Andrea F. Szabó

Appropriating Left-Speech

Women Writing during the American Depression

The 1930s have long lived in the literary and political imagination as an all-male affair. After all the decade was about work, labor, economic depression and, of course, politics; it was about mainstream conservative inertia and political dissent; it was about the future, and the roads leading into that future. What could women have contributed to that affair?

American literary scholarship in this part of the world has long neglected the study of this period for its highly politicized image – and the neglect becomes, historically and psychologically, all the more understandable when we turn our attention to the kind of literature that has become a kind of trademark for the period: Leftist literature. John Steinbeck readily comes to mind, and studies on his works abounded in this country at a time, but we seem to have forgotten about the fact that in the 1930s a large number of women writers from the middle-class joined the Left, and, most importantly, the Communist Party of the United States of America. After all the CPUSA welcomed all who worried about "the people" – that the "people" were first and foremost male seemed to be a surmountable problem since the CP did seem to care about women in its all-inclusive rhetoric.

Middle-class women joined the CPUSA as a conscious choice. After women were at long last granted the right to vote, the feminist movement, and women's movement in general, lost momentum – partly because of the early feminist strategies of argumentation, which emphasized women's innate ability to act as moral reformers in all spheres of life, and, largely, because the goal around which the movement organized had been reached. The vote, in this sense, proved to be a

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fiasco – it erased the feminist movement without living up to its progenitors' expectations. Women, however, continued their daily struggle in the harsh climate of the decade and some of their self-appointed spokespersons found the CPUSA the only political party that could adequately represent their interests.

Meridel Le Sueur was one of them, alongside many other women writers who are still left in obscurity despite their commanding presence in the 1930s. The clearly masculine self-image of the CP itself helped erase the memory of these women working in its ranks. This image was best reflected in the fantasy of the proletarian writer, who was "a wild youth of about twenty-two, the son of working class parents, who himself works in the lumber camps, coal mines, steel mills, harvest fields and mountain camps of America,"[1] as advanced by Michael Gold, the image dictator of the Party. This was hardly an image that Le Sueur, Josephine Herbst, and Grace Lumpkin, among many others, could assume for they were neither male, nor masculine, and they came from the middle class. Nevertheless, they found the CP empowering. One reason was the fact that the CP could hardly be perceived as monolithic – it changed its policies, its emphases as the world changed. Although party politicians cast their eyes toward the Soviet Union and often slavishly adopted its policies, change, any change, could be seen as a sign for the possibility of future improvement for women within the CP first and then outside it.

The Communist Party's attitude to women in the 1930s falls into two periods, as Paula Rabinowitz notes. The first is characterized by Gold's view, where women provide support in the background, whereas in the late '30s, the so-called populist era, "the Party sought to fit itself into mainstream American culture, it adopted images of wholesome family life that conformed to stereotypes of Mom and apple pie."[2] Although in both periods women's place was circumscribed by traditional views, the image changed from non-entity to the provider of comfort. As the shift took place, the debate on women's sexual freedom and birth-control was silenced, just as the image of the working and fighting woman was suppressed, but their presence could not be erased causing an inherent tension in Party ideology and in its various manifestations. Le Sueur's

1 Paula Rabinowitz, "Women and U.S. Literary Radicalism," in: *Writing Red: An Anthology of American Women Writers, 1930–1940*, eds. Charlotte Nekola and Paula Rabinowitz (New York: Feminist, 1987), p. 3.
2 Rabinowitz, p. 11.

only novel, *The Girl*,[3] written in 1939 but published in 1978 because the Party condemned it as not serviceable enough, well exemplifies this tension.

The roots of the tension are manifold, but the Communist Party's ambivalent attitude to women and especially to the traditional tropes of their existence features most prominently. The ambivalence was the result of both historical and ideological battles fought within the ranks of the Leftist movement around the world. One impulse was to include everyone regardless of the color of their skin and of their sex as a counterexample to the exclusionary politics of the upper and middle classes. Nonetheless, the privileging of the patriarchal family structure was never an issue of debate within the CPUSA since working class males and females could by definition not be at cross-purposes: the working class male fought an ideological and political battle to establish the utopia of a classless society where the earnings of the head of the family were enough to provide for his whole family; married women were not seen as possible providers in an ideal society.

The first impulse resulted in soliciting more and more women to participate in the class struggle and promoting them; and the second in viewing them with suspicion if they intended to continue work for the CP once they were married or pregnant. This was exacerbated by the events in the Soviet Union, where in 1936 abortion was banned as a legislative method to raise the birth rate, which was, cleverly, disguised as an appeal to the merits of family life.[4] A year later the CPUSA followed the Soviet lead and appealed to motherhood by idealizing it – in sharp contrast to what Le Sueur had written in her journals about a pregnant woman in the CP three years before: "Here she was having a baby. She was not organizing anything to them. I suppose she is kind of out of it. I felt they had kind of dropped her until she was through with this."[5] Some stated that the party even ordered women to have abortion if it interfered with their political interest.[6]

The ranks of the CP were further torn by an ideological and practical contradiction. The Left insisted on giving voice to the people, to let their stories be heard, but only those could hope to be let speak whose stories provided proof for the validity of the arguments about economic exploitation. In addition, it was

3 Meridel Le Sueur, *The Girl* (Albuquerque: West End, 1990).

4 Constance Coiner, *Better Read: The Writing and Resistance of Tillie Olsen and Meridel Le Sueur* (New York: OUP, 1995), p. 58.

5 Vol. 9, 1934–35; quoted in Coiner, p. 95.

6 Coiner, p. 78.

painful to see that the CP's efforts, thanks to the Works Progress Administration's Federal Arts Project, coincided with those of the bourgeois government in recording the present. The Nazi threat in Europe, however, proved to be ample reason not to oppose the government in every respect but rather join forces and create a Popular Front, where representation and the "people" were not divorced from each other. As Alessandro Portelli points out such a conflation of representation and the feeling of "the immediacy of the body" happened only twice in American history: in the Civil War, where the government came to be seen as the people and the second time in the Depression.[7]

Le Sueur's *The Girl* operates along the axis of these contradictions, widening the rifts between the ideological arguments and their realization. Also, Le Sueur felt the contradictions skin-close because she was pregnant with her second daughter at the time of writing the novel and she never intended to cease work for what she believed in. In addition, she gave voice to characters in the novel whose stories the CP did not find suitable for representation. Thus, in effect, as a result of her insistence on following the tenets of the CPUSA, she ultimately subverted the very ideology she wanted to promote.

The tension was further intensified by another debate among the radical women writers themselves. Although all argued against the appropriation of the female body for politics as well as against the conviction that women exist for the purpose of providing vehicles for the reproduction of the new, socially conscious man, the routes chosen by them were strikingly different. Le Sueur represented one group among them, while Lumpkin another. Both came from a middle class background and both turned ultimately to popular genres in their literary careers: Lumpkin to the romance and the comedy of manners while Le Sueur to the gangster story and children's literature. The works of both writers, though, contained the threat of dissenting voices by providing opportunity not just to talk but to appropriate speech for the voiceless, and thus both subverted the assumed priority and hierarchy of certain kinds of voices. However, while Lumpkin embodied the middle class woman aspiring to be a female intellectual, who had a rather ambivalent relationship to traditional tropes of female existence, such as maternity, Le Sueur wished to lose herself in the working class and maintained a rather suspicious attitude towards intellectuals. She believed in the principles that

7 Alessandro Portelli, *The Text and the Voice: Writing, Speaking and Democracy in American Literature* (New York: Columbia UP, 1994), p. 160.

Gold advocated: there is nothing that school could teach you, you have to live it.[8] This belief resulted not just in the romanticization of the worker and the dismissal of the middle class intellectual as a possible betrayer but also in the glorification of the female body and maternity as symbols of rejuvenation. Maternity meant for Le Sueur a dehistoricized continuity that, nevertheless, could not be confused with intellectual abstraction.

Maternity was also important for Le Sueur since it embodied the CP's vision of future but denied its insistence on fight, battle, and victory; instead, it expressed her vision of future in terms of continuity and organic community. Another dimension is her view that giving birth is an anti-bourgeois act in itself,[9] the direct antithesis of middle-class synthetic infertility. Pregnancy for her is not the curse of economically underprivileged women, as many working class women perceived it, but a special privilege of the people, who were still in touch with the life-sustaining soil. By putting maternity in the foreground, the future is not the linear teleological progression of the CP any longer, but the circular eternal return of the fertility myths, overtly manifest in Le Sueur's fascination with the Persephone-Demeter myths.[10]

The Girl is then a story written amidst conflict, which manifests itself in its plot as well. It tells of an innocent country girl who finds a job as a waitress in a bar where alcohol is illegally served. She falls in love with a handsome young man, who is then killed in a bank robbery together with the bar owner's husband, and the gentleman who actually ran the bootleg business. Only the women remain alive: the nameless Girl; Clara, her roommate, who occasionally works as a prostitute; Belle, the owner, who has to leave the bar for lack of police protection; Butch's, the young lover's, insane mother, and Amelia, the Communist mother-worker. Clara dies of tuberculosis, but at the moment of her death, the Girl gives birth to a girl, while the street is full with demonstrators, male and female alike.

The novel is made up of several plot lines. One is the conversion plot, which depicts in a linear progression how the girl finds a community that cares and

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8 Coiner, p. 92.

9 Nora Ruth Roberts, *Three Radical Women Writers: Class and Gender in Meridel Le Sueur, Tillie Olsen and Josephine Herbst* (New York: Garland, 1996), p. 36.

10 Blanche H. Gelfant, "'Everybody Steals': Language as Theft in Meridel Le Sueur's *The Girl*," in: *Tradition and the Talents of Women*, ed. Florence Howe (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1991), pp. 190–191.

where she learns to care; the romance plot with Butch depicts her passage to womanhood; whereas the third plot is the circular story of loss and recovery.[11] This third plot is not goal-oriented in any ways: it is the re-affirmation of the pleasure of symbiotic unity, of communal identity, and of women's creative power. A further complication is the inclusion of the bank robbery and the hardly typical setting for a Communist conversion story in the bootleg business. In this respect, Le Sueur followed the trend of many Leftist writers who turned toward popular genres with the avowed aim to entertain and propagate the Cause at the same time. The juggling of so many plot lines requires a high degree of authorial control, and it was exactly this that Le Sueur refused to do, she insisted that she was just the recorder and not by any means the originator of the stories – and not the story – of *The Girl*.

The novel, according to Le Sueur, is the result of a workshop, where women could tell their stories, where they at last could talk and where their stories counted. She was there only "as a woman who wrote (like the old letter writers) and who strangely and wonderfully insisted that their lives were not defeated, trashed... "[12] She was just a recorder, there being no tape recorder yet, what Christine Laennec terms as "antigrafus," whose writing is "a form of writing-without-having-written."[13] She only acknowledged that she decided on the order of the stories but the writing itself was collaborative. In this insistence several things were at stake: collective writing was not just an affirmation of the social embeddedness of every individual, of the necessity to counter alienation and that of the importance of developing a "communal sensibility [...] a more collective self and acquiring autonomy and empowerment in discovering this self's multiple extensions into others,"[14] but it was also the denial of her own position as a writer standing outside and above as the sole arbitrator of the worth of her informants' lives. It was a testing ground for her passing as a radical, so preoccupied with the inclusion of the dispossessed.

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11 Gelfant, p. 184.

12 Meridel Le Sueur, "Afterword" to *The Girl*, p. 133.

13 Christine Moneera Laennec, "Christine Antigrafe: Authorial Ambivalence in the Works of Christine de Pizan," in: *Anxious Power: Reading, Writing, and Ambivalence in Narrative by Women*, eds. Carol Singley and Susan Elizabeth Sweeney (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993), p. 35.

14 James M. Boehnlein, *The Sociocognitive Rhetoric of Meridel Le Sueur: Feminist Discourse and Reportage of the Thirties* (Lewiston: Mellen, 1994), p. 109.

Disclaiming her authorship also meant the disclaiming of writing as saying "I I I [because] writing is the act of saying I, of imposing yourself on other people [...] It's an aggressive, even a hostile act."[15] But Le Sueur wanted to write against the dominance of male Leftist logocentrism and of American individualism. She offered her service to put down what she was told but disclaimed authority above her material, she described herself as a life-long listener, but not more.[16] The emphasis on the oral origin is important for other reasons as well. The Left saw the possibility of challenging the cultural order in recording the experience of the working class and developed the theory of proletarian realism heavily relying on reportage as participant observation and oral history.[17] Orality, as Portelli notes, "undermines national institutions by feeding memories, rituals, aggregating all passions, which escape the controls and certainties of written reason and law."[18] Le Sueur's narrative, however, undermines not only the national institutions but also the CP by including the voice of women threatening the authenticity of the Party's official voice.

The threat is even more explicit because the anonymity of the title character suggests a non-singular experience of transformation from a passive conveyor of polemic to not just the acquirer of language but also to its appropriator. At first, she is a silent listener, who does not even understand the language used around her, especially the references to baseball and sexuality, but after being initiated into the language of beating and victory, she not only asserts her own right to speak, but also appropriates and transforms that language into a communal experience.[19] Her initial entrapment in male language transforms into a demand for presence, for authority, for the right to tell not just her story but her mother's as well.

The girl's anonymity, however, serves other purposes as well. She has no pre-established identity and her *Bildung* is not the result of a Cartesian separation but the accommodation of all competing voices around her. Her identity is the result of interconnectedness and not of a self-contained autonomy. Her story and her self are communal, defying the ideology of individualism.

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15 Joan Didion quoted in: Singley and Sweeney, "Introduction," in: *Anxious Power*, p. 3.
16 Gelfant, p. 74.
17 Elaine Showalter, *Sister's Choice: Tradition and Change in American Women's Writing* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1991), p. 116.
18 Portelli, p. 31.
19 Gelfant, p. 187.

Le Sueur let go of the autonomous individual and created a self that defines itself through connection with others. The writing of the novel is the very instantiation of this idea, where the person under whose name it is published is not more than a central intelligence, through whom others learn to tell their stories. She is no all-powerful author, no one is subordinate to another, the vocabulary of winning and beating disappears, or rather transforms into a language with different meanings. The author cannot exercise total control since the spoken art is "additive, rather than subordinative; aggregative or clustering, rather than analytic; and copious, redundant, or generous rather than spare."[20] There can be no one story, no one plot but multitudes of them.

The setting of the novel itself indicates an attempt at accommodation, since it takes place in liminal spaces. The center of action in the first half of the novel is located in the bar, a boundary of the private and public domain for women since, although they work, it is a job that is close to their nurturing role: they are engaged in cooking, waiting on males, and, importantly, in the second chapter, the bar is transformed into a maternity ward. Similarly, the last scene connects the private and public domains: it is a room where death, birth, and political propaganda take place at the same time. Furthermore, with the sound of demonstrators in the room even the inside/outside division seems to disappear. Whenever the action retreats into either the public or private domain, catastrophe strikes down: in the closed-off hotel room the girl is raped, whereas the public sphere brings death – all men are killed in the bank and in the hospital the danger of forced sterilization lurks. Only liminal spaces are protective.

Similarly, self-enclosed individualism and total dissolution in the community are equally dangerous, the girl has to give up Butch's American Dream of owning a gas station, however fascinated she is with his capacity for and vocabulary of conquest, and she has to learn to become a member of a community while becoming the author of her own fate. If she had just given up her familial loyalty for the sake of Butch or for the Popular Front, her identity would still be unresolved. Accordingly, Clara has to die because she believes that her own body can save her through either marriage or prostitution.

The construction of the novel is equally located on a boundary: it is just as much oral as it is the imposition of one author; it mirrors the past stories of women and deals with the future; in addition, the fluidity of its generic

20 Jean M. Humez, "'We Got Our History Lesson': Oral Historical Autobiography and Women's Narrative Arts Traditions," in: Howe, p. 127.

classification has an equally important bearing on our understanding. The girl's Bildungsroman unfolds as she attempts to leave home; however, not even after the death of her father when the whole family subvert the rules of propriety is she able to do so. She looks for help in her mother's story but she finds it only after the romance plot terminates and Butch dies. Men have to die in the story since a romance plot cannot be liberating in spirit if played according to established rules – the girl and Belle are annihilated in love although they gladly participate in it as a form of self-annihilation. Also, men represent the language of competition and after it has already been appropriated and transformed no sign of its previous usage can be left as a reminder; therefore, men need to disappear for good. Women have to learn to speak for themselves, to speak their own language and not just be vehicles of it. This, however, does not only mean the reversal of the old script, the exchange of roles between victim and victimizer. Le Sueur tried to create a new script, which contained the creation of a different self, one endowed with both social consciousness and organicity.

Le Sueur wrote in her journal that John Dos Passos with his objective, outside pose represented "the man speech" but that "we need, too, the woman speech. I would like to say the woman speech."[21] *The Girl* is an attempt at writing that "woman speech" which did not repeat the guilt of silence about working class women's experiences, which was a testimony that women cannot be left invisible and unheard, and that they themselves can break out of their history of silence. The novel in this respect is a pivotal moment in the appropriation of the CP's ideology that emphasized the creative power of the working class. However, conflict was inevitable since the meaning of motherhood was not just different for the CP and for Le Sueur, but antagonistic. For the CP motherhood followed the trajectory of shift in meaning from "nuisance" to an ideologically hardly justifiable Soviet imperative, whereas for Le Sueur it represented wholesomeness.

This is not to imply, though, that Le Sueur was on the mission of creating an all-female universe as a political agenda; she readily acknowledged her dependence on males in the "Afterword" to Margery Latimer's *Guardian Angel*: "We still feel the fright without the old dominance, the prisoner can long for the prison." Therefore, the ending of the novel can hardly be seen as more than a temporary stage necessary for the verbally disempowered women to find a voice in order to be able to break out of their closed-off worlds. On the other hand, the strategic value of a female community is easily confused with retreat and is interpreted as a

21 Vol. 7, 1933; quoted in Coiner, p. 95.

proof for the inefficacy of women's action and with the re-affirmation of women's powerlessness and marginality. However, the women of *The Girl* do not retreat into a silent rebellion as if their only way of rebellion were its intimation; instead, they move out from their places in the private sphere into liminal spaces and by appropriating CP-sanctioned male language they stage a revolution in their own name.

The threat of the novel for the Left was not negligible, although its source does not lie in the fact that she portrays the *lumpenproletariat* instead of diligent factory workers, but rather in the fact that Le Sueur writes about the futility of the lives of a large proportion of the working class. Furthermore, actually it is they who write their stories, who appropriate the CP's language and threaten its uniformity. Similarly, the re-awakened feminist movement too had serious reservations about the novel, though without them the novel would not enjoy the acclaim it receives today; in fact it would not even have appeared in print in 1978. Nevertheless, feminist criticism praises *The Girl* only for its protofeminism, for its daring to tackle questions that not many had courage to care about. Yet, today the epitaph of biological determinism haunts feminist critical writings on Le Sueur's novel, short stories, reportage, and poetry. We should not, however, fail to acknowledge that her goal was not to set an agenda for invigorating a feminist movement but to attempt to accommodate all her ideals: her ideal of collective authorship, her effort to give voice to the silenced, her political activism, and an emphasis on the importance of organic communities. Her work is thus not translatable into any language that relies on teleological vocabulary.