the city to the suburbs in the post-World War II period. First, the decision of the Federal government to subsidize roads and highways; secondly, the widespread use of automobiles that permitted to live in the outskirts while working in the cities.

In his research, Donald Tricarico not only challenges the notion that Italian Americans moved as a single mass to the suburbs, but he also criticizes the idea that Italian American mobility was synonymous with the completion of the last stage of assimilation. As Tricarico writes, rather than making a break with ethnic culture situated in the city, Italian American suburbanization should be viewed as an extension of the latter (Tricarico 2017: 961). Taking New York's suburbs as a case study, Tricarico shows that kinship in ethnic communities remain at the core of mobility patterns, though within a new household that differed enormously from the tenements, where having a private space within the family household was basically impossible. Moreover, the persistence of elements and symbols of ethnic identity was signaled by rituals and practices that belonged to the Italian community. For instance, gardens and orchards were particularly tied with an embedded rural knowledge of the community, as well as traditional foods and recipes, whose role in identity-making processes has been analyzed by Louise DeSalvo and Edvige Giunta[7].

By the 1970s, a mainly working and lower middle class Italian American community was characterized by home ownership and residential stability, accompanied by socioeconomic mobility (Tricarico 2017: 969). Tricarico concludes that the concentration of Italian Americans in the suburbs can be understood as a collective ethnic strategy, whose core is Italian American kinship. However, in the movement from tenements to the suburbs, business opportunities and the enhancement of living conditions cannot be factored out.

[7] See Edvige Giunta, A Tavola: Food, Tradition, and Community Among Italian Americans (1998) and Louise DeSalvo, Edvige Giunta (eds.), The Milk of Almonds: Italian American Women Writers on Food and Culture (2002).

Finally, the field of education is certainly one of the most important aspects to analyze. As I will illustrate in the second chapter, this is reflected in ethnic literature too, where education plays a central role in immigrant autobiographies as the element of redemption from the character's immigrant background. For immigrant female characters, culture was the means of emancipation from a subaltern condition in a patriarchal system and "Old World" values. *Breadgivers* by Anzia Yezierska, published in 1925, is a classic example of ethnic literature where education is the engine and soul of the narration. Furthermore, the relationship between education and class issues is central in the American modern and contemporary social panorama. As Alba shows, there is a connection between the rates of truancy and dropout in schools for second-generation Italian Americans and the working-class environment in which they grew up (Alba 2017: 940). A substantial narrowing of the educational gap between white native Americans and Italian Americans occurred for those born during the late 1930s, while for what concerns those born after 1950, the gap had almost completely vanished. This led to an improvement of the occupational status and to new job opportunities, which resulted in the pursuit of better living conditions.

To conclude, throughout the second half of the twentieth century, Italian Americans were the protagonists of a process of "fragmentation of ethnicity along the lines of class, generation, and ancestry" (Massey, quoted in Tricarico 2017: 975). Distinction in experiences and linkage with Italian American sociocultural worlds were notable among older, first- or second-generation Italian Americans, who had grown up in the immigrant settlements before the Immigration Act of the 1920s. Already from the second generations of Italian Americans, their ethnic background had become less and less relevant in relation to the members of another ethnic group. As Alba writes, individuals from both sides of the boundary see themselves more and more as alike, assuming they are similar in terms of some other factors such as social class (Alba 2017: 951). This demonstrates that assimilation is never a straight-line process; in fact, the persistence of cultural and ethnic heritage can take various forms. Hence, it is fundamental to move away from the paradigmatic patterns of assimilation, and to understand the experience of individuals with an ethnic background as a process of cultural stratification.

CHAPTER 2:
Moving Beyond the Canon

Without words, they tell me
to be ashamed.
I am.
I deny that booted country
even from myself,
want to be still
and untouchable
as those women
who teach me to hate myself.
(Maria Mazziotti Gillian)

Sdraiate sui cofani delle macchine, sulle Lincoln blu petrolio o color ruggine abbassate dal loro peso, in posa come le modelle, senza reggiseno, immigrate, sempre meno religiose.
(Claudia Durastanti)

2.1 An overview of Italian American literature

The limitations of the term ethnicity as a concept shaped in the early twentieth century have been underscored by the recent research and emerging literary forms that challenge the binary between ethnic and WASP. Historically, the debate on what it means to write "ethnic" became the focus of a series of studies inaugurated by the publication of *Beyond the Melting Pot* by Nathan Glazer and D. P. Moynihan in 1963. In their following collection *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (1975), Glazer and Moynihan coined the term "radical expectancy" to describe the belief that "class circumstances would become the main line of division between people, erasing the earlier lines of tribe, language, religion, and national origin, and that thereafter these class divisions would themselves, after revolution, disappear" (Glazer and Moynihan in Sollors 1986: 20). Although the limits of the term "ethnicity" were already somehow evident at the time of Glazer and Moynihan's studies, in the 1970s "ethnicity was still perceived as a new word that sent scholars to their dictionaries" (Sollors 1986: 23). In 1969, Friedrik Barth argued that it is "the ethnic boundary that defines the group, not the cultural stuff that it encloses" (Barth in Sollors 1986: 15), somehow emphasizing that ethnicity is a label tailored and pinned on the identity of a group from the outside. However, Barth's theory can easily minimize the "cultural content" of ethnicity, placing the emphasis on the contrast with the outside.

From this perspective, contrastive strategies such as naming and name-calling among different groups become the most important thing (Sollors 1986: 28). It is undeniable, though, that the term “ethnicity” had long been the synonymous of “otherness”. According to Sollors:

> The contrastive terminology of ethnicity reveals a point of view which changes according to the speaker who uses it: for example, for some Americans eating turkey and reading Hawthorne appear to be more "ethnic" than eating lasagna and reading Puzo. (Sollors 1986: 25)

The ambiguity of the concept of ethnicity and the multiple debates around it reflects the intricacies and the contradictions that are intrinsic to cultural processes. Such issues are the subject of Werner Sollors’s seminal work *Beyond Ethnicity* (1986). Sollors’s work is one of the most influential elaborations on the way in which the individual’s cultural background and their lineage have proven to be pervasive in the formation of Americanness within the assimilationist framework. Here, I am drawing on Sollors’s work in order to present an early model in which the concepts of heritage and kinship were put in a relation of dialectic opposition in the determining American identity. As Sollors maintains, "the conflict between contractual and hereditary, self-made and ancestral, definitions of American identity – between consent and descent” can be considered as the central drama in American culture (Sollors 1986: 5). In *Beyond Ethnicity*, descent relations are "those defined by anthropologists as relations of ‘substance’ (by blood or nature)”, while consent relations are those of “law” or “marriage” (Sollors 1986: 6). The author sums up the difference between consent and descent as the following:

> Descent language emphasizes our positions as heir, our hereditary qualities, liabilities, and entitlements; consent language stresses our abilities as mature free agents and “architects of our fates” to choose our spouses, our destinies, and our political systems. (ibid.)

The debate around Americanization and the nature of assimilation is exemplified by the group division of scholars between those who favored a consent-based identity, and those who favored a descent-based identity. On one side, as Sollors points out, “some newcomers, immigrants, scholars, and radicals have interpreted Americanization in the tradition of universal regeneration” (Sollors 1986: 87). For instance, in *Essentials of Americanization* (1922) Emory Bogardus wrote:

> The native-born and the foreign-born alike must experience the process of Americanization. In the case of natives, Americanization involves getting acquainted with the best American traditions and current standards, and practicing and trying to improve the quality of these traditions and standards. (Bogardus in Sollors 1986: 87)

In Bogardus's view, being American implies a continuous adherence to standards and traditions that each individual, even the natives, should practice and enhance.

On the other side, descent-oriented theorists believed in a sort of "hereditary election" that sees American identity as something received by birth and passed onto generations (Sollors 1986: 88). Such perspective shows the contradictions entailed in many descent-oriented theories, since scholars would reject the idea of an achieved American identity, but believed in an inherited form of acquisition that comes with the stratification of generations. For example, American academic Barrett Wendell (1855-1921) argued for the concept of "genetics of salvation", that views identity as connected to territorial belonging. According to Wendell, children of immigrants can become American "in the sense in which I feel myself so – for better or worse, belonging only here" (Wendell in Sollors 1986: 89).

Therefore, at a first glance, discourses on consent and descent had been articulated in a way that made as clear-cut as possible the absolute polarization of these two positions, thus hiding the discrepancies implied in such dichotomy. To provide another example, the contradictions of the assimilationist perspective that placed great emphasis on consent at the expense of descent – or, in Sollors's terms, that favored "achieved rather than ascribed identity" (Sollors 1986: 37) – are evident in the whole history of the United States' relationship with black communities. Through cultural and institutional forms of discrimination, the United States denied the possibility for black individuals to achieve a nondescript Americanness, as they were perceived as unassimilable. Thus, the assimilationist idea of consent-based identities reveals its timeserving nature when it comes to laws and policies such as the "one drop" rule[8], which highlight the importance of descendance in distinguishing "us" from the designated absolute-other. Therefore, Racial discrimination became the catalyst of a necessary opposition between pure-white and its counterpart.

[8] The "one drop" rule was one of the legal bases of racial discrimination in many parts of the United States. It asserted that any person with even one black ancestor was considered racially black, thus impeding intermarriages, and preventing rights equality. The rule was outlawed only in 1967.

The semantic limitations of words and terms that define the concept of ethnicity are at the core of Sollors' work, who admitted that in writing the book, his use of the word "ethnicity" became more and more hesitant. However, argued Sollors, in lack of a better vocabulary "ethnicity" and "ethnic" serve the purpose to talk about conflicts between consent and descent (Sollors 1986: 39). Sollors underscored the problematics of this set of terminology from the beginning of his research, claiming that "terms like 'ethnicity', 'melting pot', 'intermarriage', 'regionalism', and 'generation' are all used in a dazzling variety of elusive ways" (Sollors 1986: 5). Because of their ambiguity, these words have been defined by Robin Winks as "semantic safety-valves" to which scholars resort in order to avoid a deeper analysis of complex phenomena, namely American imperialism and racial discrimination (Kroes in Sollors 1986: 5). Finally, according to Abner Cohen, "for many people, the term ethnicity connotes minority status, lower class, or migrancy. This is why sooner or later we shall have to drop it or to find a neutral word for it, though I can see that we shall probably have to live with it for quite a while" (in Sollors 1986: 39).

Considering the debates on the term ethnicity, Sollors proposes a broad definition of ethnic literature that tries to overcome the assumption according to which ethnic writing is equated to parochialism, which is converted in the expectation of "genuine" ethnic themes. This expectation underlies an essentialist view on ethnicity based on authenticity. According to Sollors, a more inclusive definition of ethnic literature includes "works written by, about, or for persons who perceived themselves, or were perceived by others, as members of ethnic groups, including even nationally and internationally popular writings by "major" authors and formally intricate and modernist texts" (Sollors 1986: 243). Sollors's definition has two important implications. First, it aims at going beyond the idea that ethnic literature necessarily equates with minority literature, and it exhorts to reflect on the cases of internationally recognized authors such as Vladimir Nabokov or Eugene O'Neill. Secondly, Sollors's definition revolves around the idea of self-perception and external perception, calling into question not only the themes of ethnic writing, but also the standpoint of the author and the audience that is implied. Sollors indeed argues that "ethnic writers in general confront an actual or imagined double audience, composed of 'insiders' and of readers, listeners, or spectators who are not familiar with the writer's ethnic group" (Sollors 1986: 49).

Turning to Italian American literature, its tradition struggled to consolidate, to be recognized, and to obtain its status within the American literary canon, but always and irretrievably in the category of ethnic literature. Early examples of Italian American literature, which mainly include autobiographical novels and immigrant autobiographies, negotiated forms of Italianness and Americanness and can be read as "handbooks of socialization into the codes of Americanness" (Sollors 1986: 7). However, as I have analyzed in the first chapter, already after the Second World War Italian Americans are no longer in need to be trained into mastering codes of Americanness. Therefore, it is important to ask what it means to write about "ethnicity" and from an "ethnic" background for third- and fourth-generation writers. If writing "ethnic" entails a certain form and content, how did Italian American authors re-configure them and re-appropriate their ethnicity? If we can still claim that there is something ethnic about Italian American literature, can such concept be reshaped? and how? These are some of the questions discussed by scholars of Italian American studies.

2.1.1 Italian American studies

Although Olga Peragallo's *Italian American Authors and Their Contribution to American Literature*, published in 1949, and Rose Basile Green's *Italian-American Novel: A Document of the Interaction of Two Cultures*, published in 1974, mark an early interest for Italian-American literature, it was not until the 1980s that important critical studies and anthologies were published consistently (Boelhower 1986; Buonomo et al. 2011). The debate on the formation of the Italian-American canon began as late as 1993, with the reaction of Italian-American writers and critics to Gay Talese's front-page article "Where Are the Italian-American Novelists?" in *the New York Times Book Review* (Buonomo et al. 2011: 77). In this article, Talese reflected on the absence of a recognizable tradition of Italian American writers, as well as the lack of mainstream recognition by the American intellectual and literary environments. According to Robert Viscusi, Talese finally gave a clear shape to a set of preconceptions about what are considered to be Italian American themes in the eyes of the publishing market (Viscusi 1994: 267). Talese's article thus started a productive, public debate among Italian American scholars whose responses mainly appeared in the Fall 1993 and Spring 1994 issues of *Italian Americana*.

However, by the 1990s, writers would no longer be categorized solely by their ethnicity, and the fact that the demand for visibility by Italian Americans arrived so late demonstrated that there had been no previous recognition of Italian American identity within the larger body of American literature. According to William Q. Boelhower, the ethnic revival of the 1960s together with the rise of postcolonial studies headed by Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Paul Gilroy, have lain the basis for a big cultural shift that, as Boelhower phrased it, "spelled the end to the melting pot synergies and radically shook up the traditional canon of American literature" (Boelhower 2021: 10).

According to Boelhower, such a cultural shift was marked by the emerging of new virtual and physical cultural spaces, such as the birth of *MELUS* (Society for the Study of Multi-ethnic Literature of the United States), which began publication as a small house organ in September 1974. In 1987, *MELUS* featured a special issue on Italian American literature that includes much of the work done by historians and researchers in the Italian American Studies Association, founded in 1966 (Boelhower 2021: 12). In his retracing of the history of Italian American studies, Boelhower also mentions the review *VIA: Voices in Italian Americana*, whose first issue came out in 1990 under the supervision of Fred Gardaphé, Paolo Giordano, and Anthony Julian Tamburri. The first collective effort to anthologize the works of Italian American women was the publication of *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Women* by Helen Barolini in 1985. Talking about the anthology, Barolini maintained that "once the missing pieces have been fitted into the national literature […] the emphasis on ethnicity, per se, will have been transcended" (Barolini in Boelhower 2021: 13). Following in Barolini's steps, in 1991 Gardaphé, Giordano, and Tamburri edited the anthology *From the Margin. Writings in Italian Americana*. Considering both the first and the revised edition (2000) of *From the Margin*, the anthology includes both contemporary Italian American fiction and the early works of immigrant autobiographers, such as Constantine Panunzio, Pascal D'Angelo, Jerre Mangione, Jo Pagano, and Leonard Covello (Boelhower 2021: 14). Among the most relevant anthologies, collections and academic literature produced in the 2000s, Boelhower mentions Marina Cacioppo's *If the Sidewalks of These Streets Could Talk. Reinventing Italian-American Literature*, published in 2005, and Ilaria Serra's *The Value of Worthless Lives*. *Writing Italian American Immigrant Autobiographies*, published in

2007. Serra's work can also be found in Italian under the title of *Immagini di un immaginario. L'Emigrazione Italiana negli Stati Uniti fra i due secoli 1890-1924*. These two studies are both concerned with the genre of immigrant autobiography and are the result of a deep archival work. Marina Cacioppo's book investigates immigrant autobiography as a genre that challenges the values and the typical narrative of the American Self that dominates the genre of autobiography. Ilaria Serra's book is particularly relevant, inasmuch as the author classifies the autobiographies that she analyzes according to different categories, i.e. working-class subjects, immigrant artists, immigrants in religious life, immigrant women, and Italian Americans who achieved success through education or business. What is more, Serra collects fifty-eight narratives of immigrant autobiography, among which only twenty-one were already known (Boelhower 2021: 20).

2.1.2 Assembling the Italian American literary canon

The main purpose of Italian American studies has been to identify, to assemble, and to produce critical evaluation of the literature written by Italian American authors. But can the urge of assembling a body of Italian American literature be explained solely as a demand for recognition?

Literary canons are part of what we come to think of as our cultural heritage, which is a notion that is often perceived as natural and ahistorical. I believe that such feeling of "naturalness" – which is directly connected to the issues of consent and descent that I have previously explored – requires further analysis. In fact, investigating the formation of literary canons covers multiple purposes. First, it dismantles the idea of "naturalness", raising awareness on the artificiality and ideological reasons that underlie cultural patterns; secondly, literary canons tell us something about our position as people who make and participate in culture. Finally, in the case of Italian American literature, and generally in the field of ethnic literature, the analysis of the canon is concerned with the very question of what is visible and invisible, what leaves tangible traces and what is still excluded from cultural codification. More specifically, it addresses the fundamental questions of written and oral traditions, of national language and dialects. As Martino Marazzi writes, "the canon works canonically, and its origins are also in some way self-reflective. So much for the illiteracy of the first generation. No people is ever without a culture" (in Buonomo et al. 2011: 98). Therefore, the lack of interest in Italian American

literature depends on the lack of critical tools to interpret these works. As Marina Cacioppo pointed out, the oblivion of early forms of Italian American writings can be explained by practical and political reasons. First, these texts are dispersed in Italian-American periodicals, held in archives both in Italy and in the United States. Secondly, they are written in Italian and/or dialects, thus they are very difficult to read for many non-Italian scholars and "hard to inscribe within disciplinary boundaries, as they are fundamentally transatlantic products, neither Italian nor American" (in Buonomo et al. 2011: 91). What is more, Italian American literature has been underestimated by both American and Italian scholars. In the 1940s and 1950s, prominent critics such as Giuseppe Prezzolini and Emilio Cecchi considered the textual production of the "colonia" as derivative and provincial, relegating it to a marginal position. It was only with the recent transformation of Italy from a country of emigration to a country of immigration that scholars manifested a new interest in immigration studies (in Buonomo et al. 2011:91).

In their introduction to the Forum on "The Emerging Canon of Italian American Literature", *RSA* 2010-2011, Leonardo Buonomo and John Paul Russo have joined forces with other authors to propose a possible canon of Italian American fiction for the period 1925-1950. Sociologists like Leonardo Covello, Herbert Gans, Joseph Lopresto et al. have identified the most recurring and salient themes of these works as the conflict with the "first generation values", personal freedom, and marriage inside or outside the group (Buonomo et al. 2011: 78). Among the milestones of Italian American literature, Buonomo and Rossi mention Louis Forgione's *The River Between* (1928), Garibaldi Marto Lapolla's *The Grand Gennaro* (1935), Guido D'Agostino's *Olives on the Apple Tree* (1940), Mari Tomasi's *Like Lesser Gods* (1949), and John Fante's *Ask the Dust* (1939). However, as Cacioppo points out, the predominant focus in assembling a canon of Italian American literature has been placed on male authors of the 1930s and 1940s, such as John Fante, Pietro di Donato, and Jerre Mangione, thus obscuring the literary output in Italian produced in the period immediately after the mass migration waves (in Buonomo et al.: 91), as well as the contemporary works that were published during the 1980s and 1990s. In Cacioppo's view the recovery of texts that belong to the period 1925-1950 is fundamental not only because these works might anticipate themes and genres that will be recurrent in later Italian-American literature, but also because they articulate

the complex relation between the conventions of the genre and the needs of self-representation and self-definition.

The early genre of immigrant autobiography and the context of its appearance is precisely the aim of William Boelhower's second edition of *Immigrant Autobiography in the United States. Four Versions of the Italian American Experience* (2021). In his introduction, Boelhower writes:

> The immigrant autobiographical macrotext offers not only a new epistemological grid for a dialogical reading of American culture, but also a deconstructive approach to the often ritualized self of American autobiography. […] To put it another way, as an emerging genre immigrant autobiography is both mirror and agent of this shift, inasmuch as it implicitly works to found the cultural revolution that the minority battles of African Americans, Chicanx, Native Americans, Asian Americans, Jewish and Italian Americans, and Puerto Ricans would elaborate during the urban crises of the 1960s and 1970s. (Boelhower 2021: 30)

Since immigrant autobiographies are, as Cacioppo phrased it, "transatlantic productions", texts that traverse and inhabit two different countries, it can be argued that they engage with feelings on both *Italianità* and Americanness. In the first chapter I have tried to illuminate the interconnection between the definition of Americanness and Italianness as two parallel identity-making processes that were taking place in the United States and in Italy at the turn of the twentieth century. In this context, Italian immigrants in the United States appeared as subjects whose identities were not rooted in any previous strong national sense. Therefore, the fabrication of both Italian and American identity can be analyzed as the product of larger nation-building processes, and, interestingly, they share some commonalities in their stages. For instance, both Italy and the United States took advantage of emigration and immigration respectively for nourishing a sense of patriotic belonging. Secondly, both the US and Italy were going through a new imperialist phase at the end of the nineteenth century. As Robert Viscusi writes, the United States culture reached the exasperated apogee of imperialism with the triumph of Admiral Dewey in Manila Bay (1898), precisely when the first Mass Migration waves were crossing the Atlantic (Viscusi 2006: 69). Meanwhile, the formation of a new Italian identity had a primary role in the agenda of the post-Risorgimento Italian government, which undertook several political, urban, and cultural initiatives. Prime Minister Francesco Crispi envisioned the oneiric and idealistic plan of a new empire as the best way to let nationalist feelings grow among the various Italian regions. Therefore, Crispi set up Italy's invasion

of Africa in 1894, which eventually resulted in the defeat of Italians in the battle of Adwa (1896).

How did the events in Italy affect Italian immigrants in America? To what extent the literary production of Italian Americans and the emerging genre of immigrant autobiography reflect such historical processes? What kind of Italian identity was being shaped in the mind and heart of Italians in the United States, and, simultaneously, what sense of Americanness?

Within Italy's programme of shaping patriotic feelings, the Italian-language newspapers and journals were means to make propaganda about the endeavors of the Italian government, which, at the time of the Mass Migration, was conducting massive urban plans for the construction of monuments and buildings. However, when it came to the literary production of Italian immigrant writers and novelists, the undertakings of the Italian government could not be a possible topic to address explicitly, since American literary culture, especially at the turn of the century, favored stories that revolved around the idea of self-construction (Viscusi 2006: 71). In this context, ethnic literature has always been in an ambivalent relationship with the American construction of the Self, producing literary texts and stories that might simultaneously challenge and adhere to the traditional *topoi* and ideological framework of American literature.

At the turn of the twentieth century, the assimilationist standpoint was dominant. Therefore, as Boelhower writes, immigrant autobiography did not automatically gain acceptance as a literary achievement. According to the author, researchers who study American culture must not forget that "immigrant autobiography is preeminently a model fighting for status in American literary history" (Boelhower in Viscusi 2006:71). Therefore, Italian immigrant autobiographers had to carve out their own literary space to express their feelings about Italian identity as well as their relationship to the "New World".

Among the early practitioners of Italian immigrant autobiographies, Pascal D'Angelo (1894-1932) is probably one of those writers who managed to obtain recognition in the American literary panorama. D'Angelo initially came to the United States as an illiterate peasant. After he learned to read and write as an autodidact, he began to compose poetry, eventually catching the attention of Carl Van Doren, editor of *The Nation*, who published his poems in 1922. In 1924 Pascal D'Angelo published the

autobiography *Son of Italy*, thanks to which he established himself as an Italian-descendant in the American literary institutions (Viscusi 2006: 72). Robert Viscusi's analysis of *Son of Italy* is particularly relevant here, inasmuch as the scholar identifies the historical process of the formation of Italian and American identity in the parable that Pascal D'Angelo makes of himself. *Son of Italy* begins with an introduction by Carl Van Doren that tells how he discovered the writer, retracing D'Angelo's path towards a moment of epiphany in which, after listening to *Aida*, he realizes that writing poetry will be his ultimate goal. The pursuit of a career as a writer seems an impossible task that activates the engine for the self-made-person narrative that is so crucial for American literature (Viscusi 2006: 73). In the description of the transformative moment that occurred while listening to *Aida*, D'Angelo makes use of comparisons that associate the beauty of the piece with classic European poetry, referring to Keats' and Shelley's poems. As Viscusi points out, the autobiographer brilliantly uses European counterparts for Whitman and other writers that are included in the American literary canon, as they contributed to the shaping of the "sovereign democratic self" (ibid.). In other words, D'Angelo stages a subtle battle between two main canons in the attempt of legitimating his own literary potential as an enrichment to American literature. What is more, in choosing *Aida* as the core of the epiphany, D'Angelo shows a wise use of references that might articulate the imperialist wave that was taking place in Italy. Indeed, *Aida* is a classic in the history of Italian opera. Written at the end of Risorgimento, it was commissioned with the aim of reconfiguring Egypt as a European nation, celebrating nationalization through the battle between Egypt and Ethiopia. As Viscusi writes, "the immigrant watching this opera witnesses the creation of an ideal Italian male and in that moment comes on the scene of his own nationalisation […]. He has seen himself on the stage of Italian national myth. He too can be the voice of a 'nation of nations'" (Viscusi 2006: 74). Furthermore, *Aida* had a particular significance for Italians living in other countries, since it was written for performances outside Italy, and it gave Italian migrants the opportunity to experience bits of the nationalization forces that were driving the country on a political and cultural level.

The influence of the historical events that were taking place in Italy and America are evident not only in the genre of immigrant autobiography, but also in other fiction and non-fiction writings produced before and even after the 1960s. As Fred Gardaphé claims,

the rise of Fascism in 1920s-40s Italy would have a tremendous effect on the identity and behavior of Americans of Italian descent (Gardaphé 2011: 22). Especially after the fall of Mussolini, Italian American writers started to address Fascism in both fiction and poetry, and not seldom anti-fascist feelings were combined with working-class and labor issues, which progressively consolidated as some of the most important themes in Italian American literature. As Gardaphé pointed out, the cultural work done by immigrant intellectuals who dedicated their lives to the working-class cause is evident in the voices of political and labor activists such as poet/organizer Arturo Giovannitti, Frances Winwar, journalist/organizer Carlo Tresca, and Luigi Fraina (Gardaphé 2011: 22). Arturo Giovannitti (1884-1959) can be considered as one of the most prominent anti-fascist writers and, together with Joseph Ettor, he organized the famous 1912 Lawrence Mill Strike. In his poems "To Mussolini", "Italia Speaks", and "The Battle Hymn of the New Italy", the call for a new, patriotic uprising and the opposition to the fascist regime are expressed through a style that echoes the poetry of Giosué Carducci and Walt Whitman (Gardaphé 2011: 23). Similarly, Constantine Panunzio (1884-1964), author of the autobiography *The Soul of an Immigrant* (1921), contributed to clarifying the relationship between Italian Americans and the Fascist time through his article "Italian Americans, Fascism, and the War", published in 1942 in the *Yale Review* (Gardaphé 2011: 24).

Furthermore, important anti-fascist writings appeared in publications written by the "fuoriusciti", those Italian intellectuals who left Italy and often found refuge in American universities. Thanks to cunning political strategies like the U.S. quota restrictions of 1924, a number of Italian intellectuals were allowed to immigrate to the United States, thus fleeing from the regime (Gardaphé 2011: 24). Together with Enrico Fermi and Niccolò Tucci, several writers migrated too. To mention some of them: Gaetano Salvemini at Harvard, Max Ascoli at the New School for Social Research, Lionello Venturi at Johns Hopkins (Diggins in Gardaphé 2011: 23).

Finally, in the 1960s, the experience of anti-fascism in the life of Italian Americans was the subject of a further elaboration by writers such as Jerre Mangione. The effect of Fascism on the identity of Americans of Italian descent is the subject of the memoirs *Mount Allegro* (1943) and *An Ethnic at Large* (1978). What is more, Mangione's second novel, *Night Search* (1965), is based on the assassination of activist Carlo Tresca.

The novel revolves around the story of Michael Mallory, the illegitimate son of an anti-fascist labor organizer inspired by the figure of Tresca himself.

2.1.3 Literary Generations

As I have illustrated in this first section, both the genre of immigrant autobiography and other fiction and non-fiction works written in the early period 1925-1950 have expressed the authors' willingness and desire to be part of American culture without denying their Italian descendance. This evidences the fact that assimilation is not, and it has never been, a term indicating the natural stratification that occurs generation by generation in cultural processes. Considering that no cultural process can be defined as "natural" *per se*, the idea of assimilation is the epitome of an ideology that aimed at the construction of a nation based on the subsuming of other ethnicities and cultures.

The stratification of different cultural inputs and experiences that occurred throughout generational progress has produced literary texts that cannot be analyzed any longer from the exclusive point of view of ethnicity and within the assimilation perspective. The perception and the formulation of ethnicity for third-generation Italian Americans is indeed much more nuanced. Turning to or looking for an Italian ancestry for third- and fourth-generation Italian American implies the desire and the opportunity to do so, since the connection with their ancestors' homeland is not so immediate anymore. Then, what is left of "ethnicity" in the works of these writers?

In the first chapter, I have tried to outline the socio-cultural reasons for a re-categorization of Italian American writings, especially concerning those writings produced from the 1960s onwards by third-generation Italian Americans. According to Gardaphé, the acculturation of Italians to the United States has been rather thorough, and the shift from "labor immigrants" to "social immigrants", and eventually to "cultural immigrants" should be the main concern of Italian American studies. If the first-generation immigrants can be defined as labor immigrants, building U.S. infrastructures, and fighting U.S. wars, the second generation became that of "social immigrants, searching for acceptance in the larger society, something that would be easier for them once they lost the alien trappings of *Italianità* and mastered the means of obtaining power in American society" (Gardaphé 2011: 18). Third generations instead had the privilege to access education, which subverted familial roles radically and strikingly, thus complicating class-related issues that had already emerged, since "the child became the

teacher to the parent, the guide, the translator, and this became a notion that challenged the traditional structure of the Italian concept of family" (Gardaphé 2011: 19).

From a literary perspective, different experiences and ways to live with one's own Italian descendance are reflected in writers that choose to deal with "Italian American themes", and those who do not. Fred Gardaphé names the former category as "the visible", while the latter are referred to as "the invisible" (Gardaphé 2011: 26). This distinction is rather sharp and can be problematic: considering the aforementioned cultural and material conditions, there is no obligation to deal with established Italian American themes, and this choice does not make one less Italian American, it does not erase one's own identity. Nonetheless, I believe that Gardaphé's argument should be interpreted as a call for Italian American writers, scholars, and artists to challenge stereotypical narratives, avoid self-ashaming and silencing, and propose a fluid identity. Gardaphé draws on Michal M.J. Fischer's notion of the "re-invention of ethnicity", in which ethnicity is described as something that is not "simply passed on from generation to generation, taught and learned; it is something dynamic, often unsuccessfully repressed or avoided" (Fischer in Gardaphé 2011: 26). As Gardaphé points out, mainstream American writers such as Diane di Prima or Gregory Corso, but also important scholars such as Sandra M. Gilbert, did not identify as Italian Americans until later in their lives (Gardaphé 2011: 29). Their work was never analyzed nor received through the lens of Italian American writing, mostly because they did not always address themes of ethnic identity and they never "came out" about their Italian descendance. However, the lack of recognition of their identities has allowed them to enter the canon of American literature. The works of writers who addressed in the past themes of Italian American identity, have not been equally appreciated. Hence, turning to the question of what the canon might tell us about the cultural structures in which we are enmeshed, this evidences that for a long time writings that was openly "Italian American" led to the lack of public recognition. What I am trying to underscore here is that erasure is a fundamental tool in the process of assimilation. The removal of traces and aspects of non-mainstream identity has long been applied to other types of marginalized identities in order to make them more "acceptable" and not dangerous for the standards of our cultural canon. Aspects of authors' and artists' lives that might include an "uncomfortable" gender, sexuality, political position, or ethnic background have often been ignored or overlooked by critics. This also leads to a self-

induced lack of identification or to the codification of one's own identity through stereotypes and *topoi* fabricated from the outside. To answer these questions, Fred Gardaphé advocates for the inclusion of "Italian American histories and stories in the body of material that one must master to be considered American", exhorting scholars of Italian descent to raise awareness on the tradition of Italian American literature and history (Gardaphé 2011: 30). Contributing to the discourses that concern ethnicity and identity is crucial to move beyond the twentieth century-focus on identities built on immigration and re-frame the dichotomy of consent/descent within new dialectical formulations such as genealogy/heritage.

2.2. Against silence: A genealogy of Italian American women writers

In "The Shelter of the Alphabet" poet and writer Carole Maso identifies her home in the ocean, in the people who have crossed it, in her mother, in language, and all these things are different and yet at the same time equal. Home is language; language is the ocean; the ocean is her mother; her mother stands for all those who crossed the ocean. Maso writes "The Shelter of the Alphabet" looking at a picture of her parents where they seem to be deeply in love with each other. She identifies her home – *casa* – as her mother's blood and breath, her desire to give birth to her. Therefore, home is not a place, but a body – her mother's desiring body. Further in the text, Maso identifies home in the literary space, and what strikes the most is that she also includes authors from the traditional body of American literature. She identifies William Carlos Williams and Allen Ginsberg as her "literary fathers" – *padri letterari*. Despite saying overtly that she hates America's multiple forms of discrimination, the author expresses how fundamental American literature was for her, and this does not sound as a contradiction at all. In fact, in Maso's text the distinction between literature and the social space of North America appears to be clear-cut, as if the literary dimension is redeemed from its national character. Such distinction becomes more comprehensible when the author moves from literature to language, identifying the latter as a safe space made of syllables and stretches of words, but also pauses and silences. Here, the very structure of language articulates the experience of immigrants as they learn a new idiom. In re-claiming both the canon of American literature and the English language, Carole Maso designs her own genealogy, that is composed of cross-cultural references, contradictions, removals, inherited desires.

As the last piece of her genealogy, the author mentions Saffo, which symbolizes a distant foremother, an interrupted heritage, and a fragmented language.

Carole Maso's writing introduces the question of what home is, how it is defined as a concept and as a place, and who we imagine inhabiting it. The text brings about an interesting distinction between parents, ancestors, and one's own personal genealogy. What does it mean to descend from something and someone? And is it possible to draw a distinction between a biological lineage and a literary kinship?

In the second section of this chapter, I will further explore the notion of literary canon as a virtual cultural space that reflects discourses and material cultural processes. In the first section I have analyzed the ways in which the concept of "ethnicity" and the category of ethnic literature have influenced and interacted with the broader American literary canon. I have drawn on Sollors' and Boelhower's work to highlight the idea that, in the case of immigrant autobiographies, the struggle for recognition as part of American literature has equaled the struggle for visibility. Nonetheless, such recognition has never implied a full assimilation to American culture, and often those who managed to be acknowledged as American authors had to omit aspects of their identity. In the works of Italian American women, the issue of gender intervenes in the formulation of Italian ethnicity, producing interesting and diverging texts. As Mary Jo Bona points out, the category of gender functions as a lens that complicates the opposition between "Old-World" and "New-World" values, namely, between Italian and American culture (Bona 1999: 4). The women depicted in Italian American novels have to deal with both their ethnicity, as immigrants or daughters of immigrants, and their gender, as women enmeshed in a patriarchal culture that pervades both the country that they inhabit in the present and that of their ancestors'.

Therefore, the literature of Italian American women writers can be analyzed as a case that challenges the conventional idea of a literary canon in its nativist and male-centered character. For these reasons, I believe that the very term "literary canon" does not apply to the tradition of Italian American women's literature, and that it should be re-configured in a new framework that shifts the focus from the stable idea of a national canon to that of a literary genealogy. In fact, a literary canon collects those works which are considered to be seminal for the building of the nation, thus representative of a certain culture. In some respects, immigrant autobiographies already resisted this notion since

they were produced by authors and writers who did not grow up surrounded by American culture. Therefore, they often appropriated traditional American *topoi*, literary figures, and themes in order to legitimate their arrival in the "New World", thus giving an apparently similar but actually radically different meaning to them. As I have proposed in the previous section, instances of such meaning-construction process can be Mary Antin's prophetical narration of the immigrants arriving in the United States as repeating the arrival of the Pilgrims, or Constantine Panunzio's use of elements from both the European and American culture.

Secondly, because of the high percentage of illiteracy among Italian immigrants, Italian culture might not have been present to them in highbrow cultural forms such as novels and theater plays. This implies that the notion of literary ancestors and models was somehow absent. Here, the focus on gender becomes even more important. Italian immigrant women often had no actual writing or reading skills, and the visibility of female authors at the end of the nineteenth century was quite low anyway. Indeed, the task of recovery and establishment of a literary tradition for third- and fourth- generation Italian American women has just recently begun, and, as Mary Jo Bona argues, "such work necessarily requires an analysis of the interpenetration of their novels with the literary and cultural American context and an awareness of their position as *Italian* American *women*" (Bona 1999: 5). Bona is advocating not only for a retrieval of works written by women of Italian descent, but also for raising awareness of the significance of the Italian American experience in order to avoid silencing. I believe that the task of retrieval is even deeper and more complex. Retracing the experience of Italian American women implies dealing with those textual forms that have eschewed critical evaluation so far, which include texts written in dialects that are stored in Italian and American archives, the oral transmission of knowledge that relies on memory, discourses on *Italianità* embedded in writings that do not identify openly as coming from an Italian American voice, stories embedded in political essays, journals, and reviews that bear witness of the life of Italian American immigrant women workers. Engaging with such a wide and heterogenous range of texts is not an attempt to include anything –regardless of textual type – that talks about Italian American women within the tradition; rather, acknowledging the dignity and the diversity of such diverse texts is a necessary approach for conducting research on minority literatures. Within these fields, it is not unusual that

writings might include forms of orality, hybrid language, or the use of crafts for storytelling as expressive tools that often slip away from canonical categorizations.

2.2.1 Gender and ethnicity in the experience of Italian American women

Considering the debates on ethnicity that I have analyzed in the first section of this chapter, it is legitimate to wonder if there is any connection between third- and fourth-generation writers such as Louise DeSalvo and Mary Cappello, and writers considered to be "ethnic" writers, such as Mari Tomasi. As I have argued before, since the socio-cultural context has rather changed from the 1960s onward, writers of the third generation cannot be categorized as ethnic writers. These writers are not interested in representing themselves as Americans; rather they are more engaged in revitalizing regional customs by incorporating them into their novels (Bona 1999: 9). As Edvige Giunta writes, "Italian American women writers put into words the tension that originates from their own plural cultural identities, and their texts are both a sign of acculturation and cultural displacement at the same time"[9] (Giunta 2001: 17).

The idea of ethnicity as a dynamic concept that is not ahistorical nor immutable, but rather that undergoes change, avoidance, repression, and re-invention, suggests that from the beginning of Italian migration up until now, the perception of one's ethnicity as perceived from the outside and from the inside is dramatically different. Italian Canadian professor Linda Hutcheon has proposed the idea of *crypto-ethnicity* as a possible formulation for the dual and simultaneous sense of belonging and detachment, of nostalgia and present-ness, of pride and shame, that is specific of Italian American women.

> By *crypto-ethnicity* I mean the situation of immigrants whose family name was changed when they arrived in a new land or women like me who married at a time when social custom meant taking a husband's surname and who suddenly found more than the nominal marker of their ethnicity altered. (Hutcheon et al. 1998: 32)

The concept of *crypto-ethnicity* addresses immediately the process of silencing that Italian American women writers have been through. As Hutcheon writes, "the Mortolas, the DeMarcos, the Noceris, are crypted under the Gilberts, the Torgovnicks, the Davidsons"[10] (Hutcheon 2001: 28). Hutcheon maintains that all women writers and

[9] My translation.
[10] My translation.

scholars of Italian descendance have grown up surrounded by Anglo-American language and literature. Nowadays, they write and teach *in* English and *about* the English language in the academic field, whose departments have been traditionally structured according to the nineteenth-century idea of literature as constitutive of the nation. As an "ethnic" English professor, Hutcheon is engaged with understanding the experience of those who grew up in an environment that was split between the public and the private sphere, in which Italian was the domestic language and culture, and English was the language of the outside world. In highlighting such distinction, Hutcheon re-considers ethnicity as a position that generates and is generated by a process of othering. As an Italian Canadian enmeshed into the cultural paradigm of Canadian multi-culturalism – quite different from the United States' melting-pot ideology – Hutcheon argues that despite the recent updates of the discourses on multi-culturalism, simplistic and dangerous views on the co-existence of different cultures might still end up in elaborated re-configurations of white supremacy. Indeed, the author does not identify with a definition of ethnicity as the loss of traces of identity and the lessening of one's own alterity as time goes by. Rather, Hutcheon describes ethnicity in Michael J. Fischer's terms, as an inter-reference between two or multiple cultural traditions (Hutcheon 2001: 30). Therefore, thinking with Homi Bhabha, Hutcheon believes that ethnicity might be a form of social and textual affiliation for both the reader and the writers, as they acquire a precise form and connotation when they are put into a word-hierarchy; both emerge as the terms of different, and sometimes opposite, cultural codifications (ibid.). Thinking of ethnicity as a form of affiliation ultimately reveals cultural constructions and frees the individual from the discourses of authenticity and pureness:

> There have been such liberating moments for me as a crypto-ethnic, moments when the imprisoning boundaries of purist notions of ethnicity could be challenged merely by being Italian while others though I was English or Scottish. […] And the crypto-ethnic marker I once valued as a protective mask I now appreciate as a reminder of the constructedness of all forms of ethnic identity. (Hutcheon et al. 1998: 32)

Re-claiming the artificiality of ethnic identities was possible for third- and fourth-generation writers whose cultural experience is characterized by different degrees of exposure to Italian culture, and in most of the cases there is no immediate knowledge or experience of it. Acknowledging ethnicity as a positionality and a form of textual affiliation has allowed Italian American women writers to imagine a possible textual

genealogy that explores and fills in the distance from their ancestors' culture and the lack of models to look up to. In this sense, the term "ethnicity" is not a semantic safety-valve that, from the perspective of nativist Americans, describes blood ties as the pure expression of descent, nor it indicates the inevitable heritage and burden of one's culture of origin. It is precisely the distance from their ancestors' cultures that is reclaimed, as it opens up the possibility for the search of literary or political kinship. Nonetheless, such distance is always painful and never idealized by the authors. It is simultaneously a silent, empty space and a chance to explore one's identity.

2.2.2 Re-tracing Italian American women's writings

Women of Italian descent confronted this literary absence by recovering texts by Italian American women authors. In the lack of a previous tradition to draw on, the process of collecting the works of Italian American women writers has coincided with the creation of a theoretical framework. It was through the effort of scholars such as Helen Barolini, Mary Jo Bona and Edvige Giunta that the emphasis has been placed on the contribution of Italian American women writers, filmmakers, and publishers to dismantle monolithic stereotypes of Italian American identities. Such archaeology of texts has progressively restored and echoed the voices of women of Italian descent that have been suppressed.

As I have argued before, the notion of "literary space" includes the idea of a literary canon and the way it influences the material dimension of publishing houses and the literary market. Without a visible and widespread literary tradition, Italian American women writers have been under the market's radar for a long time. During this time of anomie, these writers have experimented their own ways to overcome this silence. Sometimes they took a male pseudonym, or they de-ethnicized their surname, turning it into an American surname. These two strategies reflect the levels of gender and ethnic discrimination that these writers were subjected to . Sometimes they even had to take their non-Italian husband's surname, as Sandra (Mortola) Gilbert and Marianna (De Marco) Torgovnick did (Giunta 2001: 15). Another way was to self-publish their works. Edvige Giunta conducted in-depth research on this topic, revealing a number of self-publishing houses. *Ata Press* by Dorothy Bryant*, malafemmina press* by Rose Romano, and *Women's Words Press* by Nancy Caronia are just a few examples. To self-publish is an act of political resistance, as it represents the attempt to carve out one's own space into the general discourse of power. Since these writers created opportunities to publish not

only their works, but also those from other women writers, Giunta defines it "cultural activism" (ibid.). What is more, the combination of class consciousness and ethnic literature has never been welcomed by the dominant literary market. The relationship with working-class issues and literature is evident not only in the works of Pietro di Donato or John Fante, but also in a long history of women writers who recalled the stories of their relatives' exhausting working conditions, such as Mari Tomasi did in *Like Lesser Gods* (1949), Julia Savarese in *The Weak and the Strong* (1952), and Marion Benasutti in *No Steady Jobs for Papa* (1966).

As I have illustrated in the first section of this chapter, the publication of Helen Barolini's *The Dream Book* in 1985 can be considered as the first attempt to anthologize Italian American women's writings in order to make different literary generations visible and establish temporal and spatial coordinates. Barolini managed to collect the works of fifty-six writers, ranging from fiction and poetry to non-fiction and memoirs, drawing on archival material and a variety of sources. Once aware of the existence of a genealogy, Italian American women writers started to read each other and mutually draw on their works. As Giunta writes "the recognition of one's work as a part of a literary tradition immediately creates a sense of legitimation"[11] (Giunta 2008: p. 15).

The Dream Book was born out of an interrogative, since "paths are made by walking. Books are made by questioning" (Barolini 1985: ix). The question here was very simple: in light of the American literary canon and the formation of a recent canon of Italian American literature, where are Italian American women writers? Barolini argued that she wanted to "name the names" of those who have been silenced because of being women and daughters of immigrants, and to illuminate the "historical context of silence". However, Barolini underlined, "*The Dream Book* was intended not as an act of separatism, of setting a specific ethnic group apart from the main body of American literature" (Barolini 1985: x); rather, the scholar aimed at the recovery of forgotten, seemingly marginal writings that eventually will speak for themselves, because in the end "each writers must transcend ethnic-gender qualifiers through the work itself" (Barolini 1985: xiii). By continuous references to the struggle for recognition endorsed by other non-white writers – such as Alice Walker's for African American women writers, or Amy Ling's for Asian American women writers – and the way in which their works mutually

[11] My translation.

resonate, Barolini intended to finally get rid of ethnic categorizations, and establish literary alliances based on new criteria. Interestingly enough, Barolini pointed out that although the act of writing was a way to give voice to Italian American women, this did not lead immediately to the creation of a sense of community and literary tradition, as it happened for other non-white authors. In *Black Women Writers at Work* Toni Cade Bambara claimed that "what determines the shape and content of my work is the community of writers" (Bambara in Barolini 1985: 25). This was not the case for Italian American women writers, who, at the time when Barolini was working on *The Dream Book*, thought themselves unique as writers of Italian American background, and very few knew of the others (Barolini 1985: 25). Of course, this has to do with the lack of a critical framework and scholarly effort to study and anthologize these works. The importance of *The Dream Book* lies precisely in the fact that it allowed women to read each other, form groups, create their own critical lens. As Giunta argues:

> These authors argue for the necessity of such spaces as the forums in which words can be spoken and change can begin. In doing so, they politicize their ethnic identity as one of the means that makes it possible to rid communities of the insidious power of silence. Writing, then, makes it possible to pursue the kind of work that is at the center of the public intellectual's life. To build community even as one seems engaged in dismantling it. (Giunta, 2002: 136)

According to the anthology compiled by Barolini, the letters written by Sister Blandina Segale (1850-1941), published in 1948 under the title *At the End of the Santa Fe Trail*, are the earliest recorded writings by an Italian American woman. As a teaching nun of the Sisters of Charity, Sister Blandina's letters described her mission to the far west from 1872 until 1893 (Barolini 1985: 7). The book is part of an early generation of Italian American immigrant writers, in which authors such as Bella Visono Dodd (1904-1969) and Frances Winwar (1900-1985), neé Francesca Vinciguerra, are included. Another interesting example is the oral history of Italian immigrant Rosa Cassettari, whose story was recorded only in 1970 by Marie Hall Ets, a social worker, in the book *Rosa: The Life of an Italian Immigrant*. These writers are quite exceptional in the context of first-generation immigrants. As I have argued before, Italian language, literature and writing skills were not known to the great mass of dialect-speaking immigrants, therefore they had to acquire "not only the words and concepts of their new world but the very notion of words as vehicles of something beyond practical usage" (Barolini 1985: 4). This was

particularly important for Italian women, who, as Barolini pointed out, did not come from a tradition that considered it valuable for them to narrate their lives as documents of instruction for future generations (Barolini 1985: 5). The lack of a previous literary tradition cannot be explained solely by the displacement of Italian immigrants and the high percentage of illiteracy. Class conditions that shifted from poverty in rural Italy to exploitation as raw labor in America are particularly influential. According to Barolini:

> When you don't read, you don't write. When your frame of reference is a deep distrust of education because it is an attribute of the very classes who have exploited you and your kind for as long as memory carries, then you do not encourage a reverence for books among your children. (ibid.)

It is crucial to acknowledge class as one of the themes that has informed Italian American women's literature, either as a main theme or simply as a background, up until the memoirs that were written in the 1990s and that I have analyzed in the third chapter. In these memoirs, as well as in the aforementioned early writings, education plays a key role as means of emancipation, but whose consequences include an inevitable conflict with the family. In first-generation writers, education was mostly seen as the way for economic independence, rather than the means of emancipation from gender roles. To this regard, the life of Sister Blandina Segale and Bella Visono Dodd can be considered as an exception among the early Italian American writers, since they both received an education. Dodd, for instance, managed to become a college professor and later became a labor activist and public speaker for the Communist Party. However, in her autobiography *School of Darkness* (1954) she leaves a testament of the hardships of her non-traditional life. Sadly, her marriage eventually broke, and she was cast out of the party that she was so fond of.

In the following generations of Italian American women writers, education was progressively connoted as the tool for emancipation and empowerment, as I will illustrate in the third chapter through the analysis of Louise DeSalvo's *Vertigo*. However, moving beyond the family to pursue education and self-independence was an ideal that clashed with the experience of Italian American women, who often migrated with their families, unlike English-speaking migrants, such as Irish women that could migrate on their own and look for a job as maids (Barolini 1985: 9). As I have illustrated in the first chapter, Italian American women's political activism was also marked by the strong hope to create

better working and living conditions for themselves and their families, as well as their future descendants.

In the past, breaking the silence for Italian American women meant either causing a break with their family and giving up to their ancestry, or learning to be ashamed of it. However, thematizing this cultural rupture and paths of identity has become a way for the latest generations of writers to come to terms with such constraints, and writing itself has become an act of public assertiveness. Mary Jo Bona identified family conflict as one of the central macro-themes that have always run through Italian American women's literature, and that informed and produced several subsequent themes. Among these, the figure of the mother plays a key role. As Bona writes, "Italian American women writers portray the mother's role in the family in complicated and varying ways, as being both strong and weak; articulate and silent; traditional and rebellious; assertive and ineffective" (Bona 1999: 15). Similarly, grandparents and grandmothers specifically, represent a frame of reference and a unique insight into Italian culture, being the only repositories of a far and distant memory. To choose the family as the focus of several Italian American novels not only reflects the urge of articulating the changes that affected Italian American everyday life, but it also lies at the core of the very question of breaking the silence for women writers. According to Bona, "to write of the family and tell its secrets is a profoundly courageous act of autonomy" (Bona 1999: 15).

Italian American women's writing has changed considerably from the early generation of writers that included Winwar, Sister Blandina Segale, and Dodd in the way in which the aforementioned themes were treated. In the period 1940s-1960s, a new generation of Italian American women writers was concerned with retelling the story of the Italian migration to the "New World", the suburban mobility and the conflict within the family, mostly through the form of the novel. Although locating the origins of Italian American women's tradition is still subject to different interpretations, Bona identified Mari Tomasi's novel *Like Lesser Gods* (1949) as a starting point. According to Bona, *Like Lesser Gods* is the first novel that focuses on the development of the Italian family in America, addressing issues such as the ethnic neighborhood and the sense of community. Secondly, even though Tomasi might have not had a clear literary tradition behind her, she trained and conceived herself as a writer. In fact, Tomasi worked on the Vermont Writer's' Project, and served as a city editor of the *Montepellier Evening Argus*.

Since her family settled in Barre, Vermont, where the largest community of immigrant miners resided, the issues of immigrant workers were an essential focus of her novels. As Bona highlights, the writer depicted with constant emphasis the diseases from which immigrant workers suffered, underscoring the negative consequences of coming to America, thus reversing the popular trends of nineteenth-century novels that depicted Italy as insalubrious (Bona 1999: 17). Other fundamental works from this period are *Deep Grow the Roots* (1940), also by Mari Tomasi, *The Weak and the Strong* (1952) by Julia Savarese, *Who Can Buy the Stars* (1952) by Antonia Pola, *A Bridge of Leaves* (1961) by Diana Cavallo, and *A Cup of the Sun* (1961) by Octavia Capuzzi Waldo. Except for *Like Lesser Gods* and *A Bridge of Leaves*, nowadays these works are all out of print. Written in 1966, *No Steady Jobs for Papa* (1966) by Marion Benasutti seems to mark an in-between phase that inaugurates a young generation of Italian American writers, who, as Barolini writes, "easily 'pass' into the American mainstream of writing without overt ethnic tones in their material to keep them emarginated" (Barolini, 1985: 48). Intermarriage has contributed to the emergence of new questions on identity and heritage, now approached as part of the writers' inner life and intimate connection with their families. *Paperfish* (1980) by Tina De Rosa, *Ghost Dance* (1986) by Carole Maso, as well as also works from second-generation writers such as *Miss Giardino* (1978) by Dorothy Bryant, have articulated traditional themes of family conflicts and the struggle for education moving beyond the patterns of ethnic literature. Working-class issues still pervade the writings of the recent generations of writers of Italian descent in the form of an uncomfortable and bequeathed sense of unworthiness. Among these writers, *Vertigo* (1996) by Louise DeSalvo, *Night Bloom. An Italian American Life* (1998) by Mary Cappello, *Were you Always an Italian?* (2000) by Maria Laurino, and *Crossing Ocean Parkway* (1994) by Marianna DeMarco Torgovnick creatively explored the genre of memoir to investigate such intimate but still politically-relevant issues.

2.2.3 Disobedience to the laws of genre: memoirs and autobiographies in the context of women's writing

Autobiography has been pervasive and largely analyzed in American literature as a genre that traditionally encapsulated the stories of great personalities, and at the turn of the twentieth century it came to represent the possibility to articulate the experience of ethnicity and the life of immigrants. Memoir, on the other hand, has emerged as a slippery

genre, hard to define, easy to criticize, precisely because of its focus on memory as the source of narration and authenticity.

According to Caterina Romeo (2005), the emergence of memoir as a genre needs to be contextualized in the narrowing of the distance between theory and praxis that progressively occurred at the end of the 1980s, finding support in feminist theory. In order to investigate the use of memoirs in Italian American women's writing in the period 1980s-2000s, as well as their significance in relation to the post-colonial and feminist theories on *écriture feminine*, Romeo retraces the development of autobiography and memoir. First of all, Romeo maintains that the definition of memoir as a genre can be quite tentative. As Caren Kaplan argued, the very concept of genre should be re-considered when analyzing writings produced by subjects that write from the margin, where such marginal position is produced by political and socio-cultural discrimination based on race, ethnicity, gender, class, ableism. Therefore, some forms of writings might resist to the *loi du genre* that Derrida formulated (Kaplan in Romeo 2005: 36). As I will further elaborate, this is particularly fitting in the case of Italian American women writers and the lack of a recognized and accessible literary tradition.

As Romeo pointed out, the experience of women has often been expressed in autobiographical forms, but a proper literature and scholarship on women's autobiography has emerged only at the end of the twentieth century. This is due to the fact that the genre of autobiography struggled to be considered and evaluated by literary critics. At the beginning of the 1980s, feminist theory started to analyze women's autobiography as a distinct genre that allows to re-think concepts such as subjectivity, authorship, legitimacy, self-representation, digging out a number of texts that had been ignored or forgotten (Romeo 2005: 38). Such efforts consolidated in the publication of *Women's Autobiography* in 1980 by Estelle Jelinek, who collected systematically the literature on women's autobiography. However, as Romeo maintains, the limits of the research stem from the fact that Jelinek picked gender as the sole criterion for defining these writings and their difference from literature written by men, thus falling into an essentialist view of gender that overshadows other factors that characterize the act of writing from the margin[12]. This ends up in the problematic stance of considering women's

[12] See N.K. Miller, "Toward a Dialects of Difference," in *Women and Language in Literature and Society,* eds. S. McConnell-Ginet, R. Borker, N. Furman (New York: Preager 1980), pp. 258-273.

literature as a separate category that requires a separate set of critical tools and interpretive categories, but still leaving the existing paradigms untouched[13].

A first shift that occurred within the study of autobiography was to include non-traditional forms of self-writing. To this regard, Romeo mentions the importance of *Life-Lines: Theorizing Women's Autobiography* (1988) edited by Bella Brodzki and Celeste Schenck, who included *testimonios* as part of a collection of autobiographies written by women, thus adopting a post-colonial approach that aims at illuminating the power relations that inform culture. A post-colonial approach is necessarily related to a multidisciplinary approach that questions the very idea of what is considered to be a literary text, known in traditional form, style, and genre. To consider literature as made solely of texts written in one language and according to the criteria of the western canon has led to the exclusion of forms of orality, linguistically-hybrid texts, and private writings such as diaries and letters that, in the case of Italian American women's writing and not only, represented the primary form of artistic and self-expression[14]. In *Women's Personal Narratives* (1985), Leonore Hoffman and Margo Culley show that non-traditional texts, such as writings by women who did not aim at being published, often constitute the core of women's writing (Romeo 2005: 41).

The emergence of cultural studies in the 1990s, and the emphasis placed on the analysis of texts from the point of view of class and ethnicity has lain the basis for a new definition of autobiographies. Within this framework, the white, Anglo-centric, protestant American culture was challenged by texts written by different subjects perceived as "ethnic", whose contribution has illuminated the differences and the similarities of each marginalized experience (Romeo 2005: 42). The recovery of Zora Neale Hurston's work by Alice Walker, as well as the publication of Latinx and Chicanx's texts, such as *Borderlands/La Frontera* (1987) by Gloria Anzaldúa and *This Bridge Called My Back* (1981), edited by Anzaldúa and Chérrie Moraga, are only some of the literary cases that broke through the American canon.

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[13] See Shari Benstock, "Expatriate Modernism: Writing on the Cultural Rim"; Sonia Saldívar Hull, "Wrestling your Ally," in *Women's writing in Exile* ed. Mary Lynn Broe and Angela Ingram, Modern Language Association of America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1989), pp. 20-39; 181-198.

[14] See Sidonie Smith, *A Poetics of Women's Autobiography: Marginality and the Fictions of Self-Representation*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987.

In the 1990s another fundamental field of studies has emerged: the development of working-class studies has finally shed light on the experience and literary production of working-class women. To this regard, Janet Zandy's *Calling Home: Working Class Women's Writing* (1990) and A. E. Goldman's *Take My Word: Autobiographical Innovations of Ethnic American Working Women* (1996) have contributed to restoring a heterogenous group of texts:

> Personal narratives by ethnic American women who for all practical purposes remain anonymous because their work, developed out of such genres as oral history, political documentary, and cooking, not only transgresses the boundaries of the literary canon but falls altogether outside what is generally considered "literature". (Goldman in Romeo 2005: 46)

The convergence of these fields of studies created a critical framework that dismantled the idea of self-writing as declined only in the form of the autobiographical male subject "I". This approach problematizes the very idea of literature as being written from the top, aimed at defining national, geographical, and political boundaries of identity, by counter-proposing a historicized subject whose complexity is given by political, linguistic, and socio-cultural factors. This approach analyzes the tensions between the particular experiences of individuals and the dominant discursive power, offering:

> an account of the world as seen from the margins, an account which can expose the falseness of the view from the top and can transform the margins as well as the center […], an account of the world which treats our perspectives not as subjugated or disruptive knowledges, but as primary and constitutive of a different world. (Hartsock in Romeo 2005: 48)

Naturally exceeding the boundaries of autobiography in its hybrid nature, the genre of memoir embodies this kind of self-writing.

Unlike autobiography, which focuses on a truthful account of life, writing memoirs places the emphasis on memory as a means of re-negotiating one's identity (Romeo 2005: 53). Rather than truth, memoir is concerned with restoring the authenticity of the subject's inner reality, and this leads to a fragmented narration that does not aspire to cohesiveness and makes use of fictional devices such as scenes and dialogues. It is hard to establish the degree of continuity between autobiography and memoir, considering that there are a number of autobiographical texts that mock and challenge the boundaries of the genre in a creative way. However, if it is true that there is a relation between

autobiography and memoir, that is not necessarily a derivative relation. Edvige Giunta argues that the main difference between autobiography and memoir lies in both the subjectivity and the positionality of the author:

> Secondo me l'autobiografia è la scrittura di una vita percepita da una posizione di consapevolezza e di sicurezza sia culturale, sia personale. Tuttavia, *Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, New York, Random House 1993, di Gertrude Stein e *The Autobiography of My Mother*, New York, Penguin, 1997, di Jamaica Kincaid consapevolmente mettono in discussione il genere dell'autobiografia che le autrici affermano invece di scrivere. […] Al contrario dell'autobiografia, il memoir, o almeno il memoir che io insegno e di cui scrivo, si presta a narrazioni di tipo frammentato e discontinuo che rivelano dislocazione e frattura tanto a livello culturale che personale. (Giunta 2002: 10)

The shift from an aspired truth to the search for a collective dimension in one's personal memories has its biggest consequence in the fact that potentially, any life can be the material for self-writing. Therefore, according to Romeo, the genre of memoir actualizes a democratization of literature, in which the collective dimension of marginal communities and the subjectivity of the author are combined (Romeo 2005: 61). Precisely because of its potential to give voice to diverse, plural, and marginal identities, as well as creating connections between personal and collective memory, the genre of memoir includes texts that range from physical and psychological trauma narratives, reflections on body and illness, stories on social, political, class, and racial discrimination. According to Judith Herman, self-writing enables the individual to reflect on personal or community traumas, transforming the process of narration into a healing process (Romeo 2005: 58). Inhabiting language becomes a way to re-center, and healing becomes a linguistic event[15]. That is why since the 1980s memoir has emerged as one of the genres that managed to give voice and shape to the experience of writers who, through the re-appropriation of their personal and bequeathed memories, re-write the history of communities whose identities were fabricated from the outside. Hence, the relationship between memoir and ethnicity is particularly relevant. As Boelhower pointed out, Barolini's decision to inaugurate the rubric "Memoir" in *The Dream Book*, including seven memoirs from Italian American women in the revised edition, acknowledges the continuity between

[15] See Brenda Daly, *Authoring a Life: A Woman's Survival in and through Literary Studies*, State University of New York Press, Albany, 1998.

early writings of Italian American women as "ethnic writers", and the recent generation of writers.

> That her [Barolini's] anthology should begin from the beginning – namely, with autobiographies and memoirs – is her way of acknowledging not only the genealogical antecedence of the immigrant experience but also the hypostatic presence of the 'old country' as cultural compass. In effect, contemporary Italian American ethnicity continues to draw its authority and energy both from the country's Little Italy enclaves, where the first generation huddled together upon arrival, and from the cultural bridge leading back to Italy itself. Much of ethnic sign production derives from this double bind of routes/roots. (Boelhower 1986: 14)

Therefore, the transition from ethnic autobiographies to memoirs draws a line of continuity that expresses the urge of questioning, even before creating, the literary tradition. Writing memoirs necessarily implies a dialogue with the past, which is articulated on both a personal and a collective level. On the one hand, for Italian American women, writing memoirs had the power of reconnecting third- and fourth-generation authors with their immigrant and ethnic background, embodied in the experience of their grandparents and ancestors. On the other hand, some of these authors continue to address and thematize ethnicity, but from a completely different perspective, that of "white ethnics". Here, ethnicity becomes the subject of a creative and political inquiry that attempts to imagine a space where identity is not stretched out by stereotypes, nor kept as an intimate secret to be ashamed of. When writing, Italian American women are not negotiating between an external and internal perception of identity; rather, they are trying to reclaim the very meaning of being American with an Italian descendance.

As "white ethnics" whose economic and social status has improved throughout the century, Italian Americans do not fit easily nor completely in the category of "minority groups" and "minority writing". However, I believe that the process of re-semanticization of their identity still evidences a fundamental component, namely, the fact that Italian Americans, just like Jewish Americans, are still perceived as "ethnics" despite their change of status. In elaborating on the term "ethnic", Edvige Giunta claims that:

> The term "ethnic" is, of course, highly problematic if used etymologically, for who is not ethnic? I use the word, however, to signify cultural minorities, groups that, even when and if many of their members have acquired some kind of social and economic status, are perceived and perceive themselves as culturally marginal. (Giunta 2002: 5)

As I have argued, in the context of the lack of a literary tradition, the reflection on the experience of marginality has led to the formation of literary kinships. In writing memoirs, the authors attempt to recover and imagine the voices of their ancestors, thus giving voice to their personal memory and to the collective memory of their community. When it comes to Italian American women's writing, I believe that the very reflection on marginality had a second impact on the idea of literary kinships, since it also pushed the authors to look for "literary sisters" and foremothers in writers from other communities. Although authors from different communities describe different experiences of cultural, sexual, religious, ethnic, racial discrimination, they often draw on each other's work to "affirm the importance of solidarity and to seek an affirmation of their own political and literary choice" (Giunta 2002: 6). Such resonance might come in the form of direct or indirect references to other women writers' works. For instance, Louise DeSalvo claimed that her encounter with the literature of African American, Asian American, Native American, and Latina women alerted her to the fact that she had not come to terms with her Italian American identity; Rosette Capotorto dedicated "Bronx Italian" to Audre Lorde; Mary Cappello claimed that she was inspired by filmmakers Julie Dash and Cheryl Dunye, as well as writers such as Alice Walker, Toni Morrison, Gloria Anzaldúa, Jewelle Gomez, bell hooks, and Gayle Jones (ibid.).

Turning to Homi Bhabha's re-thinking of ethnicity as a form of textual affiliation, when it comes to the experience of Italian American women writers as women that in most of the cases have an ethnic, working-class background, the idea of a literary canon does not convey the meaning, nor it reflects the nature of such experience. Here, I would propose the concept of literary genealogy, not to draw a mere terminological distinction, but as way to create a language that expresses the premises and present purposes – the characteristics – of these writings:

> Genealogy is attempting to go further by tracing possibles ways of thinking differently, instead of accepting and legitimating what are already the "truths" of our world. The aim is to provide a counter-memory that will help subjects recreate the historical and practical conditions of their present existence. (Tamboukou 1999: 4)

If we consider that writings coming from an ethnic background already challenge the boundaries of the national canon, Italian American women's writings strongly resist this notion because of the specific condition of invisibility that Italian immigrant women

experienced in the past. A similar fate was that of the following generation of authors that described their lives, who remained invisible to both the American canon and to the recently-formed Italian American canon. In this sense, talking about genealogies is crucial, because it acknowledges the authors' choice to look back to the past and to dig deep into it, or to look around in the present, searching for voices of women and subjectivities that have inhabited and written from the margin, drawing on their work as foremothers or sisters. The concept of genealogy that I am trying to propose here acknowledges the text as the *lieux* for cultural affiliation and solidarity, for identification and self-recognition, which necessarily resists absolute otherness by acknowledging privileges and material conditions. Indeed, as Tamboukou maintains, "genealogy introduces the problem of how by becoming constituted as subjects we come to be subjected within particular configurations" (Tamboukou 1999: 9).

Interestingly, Foucault's notion of genealogy is based on the analysis of *descent* and *emergence*. "Descent" is a term that has recurred throughout this research, and my intention is to explore and eventually rework its meaning outside of the paradigm that sees consent and descent as two mutually exclusive ways of thinking one's identity. In doing so, Foucault's notion of genealogy as a methodology is particularly relevant:

> Genealogy as an analysis of descent, is thus situated within the articulation of the body and history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by history and the process of history's distinction of the body. (Foucault in Tamboukou 1999: 10)

According to Maria Tamboukou, descent does not imply a search for origins, and for this reason it is opposed to a pretended unification of the self. Rather, it "traces the numberless beginnings not easily captured by the historian's eye" (ibid.). In this context, memory and its multiple expressions of transmission – either as official recordings or whispered secrets, as sunken memories or strong reminiscences – are the engine and soul of writing, and memoirs naturally appear as one of the genres that express such affiliations and archaeologies of memory. Being the material for a creative and political inquiry on self- and community representation, in some cases memoirs can be interpreted as autoethnographic works.

2.3 Decentralizing knowledge

In light of the debate on memoir that I have just analyzed, in this last section of the second chapter I would like to propose an interpretation of memoir and self-writing as a form of autoethnographic work for writers who experienced cultural marginalization and/or engage with reclaiming the representations of their identity. I am not proposing here that all processes of writing memoirs equal to conducting autoethnographic research, nor I am being blind to the specific characteristics of memoir and autoethnography as they pertain to two different fields: memoir is a literary genre, and autoethnography is an anthropological praxis. However, defining the boundaries among different fields is only useful when it serves the purpose of establishing the extent to which they can communicate with each other without making confusion, whereas tracing incommunicable lines often does not allow to see commonalities in the aspects and motivations that underlie different types of work. What I am proposing here is a reading of memoirs written by writers that are perceived or perceive themselves as "ethnics", as a genre engaged with an inquiry on identity that is both personal and political. Indeed, similar reflections on culture and heritage have an impact on aspects of identity that concern educational paths and gender roles. What is more, this kind of memoirs are interested in activating and interacting with memory in the form of oral transmission or personal archives. In order to clarify the boundaries and the spots for a possible dialogue between memoir and autoethnography, I will briefly introduce a definition of autoethnography.

2.3.1 What is autoethnography?

Autoethnography is defined by Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) as an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others, and it treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both a process and a product (Ellis et al. 2011: 1). For these scholars, the definition of autoethnography already borrows features from a literary genre, i.e. autobiography, as it reflects on personal experiences, but within a broader socio-cultural context. In writing autoethnography, Ellis et al. argue that authors may use interviews as well as other types

of texts, such as photographs, pieces of literature, journals, and recordings to encourage a process of recalling (Ellis et al. 2011: 3).

It can be argued that the main purpose of ethnography is helping both cultural members and cultural strangers to understand the relational practices, common values, and beliefs that feature a certain culture. Hence, in order to study a culture, ethnographers become *participant observers*, taking *field notes* of cultural happenings. On the contrary, as Ellis et al. argue, when researchers do autoethnography, they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies – an autobiographical narrative device – as connected to their experience as members of a specific culture. Therefore, autoethnography is produced first by field notes, interviews, study on artifacts, and then by storytelling as re-elaboration, often arranged in aesthetical and non-academic forms, thus producing accessible texts (Ellis et al. 2011: 5).

Depending on how much emphasis is placed on the researcher's self and their interaction with others, as well as the use of traditional analysis and the focus on power relations, Ellis et al. distinguish nine kinds of autoethnographic forms: indigenous/native ethnographies, narrative ethnographies, reflexive interviews, reflexive ethnographies, layered accounts, interactive interviews, community autoethnographies, co-constructed narratives and personal narratives (Ellis et al. 2011: 7). Among these, the form of personal narratives is particularly relevant for my research, as in the following chapters I will try to analyze the autoethnographic aspects of Italian American women writers' memoirs. Personal narratives are defined as "stories about authors who view themselves as the phenomenon and write evocative narratives specifically focused on their academic research and personal lives" (ibid.). Personal narratives are probably the most criticized form of autoethnography since they are often not supported by traditional analysis or references to scholarly literature.

Indeed, Ellis et al. point out that autoethnography is dismissed from the point of view of both autobiography and ethnography. As part autobiography, autoethnography is not sufficiently literary or it does not experiment with writing enough. As part ethnography, autoethnographic research is considered to be below the scientific standards, inasmuch as it does not engage with a sufficient number of cultural members, and it lacks accurate field notes (Ellis et al. 2011: 12).

Despite sharing methodologies, the context of ethnographic and autoethnographic work is completely different. For ethnographers, field work is related to the process of observation, which in the case of autoethnographers is part of their life as they have first-hand knowledge of clashes with hegemonic cultural patterns. What is more, as Ellis et al. argue, this criticism perpetuates the traditional binary of art and science as two parallel lines that have their own methodologies and creative process (Ellis et al. 2011: 11). In recent times, the distance between these two categories has been narrowing, as new epistemological frameworks have been proposed for the purpose of de-centering the privilege of white, western, middle/upper-class knowledge. In this context, interdisciplinary approaches and trans-medial works are encouraged as ways to contaminate the traditional ways of writing and thinking, as they include and validate different modes of expression.

When it comes to the possible limitations of autoethnographic writing as a research tool, Minerva S. Chávez (2012) identified three possible arguments. First, a single autoethnographic account, in its highly subjective character, cannot claim generalizability. Still, a group of narratives that bear witness to a specific socio-cultural problem should be taken into consideration not despite, but precisely because of their subjective point of view and collective insight. Secondly, some scholars warned about the risk for autoethnographic writing of treading on the side of essentialism because of the fact that the researcher might either be the participant or a cultural member. However, Chávez responds to such criticism by foregrounding the necessity of changing not only the external paradigms, but also to detect them within the researcher's standpoint (Chávez 2012: 345). Finally, Chávez draws attention to the fragmented nature of memory, which can be considered as both the main asset and the limitation of the autoethnographic method. The kind of self-knowledge that is developed through interviews of people within a certain community, self-interviews elaborated in the form of memoirs, performances, and experimental writing, is a consequence of a process of retelling and reinterpreting the events. A work that is the product of fragmented memoirs and personal experience clashes, of course, with the criterion of pure scientific objectivity.

2.3.2 Autoethnography and self-writing in the context of education

Autoethnography foregrounds the possibility of carrying out research on a specific culture, community, or socio-cultural aspect from the perspective of a member of that

culture or community. In doing so, the value of scientific objectivity is reframed in favor of the situatedness of the subject/researcher[16].

The way in which autoethnographic research is intertwined with literary genres such as memoir and autobiography lies precisely in the validation and analysis of non-traditional types of texts. As I have argued in the previous section, an important shift that occurred in the studies on autobiography was the analysis of works that had never been considered before as valid forms of self-writing. Among these, diaries, letters, and *testimonios* were included. *Testimonios* are at the center of Minerva S. Chávez's work on Chicanx's identity through education and autoethnographic writing (2012). Chávez's research is fundamental to understand the connection between autoethnography as a form that proposes a substantiated reflection on culture and the potential role of self-writing in teaching, which will be central in the analysis of Louise DeSalvo's memoir. Chávez's work includes reflections on race that are not directly part of the experience of Italian American women. However, her arguments on the meaning of writing from the margin as a non-white, working-class scholar are quite relevant also for the analysis of memoirs by Italian American women.

Chávez resolutely situates herself at the margin of the academic discourse, since it is "a space where my stories, intertwined with the experiences of my community(ies), are read alongside academic texts" (Chávez 2012: 335). The margin is conceived as what "disrupts forms of knowledge that render the author's identity inconsequential" (ibid.). Furthermore, for Chávez the margin is the place where the works of other women of color and ethnic women meet in the attempt of developing a research methodology that focuses on the interconnection between experience and political awareness. In this context, teaching is also seen as a political praxis. According to Chávez, theorizing narratives serves to emphasize the complex relations between the personal and the political, as they act on the formation of the student's knowledge, critical thinking skills and personal beliefs. Thinking from the margins allows to "unlock the polarities" (Rendopón in Chávez 2012: 335) and disrupt the old belief systems. Within this framework, autoethnographic texts represent a tool of "subaltern resistance" that challenge political and cultural dominance (Chávez 2012: 337). As the author argues, without the use of *testimonios* and

[16] See Kirin Narayan, "How Native Is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" in *American Anthropologist*, 95(3) (September, 1993), pp. 671-686.

first-person narratives, her ability to challenge dominant perceptions around language and class would be limited.

Two elements are particularly stimulating in doing autoethnography. First, the use of emotions by the researchers that puts the reader of academic papers in an unconventional spot. This subverts the usual ways of reading and writing academic texts. Secondly, Chávez highlights that autoethnography has the power and the potential of creating new relationships among individuals, writers, and researchers coming from different backgrounds, with the purpose of de-centering dominant power discourses and creating more equitable educational spaces (Chávez 2012: 342).

2.3.3 Autoethnography, memory, agency

In re-claiming representational spaces and discourses on identity, autoethnography often finds its material in private and collective memories, especially when it comes to interviews and personal narratives. The role of memory and its historical value is central in most if not all communities, varying according to the modes and channels of transmission and the degree of importance that is placed on it. Turning to Italian American women's literature, memory plays a key role in both fiction and non-fiction, with particular regard to the genre of memoir. As the Italian American community(ies) have experienced radical changes in economic status and perception of ethnicity, memory keeping was fundamental in the attempt of pursuing and restoring a sense of continuity across generations.

Writers and researchers of Italian descent acknowledge the differences in the linguistic-cultural experience and the living conditions from the first generation of Italian immigrants. Work was determinant in the experience of first-generation Italian Americans, insofar as they had to be able to provide for themselves and reach economic stability. Across generations, social and class elements like sheer poverty have decreased, and the hard work of the previous generations is often indicated as one of the main factors that laid the basis for such improvement. As I have pointed out, aside from the immigrants' hardships and willingness, other social and economic factors have determined such improvement. In this context, working on memory in both autoethnographic research and self-writing helps to localize and illuminate the general narratives around which a sense of community was built. What is more, this type of inquiry works as a bridge between different cultural experiences. As Hannah Burgwyn

argues, “generational changes within families and larger effects of modernity have caused a shift in perceptions of the individual's involvement within the community” (Burgwyn 2010: 88). As a third-generation Italian American, Burgwyn carried out autoethnographic research in Bayonne, New Jersey with her Italian American family. While conducting the research, Burgwyn began to notice the importance of memories in the construction and maintenance of an Italian American identity, and how the role of “memory-keepers” works as a defining feature of female agency within the community. Realizing the difference between her experience and her great aunts’ has allowed the researcher to have a deeper comprehension of how "factors such as education, gender, sexual orientation, class, race or sheer duration of contact may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status" (Narayan in Burgwyn 2010: 31).

Therefore, not only memory serves as a tool to preserve cultural ties to Italy, but it also provides an avenue for female agency. Passing on rituals and traditions were tasks usually covered by women, for which Burgwyn coins the term “kin work”. Borrowing from Micaela di Leonardo, Burgwyn identifies memory-keeping as part of the domestic and care labor that women are supposed to do. Therefore, “kin work” can be defined as the conception, maintenance, and ritual celebration of cross household kin ties, including visits, mailing letters, doing telephone calls, organizing holiday and family gatherings, deciding to strengthen particular ties, and all the emotional and intellectual work implied in these activities (Di Leonardo in Burgwyn 2010: 342). The role of memory-keepers is constructed in the private sphere of home but extends into the public space of the community and through generations. Indeed, Burgwyn recalls that "looking at the walls of Aunt Celeste’s wood-paneled living room I was overwhelmed by all of the pictures of family and friends" (Burgwyn 2010: 89). Kin work is thus contextualized within the problematization of care labor and gender roles, but it is also explored as a way to carve out a space for female agency in order to mediate the power and the closure of household units (Di Leonardo in Burgwyn 2010: 343). Engaging with such inherited, sometimes undesired, knowledge and memory, women of the third generation explore their Italian descendance in the bigger and contemporary context that witnessed the proliferation of reflections on gender that reflect on the construction of a female subjectivity.

To conclude, memoirs can be interpreted as autoethnographic works as they are interested in the interrelation between memory and the impact on personal and collective

identity. As a literary genre and as an approach to research, memoir and autoethnography *engage with* and they themselves *are* considered as non-traditional texts. Finally, as reflections on culture and (self-) representation, they are often produced by individuals who express the necessity of reclaiming such representations by problematizing the concepts of authorship and the ways in which knowledge is formed.

CHAPTER 3:
Crossing Thresholds of Identity

Je hasarde une explication: écricre c'est le dernier recour quand on a trahi.

(Jean Genet)

poi mi addormentavo pensando che il mio destino fosse innamorarmi e diventare una brava repubblicana.

(Claudia Durastanti)

By the 1980s-1990s memoir became one of the most prolific genres in the United States, gaining the attention of critics and writers. This proliferation coincided with a paradigm shift for writers of Italian descent, who could finally rely upon a past generation of Italian American women writers that contributed to creating a critical framework out of their experience as working-class, ethnic women. However, these new third- and fourth-generation writers have a different perception of both their ethnic and working-class background. They are indeed often college-educated, and their connection to their Italian heritage comes through the form of overheard words pronounced by their grandparents and mispronounced by their parents; by the names of the shops in neighborhoods such as Hoboken and Bensonhurst; by their own names that originally took after those of their ancestors, but now have been progressively modified and Americanized. In this context, memory appears as both the battlefield and the weapon for a conflict between heritage and genealogy. Questioning one's identity becomes a process that moves beyond the paradigm of acculturation, and rather involves retracing paths of identity and recognizing the bequeathals of an ethnic, working-class background.

As I will analyze in the following chapters, memoir appears to be the only possible narrative option capable of reframing this personal journey as one possessing a collective worth. As Caterina Romeo writes, in order to recognize themselves as part of a collective memory and history, single subjectivities need to distance themselves from the collectivity first:

> Il soggetto plurale, presente nella memoria collettiva che secondo l'autrice [Mary Cappello] fa parte del nostro patrimonio genetico, deve diventare soggetto singolare, come afferma Mary Saracino, effettuando uno spostamento dal "noi" all' "io". Soltanto in un secondo momento il soggetto individuale può tornare a quello collettivo, ma

> questa volta il "noi" non include più soltanto gli altri membri della famiglia – anzi, a volte li esclude totalmente – ma più in generale altri soggetti desiderosi di aderire a una comunità che non si definisce in base a legami famigliari. (Romeo 2005: 188)[17]

As Hannah Burgwyn writes, "generational changes within families and larger effects of modernity have caused a shift in perceptions of the individual's involvement within the community" (Burgwyn 2010: 88). Hence, the shift from "us" to "I" does not signify the absolute rejection of a collective dimension; rather, it is part of a new, modern way of community-building that reworks the meaning of "community". However, exploring and embracing the generational, cultural, and class differences has one main consequence: loss. What will remain and what will be put aside? Is it possible to re-claim a space once you leave it? Is it possible to even come back?

In this chapter I will address these issues by analyzing the way in which historically marginalized subjectivities, i.e. ethnic Italian American working-class women, interact with the dimensions of language, memory, representation within the domestic and the academic spaces. Indeed, by analyzing their works, I have realized that for these writers, space is never a fixed entity; rather it appears most often in the form of a temporary home, of a threshold, or in combination with a verb: crossing. Therefore, I will try to focus on the consequences of crossing different thresholds of identities by analyzing namely the phenomena of upward mobility, and the dispersion of memory.

3.1 The text as body archive

Memoir involves a continuous reimagining and reinventing of the past that necessarily demands for a recovery of personal memory. To this regard, archival work was a fundamental tool for the recent developments of both historiography and literary scholarship on Italian American identities. In the field of literary criticism, *The Dream Book* by Helen Barolini and *The Value of Worthless Lives* by Ilaria Serra are two examples in which digging into Italian and American archives has allowed to uncover early autobiographical and memoiristic works by Italian American immigrant workers and

[17] "The plurality of the subject, which, according to the author, is present in the collective memory as part of our genetic makeup, needs to become a single subjectivity, as Mary Saracino writes, by shifting from "us" to "I". Only later the individual subject can come back as a collective one, but now "us" does not include family members only – rather, sometimes it radically excludes them – but a more general group of subjects whose desire is to enter a community that is not defined by blood ties". My translation

women. At the same time, personal archives and collective memory have also proven to be fundamental in the recovery of significant parts of Italian American history. In Rudolph J. Vecoli's essay "Italian Immigrants and Working-Class Movements in the United States", historiographical analysis is combined with autobiographical irruptions into the scholar's family history. Here, Vecoli suggests a concept of "archive" that goes beyond the institutional meaning of the term, and extends the notion to private memories and personal archives. According to Vecoli, a historicized concept of identity necessarily locates class and ethnic consciousness in personal and group memories, traditions, and experiences (Vecoli 1993: 297). Vecoli writes that "Marx and Weber gave me vocabularies and theories with which to interpret and articulate my experiences, *but they were my experiences and they were real*", thus emphasizing the need to center on the material texture of lives (Vecoli 1993: 298). Furthermore, in order to reconstruct the history of Italian Americans as a marginalized community, the recovery of personal and family memories plays a key role when pre-existing archives are incomplete. For instance, Vecoli argues that a consistent number of documents on Italian American working-class grassroots organizations have generally not been stored in mainstream institutions, with only few exceptions. In addition, Red Scare policies have led to the destruction of organizational archives and personal papers (Vecoli 1993: 300). Therefore, the way in which historical gaps have generated stereotypical narratives is at the core of the recent scholarship in Italian American studies, and the recovery of personal and family memories counteracts pre-fabricated narratives.

The importance that some Italian American scholars have placed on the role of personal memory and archives as valuable sources that might complement, or even challenge, institutional documents, can be contextualized within the framework of autobiographical and personal criticism. Feminist scholar Nancy Miller defines personal criticism as a type of academic writing that "entails an explicitly autobiographical performance within the act of criticism" (Miller in Romeo 2005: 51). Borrowing from Miller, Brenda Daly investigates the notion of "autobiographical criticism" to define a particular kind of writing that merges the theorization and the narration of one's experience. Such type of writing is grounded in an embodied, often gendered perspective, but it generally involves the act of narration as self-reflection on race, ethnicity, class, and

sexuality. Therefore, writing works as an epistemological tool in which theory and experience blend.

Turning to Italian American women's literature, *Vertigo* (1996) by Louise DeSalvo (1942-2018) and *Night Bloom. An Italian American Life* (1998) by Mary Cappello (1960-) are two memoirs produced by writers who also happen to be academics, and whose writings reflect on the way in which memory and personal experience influence their studies. *Vertigo* is especially relevant in this analysis, since DeSalvo's considerable work on Virginia Woolf informed most of the memories that are present in the book. As I will analyze in the following sections, the figure of Virginia Woolf will be central in DeSalvo's memoir to investigate the relationship between writing and healing, as well as to explore themes of secrecy, shame, and the privilege of writing.

In the memoirs of Louise DeSalvo and Mary Cappello, the understanding of gender, ethnicity, and working-class background is aided by textual and visual family archives, hence turning personal memory into the object of a political inquiry. In retrieving and interrogating non-traditional texts such as letters, diaries, poems, and photographs, DeSalvo's and Cappello's memoirs can also be interpreted as types of autoethnographic personal narratives. As I have argued in the second chapter, both memoir and autoethnography engage with non-traditional texts, considering them as valuable documents for a reflection on culture and self-representation. To this regard, Antonio Gramsci's perspective on the subject as a product of historical processes is quite relevant to this research:

> The starting-point of critical elaboration is the consciousness of what one really is, and is "knowing thyself" as a product of the historical processes to date, which has deposited in you an infinity of traces, without leaving an inventory…Therefore it is imperative at the outset to compile such inventory. (Gramsci in Singh 2018: 18)

3.1.1 Autoethnography and personal archives in Italian American women's memoirs

Memoirs of Italian American women engaged with aspects of autoethnography in multiple ways. Here I will briefly introduce two cases: Maria Laurino's memoir as a personal narrative that engages with more traditional forms of autoethnography, and Kym Ragusa's memoir, that makes use of personal archives as non-traditional texts.

In *Were You Always an Italian?* (2000) Maria Laurino's quest into the collective history of Italian Americans goes through eleven chapters in which the author analyzes

her relationship with Italian American neighborhoods, Catholic religion, class mobility, and features that are often connected with ethnicity, such as food, clothes, and scents. Laurino's memoirs merges with autoethnography insofar as the author engages directly with discourses and perceptions on ethnicity, comparing them with her own experience. For example, in the second chapter of the book, Laurino investigates the impact of Edward Banfield's ethnographical theory of amoral familism, also analyzing the blatant racism and caricatural representations that Banfield's legacy perpetuated in the discourses on Italian American identity. At a certain point, though, the author pauses to wonder whether there are traces of such theory in her own family:

> Do I bear the atavistic traits of my ancestors? Was my father raised by a tribe of "amoral familists" in New Jersey; and did he inherit their fatalism and pass it along to all of us? […] As we grow older, my mother twisted the notion of family to its most exclusionary construct, out tiny nuclear unit. Yet I believe her words "Trust only the family," were formed not by some inescapable southern Italian character trait but because my family suffered a deep disillusionment with, and were defeated by, the American institutions they confronted daily. That the nineteenth-century disappointment of my Lucanian grand-parents crossed well into the twentieth century of my own family attests to the extraordinary difficulty of acculturation and the arduous journey of escaping poverty. (Laurino 2001: 46)

Here, Laurino reflects on the hardships faced by her immigrant grandparents and of her Italian American parents to settle in the New World and in the modern suburbs, so as to contextualize the need to turn to family protection.

In the chapter "Bensonhurst" the author collected field observations by traveling to Bensonhurst and talking to young Italian American students from one of the local high schools. Laurino does not hide her ambivalence towards the stereotype of what is considered to be the typical "Brooklyn Italian", especially concerning their uneasy history with race:

> In the portrait of Bensonhurst that emerged after the Hawkins tragedy, Italian-Americans appeared before me like cardboard cutouts, angry, insular, capable of murder, yet I also sensed that many residents were as familiar as family […]. I needed to discover what traits I shared with these residents because I had made myself the "other," quickly drawing a line between me and them. The nagging question that taunts the suburban ethnic rang in my ears: what is my relationship to my heritage if this community defines Italian American culture for the rest of us? (Laurino 2001: 126)

A profound analysis on the relationship between race and Italian American identity is the subject of the memoiristic and autoethnographic work of the writer and documentarist

Kym Ragusa. Having African American and Italian American roots, Ragusa's research focuses on geographical and conceptual borders in terms of gender, class, and race. Ragusa is the author of three video-documentaries, *Demarcations* (1992), *Passing* (1996) and *fuori/outside* (1997), and a memoir called *The Skin Between Us* (2006), which translates into words and expands on some of the footages and themes of the documentaries.

In *Passing* the author focuses on the figure of her maternal grandmother, Miriam, whose light skin tone allowed her to *pass*[18] and to be employed in factory jobs that were destined to white women. While being able to pass for white was a source of pride for her grandmother and great-grandmother, in her memoir Ragusa recalls that this was the cause of discrimination by her classmates, who would call her "whitey". In *Passing,* black and white frames are accompanied by the voice of her grandmother Miriam recalling an episode of racial discrimination. While traveling with a friend in 1950s Florida, Miriam stops at a diner without knowing that the place was allowed to whites only. At first, the men that served her were confused about her race, and asked her "What side of the tracks are you from?". Unaware of the fact that segregation policies might have still been in force, Miriam replies "New York", but as soon as she realizes the meaning of the question, she screams "You just served a nigger", and then runs away.

fuori/outside is instead a video-letter and interview to her paternal grandmother, Gilda, who at this point was the only member left from the first generation of Italian Americans in Ragusa's family. Gilda thus represents both the memory of the first Italian migration and the personal and troubled history of Ragusa's plural identity. However, by the time the author records the interview, her grandmother was already suffering from severe Alzheimer, which highly influences the process of recollection. Through fragmented twirls of memory, Gilda brings about episodes of domestic violence that were perpetrated on her – and that Ragusa was not aware of –, thus highlighting the patriarchal violence that pervades Italian American culture. As Giunta writes, in these documentaries Ragusa constantly shifts roles, being simultaneously the director, the interviewer, and the audience (Giunta 2002a: 55). The co-existence of different roles and multiple gazes

[18] *Passing* originally referred to the abbreviation of *passing for white*, a practice that light-skinned black African Americans adopted to blend in with the whites so as to avoid the legal and social consequences of racial discrimination. The term is now used to indicate the general meaning of wanting to be perceived as part of another ethnic group.

conveys both the plurality of Ragusa's identity and the specificity of working with personal archives. Indeed, Ragusa interviews her paternal grandmother, but the answers to her questions have a direct impact on the reconstruction of the interviewer's family history and provides her with valuable insights to contextualize the discrimination that she experienced as an Italian American and African American woman.

The issue of gaze is also at the core of *The Skin Between Us*, insofar as the author encompasses in the narration some family pictures, which cover a twofold purpose. First, they work as a visual aid to encourage reminiscence; secondly, they are important documents that contain underwritten information. In the first chapter of the memoir, Ragusa analyzes the only picture that she has with both of her grandmothers:

> The picture is of the three of us sitting at the dining room table after dinner, Gilda to the left, Miriam next to her in the center, me a little off to the right. None of us look at the camera – I don't remember who took the picture, although I suspect, because it seems such a candid moment, that it must have been my husband, a filmmaker, always looking to capture his subject off guard. […] Gilda is glancing sideways out of the frame, her eyes are lowered, her face almost grave. No sign of her earlier laughter. […] I'm struck by the quality of Miriam's gaze, turned toward Gilda, even as Gilda looks away. It's the look of a hard-won love, of quiet victory. It took years of struggle, this gender gaze. It was work. I'm at the other end of the table, my face half in the light, half in shadow. (Ragusa 2006: 10)

Figure 1. Gilda, Miriam, and Kym Ragusa, from Kym Ragusa, The Skin Between Us, New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2006.

Here, the author reflects on the meaning of gaze both within and outside the boundaries of the photograph. From the fact that no one is looking at the camera, Ragusa infers that it was probably her husband who took the picture, since he always captures his subjects "off guard". If the picture had been taken by a family member, the author seems to suggest

that the three of them probably would have posed. What emerges from this photograph is instead the image of three women, captured without a warning, living in the past and the present at the same time. On the left there is Gilda: she frowns and looks away. Indeed, throughout the memoir she is described as nostalgic, haunted by the memories of her previous Italian life, and always trying to reiterate traces and forms of *italianità* in her daily life in the United States. Miriam, on the other hand, is in full light, matching with the descriptions that Ragusa often makes of her. Compared to Gilda, Ragusa's relationship with Miriam has always been less ambivalent, less conflictual. The author explains that she has always felt more accepted by the family on her mother's side, whereas her existence had been hidden to Gilda for about two years, since she did not approve of his son's relationship with a black woman.

To conclude, in *The Skin Between Us*, Kym Ragusa makes use of her personal photographic archive as an interpretive compass that helps her to disentangle and locate her memories in the complex history of Italian Americans and African Americans.

3.1.2 Visual and textual family archives in *Vertigo* and *Night Bloom*

In *Vertigo* and *Night Bloom* photographic and textual archives play a key role in the process of exploring and reclaiming the past. In this section I will elaborate on the fundamental value that photographs, diaries, and letters had for DeSalvo and Cappello in writing their memoirs, as elements that lead and intervene on the narration.

In the prologue to *Vertigo*, Louise DeSalvo matches the decision to begin to write her memoir with the decision to finally unpack the boxes that she stored in the basement after her mother's death. These two actions are inextricably bound to each other, as they function as a verbal and visual exploration of memory. Afraid of dealing with her sister's suicide and her mother's death, DeSalvo describes the act of opening the boxes as the result of a difficult and tormented decisional process, comparing them to ghosts that haunted her basement. The boxes contain DeSalvo's sister's personal effects, her clothing, her pottery, and her mother's collection of family photographs, letters, and recipes. Therefore, in writing her memoir, the author deals with a corpus of unusual texts, and this gains particular value considering the feminist literary studies[19] that advocated for the necessity to include private writings and intermedial texts as autobiographical forms of women's writing. For DeSalvo, engaging with the photographs collected by her

[19] See chapter 2.2.3

mother, interpreting the way in which she stored them through her handwriting is an attempt to read her personal narrative. It equates to interpreting a text – her mother's testimony – that contains the memories she decided to hold on to. Therefore, absences are also eloquent: the things that are not present in those boxes are the ones her mother wanted to erase, or to let go.

Pictures that portray her mother are also crucial for DeSalvo to interpret her relationship with her ethnicity, to identify signs of her chronic depression, to decipher her intimate thoughts that rarely came out verbally, and to draw a connection between their experiences as women:

> In one photo of my mother, which my father has taken of her on their honeymoon, she is oblivious to him and the camera as she sits on a bench on a rock-strewn beach in Maine, wearing sunglasses and a bathing suit with huge daisies. She is concentrating intently on a piece of writing – a letter to a friend – that she balances on her lap. […] There are innumerable photographs my husband has taken of me throughout my life in precisely this pose, photos in which I am writing, always writing, as my mother does in this one – and I too am wearing sunglasses and a bathing suit, I too am on one beach or another, in one chair or another, ample thighs crossed, staring down at the current piece of writing in my lap, refusing to look at the camera, choosing my words carefully, so carefully, oblivious to my husband, to my children, to the world. (DeSalvo 1996: 46)

This passage encapsulates the feeling of estrangement to the outside world that characterizes both Louise's and her mother's relation with space – also expressed by the title of the memoir –, and the centrality of writing as a consequence of their introjection. The author metaphorically overlaps the picture of her mother and the picture that her husband takes of her, revealing that their shapes perfectly correspond. Here, the element of gaze is also fundamental. When cameras became affordable for a vast audience, photographs from personal family archives show that it was often the husband, the father, or any other man of the family who took charge of taking pictures and the one who knew how to use the camera. Indeed, the description of these pictures might resonate with a thousand of other pictures of women on family holidays and honeymoon. In DeSalvo's memoir, the obliviousness of her mother towards the camera is contextualized in the complicated relationship that she had with her husband after he returned from his service in the Second World War. Similarly, DeSalvo recognizes herself as equally oblivious to her husband's gaze, which reminds her of her obligations as a mother and a wife. Throughout the memoir DeSalvo elaborates on her distancing from preconceived ideas

of motherhood and marriage, especially after her husband's adultery. Writing thus appears as a safe space, often clashing with the outer world, in which these two women find shelter. Arguably, the author's choice to describe the pictures that she finds rather than including them, as for example Ragusa did at the beginning of her book, marks DeSalvo's predilection for words as means to interpret her past. The absence of the actual photographs not only prevents the interruption of the flow of writing, but it also signals that diving into memories and writing are two consequential, but still separate moments. Therefore, Louise DeSalvo is not as much interested in reconstructing her past as she is in working on the interpretation of it, in order to tailor her own narrative.

In *Night Bloom* Mary Cappello engages with a textual family archive that consists of the journal of her grandfather, John Petracca, and the poems and letters of her mother, Rosemary Petracca. The possibility of retrieving such material, especially the one belonging to her grandfather, is highly determinant for the themes that the author tackles. Specifically, the journals of John Petracca are a precious document that attests the life and the struggles of the first generation of Italian immigrants. In 1916 Petracca migrated with his mother from Teano to reach his father who had already settled in the United States some years before. Here, Petracca begins to work as a shoemaker, but his journals reveal the disillusionment with the New World and his desire of being able to write in English. Therefore, *Night Bloom* deals with themes that were not present in *Vertigo*, such as immigrant work, displacement, and poverty.

Considering the radical difference between her own and her grandfather's experience, Cappello writes that she does not have the means to value his writing (Cappello 1998: 29), pointing to the untranslatability of the immigrant experience on a linguistic and metaphorical level. John Petracca was originally a proficient writer in Italian, who by the age of twenty-five had already written and published a novella in serial form entitled *Il Segreto di un Destino* in a local Italian American newspaper, *La Gazzetta Calabrese*. However, as a fourth-generation Italian American, Cappello never learned the language, thus she cannot read the story; yet, she writes, as a "bona fide product of assimilation, I have a Ph.D. in English" (Cappello 1998: 24). In Cappello's eyes, the experience of her grandfather appears to be untranslatable, as she must renounce a whole, fundamental part of his inner life that was expressed through his mastery of Italian. The inevitable loss entailed in the migration to another country reverberates in the

impossibility for Cappello to reconstruct the wholeness of John Petracca's life. This is even more exemplified by the alleged existence of an entire novel written in Italian that inexplicably disappeared after the 1970s, when Petracca died. The absence of the novel seems to signify the progressive dissolution of Cappello's grandfather's life in Italy, which by now exists only as a memory, just like the novel.

Nonetheless, Petracca's journals bear witness of his attempts to learn English and keep track of his life in the United States, occasionally shifting to Italian only when addressing certain topics. After arriving in the United States, John's main purpose was to learn English, something that according to the author altered the course of his literary output. The journals of John Petracca can indeed be described as what Alice Yaeger Kaplan defines as "language memoir", where the second language is not always a foreign language that is learnt reluctantly, or a language of upward mobility, but also a safe means to convey one's intimate life in a new linguistic and cultural context. According to Kaplan, language memoirs have never been categorized or named as such, either because they are discussed in terms of the history of a specific ethnic or national literature, or because language is understood as a "mere décor in a drama of upward mobility or exile" (Kaplan 1994: 59). Cappello remembers her grandfather keeping a dictionary of English on the dining room table, attempting to read and write in that language. Such desire cannot be ascribed simply to the legitimate, instrumental purposes of acculturation, but it should also be considered as Petracca's determination to be accounted for as a writer, and to have his dignity recognized beyond his citizenship. However, Cappello writes that "to be a laborer and writer in this culture was not allowed; there were no means by which his writing could become public. He wore the mantle of English uncomfortably" (Cappello 1998: 26). Here, the author emphasizes the importance of writing to be recognized by the outer world, to step outside the absolute privateness and taboo of poverty. To this regard, Kaplan writes:

> There is no language change without emotional consequences. Principally: loss. That language equals home, that language is a home, as surely as a roof over one's head is a home, and that to be without a language, or to be between language, is as miserable in its way as to be without bread. (Kaplan 1994: 63)

Therefore, language appears to be profoundly connected to home and citizenship. In his journals, John Petracca describes the alienation that he feels in the New World since

"his own identity had been shaped too harshly by divisions that included citizen/alien, English-speaker/Italian-speaker, middle class/poor" (Cappello 1998: 5). In the wake of 1940s xenophobia, the immigrant's citizenship was constantly under siege, and the notes that Cappello includes in her memoir from her grandfather's journal describe the haunting fear of being dispossessed of his house, of being existentially and legally displaced:

> February 7, 1942. It is Saturday, and it is raining furiously. I have to give my full pay to the gas and electric company if I want to keep it in my home. Yesterday, one of their agents again called on us and tyrannically threatened to shut it off. He didn't go out till my sick wife promised him that she would send me on the next day to pay for it. What is the use of working if you cannot acquire the most necessary things for the existence of your family? (Cappello 1998: 35)

> February 24, 1942. I have worked a half day. I had to visit the naturalization office in regards to my wife. She has lost her citizen's rights by marrying me. And now I have it. Good thing they told me she doesn't have to register this time. The office is filled to capacity by people of every age. I had to wait for two long hours before I could receive that assurance. The faces of those people showed me a pathetic picture which I shall never erase from my vision. (Cappello 1998: 37)

By analyzing the notes from John Petracca's journal, I have introduced the theme of marginal subjectivities' relation to space. Petracca indeed inhabited the dimension of the English language, of new geographic and national boundaries, and of his new home in a perpetual state of estrangement.

A recurring theme in Cappello's memoir is the idea of life as made of multiple crossings, the incapability or the impossibility to just settle in one place. In particular, the absence of a sheltering home, the perpetual sense of being suspended at the threshold is reflected in the notes of John Petracca in their form and contents. Petracca's repair shop was attached to his house, and Cappello imagines that his clients could find him hunched to repair shoes or in the act of scribbling. Although he had experience in writing fiction in Italian, the form he turned to with "the most vigor and consistency" was "an ever-changing system of journal keeping and making", that contained poems, urbane, poetic, reverential, or philosophical jottings (Cappello 1998: 26). This was also the form that better suited and reflected his daily routine and a temporality that revolved around work.

Audre Lorde claimed that "of all art forms, poetry is the most economical. It is the one which is the most secret, which requires the least physical labor, the least material, and the one which can be done between shifts" (Lorde, 2007: 110). Petracca's poems and notes are scored on "whatever errant piece of paper happens to be at hand when the desire

to write comes", and they visually appear in the form of what Cappello describes as "improvised clock faces" (Cappello 1998: 27). When writing, her grandfather did not follow the predetermined left to right, top to bottom line; instead, he shifted the line each day by turning the page to a different angle, thus following a clock-like orientation. This, of course, also modifies the reader's experience, abruptly taking them into his temporal and spatial dimension, overwhelmed by work and narrow spaces, punctuated by brief moments of writing:

> What is important is that the angle of his entries gives the illusion of space, it makes the page seem bigger than it is. My grandfather's page is like an overcrowded tenement. This tells me, especially in light of my fancy theorizing, that I lack the resources, I do not have the means to value my grandfather's writing for what it is. (Cappello 1998: 29)

Cappello's grandfather's poems and notes are valuable documents that embody the material life conditions of Italian immigrants at the turn of the century, and they also represent an important basis for the author to understand her ethnic background. However, she acknowledges that the contact with her grandfather's memory is irremediably mediated by translation, by loss, and by a three-generation distance.

The contents of Petracca's notes are equally important in Cappello's understanding of her working-class and immigrant background. Most of the notes describe severe poverty that prevents the family from recreating the idea of a safe home. Significantly, the author associates the incapacitating cold that invades John's journals with the interior frost that pervades her mother's poems:

> January 2, 1945: It is cold, cold and cold. Our home, due to the many cracks that time has cruelly created, cannot get warm. My mother feels cold, my wife feels cold, and I too am feeling cold. Furthermore, to make things worse, Rosemary and Frances, sent home from school that the local could not become warm, they too protest cold. What am I to do? Cry? Indeed not. But, although I feel bitter towards the whole thing, I am laughing and dancing all over the rooms. Trying to keep warm and inspire gaiety so the rest could snap out of their grimace and become happy and warm in spite of all the adversities that poverty drags along mercilessly.
>
> *From the Journal of John Petracca*
>
> Let us gather to ourselves / In harvest / The heady autumn air / The fluted dahlias / The white blooms of basil / The final figs / Let us save them from / Frost.
>
> *From "Frost will come" by Rosemary Petracca Cappello* (Cappello 1998: 30)

Cappello's grandfather died of lung cancer that probably came from his smoking habit and the inhaling of various toxins in his shoe repair shop. In drawing parallels between her mother's and her grandfather's writings, the author reflects on inherited and embodied forms of bodily pain, claiming that "poverty afflicts, first and foremost, a person's body", and "certain effects persist even if one experiences upward mobility" (Cappello 1998: 44). Indeed, Cappello recognizes this heritage in her mother's restlessness and within her poems that often revolve around themes of hunger and frost.

Therefore, Mary Cappello creates a dialogue between two parts of her family archive to trace a lineage in which writing is not only a form of resistance to the incessant rhythm of labor, but also a mode to express "the politics of their daily lives" (Cappello 1998: 66). Most importantly, the author emphasizes the importance of writing for authors with ethnic and working-class origins as a way to break the dichotomy between private and public matters.

3.2 Writing as unraveling

In this section, I will analyze how writing memoirs becomes a way for DeSalvo and Cappello to cross the boundaries of home secrecy and to re-claim their space as women through authorship, shaping an idea of writing that is simultaneously personal and political. Most importantly, I will focus on how the dichotomy between private and public sphere informs dominant discourses on mental health issues, living standards, sexuality, and gender roles, so as to highlight the importance of questioning such dichotomy in order to deconstruct them.

3.2.1 Domestic battlefields in *Vertigo*

After dedicating entirely to the study of Virginia Woolf's life and works, under the suggestion of her editor, Rosemary Ahern, Louise DeSalvo decides to explore the genre of memoir to tackle her own identity as a woman of ethnic and working-class origins. This will lead to the writing of *Vertigo*, published in 1996. Before diving into her family history, DeSalvo publishes one of her major studies on Woolf, entitled *Virginia Woolf: The Impact of Childhood Sexual Abuse on Her Life and Work* (1989). The book analyzes Virginia Woolf's writing and her struggle with depression in light of the sexual abuses perpetrated on her as a child and adolescent (Romeo 2005: 121). In Louise DeSalvo's experience, academic work was a therapeutic practice that allowed her to explore themes such as writing as healing from depression, and writing to trespass the boundaries of an

oppressive, pre-fabricated narrative. Most importantly, it encouraged her to write about her identity as a working-class, Italian American woman. At the beginning of her memoir, DeSalvo writes:

> In the winter of 1980, as I am reading Virginia Woolf's early diaries, I start to keep a diary, in direct and somewhat sheepish imitation of her lifelong practice, which she began at the age of fifteen. […] Unlike Woolf, who was taught early that the events in her life and her thoughts were significant and worth recording, as an Italian-American woman with working-class parents, my experience was very different. […] Writing anything that I was doing, anything that I was feeling or thinking, was dangerous in a household like mine in which one did not have a right to privacy, in which the contents of one's bureau drawers were routinely riffled through and inspected. It was apparently dangerous, too, for Virginia Woolf. I have noticed that the diary she kept at sixteen had a lock and a key, and that she also sealed sheets from another diary between the pages of a book she had purchased especially for the purpose (Dr. Isaac Watts's *Right Use of Reason*) to hide them from the prying eyes of her household. (DeSalvo 1998: 4)

As a young woman, Louise was not allowed to have her own private dimension; everything needed to be of household domain, and writing was perceived as a challenge to the anti-intellectualism that was imposed on Italian American women. Significantly, DeSalvo writes to investigate her family memories and the trauma of her sister's death and her mother's depression. While studying Virginia Woolf, DeSalvo tried to draw a path in which her mother's and sister's struggle to figure out their own space was intertwined with their Italian American identity and gender expectations:

> When I started my work on Woolf, I did not realize how similar her family was to mine – did not know my sister would kill herself as Woolf had; did not see depression as the core of my mother's life as it was the core of Woolf's and her mother's; did not realize that I, too, would fight depression; did not see that we were both abuse survivors. And that I would learn, through studying her, the redemptive and healing power of writing. (DeSalvo 1996: 11)

In January 1984, Louise DeSalvo's sister, Gilda - named after her paternal grandmother, and later nicknamed "Jill" by her husband - killed herself in the basement of the apartment that she shared with another woman. Throughout the memoir, mental illness and depression are described as an inescapable heritage, an impending menace on the progression of Louise's work, who eventually manages to find her way as a writer and a scholar *despite* her family. In the first chapter of the memoir, DeSalvo describes a picture with Jill taken by their father, displaying her complex relationship with her sister, one made of obligations and pretenses:

> There is a family photograph of the two of us, taken when I am about thirteen and she is ten. I am sitting in my nightgown, in my mother's rocking chair. Jill is on my lap, pretending to be a baby. I hold a toy bottle to her lips. I pretend to feed her. My father is taking the picture, and we are posing for it. I look like I have been pressed into this against my wishes though I wear a phony smile. My glassy eyes look past her, past the camera, and past my father, into the far, far distance. Jill looks straight into the view finder. She, too, wears a phony smile, pretending she's having a good time. But I can see the sadness in her, the sadness that was always there. (DeSalvo 1996: 26)

Jill's suicide is described by DeSalvo as "the most important and traumatic event I have experienced in my adult life" (DeSalvo 1996: xv). Indeed, in *Vertigo*, Jill's death is the event that activates the process of unveiling family secrets. The boxes and envelopes that Louise's father gives to her after her mother's death do not contain so much her mother's personal effects, but mainly Jill's clothes, treasures, pottery, kitchen utensils – all the objects that will tell Louise "what it was about my sister that my mother wanted to remember" (DeSalvo 1996: 15).

It is after Jill's death that DeSalvo begins to understand and gets to know more about her mother's chronic depression. During Jill's relapses, DeSalvo's mother's mental health condition deteriorates, and she checks herself in the psychiatric ward of the local hospital. Through this event, the author finds out that her mother had been hospitalized for depression before, and even received shock treatment when she was young. Daughter of a widowed Italian immigrant who spoke no English and worked for the railroad as day laborer, DeSalvo's mother lacked proper parenting and suffered from the absence of a mother. As a day laborer, her father had q difficult time finding adequate childcare for her, and he often had to rely upon neighbors or relatives, until he remarried with an Italian immigrant woman who came to the United States in the latest stages of the migration. Nonetheless, DeSalvo's mother was a brilliant student, and the author recalls that her proudest memory was of when she won a prize in high school for writing. Despite being a gifted young girl, she could not afford going to college and eventually started to work as a salesperson. As I have pointed out in the second chapter, the figure of the mother is crucial in Italian American women's writing, as it embodies a type of female role that is both looked up to and rejected in its strengths and weaknesses. Such ambivalent feelings need to be understood within the context of writing about the working class too. Coming from a working-class family, Louise DeSalvo's mother cherishes her daughter's education and struggles to provide opportunities for her, even if this implies leaving

Hoboken and moving to the suburbs, causing great pain to her children. The book recounts moments in which the author observes her mother, trying to catch the slightest gesture that might offer an insight into her emotional life, often with no success. She is described as inscrutable, busy looking down into her cup of coffee, "as if it can give her something we can't" (Louise DeSalvo, 1996: 91). She seems tangled up in the impossibilities of her past, in the pain caused by the absence of her own mother, which will manifest later in the constant arguments with her stepmother.

Nonetheless, in Italian American women's literature mothers and female ancestors cover a sort of predictive role: aware of their embodied experience, they are determined to provide the material conditions for their daughters to improve their life. *Vertigo* does not fall outside this *topos*, as the author constantly oscillates between perceptions of her mother as docile, even passive, and depictions of her as the woman who deeply cared for her education. Writing, and before that, reading, learning, getting an education, are conceived as a rebellious act of freedom, but from the beginning they entail a sense of betrayal. In the chapter "Finding my way", DeSalvo describes her mother's habit to brag about her daughter starting school when she was only four years old as an exaggeration, a family story that grows true with repetition:

> My mother's story about my starting school at four is something of an exaggeration. Although it is literally true that I start school when I am four, I turn five just a few weeks later, and so it would have been more accurate if my mother had said that I was nearly five years old when I started first grade. And although I have learned to read, in my recollection, I do not learn by myself; it is my mother who teaches me. But my mother's story, her pride in describing my precocity, suggests that she had secret aspirations for me that she never openly shared. Perhaps she dreamed that I could fulfil her thwarted ambition of one day attending college, of one day becoming a writer. (DeSalvo 1996: 68)

As the author writes, this story, told through the years, appears as a sort of premonition that underlies the purpose of foreseeing and legitimating Louise's whole educational achievements, since "it means that, despite my difficult infancy, despite my difficult early childhood after my father comes home from the war, when I give my parents what seems like nothing but trouble, I have turned out all right" (DeSalvo 1996: 69). What is more, DeSalvo acknowledges that it is because of her mother's commitment that as a first-grader she was already advanced in writing and reading, but her mother cannot or won't recognize that. The narrative of being gifted with a talented daughter seems to be a more

comfortable version of the story that overshadows, for a moment, the difficult struggles of motherhood. In the descriptions that the author makes of her mother teaching her how to read, she seems as she is following a secret intuition, that the way to heal herself lies in teaching her daughter:

> My favorite photograph from the wartime years. I am sitting on my mother's lap as she sits in the rocking chair in our kitchen, reading to me. During the years my father is away, my mother reads to me every night before I go to bed. […] The formality of reading allows her to interact with me without uncertainty and anxiety. Much of the time, her voice is strong and clear, changing in timbre and pitch to suit the meaning. Sometimes, though, she reads in a monotone; her thoughts are someplace else. (DeSalvo 1996: 63)

For DeSalvo, the act of reading bears the memories and the significance of her mother's efforts, and literature stands as a long-desired private space, which significantly exists in the memory of the author only during the war times, when men are away. Later in the memoir, DeSalvo draws a connection between herself, her mother, and her grandmother as women who, through reading and sewing, are able to fabricate stories:

> Teaching me to read is the greatest gift my mother gives me as a very young child. (When I am older, she and my grandmother will teach me a love of handiwork – how to sew and how to knit.) Reading becomes my greatest pleasure in life; continues to be my greatest pleasure. […] Every act of reading, a journey back to my mother's arm. (DeSalvo 1996: 64)

The memory of DeSalvo's grandmother and mother teaching her how to sew is embedded in the parenthesis, signaling a sort of unexpected appearance of memories that erupt because of analogy, and eventually overlap. For the author, sewing, reading, writing are all profoundly intertwined. When asked about the importance of sewing for Italian American women, Donna Gabaccia claimed: "we grasp for those embodied forms of labor in order to keep culture tied to the very material, pragmatic, embodied lives of the people whose minds and subjectivities we want to understand" (Gabaccia in Brioni et al. 2012: 105). Textile work was indeed the main occupation for Italian immigrant women in the early twentieth century, turning sewing into an activity that oscillated between work and hobby, thus exemplifying the blurred line between private and public of women's domestic domain. In the artistic practice of Italian Australian artist and curator Luci Callipari Marcuzzo, sewing plays a key role in connecting the artist to the stories of migration of her parents and grandparents, who left Calabria and reached Australia in the

1950s. In her project *Tracing the threads of the past: apron*, the artist uses sewing machines as if they were translation tools (Brioni et al. 2023: 101). The act of translation is embodied by the artist herself, who dresses up with the typical clothes of Italian immigrants, and starts working with the sewing machine.

Figure 2. Luci Callipari-Marcuzzo, Tracing threads of the past: apron, live-art performance, in Beyond Borders. Transnational Italy exhibition, curated by Viviana Gravano and Giulia Grechi. The British School at Rome, Italy, 2016. Photo credit: Carolina Farina / Routes agency

The distinction between crafting and working, the physical and psychological wounds that work leaves on the body versus the marks of one's creativity and skills, are part of the reflections on class and migration that are at the center of both *Vertigo* and *Night Bloom*. For instance, Louise remembers Jill as an indefatigable worker: always in her work clothes, always on the move, trying to make a living out of her pottery:

> (She often wrote me of trying, and failing, to please her husband, to win his approval. Of wanting meaningful work of her own that would pay well so that she could have some self-respect, but not knowing what that might be, for the pottery she loved earned her next to nothing. Of days when she couldn't summon enough energy to get up in the morning, though she insisted on baking her own bread, and growing her own vegetables to keep their costs low.) I see Jill bending over the potter's wheel, her long, honey-colored hair covering her face. I see her hands, red as raw meat from working with clay. Blunt, powerful fingers. A worker's hands. My father's hands. (DeSalvo 1996: 15)

It is important to remark how Jill is associated by the author with their father, whose main characteristic will later be defined in the book as "being good at fixing things". As it was

the case for her mother, DeSalvo's father did not receive much education. Having dyslexia, he quit school to work to help his family, and later enlisted in the navy, where he became a skilled laborer. Interestingly, only once in the book the author mentions another feature of her father: besides being a good worker, he was a great singer. However, unable to afford proper musical schooling, he never explored his raw talent. The author thus associates her father's talent and crafting skills with Jill's pottery, which mingles art and dexterity, but it is still not enough to give her economic stability. The quest for a dimension that can suit them is what bonds Jill's, Louise's and their mother's lives. As Romeo points out, the desire to stay home is the catalyst of DeSalvo's mother's difficulty in being in touch with the external world. Jill, on the other hand, seems to be completely incapable of living both her inner and the outer space serenely. Her constant feeling of disorientation leads her to being always on the move, and eventually realizing that there is no cure for her perpetual sense of disorientation (Romeo 2005: 128).

At a closer look, the lack of a fixed spatial dimension, the perpetual sense of loss that is apparently healed by a continuous and spasmodic action, is what distinguishes all the working-class Italian American women who are at the core of *Vertigo*. The reader identifies them with Louise, with her mother and sister who struggle to find their own space, with the figure of Aunt Vinnie, the madwoman. But these are also the women that sew, laugh, work till exhaustion in the streets of post-suburban-mobility Hoboken:

> The street where I used to live hasn't changed much, though there are more men in their twenties and thirties around than I remember. But the old women who put pillows on the windowsills to rest their beefy arms and lean of the window to watch what's happening on the block are still there. […]. A mother still stands in the street, craning her neck backwards, to talk to her friend at an open window five flights up, and she does not move when a car pulls up and blows the horn, because, after all, this is her street, not his, and she's entitled to do anything she wants here. (Louise DeSalvo, 1996: 94)

In DeSalvo's writing the presence of men metaphorically and realistically coincides with the imposition of the patriarchal order as a set of rigid rules. In the chapter "Combat Zones", feelings of rebellion against a superimposed order are expressed by Louise's anger towards her father, who comes back from service in the Second World War. "Combat Zones" covers the war years 1943-1945, and it is a chapter in which memory and desire are mingled to produce a tangible dream. The author cannot tell if the way she remembers things is actually the way things were, and this eventually creates a blurred,

but still distinguishable reality. This is reflected in the way in which the domestic space is described:

> Before the war, hellos between women and children were exchanged, politely and briefly, as we passed one another on the stairs, or on the streets outside (the men merely grunting, or nodding in grudging recognition). […] But after the men left for the war, the women, who were left behind to raise their families single-handedly, threw open all the doors to their apartments, and children began to clatter up and down the five flights of stairs at all hours of the day and night. Women and children wandered from one apartment into another without ceremony or invitation. […] Children, even girl children, were allowed to play hard enough to get dirty and rip their clothes. […] Gangs of women – five, six, or more – gangs of children – nine, ten, or more – would gather together in the tiny parlors of apartments during birthday parties (which seemed to occur weekly) or holiday celebrations or for no good reason at all, except for the pleasure of being together. (DeSalvo 1996: 51)

The domestic space ceases to be "domestic", meaning featured by privateness, rules, and loneliness. The separation between one household and another falls off, and discretion disappears in favor of solidarity. The photographs that the author analyzes in this chapter reflect such radical change, providing her with some of the most meaningful and empathetic insights on her parents and her community:

> After the party, the women scrunch together, happily, on the sofa, for a picture taking session. They have had their sherry; they are very happy. They lean against one another's knees, lean into one another's bodies, caress one another's shoulders. […] They decide to have six copies of the picture made to mail their men at war. (In various combat zones, on battlefields and battleships throughout the world, six men will later open their letters, look at this picture, and wonder to themselves, what is going on, and why on earth these women look like they're having such a good time.) (DeSalvo 1996: 52)

Although during the war women would spend time penning letters to their husbands, for DeSalvo their life was, after all, calmer and happier than before. For these reasons, in the eyes of young Louise the return of her father is perceived as "an invasion of these men into what I had come to consider my private territory" (DeSalvo, 1996: 56), for which she will never forgive him. Coming back to the old routine – which included going to church and being quiet when requested – was a shock, and the house turned into a battlefield again. However, once again DeSalvo resorts to pictures in order to locate her memories. In fact, she admits: "this is how I remember I felt when my father came home, but the photos taken of my father and me after the war tell a different story. In them, I am euphoric" (DeSalvo 1996: 60).

To conclude, in *Vertigo* the domestic space is described as separated from the possibilities that writing and learning open up. Home is a space marked by power dynamics, whereas writing draws and solidifies a genealogy of women whose creativity survives in the daily toils of work, whose craft is passed down onto new generations in ways that are invisible to the common eyes. Most importantly, it is through writing and studying that DeSalvo recognizes traces of her mother's willpower and desires in her.

3.2.2 The inherited garden in *Night Bloom*

As it is in *Vertigo*, in *Night Bloom* the category of space is at the core of Italian American women's troubled relationship with both mainstream American culture and their ethnic background, which often considers women as subaltern. Cappello's writing addresses themes of home, secrecy, and writing too, so as to explore the intersection between gender, class, and ethnicity.

In the prologue, "Slender Iris", Mary Cappello recalls a spring day that through the eyes of a four-year-old Mary is indigo colored. Her brothers have taught her the name of colors, but as a preschooler, Mary used to mix up the words that she still had not mastered. Significantly, she gets "violet" mistaken for "violent", a word that, as it was the case for DeSalvo, describes the nature of her parents and grandparents' life, and anticipates the impetuousness of her memories. The colors indigo and violet alternatively shift hues as they indicate first the irises that stand out in her father's garden – the direct result of his care – and then the bruises that he causes on the body of Mary's oldest brother, Joe.

In the first section of the memoir, Cappello composes the picture of the garden through antithetic images:

> Snapdragons, if you press the hairy underside of their throats ever so gently, will speak. As a child, I wanted to eat every blossom in my father's garden, until I learned the pleasure in my mouth of their names: calla lily, cosmos, rose eclipse, dahlia. (Cappello, 1998: 3)

The juxtaposition of flowers that will speak to you, but only if you force them to, and of human desire that, out of curiosity, might even devour blossoms, expresses the ambivalent space of the garden. In *Night Bloom*, the garden represents heritage and all the intricacies attached to it. The garden comes from the male lineage of Cappello's family, since it was men who would take charge of it, and the three gardens that were passed on across generations belonged to Mary's father, to her maternal grandfather, John

Petracca, and to her great-uncle by marriage, Antonio Polidori. The most beautiful one, though, exists only in the memory and tales of the family, and it belonged to Cappello's maternal great-grandfather, Antonio Petracca. Here, the garden plays a key role as it becomes the metaphor for home and migration:

> The earth the gardener digs in and the root systems he tends are attached in complex ways to a house or an idea of a house, to a neighborhood, to a state flower, to the landscape of the country that he has left if he is an immigrant, to the gardens of familiar patriarchs and matriarchs. (Cappello 1998: 5)

Antonio Petracca was the first of Cappello's family that migrated from Teano. As soon as he made a modest living in the United States, working as a gardener for the wealthy families who lived on Philadelphia's Main Line, he called his wife and son to join him in 1916. His mastery in gardening was a myth passed on across generations to counterbalance the fact that he was "shrouded in mystery, a source of family shame or family pity. However judged, his was certainly the greatest of family secrets" (Cappello 1998: 6). Secrecy and shame are thus themes that pervade Cappello's memoir too, especially concerning the figure of Antonio Petracca, who is the protagonist of several family stories. Apparently, the man was exiled from his town of origin because of a death and possible murder related to an illicit love that possibly generated a child. What the author knows for certain is that her grandfather had been chronically unfaithful to his wife, Josephine Conte, during her pregnancy, thus leaving her the most part of parenthood and caretaking. Eventually he became estranged from both his wife and child. As Cappello argues in her memoir, the stories revolving around her great-grandfather contain elements of the typical stereotyped narrative of passion and murder that characterizes Italian characters, but the author uses the different myths and versions of such stories to assemble a different narrative, focusing on the women of her family that paradoxically played a key role in the transmission of these stories, but were relegated to a marginal position in them. Here, Cappello's writing echoes with Burgwyn's concept of memory-keeping, i.e. the oral transmission of family memories that provides an avenue for female agency:

> It was hard to discern whose need the story most spoke to now, for the teller each piece originated with was hopelessly lost in the intermingled strands offered mainly by the women in my family: great-grandmother tells my grandmother who tells my mother who compares what she knows with her sister. Running alongside this confused pattern

> is the border of my grandfather's grave silence and his dinnertime rituals. (Cappello 1998: 9).

Cappello aims at questioning the centrality given to her great-grandfather, even though he is and had always been absent in more than one way, by paying attention to the minimal gestures and to the experiences of the women in her family.

Cappello first concentrates on the figure of her great-grandmother, Josephine, who, after being called by her husband, embarked for the transatlantic journey alone with her child. By that time, John was already sixteen, and he came to be her mother's confidant and supporter. Josephine Conte is described by the author as an enigmatic woman who had her own ways of dealing with the pain caused by her husband and the trauma of migration. The author writes that "she would, for example, open the neckline of her dress and talk down into it, as if she were telling her troubles to her own heart. And when that didn't work, my mother told me, she would go to a place she'd never been before and leave her troubles there" (Cappello 1998: 7). Josephine is the first that appears in the genealogy of Mary Cappello, because she represents the first example of female solidarity as a form of resistance in her family. She took care of her child during the voyage to America, and she continued doing so during the multiple absences of her husband. In addition, she offered pieces of her experience to her daughter-in-law, Rose Arcaro, helping her to take care of her children. In return, Rose shielded Josephine's secrets. Indeed, Cappello thinks of her grandfather's survival of infancy and childhood as "a testament to my great-grandmother's decision to cease to live in and through her husband and his passion" (Cappello 1998: 10).

Therefore, the figure of Josephine Conte becomes central in the construction of Cappello's own mythopoeia, creating a self-narrative which tries to rekindle the connections between her present self and her origins through the stories and the objects of her family. It is in her great-grandmother that Cappello locates signs and clues of her identity as an Italian American queer writer. In a journal entry dated April 12, 1942, Cappello's grandfather recalls episodes of his mother's birthday; in particular he remembers the presence of a woman named Frances, who her mother was particularly fond of:

> Today is my mother's birthday. I am so happy that the day is beautiful and that everyone is doing his best to make mother happy. When I came back from work I saw

> Frances and little Rosemary fixing a basket full of azaleas. They mentioned to me not to let anyone in the house know it. Later they marched in both holding the basket singing Happy Birthday to Grandma. It was simply grand. Mother kissed them both. I believe, besides mother's blowing the candles out on the cake ahead of time, their act was the best. (Cappello, 1998: 11).

From this journal entry, Cappello holds on the hazy figure of Frances to question the relationship between the two women. She wonders what kind of relationship they had, whether they had met before or after her great-grandmother discovered about her husband's unfaithfulness, marking the beginning of her chronic sadness, if their love might be related to this event, and finally the author simply asks herself: "are these questions that only a lesbian-great granddaughter would ask? For every person consoled, there is someone else in search of consolation" (ibid.).

In the first part of Cappello's memoir, heritage thus takes the form of the garden underwritten by a bequeathed enigma, a burdensome memory that mostly originates from her great-grandfather. The hedge that was part of his garden was initially transplanted to Mary's grandfather's garden, who later planted cuttings of it around the front yard of Mary's parents' garden. Ironically, the hedge survived for three generations, eventually becoming the border of Mary's house. Following the family's tradition, Mary's father was the one who took care of the garden, but her mother played a central role in the realization and maintenance of it, and, as it happened with the women before her, Rosemary Cappello's relationship to the garden was ambivalent.

On the one hand, in the eyes of the author the garden was a place connected with rest, a brief pause from the indefatigability of her working-class household:

> I remember how gardens provide a way to wander, and how gardens become a place for the sweetness of doing nothing. After squeezing out orange juice for a family of nine, […] my great-grandmother, Josephine Conte, disappears through the screen door of her son's house to the garden. She's left her rosaries behind, fills her pockets with camphor leaf, she sits or stands staring, not sighing now for her five dead children […], or for the ocean between her and the place of their birth and death. She walks slowly; she nods; she sits or stands. She's doing nothing. (Cappello 1998: 5)

On the other hand, to "the sweetness of doing nothing" that Josephine used to practice in the garden, Cappello counterposes the vehemence of her mother in cutting the hedge, her stress in taking care of the plants, the power of the garden to amplify her agoraphobia, which led her to be secluded in the house almost completely for seven years. In addition, the hedge is defined as "the metaphoric border that was supposed to keep my family's

gardens from intermingling, each in its way hoeing its own row toward an idea of class mobility" (Cappello 1998: 14). After getting married, Cappello's parents, Italian Americans of the third generation, moved to Darby, Pennsylvania in a working-class neighborhood where row homes were the standard: twenty two-story units directly joined one to the other. The hedge thus outlined the private space of the household, as privateness conveys a social status. However, the hedge became also the physical boundary that kept Rosemary Cappello confined, and the object onto which she could channel the frustration caused by a seemingly inescapable and undesired life:

> My mother, as a guardian of its second incarnation before her house, took to her hedge with a ferocity that, while it never exactly smacked of violence, certainly seemed electrified by a force within my mother that she couldn't otherwise express. As a keeper of the hedge, my mother's job was to periodically trim it, which she did in those days with long-edged wood-handled shears as opposed to electric blades. The job took muscle, and my mother trimmed the entire hedge at once without pause. […] Smothered, she did not shout, but rapped out a refrain several hours' long: "Fuck this fucking hedge" and the shameful story it will never yield; "Fuck this fucking hedge" and the paternal body it pretends to shield; "Fuck this fucking hedge," symbol of containment, of what keeps me in, of what I cannot leave or leave behind. (Cappello 1998: 15).

According to Romeo, the refrain "fuck this fucking hedge" symbolically echoes and reverses a prayer, using the repetitiveness and the rhythm that usually serve the purpose of creating a sense of community, to convey rage and frustration (Romeo 2005: 176). Rosemary's frustration comes from the fact that she cannot find any comfort either in the Catholic Church, where she used to look for emotional and social sustenance, or in her family. Therefore, the hedge represents the impossibility to escape the patriarchal order, embodied by the figure of Antonio Petracca and Rosemary's violent father, and the narrative that it imposes on women.

Nonetheless, Rosemary is a central figure for the development of Mary Cappello's special relationship with writing. A writer of poetry herself, Rosemary Cappello was also a brilliant student: after graduating from her high school's commercial course and winning several prizes for her achievements in Latin and English writing, she began to work as a secretary at a radio station in Philadelphia, even though "she was expected to find employment in the business world as soon as possible after high school, or to marry" (Cappello 1998: 12).

In the description that Cappello makes of her mother, the woman seems to simultaneously challenge the pre-existing narrative on Italian American women and keep ties with rituals and traditions:

> It is 1968, and my mother's views on civil rights make her the local radical; her article appearing in the *Catholic Standard and Times* describing the paper as a "dismal rag" has not endeared her to our law-abiding Italian and Irish neighbors. Still my mother sends me at eight years old on the errand to deliver tomatoes in odd-sized brown paper bags to each unsuspecting asphalt dweller. (Cappello 1998: 3).

In this excerpt, Cappello's mother intellectual life and political interest almost seem to echo the forgotten history of working-class political organizations that was part of Italian American heritage. However, her article is juxtaposed to a more traditional image of a woman that plants her own vegetables and sends them to her neighbors. Further in the book, the tension that is produced by the juxtaposition of containment and willpower, escape and endurance, is exemplified by Mary's mother's desire to take her daughter to the library despite her agoraphobia. Let us compare the descriptions of the trip to and back the Darby local library:

> A walk to the library was always prefaced with this scene: I stand in the doorway of my mother's bedroom and watch her watching herself in the mirror as she combs her hair. She sings. Songs I can't now remember […]. My mother is singing and walking. All things swim and glitter. (Cappello 1998: 60)

> In the descent down the highly pitched staircase, I walk with my mother behind me. She instructs me to hold onto the railing. I won't really observe until I'm an adult that, confronted with certain staircases, my mother needs another person to walk in front of her. Midway down the stairs, a narrow window looms to the right. I've bounded to the bottom, but my mother's steps have ceased to follow me. "Wait" she says. […] It's as though the steps have become a room, a room that defies the shape of things as she knows them, a room where surfaces repel and clouds are solid, a room in which she is forced to grope. All things swim and glitter. (Cappello 1998: 63)

In just a few pages Cappello manages to describe the shift that occurs in the journey to the library, which is characterized by oneiric images of her mother's vitality and the abruptness of her strong panic attacks. Significantly, the author describes how the perception of space rapidly changes, conveying a sense of disorientation and estrangement. The sentence "All things swim and glitter", which marks the end of both these episodes, works as another refrain that glues together the painful and the comforting memory of her mother, as well as her relationship with literature. As Cappello writes:

"My making a life of reading has, I know, everything to do with the pleasure and horror of trips with my mother to the Darby Library. It's as much about refuge as it is about unbearable confrontation" (Cappello 1998: 64).

To conclude, in this section I have analyzed how for both Louise DeSalvo and Mary Cappello the choice of writing as primary means of expression was influenced by their mothers. DeSalvo's mother's educational path was interrupted early because of the need to be able to provide for herself; Cappello's mother's love for writing continued to be a sheltering dimension despite and beyond the material conditions of her life. However, for the two authors being able to pursue an education, become writers and actually cross the boundaries of class and gender expectations has generated multiple conflicts.

3.3 When writing is betraying

In this section, I will focus on the relationship between class and education, in order to reflect on the meaning of concepts such as emancipation and authorship. Discourses on emancipation from one's own context of origin in terms of class and ethnicity sometimes reproduce narrative patterns of self-made success, in which education acts as a social ladder, serving the purpose of rejecting one's background. Arguably, this is because standards of education are still enmeshed in a stigmatized discourse that overlooks the context of low school enrolments and drop-outs. In addition, from a gendered perspective, Daniela Brogi argues that women's educational paths have long been encoded into scripts of extraordinariness, merit, or luck (Brogi 2022: chap. 2). This erases experiences of mutual support among women, and fuels the neo-liberal idea of self-realization at the expense of others. Therefore, authors that address class-related themes with the purpose of questioning and deconstructing the narrative of achieved individual success necessarily deal with a sense of class betrayal, where writing, especially when it is part of a career that leads to social mobility, seems to cause an irreversible break. Themes of upward mobility and cultural breaks are vividly present in both *Vertigo* and *Night Bloom*, where being college-educated collides with the imposition of anti-intellectualism on Italian American women, threatening the relationship with their families and the wholeness of their identities.

3.3.1 Upward mobility in *Vertigo*

In "A Literary Person Out of Context", an essay written in 1986, Helen Barolini explains the reasons for Italian American women's marginalization from literature:

> An Italian American woman becomes a writer out of the void. She has to be self-birthed, without models, without inner validation, and without the outer world's expectation that she can or should succeed. She is perceived as a stranger both to literature and in literature. Inwardly besieged by doubts (for she is betraying her *destiny* of self-giving in the service of others,) and tormented by the insinuation of hubris as she aspires to go beyond her cultural boundaries. (Barolini 1986: 4; my italics)

As "writers out of the void", the creativity of ethnic women is conceived only in the exceptional, de-historicized form of pure genius. To this regard, the concept of "anxiety of authorship" proposed by Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar in *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979) is enlightening. Gilbert and Gubar define the anxiety of authorship as the difficulty in inhabiting the creative space of writing, which is partly due to the lack of previous literary models of women writers. Furthermore, Gilbert and Gubar analyze the anxiety of authorship as part of a general difficulty for women in occupying physical, socio-cultural, and political spaces (Romeo 2005: 171).

It is important to highlight that Barolini belongs to a different generation of writers, whose parents, in their typical Italian American ambivalence, "not only gave a base to my aspirations as a writer, but also undermined the confidence necessary for realizing them" (ibid.). However, the same feeling of estrangement to literature seems to persist even in the younger generations of Italian American women writers. As Romeo highlights, for a long time women of Italian descent did not have the possibility to go through the mainstream cultural carriers. This was caused not only by a fixed gender hierarchy entailed in Italian American communities, but also by the exclusion of ethnic women from mainstream cultural opportunities (Romeo 2005: 173). Even for DeSalvo, for whom creative and academic writing was a way heal from her past, the inescapable sense of unworthiness is pervasive:

> Even as I write, though, I am wary of what I am writing. I am, inescapably, an Italian-American woman with origins in the working-class. I come from a people who, even now, seriously distrust educated women, who value family loyalty. The story I want to tell is that of how I tried to create (and am still trying to create) a life that was different from the one that was *scripted* for me by my culture, how, though reading, writing, meaningful work, and psychotherapy, I managed to escape disabling depression. (DeSalvo 1996: xvii; my italics)

For both Barolini and DeSalvo, writing and self-writing is an act of resistance to a *destiny*, a *script* of silence that confines women into the system of reproductive gender roles and

of class determinism. Writing ultimately equals breaking the silence and re-claiming a voice, and in the momentarily absence of figures to look up to, DeSalvo dives into the work of other women writers with ethnic origins, reinforcing the concept of literary genealogies:

> As a working-class girl, born and raised in Hoboken, New Jersey, how could I hope to fulfil a life's ambition, to do serious intellectual work, to become a critic, a writer? Though I had read scores of books, not one had been written by an Italian-American woman. I had no role model among the women of my background to urge me on, though I had found inspiration in the works of African-American and Jewish-American writers. (DeSalvo 1996: 9)

Breaking the script of silence is strongly related to the theme of shame and its derivative elaborations: decorum, respectability, discretion, endurance. As Giunta phrased it, self-writing indeed implies "recognizing the shame that lies at the core of writing" (Giunta 2002b: 68). In order to move beyond the script, both Louise DeSalvo and Mary Cappello were obliged to break the rules of discretion, revealing family secrets, and describing the hardships of working-class families. Eventually, what comes out is the violence of the past, which for DeSalvo is represented by the oxymoron of not having a private space within her house:

> Our tiny apartment, it is true, is barely suited for two people, and certainly not for four. There is absolutely no privacy. No doors separating the kitchen from the bedroom, or the bedroom from the parlor. We all wash up, standing in front of the kitchen sink, in full view of everyone else […]. Five of us share the toilet that is in a cubicle between two apartments, and, unless you remember to lock both doors, someone inevitably open one when you are inside. (DeSalvo 1996: 72)

Most importantly, this feeling of oppression is exemplified by Louise's impossibility of sleeping serenely in the bedroom that she shares with her parents and her sister. DeSalvo recounts how she would be awaked by either her little sister's cries, or by the sounds of her parents' lovemaking. Later in the memoir, the violence of this first approach with sex appears to be determinant for Louise's future relationship with boys and her sexuality.

Internalized shame and the imposition of discretion about one's own working-class background often requires to be disguised, to dress up. When she was about to start school at the Sacred Heart Academy, DeSalvo recalls her mother spending the whole summer sewing the blue serge uniforms and white cotton blouses that were required to wear by the nuns:

> Though sewing them is hard work, my mother says she thinks that wearing uniforms is a very good idea because it makes everyone seem the same so that, during school hours, the rich kids and the poor kids will all look similar, and that means no one will get preferential treatment. This is what's so good about Catholic school. (DeSalvo 1996: 67)

Further in the same page, DeSalvo compares the initial care that her mother showed to present her daughter beautifully dressed to her progressive indifference in choosing her own clothes: "'There are too many choices,' she tells us. 'I get all confused." (ibid.)

There are different ways, though, to write about the working class, to break the silence of family secrets, and each way reflects a mode of articulating the constant dialogue between fear of belonging and the need of getting away. Chantal Jaquet proposes the notion of transclass to define the break that occurs in the continuity of social models[20]. According to Jaquet, an individual is defined as *transfuge de classe* (class migrant, transclass) when a significant change occurs in their socio-economic condition, allowing them to move to a different social environment than the one bequeathed by their parents (Spagnuolo, "In fuga dalla classe"). Writing about transclass and questioning social mobility challenges the narrative of class determinism, but it also implies taking the risk of getting exposed to critiques. Indeed, writing about the working class from "the other side" can easily be targeted and criticized in its constant dialectics between what remains and what is lost. To such criticism, Nobel prize-winning author Annie Ernaux responded that writing about the working class does not erase one's background, nor it relieves the writer from the burden of memory. In fact, writing brings about the responsibility of carrying such memory. Ernaux wrote extensively about the contradictions of writing and its alleged transitive nature, allowing her to cross the threshold of her working-class roots by acquiring what Pierre Bourdieau called "cultural capital". In the attempt of describing Ernaux's style, critics have claimed that the author makes use of a plain, neutral style for very specific reasons:

> The Nobel committee praised the "clinical acuity" with which Ernaux writes. But if she writes in this way - neutrally - it is to do justice to the class from which she emerged. She is trying not to make a spectacle [*donner à voir*] of the people she's writing about, she recently told the French literary journalist Augustin Trapenard: "When you are a class migrant, it is very difficult to write." She sought, above all, a

[20] See Chantal Jaquet, *Les Transclasses ou la non-reproduction*, Paris, PUF, 2014.

> form of writing that would "transcribe the reality and the way of life of my family in a literary form that would not betray them." (Elkin, "Annie Ernaux is no traitor")

As a writer of fiction, Ernaux opted for a plain language that could reflect both the linguistic and semantic reality of her parents, as well as the sense of impenetrability that plain language often conveys. For the writer, her parents remain undecipherable, and all the knowledge that she has, all the lexical variety that she acquired, seems to be of no use before them. All she can do is to undress language, take away all the embellishments, in order to shield her parents' reality from pietism, and even from sheer empathy. In a way, it is a style that respects and pays homage to the rules of discretion.

In writing their memoirs, Luise DeSalvo and Mary Cappello approach the theme of upward mobility rather differently, deciding to expose openly their family memories. I believe that the difference lies in the way in which memoir is used by these two authors to talk about ethnicity and Italian American culture.

In describing herself as "inescapably, an Italian-American woman with origins in the working-class", DeSalvo points to both the lack of a tradition of Italian American women writers, and to the pressure exerted by her own family environment. In 1949, DeSalvo's family moved from Hoboken to Ridgefield, playing their part in the contemporary mobility to the subrubs. Ridgefield appear to the writers' parents as "a promised land", since moving there "signifies that the hell of the war years is finally behind us, […] we can be solidly, and respectably, middle class" (DeSalvo 1996: 87). However, the writer explains that "when we move, I feel like a person who has committed a capital crime", leaving behind the Italian neighborhood in which she grew up for ten years. Although moving out of Hoboken feels like betraying her Italian American roots, for Louise, moving to the suburbs had a significant impact on her future:

> My parents have worked hard, made sacrifices, to get us out of there, I know, and they think they are doing themselves and us a great favor. (They were right. It was best for me because it was far easier for an Italian-American girl to find her way to college from Ridgefield than it would have been in Hoboken, where there was enormous pressure for working-class Italian-American girls to be anti-intellectual.) (DeSalvo 1996: 90)

In Italian American communities, anti-intellectualism was praised as a distinctive value, a feature that was used to characterize Italian Americans because it underscored the tie between ethnicity and working-class roots. Hence, crossing the line of average education

was equated to being less ethnic, getting close to middle-class WASPS. The interrelation of class and ethnicity is explored by the author through the descriptions of the ambivalent impact that her education had on her extended family. The story about Louise starting school when she was only four years old had the consequence of finally making her visible to her family members, especially her grandfather, by comparing her to her cousins:

> The story signals that I am special. It differentiates me in my paternal grandparents' eyes from my cousins (and from my sister), none of whom, they believe can match my intellectual accomplishments, no matter how hard they try. […] On Easter, my grandmother cooks a lamb's head for the family dinner. With great ceremony, my grandfather plucks the lamb's eyes out from its socket, and gives it to me to eat. I shake my head no, refusing. "You have to eat it," my grandfather says, "it's an honor, it's for good luck." (DeSalvo, 1996: 69)

Through the grim ritual of offering the lamb's eyes to Louise, her grandfather is acknowledging her potential. This leads to Louise's understanding of how education plays a role in power relations, allowing her to be considered regardless her gender:

> I don't know why I am singled out in this way. Nor do I know whether I would have been singled out in this way despite my accomplishments, if my father wasn't my grandparents' only son, or if I had an older brother or cousin, for, in Italian-American families, one child is often selected by family elders to carry all the hopes for success of the family. For whatever reasons, in my family, I am that child. (ibid.)

Significantly, Louise is the only one that her grandfather involves in his few cultural activities, such as attending performances at the Metropolitan Opera, where he never takes his wife or his other grandchildren. Opera is described as the cultural activity that her grandfather enjoyed the most because of its relationship with Italy: "He doesn't like any opera but Italian opera" (DeSalvo 1996: 70). However, the author recalls a specific episode that caused a fracture in this routine that they shared. After attending a performance of the Pulitzer prize-winning opera, *Vanessa*, Louise expressed her appreciation for such a typical American play, and her grandfather called her a traitor. "*Vanessa* is the last opera I remember seeing with him" (DeSalvo 1996: 71).

Vertigo includes several episodes where ethnic betrayal is intertwined with the notion of transclass, where education always works as a powerful instrument for dodging labels and impositions from both the Italian American and the mainstream culture. A significant example of that occurs in the early school years, where DeSalvo experiences

a clash between her Italian American identity and the way in which her ethnicity is perceived by her classmates:

> I had already been laughed at for my long, unpronounceable Italian last name (which contained twelve letters in all, seven consonants and five vowels). […]
>
> "Hey, what kind of name is that?" from the non-Italians.
>
> "Your name is bigger than you are" from the bigger kids.
>
> Or the far more commonplace, "That's gotta be a Wop name; who else but a Wop would have a name like that."
>
> I had defended my name to a slovenly boy I instantly despised with a series of remarks uttered with all the disdain that a nearly five-year-old girl can muster when she wants to be dismissive, contemptuous, and superior.
>
> "I already know how to spell my last name," I told him, my nose pointed high in the air. My mother says that if I can learn how to spell my last name, there isn't anything I can't learn. I already know how to read and write. […] What do you know? You don't look like you know anything." (DeSalvo 1996: 77)[21]

In this episode, Louise makes use of her knowledge and her advanced skills to read and write as a first grader so as to protect herself. However, if knowledge sheltered the author from discrimination when she was young, it also singled her out, creating an unfillable distance from her family and community, and confining her to the loneliness that she will describe extensively as part of her adolescence. Privileged by her grandfather, DeSalvo noticed that her relatives began to feel her as "someone around whom they feel uneasy" (DeSalvo 1996: 70). Describing an old family picture, the author writes:

> There I am in a family picture taken on Easter Sunday, standing off to one side, separated from the rest of them, posing like the models I have seen in magazines, one foot in front of the other, clutching at my pocketbook in front of me, looking as I always look, far too old for my years. (DeSalvo 1996: 70)

As a third-generation Italian American, writing appears to Louise DeSalvo as the only possible way to articulate personal trauma, illness, and cultural breaks. Writing about herself and her family allowed DeSalvo to shed light on working-class themes in the

[21] *Wop* is an ethnic term describing anyone of Italian descent. According to popular knowledge, it described Italians that arrived in North America as immigrants without papers and worked in construction and blue-collar work. Other ethnic slurs used for Italians, many of which group Italians with black or Hispanic people, are Guinea, Guido, Dago. For an extended list and etymology see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_ethnic_slurs_and_epithets_by_ethnicity

context of American literature. In reclaiming this creative space, the author eventually breaks the dichotomy between the secrecy of the private household and what is allowed to be thematized in literature, hence made public. In doing this, literature and memoirs specifically gain a political value, insofar as writing is encouraged as an embodied practice. In addition, a similar approach addresses the anxiety of authorship by democratizing writing. According to Brenda Daly, the concepts of authority and authorship are deeply linked, hence writing is transformed when the subject re-appropriates their own voice in order to express their embodied experience (Romeo, 2005: 15). This can be pursued only by restoring the connections "between the public and private worlds, between the individual and the community" (Herman in Romeo, 2005: 15).

3.3.2 Crossing class boundaries in *Night Bloom*

In *Night Bloom*, Mary Cappello's difficulty in covering an academic role coincides with the fear of moving away from her family's origins, and such fear is inscribed in her body and her relation to space. When she becomes a professor, Cappello develops a phobic fear of falling that resonates with her mother's agoraphobia, which intensifies whenever she is at university:

> Going through the process of gaining tenure as a professor, for example, I developed a fear of falling – a virtually phobic fear of losing motor control as I walked from my office to the campus library. Every step was a trial as I feared (or wished?) that something would give way, and I both craved running into colleagues (to remind me where I was) and feared running into colleagues (lest they would read the terror on my face). Tenure had the unfortunate image of a ladder attached to it […]. I realized that I wasn't so much afraid of not getting tenure as I was afraid of getting it. (Cappello 1998: 90)

The internalized sense of unworthiness emerges through the constant oscillation between fear and desire, reaching its peak in the last sentence, where the fear of getting a job as a professor is so invalidating that it overtakes the desire for it. In *Vertigo* the inner conflicts generated by upward mobility are articulated through episodes in which guilt and release blend together. On the contrary, in *Night Bloom* Cappello does not deal with any sense of guilt; rather she appears to be fully aware that her choices will outdistance her from her family, an event she fears. Therefore, her memoir is an attempt to re-create the cohesiveness of her identity within her family history. For this reason, the author intends to examine the events that "took up permanent residence in my psyche as one of many

identity themes" (ibid.). In describing her transition to the middle class, Cappello defines her profession as "tenure ladder", in which the improvement is both social and economic, since she might get a permanent job in the cultural sector that will offer her wellness and stability:

> As I climbed higher and higher up the ladder of middle-class-dom, I surmised, I feared losing my working-class family. Tenure was a pinnacle that would release me, but who wanted to be released? I wanted to be embraced, and through my fears I had been trying to re-embrace my family via my mother, by identifying not with her pleasurable and pleasure-giving self but with the readiest marker of her suffering, of her detachment from me: her phobias, her terror. If I could become my mother, I wouldn't lose her. And if I could become her in her pain, not only would I not forget her, but she would remember me because she would remember that I loved her. (ibid.)

In this excerpt, Cappello defines tenure as a release, suggesting the sense of emancipation that was present in DeSalvo's descriptions of her academic writing. Unlike DeSalvo, Cappello describes such release as devoured by an intense fear to move away from her working-class origins. Fear, however, becomes the handhold that the author grabs on to in order to re-connect with her mother. For Mary Cappello writing is a journey back to her mother's arms too, but this necessarily goes through the reminiscence, the re-enactment, and the re-appropriation of her mother's bodily and embodied experience:

> Tenure – I could never have anticipated it thus – threatened to cut the connections that defined me. And yet it wasn't as though academia and a life spent reading made up one distinct world while the life of my family or my memory of growing up working class made up another. Treasured walks with my mother to the Darby Library marked the path to academia for me, as did my witnessing of my mother's panic attacks on the Darby Library stairs. (Cappello 1998: 91)

Therefore, Cappello writes her genealogy across different generations of her family, and in doing so she sews back the strips of apparently incompatible realities, thus healing the fracture generated by upward mobility. This allows her to better understand not only her working-class background, but also her ethnic heritage, by identifying forms of resistance to alienation and to the frantic stress of labor:

> My immigrant heritage is marked by inappropriateness and delegitimized sounds, call it the noise of my grandfather's desire to make a living crafting shoes, of my mother's desire to be accounted for as a woman, of my desire to love other women, of our collective desire to be writers in an American culture that stifles the imagination of difference and that refuses artistic practice as a place around which the mind and heart might rally. (Cappello 1998: 73)

In including the inherited journals of her grandfather and the poems of her mother, Cappello uses the memoir to revisit, to retell, and to reframe not the *true* story, but an interpretive truth construed by a multifold account of different subjectivities (Giunta 2002b: 129). Hence, it is by restoring one's personal narrative in its completeness and uniqueness that the mutual contaminations between different realities are finally made visible. In this context, writing really works as a sewing machine that mends the rips and stretches caused by transatlantic and local crossings; it is a brief pause at the threshold that allows to go back and forth in memory:

> I have paused at the threshold of writing these memories – of the trip to the library, of the fall from the dive – for a very long time, convinced, I'm sure, that once I write them, I won't have to make those journeys so suffused with pleasure and pain again; convinced, I'm sure, that once I write them, I will no longer need to repeat them, and afraid therefore of where that would put me, of not knowing then where or who I might be. (Cappello 1998: 92)

3.3.3 Memoirs of working-class and ethnic women in teaching

For Louise DeSalvo and Mary Cappello memoir is a form of self-writing and political reflection in which Italian American identity is re-worked. "Italian American" is not a label that these authors passively inherit, but rather they view it as "a complicated site for the articulation of a politicized and progressive Italian American positionality", challenging both the notion of sheer descendance and the feeling of patriotic pride (Giunta 2002b: 8). In transitioning to middle-class values, the political legacy of Italian American radicalism and its connection to working-class and ethnic origins has been replaced by conservatism, republicanism, and patriotism. In light of that, authors like Louise DeSalvo, Mary Cappello, Maria DeMarco Torgovnick, Kym Ragusa and others, have tried to restore and re-inscribe the history of Italian Americans by making use of literary devices, thematizing assimilation, heritage, ancestry, identity. As Giunta writes, "while ethnicity does not define or generate politics, identity is often understood to lie at the intersection of mutable cultural constructs such as gender, ethnicity, race, nationality, class, sexual orientation, and disability" (Giunta, 2002b: 22). Re-claiming identity thus generates politics.

Through her long path of memoir-writing that includes *Vertigo*, *Breathless. An Asthma Journal* (1997), and *Writing as a Way of Healing* (2000), Louise DeSalvo came to theorize her own conception of memoir and its impact on the material texture of daily

life. The author rejects the idea of a recovery narrative, where the "perniciousness of the word recovery" lies in the fact that "it suggests, too, that people are personally responsible for curing their illnesses. I realize that I am against the neatness and the lie of what I suddenly recognize as the comforting arc of the recovery narrative" (DeSalvo in Romeo, 2005: 152). Therefore, the writer proposes the concept of "healing narrative", in which there is no ultimate purpose of getting cured, questioning the idea of an illness as something extraneous to one's body that should be eradicated. For DeSalvo writing is not only a path for self-understanding through art-making, but also a political project:

> Writing testimony, to be sure, means that we tell our stories. But it also means that we no longer allow ourselves to be silenced or allow others to speak for our experience. Writing to heal, then, making that writing public, as I see it, is the most important emotional, psychological, artistic, and political project of our time. (DeSalvo in Romeo, 2005: 160)

By rejecting the idea of a cohesive reconstruction of one's life that aims at a resolution, memoirs do not stage the resurrection of the subject, nor they restore a new, fixed identity; rather, writing memoirs is concerned with producing texts that embody and hold on interrupted memories, thus giving voice to those who are traditionally relegated to the margins and do not adhere to a self-made success narrative. According to Romeo, the political character of memoir-writing resides precisely in the necessity of challenging and re-defining the concept of personal success (ibid.). The only achievement here is to re-claim one's right to speak, re-appropriating authorship and the connection between personal experience and collective history.

This stands as particularly relevant considering that, despite social mobility and their status as white ethnics, Italian Americans continued to represent a large portion of high school drop-outs, according to one study conducted in New York in the 2000s (Giunta 2002b: 21). The linkage between class and education has been widely explored through the analysis of Louise DeSalvo's *Vertigo*, but the material impact that *Vertigo*, and memoirs in general, have in pedagogical environments is the subject of Edvige Giunta's *Dire l'Indicibile: il memoir delle autrici italo-americane* (2002).

Both *Vertigo* and *Breathless*, along with other memoirs such as Audre Lorde's *The Cancer Journal* (1980), Maya Angelou's *I Know where the Caged Birds Sing* (1970), and Nancy Mairs's *Waist-High in the World: Life among the Non-Disabled* (1996) were part of a course on memoirs and memoir-writing that Giunta taught at New Jersey City

University. After teaching in an American university where most of the students came from private schools, Giunta experienced teaching to a diverse group of students, in terms of ethnicity, age, nationality, language, and who mostly came from working-class families. Furthermore, these students were not full-time students since they had to work and/or provide and take care of their relatives besides studying. Throughout this journey, Giunta cooperated with Italian American writers such as Nancy Caronia, Rosette Capotorto, Maria Mazziotti Gillian, and Louise DeSalvo, who held seminars in her classes and offered valuable insights. DeSalvo herself started a class of memoir-writing at Hunter College in New York at the beginning of the 1990s, and her experience has proven to be fundamental in the elaboration of Giunta's creative-writing classes. Having working-class backgrounds, Giunta argues that the students were not only unused to writing about themselves, but they also had no familiarity with writings that described working-class environments and lives (Giunta, 2002a: 15). Significantly, Giunta selected books from authors of working-class backgrounds only, some of them from New Jersey, whose texts were focused on the rehabilitation of their family memories and traumas, especially concerning ethnic and class discrimination. In addition, students were encouraged to write a journal throughout the course and to compose their own memoir at the end of it. Of course, the process was not uncomplicated. The scholar recalls that when she first introduced the course, two of her students dropped out after a couple of weeks, and throughout the years similar episodes recurred. This evidences that sometimes students were just not ready to dig into the past, or the emotional/practical work required too much effort. Indeed, besides the emotional difficulties, students struggled to find the time for journaling within their daily routines, sometimes lacking privacy at home, technological resources (laptops mostly), and physical energy. What is more, most of them were bilingual or trilingual, thus writing might become a toil. In describing her relationship to writing, Miranda Chávez writes:

> I formally learned about the process of writing as an undergraduate student in a small, elite, private, liberal arts college located in Western Massachusetts that was incredibly patient with me. I spent endless hours sitting alongside my writing instructor during those college years, meticulously going over my drafts with Professor Levinson as he pointed out everything from basic grammar errors to opportunities for deeper analysis. Four years of intense writing instruction and mentoring, however, can only begin to make a small dent after all those years of being under-schooled. As a result, writing is not a pleasant task for me. I struggle greatly with it while I kick, scream, and

> procrastinate. Writing, in my opinion, feels more like an unruly younger sibling than a best friend you love to hang with. (Chávez 2012: 336)

In light of this, Giunta opted for an interdisciplinary and trans-medial approach as a way to overcome linguistic difficulties by including art and photography in memoirs, as well as providing the students with the opportunity to get published or to expose their work outside the class.

Hence, Giunta values memoirs of ethnic and working-class women writers as particularly important in this context of education, as they are ways of providing the students with models that might resonate and lead to self-reflection. Among the reasons why *Vertigo* is a key tool for education, especially when teaching to students who come from historically marginalized communities, Giunta mentions the importance placed on memory, the emphasis on class and gender issues, the accurate description of Italian American communities and neighborhoods after the Second World War, the relationship of solidarity among women, the way it addresses mental health and abuses (Giunta, 2002a: 33). As Chávez argues, addressing such narratives "serves to further emphasize the complex relationships between the personal and the political as they pertain to the formation of student ideologies in the construction of their individual beliefs and actions toward education" (Chávez, 2012: 335). To conclude, literature, and especially memoirs are central to interrogating the students' relationship with culture, both as a practice of self-writing and as testimonies that provide a different narrative on the collective history of various ethnic groups, thus placing the emphasis on their autoethnographic aspect.

CONCLUSION

By analyzing Italian American women's memoirs, this research aimed at discussing how the significance of the term "heritage" was reframed in the experience of Italian Americans of the third and fourth generation through the act of writing.

As I have analyzed, for third- and fourth-generation Italian American women writers, the connection with their ancestors' culture and country of origin does not come in the form of immediate cultural and chronological proximity. Therefore, their ethnic identity acquires new, different meanings. The authors that I have focused on re-appropriate the political quality of their ethnic identity, reframing it as a positionality and a form of textual affiliation. This allows them to imagine a possible genealogy that retains the ties with their ancestors' culture and overcomes the lack of an established tradition of Italian American women writers. As I have argued, Italian American women writers have often claimed a kinship with authors from other ethnic backgrounds or minority literatures, thus moving beyond a strict notion of ethnic affiliation within the literary space. This has also emphasized the presence of recurring themes in the political and literary choices of authors who locate themselves at the margin of the cultural and literary canon.

In the memoirs of Louise DeSalvo and Mary Cappello, new interpretations of ethnicity as a form of textual affiliation are evident in the way in which the text becomes the site for the articulation of the dialectics between heritage and genealogy. The process of resemanticization of the word "ethnicity" goes through the exploration of the authors' personal archives, which are incorporated in their memoirs, thus highlighting the value of personal and collective memory.

In *Vertigo*, De Salvo merges the creative reconstruction of her life with the analysis of photographs that portray her mother and sister in order to come to terms with the trauma of their loss. By addressing themes of depression, abuse, education, and class-related issues, DeSalvo manages to locate the experience of the women in her family in the complex interrelation of gender, class, and ethnicity. Indeed, DeSalvo contextualizes the spatial dislocation that haunts her mother and sister in the lack of opportunities that they had as ethnic, working-class women. In light of this, the author tries to investigate the meanings entailed in her experience as an Italian American writer and scholar who

managed to pursue an education and cross the boundaries of ethnic and class-determinism. In writing *Vertigo*, DeSalvo eventually manages to fabricate her own personal narrative and to reflect on the role of becoming a writer and a teacher with an ethnic, working-class background.

Compared to *Vertigo, Night Bloom* has substantial differences in the way in which the author reflects on the concepts of heritage and genealogy. In *Night Bloom*, Cappello re-appropriates her personal and bequeathed memories through the creative recovery of her mother's and grandfather's journals, poems, and letters, whose excerpts are included in the memoir. Therefore, the body of the text appears as composed by different memories that are put into dialogue through the interplay of analogies and echoes. The author interprets these documents as signs of her mother's and grandfather's desire to carve out their own creative space and establishes a new kinship with her forebears that goes beyond blood ties. In retrieving these texts, Cappello had the opportunity to reflect on Italian American immigrants' experience of geographical and linguistic dislocation, as well as on the impact of the patriarchal structure of Italian and American societies on women's lives. Therefore, in including these writings within her memoir, Cappello manages to restore a sense of continuity across the generations of her family.

To conclude, by analyzing the memoirs of Louise DeSalvo and Mary Cappello, this research aimed at investigating the use of memoir as a form of self-writing that, through the exploration of personal memories, discusses the intertwining categories of gender, class, and ethnicity in the experience of Italian American women. Specifically, in this research, memoir was analyzed as a form of autoethnographic personal narrative, insofar as it includes reflections on Italian American identity produced by members of that specific cultural background. The ultimate purpose of this type of writing is opposing stereotypical narratives, in order to re-write the collective history of a community whose identity had been fabricated from the outside. In this context, Italian American women writers do not treat ethnicity as a distant memory or a mere cultural fabrication, but rather they give a political connotation to their ethnic identity and reclaim it as a specific positionality. In this context, textual and visual personal archives play a key role as they function as important documents that allow the authors to ground their experiences in socio-cultural phenomena, namely Italian American migration, upward-mobility, and the dispersion of memory across generations.

SUMMARY IN ITALIAN

Alla luce di un crescente interesse verso l'esperienza della migrazione italiana, in particolare da una prospettiva di genere, numerose pubblicazioni si sono concentrate su uno studio approfondito della storia e delle rivendicazioni politiche delle lavoratrici italiane negli Stati Uniti nella prima metà del Novecento. Ciò è testimoniato ad esempio dal recente volume *Talking to the Girls. Intimate and Political Essays on the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory Fire* (2022), curato da Edvige Giunta e Mary Anne Trasciatti, ma anche dall'influenza di questi studi su testi letterari, come nel caso di *Missitalia* (2024) di Claudia Durastanti.

A partire dalla storia dell'immigrazione italiana negli gli Stati Uniti e dalla riscoperta di una coscienza di classe tra lɜ lavoratorɜ italoamericanɜ, questa ricerca ha analizzato il concetto di eredità nella sua accezione politica, culturale, di classe, attraverso due memoir scritti alla fine degli anni Novanta, ovvero *Vertigo: A Memoir* (1996) di Louise DeSalvo e *Night Bloom: An Italian American Life* (1998) di Mary Cappello. Al centro di queste opere c'è l'esplorazione da parte delle autrici delle loro memorie personali e familiari, nonché l'intersezione tra le categorie di genere, classe ed etnia. DeSalvo e Cappello cercano infatti di riappropriarsi della propria identità di autrici provenienti da una famiglia operaia di discendenza italiana attraverso l'analisi della storia della propria famiglia, dell'infanzia, e dell'età adulta. In questo contesto, l'uso degli archivi privati, sia fotografici che testuali, e l'inclusione di questi all'interno dei memoir, ha permesso alle autrici di ricostruire e re-interpretare la memoria.

A ben vedere, nel contesto degli Italian American Studies, il lavoro sugli archivi privati e sulle memorie collettive è stato fondamentale tanto in un progetto di ricostruzione letteraria del passato, quanto negli sviluppi della storiografia recente sulle comunità italoamericane. Per questo motivo, il primo capitolo è interamente dedicato a fornire una panoramica sulla storia della migrazione e delle comunità italoamericane negli Stati Uniti. Dal punto di vista storiografico, ho evidenziato come il lavoro d'archivio si sia rivelato fondamentale in particolare per il recupero della storia dei movimenti operai italoamericani, soprattutto quelli femminili, della prima metà del '900.

Nel secondo capitolo ho analizzato come le donne italoamericane siano state per lungo tempo al margine sia del canone letterario americano, sia del canone specifico della

letteratura italoamericana. Ho affrontato questi temi introducendo brevemente la formazione del concetto di *ethnicity* e di *ethnic* literature, per poi concentrarmi ampiamente sulla formazione di una tradizione di scrittrici italoamericane. In questo caso, il concetto di genealogia è stato fondamentale per proporre un'idea di tradizione letteraria che non rientra nel paradigma del canone. Partendo dal concetto foucaultiano di genealogia e dagli studi femministi, ho sottolineato come il "fare genealogie" permetta di trovare echi e risonanze politiche e letterarie nell'esperienza di altre autrici e in voci storicamente marginalizzate.

Infine, nel terzo capitolo, ho analizzato come lo spazio creativo della letteratura diventi uno spazio di resistenza alla marginalizzazione, al senso di perdita e disorientamento che domina i ricordi di DeSalvo e Cappello. Per queste autrici, la letteratura diventa un luogo in cui potersi riappropriare dei loro ricordi e della loro identità italoamericana.

Capitolo 1: Attraversare l'Atlantico

Tra il 1860 e il 2011 più di ventinove milioni di italiani lasciarono il proprio paese. Di questi, oltre 4,5 milioni arrivarono negli Stati Uniti tra il 1881 e il 1920. La maggioranza deglli immigrati consisteva di *labor immigrants*, cioè di persone arrivate in America per lavorare, guadagnare e poi tornare in patria. A causa di alti livelli di analfabetismo, li immigrati italiani hanno lasciato relativamente pochi documenti della loro esperienza, la maggior parte dei quali è scritta in italiano. Ciò ha avuto conseguenze notevoli sui discorsi e sulla rappresentazione che riguardava le soggettività e le comunità italoamericane, poiché la loro identità sociale e culturale venne progressivamente costruita dall'esterno. Sin dagli anni '40 del Novecento, li storici dell'immigrazione italoamericana hanno individuato le lacune e i *bias* degli studi precedenti, cercando di decostruire le narrazioni stereotipate attraverso un approccio *bottom-up* che problematizza la rappresentazione tradizionale.

Primo di questi stereotipi è il dato che l'immigrazione provenisse solo dalle regioni del Sud Italia. In realtà l'emigrazione fu un fenomeno che interessò tutte le regioni, a partire da quelle settentrionali tra il 1876 e il 1900, raggiungendo il suo apice tra il 1900 e il 1920, coinvolgendo regioni meridionali. Tra le ragioni di queste massicce ondate migratorie, le difficoltà economiche e le persecuzioni per motivi politici ebbero un ruolo fondamentale. Sottoposti a una forte oppressione politica, contadini, operai, socialisti e

anarchici lasciarono il Paese, portando con sé le proprie ideologie. Inoltre, fu all'indomani dell'Unità d'Italia che si consolidarono le differenze tra Nord e Sud. Queste premesse, radicate nella storia dell'Italia, sono cruciali per interpretare gli sviluppi della vita degli italiani negli Stati Uniti e la loro marginalizzazione fino agli Quaranta e Cinquanta. In particolare, sono necessarie per comprendere come lɜ studiosɜ americanɜ del primo Novecento formularono il concetto di inferiorità razziale degli Italiani provenienti dal Sud. Quando lɜ immigratɜ italianɜ sbarcarono negli Stati Uniti alla fine del XIX secolo le politiche di segregazione razziale e il genocidio delle popolazioni indigene erano già elementi costitutivi della storia del Nord America. Ciò contribuì alla creazione di un clima discriminatorio durante l'epoca delle migrazioni di massa, testimoniato in particolare dalla fondazione della Commissione Dillingham nel 1907.

Una seconda narrazione da confutare è quella che riguarda l'esperienza delle donne italoamericane negli Stati Uniti. La maggior parte degli studi storici prodotti negli Stati Uniti fornisce un ritratto fuorviante di queste donne e lavoratrici, spesso descritte come isolate, passive, e che si basa su una nozione di assoluta arretratezza culturale dell'Italia. Tuttavia, tra gli anni Ottanta e i primi anni Duemila, lɜ storicɜ italianɜ e americanɜ hanno iniziato a colmare le lacune storiografiche, mostrando come forme di solidarietà, coscienza di classe, e militanza fossero in realtà presenti nelle comunità di lavoratrici italoamericane. Un esempio è il Gruppo Anarchico Louise Michel, oppure il Club Avanti. In particolare, questi studi hanno mostrato come l'invisibilizzazione delle soggettività delle lavoratrici italiane e italoamericane derivi da un'interpretazione liberale e anglo-centrica del concetto di emancipazione. La specificità dell'esperienza di queste soggettività risiede proprio nella loro dimensione collettiva e non individuale. Ciò significa che per le lavoratrici di discendenza italiana, la lotta per l'affermazione dei propri diritti in quanto donne e operaie aveva come scopo un miglioramento della vita non solo individuale, ma che si estendeva alle famiglie, allɜ figliɜ, e alla comunità.

Nel secondo dopoguerra, la vita delle comunità italoamericane cambiò profondamente. Dopo il 1952, gli ostacoli alla naturalizzazione scomparvero, e lɜ italoamericanɜ acquisirono lentamente lo status di persone bianche, seppur con forti ambiguità. Tuttavia, lɜ italianɜ vennero rapidamente associatɜ alla criminalità, un pregiudizio che si era consolidato con l'uccisione di David Hennessy nel 1890 e i linciaggi che ne seguirono, oltre alle agitazioni della classe operaia e le *Red Scare policies*. La

percezione della bianchezza dellɜ italianɜ è legata soprattutto al progressivo spostamento verso i sobborghi che cominciò nel secondo dopoguerra e si intensificò negli anni Sessanta. La coesistenza di diversi gruppi etnici nello stesso quartiere contribuì infatti a complicare le dinamiche di razzializzazione, arrivando fino al caso dell'omicidio di Yusef Hawkins nel 1989 a Bensonhurst.

In generale, per tutta la seconda metà del XX secolo, lɜ italoamericanɜ furono protagonisti di un processo di stratificazione culturale che vide la progressiva frammentazione della differenza etnica per riproporsi nei discorsi di classe, di eredità culturale, e di distanza generazionale.

Capitolo 2: Oltre il canone

Alla luce dei processi di acculturazione e di stratificazione culturale analizzati nel capitolo precedente, è fondamentale domandarsi cosa significhi per lɜ autorɜ di terza e quarta generazione scrivere di eredità culturale, di Italianità e di *Americanness*. Se nel contesto dell'autobiografia di immigrazione della prima metà del secolo, la "scrittura etnica" implicava una certa forma e un certo contenuto, in che modo lɜ nuovɜ autorɜ italoamericanɜ si sono riappropriatɜ della propria eredità e identità?

Per rispondere a queste domande, lo sviluppo degli Italian American Studies e il riconoscimento di un canone letterario italoamericano sono stati due elementi cruciali. L'analisi del concetto di canone è fondamentale negli studi letterari, poiché produce una riflessione su ciò che è visibile e invisibilizzato, ciò che lascia tracce tangibili e ciò che è ancora escluso dalla codificazione culturale.

Una spinta decisiva agli studi sulla letteratura italoamericana venne data nel 1993 dalla pubblicazione dell'articolo di Gay Talese "Where Are the Italian-American Novelists?" *nel New York Times Book Review*. In questo articolo, Talese rifletteva sull'assenza di una tradizione chiara di scrittori italoamericani, nonché sulla mancanza di apertura e riconoscimento da parte degli ambienti intellettuali *mainstream*. Diversi studiosi come Fred Gardaphé e Robert Viscusi sostengono non tanto la canonizzazione di determinati testi, quanto la necessità di includere storie e racconti sull'identità italoamericana nel bagaglio di conoscenze sugli Stati Uniti per come esistono ora. Questo contribuisce anche a una ridefinizione della categoria dell'etnia che rifletta l'esperienza delle terze e delle quarte generazioni, superando il paradigma della cultura di discendenza

e di acquisizione, per ricollocarsi negli studi sulla memoria, sulla eredità culturale, e sull'identità ibrida.

Nelle opere delle autrici italoamericane, la questione del genere interviene fortemente sull'elaborazione dell'identità italiana, producendo testi che divergono dal canone della tradizione. L'esperienza delle autrici italoamericane e delle protagoniste dei loro testi si colloca nell'intersezione tra etnia, classe e genere, considerando la loro posizionalità di donne provenienti da un contesto working-class ed etnico, immerse in una cultura patriarcale che appartiene tanto agli Stati Uniti che all'Italia, seppur in modi diversi.

Se già la tradizione consolidata di autori italoamericani si muoveva in una scrittura che superava i confini nazionale, la letteratura delle scrittrici italoamericane può essere analizzata come un caso che sfida l'idea convenzionale di canone letterario, tanto nel suo carattere nazionale che patrilineare. Per queste ragioni, ritengo che la definizione stessa di "canone letterario" non si applichi al corpus di testi prodotti dalle autrici italoamericane, e che questo dovrebbe essere compreso in un nuovo concetto di genealogia letteraria.

Tale affermazione è motivata anche da ragioni storiche. Fino agli anni Ottanta, infatti, non si è riscontrato uno studio sistematico della letteratura delle autrici di discendenza italiana, senza contare che un'operazione consistente di recupero dei testi delle donne italoamericane e delle immigrate italiane è solo agli inizi. Il primo grande tentativo di raccogliere e antologizzare le opere in circolazione delle autrici italoamericane arrivò solo nel 1985, con la pubblicazione del volume *The Dream Book: An Anthology of Writings by Italian American Wome*n di Helen Barolini.

Questo ha comportato per lungo tempo l'assenza sostanziale di una tradizione a cui fare riferimento per narrare la propria esperienza. Le autrici hanno affrontato questa assenza letteraria sia attraverso il recupero dei testi dimenticati, sia intessendo una rete di relazioni e di echi letterari con altre autrici di provenienza working-class e non WASP. Creare genealogie significa dunque valicare i confini dei discorsi di appartenenza etnica, e ripensare la propria etnicità come una posizionalità dalla quale si possono instaurare dei rapporti di solidarietà e riconoscimento attraverso il testo.

Per le autrici italoamericane, creare delle genealogie attraverso il testo ha significato anche esplorare le proprie memorie e le proprie storie famigliari per

rintracciare punti di connessione con un passato che sembra ormai irrecuperabile e difficile da comprendere. In questo senso, il memoir si configura come uno dei generi più interessanti nella letteratura delle autrici italoamericane. Il memoir implica necessariamente un dialogo con il passato, che si articola sia a livello personale che collettivo. Da un lato scrivere di sé ha dato la possibilità alle scrittrici di terza e quarta generazione di esplorare l'eredità della migrazione, incarnata dall'esperienza dei loro nonni e antenati, e la loro provenienza di classe. D'altra parte, alcune di queste autrici continuano ad affrontare e tematizzare l'etnicità, ma da una prospettiva completamente diversa, quella di *white ethnics*. In questo caso, l'etnicità diventa oggetto di un'indagine creativa e politica che tenta di immaginare uno spazio in cui l'identità non venga né travolta dagli stereotipi, né tenuta come un segreto di cui vergognarsi.

Proprio per questa relazione con la memoria personale e collettiva, i memoir delle autrici italoamericane possono, in alcuni casi, essere interpretati come opere autoetnografiche, in quanto permettono di operare una riscrittura della propria identità per decostruire narrazioni stereotipate. La scrittura di sé, sia nella forma letteraria del memoir che in quella antropologica dell'autoetnografia, produce infatti delle riflessioni sulla cultura e sulla (auto)rappresentazione.

Capitolo 3: Attraversare le soglie dell'identità

Tra gli anni Ottanta e Novanta, il memoir si consolida come uno dei generi più prolifici negli Stati Uniti. Questa proliferazione ha coinciso con un cambiamento di paradigma per le autrici di origine italiana, che ora possono finalmente fare riferimento ad una tradizione più solida di scrittrici e accademiche italoamericane. Queste autrici hanno contribuito a creare gli strumenti critici adeguati ad analizzare l'esperienza di donne di discendenza italiana e di famiglia operaia.

Vertigo (1996) di Louise DeSalvo (1942-2018) e *Night Bloom. An Italian American Life* (1998) di Mary Cappello (1960-) sono due memoir in cui le autrici riflettono sul modo in cui la memoria e la propria provenienza di classe hanno influito nel loro percorso come accademiche. *Vertigo* è particolarmente rilevante in questa analisi, poiché l'immenso lavoro di DeSalvo sulle opere e sulla figura di Virginia Woolf pervade la maggior parte dei ricordi presenti nel libro. La figura di Virginia Woolf è infatti centrale in *Vertigo* per indagare il rapporto tra scrittura e guarigione, oltre che per esplorare i temi del segreto, della famiglia, della vergogna e del privilegio della scrittura.

Nei memoir di Louise DeSalvo e Mary Cappello, le riflessioni sulla propria posizionalità e sull'intersezione tra genere, etnia, e classe avviene attraverso l'esplorazione di archivi familiari di tipo fotografico e testuale, riflettendo così sul carattere politico della memoria. Recuperando e interrogando testi particolari come lettere, diari, poesie e fotografie, i memoir di DeSalvo e Cappello possono essere interpretati come delle narrazioni autoetnografiche, in quanto questi elementi fungono da documenti preziosi per produrre una riflessione sulla cultura e sulla rappresentazione di sé.

In *Vertigo*, l'inizio del memoir coincide con la decisione di DeSalvo di aprire le scatole che contengono fotografie e oggetti appartenenti a lei e a sua sorella. Queste due azioni sono quindi indissolubilmente legate tra loro, poiché equivalgono ad un'immersione verbale e visiva nella memoria. In particolare, l'interpretazione delle fotografie che ritraggono sua madre è fondamentale per DeSalvo, poiché in esse cerca di identificare i segni della depressione che la affliggeva, e il modo in cui questa era connessa con la sua esperienza di donna italoamericana. Affrontando temi come la depressione, l'abuso, il rapporto tra classe ed istruzione, DeSalvo riesce a comprendere l'esperienza delle donne nella sua famiglia attraverso una prospettiva intersezionale. Alla luce di ciò, l'autrice cerca poi di indagare i significati impliciti nel proprio percorso di scrittrice e studiosa italoamericana che è riuscita ad oltrepassare i confini del determinismo etnico e di classe, cercando di decostruire una narrazione di *self-made success*.

Rispetto a *Vertigo*, *Night Bloom* presenta differenze sostanziali nel modo in cui Mary Cappello riflette sul concetto di eredità e genealogia. In *Night Bloom* Mary Cappello si confronta con un archivio prettamente testuale, che consiste nel diario di suo nonno, John Petracca, e nelle poesie e nelle lettere di sua madre, Rosemary Petracca. La possibilità di recuperare tale materiale, soprattutto quello appartenuto al nonno, è fortemente determinante per le tematiche che l'autrice affronta. Nello specifico, i diari di John Petracca sono un documento prezioso che attesta la vita e le condizioni lavorative della prima generazione di immigrati italiani. Mary Cappello mette quindi in dialogo diversi elementi del suo archivio familiare, così da creare una parentela basata sulla passione per la scrittura. Quest'ultima non è solo una forma di resistenza al ritmo incessante del lavoro, ma anche un modo di esprimere la dimensione politica della

quotidianità e del privato. Nel recuperare questi testi, Cappello ha avuto l'opportunità di riflettere sull'esperienza di dislocazione geografica e linguistica deglꞎ immigratꞎ italoamericanꞎ, nonché sull'impatto della struttura patriarcale della società italiana e americana sulla vita delle donne. Incorporando questi elementi all'interno del memoir, Cappello riesce a ripristinare un senso di continuità tra le generazioni della sua famiglia.

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