



## ***Failed Family Sagas: Male Lineage in Italian/American Literature and Literary Tradition***

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### **ABSTRACT**

The aim of this article is to examine how failed family sagas have defined early Italian/American culture and female literary tradition through Julia Savarese's *The Weak and the Strong* (1952) and Marion Benasutti's *No Steady Job for Papa* (1966). The idea of failed (female) lineages is articulated in a thematic sense that is overtly expressed in the depiction of both families in the texts. These convey a doomed plot which matches the coarse realities of immigration and the depression, as well as reflects the boundaries represented by the intersecting limitations of embodying racial and gender difference. Particularly, the article focuses on how male lineage is paramount in the novels and define Italian/American culture. In this sense, the analysis also contends that, as the authors themselves also encountered similar limitations, the lost genealogy of these early precursors has equally endangered the Italian/American female literary tradition.

**KEYWORDS:** Italian/American literature; Family saga; Male line; Female genealogy; Gender; Ethnicity

No machine can rob them of their work / No one wishes to take their places / Their hours cannot be shortened / Their wages cannot be lowered

—Rosa Marinoni, “Unemployed”,—Julia Lisella, “Modernism, Maternity and the Radical Woman Poet”

### **1. LITERARY GENEALOGIES**

As feminist and Italian/American scholarship have already addressed, literary (matri)lineage proves important for women writers to both reclaim and question tradition (Gardaphe, 1996; Hirsch, 1989; Mannino 1997; Walker, 1984; Wall, 2005). For instance,

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Edvige Giunta notes that the use of the grandmother figure is a “recurring device that Italian/American writers employ to mediate their relationship to ethnicity, as well as the quest for female selfhood” (1998: 428). For this reason, through a generational and genealogical perspective that the study of the family saga permits, this article explores the representation of failed lineages through Julia Savarese’s *The Weak and the Strong* (1952) and Marion Benasutti’s *No Steady Job for Papa* (1966)<sup>1</sup>, which illustrate the double bind of how gender and ethnic prejudice have hampered the Italian/American community. The analysis focuses on the recurrence of a prevailing male line, which captures the governing narratives of failed genealogies exemplified in the characters of the novels and the authors to be discussed. By further drawing on the thematic trope of depression, which references the historical era as well as the settings depicted, the comparison aims to show how both the Italian/American cultural and literary tradition as a whole are rendered as seriously endangered by those early rejections.

Mary Frances Pipino has identified Benasutti’s *No Steady Job for Papa* as a literary precursor of later key Italian/American writers such as Helen Barolini, Dorothy Bryant and Carole Maso, not only because of the dual treatment of gender and ethnicity, but in her postmodern anticipation too (2000: 9). This critical recognition serves to bring attention to the difficulty of forging a tradition, particularly a female one, if these early efforts were hampered by gender prejudice, as they were:

Even works that have purported to examine the Italian American literary tradition (or lack of it) have ignored women’s voices. For example, Rose Basile Green’s study [...] examines over sixty novelists—only four of whom are women. Gay Talese, in his essay examining the curious ‘silence’ of the Italian-American novelist, refers exclusively to male novelists and theorists in answering these question. (12)

This can be fully examined by analyzing the prevalence of the male lineage in texts as well as authors, since the literary tradition missed both women writers Benasutti and Savarese. Following Cheryl Wall, the metaphor of *the line* is a critical tool that can be applied both to issues of genealogy in fiction and to intersectional demands within a literary tradition. In *Worrying the Line: Black Women Writers, Lineage, and Literary Tradition*, Chall proposes a reconfiguration of an identity trope, that of genealogy, which points to affirmation of community and tradition through affiliation and interconnection, but not in the linear fashion of the characteristic ecologies of belonging. Rather, *the line* is conceived of as distinctly troubled or *worried*. Wall discusses *the line* as an apt metaphor not only to explore matters of genealogy in African/American texts, but also as a suitable instrument for its “potential to look at literary traditions that are intertextually codified or signified” (2005: 11). She examines both the possibilities and limits of looking at literature and a cultural tradition through a filial lens, particularly in the African/American case, as this community has generally been presumed a racial identity. As a consequence, Wall remarks, “too often that common racial classification

has veiled differences of gender, class, ethnicity and sex preferences” (11).

Particularly, the literary fates of Benasutti and Savarese can be similarly read in the context and the critique of a tradition which is liable to be *worried*. We can therefore develop a parallel analysis of a troubled or ‘failed’ line in these early authors of the Italian/American literary tradition, as well as in the characters they create in their family sagas. In light of Western literary history, Bona situates Benasutti in the ‘eternal’ dilemma for women writers, having to choose between family and creativity (1999: 209). Benasutti belongs to a tradition of *female* writers who are ‘beginners’ in the profession inasmuch as the fact that she only “produced only one novel in her lifetime”, makes Bona speculate that this is “perhaps mute testimony to a life in which family matters took priority over artistic production” (1999: 50). In other words, this scarce visibility is understood as a distinctively gendered literary production in which women are culturally demanded to choose family rather than writing. In addition, when women do write, they are also more likely to engage in certain ‘female’ topics such as the family, as Benasutti illustrates in the dedication “To [her] Family” at the beginning of the novel. It provides further information about the production and reception of her book: it is truth-based, but Benasutti excuses poetic license derived from her own will and especially from the inevitable “exigencies of time and memory” (1966: 244). She thanks a professor who, on encouraging her to write about what she knew, prompted her in the validity of her creative and cultural heritage, family matters, which as she answered then, was “all [she knew]” (244).

More paradigmatically, Savarese did not even have the chance to fully develop a family saga, as she intended, with a trilogy about the Dante family. According to Carla Simonini, despite critical acclaim upon publication, *The Weak and the Strong* was “never reprinted and the author never published the subsequent installments she references in calling the novel the first in a trilogy of stories about her family of protagonists” (2010: 228). Her publisher did not allow Savarese to complete the trilogy, as it provided an “unusual picture of Italian American commonplaces” in terms of food, faith, and family (238). It also challenged the “symbolic confluence” of what was considered the urban experience of Italian Americans (229); unlike other novels, it did not depict urban locals (like the cornerstones Pietro Di Donato’s *Christ in Concrete* or Garibaldi Lapolla’s *Gran Genaro*), nor was even set in Little Italy, but in an ethnically mixed enclave, in Yorkville, not generally inhabited by Italians. Indeed, there is no place reference in the text, a fact that was also deemed original in a review by Marcus Lee Hansen, an influential historian who praised this selection of setting and the decision to represent a pan-ethnic-working class community (229).

By contrast, it is revealing that a male contemporary, Pietro Di Donato, managed to have his trilogy published and reprinted since then, whereas Savarese’s scant work today is hardly available<sup>2</sup>. Critic William Boelhower (1991) retrieved Di Donato’s trilogy as the Italian/American essential in the ‘immigrant genre’ he studies in a number of ethnic texts, and American letters have finally granted *Christ in Concrete* a place in many literature syllabuses

as a key proletarian novel (Falco, 2006). Nevertheless, Savarese's text is not easily accessed<sup>3</sup>. Her case, however, is far from unique as many Italian/American women did not pass beyond their first novel due to gender as well as ethnic prejudice (Barolini, 1985; Mannino, 2000). Barolini reads Savarese's work in light of the double marginalization of early writers such as Antonia Lapolla and Mari Tomasi, who also counted one work as overall literary production, relating this to their shared depiction of unconventional woman characters: "[c]ritics called her strong descriptions of poverty and the Depression era 'bleak,' 'tough,' 'unrelenting,' and—the ultimate pejorative!—'humorless.' Of course, for an established male writer like Di Donato, or woman writer like Jean Rhys, or Flannery O'Connor, that kind of unsentimentality would be *verismo* of the highest order" (1985: 16-17). At best, Pipino similarly notes, that the "reality of production" for many of the early writers was "meager" is due to limiting consideration of their writing as "local color" (2000: 65).

## 2. FAILED DYNASTIES AND DEPRESSION NARRATIVES

Having considered the cultural and literary context, it can be argued that these varied constraints faced by the authors are also reflected in their textual production. In *Steady* we are presented with a 'typical' picture attesting to U.S. industrial expansion and immigration phases, through the social description of a mining town. It also depicts the smaller class and gender economies governing spatial distribution and the use of such setting, which is keenly perceived by the narrator Rosemary. We are firstly informed about the composition of the immigrant population, Italians and Swedes, where group distinctions are far from transparent, as Rosemary is careful to detail: "Mostly Italians 'from the north.' The ones 'from the south' were practically enemy aliens" (Benasutti, 1966: 3). This is not a small difference. This outline is not only emphasized by the way in which her own family strongly abides by such prejudice, but is also reflective of specific settlement and ethnic development patterns of Italian immigration in the U.S., which the narrator also explains: "I was nine years old and in my world the north and the south of Italy were even less homogenized in America than they had been in the Old country, where the provinces were apart and stayed apart and the people never intermingled as they did here" (5). Intra-ethnic difference thus complicates class and racial conflict and identity; this description does not substantially differ from the comment on the situation of miner Tulio: by marrying the superintendent's daughter, he is shown to be breaking class and ethnic lines, a move which is resented by her father, as "Tulio was a laborer in the mines, a foreigner" (6).

The second chapter, "Bring Shoes", moves back to 1892, not simply to contextualize the narrative after the family's entrance into the country through the mythical Ellis Island, but to historicize it. This arrival is rendered in a critical manner by the intended allusion to constitutional rights which the immigrant is invited to partake (in the line of Emma Lazarus's

welcome poem), “that doorway to Freedom, Wealth, and the Right to Pursue Happiness” (8), and by bringing attention to the key episode that genders (im)migration. On the one hand, it captures the delayed and dependent female migration<sup>4</sup>, as this corresponds to a precise historical era “when its doors were opened to the European immigrant. Mamma came much later, in her bare feet” (8). On the other hand, it registers Italian women’s immigrant status through the further passive and objectifying process of the historical phenomenon which reduces them to the condition of “bride-pictures:”

In those days brides were often chosen from photographs, sent by eager mammas to the men who had gone to America to seek their fortunes. But my father, who had always had an eye for beautiful women, was not going to buy a pig in a poke. He wanted to see for himself. One day, shortly after his arrival in Tirol, he and Mamma met, although, to hear Papa tell it, all had been shrewdly arranged—by him. (9)

In this respect, the novel is not simply limited to registering gender regimes of mobility or migration, such as the notion of ‘chain migrations’ that is used by sociology and migration literature in order to consider the role or importance of local bonds, which is why Giovanni/Papa had migrated following the help of a relative already in the host country. The concept is also frequently employed to refer to family settlement following the breadwinner, sometimes taking place after several years as is Mamma’s case<sup>5</sup>. *Steady* additionally inscribes the intense patriarchal control and dependence that accounts for such differential patterns of migration. The male role of breadwinner is so prevailing that the family continues resettling in different parts of the country trying to find a job for Papa. As he fails to succeed in different business, the need for a steady job becomes an imperative for the whole family. Mamma and Rosemary do also work and are shown to be able to guarantee’s the family’s survival in times of crisis, although attitudes to work are clearly distinguished in the novel in terms of gender:

The boardinghouse had meant the hardest kind of drudgery for our mother. Like everything else that Papa ventured, the bakery was doomed to failure from the beginning. The beautiful ovens, so costly to build and to operate, that Papa had helped to put together of warm red bricks, were now cold, abandoned. Gone, too, the marvelous smell of newly baked bread. And it was typical of us that we did not realize, then or ever, that the essential difference between our parents was that Mamma would never, under any circumstances, have sold bread to buy hyacinth, while Papa would cheerfully have given it all away. (20)

In fact, the male line is explicitly emphasized by associating men’s work to the family’s continuity:

Papa would have been quite happy as a priest, but we liked to think that having five daughters brought him greater happiness, even though we were ready to concede that five sons might have made him happier still, in addition to solving our economic problems.

Papa said, and often, that had our mother given him five sons he might have established a Dynasty, a Big Business, and then he would not have had to work at all. (101-102)

If Papa's dynasty is failed, a female one, it is implied, is out of the question or can well be replaced by a supposedly more efficient lineage of sons. Some recognition is occasionally allowed to Mamma's decision-making capacity and influence, although her power is finally circumscribed to Papa's search for a job. Despite this seemingly unquestioned association, the text registers Mamma's awareness and possibly voiced critique of such dependence. This is shown by the contrast of the grandmother's argument, decidedly family-oriented in accordance to a woman's role, with Mamma's own reasoning about her husband's expenditure. "Long before" the father decides to try his luck in the "building boom" in Philadelphia (20), and after a break-in incident in the boarding-house injuring her,

our mother had come to the conclusion that a mining town was too harsh a place in which to raise daughters. Nonna was right, it was time to go. For Papa would never succeed as a businessman, here or anywhere. With the cheerfulness of a profligate millionaire, he would always dispense this world's goods as quickly as he acquired them. Collecting bills was an affront to his very nature. What Papa needed—and Mamma was right, as always—was a 'steady-job'—she always pronounced it as one word—and let someone else do the worrying. (23)

This problematic lack of a secure livelihood anticipates the doom that is recurrent in all the depictions of family life. Even though the novel covers a year, the repetition of the same situation over the years is expressed through the cyclic time of acceptance and the insistence with a failed future. "As spring gives way into summer", and the family moves into the Germantown, this time by Mamma's initiative, the novel leaves us with an ambiguous ending of Mamma's triumphs, as celebrated as again compromised:

Slowly, but certainly, Mamma, as well as we children, had begun to accept our way of living as a way of life, our life. Papa would never be working when the sun did not shine. He would begin to work in the spring and into the summer and, if we were very lucky and weather held, even into the fall. But in winters he would not work at all. The winters would be a quiet time, even a restful time, when we would all be together in the house where it was warm and the good smells of Mamma's cooking were everywhere. It would not be easy, and Mamma might continue to rave and rant, but it would have its compensations [...] How could you appreciate the good things of life if there were no hardships? This was the way of our life, the way it would always be. And it was as though, knowing this, we came into sunshine after rain, into quiet after strife. Fartharamore, Mamma said, since this was it, we might as well accept it with as good a grace as did Papa, who, in his innocence or in his wisdom, had accepted it long before we did. (Benasutti, 1966: 230-231)

The family's uncertain situation is expressed through the inevitability of an unbreakable cycle, which recalls the representational strategies of a sense of doom in Julia Savarese's portrayal of the Dantes' future and life in the tenements. In *WS*, the family is on the verge of perishing already at the beginning of the novel. We are informed of the degradation experienced by "[t]hree generations", which, in the "airless bedrooms" of the New York tenements, "had forgotten" their roots and almost crashed every hope (Savarese, 1952: 17). It is worth mentioning how, besides this very explicit rendition of doom, there is a sense of impending failure of the cultural community at large of which this family could be but a representative. This is expressed once again through repetition, the effect of an impending cyclic time. As the opening lines well capture,

It would always be so, Fortuna thought. People coming and going, to this place, to places like this. Why did they bother to move? Different streets, different cities, different worlds; poverty was the same all over. Its face, no matter where one found it, always bore the same wrinkles, wore the same scars. The rich roots of her Italian stock had long since lost the strong sap of wind and sun and clean countryside. (17)

Allusions to the seasons also serve to emphasize the idea of a never changing life-cycle and are a structural key element since they mark the chapters, as well as key events in the novel. The novel opens in April, 1930, when the protagonist "FORTUNA DANTE awoke" to a setting "damned to repetition" (17); "JOSEPH SAT" introduces this main character in the second chapter, where we learn more about the social context of the Depression and its effects on the family but as well as on male psychology and identity. In fact, as Joseph is in relief and the security of the male workforce is no longer a guarantee, the family's survival is seriously jeopardized and gender roles are disrupted. Chapter three "THE LONG DAYS passed" explicitly reckons the difficult transition of just one month, to be continued, as April is "dragging behind a sullen, persistent May that pledged only heat and further hunger" (63). Fourthly, "SUMMER. A season lush with the fruits and wines from the earth-but there was hunger" (93). Then, "WE ARE USED to the sorrows" (122) is repetitively matched by a seasonal comparison, since the family has also literally "become accustomed to the days of dark rain", leading to a new April, though not different from the previous year in "SPRING CAME in 1932" (136). "THE SUMMER" follows, "passed without special occasion or event, except in the death of spirit and the flight of pride, of which no true historian bothers to make note" (170). Chapter 9 "THE MUSIC is peace" signals "when Christmas came and the children [Gino and Gabriel] pretend that they did not know what the holiday was for" (225). In Chapter 10, "GABRIEL'S CLASS", January 1935, is approaching the "exciting" moment when all but Gabriele should pursue their dreams after graduation. Chapter 11, "THE WILKSES", after Joseph's death, has Gino and the baby Gloria going to live with relatives they do not remember much, Uncle Al and aunt Theresa. Finally, "TOM DRISCOLL slept" introduces Joseph's

friend, who composes the music for his funeral that he had been unable to compose in life.

The failed family saga is evident in the father's ultimate death. This doomed lineage is foreshadowed at the beginning of the novel, when Fortuna, who is pregnant, worries about the strength of her child to survive. She particularly situates this new life in the context of a decaying and inevitable fate:

She had no great desire to awaken, to be thrust irrevocably into the twisting, squeezing palm of another day [...] To look beyond the clumsy broken bed, in which she and Joseph lay, into the stupid sameness of a new day, a day that would not be heralded by sun in this windowless, airless box of a room where night and day were merely a change in the blackness of its shadows. [...] Already she could feel her child, within her body, womb-bound, struggling against her, plaguing her with its captivity. (3)

This allusion to this confining human being inside her is also an indication of the difficulty to continue the culture across the generations despite Fortuna's own willpower. Not uncoincidentally, she identifies this despair in "the futile seed of a weak man" (8), which refers to her opinions about Joseph's inability to sustain the family in the novel. She thus seems to challenge the prevalence of the male line. Furthermore, as in Benasutti's text, male expenditure is particularly rebuked due to their deprivation, even though such critique is not limited to depression times, which is shown by Fortuna's remembrance of her own father's tyranny and how the family was already hungry back then. He shows great pride during the Festa of Lady Carmel, wearing the clothes Fortuna and her mother had prepared for him "being up half the night" (59), which contrasts with the care for the family that he should presumably provide. When Fortuna's brother Francis, suffering from hunger that makes him even vomit, asks for some food from the packed street stands, his request is not only met with a curse, but also "her father slapped him across the face and told him to shut up" (60). In addition, emotional nurturance is lacking as Fortuna has to reckon that play with him, revived through the imaginative movies she projects on the kitchen's wall, "had hardly ever been like that, except in memories. Most of the time, her father was a conceited, selfish man who starved his family, and brought home an antique clock that he had taken fancy to, so that they had been able to count off the hungry, empty times" (59).

### 3. MALE OUTSIDERS / FEMALE CHRONIC WORRYING

The trope of failed dynasties is further expressed in an insistent vocabulary of prophecy and chronic behavior, often including an apparently irreconcilable rendition of male and female gender roles, which the novels seem to trouble. Most clearly, this is rendered through the depiction of "defective maleness" (Pinino, 2000: 232), or the portrayal of male characters as outsiders, whereby a critique of the enforced bread-winner role is enacted. In *WS*, Joseph is born a poet and reduced (and finally destroyed by) towards back- and soul-breaking duty to



work and family, just as Giovanni in *Steady*, who is fetched from his vocation as a priest to the family burdens that encapsulate the experience of depression:

He was a man of many talents, our father, and adaptable. But he didn't belong in the Navy Yard any more than he had belonged in the coal mines. A young man who had once studied for the priesthood had no business at all shoveling coal or painting the sides of the ships of war. The grayness of everything depressed Papa. (Benasutti, 1966: 26)

There are always women to ultimately shoulder the burden of family, which is proved in both novels by their unrelenting work even during harsh times including the depression, as the introducing poem to the article captures<sup>6</sup>. However, despite additional commentary on incomprehensible male expenditure when the family goes hungry, the belief that family provision is unilaterally assumed through distinctly separate roles seems to be the root of the problem. Hence the role inversion in that Joseph proves well apt in providing emotional support while he is a failure by traditional gender standards, or the irony that Fortuna's and Mamma's lives obsessively revolve around their husbands' jobs (or lack of) rather than their own unacknowledged workloads, which situate them as perfectly capable bread-winners. This is indeed not irrelevant to narrator Rosemary's acute eye and comment: "'*Io?*' she said, bewildered. '*I kill him— with work? Allora!* [...] It was a curious indication of Mamma's character that she did not, at this time or ever, refer to how hard she worked. Work was her very nature'" (188; emphasis in original).

Again, as succinctly captured in Rosemary's critical observations, women are the ones to make ends meet and cope with deprivation in both texts:

It was only through Mamma's capable management that Papa's earnings, never too great at best, were made to last through the periods of depression. But in spite of Mamma's dire prophecy of imminent total starvation, there was always an abundance of good food on the table, simple but delicious as only Mamma could make it. And thanks to her clever fingers, we went to school in decent clothing and were, at least outwardly, the equals of our peers. (141; emphasis added)

This is in fact the inherited role, not by virtue of blood but of gender, that these family sagas portray, as it is linked to a sense of eternal or *chronic worrying* on the part of the female characters, using a phrase to describe the grandmother's own concerns in *Steady*. In the fourteenth chapter "The Tender Branch", the narrator reports on her Nonna's legend about a spring branch that is carried from house to house as a promise "of rebirth, of survival of warmth over cold, of happiness over sorrow" (139). This legend signals a parallel material reading that compares life in Italy with that in the U.S., while Mamma's and Rosemary's concentrate on not very dissimilar realities of cultural adjustment or identity with the worries over the *topoi* of

the house and the street that for Mamma and Rosemary differently represent gender, class and ethnic distinctions.

All of the above converge for Rosemary, as reflected through the omnipresent shadow of living in the Back street, which stands as a signifier of larger spatial and social divisions, and her obsession to cross all such borders. The Back street is contrasted to the fascinating Tennis Court, “where the rich children played” (30). Throughout the novel, Rosemary attempts to “explore farther into this other-world place” (32), although she is eventually punished for transgression into a space in which, as an Italian, she is not supposed to be. In fact, the Tennis Court is not only fenced but is also guarded against ‘strangers’ by discursive practices. When Rosemary finally rejoices that “I was here! [...] *This* was the Tennis Court” (83; emphasis in original), she is harassed by the slur that she is just “one of those wops from Goat Hill” (84). As a consequence, she becomes aware of her ethnic difference, which is markedly spatialized:

All at once I was full of hate, of my mother and father, of the place I lived in, which had heretofore been as all other places only more fun and was now, by a single cruel word, made dirty, unclean. I thought of the loathsome ditch that Mamma hated so, and I hated it too. The street was a mean back street full of mud when it rained. (85)

For Mamma, *‘na bella casa* (a beautiful house) figures firstly within a cultural and gender framework that calls for women’s dedication to family (Bona, 1999), as well as for attention to public appearance or the need to make a *bella figura*, as she is fixated with surpassing a certain status in relation to Zia’s (the aunt’s) house. Equally though, she feels the pressure to have to comply with such mandates within the restrictions that immigration and cultural difference entail. Hence the additional burden she shares with Rosemary as “more than anything she [also] hated the *feeling* of being poor that the [Back] street gave her” (Benasutti, 1966: 33; emphasis in original). In fact, the feeling of fury recurrently appears as a motif to masterly converge the intersecting anger at the husband’s lack of a steady job, their material deprivation and social marginality: ““One day I shall be free of it, of the dirt and the mud. I shall have *‘na bella casa* to live in all the days of my life. Like your sister,’ she would end always on a note of envy. Then she would begin to bang pots and pans about in a fine fury” (34).

Lastly, the grandmother’s explicit acknowledgement of “chronic worrying” is about next winter’s coal and repeated scarcity across generations (139), which makes her as concerned as Mamma and Rosemary are:

She was obsessed with a great ambition to have the coal piled high to the ceiling of the cellar and the shelves stacked with cans and jars of food long before winter’s onset. She would take up again the burden to possess a home of her own. She had had enough

of landlords and of the black bread of the poor in the Old Country, she would say with grim determination. (139)

In stark contrast to these continuing patterns across three generations of women, father figures, being attributed the socially sanctioned breadwinner role, are ineffective to properly provide for the family and are depicted as outsiders. This is, therefore, the parallel pattern to that of female chronic worrying. Italian/American male (or patriarchal rather) defectiveness, in fact, has not gone unnoticed to either critics or writers of early Italian/American novels, a defectiveness which they have to a certain extent explained as an effect of immigration, a disease for both family and culture. As men are incapable of solving the family's problems for being more self-centered, it is women who mostly bear the responsibility: "Unlike Mamma, our father enjoyed life in the Back Street, as he would have enjoyed living anywhere, natural hedonist that he was" (32-33). Alternatively, men are utterly eradicated of their only patriarchal role for which they are recognized as valid men and fathers, and which women then come to the task of fulfilling. This is shown in *WS* when the father Joseph complains that, as he is forced to look for a job, he is always away from the family, resulting in his ignorance about the problems that their children have in school, for instance. In other words, he feels guilty and in the middle of a contradiction in that his very role as breadwinner is preventing him from fully complying with his duties to family, and "a man who does not know his family is a stranger to himself" (1952: 38). In turn, women also face their own contradictions about their gender role within the family.

Mary Jo Bona has put forth an explanation for a certain construction of Italian/American female characters; one which, according to her theoretical model of the *ethnic bildungsroman*, acknowledges a female identity that is relational but also culturally-inflected. In other words, this framework of identity development moves beyond a psychosocial or gender socialization that may aptly describe a western experience of womanhood into a consideration of cultural or ethnic values that coalesce with gender identity. Family unity and development figure as comparable to or accompanying individual success (or lack thereof). In her initial chapter "Family Novels of Development: Mari Tomasis' *Like Lesser Gods* and Marion Benasutti's *No Steady Job for Papa*", Bona analyses Mamma's achievement of a house of her own (family). It is a success by Mamma's standards throughout the novel, although, following Bona, it would not be as personal as is familial (if the distinction can indeed be made) since here the woman character is devoted to her family needs, as expected, to the material rise for progeny. Carla Simonini describes the similar female endeavor in other novels such as Mario's Puzo's *The Fortunate Pilgrim* (1964) as the immigrant protagonist Lucia Santa "improv[es] the family's economy status in the face of the failures of the men" and finally manages to materially rise by moving from Manhattan's tenements into the suburbs (Simonini, 2010: 238). The same could be said of Fortuna in *WS*, who uses an image of "break through and into wider urban space"

(238). It is precisely when we learn of Fortuna's relinquishing hope, influenced by her parents and Joseph, who "made peace with their poverty on very *Italian* cultural terms" (238; emphasis in original), that she pronounces the one promissory phrase of the novel: "It is not uncommon miracle for street cracks to sprout green" (Savarese, 1952: 73). Contrasting with the surrender and hopeless acceptance of an Italian sense of *destinu* (fate) in which the members of her family succumb, Fortuna embodies the primary concern and (failed) fight for family's survival. As discussed earlier, in *Steady* Mamma has achieved the very same goal with her final move out of Back street for the future of family.

Helen Barolini further explains that this representation of women's devotion to family is also a result from the "heritage of conflict" immigrant women experience by virtue of their role as cultural reproducers (1985: 12). They are often divided between commitment to husband and to tradition, on the one hand, and the desire to improve their children's lives and answer strong assimilation pressures, on the other, which is also highlighted by Pipino as the mothers' "dilemma" (2000: 48). Pipino has additionally noted that early writers such as Benasutti had to negotiate their way into the literary realm because of the way in which, quoting from Bona, mothers in fiction "expand the confines of female possibility by their belief in themselves to be active, assertive, independent women *within* a familial framework of marriage and children" (2000: 47). The character of Mamma certainly represents the typical "dilemma" between husband and children as Italian/American women have to both advance their family's situation and contend with patriarchal authority or mentality, which sometimes works against that duty (48). Thus, although she is repeatedly portrayed or seen as regal, Mamma's description is not idealized and fits a common gender picture of expressing "conflicted" and "secret aspirations" (DeSalvo, 1996; Laurino, 2009). She is repeatedly shown not to have a particularly progressive mentality. Mamma believes the home to be a "private place, for the family" and shows suspicion at the neighbours' behavior regarding the education of boys and girls, "with all that foreign singing and dancing and young people going and coming" (Benasutti, 1966: 51). Reacting to her own daughter's decision to bob her hair, "Mamma said furiously that it'd not surprise her one bit if before long women would begin wearing pants and then you would not be able to tell the difference between male and female and *then* what would become of the world?" (47; emphasis in original). Hence, Mamma exhibits the so-called "Madonna contradictions" of immigrant mothers (Barolini, 1985: 9; Bona, 1999: 44-45), which also explains the sense of a seemingly celebratory unity of family by the end, despite prevailing critique of patriarchal power therein.

In *WS* the family is distinctly alienated and, as Simonini explains, "Savarese is purposeful, also, in 'locating' respective members of family in terms of their generational distance [...] the father Joseph Dante, was born in Italy, the mother, Fortuna, seems to have been born in New York (of Italian immigrant parents). The children, Gabriel and Gino, inhabit

a space between second- and third-generation ethnicity” (2010: 229). Regarding maternal representation, great importance is also conceded to the mother figure and deference to the father (both by her and their children) is only prescribed when in public as Italian/American family dynamics hold given that women’s power is rather limited to the private sphere (Barolini, 1985; Nardini, 1999). According to Simonini, due to the novel’s setting outside Little Italy “Fortuna can even reject such façade of patriarchy” (2010: 231). Nevertheless, such power is also a result of what has been critically identified as the afore-mentioned ‘failed masculinity’ of Italians due to unsettling displacement or other consequences of migration. Using Judith Halberstam’s model of female masculinity, Fred Gardaphe contextualizes the construction of powerful Italian/American female characters mostly when in the absence of men: “women are enacting masculine roles quite naturally to fill voids left by the men in their lives, who ultimately present masculinities that have failed to perform” (2006: 26). Besides, more importantly than understanding how the taken-for-granted association of men and work is challenged by the effects of migration, or the depression by extension, as grand explanatory narratives, women’s unrelenting depression status needs to be acknowledged inasmuch as they are never actually disentangled from (unpaid) work. Even during official depression times, the burden of domestic work proves even stronger.

WS foregrounds the disruption and psychological crumbling of the family during the 1930s, particularly for the immigrant community, more severely affected by food and work shortage. Since in the absence of the means of a proper livelihood Fortuna still has to provide for family, she is the main pillar and is forced to wander the city looking for some alternatives. She is explicitly acknowledged such prominence and capacity, as “[t]here was a fierce diamond-dignity in the woman, which shone even in the roughness of this slum setting” (Savarese, 1952: 6). Yet, Fortuna is also depicted in an ambivalent light, reuniting the mentioned Madonna contradictions, in that “she might have been a queen or a harlot. She was the best of both” (6). All her willpower is insufficient, however, given that it is the male line that seems to prevail, again even in the evidence of failure. This line is so distinctly weak while clear-cut, binary gender roles admit no easy accommodation:

She would look desperately about her for the instrument of her hope; a strong, untrembling, promiseful symbol. Instead, there was only Joseph who, if he did not accept, neither did he besiege; Gabriel, the frightened one, whom poverty would paw and stomp upon at will; and Gino. For a long time she had looked at Gino as the one, but he was too quiet for a boy, thoughtful, unspeaking; he did not yell enough. And in her body the futile seed of a weak man; even now it did not struggle inside her as it should [...] She could feel its weakness, not half so strong as the seed of hope rooted within her, bound by an unwilling womb, fed by a body that would have long ago smothered it, except that, in so doing, would itself have perished. (18)

Additionally, it has been contended that food writing and life writing is characteristic of Italian/American culture, especially by women (DeSalvo & Giunta, 2003). We can further pinpoint a ‘failed lineage’ in terms of how the struggle against dominant culture is said to be substantially enacted through food and its role in cultural transmission, which constitutes a woman’s socially acknowledged important power (Pipino, 2000: 233-234). Then, the collapse of the Dante family due to the jeopardy of food is not simply understood in a literal sense. As a result, the depiction of a thwarting cultural role around food signals another important obstacle to establish and consolidate Italian/American identity and community.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The critical framework from other ethnic communities shows how the topic of genealogies is a powerful form of creating and investigating cultural and literary traditions, as Cheryl Wall distinctly argued by applying the metaphor of the line to the analysis of both texts and writers. Genealogy is often related to tradition, which authors find it necessary to (re)affirm as they find differential validation depending on their place within racial or gendered structures of power. Family sagas are a key expressive and analytical tool for their reliance on genealogies and generations, which are a constant in discussions of culture, literature and criticism. Often, genealogical discourse is reflective of either competing or intersecting interests, as was shown by Wall’s worrying of the line of Anglo and African/American traditions in terms of race and gender respectively. The same critical outline is applicable to the Italian/American tradition, as I have discussed through the idea that the failed female dynasties represented in the texts extend to the literary fates of the authors Savarese and Benasutti.

Texts were initially hypothesized to encapsulate failed (female) lineages in a thematic sense due to the explicit allusions to a doomed dynasty and the limitations of the characters out of intersectional racial and gender difference. In the authorial analysis I also showed that ethnic and gender prejudice have deeper reverberations inasmuch as, in terms of literary traditions, the neglect of early writers has a considerable impact on the establishment or validation of ‘other’ literatures. Standards of literary analysis and genres are not the products of ‘disembodied reason,’ but respond to racialized and gendered systems. They reflect universalized power positions out of which critical assumptions and disciplines of knowledge, if not revised, may in fact legitimate further exclusion. For this reason, tracing the origin of ‘failed’ genealogies allows us to acknowledge the rightful place of the early writers Benasutti and Savarese within Italian/American cultural tradition and women’s writing.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> From here *WS* and *Steady* respectively.

<sup>2</sup>But see Gardaphe for an account of how Di Donato himself suffered considerable rejection. His literary merit and success tilted as “Beginners Luck” (2004: 54), Di Donato was virtually left out of a

literary generation: that corresponding to studies on the social novel considered by critics who privileged the class approach over the ethnic component. In fact, Gardaphe explains, Di Donato was key to a new generation of Italian/American writers who concentrated on social conditions. If early reviews could admit that he belonged to the “proletarian gallery of artists,” they betrayed ethnic prejudice in judging his writing as “full-blooded and passionate” (61).

<sup>3</sup>To my knowledge, Savarese’s text can only be fully accessed through the New York Public Library catalog. In this respect, I would like to remark my inability to research another early Italian/American text that could perfectly fit this study on failed family sagas, Diana Cavallo’s *Juniper Street Sketches*, since I could only find critical references and excerpts of the novel dispersed in anthologies: Anthony J. Tamburri et al.’s *From the Margin: Writings in Italian Americana* (1991). In any case, it can well be used for comparison with Savarese and the argument of a diminished tradition, since Cavallo did not actually finish her novel either, for reasons unknown, as professor Gardaphe informed me during a research stay.

<sup>4</sup>Only Ireland featured a larger, almost exclusive actually, female migration in European transatlantic migration. Italian female migration to European countries and within the country was, however, very high, actually outnumbering men in the so-called “step” migration (Gabaccia, 1996: 90), that is, reaching national and continental before transnational destinations. In this case, unlike patterns to the US, women often migrated individually rather than in family groups, as is exemplified in the characteristic seasonal migration once a year by the Mondine, internal workers in the rice fields of the Po valley, mainly the regions of Lombardy and Emilia-Romagna, (Ruberto, 2007).

<sup>5</sup>Her name is Europa but is renamed as Mamma or Donna.

<sup>6</sup>The poem expresses how “Depression may have put men out of work, but women are, for better or worse, never unemployed” (Lisella, 2007: 190).

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