JAST, **2023; 60: 97-120**
Submitted: 13.01.2023
Accepted: 01.06.2023
ORCID# 0009-0007-0168-5581

More than Marias and Toninos:

Pietro di Donato Takes Italian Americans beyond a Single Story

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Abstract

This essay examines specifics in the literary works of Italian American author, Pietro di Donato, that demonstrate how the author highlights complexities of Italian American identity. Focusing on scenes from a variety of di Donato's works – not just the ever-popular *Christ in Concrete* – this essay shows common objects from every-day life playing a role in revealing some profound characteristics associated with one America's most misunderstood immigrant groups.

Moving through a timeline of novels, articles, and short stories produced during di Donato's fifty-plus years of writing, this essay brings attention to scenes and characters unacknowledged in previous research. The scenes from di Donato's writing focused on throughout this essay feature objects and tools that have a role in character development, thus expanding the understanding of Italian American Identity. Most notably, this essay departs from typical indicators of Italian American identity like food or religion and includes references to di Donato's last novel which remains unpublished; *The American Gospels*.

Keywords: Italian American, job, labor, objectify, Pietro di Donato, Stereotypes, tools

Maria'lar ve Tonino'lardan Daha Fazlası:

Petro di Donato İtalyan Amerikalıları Tek Bir Hikayenin Ötesine Götürüyor

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Öz

Bu makale İtalyan-Amerikalı yazar Pietro di Donato'nun edebi eserlerinde yazarın İtalyan-Amerikalı kimliğinin karmaşıklığını vurguladığı özelliklere odaklanır. Di Donato'nun sadece en popüler eseri *Christ in Concrete*'teki değil diğer eserlerindeki çeşitli sahnelere de yoğunlaşarak Amerika'nın en çok yanlış anlaşılan göçmen grubuyla ilişkilendirilen bazı önemli özellikleri ortaya koyan günlük hayatta önemli rol oynayan bilindik objeleri tartışır. Di Donato'nun 50 yılı aşkın yazarlık kariyerinde ürettiği romanlar, makaleler ve kısa öyküleri gözden geçirerek bu makale önceki araştırmalarda incelenmeyen sahnelere ve karakterlere dikkat çeker. Di Donato'nun eserlerinden sahnelerin tartışıldığı bu makale karakter gelişiminde rol oynayan objeleri ve aletleri örnekleyerek İtalyan-Amerikalı kimliğin anlaşılmasına katkıda bulunur. Bu makale çoğunlukla İtalyan-Amerikalı kimliğinin yemek ve din gibi tipik göstergeleri incelemekten çok di Donato'nun basılmayan son romanı *The American Gospels*'ın incelemesini içerir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Christ in Concrete*, İtalyan-Amerikalı, nesneleştirmek, Pietro di Donato, *The American Gospels*

In her 2009 Ted Talk, Nigerian-American novelist, Chiamamanda Adiche warns against believing "a single story" associated with a people, place, or era. In her talk, after sharing some past personal tragedies, Adiche says,

> All of these stories make me who I am but to insist on only these negative stories is to flatten my experience and to overlook many other stories that formed me. The single story creates stereotypes. And the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story (Adiche 00:12:54–00:13:25).

Adiche's message about a single story is warning about limiting one's exposure to and the awareness of truths. Throughout the Ted Talk, Adiche emphasizes how oppressive social and political structures perpetuate the single story.

The work of Italian American author, Pietro di Donato, criticizes and challenges a single story commonly associated with Italian Americans. In di Donato's writing, labor, survival, and pride materialize to contradict stereotypes and add complexity and depth not usually associated with this ethnic group in America. Using the objectified body of the worker and the actual construction tools, di Donato challenges the single story of Italian Americans to show multiple truths about the Italian American people and experience.

Di Donato, too, holds accountable the oppressive social and political structures responsible for perpetuating stereotypes associated with Italian Americans. For example, in his 1960 biography of Mother Xavier Cabrini, *Immigrant Saint*, di Donato confronts the stereotypes Italian immigrants were met with upon their arrival at Ellis Island. He writes, "Social workers periodically probed the immigrant masses through dispassionate interpreters … Italian women were portrayed as stout, cheerful, rosy-cheeked 'Marias,' singing at their chores, and the men 'Toninos' loving the pick and shovel, wine, macaroni and fiestas – or, as swarthy born killers committed to such nebulous, often mystical societies as the 'Black Hand,' the 'Camorra,' or the 'Mafia'" (*Immigrant Saint* 72). Di Donato's use of the word "portrayed" emphasizes the Maria/Tonino description of the immigrants as empty and inadequate. The portrayal and ensuing stereotype perpetuate a single story about Italian Americans.

Working-Class Studies scholar, David Roediger, discusses the single story and stereo-typing commonly associated with the Italian American and Italian immigrant labor force in America at the beginning of the twentieth-century. In his 2017 collection of essays, *Class, Race, and Marxism*, Roediger's research reveals Italians were perceived to be irresponsible and therefore unfit for leadership positions, or those involving risk (Roediger 148). Interestingly, evidence confirming such can be found in di Donato's famous first novel, *Christ in Concrete*.

In the semi-autobiographical *Christ in Concrete*, the protagonist Paul's father dies on the job and the remaining family members are left

destitute. After the fatal accident, twelve-year-old Paul leaves school to work in his father's place. Paul's father, Geremio, is killed on the job because the project foreman tried to cut-corners and save money. In one of the novel's most famous scenes, the family is denied any compensation for Geremio's death. The foreman tells the hearing board about Italian laborers, "I'll be hanged if I can prevent them from hurting themselves" (*Christ in Concrete* 131). The foreman blames Geremio for his own death. From this point forward in di Donato's writing career, one of his underlying purposes is fighting Italian American stereo-types.

Looking closely at di Donato's works, especially those published later in his career, reveals representations of Italian Americans beyond a single story; as more than "Maria" and "Tonino." With his novels, biographies, and short stories, di Donato creates a more complete picture of the Italian American experience by dismantling the role labor plays in the immigrant's life. Di Donato uses the construction job, the body of the laborer, and the construction tools to evolve Italian American identity. Returning to *Immigrant Saint*, for example, di Donato shows how many Italians felt forced to immigrate. In conversation with Mother Cabrini, one man explains, "As much as I loved Caccamo I could not bear the hunger of my family and my business debt of 450 lire. Pray for me, pray that I will return someday to Caccamo with the money to pay off debt and feed my family," (*Immigrant Saint* 65). This man from Caccamo is not simply a "Tonino" excitedly searching for the chance to work hard and buy pasta. He is looking for a chance to earn well and survive. His goal is to return to the place and people he was forced to leave behind.

In the coming pages I discuss how the act of labor, the body of the laborer, and construction tools, all function as objects that contribute to the development of Italian American identity in novels and short stories by Pietro di Donato. In addition to an analysis of such published works, I conclude with an explanation of di Donato's last, currently unpublished novel, *The American Gospels*. I show how even this final piece adds to the complexity of Italian American identity.

Job Personified

Pietro di Donato entered the literary scene in 1939 when *Christ*

in Concrete was chosen over John Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* for the book of the month club. Di Donato's semi-autobiographical novel draws upon the author's own experiences after his brick-layer father is killed in what could have been a preventable accident. Italian American scholar and di Donato expert, Fred Gardaphé, argues that

> *Christ in Concrete* has become a literary classic because it presents di Donato's own true story as a founding myth of Italian/American culture. As a myth it presents a heroic figure, Paul, who searches for God in the form of Christ, whom he believes can save his family from the terrible injustices brought upon them through a heartless society (*Dagoes Read* 90).

In the novel just as in di Donato's real life, Paul's family is initially denied compensation for Geremio's death and the twelve-year-old is forced to work in his father's place.

Christ in Concrete establishes some ideas that will have a consistent presence in di Donato's writing. In his article, "'Flesh and Soul': Religion in Di Donato's *Naked Author*," Anthony Cavaluzzi claims that what would become long-standing themes in di Donato's writing are introduced in that first novel. Cavaluzzi writes, "Di Donato's place in American literature has been sourced with *Christ in Concrete*. And among the many themes developed in that novel is Di Donato's portrayal of immigrant religion as it relates to daily experiences of Italian/Americans. The relationship between religion in America and the elusive American Dream (views in capitalist economic terms) is drawn primarily through abstract images" (Cavaluzzi 59). It is true that religion, Catholicism, the American Dream, and the exploits of capitalism are major themes established in *Christ in Concrete* that maintain significant roles in di Donato's writing. In addition, themes like poverty, death, love, family, labor and sensuality are also explored, and maintain significant roles.

What Cavaluzzi refers to as "abstract images," can be attributed to di Donato's syntax. The novel's syntax is probably the most defining feature of *Christ in Concrete*; distinguishing it not just from other Italian American novels, but di Donato's other work. In Anthony Tamburri's *Re-reading Italian Americana* (2014), Tamburri clarifies

the methodology that produces the abstract effect. He explains,

> the language that the characters speak in their utterances is often the "English" equivalent to what it is, we may readily assume, the "Italian" they are speaking; and the accented English that they also speak, that which we come to know as, colloquially, broken English … In a sense, di Donato goes from writing a novel in which he adds Italian to one in which he translates, so to speak, to English for his reader's comprehension of the dialogue that takes place among his many characters. (Tamburri 30)

According to Tamburri's explanation, *Christ in Concrete* is an Italian language novel written in English. The language is English but the structure, for the most part, remains Italian which creates, at times, an abstract effect.

We can go directly to the author for additional explanation of the language in *Christ in Concrete*. In one of the most detailed and complete interviews with di Donato, originally published in *MELUS* during the mid-eighties, di Donato discusses his writing style. He tells the interviewer, Dorothée von Huene-Greenberg, "By virtue of not having had an education, I can be direct and literal and translate literally. If my mother said a thing in a certain way, that's the way I translated it, without any thought of grammar or this and that" (von Huene-Greenberg 36). A brief but succinct example of such, from the "Fiesta" episode of the novel, is dialogue between two *paesanos,* The Lucy and Luigi, "The Lucy winked at Luigi, nodded toward the joyful breasts of Cola and sighed: 'Ah, mother mine, your nursing habit I yet have not lost …' Luigi's twisted eye danced" (*Christ in Concrete* 149). 'Mother mine' is a direct translation of *mamma mia,* a familiar Italian phrase. In this scene as well as throughout *Christ in Concrete*, di Donato's writing adjusts for language but leaves the Italian syntax.

Italian syntax was something that remained unique to *Christ in Concrete* as di Donato evolved his craft. His third novel, for example, *Three Circles of Light* (1960), is set in the same neighborhood and tenement housing as *Christ in Concrete* and includes many of the same *paesanos*[1]. *Three Circles of Light* functions as a prequel to *Christ in Concrete*, providing more background and information about life

within the immigrant community and details every day events before Geremio is killed at Job.

This third novel essentially ends where *Christ in Concrete* begins, with some overlap and repeated telling of Geremio's death. *Three Circles of Light*, however has more typical English-language syntax. Looking more closely at a scene from *Three Circles of Light*, which includes dialogue like the example above from *Christ in Concrete*, it is easy to see the change. Geremio, in conversation with young Pietro, says, "'Do not ever dishonor the art of the trowel … If you lay one brick in your lifetime, lay it true. Scrape the mortar from beneath your feet, slob!' Do not beat the brick with your trowel as though you were sounding the tambourine – press the brick into the mortar lovingly and without chicanery'" (*Three Circles* 80-1). This conversation between Geremio and Pietro surely would have taken place in Italian like the talk about Cola between The Lean and Luigi. Two decades later, though, di Donato chooses to present the conversation in English with conventional syntax. This choice regarding syntax changes both the mood and tone of *Three Circles of Light* in comparison to *Christ in Concrete*, despite the retelling of similar events and a similar setting. While the syntax of the latter transports the reader into a time and place, sharing in the narrator's pain, the former creates feelings of nostalgia and conveys reflection and sometimes regret.

In addition to di Donato's sentence structure and language style in *Christ in Concrete*, di Donato combines the act of labor and the physical space of the construction site to create an additional character in the novel. Job, personified, has a sense of autonomy. It is free to interact with the protagonist and other characters in the novel. In a later work from the 1970s, published originally in *Penthouse Magazine*, di Donato revisits the year 1939. "My Uncivilized Past" is a cynical retelling of the events from the day *Christ in Concrete* wins book of the month and di Donato finds himself changed from a day-laborer to a wealthy writer. Di Donato describes how, "In the novel I gave labor a soul. I made family an intimate, sacred community. I theatricized the fable of religion, placing each sentence within the framework of ritual, instinctively patterning my work after the morality plays of dark mystic times gone" ("My Uncivilized Past" 94). In this excerpt not only does di Donato refer to, and confirm the presence of themes Cavaluzzi mentions above, but he describes how he personifies labor in the novel.

Fred Gardaphé talks more about Job personified and the way it works to elevate the laborer in *Christ in Concrete*. In his article, "Italian American Literature and Working-Class Culture," Gardaphé explains,

> Donato's highly mythic and poetic best-selling 1939 novel, *Christ in Concrete*, personifies work as 'Job,' the antagonist to the worker-as-Christ, the protagonist. The novel turned Pietro di Donato into a hero of the working class, a champion of the exploited worker struggling to express his/her experiences of being used and abused. Early publicity photos included some in which the author was bare-chested, laying bricks on a job site, as evidence of his worker-god status. (Gardaphé 412)

Job, functions perfectly as an antagonist in *Christ in Concrete*, as Gardaphé explains above, because it remains in control throughout the novel. The strong, persistent men of Job, with their work ethic, skill, resilience and knowledge of their craft are consistently controlled, belittled, and attacked by this antagonist.

The personification of Job that emphasizes its presence in the novel and establishes it as a truly evil force in *Christ in Concrete* appears early, when it kills Geremio and the others. Before Geremio's death, the reader is introduced to the oppressive nature of Job when di Donato describes the force it has over a *paesano* called The Lean. Di Donato writes, "The Lean as he fought his burden on looked forward to only one goal, the end. The barrow he pushed, he did not love. The stones that brutalized his palms, he did not love. The great God Job, he did not love" (*Christ in Concrete* 8). The misery Job causes The Lean is conveyed with words like "fought" and "burden," while Job is portrayed as truly powerful when it is referred to as "great God Job." And then, just a few pages later, di Donato describes how, "Job tore down upon them madly. Walls, floors, beams became whirling, solid, splintering waves crashing with detonations that ground man and material in bonds of death" (*Christ in Concrete* 14). In this moment, Job flexes its power and capabilities as a functioning character in the novel. Job, maintaining its autonomy through the last pages and beyond.

The personification of Job described by Gardaphé as originating in *Christ in Concrete* maintains its human-like presence in some of di Donato's future novels. Two of di Donato's later novels,

the aforementioned *Three Circles of Light*, and *The Penitent* (1963), both include examples of Job personified. Di Donato assigns the responsibility of his father's death to a building that "hated father." He writes, "The edifice on which father was laying brick collapsed. The building hated Father, hated Annunziata and her children. The many floors and walls threw themselves vengefully upon Father and crushed him. That Good Friday, Father, against his wishes and our wishes, became my very own Christ in concrete" (*Three Circles* 176). This example from *Three Circles of Light* demonstrates the continued personification of Job. The essential materials of Job – the floors, the walls, even the building itself – are capable of hate. Di Donato is careful to include the resonating hate of the building, since Geremio's death results in such suffering for his family.

Job, or labor personified is also noticeable in di Donato's fourth, full-length novel, *The Penitent.* When di Donato set out to tell the story of Saint Maria Goretti the project eventually took a somewhat different direction. While the first part of the novel does focus on the young saint, the remaining parts are mostly about the experience of her murderer, Alessandro Serenelli. Returning to the von Huene-Greenberg interview, di Donato explained the connection he developed with Serenelli while conducting research for the novel. Di Donato tells his interviewer,

> she didn't live long enough to become a woman. Alessandro is twenty years old, and she is twelve years old, and his life was ruined and her life was destroyed. In his little cubicle in the Franciscan *convent*o in Macerata he had books, and had my book in Italian, but the book that he read and reread and [which] was worn and frayed was *Crime and Punishment*. We communicated. He had read *Christ in Concrete* backwards and forwards. He was so sympathetic. He said, 'You're the boy that did that and went to work.' He wept. (von Huene-Greenberg 41)

Di Donato also describes the closeness he feels to Serenelli in *The Penitent.* Di Donato explains, "I had reached common ground with Alessandro: we were both of Italian pleasant blood, are saved and strengthened by the same faith, know manual labor, and relish profound literature" (*The Penitent* 121). Perhaps this common ground inspired di Donato to personify Job in Serenelli's story as well.

As a poor sharecropper, Serenelli often felt his life did not belong to him and he was consumed by apathy and desperation. Serenelli's bleak circumstances are considered early in the novel, "Soon the army would take him against his will. Another trap made by incomprehensible forces. If he did not lose his life in the army he would be returned to his father and the soil. Was he to wed a peasant, raise more slaves and be in hopeless debt …" (*The Penitent* 13). Serenelli eventually admits to his biographer, "I was bored, and stung by a life of exhausting labor and hopeless bondage to landowners, and so I reasoned that it made no difference if I did commit a crime and was incarcerated" (*The Penitent* 62). Perpetually feeling the sting of labor, di Donato and Serenelli are imprisoned by the same forces; exploited by the same economic structures. Job personified assumes the same oppressive role in both of their lives.

The Body of the Laborer

The previous section analyzed the personification of labor in di Donato's writing. "Job" materializes as a functioning character in novels like *Christ in Concrete*, *Three Circles of Light*, and even *The Penitent*. In these novels, Job controls the laborer's life. The personification of Job and the power it exerts over the worker, however, is dependent upon the body of the worker. Therefore, the laborer's body is a vehicle from which the individual is controlled – as discussed in the last section – and, as I demonstrate in this section, the body is an extension of the laborer's identity.

Italian American identity in the United States is a complicated topic. Although Italians were never denied the rights of citizenship because of their ethnicity, religion, or skin tone, some members of the traditionally white or Anglo-Saxon community regarded Italians as "other," and many still do. In her book, *Are Italians White? How Race is Made in America*, Historian and Italian American scholar, Jennifer Gugliemo, attributes Italians being classified as other to the slow ascent of the group into a space of economic stability. Guglielmo writes, "Since many Italians remained poor and working class longer than most other European immigrants, they have often lived in the nation's blue-collar neighborhoods, amid people of color" (Guglielmo 4). Relatedly, Thierry Rinaldetti argues that, "being Italian meant, first

and foremost, being an outcast not only in American society at large but within the U.S. proletariat as well" (Rinaldetti 96). Italians seem to exist in a culturally "gray-area," even among others in the same social class.

Similar to Guglielmo's implication above, that Italian American whiteness is young, and Rinaldetti's claim that the Italian American experience is characterized by otherness, Gardaphé feels Italian American whiteness is fragile. Gardaphé explains,

> For Italian Americans, "making it" has come with a high price tag … They've had to trade or hide any customs which have been depicted as quaint, but labeled as alien, in order to prove equality to those above them on the ladder of success. In this way, Italian Americans have become white, but as a different kind of white than those of the dominant Anglo Saxon culture. Italian Americans have become white on a leash. And as long as they behave themselves (act white), as long as they accept the images of themselves as presented into the media (don't cry defamation), and as long as they stay within corporate and cultural boundaries (don't identify with other minorities), they will be allowed to remain white. ("We Weren't Always White" 187)

Based on the work of Guglielmo, Rinaldetti and Gardaphé one can draw the conclusion that Italian American identity is closely associated with the individual's proximity to a working-class social status as well as a lingering dedication to Old World tradition.

In di Donato's writing, Italian American identity is expressed in exactly this way; not only in his novels, but also in shorter pieces of writing where di Donato shows how the laborer's body is an extension of Italian American identity. Di Donato does so by depicting *paesanos* engaged with physical labor and includes descriptions of the *paesanos*' physical features that are shaped and defined by labor. Some of the best examples of this are in di Donato's second novel *This Woman* (1958), and some short stories published in magazines and the collection *Naked Author* (1970).

This Woman is a sensual novel that focuses on the relationship between the adult Paul from *Christ in Concrete* and the woman he eventually marries. *This Woman* is Joycean in structure, relying heavily on writing strategies like inner-monologue and stream of consciousness. Much of the novel explores the relationship between the mind, body and spirit, as the protagonist constantly reckons with identity, where he fits in society, and his commitment to Catholicism. As the protagonist contemplates his identity, he is unable to separate himself from his work. The unnamed narrator describes the protagonist's thinking; "His mind dwelt mainly on three sets of scenes, brickwork, women, and his soul. The three-act drama of his mental health theatre would revert first to the factual solidity of building construction, evolve to the mercury of sex, and then culminate with the spiritual judgement" (*This Woman* 8). This example from the novel shows how the protagonist's contemplation of his personal identity and his metacognitive awareness are never separate from the act of labor.

In a recorded speaking engagement for the Italian American Historical Society from the early eighties[2], di Donato, responding to the audience's questions, talks about why he renames his protagonist Paul, when he is obviously telling his own story. He first admits to an audience member, "Yes I am the – I'm Paul" ("St. Valentine's" 00:15:24-00:15:26). He then goes on to talk about the name change, explaining,

> It's easy to live somebody else's life, it's easy to – when I call him Paul, I can be objective. I could weep for him; I could feel sorry. I weep – I weep – for instance, when I – the play that I wrote about my novel, *This Woman*, this obsession because he married a widow [*inaudible*] (00:16:53) and he thought he had liberated himself, and then he finds out he is – he is the most prejudiced Madonna-Prostitute-Catholic there is and condemns his wife for having – as a human being who lived and lusted before. ("St. Valentine's" 00:16:34–00:17:10)

Not only does this example of self-criticism – or criticism of the protagonist in *This Woman* – confirm di Donato is the main "character" at the center of his work, but it also sheds light on the previous example, explaining why the division between labor and self, seem to be so difficult.

Additionally, throughout the novel, descriptions related to the protagonist's physical appearance or descriptions of the protagonist's movements coming from the narrator and other characters, also rely on his identity as laborer. For example, as Paul examines himself, the narrator describes how, "He flexed his laborer's hands. There was that dependable strength, a flowing fullness in his joints, the tickling satisfied goodness, the bite and grip" (*This Woman* 21). And, when the protagonist's love interest thinks of him, her inner-monologue reveals phrases like, "Mister bricklayer if you only knew" (*This Woman* 19). As the novel continues, Paul is referred to as, "The bricklayer husband," (*This Woman* 136) and "The young bricklayer," (*This Woman* 218), never escaping his livelihood as a descriptor for his sense of self.

Some of di Donato's lesser-known works, like the short stories "The Broken Scaffold," "The Fireplace," and "O'Hara's Love," show how the Italian American laborer's body is an extension of his identity. In these stories, di Donato tends to leave the alias Paul behind and write simply as Pete. Pete's body, although young, is very strong from years of hard work. In "The Broken Scaffold," for example, the other laborers are resentful of the contradiction between Pete's youth and ability. Di Donato writes, "Most of the men on the job hated me because, only a kid, I was the fastest bricklayer" (*Naked Author* 179). And, when a Jewess matriarch chooses Pete to impregnate her daughter, to compensate for her sterile son-in-law in "The Fireplace," it is Pete's physical appearance that first catchers her attention. Di Donato tells how, "In June I was building a patio around Dave's pool. Sarah and Leda visited. Sarah watched as I laid the slate in mortar. After I had a backstroke workout in the pool, Sarah ran her hand over my shoulder muscles and complimented my physical ability" (*Naked Author* 70). In both instances, the worker's developed body, a result from day after day of hard labor, is the primary determinant for how he is judged by others. This body of a working man, however, is not presented negatively or less than; it exudes capability and strength.

"O'Hara's Love," explores more complicated ideas associated with identity in the life of an Italian American laborer. Young Pete, who is at the center of this story, is coming of age and beginning to explore his sexual, sensual self. The complicated part, though, is that Pete has already lived and worked as head-of-household in his late father's absence, so his physical self is further developed than his emotional self. The plot of the story is centered on this dichotomy of Pete's identity; the strong working man, and the child.

Upon meeting the wife of his family's lawyer, young Pete becomes obsessively attracted to the much older Lilly-Mae Kennedy. Lilly-Mae is the wife of Mr. Kennedy, the lawyer who helps Pete's mother finally receive compensation for her husband's work-related death. When Mr. Kennedy and Lilly-Mae attend a family celebration, Pete likens himself to the *paesanos* who are drawn to Lilly-Mae's flirtatious drinking and dancing. Di Donato describes how, "The paesano men, mostly bricklayers and hodcarriers, got royally drunk and whirled willing Lilly-Mae Kennedy around in the native dancing and blatantly ogled her and salivated and ran their hot hard hands about her, and the flies of their trousers poked up obviously" ("O'Hara's Love" 3). Like the grown men at the party, Pete wants Lilly-Mae. He grapples with giving into his sexual desires, and staying true to his responsibilities as the head of household, but eventually gives in:

> Raindrops smashing on my window were tom-toms drumming Lilly-Mae, Lilly, Lilly, Lilly, sex, sex, sex. My flesh between bedsheets was an unbearable flamboyant symptom. I tried to concentrate on my mother, my studies of building-blueprints, on my sacred duty as breadwinner and head of family, of Father in heaven, of Christ who died for us and his Virgin Mother, of my debt of honor to Mr. Scott Kennedy, but the rain knew what I had to do. ("O'Hara's Love" 6)

Pete, after all, works like a man, so he has justification to desire like a man, like the paesanos at the party whom he works alongside, and who also desire Lilly-Mae.

Consistent with his complicated dual identity, Pete must lie to his mother about having to shop for construction tools for a chance to be alone with a woman. Lilly's response to his advances, continues this conundrum. Pete tells how, "She grabbed my hips and surged upward, saying, 'Petey, honey, if you don't blab to no one, I'll let you have all you can take. Kid, you're built like a man – all cock!'" ("O'Hara's Love" 10). Lilly-Mae, even as a mature woman, is confused. She is aware he is a "kid," but admits he feels like a man. The construction tools Pete claims to be shopping for – as I demonstrate in the following section – are significant objects, just like the worker's body, in developing Italian American identity.

Tools

Bricklaying and construction tools[3] materialize similarly to Job in Pietro di Donato's writing. Like Job, the tools of Job have an unwavering presence. If Job is personified in di Donato's writing, then tools are symbolic of the lifestyle and experiences of the worker. With tools in hand, a laborer has no hope of escaping who he is or what he does. The physical separation from those tools helps the laborer to realize other parts of himself.

As I demonstrate in the first section, the personification of Job is illustrated most clearly when it takes control of the Italian laborer's life, and it exerts its power over him. Because the laborer uses the tools in the same way labor uses the body, construction and bricklaying tools seem to become an extension of the worker's identity. The tools are objects which the laborer can control. The laborer's ability to properly manipulate the tools and perform a task satisfactorily ensures success when work is available. In the following paragraphs I show the relationship between construction tools and the worker's personal identity.

Like his father, and grandfather, di Donato made a living laying brick. During the von Huene-Greenberg interview, di Donato talks about how the danger associated with bricklaying became an inescapable fear – both is father and grandfather were killed on the job. Di Donato says, "My grandfather, the man that adopted my father, was killed with the collapse of a tunnel that he was building a shell in … How many times I risked my life" (von Huene-Greenberg 46). Geremio was the illegitimate child of a poor girl and a nobleman. In *Three Circles of Light*, di Donato gives some exposition on how masonry became a generational endeavor; Geremio learned to lay bricks from his adopted father. Di Donato writes,

> When father was born in secrecy, the nobleman gave him to the childless wife of a bricklayer, left his wife and family and took Father's mother to South America. They were never heard from again … At the age of seven Father was put to the craft of bricklaying. He had virile physique of the proletariat, and the proud poise of the nobility (*Three Circles* 18).

Bricklaying, being a skill handed down from one generation to the next, accompanied by intense risk and danger suggests commitment to tradition and a sense of identity is represented in the craft itself. This family exposition creates a space within di Donato's writing for brickwork to be honored, respected and treated as an art among the *paesanos*, and within the Italian American community di Donato represents in multiple texts.

Of the tools associated with Job, the trowel receives most of the attention in di Donato's work. The trowel is a source of pride for the Italian American worker in the sense that one's ability to work with the trowel effectively earns one a living. As little Paul desperately tries to fill Geremio's role in *Christ in Concrete*, one of the first things he must master is use of the trowel. Paul brings it with him to one of his first days at Job. The novel describes how,

> Paul removed his coat and pulled the trowel from his belt. He stood nervously … He reached the trowel down into the mortar. Slice down toward him, edgewise, twist in quick short circle scoop up away from him. The trowel came up half-covered with mortar – but how heavy! He dropped it back into the tub and worked the trowel back and forth in the mortar just as he had seen the bricklayers do. (*Christ in Concrete* 69)

In this scene, di Donato emphasizes the difficulty involved with being a successful mason, as well as the necessary skill that can only develop over time. The heaviness of the loaded trowel foreshadows the endless challenge that lies ahead for Paul, yet his imitation of this action celebrates the start of his apprenticeship.

Using the trowel to expand the Italian American community is also a source of pride for the mason. In *Three Circles of Light* and *Immigrant Saint*, di Donato shows the trowel as a foundational tool for creating permanent infrastructure within the ethnic community. In *Three Circles of Light*, the members of the Vastese community in Hoboken, New Jersey join to build a church. Di Donato writes, "Every family contributed almost their last dollar for our new church building.

Padre Onorio had consulted with the women. 'Can you secure the art and labor of your men?' They responded in effect: 'The trowels that earn bread shall also lay up the edifices of San Rocco'" (*Three Circles* 31). Similarly, in *Immigrant Saint*, when Mother Cabrini moves forward with building her famous Columbus Hospital, her limited financial resources present a challenge. However, the bricklayer "Master Pietro," willing to work for free, assures Mother Cabrini, "no trowel is surer and faster than mine!" (*Immigrant Saint* 175). In both novels, the trowel is synonymous with the worker and his capability.

In addition to a source of pride and representing the bricklayer's skill, the trowel and other building tools also function as a tether to labor. While physically engaged with building tools, the Italian American man is inseparable from his laborer identity. In the closing pages of *Three Circles of Light*, di Donato describes the moment he accepts responsibility for his family, writing, "As I stared into the night, I saw a trowel in my hand, and wall after wall to lay up" (*Three Circles* 188). The trowel he sees in his hand represents a life of perpetual physical labor. Revisiting *Three Circles of Light*, as well as two lesser-known short stories by di Donato, we see examples of the worker disengaging from labor by physically separating himself from the construction tools to be able to realize alternate parts of his identity.

In *Three Circles of Light* di Donato shows the bricklayers and construction workers of the Vastese community in Hoboken physically disengage from their work by hiding their work tools from view. Di Donato writes, "The winter came early with enveloping snow and mad winds. Bricklaying tools were shoved under the bed to gather rust until the spring, and the men spent the days in Tony's saloon, smoking stogies, playing cards for pennies, then going home to lean fare, and returning to Tony's to sit around the potbellied stove" (*Three Circles* 141). Weather, preventing the men from working, means relaxing days in which the men of the community spend their hours together in recreation. And while the men of the community cannot work, the women shoulder domestic responsibilities and earning. On the same page, di Donato tells the reader that during the winter,

> It was the women who managed the home, hiding a scrunched-up dollar during good weather when their men were working and eking it out in small change like drops of blood in the winter, running up a small account at the

> markets, to be honorably paid in the spring … In the winter the women and their daughters bore heavier burdens, for beside cooking, hand washing and housework, they worked at cutting embroidery. (*Three Circles* 141)

These successions of scenes in *Three Circles of Light* shows how the weight of labor never really lessens, it simply shifts; sometimes spread somewhat evenly through all members of the working-class immigrant community, other times more burdensome for the women. Most importantly these scenes emphasize the male laborer successfully disengaged from labor when the construction tools themselves – those things on which the laborer relies to complete the task – are physically removed from daily life.

A situation similar to what is described above in *Three Circles of Light* occurs in a lesser known, shorter piece from di Donato called "O'Hara's Love," referenced once already in the previous section. "O'Hara's Love" is reflective, being told through di Donato's perspective decades after the events being described have taken place. This narrative gives recount of the period in which the young laborer, Pete, already working like a grown man, develops the sexual desires of a grown man. Pete uses construction tools to help him realize the sexual part of his identity, explaining, "I dressed, put on my beret and trench coat, and told Mother I was going to New York City, and the Bronx, to two stores that sold only bricklayer's tools – that I needed a new trowel and new level" ("O'Hara's Love" 6). Pete's role as a laborer, and reliance on tools to earn for the family, allows him the opportunity to use them as an excuse. Claiming to need new tools, Pete leaves the family home and freely explores a budding aspect of his personal identity.

Finally, one of the most significant instances in di Donato's writing, showing the Italian American laborer relying on tools as a vehicle for developing personal identity, can be found in "My Uncivilized Past." Referenced briefly in the first section of this article – "Job Personified" – "My Uncivilized Past" is a retelling of how the young bricklayer becomes an overnight success when *Christ in Concrete* is chosen for Book of the Month Club. Having a reflective tone and some scattered bitterness, this story delivers occasional laugh-out-loud punchlines. This short piece captures the moment in di Donato's life when he transitions from "bricklayer," to "author."

"My Uncivilized Past" begins with di Donato declaring, "Having to work outdoors in winter for your fucking bread makes you wish you were never born" ("My Uncivilized Past" 92). This direct statement leaves no confusion of whether or not di Donato is the stereotypical "Tonino" loving "the pick and shovel." By confronting one miserable aspect of labor, di Donato expands the single story of the Italian American immigrant laborer. He develops the persona beyond the humble, thankful immigrant who is grateful for any job.

Di Donato celebrates his instant fame and financial freedom from Job. Now an author instead of bricklayer, he can officially develop the latter part of his identity by physically separating himself from his construction tools. Upon entering Bobs-Merrill Publishing Company the elevator operator tries to direct di Donato to the service elevator, basing his assumption on the tools di Donato has in hand. The operator says, "'You don't look like an author or talk like an author.'" ("My Uncivilized Past" 94). Later that evening, after it is revealed that his life is now changed, di Donato officially begins to look like an author by throwing his tools from the Brooklyn Bridge, explaining, "Every, poor, tawdry, ball-busted, day-dreaming bricklayer has cursingly vowed that – when his ship comes in, when a rich relative in Rangoon dies and leaves him a fortune, or when he wins the Irish sweepstakes – he's going to throw his fucking tools off the Brooklyn Bride" ("My Uncivilized Past" 119). This ceremonious act completes the day's transition, officially freeing the new author from Job, for the first time since he was a child.

The American Gospels

Job personified, the physical body of the laborer, and tools for construction remain material indicators of identity for the Italian American laborer in most of di Donato's writing. Later in life, Di Donato generally referred to fellow Italian laborers as "the common man." Interviews, speeches and his last novel, *The American Gospels* (which remains unpublished), demonstrates how di Donato's dedication toward this undervalued member of society shifts from portrayal to accountability. Di Donato tells von Huene-Greenberg,

> The poor man occupied himself with alcohol, with baseball, with nonsense, with trivia, with situation comedies, vulgarisms. He kept himself enslaved, and then he, becoming policemen and military and so forth, was the Praetorian Guard for the wealthy … The poor masses didn't and still don't know what they want and are incapable of uniting to get what they need. So these are the truths. Do you think the politician is going to say that? Do you think the priest will say that? Do you think the school teacher will say that? 'Slobs, you goddam robots …' No, no. (von Huene-Greenberg 46)

Truth-seeking, and action from the working man or common man become some of the most clearly stated messages di Donato puts forth during his last years. In this concluding section, I offer a discussion of The *American Gospels* in which I emphasize how this last novel continues to explore Italian American identity with material objects like Job personified, the body and tools. However, I also call attention to di Donato's challenge to the working man to fight back against the oppressive societal structures working against him.

Di Donato, a working man himself, and self-proclaimed communist, has from the beginning of his career emphasized the value of the worker's physical body. Although *The American Gospels* did not develop into a novel until much later in his career, there is evidence of the text's foundational messages – such as reaching the working man and inspiring him to act against greed-driven class inequality – being part of di Donato's personal convictions as far back as 1939. At the third annual League of American Writer's conference held at Carnegie Hall in June of 1939, di Donato recited a speech called, "Why I am a Writer," for about five-hundred people. At one point, during his speech, he says,

> I realize that in reaching out to the worker I must disregard all the lieutenants and generals of the Capitalists, disregard the Capitalists as shrewd men who are going to get what they can out of it. I say to the worker, you are the guys that are permitting this and you are hurting me too. How to reach them and tell them that they are permitting it! ("Why I am a Writer").

In each section of *The American Gospels*, Christ punishes both powerful societal figures acting in greed as well as the bystanders belonging to working class for allowing such evil actions to have been carried out by elected officials.

Fred Gardaphé is one of few scholars who has had the chance to look closely at the unpublished manuscript of *The American Gospels*. In the early nineties, *Voices in Italian Americana* featured di Donato's work, including an excerpt from *The American Gospels*. Gardaphé wrote the introduction to the issue. He explains that despite *The American Gospels* coming many years after *Christ in Concrete*, "it demonstrates the continuation of Di Donato's lifelong commitment to social criticism through story" ("An Overview" 2). Gardaphé also tells us that *The American Gospels* should be read as di Donato's, "cry out of the world just as *Christ in Concrete* was his primal scream into the world" ("Working Class Literature" 414). Gardaphé's statements suggest that the two novels are representative of di Donato's authorial essence. Di Donato's own words confirm such as well. While speaking with von Huene-Greenberg, di Donato said, "I treasure *Christ in Concrete* and I treasure *The Gospels* because they are my fate, my identity, my soul, my conscious evaluation of myself" (von Huene-Greenberg 33-4). It is important to note that some of di Donato's later work presages themes and ideas which develop fully in *The American Gospels*.

The cynical tone of the previously referenced, "My Uncivilized Past," is evidence of an ever-evolving voice during a career spanning almost six decades. The bricklayer-author in "My Uncivilized Past" is not the scared, sick tenement kid from *Christ in Concrete*, or even the sexually curious, hard-working teen who still fears God and his mother like Pete in "O'Hara's Love." The voice in "My Uncivilized Past," is more akin to di Donato's protagonist, "Pete the Red," in *The American Gospels*, as opposed to Paul from *Christ in Concrete*. For example, the term "robot slob" often appears in the *The American Gospels* to describe the mindless masses of working people allowing themselves to be manipulated and fooled by dishonest politicians. Di Donato first uses "robot slob" in "My Uncivilized Past," to discuss his disappointment about having to carry his tools with him to the publisher when he discovers *Christ in Concrete* is chosen for book of the month. Di Donato writes,

> At the end of the day, sure enough, I was fired. That was the evening I had to go to the publisher Bobbs-Merrill, then located at Fourth Avenue and 28th Street, to find out whether the Book-of-the-Month Club had chosen Steinbeck or me. Being laid off I had to take my four-foot level and big white canvas toolbag with me. I hated to carry tools in the street and subway – it made me feel like a goddamned robot slob. ("My Uncivilized Past" 92).

The suggestion from this excerpt is that di Donato is embarrassed about the judgement that will surely come from those who see him trudging along New York City's streets with his tools. They are an example of a material item that makes others assume he is a thoughtless, weak, member of that masses, content to be a slave to the wealthy corporations from which his paycheck comes.

Gardaphé emphasizes in his article, "Italian American Literature and Working-Class Culture," that "The man who wrote *The American Gospels* is very different from the one who created *Christ in Concrete*" (412). Whereas honest portrayal of ugly and unfair conditions imprisoning and killing the common man trying to survive are definitive of *Christ in Concrete*, *The American Gospels* is characterized by middle class masses who choose mindless entertainment and to believe anything told to them on TV. In *The American Gospels*, Job personified, tools for labor, and the body of the laborer still materialize to demonstrate the enslavement of the common man, but in this final novel di Donato's tone is one of disappointment and revenge as opposed to empathy.

Whether di Donato is choosing to describe the exploitation of the Italian American laborer, or he challenges the common man to push back against his oppressors, he moves Italian American identity beyond the single story or stereotypical portrayal. Di Donato's ability to consistently personify labor, as well as the role he assigns to the material necessities of working-class life – like tools or the objectified body of the laborer himself – articulate the complexity of the misunderstood Maria and Tonino.

Notes

[1] I realize the proper plural term for friends or country men would be *paesani*, however, di Donato consistently used the term "paesanos" in interviews and speeches.

[2] The recording of this speaking engagement existed in the archives only on cassette until recently. As part of my doctoral studies I not only digitized this recording of di Donato but also transcribed it.

[3] Trowel owned by Pietro di Donato. Box 30a. Pietro di Donato Collection. Special Collections and University Archives, Stony Brook University. Accessed and photographed by Giannina Lucantoni, 8 March 2017.

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